

PERSONALITY TRAITS AND SEXUAL HARASSMENT COPING BEHAVIOR: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF UNDERGRADUATES STUDENTS IN SELECTED MALAYSIAN COLLEGES

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ABSTRACT

Considerable amount of evidence suggests that sexual harassment is still a widespread worldwide phenomenon. There are several courses of action a person can take after being harassed ranging from invoking legal action to directly confronting the harasser. Whatever action is chosen, the victim would have to overcome their own personal insecurities and fear of possible retaliation. As such, exploring and understanding the personality factors is considered very relevant in addressing the sexual harassment phenomena. A purposive sampling was carried out among university undergraduate students involving 112 respondents. The overall regression model shows that personality has a significant influence on sexual harassment coping behavior. The R^2 shows that 21 percent predictability level with 3 of the personality traits was found to be significant. Neuroticism was found to have the highest influence on the coping behavior, followed by Conscientiousness and Openness. Discussions of the findings based on theoretical consideration offers justification of the result of the study.

Keywords: Sexual harassment, coping strategies, big five personality, OCEAN, college students.

INTRODUCTION

Evidence from official reports and empirical studies seems to strongly suggest that sexual harassment is still a globally widespread phenomenon that is occurring at a very alarming rate (United Nation, 2015). This phenomenon, ranging from mild sexually inclined incidents (such as staring, request for date, whistling) that might not be directly related to job threats, or to the more extreme cases which involves physical abuse or sexual intimidations. For example, a report from the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission in 2007 estimated at least 15,000 sexual harassment reported cases annually. While the European Women's Lobby reports that between 40 and 50 percent of female employees have experienced some form of sexual harassment or unwanted sexual behavior in the workplace. A survey carried out in Japan with 6762 workers and supervisors reported that two third (2254) of the respondents had the experience of being sexually harassed. Similar result were observed in Korea when 64% of women respondents have been subjected to verbal harassments, 34% visual harassment and 25% were forced to attend dinner parties with men clients. A study carried out earlier in the decade involving 30 countries including Indonesia, Philippines and India showed highest percentage of serious cases of sexual harassments including attempted rape and other indecent or sexually offensive behavior.

In Malaysia, a survey conducted by AWAM and Women Development Collective in 2002 have also shown some disturbing result, with 35% of the respondents experiencing one or more forms of sexual harassment (<http://www.awam.org.my/>). An even earlier survey of two government departments in Penang and Perlis, two Northern states of Malaysia found that 83 per cent and 88 per cent of the women respondents respectively had experienced some form of sexual harassment. However, these statistics is must also be taken with caution, since some studies have also reported situation of under-reporting of sexual harassment due to social and cultural constraints (Sabitha, 2008). The seriousness of this problem has prompted the Ministry of Human Resources to come up with the Guideline for Sexual Harassment in the Workplace (1999), while legal action could also be taken under some provision in the Penal Code, Employment Act (1955) and Industrial Relation Act (1967). Some organizations have also been proactive by introducing policies and procedures safe guarding their employees from sexual harassments. Evidence of the effectiveness of these measures can only be shown through the response of the employees themselves by invoking their rights as stated in these rules and regulations, or they could directly confront the harasser. Background data collected from some studies seems to indicate that majority of the victims seems to choose to remain silent about this problem (Alagappan and Marican, 2014). This scenario seems to indicate the relationship between individual personality traits and the willingness to act against or cope with sexual harassment. This study is an attempt to explore this relationship

LITERATURE REVIEW

Sexual Harassment

Sexual harassment refers to sexual conduct that is unwanted, unwelcome, or unsolicited coercive, or threatening sexual attention, often in a non-reciprocal relationship. It includes requests for sexual favours which are inappropriate and offensive (www.wao.org.my). Examples of sexual harassment include **verbal harassment** (offensive or suggestive remarks, comments, jokes, jesting, kidding, sounds, questioning) or **non-verbal/gestural harassment** (leering or ogling with suggestive overtones, licking lips or holding or eating food provocatively, hand signal or sign language denoting sexual activity, persistent flirting). Other classifications include **visual harassment** (showing pornographic materials, drawing sex-based sketches or writing sex-based letters, sexual exposure), **psychological harassment** (repeated unwanted social invitations, relentless proposals for dates

or physical intimacy) and **physical harassment** (inappropriate touching, patting, pinching, stroking, brushing up against the body, hugging, kissing, fondling, sexual assault).

