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Workplace Harassment: Conceptualizations of Older Workers

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Final Report for Period: 09/2009 - 08/2010

Submitted on: 10/01/2010

Principal Investigator: Blackstone, Amy .

Award ID: 0817673

Organization: University of Maine

Submitted By:

Blackstone, Amy - Principal Investigator

Title:

Workplace Harassment: Conceptualizations of Older Workers

Project Participants

Senior Personnel

Name: Blackstone, Amy

Worked for more than 160 Hours: Yes

Contribution to Project:

As Principal Investigator on the award, I designed and carried out the study from conceptualization of the study design to data collection and analysis. Analysis is still on-going but I have presented findings at a professional conference (American Sociological Association 2010) and to a state agency (Maine Jobs Council).

Post-doc

Graduate Student

Name: Costello, Michael

Worked for more than 160 Hours: Yes

Contribution to Project:

Graduate research assistant. Created database of eligible survey participants by sifting through current and past Able records (agency from whom we received names for sample); assisted with survey construction, mailing, and prep; assisted with finding and reviewing literature; assisted with maintaining relationship w/ Able; assisted with coding qualitative survey questions; and assisted with paper writing.

Undergraduate Student

Technician, Programmer

Other Participant

Research Experience for Undergraduates

Name: Stewart, Mahala

Worked for more than 160 Hours: Yes

Contribution to Project:

Undergraduate research assistant for first year of project (was not on project during second year). Assisted with annotated bibliography, creating survey codebook, survey mailing and prep (e.g., calling participants in advance to let them know to expect survey), SPSS database set-up, and data entry.

Years of schooling completed: Other

Home Institution: Same as Research Site

Home Institution if Other:

Home Institution Highest Degree Granted (in fields supported by NSF): Doctoral Degree

Fiscal year(s) REU Participant supported: 2009 2008

REU Funding: REU supplement

Organizational Partners

National Able Network, Maine Division

The Maine Division of Able, a national program designed to place older workers and match them with potential employers, gave me and my graduate research assistant access to their records from which the survey sample was drawn. Able also provided feedback on the construction of the survey instrument.

Other Collaborators or Contacts

Activities and Findings

Research and Education Activities:

Search literature.
 Review literature and write annotated bibliography.
 Revise survey instrument with consultation from Able network.
 Obtain Institutional Review Board approval for survey changes.
 Prepare clean survey sample.
 Write codebook for survey.
 Set up SPSS database for subsequent data entry.
 Print and mail surveys.
 Data entry into SPSS.
 Coding of qualitative survey items (4 qualitative questions plus unsolicited participant comments on survey).
 Analysis of qualitative and quantitative survey items.
 Paper writing.
 Interview with state capitol reporter about project.
 Presentations at professional conference and to Maine state agency.

Findings:

At present, I have written drafts of one book chapter, two papers, and an outline of a third paper. Each piece is organized around one or several key findings from the project. I therefore describe the focus of each piece below:

1. The book chapter contains an overview of how and where findings from this project fit within the broader landscape of literature on ageism and abuse in the workplace. As one of the early chapters in the forthcoming book *Employment and Older Adults*, edited by Patricia Brownell and James Kelly, the chapter presents a 'lay of the land' in terms of the content and context of older workers' harassment experiences. I present findings on the most common harassment behaviors experienced by older workers. These include having one's work contributions ignored (25.1% of sample), being left out of decisions that affect one's work (23.0% of sample), being talked down to by one's coworkers (20.8% of sample), and being talked down to by one's bosses (20.2% of sample). A major theme that each of these four most behaviors have in common is a sense of being devalued in the workplace. The most common workplace settings older workers reported having these experiences were in offices while working as administrative support and in food service/preparation positions.
2. The first paper examines which older workers are likely to become targets of harassment and how/whether these workers mobilize in response to their harassment experiences. In terms of which older workers are likely to become targets of harassment, I find that women are more likely than men to experience staring or invasion of personal space in the workplace. There were no other statistically significant differences between men and women in their responses to the harassment questions. In terms of how older workers mobilize in response to their harassment experiences, I find that, by and large, older workers do not report harassment to anyone when it occurs. No one in the sample told an attorney or a government agency about any of their experiences. Analysis of the content of older worker harassment and targeting and mobilization patterns is still ongoing but these represent the major findings for each category.
3. The second paper presents findings from an analysis of the qualitative items on the survey. The survey contained three open ended questions: 1. Did any of the experiences you reported have something to do with your AGE?; 2. Did any of the experiences you reported have something to do with your GENDER?; and, 3. What have you most enjoyed about your workplace experiences since turning 62? In addition to these

qualitative data, many respondents also opted to write their own comments about their experiences in the margins of the questionnaire. Because of the unexpected richness of qualitative data garnered from the survey, I have chosen to write one paper in which I inductively analyze these data alone. The qualitative data show that when given opportunity to share their own experiences in their own words, many older workers share quite positive experiences. Participants who reported positive workplace experiences said that working helped them maintain their independence, gave them a chance to socialize, provided them an opportunity both to learn and to share their knowledge, kept them busy, and made them feel useful and helpful. Those who reported negative experiences said that working was sometimes difficult due to disability, that it sometimes felt demeaning to have to work, that their work environment was not enjoyable, and that they experienced ageism at work. Participants also wrote comments about why they are still in the workforce. The most common reasons participated cited for remaining in the workforce were financial need, social connections, and remaining mentally, physically, emotionally functional.

4. The third paper will be a comparison of older and younger workers' harassment experiences. This collaborative paper will compare findings from my previous collaborative work on young workers' harassment experiences to the new findings on older worker harassment. Findings from both studies reveal several key differences between young and older workers' harassment experiences. First, the type of harassment behaviors that workers most commonly experience differs by age. While younger workers most commonly experience offensive joking and invasive questioning in the workplace, older workers most commonly reported being isolated and left out at work. In addition, perceptions of what constitutes harassment seem to vary by age. These and other patterns focused on differences and similarities between younger and older workers will be the focus of the third paper.

Training and Development:

This research promoted teaching, training, and learning by involving research assistants at both the undergraduate and graduate level, offering them experience with data collection, analysis, finding and reviewing relevant literature, and collaboration with local agencies. The graduate student also utilized data from the project for a collaborative research project and presentation conducted with one other graduate student in his program.

Outreach Activities:

I participated in interviews with our campus PR department, who wrote a press release about the project which was published in the Bangor Daily News, with a local newspaper (Portland Press Herald), and with the Maine state capitol reporter (who contributed stories on the project to the Bangor Daily News and the Maine Public Broadcasting Network). I presented findings from the research to the Maine Jobs Council in June 2010 and at the American Sociological Association in August 2010. I have also held several meetings with staff at the National Able Network. I have requested the opportunity to present findings from the study at the Able offices and am working with the director of the local Able program to find a day/time that is convenient for them to have me do so. I aim to conduct this presentation by December 2010.

Journal Publications

Books or Other One-time Publications

Blackstone, Amy, "Harassment of Older Adults in the Workplace", (2011). book chapter, forthcoming; chapter due February 2011
 Editor(s): Patricia Brownell and James Kelly
 Collection: Employment and Older Adults: Ageism and Abuse in the Workplace
 Bibliography: Springer Verlag

Web/Internet Site

Other Specific Products

Contributions

Contributions within Discipline:

Much sociological research on worker harassment to date has focused on middle aged workers rather than on workers in the latter stages of their workforce participation. Findings from this study show that the harassment experiences of older workers are different from those of

younger workers.

As the U.S. workforce ages, it will become increasingly important to understand and improve older workers' experiences. Understanding the challenges faced by older workers will help employers and policy makers provide safe and fulfilling environments for all workers. Findings from this study show that older workers tend not to discuss their harassment experiences with others and that many feel isolated and left out in their workplaces. Nurturing positive coworker relationships and making sure that older workers are included in workplace communications may therefore be especially important aspects of improving older workers' experiences.

Contributions to Other Disciplines:

Findings from this study will be published in the forthcoming book 'Abuse in the Workplace: Employment and Older Adults,' edited by Patricia Brownell and James Kelly. The book contains contributions from scholars in human rights, gerontology, mental health, policy, and business. The book combines a focus on ageism, workforce bullying, elder abuse, and workplace health and will be among the first to present these issues within a human rights framework focused on research, policy, and practice.

Contributions to Human Resource Development:

Contributions to Resources for Research and Education:

The data set has been utilized by graduate students in the Department of Social Work at the University of Maine for required work in their program. It will be made available to researchers affiliated with the University of Maine Center on Aging and to the Able program.

Contributions Beyond Science and Engineering:

Conference Proceedings

Categories for which nothing is reported:

Any Journal

Any Web/Internet Site

Any Product

Contributions: To Any Human Resource Development

Contributions: To Any Beyond Science and Engineering

Any Conference