

International Journal of Science and Technology  
(STECH)  
Bahir Dar- Ethiopia

Vol. 4(1), S/No 9, February, 2015: 129-141  
ISSN: 2225-8590 (Print) ISSN 2227-5452 (Online)  
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4314/stech.v4i1.11>

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**Narcissism and Sexual Harassment in Organizations: Their  
Dynamics and Coping Strategies**

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**Abstract**

*This study examined the effects of narcissism and sexual harassment on employee behaviour in organizations. It also provides some strategic ways by which employees can cope with these not so subtle problems in their work places. It adopted a descriptive approach to the study and revealed that narcissism and sexual harassment are among the many common phenomena of most organizations in the world. Sexual harassment is tangible or quid pro quo in nature and occurs when an employee's career path is directly impacted by a supervisor's unwelcome request for sexual favours or other sexual advances. It also occurs under a hostile work – related environment where intimidation is applied to secure sexual favours from unwilling employees. The consequences of any of these forms of sexual harassment can be lasting emotional damages, depression, fear, frustration, and reduced productivity. Narcissism as a psycho – social problem on the job assumes the forms of an erotic self – love or a morbid and excessive self – admiration of employees at the work*

*place or a compensatory reaction of minimal self – esteem which leads to covert jealousy towards others on the job. It was concluded that victims of these work – related psycho – social problems should seek professional or expert advice avoid environments under which they prevail or report such matters to their superior / management teams so that their cases could be effectively resolved based on some existing organizational policies on such related cases.*

**Key words:** Narcissism, sexual harassment, emotional damages, depression, intimidation, covert jealousy and reduced productivity.

### **Introduction**

Organizational life and employee adaptation have attracted a lot of discourse in the management literature. The issues that have caused a lot of concern to both management and labour range from the dimensions of organizational politics to coping with difficult bosses and employees, to dealing with office romance and sexual harassment, to some not so subtle issues such as narcissism and psychological violence or mobbing. Nwaeke (2012) observed that a lot of these not so subtle issues have cost organizations millions of dollars or naira in court settlements. Publicities about their persistent/consistent occurrences in organizations are not only defamatory but they have also brought many organizations down in terms of corporate image and competitiveness. These companies have also spent a lot of investment funds in an effort toward improving their image through diverse training and global awareness. While these psychological and social vices in organizations continue to go unabated, there is a rising wave of a new corporate order called employee dissonance due to leadership insensitivities, employee narcissism and sexual harassment the world over.

This paper addresses, in descriptive terms, the concepts of narcissism and sexual harassment, their occurrences and how employees of corporate organizations could effectively cope with them.

### **Review of Relevant Literature**

#### **Sexual Harassment**

Sexual harassment, according to Melgosa (2010) occurs when someone at work or at school sends insistent and offensive messages of a sexual nature to another person, making him or her feel uncomfortable. These messages take the forms of erotic comments or jokes, sexual gestures or looks that, in the judgment of an impartial person, are inappropriate, pinching, caressing, or rubbing or pushing up against the person in such a way that the action appears natural, while, it actually causes shame, humiliation and even anguish to the victim, touching oneself or displaying signs of a sexual nature in the presence of the victim, notes, drawings, or e-mails of a sexual nature targeted at the victim, obscene jokes shared with the harassed person, chasing or placing pressure upon the victim in order to obtain sexual

favours, threats such as we are not going to promote you” “I will make sure that your salary is withdrawn or frozen,” “you are going to lose your job” if the person should turn the harasser in and refuse the requested acts.

It is common for harassment, as also observed by Melgosa (2010), to be performed by a high – ranking person in authority over a subordinate. In the school environment, the person doing the harassing may be a teacher who sexually harasses adolescents, or perhaps a boy or girl who plagues the younger or weaker ones. This type of harassment from “strong to weak” reveals the abusing and insensitive personality of the harasser. He or she does not recognize the tremendous damage caused, but only seeks to satisfy his\her own sexual appetite.

Byars and Rue (2004) defined sexual harassment as an unwelcome sexual conduct that has the purpose or effect of unreasonably interfering with an individual’s work performance or creating an intimidating, hostile or offensive work environment. They are of the opinion that the very nature of sexual harassment sometimes makes it difficult to prove. The fact that such a conduct normally occurs secretly and outside the employer’s wishes and can grow out of or be alleged to grow out of consensual relationships makes the investigation of complaints of sexual harassment as significant. The difficulty which employees face in proving that an adverse decision was due to their sex and their failure to submit to sexual advances has been relaxed somewhat in favour of plaintiffs. In this context the allocation of the burden of proof in court in a sexual harassment should arise if:

- a) The employee must establish a prima facie case by proving he or she was subjected to sexual harassment and denied a benefit for which he or she was eligible and of which he or she had a reasonable expectation.
- b) The burden then shifts to the employer to prove, by clear and convincing evidence, that its decision on the matter was based on legitimate, nondiscriminatory grounds.
- c) If the employer succeeds in meeting that stringent burden, the employee may then attempt to prove that the employers stated reasons are pretextual.

