

**A Question of Trust:
Meaning Making in the Aftermath of a Sexual Harassment Scandal**

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ABSTRACT

Since the rise of the #MeToo movement numerous organizations in Canada and the United States have been publicly outed for sexual harassment (e.g., CBS, Fox News, Google, Canadian and U.S. military), leading to costly lawsuits and reputational damage. These scandals have helped propel the exponential growth of sexual harassment literature relating to the contributors to harassment, the outcomes for individuals, and potential interventions. However, the research is scarce on how employees (not just victims) make sense of these harassment-related scandals and their organization's response. Of additional interest, is how such scandals shape employees' image of their organization and their relationship to it.

Using Weick's (1995) seven sensemaking properties and Piening et al.'s (2020) proposed model of employee responses to organizational identity threats, the current study addressed the gap in the literature by investigating how members ($N=3,810$) of a large North American law enforcement organization made sense of (a) public allegations of sexual harassment against female employees and (b) the organization's response to these events. We also examined potential identity threats and how employees reacted to these threats through an analysis of secondary survey data.

Whereas some individuals challenged the plausibility of the harassment allegations, the findings revealed that the majority of participants perceived harassment to be a systemic issue rather than the actions of a few bad actors. The meanings extracted from social cues referenced a hostile working environment for women, with some indication of the intersectional nature of this hostility as it pertained to race and sexuality. The prevalence of sexual harassment was primarily attributed to a boys' club culture that alienated women (and nonconformers) and protected wrongdoers. Aligned with this cultural depiction, participants described a complaint process that was distrusted and perceived as retaliating against victims while failing to hold harassers

accountable. Further implications of organizational culture were demonstrated through descriptions of leaders who engaged in harassing behaviors, failed to hold harassers accountable, dismissed complaints of harassment, and/or retaliated against victims, as well as comments (from both men and women) that belittled claims of harassment. Conversely, individuals who were more likely to deny or doubt the veracity of harassment allegations were more likely to blame the media and other external actors for inflaming the harassment issue.

Consistent with studies examining reactions to diversity initiatives, many participants criticized plans to increase the representation of women, Indigenous officers and members of other minority groups based on concerns for not selecting the best candidates, the unreasonable of female targets given the male-dominated policing environment, or the potential negative implications for women who may be unfairly judged. A significant number of participants (mainly men) also expressed frustration with selection processes that were perceived as unfair and discriminating against White men. For nonconforming men, the findings indicate an additional layer unfairness for men who perceived they were already excluded from the 'Club'. Other reactions pertained to worries that diversity targets would not address deeper issues, such as reforming organizational culture, investing in leadership development, or achieving meaningful consequences for harassers.

The findings further highlighted the identity aspect of sensemaking, demonstrating that for the majority of participants, the organizational identity was no longer aligned with how they saw themselves. Thus, participants primarily reacted to events through psychological distancing from the organization. An interesting observation was that only 47% of participants would recommend the organization as a good place to work with women equally likely to recommend/not recommend as men.

Finally, this study makes significant contributions to both research and practice by extending our understanding of organizational sensemaking, as it relates to sexual harassment, beyond the perspective of just victims to bystanders, potential harassers, and individuals who may not have experienced or observed harassing behaviors. Importantly, the study shows the intersectional nature of harassment and the varying social cues relied upon to make sense of harassment allegations. The findings also illustrate the important relationship between organizational culture and sexual harassment and the differing ways in which individuals may interpret the organization's response.

References:

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- Weick, K. E. 1995. *Sensemaking in Organizations*. Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA.