



Employing Ambivalent Sexism Theory as a Lens to Make Sense of Workplace Sexual Harassment Narratives in the Ombuds Profession

R. E. PURTELL

ABSTRACT

Women are often subject to a variety of sexually harassing behaviors at work and may bring these experiences and related concerns to experienced ombuds professionals. Employing Ambivalent Sexism Theory (Fiske & Glick, 1995) in a mixed methods content analysis of narratives about sexual harassment cases provided by experienced ombuds professionals, the current study identified several interesting trends among the sexual harassment cases described in these narratives. Within N=10 narratives published by The Journal of The International Ombuds Association, men were sole perpetrators of sexually harassing behaviors unto women. Harassing behaviors characterized as benevolently sexist also outweighed those characterized by hostile sexism. Additionally, perpetrators of sexual harassment were not punished for benevolently sexist behaviors and were only

subject to mediation between themselves and victim by a third party in cases of hostile sexist harassing behaviors. The qualitative portion of this analysis revealed problems of formally reporting sexual harassment. This paper concludes with a discussion of findings and their implications for the ombuds profession.

KEYWORDS

ombudsman, ombuds, sexual harassment, Ambivalent Sexism Theory, mixed methods content analysis, narrative

Women are often subject to commonplace harassing sexual behaviors which collectively communicate that women are expected to accept men's advances without question. The disproportionate perpetration of sexual harassment against women reflects an enduring power imbalance between men and women, and there is no evidence to suggest that this trend has declined in recent years. In fact, National Public Radio (NPR) recently recapped these trends, including survey data which reports that 81% of women have been sexually harassed in their lifetime compared to 43% of men, in response to the survey's definition of sexual harassment including a broader continuum of experiences that women face (Chatterjee, 2018). However, men often do not interpret their harassing behaviors as sexual harassment (Rumrill et al., 2018). Fiske and Glick's (1995) Ambivalent Sexism Theory (AST) was born out of their interest to explain what motivates sexual harassment.

Furthermore, when organizational members are dissatisfied with organizational conditions – like the prevalence of workplace sexual harassment – they may choose to dissent, or speak out, against these behaviors and the organizational culture which condones them (Kassing, 1997). Alternatively, women who experience sexual harassment in the workplace may also take their concerns to a third party within the organization, such as an organizational ombuds professional (Adams & Rasch, 2020). Thus, the purpose of the current study is three-fold: (a) to answer repeated calls for empirical research on the organizational ombuds profession (Bingham, 2015); (b) to employ Ambivalent Sexism Theory (AST; Fiske & Glick, 1995), which explains the mixture of both positive and negative sexist attitudes towards women, as the theoretical framework for an investigation which seeks to contribute to the development of ombuds work as an evidence-based profession (Bingham, 2015); and (c) to enable ombuds professionals to identify possible motivations of ambivalent sexism so that they may improve their organizational cultures at large (Barkat, 2015).

Organizational Members' Responses to Sexually Harassing Behavior at Work

Sexual harassment comes in many forms and a majority of women report that it occurs both inside and outside of their professional environment (Graf, 2018). Moreover, about four-in-ten working women report facing gender discrimination at their jobs (Parker & Funk, 2017) and 77% of Americans say that sexual harassment is a significant barrier to women's equality in the U.S. (Barroso, 2020). The issue is so pervasive in fact that 65% of social media users report seeing some content related to sexual harassment or assault online daily (Anderson & Toor, 2018). Sexual harassment in the workplace first and foremost is deleterious to those who experience it (e.g., Clason, 2019; Conkel-Ziebell et al., 2019; Ford & Ivancic, 2020). Though sexual harassment also has ramifications for organizations at large (e.g., Connor & Fiske, 2019; Ford & Ivancic, 2020; Krishna et al., 2021). Sexual harassment persists and often goes unreported, despite victims' intentions (Goodwin et al., 2020). The previous body of literature demonstrates that tolerance for harassing behaviors is largely influenced by organizational culture (e.g., Dykstra-DeVette & Tarin, 2019; Ford & Ivancic, 2020; Keyton & Rhodes, 1999).

When women experience sexual harassment in organizations that tolerate—or even condone—these behaviors, they may begin to feel isolated and seek other avenues by which to make their complaint heard outside of formal reporting processes. One of those avenues involves circumventing one's immediate supervisor to address the complaint with someone else in a position of power within the organization (Kassing, 2002). Although circumvention is one of the least frequently used dissent strategies (Kassing, 2005), an employee may choose this strategy in the face of supervisor inaction, poor supervisor performance, and supervisor indiscretion (Kassing, 2009). Unfortunately though, this strategy is inherently risky and has been associated with deterioration of the supervisor-subordinate relationship, reprimanding, confrontation, retaliation, or sanctioning of the dissenter, and lack of corrective action entirely (Kassing, 2007). Thus, it is possible that victims of workplace sexual harassment may first seek more neutral parties to express their concerns before using any of these dissent strategies. Consequently,

ombuds are often the first to be informed in the case of workplace bullying (Hollis, 2016), a trend which likely extends to a myriad of sexual harassment cases received by ombuds professionals (Adams & Rasch, 2020).

Because ombuds ascribe to key standards of impartiality, confidentiality, independence, and informality, and function in part to provide clients with assistance with problem identification and resolution and strengthen their conflict competence (Barkat, 2015), it is no wonder that they are oft brought concerns about sexual harassment in their organizations (Adams & Rasch, 2020). Ombuds have recognized that sexually harassing behaviors are dominated by more complex and covert behaviors than assaults and quid pro quo (e.g., unsolicited invitations for sex, gender discrimination and stereotyping; Adams & Rasch, 2020). Implications of ombuds work with these behaviors have remained largely unaddressed (Adams & Rasch, 2020). Greater understanding of these more nuanced behaviors could empower ombuds professionals to have more productive conversations about sexual harassment with powerful organizational leaders and allow them to better establish trust with visitors who confide in them about these behaviors (Blair, 2017).

