

Perceptions of Sexual Harassment in Athletic Training

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Objective: To describe and analyze the experiences of ethnically diverse female certified athletic trainers (ATCs) in order to discern the perceived nature of sexual harassment in the athletic training profession.

Design and Setting: Both quantitative and qualitative methods were used for a larger study; however, only the qualitative data are presented here. An in-depth telephone interview survey for the larger study was developed, of which several questions pertained to sexual harassment.

Participants: An ethnically diverse group of twenty-five female ATCs (American Indian/Alaskan Native; Asian/Pacific Island; Black, non-Hispanic; Hispanic; and White, non-Hispanic), five from each ethnic/racial group, participated in the interview.

Measurements: Data were collected via an in-depth telephone interview. Female ATCs were asked if they had

experienced sexual harassment in the classroom, clinical rotation or on the job. The data were analyzed using Vaughn, Schumm and Sinagub's¹ five step method of qualitative data analysis.

Results: Regardless of race/ethnicity or date of certification, women perceived they experienced sexual harassment when the incident involved physical abuse or created a threatening environment. Comments and jokes of a sexual nature were perceived as "boys being boys," rather than as sexual harassment.

Conclusions: The data suggest diverse female ATCs do not have a clear understanding of what constitutes sexual harassment.

Key Words: sexual harassment, women in athletic training, qualitative research.

In Fiscal Year 2005, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) received 12,679 charges of sexual harassment. Eighty-six percent of those charges were filed by women.² In a survey of 525 undergraduates, 40% of the women and 28.7% of the men were sexually harassed by a college professor or instructor.³ In the athletic training profession, female pioneers^{4,6} as well as athletic training students,⁷ reported incidences of sexual harassment and that the opportunity for, and the perpetuation of, sexually harassing behaviors exists.^{4,7} Likewise, the Women in Athletic Training Committee⁸ asked female certified athletic trainers (ATCs) if they had ever been victims of sexual harassment in athletic training; thirty-seven percent of which indicated "yes."⁸

The athletic training environment and structure of athletic

training education are such that the focus is predominantly prevention, evaluation, immediate care, and rehabilitation of illnesses and injuries affecting physically active individuals.⁹ The athletic training room or sports medicine clinic environment and the interactions between the ATC and others (i.e., athlete, patient, coach, and supervisor) are usually not the priority. As such, little research has been published that examines the athletic training environment and the interactions that occur, including sexual harassment. While some research on sexual harassment suggests that "culture or ethnic background may interfere with students' ability to label inappropriate faculty behaviors as sexual harassment,"^{3(p297)} other previously published studies have focused exclusively on the experiences of Caucasian women.⁴ Therefore, as part of a larger study on women in athletic training,¹⁰ the purpose of this research was to understand the nature of sexual harassment in athletic training as perceived by diverse female ATCs.

Sexual harassment is defined by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission as a form of sex discrimination that violates Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Sexual harassment involves, "unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature,"^{11(p171)} when the conduct explicitly or implicitly... affects an individual's employment, unreasonably interferes with the individual's work performance, and creates an intimidating, hostile or offensive work environment.^{2,11-13} There are two types of sexual harassment: quid pro quo harassment and hostile environment. Quid pro quo, or this for that, involves the victim being promised



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a benefit in exchange for sexual favors, including requests for dates. Quid pro quo can only be committed by someone who has the power to make employment decisions.¹³ When quid pro quo occurs, the victim's submission to or rejection of the conduct is used as a basis for employment decisions.^{13,14}

Hostile environment sexual harassment occurs when the conduct of the harasser creates a hostile, offensive or intimidating environment. Factors which may determine a hostile environment include: the verbal and/or physical nature of the conduct, frequency of the conduct, hostility and offensiveness of the conduct, the working relationship to the harasser (co-worker or supervisor), perpetuation of the conduct by others, and if there is more than one victim.¹⁴ Behaviors that may contribute to a hostile environment include: discussing sexual activities, touching unnecessarily, commenting on physical attributes, displaying sexually suggestive pictures, using demeaning or inappropriate terms, such as "Babe," telling sexual jokes and innuendo, and using indecent gestures.^{12,13}

