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RESEARCH ARTICLE

"The organization seems to be only worried about the organization": The role of sensegiving and sensebreaking in reporting sexual harassment

Madison Adams[a], Jennifer A. Scarduzio[b] and Shawna Malvini Redden[c]

[a]College of Communication and Information, University of Kentucky, Lexington, Kentucky, USA; [b]Department of Communication, University of Kentucky, Lexington, Kentucky, USA; [c]Department of Communication Studies, California State University, Sacramento, California, USA

ABSTRACT

Despite decades of research and policy, sexual harassment continues to be routinely underreported. This study qualitatively examined sexual harassment targets' experiences with reporting workplace sexual harassment to their organizations. Targets' narratives illustrate how organizational members facilitated sensegiving and sensebreaking throughout the reporting process, and the findings showed how sensegiving and sensebreaking were constitutive of the organization's culture regarding sexual harassment. A key contribution of this article is that it extends previous research on sensegiving by exploring a new type of sensegiving called implicit sensegiving. In addition, this study extends literature on sensebreaking by exploring two types of sensebreaking, which we term positive and negative sensebreaking. Practical implications for organizations include accurately enacting their sexual harassment policies and being careful to discipline the harasser and not further isolate or marginalize the target when they formally report to the organization.

KEYWORDS

Sexual harassment; reporting sexual harassment; sensegiving; sensebreaking; sensemaking

Introduction

Although the #MeToo movement has helped bring awareness to the prevalence of sexual harassment, many targets of workplace sexual harassment are still reluctant to formally report these experiences to their organizations (Kirkner et al., 2020). For example, many targets hesitate to formally report sexual harassment because they want to handle the issue themselves, feel embarrassed, fear organizational retaliation or they will not be believed, and/or suspect that nothing will happen to the harasser (Foster & Fullagar, 2018; Kirkner et al., 2020; Scarduzio et al., 2020). Thus, when a target does formally report harassment, it is especially important to examine how organizational members respond and how the target feels about their response.

One way to better understand how targets perceive the response after they report is through sensemaking. When targets experience harassment, they may engage in sensemaking to interpret the experience of being harassed as well as the reporting

CONTACT Madison Adams madison.adams@uky.edu College of Communication and Information, University of Kentucky, 111 McVey Hall, Lexington, KY 40506, USA.

process (Dougherty & Smythe, 2004; Weick, 1995, 2001). Sensemaking refers to the "meaning making" process where individuals and collectives make sense of experiences (Schwandt, 2005, p. 182; Weick, 1995, 2001). Closely related to the process of sensemaking are the processes of sensegiving and sensebreaking. Sensegiving occurs when organizational leaders or stakeholders attempt to influence another's meaning making (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991). Conversely, sensebreaking involves the "destruction or breaking down of meaning" (Pratt, 2000, p. 464) when "previous mental models are called into question" (Hoelscher et al., 2016, p. 483). Because sensegiving and sensebreaking can occur during emotional experiences (Scarduzio & Tracy, 2015; Weick et al., 2005), such as the potential emotions experienced when reporting sexual harassment, it is important to explore how organizations give sense and break sense when a target formally reports sexual harassment to the organization.

Furthermore, sensemaking, sensegiving, and sensebreaking are not only individual or interpersonal phenomena—they are organizational. That is, as organizational members communicate with one another throughout the meaning making process, they produce and reproduce the organization's culture (Weick, 1995). Thus, exploring the sensemaking process through sensegiving and sensebreaking could give insight into an organization's culture regarding sexual harassment and how the target is enabled and constrained by the culture of the organization after they report. It is important for organizations to consider the way that organizational members respond to reports of workplace sexual harassment because how organizational members respond can challenge or maintain the culture of the organization. For instance, if a target reports harassment and organizational members respond in helpful ways to the target, this could contribute to an organizational culture that does not tolerate sexual harassment or other forms of mistreatment. However, if when a target reports and organizational members respond in unsatisfactory ways, this could perpetuate an organizational culture that tolerates sexual harassment (Fernando & Prasad, 2019). In other words, it is these micro, interpersonal interactions to sexual harassment that shape and sustain how organizational cultures perpetuate future responses. A better understanding of these interpersonal interactions can reveal how organizations can better combat larger cultural narratives that shape sexual harassment, such as sexism, racism, or homophobia.

