

Monitoring Harassment in Organizations

Laura Boudreau

Sylvain Chassang

Ada Gonzalez-Torres

Columbia University

Princeton University

Ben Gurion University

Rachel Heath*

University of Washington

January 26, 2022

Abstract

Organizations’ ability to take action against harassment is limited by their ability to elicit information from relevant parties. Escalating information, especially if it is associated with personal identifying characteristics is a difficult step for victims and witnesses concerned with possible retaliation as well as reputational costs. This prevents organizations from responding to individual issues, but also from assessing the scope and nature of the harassment problem: how prevalent is it, what share of employees is responsible for the damage, etc. We study the impact of garbled survey methods on information transmission: theory predicts that randomly switching reports that no harassment took place to reports that harassment did take place can improve information transmission by guaranteeing participants plausible deniability in the event they file an incriminating report. We evaluate this prediction of in a phone-based survey experiment about workplace harassment with employees of a large apparel manufacturer in Bangladesh. We vary the survey method (direct or garbled), the degree of personally identifiable information (team id) associated with the report, as well as the degree of rapport built with respondents. We find that garbling increases reporting of sexual harassment by about 280%, physical harassment by 310%, and threatening behavior by 52%. We also find positive effects of building rapport and a negative effect of attaching team id to the report. This improved data allows us to better understand patterns of harassment in the organization, and draw policy-relevant implications for decision-makers.

KEYWORDS:

*This project is funded by the Private Enterprise Development in Low-income Countries (PEDL) Initiative and by Columbia University’s Provost’s Diversity Grants Program for Junior Faculty.