Sexual Harassment in Educational Institutions

Studies have consistently shown that almost two-thirds of college students experience some type of sexual harassment and less than 10 percent of these students tell a college or university employee about their experiences and an even smaller fraction officially report them to relevant officers (Hill and Silva, 2005; Jordan, Comb and Smith, 2014; Bureau of Inter-University Cooperation, 2016). Reports of sexual harassment occurring in Malaysian universities are also as serious where up to 50 percent of students claim to be harassed, mostly females harassed by males. The study further disclosed that up to 60 percent of respondents to the survey reported being victims of sexual jokes, 20 percent of unwanted sexual attention, and 8 percent of unwanted sexual coercion (Hunter, 2015; Marican, 2001; Wendy Yee, Alagappan & Ngeow, 2015;).

In the United States, the prohibition of sex discrimination, gender based bullying and sexual harassment and violence in educational institutions is specifically included in the Federal law. Even though there are no similar laws in Malaysia, the offence related to sexual harassment in general are within the scope of the Guideline for Sexual Harassment in Workplace (1999), while legal action could still be taken under some provisions in the Penal Code, Employment Act (1955), and Industrial Relation Act (1967). Some schools and universities in Malaysia do have a specific in-house policy and procedure in dealing with cases of sexual harassment, nevertheless, some have on their own initiative, adopted certain policies and procedure (Mohammad, Sardar Baig, Trakic, Mallow, and Surajuddeen, 2014; Marican, 2005; Marican, 2008).

Sexual Harassment Coping Behaviour (SHCB)

In psychology, coping means to invest own conscious effort, to solve personal and interpersonal problems, in order to try to master, minimize or tolerate stress and conflict. There has been considerable number of studies published during the past decades to operationalize sexual harassment coping behaviour into meaningful categories. Maypole (1986), Gruber (1992), and Jones and Remland (1992), have attempted to classify responses to SH along a single unidimensional continuum scale from passive to assertive. These response categories include,

- avoidance — the most passive response, which may include such behaviors as ignoring the SH or doing nothing;
- diffusion — slightly more active responses, including such actions as stalling, going along with the behavior, or making a joke of it;
- seeking social support—using sympathetic others to express anger and provide emotional support;
- negotiation — a more assertive response, which may include direct requests to stop the behaviour;
- seeking outside help — using outside experts; and
- confrontation — the most assertive response in Gruber's continuum, which generally includes the use of the organizational power structure.

Gutek and Koss (1993) argue that a two-by-two typology provides a better foundation from which to examine target responses to sexual harassment. They suggest a typology featuring individual responses versus responses involving others as one dimension and direct versus indirect responses as a second dimension. In one comprehensive classification, Knapp et al. (1997) proposed that harassment coping responses fall into four categories: (a) *advocacy seeking*—recruiting formal support from organizational authorities; (b) *social coping*—mobilizing emotional support and advice from trusted others; (c) *avoidance/denial*—avoiding the harassing situation physically (e.g., avoiding the harasser's workstation) or cognitively (e.g., denying the seriousness of the situation); and (d) *confrontation/negotiation*—directly requesting or insisting that the offensive behavior cease (Figure 1).

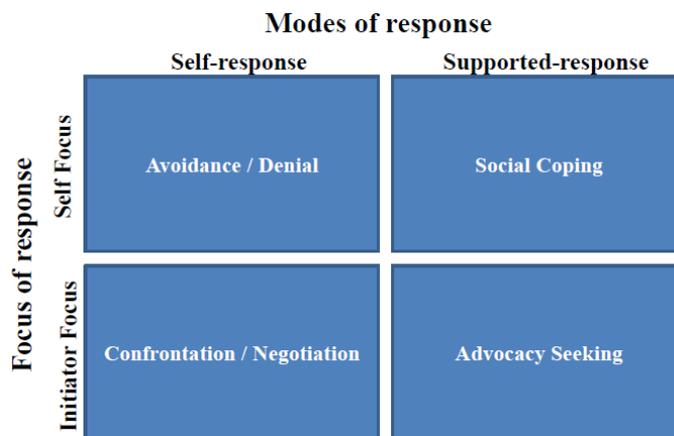


Figure 1: Typology of Target Responses to Sexual Harassment (Knapp et al., 1997)