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore how organizational members facilitated sensegiving and sensebreaking when a target chose to formally report sexual harassment. To do so, we qualitatively examined 19 in-depth targets' narratives of reporting sexual harassment and analyzed how each organization subsequently responded. From a theoretical standpoint, this study extends previous research on unintentional sensegiving by exploring a new type of sensegiving called implicit sensegiving and extends literature on sensebreaking by exploring new concepts called positive and negative sensebreaking. From a practical standpoint, this study provides suggestions for how organizations should respond when a target formally reports harassment, including taking explicit steps to avoid further traumatizing and marginalizing people who report. In the following sections, we first review literature on sexual harassment and sensemaking. Second, we detail the qualitative methods and data analysis process. Third, we illustrate the findings of the study, and we end with a discussion of theoretical and practical implications, as well as directions for future research.

Literature review

In 2023, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) received 7,732 complaints of sexual harassment, which is the highest rate over the past few years (EEOC, 2024). However, the actual prevalence of workplace sexual harassment is likely higher due to a lack of formal reporting, out-of-court settlement cases, varied and subjective organizational policies, and continued uncertainty over how to define sexual harassment (Fusilier & Penrod, 2015; Kantor & Twohey, 2019; Kirkner et al., 2020). Even though workplace sexual harassment has been illegal in the United States since the 1980s, it remains tricky to define in both law and organizational policy (McDonald, 2012; Scarduzio & Walker, 2021). Despite the differences, many legal definitions acknowledge that the behavior must be unwelcome, and that the behavior has the purpose of being degrading, hostile, or offensive (McDonald, 2012).

For this manuscript, we rely on the definition from Burn (2019) which states that workplace sexual harassment is an illegal act that occurs when "people are targets of unwanted sexual comments, gestures, or actions because of their actual or perceived gender, gender expression, or sexual orientation" (Burn, 2019, p. 96). One important aspect of this definition to note is that sexual harassment does not have to exclusively be about sex—it can be about someone's gender, and thus we include gender-based harassment in our definition. This means that sexual harassment could include, but is not limited to, behaviors such as derogatory or offensive comments about someone's gender or gender identity; unwanted touching; repeated and unwanted request for dates; unwanted comments about someone's appearance; requests for sexual favors in exchange for professional benefits; or threats if someone does not comply with the harasser's requests for sexual favors. In addition, with the increase of computer-mediated communication, workplace sexual harassment is not limited to the physical space of an organization, and it can also occur via social networking sites (e.g., Herovic et al., 2019; Scarduzio et al., 2018; Van Royen et al., 2015).

Workplace sexual harassment has many consequences for both individuals and organizations. From an individual standpoint, targets of sexual harassment may experience a range of mental and physical health consequences, such as anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and/or depression (McDonald, 2012). Targets of sexual harassment also report higher levels of absenteeism, lower productivity, and lower job satisfaction and commitment (McDonald, 2012). From an organizational standpoint, sexual harassment can create a hostile, intimidating, and offensive work environment, which may impact not only targets' but also bystanders' (witnesses') productivity (Dougherty & Sorg, 2020; Jacobson & Eaton, 2018). Moreover, sexual harassment has been found to be related to turnover rates and recruitment, and sexual harassment litigation cases can be costly (McDonald, 2012).

Despite these individual and organizational consequences, many targets are reluctant to formally report the harassment (Kantor & Twohey, 2019; Kirkner et al., 2020). The definition of formal reporting is "the act of telling an organizational authority (e.g., supervisor, equal employment representative) about unwanted or offensive sex-related behavior" (Bergman et al., 2002, p. 231). Targets may hesitate to report harassment for several reasons. For example, they may not report because they believe they can handle the issue themselves and/or they feel embarrassed (Scarduzio et al., 2020).

Others may not report because they do not think the harassment serious enough to be recognized by the organization, fear their concerns will be dismissed, fear retaliation, and/or feel uncertainty about what will happen to the harasser (Kirkner et al., 2020; Scarduzio et al., 2020). In addition, many organizations have varied and subjective policies regarding sexual harassment, which deters people from reporting sexual harassment. For example, some companies have policies that only apply to certain employees while other businesses delineate specific employee appropriate and inappropriate behavior (Fusilier & Penrod, 2015; Scarduzio & Walker, 2021). Given these concerns, as Clair et al. (2019) mention, "The real question here is not, 'why don't targets report the behavior?' The real question is, 'why would targets report the behavior?'" (p. 120).