French (1986) is of the opinion that sexual harassment as an illegal act which is a violation of an individual’s right when a superior, with the actual or constructive knowledge of the employer, makes sexual advances or demands toward a subordinate employee and conditions that the employee’s job status in terms of evaluation, continued employment, promotion, or other aspects of career development, on a favourable response to those advances or demands, and the employer does not take prompt action and appropriate remedial action after acquiring such knowledge. He further stated that an employer may be held liable for not investigating and taking appropriate action should a problem of sexual harassment develop between two

employees. Although employees of either sex may be subject to sexual harassment, probably most of the victims are women. The liability of employers in instances of sexual harassment means that organizations are legally responsible for safeguarding their employees from such treatment. To protect the rights of individual employees and the interest of the organization, top management should issue a strong policy statement prohibiting sexual harassment and stating the disciplinary steps that will be taken if the policy is violated. In addition, management must make certain that there will be no retaliation against an employee for bringing complaints of policy violation and that all complaints will receive a fair hearing. Armstrong (2009) maintains that the issue of sexual harassment has always been a feature of life at work and that it is not always quite as blatant today as it has been in the past, but it is still there, in more or less subtle forms and that it is just as unpleasant as ever. People subjected to sexual harassment can take legal action but it must be the policy of the organization to make it clear that it will not be tolerated, and this policy should be backed up by procedures and practices for dealing with harassment issues.

According to Robbins and Coulter (1999) sexual harassment is no longer a secret in corporate America. They maintain that it is a behaviour marked by sexually aggressive remarks, unwanted touching and sexual advances, requests for sexual favours, or other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature. From management's standpoint, sexual harassment is a concern because it intimidates employees, interferes with job performance and exposes the organization to legal liability. They maintained that the courts have ruled that if the employee who is guilty of sexual harassment is a superior or agent for an organization, the organization can also be found liable for sexual harassment unless it has: (a) developed a policy on sexual harassment (b) educated employees on that policy (c) created a procedure that employees are to follow if they feel they have been victims of sexual harassment, and (d) investigated any complaints or allegations of sexual harassment as stated earlier in this discourse.

In the words of Kreitner (2003) sexual harassment means unwanted sexual attention that creates an offensive or intimidating work environment or an unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favours, and other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature when submission to or rejection of sexual advances is used as a basis for employment decisions or when such conduct creates an intimidating, hostile or offensive work environment.

Ivancevich, et al (1997) maintain that sexual harassment is of two types. The first type is designated as tangible job benefit, also known as "quid pro quo" harassment. This form of harassment occurs when an employee's career path is directly impacted by a supervisor's unwelcome requests for sexual favours or other sexual advances. A second type of sexual harassment is a hostile work – environment – related sexual harassment claim whereby a person harassed would have to show

that (1) he or she belongs to a protected group, female or minority group, (2) he or she was subjected to unwelcome sexual harassment as defined above, (3) the harassment complained of was based upon his or her membership in the protected class, and (4) the harassment complained of affected the terms, conditions, or privileges of his or her employment.

They stated that sexual harassment of any type can cause lasting emotional damage, depression, and reduced productivity and that each of these consequences is costly to individuals and organizations. Victims pay all the intangible emotional costs inflicted by anger, humiliation, frustration, withdrawal, dysfunctional family units, and other damages that can be sexual harassment's aftermath. Victims of the most severe forms of harassment, including rape, can face not only severe emotional consequences, but also the possibility of a life – threatening disease. Some victims may leave jobs for one with a lower career path in order to escape the sexual harassment aura.

According to Childs, Martin and Stitt – Gohdes (2004), sexual harassment is a form of sex discrimination involving unwanted sexual attention that humiliates or intimidates and is based on gender or sexual preference. They further stated that in the United States of America, it is considered as a violation of the victim's civil rights and involves suggestive comments about one's appearance, touching or other physical contact, sexual comments or jokes, exposure to sexually explicit material and sexual advances. In addition, even if the harassment is not directed at a particular person, it may create an environment that is hostile to that person's ability to function.