Ambivalent Sexism Theory as a Tool for Making Sense of Sexual Harassment Narratives

Such harmful sexually harassing behaviors often stem from underlying, often unconsciously held, ambivalently sexist beliefs (i.e., comprised of a mixture of both positive and negative attitudes about women; Fiske & Glick, 1995). An individual's sexism has been found to be positively related to 1) the tendency to seek advice primarily from men at work; 2) the number of promotions received; and 3) career advancement (Watkins et al., 2006). Sexism also contributes to individuals' perceptions of poor performance by women at work and differential selection of men and women for leadership positions (Acar & Sümer, 2018). Relatedly, women are about four times more likely than men to report being treated as incompetent at work because of their gender (Parker & Funk, 2017). Such experiences for women are also associated with negative perceptions of their job, poorer health, and frequency of presenteeism (Manuel et al., 2017). The mere anticipation of sexually harassing behavior alone is associated with worse self-efficacy, career outcomes, and goals (Conkel-Ziebell et al., 2019). Sexism also contributes to the gender wage gap through biased supervisory evaluations and reports on female employees (Connor & Fiske, 2019). Harassing behaviors by coworkers may even occur in settings like academic conferences (Settles & O'Connor, 2014) and on social media (Scarduzio et al., 2019).

When faced with such sexually harassing and/or discriminatory behaviors at work, employees who experience or otherwise witness these behaviors will engage in sensemaking (i.e., intentional cognitive efforts to make sense of an event) by seeking further information about harassing behaviors in their organization. Sensemaking allows individuals to ascribe meaning to these experiences and determine whether or not to take action, as they interpret their holistic experiences related to the harassment (Weick, 1995). Sensemaking is retrospective (i.e., based on events that have already occurred), grounded in identity construction (i.e., we interpret experiences according to how we perceive ourselves), social (i.e., with others), continuous (i.e., ongoing and subject to change), dependent on cues from one's environment (i.e., it is not possible to have all information about an event, so we must generalize from the information we do have), and driven by plausibility (versus accuracy; Weick, 1995). Sexual harassment victims and the ombuds serving as confidants (Adams & Rasch, 2020) alike will likely develop narratives in order to help them understand and articulate these experiences (Mumby, 1987). A deeper understanding of AST (Fiske & Glick, 1995) may be useful in order to fully understand the depth of and, likely unconscious, motivation for sexually harassing behaviors by transgressors.

Harassing behaviors can be used to bar women from such power and resources in the workplace, especially if harassment is tolerated by the organization at large. The threat of an outgroup (e.g., women) taking a more powerful group's (e.g., men) resources (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) prompts the powerful group's members to think more negatively about, and act more combatively toward, the outgroup's members. Still, prejudice is more complex. According to AST (Fiske & Glick, 1995), ambivalence is characterized as a mixture of positive and negative beliefs,

such as heterosexual men's competing desires for both dominance over and intimacy with women and that these implicit attitudes are held by people of all genders.

AST (Fiske & Glick, 1995) posits that this ambivalence is comprised of two dimensions: hostile sexism and benevolent sexism. Hostile sexism is characterized by egregious, overt, violent, or discriminatory motives, attitudes, and behaviors toward women. Benevolent sexism, on the other hand, is more subtle in nature in that it is positively valenced but still functions to harm women and limit their opportunities in the workplace. Both dimensions are further characterized as stemming from three key beliefs: 1) paternalistic motivations which suggest that women are weak and in need of protection and guidance from men; 2) gender differentiation which reflects a need to differentiate between biological sexes; and 3) heterosexuality which emphasizes the unique relational interdependence between men and women. Hostile paternalism manifests as dominative in nature whereas benevolent paternalism is protective in nature. Gender differentiation becomes hostile when it is done so competitively and is benevolent when it is approached as complementary. Finally, heterosexuality can elicit both positive and negative behaviors motivated by a desire for intimacy with the opposite sex.

Sexual harassment includes predatory behavior in an interpersonal interaction where structural power differentials related to gender are salient (MacKinnon, 1979). Adams and Rasch (2020), said that the neutral, impartial, independent ombuds professional is not immune to gendered and sexual power dynamics and are likely unconsciously influenced by many of the implicit attitudes outlined by AST (Fiske & Glick, 1995). However, when ombuds are armed with knowledge about such beliefs and the resultant different forms of sexual harassment, they may be empowered to act as transformational leaders to address systemic organizational issues of workplace sexual harassment (Blair, 2017). Thus, the current study employs AST as a theoretical lens by which to interpret second-hand accounts of 12 workplace sexual harassment narratives as recounted by anonymous ombuds professionals ("Tales from the Front Line of Ombuds Work: Handling Sexual Harassment Cases," 2021) and posits the following hypotheses and research questions.

Hypothesis 1: More perpetrators of sexual harassment will identify as men than women.

Hypothesis 2: More victims of sexual harassment will identify as women than men.

Hypothesis 3: More sexual harassment behaviors will be characterized by benevolent sexism than hostile sexism.

Research Question 1: How do victims respond differentially to experiencing benevolent sexist versus hostile sexist harassing behaviors?

Research Question 2: How do ombuds respond differentially to disclosures about benevolent sexist versus hostile sexist harassing behaviors?

Research Question 3: What problems with formal reporting of sexual harassment procedures are illuminated in narratives from ombuds?

METHOD

DATA

The current study entailed open coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) followed by quantitative content analysis (Riffe et al., 2005). The population for the study consisted of a set of 12 anonymous narratives by experienced ombuds professionals recounting their navigation of particularly challenging cases in which issues of sexual harassment were involved in some way ("Tales from the Front Line of Ombuds Work: Handling Sexual Harassment Cases," 2021). Purposive sampling of 10 of the 12 total units in the population were subject analysis employing the coding

strategy described in detail below. Two narratives were excluded from analyses because they did not feature a victim of an incident of sexual harassment.

