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Social Class and Workplace Harassment During the Transition to Adulthood

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Abstract

Young disadvantaged workers are especially vulnerable to harassment due to their age and social class position. As young people enter the workforce, their experiences of, and reactions to, harassment may vary dramatically from those of older adult workers. Three case studies introduce theory and research on the relationship between social class and harassment of young workers. We suggest two mechanisms through which class may structure harassment experiences: (1) extremely vulnerable youth are directly targeted based on their social class origins, and (2) the type and condition of youth employment, which is structured by class background, indirectly affect experiences of harassment. © Wiley Periodicals, Inc.



Since the 1979 publication of MacKinnon's *Sexual Harassment of Working Women*, social scientists have dramatically increased knowledge of harassment amid major law and policy reforms. In recent years, investigations expanded to include generalized workplace abuse in addition to sexual harassment (Krieger et al., 2006; Richman et al., 1999; Rospenda, Richman, Wislar, & Flaherty, 2000). Although workers in the United States today are legally protected from harassment and abuse, prevalence rates remain high within organizations. Moreover, key questions bearing on the special vulnerability of younger and less-advantaged workers remain unanswered.

To date, sexual harassment research has focused on either adults in the workplace or younger students in educational settings (American Association of University Women, 2001; Hand & Sanchez, 2000; Robinson, 2005). Harassment of new entrants to the labor force has received little attention, yet their experiences are likely to differ greatly from those of students and more experienced workers. Moreover, the least advantaged young workers may be especially vulnerable to harassment. Class origins are likely to affect the amount, quality, and type of work and, hence, workers' exposure to harassing situations. Apart from its intrinsic contribution to knowledge, better understanding of the harassment experiences of young workers is essential to designing preventative training and responsive workplace policies.

This chapter first examines young workers' experiences through three case studies, taken from interviews with Youth Development Study (YDS) participants. We next conceptualize the relationship between measures of social class and workplace harassment based on the literature and consider mechanisms that might link social class and harassment. We conclude by considering broader implications and directions for future research.

Young Workers' Experiences

In 2002–2003, we interviewed thirty-three workers in their late twenties who were participants in the ongoing longitudinal YDS (Mortimer, 2003). Fourteen men and nineteen women participated in sixty- to ninety-minute interviews surrounding high school and post-high school workplace experiences with harassment and discrimination. All interviews were recorded and transcribed. We present the profiles of three interviewees, Rachel, Lisa, and Adam, chosen because they highlight the range of experiences featured in the interviews. Rachel's and Lisa's experiences show how sexual harassment operates for young or inexperienced workers, and Adam's features workplace racial harassment. Class origins vary significantly. In neo-Marxian terms, Lisa's parents would be considered members of the managerial class (Wright & Perrone, 1977), while Rachel and Adam have more disadvantaged class origins. Together the profiles reveal how social class can influence harassment.

Rachel. Rachel is a mixed-race woman whose parents were unemployed during her freshman year in high school. Her class origins are perhaps less salient than her own class position as an adolescent: she began living independently and supporting two children while still in high school. During this time, she was sexually harassed by a supervisor at a fast food restaurant and later at a retail call center. At the restaurant, Rachel says, "He came for me while I was standing at the drive-through window and he came from behind and grabbed me. And rubbed up against me." Rachel contacted a lawyer, who told her, "If they don't let him go and he does it again, then we have a case." But, says Rachel, the restaurant "ended up letting him go. To avoid the problem." Rachel left the job shortly after, explaining, "I was just totally disgusted and I quit."

At the retail call center where Rachel worked next, a supervisor began harassing her: "He made sexual comments and gestures towards me. [He] would make comments like 'Oh I'd love to see you at [local strip club]' or just little smart comments regarding seeing me in the nude or comments about how he wishes he was my husband." Rachel approached management following several similar interactions, who released the supervisor after Rachel threatened to contact a lawyer. Rachel believes she was vulnerable to harassment because of her status as a young mother: "Well, for one I was young. And I was a young mother. [People seemed to think] 'you must be a freak or something because you have a child at a young age.'" In both cases, Rachel's parents supported her decision to speak up about the harassment. Rachel's harassers may have perceived her as unlikely to complain given her need to stay employed to support her children. It may have been her family's support that prompted Rachel to take action.