Sexual favoritism may take the form of implicit quid pro quo harassment and/or hostile work environment harassment. Sexual favoritism occurs when one or more individuals are given preferential treatment by a person in a dominant or power role. The people who are not given the preferential treatment can claim sexual favoritism.^{2,12}

If sexual harassment occurs in the athletic training environment, the harassing behaviors could prevent athletic trainers from performing tasks necessary for doing their job.¹⁵ Unfortunately, sexual harassment is not currently, nor has it previously been, a topic included in the educational competencies for athletic trainers.¹⁶ Therefore, through the use of vignettes, the current study demonstrates the perceived nature of sexual harassment manifested in athletic training.

Method

Design

A large study on women in athletic training,¹⁰ using both quantitative and qualitative methods was designed. As a part of the larger study, an in-depth telephone interview survey with several questions pertaining to sexual harassment was developed. The qualitative data on sexual harassment from the telephone interview are presented here. The University Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects approved the study and consent was obtained before data were collected.

Participants

Of 246 women who participated in the larger study, 117 volunteered to be interviewed. Those who agreed to be interviewed were stratified by race/ethnicity. Twenty-five women were randomly selected for the interview, five from each stratum. Stratification and selection were used in order to ensure equalized representation among the population of female athletic trainers. The self-identified ethnic/racial heritage of the women was Black/African American ($n=5$), American Indian/Native American ($n=5$), Asian national/Asian/Asian American/Pacific Islander ($n=5$), Caucasian/White ($n=5$), and Hispanic ($n=5$). The ethnic origin of

Asian/Asian American/Pacific Islander women represented four different countries and the Native American/American Indian women belonged to three different tribal nations. In order to protect the identity of the women, the specific country of origin and nation were not included and pseudonyms were given to all women identified. Athletic training certification dates spanned three decades, 1970's (4), 1980's (5) and 1990's (16). Specifically, the certification year for the participants ranged from 1975 to 1998, inclusive.

Instrumentation

The Women in Athletic Training: Career and Educational Experiences Interview Survey¹⁰ was developed for a larger study, in order to chronicle and analyze the stories, experiences, viewpoints and social realities of ethnically/racially diverse female certified athletic trainers. The survey was modeled on earlier work by Grant-Ford.⁶ The interview questions were semi-structured and open-ended to allow the participants to tell their own stories and elaborate on contextual content. Several questions pertained to sexual harassment. The women were asked, "When you were a student, did you ever experience sexual discrimination or sexual harassment during class or during your clinical rotation?" Once you became a professional, did you experience sexual discrimination or sexual harassment in the work place?" If the answer was "yes" for any of the locales (i.e., class, clinical rotation or work), they were asked to describe what happened. The terms sexual discrimination and sexual harassment were not defined for the participants. The researchers wanted to know what the women perceived as sexually harassing behaviors. The researchers did not want the participants to take an experience and redefine the experience, based on the legal definition.

Data Collection

The lead author conducted the telephone interviews. An initial call was made to describe the study, to obtain consent for participation and audio-taping, and to schedule the interview date. The interviews were conducted at the participants' convenience. The interviews lasted an average of 49 minutes, ranging from 26 to 91 minutes in length. During the actual interview, a voice activated telephone recorder was attached to the telephone to facilitate data collection; notes were also taken. To manage the data, the audio tapes were transcribed. The transcripts were proofread and verified for accuracy by comparing the audio tapes and written notes. Each participant had the opportunity to review her own transcript for accuracy of words and meanings, and to consent to its use.

Data Analysis

When working with text or data that is less organized, such as interview data, one "...often note[s] recurring patterns, themes, or 'gestalts' which pull together many separate pieces of data."^{17(p246)} Vaughn, Schumm and Sinagub's¹ five step method of qualitative data analysis is inductive, allowing for "pulling together of separate pieces of data".^{17(p246)}

The first step was to identify the big ideas. These big ideas

were initially based on the questions asked during the interview and provided the initial framework for the subsequent selection of units of data. For example the first big ideas were associated with identifying all data related to perceived sexual harassment/sexual discrimination and data where an incident occurred but was not perceived as sexual harassment/sexual discrimination.

The second step involved unitizing the data. In this step, specific units of information that emerged from the big ideas were identified. The units varied in size from a single phrase, such as “roll off my back” or “inappropriate comments by athletes,” to a paragraph.

Step three was to categorize the units of data. Other qualitative analysis procedures call the step, coding.^{17,18} Those units identified in step two were grouped into relevant categories. The two initial categories were labeled *incidents* (indicating specific accounts of where perceived sexual harassment/sexual discrimination occurred) and *just language/joking/non threatening* (indicating that activities occurred, but were not perceived as sexual harassment/sexual discrimination).

Step four required negotiation of the categories. Units and categories were thoroughly reviewed to determine if the categories accurately reflect the data, and if the data are accurately categorized. Once the negotiation process was completed, the initial categories were renamed to better reflect the data. No new categories emerged during negotiation. The units were re-examined to determine if they accurately represented the renamed categories.

The final step was to identify themes. In this step, the big ideas from step one were re-framed, restated, refined and became themes. The emergent themes had to be supported by the categories generated in steps two through four. The two themes that emerged are presented in the results section.

Results

Female ATCs were asked about sexual harassment during the interview. Sexual harassment was not defined for them in order to ascertain what the women thought constituted sexually harassing behaviors from their perspective. Current data suggest, as with Anderson^{4,5} and Grant-Ford,⁶ that female ATCs perceived sexual harassment occurred as a result of their gender and not their race/ethnicity, or certification year.

During the interviews, when asked if they had been sexually harassed in the classroom, clinical rotation, or work place, two themes emerged. First, female ATCs who recalled being inappropriately touched or working in a threatening environment perceived that they had been sexually harassed. Second, women who recalled having verbal exchanges, verbalization by the offender, or did not feel threatened, said, “no”, and qualified the answer by labeling the behavior as, “boys will be boys.” The boys will be boys behavior was considered part of working in a male dominated sporting environment. Overall, sixty-four percent of the women ATCs interviewed perceived they had been sexually harassed. The harassment occurred as a student in the classroom or clinical rotation; and/or as a professional in the work place. The harassment was perceived to have occurred more often during the

clinical rotation and least often in the classroom.

The following six stories illustrate the divergent notions about sexual harassment, which involved inappropriate touch or a threatening environment. The names used are pseudonyms for the participants.

Theme One: Inappropriate Touch or Threatening Environment

Mary Jo talked about how male athletes sexually harassed her by touching her inappropriately when she stated, “So some of the athletes – there was sexual harassment and things like that . . . They [the athletes] grab you, or they touch you, or they rub you, or things like that.” When asked if particular athletes were more likely to engage in this behavior, Mary Jo said, “Sure. Football. The whole football team. [It was] pretty normal for them, (pause) at the time [during the late 1970’s].”

Rosa, perceived she experienced sexual harassment by a baseball player. She told the following story:

“. . .there was really only one time that I was offended . . . It’s when I was working baseball. It was my first year, and I’d worked with them for one whole semester and a month into the second semester or so – month or two. We were at a game, and I was sitting on the bench, and their bags were underneath us all, on the bench. And one of the players who tended to be one of the big jokesters on the team, one of the guys that would say things that the other guys would go, ‘Shut up!’ I was sitting there watching the game, and not really paying attention to him. He comes over and he kind of knelt down like he was going to get something from under the bench. But instead of going around me, what he did was put one hand on each of my knees and open[ed] my legs. Yeah. And then I just jumped up and I just said, ‘What the h*** are you doing?’ And he said with a really big smile, ‘What? I’m just tryin’ to get my bag. It’s underneath you.’ I said, ‘No.’ I said, excuse me, but I said, ‘Bull***!’ I said, ‘That’s not what you were doing.’ You know, and I said, ‘Don’t ever do that again!’ And, man, the guys were just like kind of in shock when he did it. And it never happened again. Not even anything close, but, yeah, that definitely, I would say, was a sexual harassment situation.”