These narratives were published in a special issue of the *Journal of the International Ombudsman Association* to allow experienced organizational ombuds professionals to share their stories of helping individuals with sexual harassment cases. The narratives ranged from two to five pages of single-spaced text. The authors kept the identities of anyone involved confidential by remaining anonymous and omitting or otherwise altering any nonessential details related to the case described in each narrative. In producing these narratives, ombuds were able to share how they handled each case as well as their emotional experiences during these cases in detail. Despite repeated calls for research on the ombuds profession (Bingham, 2015), this unique perspective is grossly underrepresented in empirical research. Through analyzing these narratives and considering the unique position of ombuds to silently influence policy by highlighting systemic problems in organizations (Hollis, 2016), this unique dataset provides fruitful ground to focus on the values and challenges of ombuds work as it relates to workplace sexual harassment.

CODING

Two independent coders blind to the purpose of the study received the codebook created by the author and underwent coder training prior to analyzing the data. Because the sample consists of only 10 units, the current study elected to forego a preliminary round of coding of a random subset of the population (usually a common practice in social science research with large samples of data subject to blind coding; Riffe et al., 2005). Each described sexual harassment incident served as the unit of analysis for the current study. The dataset first underwent open coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) toward the goal of refining the preliminary codebook developed by the author (see appendix for revised codebook). The two independent coders then coded the data so that it could be subject to quantitative content analysis (Riffe et al., 2005). Coders assessed each narrative for variables of interest such as perceived gender of the perpetrator and victim, attempt to formally report, displays of hostile and benevolent sexism. Refer to the appendix for the revised codebook and a complete list and description of all the variables coded in this study. Particularly illuminative cases of sexual harassment were selected by the author for the qualitative analysis portion of this study. These narratives were subject to a close reading similar to that of Kimport's (2012) study in which she identified and described unique ways that same-sex wedding photos challenged assumptions related to gender and heteronormativity by newlyweds' poses and attire. Narratives were selected for the qualitative portion of this study if they included details about an explicit discussion between the ombuds professional and the visitor about challenges or hesitation related to formally reporting an incident of sexual harassment.

RELIABILITY

After the data was independently coded by the two coders, inter-coder reliability was assessed by computing Cohen's kappa (i.e., an estimate typically used for small samples of data subject to independent coding in social science research) for each variable outlined by the codebook described above. Overall, Cohen's kappa for the current study's variables ranged from 0.50 (moderate) to 1.00 (perfect) agreement. Specifically, Cohen's kappa was 0.50 for attempt to formally report, 0.70 for mediation and benevolent sexism display – gender differentiation, 0.80 for number of victims, fear of retaliation, direct confrontation, emotional labor, and benevolent sexism display – other, and 0.90 for hostile sexism display, benevolent sexism display – protective paternalism, and benevolent sexism display – heterosexuality. All other variables had perfect agreement (i.e., reported gender of offender, reported gender of victim, victim displays self-blame, and punitive action). See table 1 for a complete list of the variables coded for each of the 10 narratives analyzed in this study.

*Study Variables Coded and Analyzed for Each Narrative*

	1	2	4	5	6	8	9	10	11	12
Gender of Offender (Man)	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Gender of Victim (Woman)	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Number of Victims	1	1	5	1	1	2	1	0	1	0
Victim Displays Self-Blame	X	X	X	—	X	X	X	—	X	—
Victim Fears Retaliation	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	—	—
Attempt to Formally Report	X	—	—	—	X	—	—	—	—	X
Punitive Action	—	—	X	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Mediation	X	—	X	—	—	—	X	—	X	—
Direct Confrontation	—	X	—	—	—	—	X	—	—	—
Emotional Labor for Ombuds Professional	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	—	X
Hostile Sexism Display	X	—	X	—	X	X	X	—	X	—
Benevolent Sexism Display – Protective Paternalism	—	—	—	—	X	—	X	—	—	—
Benevolent Sexism Display – Gender Differentiation	X	X	—	—	—	—	X	—	—	—
Benevolent Sexism Display – Heterosexuality	X	X	—	X	X	—	—	X	X	—
Benevolent Sexism Display – Other	—	X	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	X

Note. X indicates presence of variable in a given narrative. Narratives 3 and 7 excluded from analyses.

ANALYSES

Percentages were calculated for the following variables to test this study's three hypotheses: gender of offender, gender of victim, hostile sexism display, and benevolent sexism display. Bivariate correlations were run to test the study's first and second research questions. For the bivariate correlations, all coded benevolently sexist behaviors were combined and reflected by a single dichotomous variable to indicate the presence or absence of any type of benevolently sexist harassing behavior (i.e., protective paternalism, gender differentiation, heterosexuality, and other). All statistical analyses were performed via Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) Version 28.0.0.0. To answer the study's third and final research question, four narratives selected by the first author were selected for a qualitative close reading as indicated above (Kimport, 2012).

RESULTS

In all 10 sexual harassment narratives coded in this study, all reported offenders identified as men and all reported victims identified as women. Thus, hypotheses 1 and 2 were fully supported. The third hypothesis predicted that more sexual harassment behaviors would be characterized by benevolent sexism (i.e., protective paternalism $n = 2$, gender differentiation $n = 3$, heterosexuality $n = 6$, and other $n = 2$) than hostile sexism ($n = 6$). This hypothesis was also supported. Although some narratives ($n = 4$) were coded as having sexually harassing behaviors characterized by both hostile and benevolent sexism, cases with only benevolently sexist behaviors ($n = 4$) outnumbered those with only hostile sexist behavior ($n = 2$). Additionally, of the total of 19 sexually harassing behaviors identified by the independent coders in this study, the total number of benevolently sexist behaviors ($n = 13$, 68.4%) outnumbered hostile sexist behaviors ($n = 6$, 31.6%). Thus, hypothesis 3 received full support.

