Secure Survey Design as a Tool for Monitoring Harassment in Organizations

Authors: Laura Boudreau, Ada González-Torres, Sylvain Chassang, and Rachel Heath

This study tested different methods of surveying employees about workplace harassment and found that secure survey designs that ensure plausible deniability of responses to sensitive questions can help uncover harassment that would otherwise go unreported.

Introduction

Organizations' ability to act against harassment is limited by their ability to elicit information from relevant parties. Reporting harassment is a difficult step for individuals who have been victimized and for witnesses concerned with possible retaliation and reputational costs. This prevents organizations from responding to individual issues, but also from assessing the scope and nature of their harassment problem.

In this research note, we report findings from a phone-based survey experiment that we conducted with the employees of a large Bangladeshi apparel manufacturer whose senior management was concerned that the organization may have a harassment problem. In the experiment, we study the impact of survey methods that seek to offer plausible deniability, increase trust in the survey enumerator, and reduce the perceived likelihood of leaks, on information transmission. We also show how such reporting data can be used to answer policy-relevant questions about the nature harassment, including: How widespread is it? What share of managers are responsible for what share of the damage? How isolated are victims?

Methodology

Economic theory suggests that in settings where individuals may face retaliation or incur reputational costs for reporting sensitive information, providing plausible deniability about making a report and reducing the perceived likelihood of leaks can increase individuals' willingness to report (Chassang and Padró i Miquel, 2018; Chassang and Zehnder, 2019). Motivated by this possibility, we used "hard garbling" (HG) to provide plausible deniability about making a report. Under hard garbling, reports of harassment are always recorded but, reports of no harassment are sometimes switched to reports of harassment. We can then apply statistical formulas to recover policy-relevant statistics of harassment from garbled reports. This includes the share of workers who have been harassed, how widespread harassment is across teams, and how isolated victims are. The

methodology builds on decades of research that aims to develop new ways to elicit true responses to sensitive survey questions (e.g., Warner, 1965).

To reduce the perceived likelihood of leaks, we tested rapport building (RB) by the survey enumerator, i.e., chatting about family and hobbies in a natural but pre-specified manner beyond the minimum small talk typical in a social science survey. We also reduced the amount of personally identifying information collected in the survey, including the name of workers' direct supervisor and their production team, which may reduce the fear that leaked data could be traced back to the respondent.

All these survey methods come at a cost. HG limits the severity of organizations' interventions following reports, since some innocent actors will be the target of a realized noisy complaint. RB requires extra training for those conducting the survey and is more time-consuming to complete. Collecting less PII provides organizations with less data about the nature of an organization's harassment problem. In our implementation, the organization no longer learns the name of the manager responsible for the harassment.

We conducted the survey experiment with 2,245 workers at two large garment factories that, by many measures, are representative of other exporting factories throughout the industry. We had a response rate of 63%; nearly all non-response was due to our inability to reach workers by phone, likely due to outdated phone numbers. 81% of our sample was female, with an average of 6.7 years of education and 2.9 years of being employed at the current factory. We analyse the impact of the three survey methods on reporting of threatening behaviour, physical harassment, and sexual harassment by respondents' direct supervisors.

Results

In survey arms with direct elicitation, 8.7% of workers reported experiencing threatening behaviour, 1.9% reported being physically harassed, and 2.8% reported being sexually harassed by their supervisor. As Figure 1 shows, HG substantially increases the share of workers experiencing harassment; we estimate that 13.5% of workers experienced threatening behaviour, 5.7% experienced physical harassment, and 7.7% experienced sexual harassment.

Figure 1: Share of workers reporting harassment by their supervisor, under direct and garbled survey methods
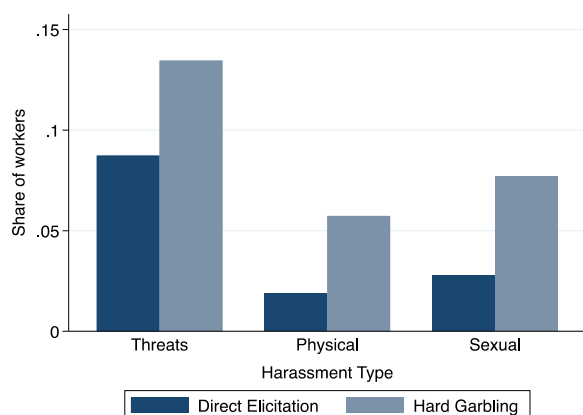

Note: This figure reports harassment rates estimated using reporting with direct elicitation (status quo condition) and HG, respectively. For both direct elicitation and HG, we pool across all treatment arms, including the RB arms and the arms in which we do not collect team-level identifying information.

Reducing PII by removing questions about respondents' supervisor increased the reporting of physical harassment by a marginally statistically significant degree, but had no detectable effect on the reporting of threatening behavior or sexual harassment. RB had a positive, but not statistically significant, effect on the reporting of threatening behavior and sexual harassment, but no detectable effect on the reporting of physical harassment. There is some evidence that while building rapport with respondents increased reporting among women it may have backfired for men. We hypothesize that this may be because the individuals conducting the surveys were all women, and being forced into small talk with an unknown woman may have made men less comfortable over the course of the survey.

We apply statistical formulas to recover policy-relevant statistics of harassment from garbled reports for the anonymous apparel producer. The primary takeaway from examining the share of workers who have experienced harassment by their supervisor (Figure 1) is that harassment is meaningfully more widespread than standard surveys or the firm's internal reporting channels would suggest and that addressing the harassment would have much larger benefits than prior evidence would conclude.

We also estimate the share of team of teams with at least k workers who have been harassed by their supervisor, and we consider values for k from 1 to 7. Figure 2 shows that harassment is widespread across teams in this organization: more than 70% have at least 1 worker who has been threatened, at least 40% have at least one worker who has been sexually harassed, and more than 25% have at least one worker who has been physically harassed.

Figure 2: Share of teams with k or more workers harassed by their supervisor
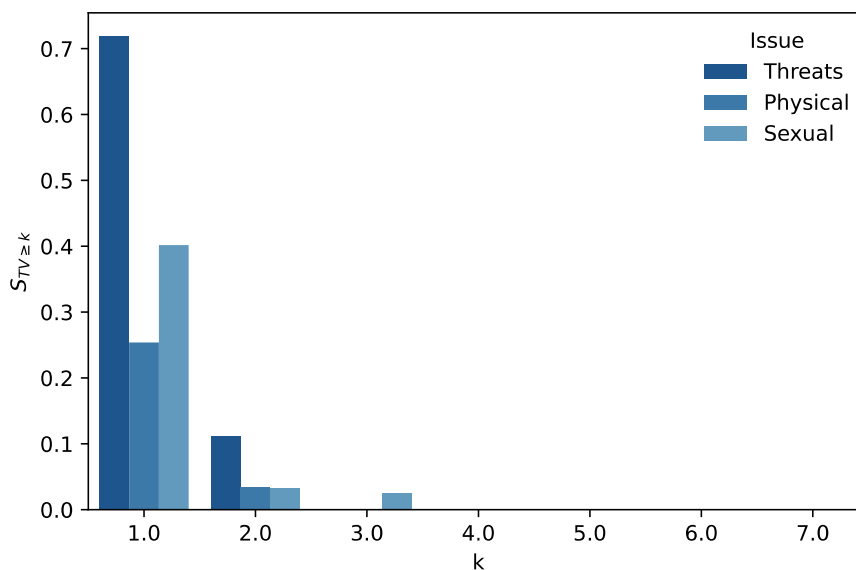
Harassment occurs at a moderate intensity – very few teams have 2 or more workers who have been harassed for any type of harassment. Especially for physical and sexual harassment, in most teams with workers reporting harassment, only individual comes forward, suggesting that the organization would miss most of these cases if it required multiple victims to come forward in to provide corroborating evidence. These patterns also suggest widespread training and behavioral changes for supervisors may be necessary.

Policy Implications

How does the survey information help us in designing policy responses? If it was just a couple of supervisors creating most of the damage, it would be easy to start an investigation and eventually fire them. In this organization, it turns out that a large part of the supervisors harass their workers, so firing them all would be a very costly policy for the company.

A policy of action in these cases could be to respond first to the most egregious cases of abuse. One way to do this could be to start with the teams with the highest number of victims, hoping that this will have a warning effect on the other supervisors. The evidence above shows that depending on the type of harassment, the victim is more or less isolated. If a harasser attacks multiple people, it is possible to create systems that collect complaints from different victims in the spirit of #MeToo. When, on the contrary, the victims are isolated, a system that forces multiple victims to report to begin an investigation would leave most harassment cases undetected. In these cases using HG as a means to detect harassment across teams is especially helpful.

We think that the question of how to scale up enforcement actions taken based on reports collected using HG is an important direction for future research. Given the "noise" baked into the HG method, the action needs to be an appropriate response to this type of information. Sending a manager to a training seminar, initiating a more thorough yearly review, or moving the worker associated with the report to a new team, for example, may be appropriate responses, whereas firing a manager would require additional investigation.

References

Chassang, S. and G. Padró i Miquel (2018): "Crime, Intimidation, and Whistleblowing: A Theory of Inference from Unverifiable Reports," *Review of Economic Studies*, 86, 2530– 2553.

Chassang, S. and C. Zehnder (2019): "Secure Survey Design in Organizations: Theory and Experiments," Working Paper.

Warner, S. L. (1965): "Randomized response: A survey technique for eliminating evasive answer bias," *Journal of the American Statistical Association*, 60, 63–69.