In an answer to that hypothetical question, targets may choose to formally report harassment because they feel uncomfortable and want to reduce that discomfort and/or because they are frustrated and want the harassment to stop (Scarduzio et al., 2020). However, when a target does report, people in organizations often respond in ways that are unsatisfactory, such as by delaying investigations, defending the harasser, silencing the target, or making the target feel like a villain in the organization (Clair et al., 2019; Fernando & Prasad, 2019; McDonald et al., 2008). Interestingly, women who report harassment may view their organization as less fair or more unjust after reporting (Adams-Roy & Barling, 1998), may experience worsened health and psychological well-being after reporting (Bergman et al., 2002), and may demonstrate lower organizational resilience (Ford et al., 2021). For example, in one study, when targets reported to an organizational stakeholder (e.g., supervisor, HR, Title IX Office), the stakeholders often dismissed the target and minimized their experiences (Lindquist & McKay, 2018). Very few of these targets received formal support, and most were discouraged from pursuing further action (Lindquist & McKay, 2018). Similarly, another study found that third-party actors (e.g., HR employees, colleagues) can persuade targets to not report, which only maintains the status quo of workplace sexual harassment in an organization (Fernando & Prasad, 2019). As the two studies demonstrate, in some cases, when a target reports workplace sexual harassment, organizational members can play role in how the target makes sense of and responds to their harassment experience. This process is related to sensemaking, sensegiving, and sensebreaking—an issue we turn to next.

Sensemaking, sensegiving, and sensebreaking

When faced with uncertain, unexpected, complex, or ambiguous events, such as formally reporting sexual harassment, individuals may engage in sensemaking (Weick, 1995, 2001), or the process of trying to "create order and make retrospective sense of what occur[ed]" (Weick, 1993, p. 635). Sensemaking is inherently a social process that occurs as organizational members rely on their social contexts, interactions, and conversations to interpret novel, complex, uncertain, or ambiguous events (Maitlis, 2005; Weick, 1995, 2001), such as experiencing and responding to sexual harassment (Dougherty & Smythe, 2004).

As organizational members communicate with one another to create shared experiences about events through sensemaking, these shared experiences then culminate in the creation and maintenance of organizational culture (Weick, 1995). In the context of sexual harassment, through the process of sensemaking, organizational members

enact a culture that will either reject or accept sexual harassment. For example, organizations with male-dominated, aggressive cultures may permit and encourage sexually harassing behaviors (Cortina & Areguin, 2021; Firestone & Harris, 1999). Consider the example of sexually objectifying environments such as Hooters, a restaurant chain that requires female employees to wear revealing clothing and flirt with customers (Szymanski & Feltman, 2015). In such a male-dominated culture, a target may experience sexual harassment but interpret or make sense of the interaction as flirting in accordance with the culture. This interpretation would then maintain a culture that perpetuates sexual harassment because the harassing behaviors are normalized (Matulewicz, 2016).

To help employees interpret and make sense of events, organizational leaders and stakeholders (e.g., supervisors, middle managers) can "give" sense to organizational members through a process known as sensegiving. As mentioned, sensegiving is the "process of attempting to influence the sensemaking and meaning construction of others toward a preferred redefinition of organizational reality" (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991, p. 442). In other words, sensegiving often occurs when there is a gap in meaning, and it is usually in response to confusing, troubling, or uncertain issues (Maitlis & Lawrence, 2007). Because sensegiving aims to influence a member's definition of the organization, sensegiving can also be seen as way to create, maintain, or alter an organization's culture. For example, if organizational policies frame sexual harassment as an individual issue and focus on taking disciplinary action against the harasser, this could give organizational members the sense that they must handle the situation on their own and potentially raise concerns for targets that they will not be believed (Deadrick et al., 1996). However, if organizational policies frame sexual harassment as a community concern that recognizes the ambiguity of how to define sexual harassment; encourage people to seek advice about a situation if they do not want to make a formal complaint; and instead promotes a culture of mutual respect, this could give sense that the organization is there to protect employees (Thomas, 2004). In either instance, an organization's policy and how organizational members enact that policy after a reporting communicate, or give sense, about an organization's values and culture.

Sensegiving as originally conceptualized was described as an intentional act used by leaders or managers during times of strategic change (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Maitlis, 2005). Recent research about sensegiving continues to examine the process in the context of organizational change initiatives (e.g., Högberg, 2021), as well as during crisis situations, such as terrorism (Mirbabaie & Marx, 2020) or during natural disasters (Mirbabaie et al., 2020). Although formal communication during both change initiatives and crises is generally strategic and intentional, other research suggests sensegiving can also be an everyday occurrence (Benbenisty & Luria, 2021; Smith et al., 2010) and can manifest in unintentional ways (Wong, 2019).