Research questions 1 and 2 inquired about the relationship between reported hostile and benevolently sexist harassing behaviors and several behavioral reactions exhibited by both victims (i.e., self-blame $n = 7$, fear of retaliation $n = 8$, attempt to formally report $n = 3$, mediation $n = 4$, direct confrontation $n = 2$) and ombuds (i.e., attempt to formally report $n = 3$, punitive action $n = 1$, mediation $n = 4$, direct confrontation $n = 2$, emotional labor or hardship $n = 9$). Several statistically significant relationships emerged. Those were a positive relationship between hostile sexism display and victim displays self-blame, a positive relationship between hostile sexism display and mediation, and a negative association between benevolent sexism display and punitive action. See table 2 for the correlation matrix of all the variables included in this analysis.

Correlations for Study Variables Analyzed in Research Questions 1 and 2

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Hostile Sexism Display	—	-.408	.802**	.102	.089	.272	.667*	-.102	-.272
2. Benevolent Sexism Display		—	-.327	-.250	.327	-.667*	-.102	.250	-.167
3. Victim Display Self-Blame			—	.218	-.048	.218	.535	.327	-.218
4. Victim Fears Retaliation				—	-.218	.167	-.102	.250	.667
5. Attempt to Formally Report					—	-.218	-.089	-.327	.218
6. Punitive Action						—	.408	-.167	.111
7. Mediation							—	.102	-.408
8. Direct Confrontation								—	.167
9. Emotional Labor for Ombuds Professional									—

Note. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

PROBLEMS OF FORMAL REPORTING

Following quantitative analyses of the relationships among variables in the narratives as specified by the independent coders, I provide an analysis of select narratives ($n = 3$) in which perceived problems with formal sexual harassment reporting processes are illuminated to address this study's third and final research question. Broadly, problematics of formal reporting fell into four themes: 1) fear of consequences of reporting; 2) harasser in a position of power; 3) belief that reporting is ineffective; and 4) the pressures associated with the formal reporting process. Each of these themes will be explained in detail and with evidence from the three narratives provided.

FEAR OF CONSEQUENCES OF REPORTING

All three of the ombuds in the narratives examined in this qualitative portion indicated that they received either explicit (verbal) or implicit (nonverbal) expressions of discomfort with the notion of formally reporting sexual harassment experiences by persons harmed. One ombuds professional even noted that the victim expressed relief upon the explanation that they could expect confidentiality unless they elected to pursue alternative actions that would require breaking confidentiality at their discretion (4, "Tales from the Front Line of Ombuds Work: Handling Sexual Harassment Cases," 2021).

These victims feared formally reporting for a variety of reasons, including *lack of confidentiality* and *retaliation by harasser and/or organization*. Victims attributed these fears to 1) their own desires to keep the situation quiet; 2) lack of explicit protections offered through formal reporting channels; 3) observed consequences for previous reporters of sexual harassment (e.g., job transfer); 4) possibility of being coerced with sensitive personal information held by the harasser (e.g., victim's sexual orientation); and 5) potential damage to one's career or reputation within their field. Additionally, one female victim had their fear of lack of confidentiality realized when they reached out to Title IX (i.e., office responsible for handling sexual harassment cases occurring at colleges and universities in the United States) and an investigation was launched against their wishes and without their consent (6, "Tales from the Front Line of Ombuds Work: Handling Sexual Harassment Cases," 2021).

HARASSER IN A POSITION OF POWER

In all three narratives, the perpetrators all held some *formal position of authority* relative to their victim. Additionally, victims described their harassers as men who were well-respected, having influence within the organization, or having some other significant amount of *social capital* within the department or organization. One victim also had disclosed to their perpetrator that they were gay and feared that they would use the information against them if they attempted to formally report him. They later learned that her perpetrator had also sexually harassed a colleague suffering from severe depression and ultimately concluded that the perpetrator intentionally preyed on victims that were relatively either *psychologically or emotionally vulnerable* to him (8, "Tales from the Front Line of Ombuds Work: Handling Sexual Harassment Cases," 2021).

BELIEF THAT REPORTING IS INEFFECTIVE

The belief that formal reporting processes are simply ineffective is a distinct problem with formal reporting. Even when victims did not necessarily display or indicate fear of retaliation, they did disclose explicitly that they did not believe the formal reporting process would result in justice being served to their transgressor. Victims believed this because 1) they lacked trust in both the reporting channels themselves and their organizations at large; 2) lack of response after formal reporting by former victims; 3) negative experiences suffered by former reporters; 4) lack of witnesses and evidence; 5) perceived organizational motives for self-preservation; and 6) perceptions that others also believe reporting is ineffective.

PRESSURES TO FORMALLY REPORT

Two of these narratives also illuminated some additional pressures to formally report their sexual harassment experiences beyond their own motivations (4, 6, "Tales from the Front Line of Ombuds Work: Handling Sexual Harassment Cases," 2021). In the first of the two narratives, a victim had approached the ombuds office in search of guidance on how to handle a string of sexually harassing behaviors after finally having been groped by the offender in the break room. Later in the narrative, it is revealed that he had several other victims that became aware of each other after giving consent to the ombuds professional for each victim to have their experiences shared amongst each other. One of the victims was enthusiastic about formal reporting or some other collective action, but not all were comfortable with pursuing this option. Although the ombuds professional in this narrative reported that the first victim he spoke with was grateful for the support in knowing she was not the only person that experienced sexual harassment from her boss, it also created undue social pressure and *increased sense of moral responsibility to formally report* despite her personal feelings about the matter.