Lisa. Lisa, a white woman with a "manager" class background (Wright & Perrone, 1977) also believes she was targeted because of her age. Although she has witnessed sexual harassment, Lisa says she has never been a victim. She has experienced workplace discrimination while working as a freelance jewelry maker, however, "Because I was a woman. Because I was pretty. Because of my age . . . I was discriminated [against] a lot, because, well, when I was in jewelry that's the whole arena [where] if you don't have gray hair and spectacles you don't know what you're talking about!"

In one of her earliest jobs, at a convenience store, Lisa encountered a vendor "who was pretty sexist and would make comments on the customers walking in. About their boobs or, yeah, mostly about their boobs." Lisa did not like the vendor's comments but did not express her discomfort until the vendor was fired after two of Lisa's coworkers filed a complaint. Afterward Lisa's coworkers told her, "We thought you didn't have a problem with [the vendor's behavior]." Lisa says this "was the first I had learned about the process of filing anything against anybody for anything" and learned, "I *can* speak up if something like this happens." Lisa's class position may have helped her obtain better jobs than less advantaged adolescents, but her relative youth left her vulnerable to age discrimination and harassment.

Adam. Adam, from a working-class background, is a mixed-race man of European and African American descent. When Adam was in his early twenties, his white coworker at a tool factory, “an older guy in his forties,” regularly made racist remarks, calling him a “dumb Mexican” and “dumb fucking idiot,” and saying, “I don’t know why they hired you, you stupid Mexican,” when Adam made mistakes. Adam described these remarks as “stuff that nine times out of ten wouldn’t bother me if it was here and there but when it’s happening over and over and over it got really old and really frustrating.” Adam believed his coworker “would just continue saying ‘stupid Mexican’ because he knew it would tick me off and I’d start getting defensive about not being Mexican. It would be a whole day thing and then it would get me sidetracked. I’d start thinking ‘I wanna get that f***er’ and all of that kind of stuff. He got there about three months after I started, and the last nine months I worked there it sucked.”

Adam said his coworker’s racist remarks were worse when they were alone, but that he also made such remarks in front of their boss. Adam’s harasser was related to other long-term employees, so he “knew that there was no way they were getting rid of him.” Adam felt that his only relief would come from quitting the job: “Looking at it now—material things don’t mean a lot to me, but if I was still there I would probably be making a very good living right now. I was very upset, obviously, that I was put in a position where I had to quit. . . . I was learning something every day and there was a lot left to learn. I could have taken that and ran with it, whether I was with them or with someone else. So I felt like I lost out on quite a bit.” Adam quit his job and, claiming discrimination, filed for unemployment. Adam explained, “You know how they have a chance to respond or deny the claim? They just sent it back. They didn’t even deny it, they didn’t even argue with me about it.”

Conceptualizing Harassment and Social Class

The three cases described above show how social class and workplace harassment can interact. Young workers’ experiences appear to be shaped by social background and status as first-time or comparatively inexperienced employees. As Adam explains, he still had a lot to learn, which could have enabled him to begin a successful career. After experiencing harassment, Adam felt his only alternative was to quit because he lacked the clout or experience necessary to end the harassment.

Social class may be a critical determinant of adolescent vulnerability to workplace harassment. Moreover, harassment in adolescence and early adulthood can have social class consequences throughout one’s career.

Whereas the three cases illustrate how social class affects workers’ experiences of harassment, other dimensions of social location and inequality also come into play. The following discussion draws from the sexual harassment literature to examine how class is bound up with gender, age, and sexual orientation.