SHCB and Personality Traits

Coping has been described as “*personality in action under stress*” and evidence has shown that there is some level correlation between coping and personality (Bolger, 1990; Fickova, 2001). Broadly, personality can be defined as characteristic patterns of thoughts, feelings, and behaviours over time and across situations. The five factor model or “Big Five” personality traits comprising of Openness to Experience (O), Conscientiousness (C), Extraversion (E), Agreeableness (A), Neuroticism (N), and have become the most widely used and meaningful taxonomy of personality.

- Openness to experience includes aesthetic sensitivity, attentiveness to inner feelings, fantasy, ideas, and independence of judgment, intellectual curiosity and values.
- Conscientious person is governed by his or her conscience. This includes competence, order, dutifulness, self-control, achievement striving, responsibility and deliberation.
- Extraversion or extravert shows traits such as warmth, sociability, assertiveness, excitement and optimism are commonly seen in highly extraverted people.
- Agreeableness shows traits such as trust, sympathy towards others; altruism, compliance, modesty and tender mindedness are very cooperative and eager to help others.
- Neuroticism indicates a tendency to experience negative effects such as anger, anxiety, depression, embarrassment, fear, guilt, hostility, impulsiveness, sadness, self-consciousness and vulnerability.

Cortina and Wasti (2005) developed a conceptual model of coping profile determinants based on an *ecological* or *systemic* perspective. The determinants of SHCB include variables at the level of the *individual*, the *microcontext* (immediate harassing situation), the *mesocontext* (organization), and the *macrocontext* (larger society). At the individual level, coping involves the cognitions and behaviours of a single person within the context of an organization, where the organization in turn operates within a larger society/culture. Another study by Malamut and Offermann (2001) discusses the sexual harassment process model of coping behavior. The determinants SHCB were identified as person-environment (occupational status, race, gender, climate, severity, and power differential), that were mediated by cognitive appraisal.

Even though both of the above studies identified personal (and environmental) factors as determinants of SHCB, however they were limited to selected demographic profile. This study attempts to include the psychological dimension of an individual by exploring their personality traits.

From this study, we posit that personality could directly influence coping strategy selection and its perceived effectiveness (DeLongis & Holtzman, 2005). For example, the sociability and approach underlying *Extraverts* may encourage support seeking, while the threat sensitivity underlying *Neuroticism* may trigger disengagement. As for *Agreeableness* (reflected by trust, altruism, and compliance) is associated with high levels of perceived and received social support it should predict high levels of support seeking and low levels of withdrawal (Connor-Smith & Flachsbart, 2007).

Conscientiousness that is defined by the high levels of self-regulation, persistence, impulse control, achievement orientation, and self-discipline that is rooted in attentional systems should predict primary control engagement strategies, which require planning and persistence in the face of difficulties, or cognitive restructuring, which require shifting attention from negative thoughts toward positive activities or thoughts (Derryberry et. al, 2003).

Openness involves the tendency to be creative, curious, flexible, imaginative, and involved in a range of intellectual interests may lead to greater use of problem solving, cognitive restructuring, acceptance, and distraction and certain disengagement strategies which involves imagination and fantasy.

Below is the diagram that illustrates the conceptual framework of this study (Figure 2).