In the second narrative, the victim wanted to do something about the sexual harassment she had experienced but was simply *unaware of alternative options* to respond to the transgression. However, as the ombuds professional explained her options, still encouraging her to file a formal report, the narrative indicated that she began to feel comfortable in considering filing a formal report. The ombuds professional stated, "I wanted to help her report, if only to illuminate the issue for administration... I was genuinely disturbed that the visitor was so afraid to use the formal process," (6, "Tales from the Front Line of Ombuds Work: Handling Sexual Harassment Cases,"

2021, p. 17). Is it possible that in the ombuds' quest for justice, that they may have also implicitly communicated an additional pressure for the victim to formally report the sexual harassment in their explanation of the reporting process and enthusiasm for it? Ombuds must be vigilant in conversations with victims of workplace sexual harassment to avoid potentially, albeit unknowingly, creating additional pressure to report.

DISCUSSION

Overall, this investigation yields evidence that ombuds' attitudes and behaviors in response to workplace sexual harassment are consistent with previous trends and research. The findings also offer several interesting practical implications for experienced ombuds professionals when working with clients who have experienced harassing behaviors at work. Finally, I will conclude with a discussion about the limitations of the current study and possible directions for future research that wishes to examine the complex issue of workplace sexual harassment from the unique position of the experienced ombuds.

All three of this study's hypotheses were supported by the quantitative analysis portion of this investigation. In the narratives examined, all perpetrators of sexual harassment were men, and all victims were women. Although men can be victims of sexual harassment (Scarduzio et al., 2018), these results do reflect trends that suggest men are typically the perpetrators of sexual harassment unto women at work (Rumrill et al., 2018). The third hypothesis predicted that harassing behaviors characterized by benevolent sexism (i.e., behaviors which are positively valenced but still function to harm women and limit their opportunities in the workplace; Fiske & Glick, 1995) would be more prevalent than harassing behaviors characterized by hostile sexism (i.e., behaviors that are more egregious, overt, violent or discriminatory towards women; Fiske & Glick, 1995). This hypothesis was also supported. Even when women are not experiencing violence at work (e.g., hostile sexism), they are more likely to be forced to cope with or isolate themselves from seemingly commonplace behaviors that make them uncomfortable (Clason, 2019). Women are also more likely to be treated as incompetent because of their gender (Parker & Funk, 2017) which in turn may negatively impact self-efficacy and achievement of career goals (Conkel-Ziebell et al., 2019).

The first two of the study's three research questions aimed to determine possible links between outcomes and experiences for perpetrators, victims, and experienced ombuds of benevolent sexism versus hostile sexism. Three statistically significant relationships emerged: positive relationships (i.e., as one variable increases, so does the other) between 1) victim self-blame and hostile sexism display; 2) mediation by the ombuds professional among the victim and perpetrator and hostile sexism display; and 3) a negative relationship (i.e., as one variable increases, the other variable *decreases*) between punitive action for the perpetrator and benevolent sexism display. These associations are certainly worthy of interpretation. Interestingly, the negative association between punitive action for perpetrators of harassment characterized by benevolent sexism and the positive association between mediation by the ombuds professional between the victim and perpetrators of hostile sexism were of the same weight.

These results suggest that organizations fail to provide justice to women who are victims of sexual harassment, especially that which is characterized by benevolent sexism, despite the negative workplace outcomes that victims experience as a result (Settles & O'Connor, 2014). This claim is further supported by direct quotes from the narratives themselves. For example, one victim seeking to resolve the harassment she was experiencing disclosed, "After I told the chair what the professor had said and done to make me feel uncomfortable, the chair said, 'Well, at least he has good taste.'" (1, "Tales from the Front Line of Ombuds Work: Handling Sexual Harassment Cases," 2021, p. 2). The author of this same narrative also stated, "...what I learned as an ombuds is that sometimes those who have the power to hold others accountable don't effectively execute their responsibility and might even need to be held accountable themselves" (1, "Tales from the Front Line of Ombuds Work: Handling Sexual Harassment Cases," 2021, p. 4). A victim from a different organization expressed frustration about "HR's non-response to her

report to them” (4, “Tales from the Front Line of Ombuds Work: Handling Sexual Harassment Cases,” 2021, p. 12). Finally, ombuds themselves expressed frustration with their organizations’ response (or lack thereof) to instances of sexual harassment. For example, “Could I walk away from this case knowing that someone in the organization was potentially committing such heinous acts and ‘getting away with it?’” (8, “Tales from the Front Line of Ombuds Work: Handling Sexual Harassment Cases,” 2021, p. 24).

Thus, institutions reinforce that these behaviors are acceptable and they are reproduced as normative aspects of organizational culture (Dykstra-DeVette & Tarin, 2019). Furthermore, when victims experience hostile sexist behaviors, they may only be addressed through mediation by ombuds seeking to preserve neutrality possibly contributing to the phenomenon by which men often do not interpret their harmful behaviors as sexually harassing (Rumrill et al., 2018). Together, these two relationships suggest that the organizational cultures in which the ombuds in the narratives examined are employed may condone some normative harassment. Additionally, there was a substantial positive association between victims’ experiences of hostile sexist behaviors and their own self-blame, reinforcing the notion that hostile sexist acts are weaponized as a punishment for women who fail to conform to socially prescribed gender roles and expectations (Fiske & Glick, 1995).

The study’s final research question sought to identify some problematics with formal reporting processes as illuminated by three key narratives from ombuds which was selected after the quantitative content analysis was completed. Four general problems emerged: 1) victims’ fear of consequences of reporting; 2) harassers holding some position of power over their victims; 3) victims’ belief that reporting is an ineffective solution to sexual harassment; and 4) increased pressure on victims to respond to an incident of sexual harassment via formal reporting channels. Interestingly, three of these themes have been identified in previous research as comprising general attitudes related to reporting sexual harassment (i.e., risks of reporting, utility of reporting, and moral duty to report; Cesario et al., 2018). Decreased perceived risk of reporting and increased perceived usefulness of reporting and one’s sense of moral duty to report are thought to increase positive attitudes about reporting sexual harassment in general (Cesario et al., 2018).