Emily and Jesslyna sued their respective institutions. Emily did not indicate the legal charges, but her story was consistent with sexual harassment via a hostile environment. She told this story, “. . . I did an internship with a Division I football team. I actually ended up suing the school for sexual harassment. . . . I was the only female actually working with the football team. And football usually, I don’t know how it is in most colleges, but I guess with the, the Division I schools they have their own separate locker room or field house that they use. So the way the building was set up, the middle of the building was the [athletic] training room. And off of the [athletic] training room to the left is the defensive locker room and off the right is the offensive. In the back of the [athletic] training room are the showers. . . . basically, everything works around the main room. I was in there one day after practice. And everybody cuts off their tape and they pretty much walk from their

locker room across the [athletic] training room and then into the back room and take a shower. So, most of them come with towels wrapped around their waist. One of the football players went to cut off his tape and his towel fell. And so, I just kind of turned my head, so I wouldn't have to look at (pause) his body. All the other football players signaled to him saying, 'There's a girl in here, you know. Watch out.' So he said, 'Well...' then he started saying some profane words. He said, 'She's not supposed to be in here anyway.' And then, he kind of took his towel and swung it over his shoulder and kind of walked around and pranced around me without any clothes on. Just kind of trying to get my attention, just to make it a point of saying you know, 'you're really not supposed to be in here.' But, in reality I was supposed to be in there, regardless. So, after that, I had spoken with the coaches about the situation. This situation just kept getting worse. He just kept on doing it more and more. And the coaches really didn't do anything about it. And then I ended up resigning, and suing the school."

Jesslyna sued for sexual assault and that incident was still pending when the interview was conducted. Jesslyna explained, "I was sexually assaulted by a coach . . . Criminally they [the charges] were dropped. Civilly, it's still pending." Unfortunately, Jesslyna was involved in more than one incident. She said, "Um, uh (pause, hesitation) I guess, in layman's terms, you could say I was sexually molested, coming back home from a road trip with football. And I was asleep when it happened."

At times, the incident was not described as personal contact, rather as an uncomfortable environment. Cheyenne described it this way,

"There was one particular time when I went to a cross country meet for the guys' [athletic] trainer. There again, you're the only girl on the van with a whole bunch of guys. And I felt really awkward because they didn't really care that I was on there – they were talking however they wanted to talk. Doing whatever they wanted to do. So I just kind of had to sit there and act like it wasn't going on."

As an athletic training student, Megan also experienced an uncomfortable environment. In her case, the offender was her clinical supervisor. The incident left her torn because other than the particular incident, she liked and respected her supervisor. Megan recalled,

"My clinical instructor was **very** inappropriate. You know those large orange cones? Ok, he told me that I need to get some Vaseline and go sit on one of those. Yeah, so I complained to . . . the head of the program. And he [clinical supervisor] said things like that before. . . . it's well documented and everything but, this guy seriously has no social skills...He is a great athletic trainer though, and that's [why], I wanted to stay at that site, and continue with my clinical... Because I learned so much from him, he's very organized, very just on top [of things]; he's the best athletic trainer I've ever known, except for his rude and unnecessary comments. . . . so I was sort of torn, do I want to stay or do I want to go?"

Theme Two: Boys Will Be Boys

The majority of experiences of a sexual nature that occurred

were described as verbal, rather than physical as previously reported. The experiences typically included inappropriate emotional and psychological abuse conditioned by dominant gender power relations. However, except for four specific incidents, the abusive verbal incidences and experiences were not considered harassing behavior by women ATCs. For example, five of the twenty-five women interviewed indicated that inappropriate comments were just boys being boys. Four of those stories are presented.

Alicia commented,

I think (pause) not anything that I would be totally offended by. I mean, football players – guys will be guys, and they make comments and things like that. . . . I mean nothing out of the ordinary that really upset me or anything like that, that I would consider sexual harassment. . . . I mean, I was asked out, was told I had, pretty legs or whatever it was – comments like that, but nothing that I would consider sexual harassment or was offended by.

LaTasha indicated that because the behavior did not threaten her or put her in danger the behavior was not harassing. She offered,

Well, if you consider what happened on that first day when we went into football harassment, I guess you could say that that happened, but I just considered it as, you know, boys will be boys, and they were having a good old time and, it's not a big deal. I mean, it didn't feel threatening. It didn't feel – I didn't feel like I was in danger. They were just having a good old time.

Ann summarized that since it was a man's world she was working in, that she had to accept what happened. She explained,

There was a different relationship between the female athletes and myself and the male athletes and myself. . . . kind of the same boys will be boys. I mean that was . . . how I accepted, like when I was doing baseball, when I was with all those guys, the comments that were made, stuff like that. It was kind of like, I felt like I was in a man's world, so I just . . . took it in stride. I didn't really take offense to stuff they would do . . .

Destiny concluded,

I figured, if you're going to play with the boys, you gotta be like the guys, and you've got to overlook some things. And not tread upon their turf and try to make changes within them. You have to adapt to them. Their environment, more so than asking them to adapt to you.

Eight of the twenty-five women ATCs interviewed felt that the inappropriate comments were "just comments" that you had to let it "roll off your back." Rosa's story illustrates how she experienced firsthand inappropriate sexual touching, which she characterized as sexual harassment, but she did not think that comments were harassment. She indicated,

I just let that kind of stuff roll off my back. I'm sure I've had plenty of coaches flirt with me. Plenty of them say things like, 'Oh, now she's getting married. I can't talk to her anymore.' But those things to me aren't sexual harassment because I just let them roll off my back. It's no big deal. I just smile and say, 'Yeah, too bad for you.' You know, just kind of go along with the joke. So, honestly,

no, I don't think since I've been in this position, that there's anything that has offended me because I do very well in fending for myself, and popping right back at them (chuckles).

Flirting or being asked for a date was not typically perceived as sexual harassment; it was taken lightly, or considered an inconvenience. As a student, Cheyenne felt that she had experienced an uncomfortable environment with the cross country team, and she did not like being called, "baby" by the football team. However, as a certified athletic trainer, being asked for a date was not taken seriously. "... A couple of doctors hit on me (laughter). Some of the coaches asked me out, but that's about it (laughter)."

Discussion

When describing what they perceived as sexually harassing behaviors, the women interviewed indicated inappropriate touching occurred and/or there was a sense of a threatening environment. Their perceptions of these two things as sexual harassment could fit the description of sexual harassment as outlined by the EEOC (i.e., touching unnecessarily, using indecent gestures) if the behavior were unwanted and pervasive.² However, in some states like Michigan, touching the breasts or groin area, or touching in a sexualized manner is considered sexual *assault* rather than sexual harassment.¹⁹ Like other women³ and dental hygiene students,²⁰ the majority of women ATCs interviewed did not know if they were being harassed. To create a hostile environment under Title VII, unwelcome conduct must be subjectively abusive to the person affected and pervasive enough to create a work environment that a reasonable person would find abusive. The reasonable person standard is very open to interpretation, but should consider the victim's perspective. Likewise, many did not recognize they were actually being assaulted. The women tended to rationalize away the abusive, inappropriate, unprofessional behavior that occurred in the athletic training room without challenging the behavior.

The lack of perception and understanding about sexual harassment and assault by female athletic trainers is disturbing and problematic. Similarly, the fact that the women perceived they were the ones who had to change rather than recognize that the environment needed to change is also problematic. The lack of understanding suggests that athletic training curriculum and continuing education need to be reviewed to determine the adequacy of addressing sexual harassment and assault issues.

A few women responded to inappropriate touch by immediately confronting the offender, while others sued their respective institutions. Most women, however, did not state specifically how they responded to harassing behaviors. The women interviewed may have felt compelled to remain quiet and act professional. Several explanations were noted in the literature on why women may have remained silent. First, "... females were willing to ignore less threatening forms of sexual harassment. While they may find them annoying or unpleasant, they do not label them as sexual harassment."^{21(p231)} Second, women ATCs, like women athletic training students, may have "felt it was their personal responsibility to manage for themselves, occasionally with the help of others, any of the experiences they had of

harassment."^{7(p88)} Third, women ATCs may have tolerated sexual harassment because they wanted, as was found with female athletes, the ability to present themselves in an acceptable way to the male athletic culture, which meant they had to learn and adopt the rituals of that culture. Tolerance becomes a requirement of acceptance.²¹ Similarly to women sport reporters, female ATCs may have wanted to be equally accepted into the male dominant sporting environment,²² and did not want to miss an experience because of their unwillingness to fit into the environment. Thus, women may have been oppressed and silenced for fear of being blamed or reprimanded.³ The following story is an example:

"We had a tournament in Montgomery, Alabama, and then one in Hawaii. So it was a long trip that we were on. And, he [tennis coach] would make references about the beach or what not. And ... it was very uncomfortable. But I thought that if I, just kept quiet and just went along, you know, I thought maybe if I said anything, he'd send me home. And I was kind of excited about taking the team to Hawaii. So, I just tried to stay quiet and, actually, (softly) I never really told anybody about it."

When male coaches or athletes made inappropriate comments towards the women ATCs who participated in the study, most said being the recipient of verbal comments did not mean that they were being sexually harassed. Inappropriate comments were often characterized as boys being boys, just comments, or not meaning anything, as was found by Giuffre and Williams,²³ who reported similar findings with restaurant workers and Texeira¹⁵ with law enforcement. Sometimes the women athletic trainers retorted when comments were made. However, more often than not, the response was to ignore the behavior or let it roll off your back. Both responses were expressed by the women athletic training students that Walk⁷ interviewed. Clearly, inappropriate sexual comments and innuendo can create a hostile environment, particularly if they are persistent, pervasive and unwelcome.² When men laugh and make light of sexually harassing behaviors the oppression of women is maintained. Likewise, when women do not address the harassing behaviors, male coaches and ATCs may not either, thereby, continuing the oppression.

There are several explanations why the women interviewed may not have considered inappropriate comments to be sexually harassing. Female ATCs, similarly to other women in sport, may have been oppressed through male hegemonic sport practices and were expected to just deal with the normative sexualized environment or leave,²² or have wanted equal acceptance in the male dominant sporting environment. Another reason may be that, like male and female students who were not sure how to classify sexist comments,²⁴ female ATCs were not socialized to recognize less severe forms of sexual harassment and may not have not been taught to recognize harassment in their athletic training courses.¹⁶ Likewise, "... women may not yet identify their experiences as sexual harassment because a substantial degree of awareness about its illegality has yet to be developed."^{23(p392)}

Therefore, what should be done? As Cheyenne asked, "Do you show women favoritism? You know, do you cover up? [male athletes wearing clothes in the athletic training room] Do you

change things just because a woman's on the field?" Her questions were apropos as she asked about the structure of men's sport, the athletic training environment and the response to the presence of women ATCs. Cheyenne's conclusion was that "apparently nobody else cared that we were on the field."

Conclusions

When female athletic trainers and athletic training students do not understand or recognize what constitutes sexual harassment, they may allow male athletes, coaches, and ATCs to harass them in the name of fun or just making comments. They may also allow the men to refer to them as cute or babe, or engage in sexual innuendo. As reported here, women athletic trainers in this study experienced sexually harassing behaviors, and in some cases assault, but did not always recognize those behaviors as such. They tended to perceive sexual harassment as occurring when there was unwanted physical contact or a threatening environment. Some did not understand or recognize the differences between sexual harassment and assault; specifically that inappropriate touching may actually be assault. Similarly, jokes, inappropriate comments, being asked for a date, comments about one's appearance, and innuendos directed toward them were seldom characterized as sexual harassing behaviors, even though these behaviors can be classified as hostile environment harassment.²

Several recommendations are suggested for future research. First, sexual harassment was not defined for the participants of the study; therefore, future research should define sexual harassment then determine women ATCs qualitative and quantitative perceptions of sexual harassment in athletic training. Second, a larger number of women ATCs should be studied in order to generalize the results. Lastly, research, from a social science perspective, needs to examine the current structure of athletic training as a profession and athletic training education in order to provide strategies for creating a safe environment in which athletic trainers can practice.

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