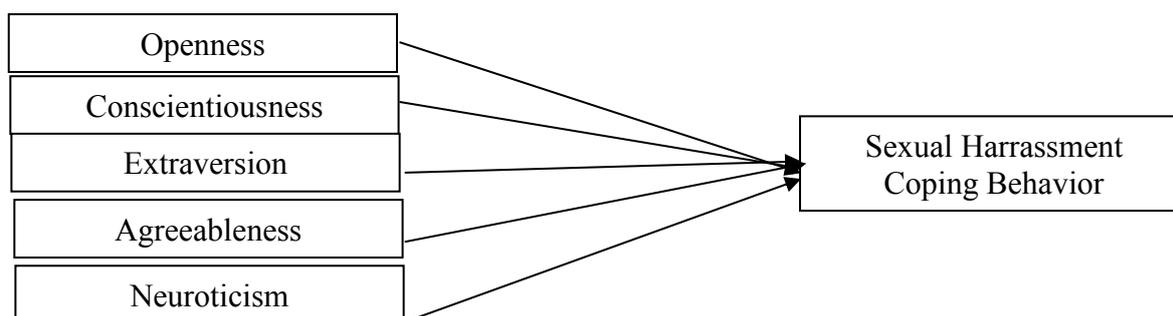


Figure 2: Conceptual framework

METHODOLOGY

Population and Sampling Procedure

After conducting an overall literature review using several online research databases, we found very few earlier studies that were specifically related to our present study. As such, an exploratory research design was adopted where the main focus is on gaining insights and familiarity for future extensive investigation could be undertaken in the future (Bhattacharjee, 2012). Another very

important aspect of an exploratory research design is to enable the researchers to test the goodness of measures to be used in the data collection process (Sekaran and Bougie, 2013).

The population for this study is final year undergraduate students from a private and public university from a diversified demographic background. The samples were chosen using convenience sampling, due to the exploratory nature of the study. Using the survey approach, a total of 150 questionnaires were initially distributed, and only 112 were returned and used for further analysis.

Measurement

There were originally 8 items used for measuring sexual harassment coping behaviour that were developed base on guidelines provided by past researches (Cortina & Wasti, 2005). The coping were operationalized as any level of rejection toward attempts of sexual harassments. However after carrying out the EFA, two of the items were dropped after failing to comply with empirical specification of having at least three items loading on each individual factor (Kim & Mueller, 1978). The remaining six items are shown in Table 1. The Cronbach's alpha, as a measure to assess reliability or internal consistency, is 0.921.

Table 1: Sexual Harassment Coping Behaviour

<u>Items</u>	<u>Factor Loading</u>
<i>I will stay away from him/her</i>	0.983
<i>I will make it clear that he/she is wrong</i>	0.983
<i>I will stay out of his/her way</i>	0.979
<i>I will talk about it with someone I trust</i>	0.976
<i>I will make a formal complaint</i>	0.935
<i>I will report the incident to the authorities</i>	0.501

The questionnaire items for the Big Five personality traits were adapted from several studies (Chen, 2013), (Costa & McCrae, 1995), (Topolewska et. al., 2014). The construct validity of these measures of personality traits were successfully re-established through the EFA, with acceptable value for the Kaiser – Meyer - Olkin measures of sample adequacy (KMO) and a significant Barlett's Test of sphericity (Table 2). The reliability score for OCEAN are 0.910, 0.928, 0.963, 0.888, and 0.904 respectively

Table 2: OCEAN – Big 5 Personality Traits

<u>Items</u>	<u>Factor Loading</u>
Openness	
<i>I have a clear imagination</i>	0.913
<i>I have excellent ideas</i>	0.909
<i>I am quick to understand things</i>	0.903
<i>I am full of ideas</i>	0.899
Conscientiousness	
<i>I am always prepared</i>	0.890
<i>I pay attention to details</i>	0.885
<i>I follow a schedule</i>	0.860
<i>I am exacting in my work</i>	0.751
Extraversion	
<i>I don't mind being the center of attention</i>	0.923
<i>I feel comfortable around people</i>	0.897
<i>I start conversations</i>	0.886
<i>I talk to a lot of different people at parties</i>	0.658
Agreeableness	
<i>I sympathize with others' feelings</i>	0.891
<i>I have a soft heart</i>	0.890
<i>I take time out for others</i>	0.830
<i>I feel others' emotions</i>	0.759
Neuroticism	
<i>I get stressed out easily</i>	0.937
<i>I am easily disturbed</i>	0.906
<i>I get upset easily</i>	0.905
<i>I get irritated easily</i>	0.624

All items uses Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

DATA ANALYSIS

The multiple regression analysis a rigorous statistical technique that is used to show how well a set of variables is able to predict a particular outcome. Before running the analysis (using SPSS ver. 21), assumptions and rules regarding the data such as, sample size, multicollinearity, outliers, normality, and homoscedasticity is ascertain as not been violated (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013). The summary of the multiple regression analysis is shown in Table 3.