However, this study’s results also suggest that increased pressure to report may be harmful for victims and put at them at increased risk of revictimization by the organization at large (Keyton & Rhodes, 1999) or other organizational members (Garcia et al., 2009). One ombuds professional pointed out, “Despite what I thought was a good initial outcome, Mary’s return brought home to me the fact that informally intervening in sexual harassment matters can leave a victim vulnerable to further unwelcome behavior,” (2, “Tales from the Front Line of Ombuds Work: Handling Sexual Harassment Cases,” 2021, p. 7). However, in cases where formal avenues were taken in these narratives, evidence of revictimization was also clear. For example:

[The victim] shared that in a moment of desperation, she called Human Resources hoping to have a confidential conversation. After listening to her, the Human Resources representative informed the visitor that her statements would initiate a Title IX investigation into her allegations and all parties would be notified of the pending action. Once the investigator contacted her, she declared that she would not participate in the investigation and tried to withdraw from the Title IX process. However, the investigation continued, and the accused was found not in violation of Title IX provisions due to the visitor’s lack of cooperation. She was reassigned to a different supervisor, but still has daily contact with the accused. She felt that the investigation happened to her without her consent and revictimized her all over again (6, “Tales from the Front Line of Ombuds Work: Handling Sexual Harassment Cases,” 2021, p. 18).

In addition to perpetrators identified in this sample of narratives as men, the narratives examined in the qualitative portion of this study indicated that perpetrators also held additional formal or informal power over their victims in addition to mere dominant group membership as related to

gender (Turner & Tajfel, 1986). For example, “Ronald (not his real name) was a long-time and well-respected person in the office, and he held significant amounts of positional authority and social cachet at all levels,” (4, “Tales from the Front Line of Ombuds Work: Handling Sexual Harassment Cases,” 2021, p. 11).

Ombuds can certainly benefit from several considerations in light of this study’s findings alongside previous theory and research (Bingham, 2015). First, by recognizing that harassing behaviors characterized by benevolent sexism ombuds may more quickly be able to (a) identify harassers and harassing behaviors as such before they escalate to the egregious behaviors as characterized by hostile sexism, and (b) affirm the experiences of victims experiencing sexual harassment who may be perplexed by the nuance of benevolently sexist behaviors (Fiske & Glick, 1995). It is also possible that the codebook developed for this study and provided in the appendix may be adapted to serve as a diagnostic tool for ombuds upon intake of visitors who may have experienced workplace sexual harassment in order to determine whether or not sexual harassment may have occurred (partly answering the call of Adams & Rasch, 2020).

Previous scholarship suggests that systemic problems identified by ombuds unfortunately often go unaddressed and that individuals who seek to address them may be penalized (Blair, 2017). One ombuds professional, however, noted, “Ombuds are strategically positioned within our organizations to see things before they happen... ombuds are often aware of issues well before the masses,” (6, “Tales from the Front Line of Ombuds Work: Handling Sexual Harassment Cases,” 2021, p. 18). This same ombuds professional also suggests that utilizing avenues such as collaboration with other ombuds and conflict resolution peers, meetings and strategic conversations, annual and mid-year reports, and feedback surveys to act as advocates for victims of sexual harassment while still maintaining integrity to their role within organizations. These suggestions are somewhat in line with previous authors’ suggestions about ways that ombuds can influence policy and aggregate data in order to highlight bias, unfairness, and unresponsiveness to issues like workplace bullying (Hollis, 2016). Thus, although constrained in some ways by their role as ombuds, the ombud is still practically positioned to influence systemic change in their organizations’ responses to instances of sexual harassment at large, if not in a case-by-case basis.

Adams and Rasch (2020) also highlight the importance of experienced ombuds’ acknowledgement of their own susceptibility to gendered power dynamics in conversations with victims of sexual harassment and that they too wield some power over visitors who disclose these experiences in discrete settings. Furthermore, they add that ombuds need not necessarily explicitly violate sexual harassment policies to make their visitors uncomfortable. One ombuds professional recommends an ongoing, critical self-reflection process when listening to visitors who disclose experiences with workplace sexual harassment:

Even while I am listening carefully, at another level of consciousness I ask myself questions: Is my body tense or relaxed? Am I receptive or skeptical? Is my first reaction to like or dislike the person? Is it easy to listen to them or is my mind wandering? Am I eager for the person to finish or am I patient and willing to follow their discourse wherever it is going? How does their identity – race, gender, sexual orientation, age, etc. – affect me and how I respond to them? This is one useful way to identify my biases, ferret out feelings that could affect my interactions with the person. It also allows me to evaluate critically whatever thoughts I have about how to proceed with the case. Am I giving them a fair shot? I also try to consider how I would handle the case if I were a different person. Sometimes, if I do not feel I am connecting well with the person, I ask this even during our initial meeting. With others these questions do not arise until after the session. I pay attention to that difference because it may tell me something about my feelings about a person. This type of question-based self-reflection is necessary if I am to treat people fairly. I always have subjective reactions to people, and I don’t let myself pretend that I don’t. For me being conscious of these reactions is the best way to keep them from

biasing how I interact with others. If I am conscious of my reactions, I can at least try to control them. I don't believe impartiality and neutrality are actually achievable, but aspiring toward them is essential. That aspiration allows me to self-correct as I work on a case. (5, "Tales from the Front Line of Ombuds Work: Handling Sexual Harassment Cases," 2021, p. 14).

Perhaps the strategies recommended here can be implemented in training and development exercises meant to strengthen ombuds' tact and sensitivity in dealing with such difficult cases and best support victims while still maintaining standards of impartiality. This self-reflection process may help experienced ombuds identify the nuance of benevolent sexism and perhaps even recognize where they have excused such behaviors in the past or perhaps even committed them themselves.

Second, ombuds are uniquely positioned to earn trust of victims of sexual harassment due to their emphasis on confidentiality, impartiality, independence, and informality (Barkat, 2015) and are often the first to learn about sexual harassment at their institutions (Hollis, 2016). With this trust comes power which in turn endows ombuds with responsibility to move their organizations toward transformational change (Blair, 2017) by effectively identifying and preventing sexual harassment. Ombuds may also be able to express victims' concerns about formal reporting and the lack of protections for reporters. Ombuds may help organizations demonstrate their acknowledgment and understanding of these concerns.

