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How Social Learning Theory Explains the Persistence of Sexual Harassment

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Abstract

This paper gives details on how Bandura's Social Learning Theory (SLT) describes the persistence of sexual harassment across institutions and generations. It asserts that individuals come to learn, observe, copy and normalize harassment, particularly when such behavior remains unchecked. Utilizing an integrative theoretical review based on systematic literature searches and thematic analysis, the study illustrates how factors like institutional complicity, peer culture, family, and cultural norms facilitate this deviant behavior. Key SLT concepts such as observational learning, vicarious reinforcement, and moral disengagement highlight how harassment becomes an ingrained behavioral script, often perpetuated when perpetrators are not punished or are even rewarded. The concept of reciprocal determinism further clarifies the continuous interplay between personal, behavioral, and environmental factors in sustaining these patterns. The research indicates that learned behavior can be unlearned through positive role models, accountability, and structural interventions. This understanding offers a vehicle for developing more effective education, prevention, and policy interventions to disrupt the social learning chain supporting sexual harassment. While SLT provides a robust framework, the paper acknowledges its limitations in adequately addressing institutionalized power relations and intersectionality.

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Introduction

Sexual harassment is a cross-cultural, cross-legal, social and behavioral phenomenon in the entire world and every context, including the workplace, schools, and public spaces (Sharma et al., 2024; Sharma et al., 2023; UNESCO, 2020; World Bank, 2019). While internationally agreed-upon definitions, such as those provided in the ILO Convention No. 190, sexual harassment is any unwelcome sexual conduct which makes the environment or workplace a place of intimidation or offense (ILO, 2019; UN Women, 2020), such definitions do not tend to be sufficient in their encapsulation of the structural and learned aspects. Studies show that the domains of inadequate institutional reactions, imbalance in power, and victim-blaming society are fertile ground for the enactment of such crimes (UN Women, 2021; OECD, 2023). The Victims are muzzled through stigmatization whereby perpetrators go unpunished due to institutional failure and sustaining the culture of violence (World Bank, 2019; UNESCO, 2020).

This study employs Albert Bandura's Social Learning Theory (SLT) to define sexual harassment as acquired behavior learned by observing, imitating, and reinforcing social systems (Bandura, 1977; Bandura, 1986). Individuals who have experienced harassment within families, peer groups or the workplace replicate such actions when they observe others committing similar acts without being punished (OECD, 2023). The findings show that institutional tolerance acts as a situational reinforcer, which rationalizes misbehavior and makes it ongoing through generations (UNESCO, 2020; UN Women, 2020). For convicted offenders of sexual harassment, this present paper examines how organizational culture, peer group processes, attitudes, and generalized social discourses construct and sustain sexually deviant behaviors. The goal is to generate results for global policy, learning and behavior change towards prevention and rehabilitation (World Bank, 2019; UN Women, 2021; ILO, 2019).

SLT, as proposed by Bandura (1977), describes how individuals learn behaviors not only from direct experience but from the observation of others, especially if the behavior is reinforced or punished. This theory is important in accounting for sexual harassment as socially learned behavior. When peer groups or institutions do not sanction harassment or even condone it by silence or reward, the perpetrators internalize the belief that such an act is acceptable. Bandura's (1997) concept of reciprocal determinism further clarifies that individual attitudes, environmental conditions (e.g., institutional culture), and behaviors all continuously affect one another. For instance, narrative interviews of convicted offenders illustrate how early exposure to sexism, institutionalized objectification and

voids of accountability predispose harassment as an ingrained component of a behavioral script (Burton et al., 2002).

SLT theory also describes how such behaviors are perpetuated across different settings. Hogben and Byrne (1998) consider reinforcement systems including peer approval, perceived power and social status as reinforces of coercive sexual behavior. In patriarchal settings such as Nepal where men are taught to control and women are discouraged from complaining against abuse, a low risk of punishment and high modeling of abusive behavior exist. It leads to moral disengagement (Bandura, 1999) whereby perpetrators justify injurious activities without guilt. Sexual harassment, therefore, makes up an early-acquired conditioned reaction to social stimuli that is strengthened unless broken by awareness policy, training and role-modeling interventions. This study intended to understand how sexual harassment is perpetuated in the long-term using SLT in application. The study focuses on how individuals learn, imitate and reinstate such actions through observing other people in their social and organizational environments especially where those actions remain unpunished or sanctioned by society. It aims at finding out how such acquired behaviors are applicable in preventing and rehabilitating individuals more successfully.

Methods

The study used an integrative theoretical review based on Torraco (2005) for examining how SLT accounts for sexual harassment continuity in institutional and socio-cultural environments. Systematic literature searches from 1997 through 2025 from databases such as Google Scholar, Scopus, JSTOR, and PubMed were carried out using the terms "Sexual Harassment," "Social Learning Theory", "Moral Disengagement," and "Nepal Gender Norms." Inclusion criteria of the study were literature with relevance to SLT and harassment in organizational or educational settings and to patriarchal or South Asian settings. Research without theoretical support (related to SLT) and those not related to learning behavior were excluded.

Thematic analysis was employed to reveal individual, social, and environmental-level patterns behind harassment behavior. This study was employed to link SLT constructs such as modeling, vicarious learning, and reinforcement to institutional silence from real environments, peer validation, and gender norms. The strategy provided an improved understanding of the process by which harassment is learned and transmitted and served as the foundation for preventive and rehabilitative intervention.

Results and Discussion

SLT originally developed by Albert Bandura, is one of the theoretical bases of human behavior, such as sexual harassment behavior as acquired and not fixed or biologically determined (Bandura, 1977). The most important concept of this theory is that people learn by observing, especially if the behavior is rewarded or not punished. By modeling, imitation, and reinforcement processes, individuals learn pro-social as well as anti-social behavior. Bandura (1986) went on to expand this model by adding Social Cognitive Theory which emphasized the reality that individuals are self-regulatory agents who are capable of anticipating and reflecting.

The application of SLT to the educational environment of sexual harassment is applied to illustrate how institutional and cultural norms can inadvertently reinforce this behavior. When harassers are not punished or worse still get promoted or rewarded, such acts as models of behavior can be learned by others (Fitzgerald et al., 1997). Observational learning (Aryal & Maharjan, 2021) is particularly powerful in hierarchically structured organizations like universities where junior employees or students can imitate the actions of their seniors (Aryal, 2022a; Aryal, 2022b) generating cycles of abuse (Raver & Gelfand, 2005). Social learning also includes the process of vicarious reinforcement, in which people do not necessarily have to experience directly the consequences of behavior to learn from it.

As an example, should students receive education that presents harassment yields to victim-blaming or organizational inaction, they learn that they may win silence as the safest course of action (McDonald & Charlesworth, 2013). These can turn into effective generators of "moral disengagement," defined by Bandura (1999) as the psychological state of people providing morally justificatory explanations about engaging in injurious actions without bringing about large dosages of guilt or shame. Furthermore, SLT also lends support to feminist theory's gendered power relations. Women are socialized to occupy lower status positions, and when assertiveness is belittled or spurned, it further discourages reporting harassment (Berdahl, 2007). These gender norms are typically reinforced through exposure to a continuum of microaggressions, normalized harassment, and institutional indifference, all of which are social learning processes (Buchanan et al., 2014).

SLT also refers to the role of self-efficacy, a person's belief in his or her ability to act as the root of intervening or resisting harassment incidents. Students who have higher self-efficacy will more likely report or act for others who do, but where the organization fails

to follow up or remediate, self-efficacy in both potential bystanders and victims is undermined (Bandura, 1997; Banyard et al., 2007). This is particularly pertinent in situations where silence is rewarded and dissent punished leading to further harassment through learned helplessness. In addition, the implications of the theory are not only for preventive interventions. Interventions based on SLT are positive role modeling (Aryal et al., 2024), peer-implemented awareness campaigns and institutionalized reinforcement of respectfulness (Taylor et al., 2011). Peer educator or student leader role model program-based interventions have been effective in intervening against offending behavior patterns in schools and colleges (DeGue et al., 2014).

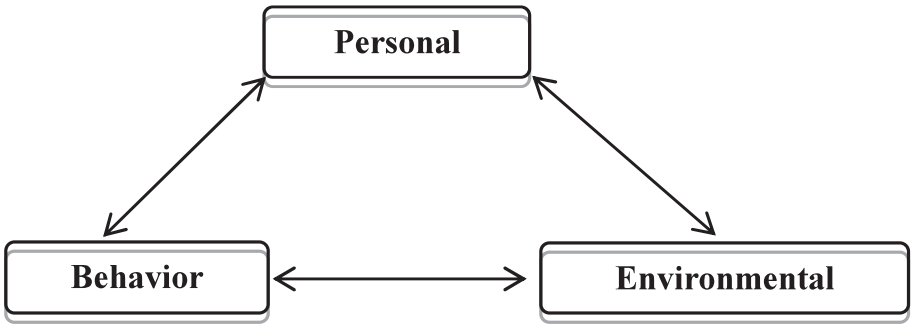

Figure 1. *Bandura's concept of reciprocal determinism*

This triangle demonstrates what affects sexual harassment directly depicting Bandura's theory of reciprocal determinism. For Bandura (1997), three interrelated personal, behavioral, and environmental factors are constantly affecting one another. Personal beliefs and attitudes, behavior like boundary invasion and environmental variables like organizational culture or peer pressure all affect sexual harassment experiences. In short, SLT offers a framework in which sexual harassment conduct is learned, reinforced, and unlearned in institutional and social environments. Observing, modeling, reinforcement and self-efficacy tie SLT together so that policymakers, researchers and teachers around the world.

Conceptual Framework

Following Bandura's SLT (1977), human behavior is not only learned from personal experience but also from observing others, interpreting consequences, and perceiving social and institutional disapproval or approval. In sexual harassment, the learning process is influenced by an interaction of personal, social, and environmental determinants. These circles constantly overlap to decide how individuals conceptualize harassment, legitimize it, resist it, or engage in it, sometimes subconsciously. This line of thinking accounts for how some conditions make individuals normalize or emulate harassing conduct in academic, social, and professional life.

Individual factors are internal cognitive, emotional, and psychological factors that govern how individuals perceive and take in social cues. For instance, low empathetic and emotionally restricted individuals fail to perceive the distress or violation inflicted on others and therefore have a greater chance of misperceiving the impact of their actions (Gini et al., 2007). Additionally, individuals with moral disengagement, disconnecting one from ethical standards of behavior can rationalize inconsiderate behavior without experiencing guilt (Bandura, 1999). This disengagement is more probable in individuals brought up in situations where sexism, aggression or dominance are the norm. Individuals with fixed gender role beliefs or who believe in male superiority are most likely to view harassment as acceptable or even humorous (Murnen & Kohlman, 2007). In addition, experience of abusive, neglectful or violent homes in early life can make aggressive sexual behavior look like a normalized way of exercising power or control (Espelage et al., 2012). These psychological and attitudinal dispositions are the essence of individual vulnerability to engaging in or tolerating harassment-related behavior.

Social factors create the proximal relational and cultural context within which the behaviors are modeled, nurtured and refined. If peer groups idealize, endorse or accept sexual teasing, objectification or domination, then individuals will tend to emulate these behaviors to be accepted or not rejected (Young et al., 2009). Silence by onlookers or people in positions of authority also condones harassment as the behavior will either be ignored or covered up (Banyard et al., 2007). This is perhaps most clearly observed in patriarchal cultures, where men's superiority is institutionalized and women are taught to accept unwanted advances rather than respond with a 'no' (Connell, 2005). Childhood is also a factor; boys and girls brought up in families that silence women's voices, insistent on men's authority and ashamed of girls' assertiveness will be likely to find gendered violence normal (Jewkes et al., 2015). Social media platforms also aggregate the learning by rewarding harassing behavior with likes, shares, or clever comments, making online violence a source of social capital (Salter, 2016). Such cultural and interpersonal drivers significantly shape attitudes and practices by confirming toxic masculinity blueprints and dissuading responsibility.

Environmental factors extend beyond interpersonal relations to encompass institutional and structural circumstances that dissuade or facilitate harassment. For example, where there exists a poor, poorly communicated or not enforced harassment policy at school or in the workplace, people are facilitated to harass others with impunity (Fitzgerald et al., 1997). These environments are conveying often by default that there are not many consequences for immoral actions.

Lastly, the physical environment also matters; open or uncontrolled areas such as canteens, hostels or student events can be breeding grounds for unchecked behavior

(Phipps & Smith, 2012). At a more general level, the media plays a significant role in attitudes of sexual entitlement and dominance. Popular films and music generally portray persistence after refusal as romantic reinforcing the overlap between consent and coercion (Coy & Horvath, 2011). These cultural standards, like victim-blaming wherein the victim is blamed for what they were wearing or did and not the fault of the attacker, also contribute to harassment by taking away responsibility (Gruber & Fineran, 2008). Socioeconomic disadvantage further fuels such trends in vertical relationships such as student-teacher, employer-intern or donor-recipient where the dominant party can use the position to claim sexual favors or crush dissent (Choo, 2021). Such environments make the structural imbalance itself part of the learning that harassment is not just possible but sometimes rewarded or tolerated.

As shown in Figure 2, three interconnected factors, personal, social, and environmental, constitute the learning ecosystem in which harassment-related behaviors are either discouraged or facilitated. Bandura's model highlights that these influences are mutual. One's actions can condition the environment as much as the environment conditions one. Through understanding how these factors interact to shape behavior, this paradigm provides an influential analytical tool through which sexual harassment causation, as well as prevention and intervention, may be explored.

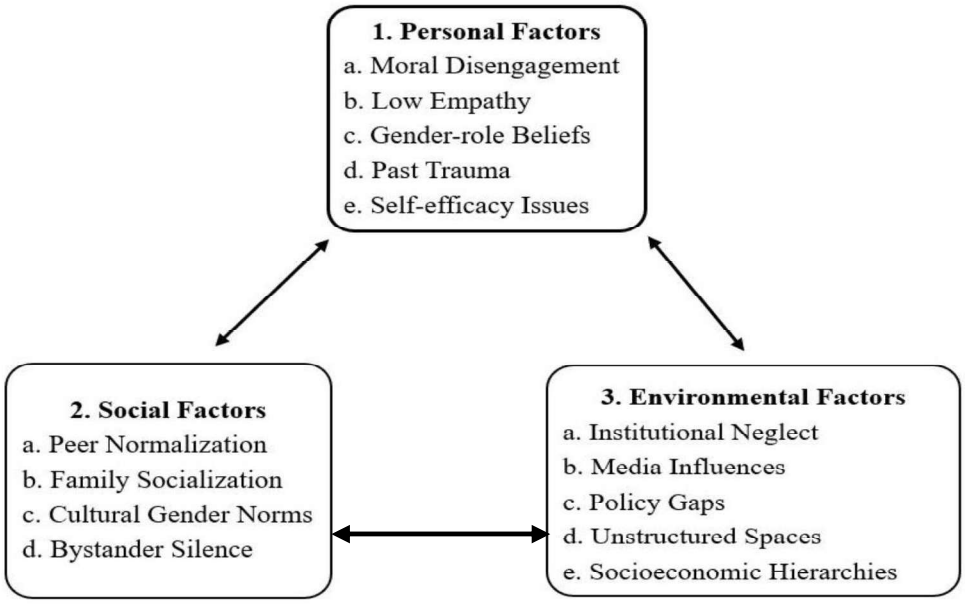

Figure 2. *Conceptual Framework of Factors Influencing the Social Learning of Sexual Harassment*

Habit Formation and the Path toward Criminality

Human deviant behavior is not inborn but socially constructed. It is acquired due to ongoing observation, imitation, reinforcement and normalization with the immediate

social environment (Bandura, 1977). These behaviors in sexual offending and harassment are developed where unwanted behaviors are rewarded and normalized, particularly in social environments accepting, excusing or even rewarding such behavior (Connell, 2005). SLT is concerned with the issue that individuals do not necessarily need to experience consequences directly to acquire behavior. Individuals may acquire behavior vicariously through observing others (Aryal, 2022a), namely, role models or authority figures who exhibit similar behavior without consequence (Bandura, 1999).

Criminal or sexually harassing behavior, therefore, emerges as the gradual result of small, mundane activities that are perhaps initially "innocent" objectification or sexist joking, progressively growing into more severe kinds of abuse when such activity is not checked or socially shunned (Young et al., 2009). This is also reinforced through the process of moral disengagement, whereby perpetrators justify or minimize their actions by blaming victims, displacing responsibility or dehumanizing others (Bandura, 1999). When this kind of cognitive restructuring is reinforced socially a deviant behavioral script is a durable personal tendency (Fitzgerald et al., 1997). Repeated exposure to environments where harassment is modeled, rewarded or ignored increases the likelihood of repeated perpetration of such acts as habit, rehearsing learned behavior into identity-based behavioral scripts (Jewkes et al., 2015).

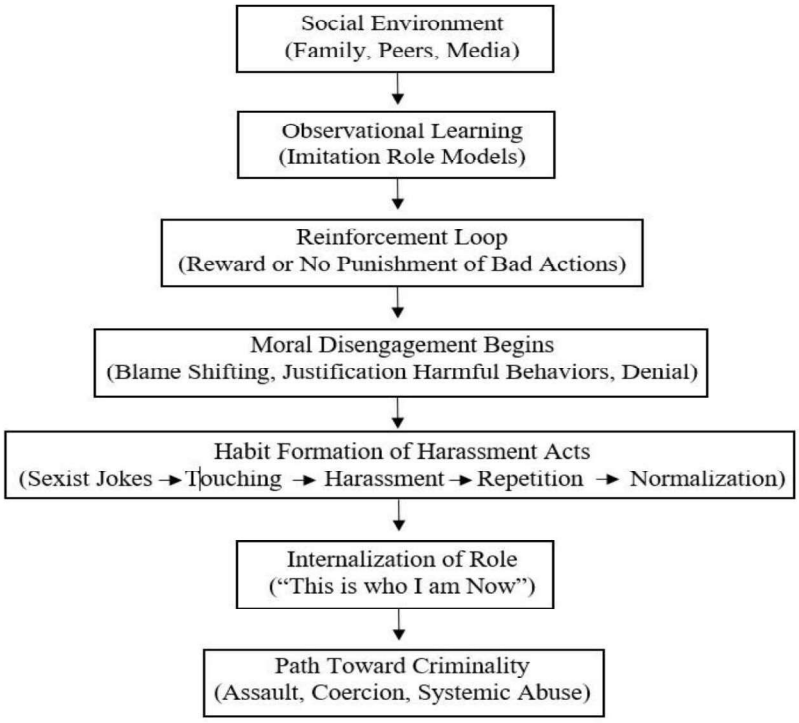

Figure 3. *Psychosocial Pathway to Sexual Offending*

Peer victimization in childhood, gender-role socialization and family or community violence exposure are involved in the subsequent development of harassing or aggressive behaviors (Espelage et al., 2012). These habituated patterns do not occur by chance but are constructed through repetitive behavioral and cognitive reinforcement in school, family, peer group, media, and workplace culture micro-contexts (Coy & Horvath, 2011). In young men, especially, exposure to hypermasculine norms and impunity for boundary-crossing behavior promotes a sense of entitlement, building a platform for repeat offenses and eventual normalization of harassment (Murnen & Kohlman, 2007; Phipps & Smith, 2012). In the long term, such acts become ingrained not just as behaviors, but as elements of the individual's identity and his entitlements over others and thus as a route to criminality.

This behavior graphically shows how people pick up unacceptable actions like sexual harassment from others are rewarded (or not punished) and gradually make that act a habit. Over time, they no longer feel guilty, repeat it and can go on to commit serious crimes. It's a step-by-step process from learning to crime brought about by personal, social and environmental conditions.

Limitations of SLT in Understanding Sexual Harassment

While Albert Bandura's SLT (1977, 1986) is a solid model for describing how individuals learn sexually deviant behaviors through observing, imitating and being rewarded, it is not perfect when applied to the multifaceted issue of sexual harassment. Among its key shortcomings is the failure to be able to adequately handle institutionalized power relations, namely gendered hierarchies and patriarchal norms embedded in educational, legal and work environments. SLT’s emphasis on tailored learning spaces ignores broader socio-political mechanisms actively shaping the normalization and reproduction of harassment. It fails to adequately tackle internalized oppression, silencing, and psychological trauma as determinants of victims that are priceless in reporting conduct and accommodation (Chaudhuri, 2012; UNESCO, 2020).

SLT's other major weakness is that it lacks theory on intersectionality. Sexual harassment is not experienced universally but is instead compounded for those whose identities intersect with marginalized groups such as gender, caste, ethnicity and economic status (UN Women, 2021). For example, female workers employed in Nepal's informal sector experience systemic and exploitative harassment that is sexual due to their lack of legal protection and socio-economic vulnerability (WOREC, 2022; NHRC, 2020). SLT does not capture completely how these intersecting identities play in a system of social

learning. In an attempt to leap over such discrepancies, there needs to be a syncretic model that cross-pollinates SLT with feminist philosophy aimed at institutional power relations (CEDAW, 2018), trauma-sensitive psychology respectful of survivor behavior (Sharma & Shrestha, 2021) and intersectional analysis situating harassment concerning socio-cultural stratification (World Bank, 2019). It is solely through combining the behavioral theory and structural criticism with local insight that we move toward a more combined strategy in responding to prevention and response to sexual harassment locally and globally (ILO, 2019; UN Women, 2020).

Conclusions

Sexual harassment is not an isolated or spontaneous act, but a learned behavior shaped by observation, imitation, and reinforcement in accepting social and institutional environments. This study, following Bandura's Social Learning Theory boldly depicts how the harassment perpetuates where harmful acts go unpunished, sanctioned by peer communities, and embedded in institutional silence, patriarchal cultures and moral disengagement. By monitoring how humans acquire and transfer such behaviors over generations, the paper not only serves its overall purpose of describing the persistence of sexual harassment but also demonstrates how such learned behaviors may be unlearned through deliberate behavior such as positive role modeling, participatory education and accountability-oriented policies. The study encourages shifting from reactive to proactive strategies, prevention and rehabilitation based on the reclaiming of the very environments that have helped perpetuate abuse offering a powerful model of change translatable to schools, workplaces and broader culture.

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