Two distinct forms of sexual harassment are also identified by them. These are "quid pro quo" and hostile work environment forms of harassment. These collaborate with the opinions of Ivencevich, et al (1997) in which they asserted that a quid pro quo harassment occurs when an employee's "submission to or rejection of unwelcome sexual conduct is used as a basis for employment decisions." Quid pro quo harassment equally involves a definite behaviour by a manager or supervisor and requires some tangible employment action such as discharge, demotion or failure to get promoted as a result of the employee's refusal to comply to the manager's or supervisor's sexual request.

In the context of hostile work environment, the kind of harassment may involve conduct by none managerial or non– supervisory co – worker or third parties such as customers, vendors or suppliers toward their clients in the work environment. Hostile work environment, the kind of harassment that has triggered the most litigation and controversy, involves unwelcome sexual conduct that has the purpose or effect of unreasonably interfering with an employee's work performance or creating an intimidating, hostile or offensive work environment.

Two Supreme Court cases in U.S.A. were cited to significantly elaborate on the dimensions of both the quip pro quo and hostile work environment related harassment issues. These are the Meritor savings Bank and Faragher and Ellerth decisions of 1998. In Meritor savings Bank case, the Supreme Court made clear that title VII prohibits both quid pro quo and hostile work environment related harassments. The Supreme Court stressed that hostile work environment generally will not be found where the conduct is isolated, innocuous, or simply offensive; rather the harassment must be sufficiently severe or pervasive so as to alter the conditions of the victim's employment and create an abusive working relationship. At the same time, the court has stated, establishing a claim of hostile work environment does not require conduct that seriously affects the employee's well-being or is physically or psychologically injurious.

In their Faragher and Ellerth Decisions of 1998, the U.S. Supreme Court made clear that where the conduct is committed by a manager or supervisor, and the employee has suffered a "tangible adverse employment" action such as discharge, demotion, or a failure to promote, the employer will be held strictly liable, even though it was unaware of the conduct and the manager or supervisor was acting outside the scope of his or her authority. Absent any tangible employment action the court ruled, the employer still will be liable for the acts of a supervisor, unless it can affirmatively establish, (1) it exercised reasonable care to prevent and correct promptly any sexually harassing behaviour, and (2) the employee unreasonably failed to take advantage of any preventive or corrective opportunities provided by the employer or to avoid harm otherwise. In light of these possible defences, an employer must establish, disseminate and enforce a clear policy against sexual harassment, one that includes a viable complaint procedure. If employees, though aware of the policy and complaint procedure, fail to report the incidents or otherwise avail themselves of the complaint procedure, their claims, in the absence of a tangible employment action, might be deemed defective.

The need to regulate sexual harassment in the workplace is, by now, well accepted. According to Childs, Martin and Stitt – Gohdes (2004) the difficulties lie in the attempt to define what adult human behaviour is prohibited and what is not, what is severe and pervasive, as opposed to offensive but innocuous or isolated. At what point does a misunderstanding or miscommunication between adults become actionable? Where do banter and horse play end and harassing acts begin? To what extent do we assess the behaviour in question in the context of our social mores? Are there issues of free speech? Can social dissonance at the workplace be completely avoided? These are but a few of the workplace issues our courts, and society, are attempting to address.

There is little or no documented empirical evidence on sexual harassment within the Nigerian context. In Nigeria, many stories of sexual harassment, and even

actual sexual intercourse at workplaces, are told with little or no intervention either through legal redress or organizational policy statements. Some observers regard such cases as part of a contractual relationship between male employers and female employees or between bosses and their subordinates. Others assume that this social vice at workplaces in Nigeria is just part of the normative lifestyle of the Nigerian people enshrined in their culture. Some also assume that without such a verbal clause in the language of employment and employment practices in Nigeria most employees, especially female employees will not have access to some reasonable and gainful employment in some establishments in the country, while some others regard it as a mere game of life in the workplace.

The validity of these claims has little or no legitimacy since no court proceedings have been established in Nigeria on sexual harassment and since little or no empirical research has been conducted in Nigeria to establish its occurrence at work places in Nigeria. Still a lot of people believe that there are some covert prima facie evidence that sexual harassment exists on a regular basis in corporate Nigeria. Some Christian groups who feel that sexual abuses in organizations in Nigeria should not be tolerable at best would refuse to speak up in order to save face and protect themselves and the virtue of their given disposition. In this context, they believe that silence remains golden in the face of immorality. They also believe that it is the duty of victims to expose such cases and the government, courts, and organizations to intervene, otherwise the best way to contain oneself or the worst case scenario is to assume a “holier than thou” attitude no matter the degree of social or personal adversity incurred by those affected by the offense.

### **Consequences of Sexual Harassment**

Despite the fact that sexual intercourse is not necessarily performed in some cases of sexual harassment, the victim(s) may suffer from a number of symptoms such as:

- a) Insomnia, lack of sleep
- b) Headache and stomach ache
- c) Appetite variation
- d) Feelings of guilt and shame
- e) Fear, frustration and tearful episodes
- f) Poor social and professional achievement
- g) Sensation of impotency to stop the harassment, and
- h) Fear to ruin his / her own reputation.

### **Some Preventive Measures of Sexual Harassment**

According to Kreitner (2003), Byars and Rue (2004), Robbins and Coulter (1999) and Melgosa (2010) the best platform to significantly reduce sexual harassment is the work environment where some preventive measures will be articulated and put in place or employees of the companies or organizations involved should make strong suggestions that should be adopted or implemented to eliminate acts of sexual harassment. These measures should aim to:

- a) Develop a harassment policy of the organization. In this context, it is very useful to have a document stating what sexual harassment means and the steps to follow when this problem is observed or when someone is the victim of such a harassment or behaviour. It should also stipulate the consequences for those who are caught or for those who may repeat such an act.
- b) Organize talks and seminars for employees of affected organizations. This, according to Melgosa (2010) can be done as part of a systematic plan of the organization. During these talks and seminars, the psychological, social and legal implications of this problem can be discussed. Instructions can be provided to teach everyone how to develop an assertive way to reject such attempts upon them. During the talks and seminars, it will be useful to discourage the use of provocative attire (dress) or sensual manners that may encourage sexual advances. Everyone who is in charge of personnel supervision, no matter the number of employees involved, should receive special instruction on the preventive measures of sexual harassment, and how to handle possible incidents between employees when they occur.
- c) Encourage a safe work environment. The physical and social settings of the workplace may favour or discourage sexual harassment. Enclosed offices or workrooms should be fitted with glass doors or windows that allow visual inspections from the outside. When the job requires working pairs, it is important to carefully choose partnerships that do not promote sexual harassment by combining same sex teams or teams of proven moral reputation.
- d) Intervene at the appearance of any sign of harassment. This is to make sure that the work environment does not include anything that may constitute sexual harassment. For example, nude photographs on display, as they any provide offence or facilitate harassment.
- e) Take all sexual harassment complaints seriously. In this case, sexual harassment must be documented. Even weak evidence of any sexual harassment should be taken seriously and measures should be taken to gather additional facts in order to ascertain the truth of such a case. Involve



witnesses or spectators of someone else's harassment, take the initiative and do not condone what is happening around you, show disapproval and speak to the victims and offer necessary assistance.

### **How to Solve Sexual Harassment Problems in Organizations**

Sexual harassment cases require some external and firm actions against those perpetrating them. It is very unusual that this problem can disappear by itself. Furthermore the actions of the harasser will become stronger if consequences do not follow their actions.

Anyone that is a victim of sexual harassment need to act decisively as others may never find out what is happening to them. They need to be very courageous and send alarm signals to people around them. They should talk about harassment details to various people in their vicinities.

Other ways to solving sexual harassment problems will be:

- a) To share your suspicion with someone you trust, an intimate friend.
- b) Talk to the person harassing you and let him / her know that those words, attitudes, gestures, etc produce disgust and request him / her never to do it again.
- c) Make sure that your manner of dressing or acting is not provocative.
- d) Take care of your mental health. The effects of sexual harassment are multiple and adverse, and you should protect yourself. Share your experiences with close friends or professionals such as psychologists. Your mental health is very important and should properly be taken good care of by involving experts (Melgosa 2004).
- e) Find out if there is a policy and who, according to that policy, is the person with whom you should file your complaint. Avoid talking to many people in order not to expand your shame and psycho-social problems.
- f) Accumulate records of the events, with date and circumstances of all incidents of harassment. If you have received written notes or drawings, keep them as proof during investigations.
- g) Think of witnesses that may have been present when the harassing behaviour occurred. If your immediate superior does not listen to your complaint, do not give up and go to the higher levels of the corporate organization. Nobody will blame you if you have followed due process. If you do not feel sure about going alone, ask a good friend to go with you.

### **Narcissism in Organizations**

Narcissism is a tendency toward an erotic self – love or a morbid and excessive self – admiration of employees at the workplace. It is really a compensatory reaction of minimal self – esteem in hiding in the person who exhibits an act of narcissism.