Gender. Gender is a primary focus of sexual harassment literature. While some find gender variability in perceptions of sexual harassment (DeSouza & Solberg 2004; Hendrix, Rueb, & Steel, 1998), others report little or no differences in perceptions (Baker, Terpstra, & Cutler, 1990) or experiences (McCabe & Hardman, 2005). Most statistics, however, show that women disproportionately experience sexual harassment. In 2006, 84.6 percent of complaints with the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission and Fair Employment Practices Agencies were filed by women (U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 2007). While the exact prevalence of sexual harassment is unknown, estimates range from 16 to 90 percent of women and 15 to 45 percent of men (Kohlman, 2001; Welsh, 1999).

Sexual harassment is a gendered expression of power (Uggen & Blackstone, 2004) used to maintain gendered organizational hierarchies and sexualize employees, typically female workers and males who do not conform to standards of hegemonic masculinity. The feminization and juvenilization of poverty (Bianchi, 1999; Simon, 1988) mean that more women and children struggle to survive on a day-to-day basis. This has left young working women especially vulnerable to sexual harassment because of their need to keep their jobs to sustain themselves and, sometimes, young children. In addition, these women are typically segregated in job sectors and within organizational hierarchies where they have less power (Padavic & Reskin, 2002) or earning potential (Rose & Hartman, 2004) than male coworkers, increasing their susceptibility to various forms of workplace harassment.

Sexual harassment researchers initially focused on gendered dimensions of power in the workplace, but the literature has grown to include other determinants. Rospenda, Richman, and Nawyn (1998) argue that the effects of gender, race, and class operate simultaneously at cultural, organizational, and individual levels to shape workplace experiences such as harassment (see also Giuffre & Williams, 1994; Teixeira, 2002).

Organizational Variation. Sexual harassment has been well documented within a variety of settings, including the sales industry (Collinson & Collinson, 1996), service sector jobs (Folgero & Fjeldstad, 1995; Giuffre & Williams, 1994), and academia (Benson & Thomson, 1982; Kalof, Eby, Matheson, & Kroska, 2001). Women in traditionally male occupations face more regular and severe forms of workplace harassment than those engaged in female-typed work (Eisenberg, 2001; Fitzgerald, Drasgow, Hulin, Gefland, & Magley, 1997; Mansfield, Koch, Henderson, Vicary, Cohn, & Young, 1991; Pierce, 2004). Men in female-typed occupations, on the other hand, not only appear to avoid negative sanctions such as harassment but may in fact enjoy the rewards of a glass escalator for crossing gender-based occupational boundaries (Williams, 2004).

Several researchers explicitly consider class in explaining harassment variation across gendered occupations. For example, Ragins and Scandura (1995) found that blue-collar women within male-typed occupations (firefighters and police officers, for example) reported significantly more

harassment than white-collar women in male-typed occupations (attorneys and engineers, for example). Female managers and supervisors, however, may be particularly vulnerable to sexual harassment in some male-dominated work settings (Rospenda et al., 1998; Uggen & Blackstone, 2004). McCabe and Hardman (2005) found that blue-collar workers in small organizations experienced more sexual harassment, were more tolerant of sexual harassment, and perceived fewer behaviors as sexual harassment than individuals within a large, white-collar organization.

While sexual harassment occurs in a variety of workplace settings, this literature suggests that the types of occupations and organizations most susceptible to harassment are class linked. To some extent, class origin is a determinant of the types of jobs adolescents pursue and obtain. Nonetheless, upper-class workers with family connections, as well as working-class workers in need of income to help support their families, are often found in similar occupations in adolescence. This fact may suggest to some that class origins have little influence on adolescent work experiences. Yet this may not be the case. Working-class youth, faced with limited job experience and few influential references, may be reluctant to report a supervisor's harassing behavior to avoid negative employment references in the future.

A meaningful work experience may ease the transition to adulthood for adolescents (Mortimer, 2003), but negative workplace experiences can interfere with this transition. Upper-class targets are often better equipped to quit their jobs and move on to more hospitable settings as they traverse the standard transition markers of adult attainment (Furstenberg, Kennedy, McLoyd, Rumbaut, & Settersten, 2004). For poor or working-class adolescents who are compelled to work for financial reasons, workplace harassment may have long-term, detrimental effects on socioeconomic attainment.