Finally, ombuds must be mindful of the emotional toll that they experience themselves while handling cases involving sexual harassment. For example:

Almost always [sexual harassment cases] have a deep impact – these are not the cases I forget about when I go home at the end of the day. These are the ones I can't stop thinking about, that wake me up in the middle of the night. Interactions with people involved in sexual harassment cases (both harassers and victims) are among the most intimate, evocative, and painful connections one can experience while in the ombuds role (5, "Tales from the Front Line of Ombuds Work: Handling Sexual Harassment Cases," 2021, p. 14).

This emotional labor is not to be taken lightly, especially given that evidence of emotional consequences for ombuds was found in an overwhelming majority of the narratives analyzed in the current study. Organizations employing ombuds thus have a responsibility to provide resources and support for ombuds who experience emotional hardship from handling sexual harassment cases in addition to avenues for them to express concerns about potential systemic issues related to sexual harassment in their respective organizations.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Although yielding significant and interesting results on the topic of workplace sexual harassment, this study's findings must be interpreted with caution given its small sample size ($N = 10$). It is important to acknowledge that such a small sample unfortunately limits the generalizability of its results beyond the organizations that employed these experienced ombuds when they provided these narratives. That being said, the ombuds professional is severely underrepresented in research about workplace sexual harassment (Bingham, 2015) which supports the merit of this investigation. Future studies should invoke cross-sectional and/or longitudinal designs collecting survey data to assess effectiveness of ombuds' interventions for visitors experiencing sexual harassment as well as their ability to identify benevolently sexist behaviors as such. Dyadic analysis of ombuds and their visitors may also enhance the validity of future studies about the ombuds' role in addressing, and supporting victims of, workplace sexual harassment.

Relatedly, although Ambivalent Sexism Theory (Fiske & Glick, 1995) was born out of interest to explain sexual harassment at work perpetrated by heterosexual men onto women, this sample



and study fail to acknowledge the nuances of sexual harassment perpetrated by women, suffered by men and LGBTQIA+ individuals, and in cases of same-sex sexual harassment (Scarduzio et al., 2018) perpetuating a cis, heteronormative view of the much more complex issue of workplace sexual harassment. Future studies should seek out underrepresented populations in sexual harassment research to represent the experiences of all victims of workplace sexual harassment. Finally, attempts to formally report as assessed by independent coders had substantially lower intercoder reliability than all other variables coded in this study. It is possible that the operationalization of this variable did not clearly differentiate enough between victims explicitly attempting to formally report their sexual harassment and narratives where formal reporting was discussed as an option, or an investigation was launched against the victims' wishes. Future researchers should carefully consider the formal reporting process alongside victims' actual intentions to report.



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AUTHOR BIO

R. E. Purtell is a second-year doctoral student in the Department of Communication Studies at West Virginia University with areas of emphasis in intergroup communication and interpersonal communication. Specifically, she is interested in contributing to our understanding of how social issues are communicated and perpetuated in the workplace by taking a social issue-centered perspective on analyzing organizational culture and communication and studying communication dynamics in traditionally underrepresented romantic relationships (e.g., consensually non monogamous relationships). She has no known conflict of interest to disclose.

Correspondence concerning this paper should be addressed to R. E. Purtell, Department of Communication Studies, P. O. Box 6293, West Virginia University, Morgantown, WV 26506-6293. E-mail: rep0027@mix.wvu.edu. R. E. Purtell 
<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1082-847X>



APPENDIX
Sexual Harassment Narratives: Extended Protocol

V1. Narrative ID number _____

Definitions and Directions

Each full narrative has already been numbered 1-12, please convert this number to a two-digit code (e.g., 1 → 01, 11 → 11).

Purpose of Code

The ID number is important, because it represents the key to connecting our quantified data on a given article to the actual narrative in the PDF of the special issue on sexual harassment by the *Journal of the International Ombudsman Association*.

V2. Reported gender of offender (Man/Woman) _____

Definitions and Directions

Please code Man as “1” and Woman as “0.” If the gender of the offender is not reported in the narrative please code as Other, “2.”

Purpose of Code

It is important to note the reported gender of the offender in each sexual harassment narrative because trends in previous research show that incidences of sexual harassment reflect enduring power imbalances between men and women.

V3. Reported gender of victim (Man/Woman) _____

Definitions and Directions

Please code Man as “1” and Woman as “0.” If the gender of the offender is not reported in the narrative please code as Other, “2.”

Purpose of Code

It is important to note the reported gender of the victim in each sexual harassment narrative because trends in previous research show that incidences of sexual harassment reflect enduring power imbalances between men and women.

V4. Number of victims _____

Definitions and Directions

Please numerically indicate the number of victims identified in each narrative (e.g., 1, 2, 3, 4, 5...). Only code the number of victims explicitly identified.

Purpose of Code

Here we are noting how many victims of the same perpetrator were identified by each organizational ombuds professional in a single narrative. Many perpetrators of sexual harassment are repeat offenders and/or have a history of sexually harassing behaviors.

V5. Victim displays self-blame (Yes/No) _____



Definitions and Directions

Please code Yes as “1” and No as “0.” If it is unclear whether or not the victim displays self-blame please code as No, “0.”

Purpose of Code

Here we are noting whether or not the victim of sexual harassment disclosed to the ombuds professional that they felt in some way responsible for and/or had encouraged the harassing behaviors they experienced. Many victims of sexual harassment blame themselves for these experiences, which may hinder their ability and/or desire to pursue formal action.

V6. Victim fears retaliation (Yes/No) _____

Definitions and Directions

Please code Yes as “1” and No as “0.” If it is unclear whether or not the victim discloses fear of retaliation from either the perpetrator of sexual harassment or others in the organization (e.g., coworkers, supervisors, etc.) to the ombuds professional, please code as No, “0.”