In the views of Bradshaw (1988) the main clinical characteristics of the narcissistic personality disorder are: grandiosity, extreme self – involvement and lack of interest and empathy for others around him or her, in spite of the pursuit of others to obtain admiration and approval. The narcissist is also endlessly motivated to seek perfection in everything he or she does. Such a personality according to Bradshaw is driven to the acquisition of wealth, power and beauty, and to find others who will mirror and admire his / her grandiosity. Underneath this external façade there is an emptiness filled with envy and rage. The core of this emptiness is internalized shame.

Melgosa (2004) says that narcissists in organizations exhibit a covert inferiority complex. They love themselves excessively and often focus on some specific aspects of themselves. Sometimes it could be their physical attractiveness or personality traits or their personal skills. Narcissist may also love the entirety of their attributes. The narcissist may be very extraordinarily flashy but very egomaniacal.

Apart from the above attributes of narcissists, they equally exhibit other features such as:

- a) A disproportionate sensation of grander and arrogance at the workplace.
- b) An excessive need of admiration
- c) An inability to understand the feelings of others at work.
- d) An obsession for power, success, great achievements, immense wealth or exquisite beauty.
- e) A feeling of superiority and the impression that others do not understand him or her.
- f) An impression that one is the holder of some special privileges that make him or her deserve exceptional treatment on the job.
- g) A desire to exploit others
- h) A covert jealousy towards others on the job, and
- i) A belief that others envy him or her regularly.

### **Other Problems of Narcissists in Organizations**

Narcissists, according to Melgosa (2004) suffer the following as a result of their psychological and sociological disorders:

- a) Social rejection. Everybody in the organization avoids them. Nobody wants to be their friend or hold a casual conversation with them. Even those who may approach them out of pity end up feeling disgust when they realize that narcissists never stop praising themselves unnecessarily.
- b) They are poor achievers. Whether it be their studies, trade or profession, narcissists do not achieve much, since their time and effort are spent building up themselves egoistically, not on actual accomplishments. When they do try to reach a goal, fear of failure leads them to doubt and inability to achieve.
- c) They go through a lot of emotional problems. Behind the narcissistic personality is a fragile individual, insecure, lonely and determined to hide his or her vulnerability; depression can occur when they realize that they are not what they would like to appear to be.

### **Overcoming the Problems of Narcissism in the Workplace**

Melgosa (2010) and Bradshaw (1988) are of the view that anybody who has narcissistic tendencies should try as much as possible to change his or her behavioural direction (through seeking professional advice). By this means he or she will avoid many interpersonal problems, nurture self – assurance, mental balance and achieve inner peace.

Narcissism is rooted in deep problems of the past or in a traumatic experience that caused a strong impression, hurting the ego. If this is someone's situation, he or she should visit a good psychotherapist to obtain some professional help or assistance.

The following advice, according to Melgosa could be helpful whether or not the cause of narcissism is personal or psychological in nature:

- a) The person should be aware of his or her situation. He or she should accept reality as a challenge that will give him or her the determination to change or alter behaviour.
- b) The person should try to help someone every day. An offer to give a helping hand to a peer, invite a friend for a drink or just use of words of praise for others will help in changing his or her behaviour pattern. By being open to others needs or helps the narcissist will understand their needs as well as his or hers. This will elicit some degree of self-satisfaction and the satisfaction of other people's needs.

- c) The narcissist should try to forget about himself or herself sometimes. When he or she is interacting with people, he or she should focus on listening, ask questions and show interest in them. Their attitudes will change and their rejection will turn into warmth and kindness. This is the only way to make friends and be warmly accepted in their work organizations.
- d) They should assume a global vision of their environment. In doing so, they should think that great things can only be soothed through community support systems. They should try to become involved with other community volunteers, in humanitarian tasks and by trying to serve the needy rather than themselves. If these measures are not properly put in place to assist the narcissist, he or she can adopt some addictive measures as means of self – help and these measures can turn out to be more destructive than being remedial in nature.

### Conclusion

Narcissism and sexual harassment have become the lifestyles of most Nigerian workers and these abnormal behaviours need to be urgently checked and redressed in order to create industrial balance and harmony in the Nigerian work environment(s). Guidelines provided by studies involving situations of these social and psychological problems in industrialized countries of the world should be followed by Nigeria organizations in order to develop a problem free work environment, encourage healthy lifestyles, enhance cooperation and encourage organizational productivity.

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