Race and Sexuality. Some scholars criticize past sexual harassment studies for ignoring the experiences of women of color (Buchanan & Ormerod, 2002; Murrell, 1996), lesbians, and gay men (D'Augelli, 1989). In contrast to the prominent role of women of color in highly publicized sexual harassment cases, Murrell (1996, p. 52) notes that "only a scant amount of empirical literature . . . specifically examines women of color and sexual harassment." While some studies report no racial differences in prevalence of workplace harassment (Piotrkowski, 1998), others indicate that women of color are targets of more severe or frequent harassment (Buchanan & Ormerod, 2002; Mansfield et al., 1991; Teixeira, 2002; Welsh, Carr, Macuarrie, & Huntley, 2006). In a sample of low-income workers, Krieger et al. (2006) found racial differences in self-reports, where black workers were significantly more likely than whites or Latinos to report sexual harassment. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender individuals were also more likely to experience sexual harassment.

At the most basic level, median household income for whites (\$48,554) is significantly greater than that of African American (\$30,858) and Hispanic (\$35,967) households (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006). Given such disparities, minority workers may be especially vulnerable. Some are forced to

leave a harassing environment, as Adam details in his interview, and others do not initiate action against harassers for fear of descending into poverty.

Age. Younger, single women are more likely than older, married women to report sexual harassment (Gutek, 1985; Ragins & Scandura, 1995). Moreover, Ford and Donis (1996) found that younger women are significantly less tolerant of sexual harassment than older women. Further study is needed to disentangle age effects from period and cohort effects on sexual harassment consciousness of workers entering the labor force. Nevertheless, as expressed in Lisa's introductory case, age does indeed matter for young workers. Robinson's study (2005) of Australian secondary schools revealed that students view sexual harassment as "an acceptable and legitimate social practice" (see also American Association of University Women, 2001). This acceptance of sexual harassment undoubtedly carries over into the adolescent workplace. In her pioneering work on adolescent workplace harassment, Fineran (2002) found that 35 percent of students working part time had experienced sexual harassment (63 percent were female).

Youth Risk of Harassment. Taken together, previous findings have several implications for young workers in their transition to adulthood. Youth appear to be at high risk of experiencing workplace harassment. While adults often differentiate between acceptable behavior among friends and appropriate workplace behavior, younger workers may find this distinction difficult, as jobs are sometimes dependent on personal relationships. Due to their young age and organizational status as new workers, they may also be unsure of the appropriate reactions to harassment. Indeed, full-time employees appear to view specific behaviors as more harassing than full-time students of the same age do (Hendrix et al., 1998; see also Baker et al., 1990).

Gender, organization type, race, sexual orientation, and age intersect with social class to affect experiences of workplace harassment. Although many suggest a relationship between workplace harassment and class, few have attempted to specify this relationship conceptually or estimate it empirically. In the following section, we discuss different ways of conceptualizing social class and offer two paths through which social class affects workplace harassment.

Why a Relationship Between Harassment and Class for Young Adults?

The difficulty of characterizing class effects in harassment research is partly due to the many operational definitions of *class* that are applicable to young workers. The class background of a worker's family of origin is commonly conceptualized using gradational measures such as parental prestige, household income, and socioeconomic status. High family income typically means that young workers who experience harassment can quit their jobs with little economic penalty, though other consequences such as stigma may be keenly felt by harassed workers of any social background.

Gradational measures of social class may be less powerful predictors of harassment than relational measures or simple indicators of extreme poverty. Gradational measures can reflect marginal differences in occupational standing, failing to adequately capture the distinction between those in extreme poverty and other workers. For purposes of understanding workplace harassment, relational measures such as neo-Marxian class categorizations offer a more appropriate representation of class dynamics. Neo-Marxian categories include employer, petite bourgeoisie, manager, worker, and surplus population, representing individuals who are unemployed or not employed or report a low family income (Wright & Perrone, 1977; Hagan, Gillis, & Simpson, 1985; Uggen, 2000). Poor and working-class adolescents may be most vulnerable to harassment, if only because many of them must work to support their families.