The role of personality traits on influencing coping behavior can be found in earlier studies (Connor-Smith & Flachsbart, 2007; and Garriz et. al., 2015). A study by O'Brian and DeLongis (1996) specifically reported that dimensions of personality derived from the five-factor model (Neuroticism, Extraversion, Openness to Experience, Agreeableness, and Conscientiousness) had important associations with coping responses. The present study added the focus on the sexual harassment coping behavior.

In aggregate, the OCEAN personality traits explain 21.4% (F change 3.714*) of variation in SHCB. Three personality traits that is found to have significant varying influence on SHCB are Neuroticism (B: 0.361), followed by Conscientiousness (B: 0.272) and Openness (B: 0.260) respectively. The remaining personality traits Extraversion and Agreeableness are found to be not significant.

Table 3: Relationship between Personality Traits (OCEAN) and SHCB.

Dependent Variable: Sexual Harassment Coping Behavior (SHCB)

Independent Variables: Personality Traits (OCEAN)

	<u>Std. Beta</u>	<u>p-value</u>
Openness	0.260	0.049
Conscientiousness	0.272	0.046
Extraversion	0.095	0.470
Agreeableness	0.007	0.957
Neuroticism	0.361	0.010

R² : 0.214
F change : 3.714 (Sig. 0.005)

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The result shows that personal traits of agreeableness and extraversion do not significantly influenced the sexual harassment coping behavior. This could be because the person having this personality trait (agreeableness) is selfless, tolerant by nature, trustful and considerate of others. When this kind of person experienced harassment by others, they have higher tendencies to forgive the harasser. They are inclined to believe that the harasser is honest and well-intentioned when ask for forgiveness. They also have the tendency to believe that the harasser's action is unintentional. Thus, the not significant outcome of the relationship between agreeableness and SHCB is not entirely unexpected (David and Suls, 1999).

For persons with extraversion personality trait, they are outgoing, talkative, energetic, sociable and assertive. Extraverts don't mind being the center of attention and they can easily feel comfortable around people. They favor being in the spotlight and frequently engage in thrill-seeking behaviors. They could even rationalize that the harasser is just joking with them. Such outcome is also similar with related earlier study by O'Brien and DeLongis (1996).

On the other hand, this study found that sexual harassment coping behavior is significantly influenced by conscientiousness, neuroticism and openness to experience. Conscientiousness person are organized, dependable, goal-focused, thorough, disciplined, methodical and industrious. They are always aware of their surroundings and get prepared in all situations. When abnormal situation (such as harassment) happened, they will respond quickly to prevent them or even report to authority. Neuroticism person will easily get upset when they are harassed. Person with such personality is more self-conscious and easy to feel insecure when irregular situation happen and will lead to the person to adopt a more defensive avoidance coping behavior. Openness to experience person have high imagination and curious about something around them. When the harassment happened, they will respond to prevent the bad consequences in future. Autonomous characteristic own by openness to experience person also lead them to respond to harasser.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE STUDIES

The exploratory nature of this study brings about some limitations that could be extended by future researchers in this area. The outcome of the EFA for the dependent variable (SHCB) as a uni-dimensional construct limits the analysis as to the scope of the coping behavior; eventhough the research intended this variable to be multi-dimensions (i.e. active and passive coping behavior). The uni-dimensional result of the EFA could also be a reflection of the background of the respondents being from only female undergraduates from specific age group. Future studies should have a more diverse study population.

Another area of SHCB study that could be explored is treating personality traits as a moderator, especially with regard to micro-context, meso-context, and macro-context variables (Cortina & Wasti, 2005).

Even considering the weaknesses of this study, it is hoped that the preliminary findings of this study would be useful in understanding coping behavior related to sexual harassment, and could be useful in determining specific training programs for addressing such highly stressful experience.

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