Purpose of Code

Here we are noting whether or not the victim of sexual harassment disclosed to the ombuds professional that they feared retaliation in some form as a potential consequence of formally reporting sexual harassment.

V7. Attempt to formally report (Yes/No) _____

Definitions and Directions

Please code Yes as “1” and No as “0.” If it is unclear whether or not the victim attempted to formally report their offender (i.e., to Title IX, Human Resources, or some other official organizational entity) prior to meeting with the ombuds professional please code as No, “0.”

Purpose of Code

Here we are noting whether or not the victim of sexual harassment disclosed to the ombuds professional that they attempted to formally report their offender either *after* or *prior to* meeting with the ombuds professional.

V8. Punitive Action (Yes/No) _____

Definitions and Directions

Please code Yes as “1” and No as “0.” If it is unclear whether or not punitive action was taken against the offender after the victim’s meeting with the ombuds professional please code as No, “0.” Punitive action does not include lack of promotion or advancement, educational intervention, or an ambiguous departure from the organization.

Purpose of Code

Here we are noting whether or not punitive action was taken against the offender *after* the victim’s meeting with the ombuds professional.

V9. Mediation (Yes/No) _____



Definitions and Directions

Please code Yes as “1” and No as “0.”

Purpose of Code

Here we are noting whether or not the ombuds professional served as a mediator and/or facilitated a conversation or meeting to resolve the sexual harassment issue between the victim and offender or between the victim or perpetrator and some official organizational entity (i.e., Title IX, Human Resources, etc.).

V10. Direct confrontation (Yes/No) _____

Definitions and Directions

Please code Yes as “1” and No as “0.” If it is unclear whether or not the victim attempted to directly confront their offender either *after* or *prior to* meeting with the ombuds professional please code as No, “0.”

Purpose of Code

Here we are noting whether or not the victim of sexual harassment disclosed to the ombuds professional that they attempted to directly confront their offender either *after* or *prior to* meeting with the ombuds professional.

V11. Emotional labor for ombuds professional (Yes/No) _____

Definitions and Directions

Please code Yes as “1” and No as “0.”

Purpose of Code

Here we are noting whether or not the ombuds professional disclosed experiencing any intense and/or negative emotions in their narratives as a result of dealing with a sexual harassment case (e.g., conflicted, angry, sickened, worried, frustration, etc.).

V12. Hostile sexism display (Yes/No) _____

Definitions and Directions

Please code Yes as “1” and No as “0.”

Purpose of Code

Here we are noting whether or not the offender in the sexual harassment narrative displayed sexist and/or harassing behaviors characterized by hostile sexism. Hostile sexism is defined as “reflecting overtly negative evaluations and stereotypes about a gender.”

Behaviors characterized by hostile sexism include (but are not limited to) groping or touching, unwanted exposure of genitals, sexual assault, or blatant discrimination or derogation based on gender.

V13. Benevolent sexism display – protective paternalism (Yes/No) _____



Definitions and Directions

Please code Yes as “1” and No as “0.”

Purpose of Code

Here we are noting whether or not the offender in the sexual harassment narrative displayed sexist and/or harassing behaviors characterized by benevolent sexism, specifically its dimension of protective paternalism. Benevolent sexism is defined as “evaluations of gender that may appear subjectively positive but are actually damaging to people and gender equality more broadly.”

Protective paternalism is defined as “implying that men should protect and care for women.”

Behaviors characterized by the protective paternalism dimension of benevolent sexism include (but are not limited to) offering to do tasks for women that they are capable of doing, being unnecessarily protective of a woman, and treating a woman as if she is fragile.

V14. Benevolent sexism display – gender differentiation (Yes/No) _____

Definitions and Directions

Please code Yes as “1” and No as “0.”

Purpose of Code

Here we are noting whether or not the offender in the sexual harassment narrative displayed sexist and/or harassing behaviors characterized by benevolent sexism, specifically its dimension of gender differentiation. Benevolent sexism is defined as “evaluations of gender that may appear subjectively positive but are actually damaging to people and gender equality more broadly.”

Gender differentiation is defined as “placing importance on traditional gender roles for women (e.g., mother & wife) and assuming that men depend on women to fulfill these roles.”

Behaviors characterized by the gender differentiation dimension of benevolent sexism include (but are not limited to) inappropriate romantic or sexual comments, insisting that men and women are opposites, forcing women into socially prescribed gender roles (e.g., childcare, party planning, baking, chores), and suggesting that men and women are of different/unequal value to the workplace.

V15. Benevolent sexism display – heterosexuality (Yes/No) _____

Definitions and Directions

Please code Yes as “1” and No as “0.”

Purpose of Code

Here we are noting whether or not the offender in the sexual harassment narrative displayed sexist and/or harassing behaviors characterized by benevolent sexism, specifically its dimension of heterosexuality. Benevolent sexism is defined as “evaluations of gender that may appear subjectively positive but are actually damaging to people and gender equality more broadly.”



Heterosexuality is defined as “romanticizing women as having sexual purity and views romantic intimacy as necessary to complete a man.”

Behaviors characterized by the heterosexuality dimension of benevolent sexism include (but are not limited to) unsolicited flirting, unsolicited invitations for sex or dates, and unsolicited comments about a woman’s physical appearance.

V16. Benevolent sexism display – other (Yes/No) _____

Definitions and Directions

Please code Yes as “1” and No as “0.”

Purpose of Code

Here we are noting whether or not the offender in the sexual harassment narrative displayed sexist and/or harassing behaviors characterized by benevolent sexism that could not be confidently categorized by its three dimensions of protective paternalism, gender differentiation, or heterosexuality. Benevolent sexism is defined as “evaluations of gender that may appear subjectively positive but are actually damaging to people and gender equality more broadly.”