Adolescent workers are often exposed to dangerous work conditions that threaten their physical and emotional health. Each year, over 200,000 U.S. children and adolescents suffer workplace injuries (Committee on the Health and Safety Implications of Child Labor, 1998). Less advantaged youth may be particularly vulnerable to such dangerous situations. Mortimer (2003) found that youth with lower parental education pursue a pattern of "most invested" work, bringing them high work hours and earnings but increased stressors and exposure to noxious work conditions.

Similarly, Entwisle, Alexander, and Olson (2000) found that early (age thirteen to fourteen) and late (age seventeen and above) workers tended to be from higher-status backgrounds. Youth beginning work at an intermediate age (fifteen to sixteen years old) were more likely to be poor, participate in subsidized school lunch programs, and perform lower on standardized reading and math exams. Disadvantaged youth have more difficulty attaining jobs (see U.S. Department of Labor, 2000, for youth unemployment rates by family income) but work more intensively once obtaining employment. Beyond disadvantaged youths' increased vulnerability due to their longer work hours, they lack the cultural capital necessary to obtain high-quality employment (Entwisle et al., 2000). As a result, they often enter positions with greater exposure to physical harm and emotional stressors than others their age.

There is far less social class variation in adolescent work than in adult work, of course, with a large percentage of teenage workers concentrated in select occupations and industries (Mortimer, 2003). Nevertheless, differences in vulnerability to harassment arise in comparing college-bound and non-college-bound youth (Finch, Shanahan, Mortimer, & Ryu, 1991) and in comparing those in supervisory positions with nonmanagers. Moreover, the newest workers—those ages sixteen and younger, for example—likely occupy less skilled and more vulnerable positions than older adolescents. Arnett (2000, p. 473) distinguishes between the "transient and tentative explorations of adolescence and the more serious and focused explorations of emerging adulthood." Workers in the emerging adulthood stage of the

life course (from roughly age eighteen to twenty-five) may be subject to far different workplace experiences than adolescents in their mid-teens.

In the YDS, approximately 93 percent of all students worked during the academic year at some point in high school (Mortimer, 2003). As these workers learn to navigate the workplace, social class is one source of stratification among them. Workplace harassment is one method to sustain socially structured hierarchies. From a Marxian perspective, harassment can be viewed as a crime of economic domination (Quinney, 1977) that serves to disadvantage workers, women, and people of color. Youth in extreme poverty are vulnerable to harassment because of their need to remain employed. Moreover, they lack the resources and social networks needed to mobilize formal complaints against harassers. Young workers who choose to stay in hostile work environments are likely to be targeted repeatedly if inappropriate behavior goes unpunished. However, by quitting, they forgo wage increases, benefits, and progress toward long-term career goals, as Adam did.

By helping to sort youth into work situations, social class is an important determinant of the type and conditions of employment young people experience. The route through which adolescents come to occupy similar or different occupations helps explain why some are harassed in the workplace, as well as their anticipated responses.

Class origins also shape childhood socialization. As Kohn's classic *Class and Conformity* (1969/1977) helped establish, value orientations and resources differ by class. While upper- and middle-class parents tend to encourage self-direction, lower-class and working-class parents promote conformity, which includes "following the dictates of authority . . . [and] having moral standards that strongly emphasize obedience to the letter of the law" (p. 189). In upholding the importance of conformity to authority, working-class youth may be less likely to question superiors or report harassment from subordinates and coworkers.

More recently, Lareau (2003) distinguishes between middle-class "concerted cultivation" and the "accomplishment of natural growth" approach that working-class and poor families use. These different child rearing strategies affect life outside the home as "middle-class children benefit, in ways that are invisible to them and to their parents, from the degree of similarity between the cultural repertoires in the home and those standards adopted by institutions" (p. 237). Middle-class youth learn to present themselves in ways that affect the types of jobs they obtain and their relationships with coworkers and supervisors. As children, they accrue institutional advantages by interacting more with adult authority figures and learn valuable workplace skills such as shaking hands and looking adults in the eye.

Based on the literature, we suggest two paths through which social class affects on-the-job harassment of youth. First, parental class origins may directly influence who is targeted. For example, young people from extremely disadvantaged backgrounds are vulnerable to harassment because

they can less afford to exit a hostile work site. Edin and Kefalas (2005) highlight the special vulnerability of poor young mothers. Seventy-three percent of women in their sample had their first child in their teens. These women placed great social value on motherhood, believing that children would change their lives for the better. However, young motherhood leaves poor women reliant on unstable, low-paying work where they are susceptible to harassment.

Second, parental class origins may influence adolescent harassment by structuring the types and condition of employment that adolescents experience. In their analysis of secondary education, Lee, Croninger, Linn, and Chen (1996) found that background factors such as race, parental education, and grade point average were correlated with sexual harassment severity, but that these relationships diminished once contextual factors in the school environment were introduced. Similarly, some class indicators, such as parental education, could affect the types and duration of youth work, which in turn determine work conditions and potential exposure to harassment. For example, adolescents of highly educated parents are better able to practice skills relevant for future careers (Csikszentmihalyi & Schneider, 2000). Youth from upper-class backgrounds are more likely to obtain career-oriented positions that function as high-level internships rather than the more pedestrian opportunities in restaurant and service work typically available to young less-advantaged workers.

Several studies show household income to be a significant predictor of youth participation in the labor force, with youth in poverty and in the highest-income households working fewer hours than other adolescents (Keithly & Deseran, 1995). Schoenhals, Tienda, and Schneider (1998) found that youth with extreme family incomes below \$1,000 or greater than \$200,000 were half as likely to work as other youth. However, other literature suggests that disadvantaged working youth tend to work more hours than their middle- and upper-class counterparts. This variation affects adolescents' opportunities to experience workplace harassment.

Beyond the two mechanisms linking class and harassment, we also expect complex interactions between class and other stratification dimensions. For example, there is some evidence that upper-status girls are subject to especially strict parental controls, which would affect their exposure to harassing work settings (Hagan et al., 1985; Hagan, Simpson, & Gillis, 1987). Alternatively, however, such young women may have greater consciousness of harassment and therefore be more likely to identify particular behaviors as harassment.

Considerations for Future Research and Policy

This chapter raises several questions about the relationship between social class and harassment of young workers. To advance knowledge in this area, future research could empirically test the mechanisms described in this chapter, especially in relation to the role of value orientation in increasing

susceptibility, and influencing reactions, to harassment. We have focused on social class as a factor influencing rates of harassment. Alternatively, experiences of harassment could affect subsequent class location, as workplace harassment has negative mental health consequences for many individuals (Fitzgerald et al., 1997; Lee et al., 1996). Young workers who experience harassment may also develop negative expectations about future employment, suffer monetary consequences, and be denied valuable work experience to prepare for future careers. Adam's experience demonstrates how such reciprocal effects operate. Had he not been forced to quit his job after suffering severe racial harassment, Adam believes he would have gone further in his career and attained more financial success.

The policy importance of such research should not be underestimated. Most individuals first experience part-time work during adolescence. Young workers exposed to harassment may lack the training and experience needed to address mistreatment. Lisa did not realize her own ability to mobilize against harassment until her coworkers complained. In Lisa's words, the complaint "changed my feelings since I *can* speak up if something like this happens. Oh wait a minute, there's something I can do about this! I can say, 'Hey! This is not right or appropriate and knock it off!'" Better training for young workers, sensitizing them to recognize and appropriately respond to harassment, would help prevent mistreatment of our most vulnerable workers.

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