For example, Wong (2019) proposed the term *unintentional sensegiving* to theorize "how leaders can give sense in ways they do not intend yet have large impacts on how others understand and respond to a reform" (i.e., how others make sense; p. 1). Furthermore, Wong (2019) theorized three types of unintentional sensegiving: passive, partial, and ambiguous. Passive sensegiving occurs when leaders are silent or defer to others, allowing others to create sense for them (Wong, 2019). In Wong's (2019) study of system reforms, passive sensegiving occurred when an administrator did not understand system changes. When lower-level employees asked for guidance, the administrator

directed the employees to more knowledgeable others to help them make sense. Partial sensegiving occurred when leaders unintentionally gave limited information, such as partial directions on new system. Lastly, ambiguous sensegiving happened when leaders sent vague or contradicting messages, such as when a supervisor said a new system reform needed to be uniformly implemented across the organization, but also specialized and tailored to specific departments. Ultimately, these types of unintentional sensegiving created confusion and/or frustration for employees and affected how the employees made sense of a change in the organization (Wong, 2019).

Because sensegiving regularly occurs in response to troubling or uncertain situations (Maitlis & Lawrence, 2007), and because reporting sexual harassment can be an uncertain and unpredictable situation for targets (Bell et al., 2014; Kirkner et al., 2020; Pershing, 2003), sensegiving—both intentional and unintentional—may be especially relevant to the reporting process and may provide insight into the organization's culture regarding sexual harassment. Thus, the following research question is posed:

RQ1: How do participants who reported sexual harassment describe the intentional or unintentional process of sensegiving?

Alternatively, sensebreaking involves the "destruction or breaking down of meaning" (Pratt, 2000, p. 464) when "previous mental models are called into question" (Hoelscher et al., 2016, p. 483). Sensebreaking introduces meaning that contrasts with the receiving individuals' accepted beliefs (Aula & Mantere, 2013) and occurs when there is a dichotomy between expected and enacted organizational responses, often during the early stages of a crisis or event (Hoelscher et al., 2016; Mirbabaie & Marx, 2020). In other words, sensebreaking creates a "meaning void," and this void then enables the processes of sensemaking and/or sensegiving (Bishop et al., 2020). The process of sensebreaking can then have positive, negative, and ambivalent effects (Pratt, 2000). For instance, if sensebreaking disrupts an employee's sense by exceeding their expectations, the employee may positively identify with the organization. However, if sensebreaking breaks an employee's sense by failing to meet their expectations, the employee may experience ambivalence or deidentification with the organization (Pratt, 2000).

With its relevance to meaning making and changing expectations, sensebreaking may also be relevant to the harassment reporting process. For instance, a person reporting harassment may expect their organization to discipline the harasser, especially if the target reports behaviors that are explicitly delineated in the organization's sexual harassment policy. However, if the organization defends instead of disciplining the harasser, this could break the target's sense and influence how they make meaning of their experience, how they identify with the organization, and how they view the organization's culture. Thus, the following research question is posed:

RQ2: How do participants who reported sexual harassment describe the process of sensebreaking?

Methods and data analysis

The data in this study come from a larger interview project that investigated online and/or face-to-face co-worker sexual harassment, reporting threshold levels, and minority experiences of sexual harassment. Individuals were invited to participate in

the study if they had experienced unwanted sexual attention online and/or face-to-face from a current or previous coworker, while working at least 30 hours per week. During the recruitment process, we were careful to use the term "unwanted sexual attention" and avoided using the term "sexual harassment." We made the decision to use this language because many times targets may hesitate to label their experiences as sexual harassment due to experiences of shame and/or stigma, and because the term sexual harassment has a legally charged connotation (Duggan et al., 2020). Therefore, by recruiting participants who have experienced "unwanted sexual attention," participants may have felt more willing and comfortable to share their experiences. Lastly, because we recruited participants who had experienced "unwanted sexual attention," they were able to self-define what they considered unwanted attention.

After receiving Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval from participating universities, participants were recruited via calls on COMMNotes, the National Communication Association's listserv, posting on one of the author's social media accounts and their personal website. Interested participants contacted either the second or third author to set up a phone interview. Participation was voluntary, and participants were able to discontinue the interview at any time. Participants received a $15 Amazon e-gift card as thanks for their time.

Participants completed a one-on-one phone interview with either the second or third author. Interviews were semi-structured using a common interview guide and ranged between 22–100 minutes ($M = 59.14$, $SD = 21.38$). Semi-structured interviews were appropriate because they provided flexible structure that allowed the interviewee's complex viewpoints and experiences to be heard without the constraint of only scripted questions (Tracy, 2020). Sample interview questions included, "Can you tell me the story of how you experienced unwanted sexual attention from your coworker?" and "Did you come forward to the organization or anyone else and tell them what happened? What response did you receive?" All interviews were audio-recorded and then professionally transcribed. The first author then checked the transcriptions for accuracy. To protect the participants' anonymity, the participants selected their own pseudonyms. It should also be noted that data were collected in the United States from a predominately Western lens.

The larger study included 27 participants; however, we chose to focus on 19 of the target's experiences for a few specific reasons. First, each of these 19 targets formally reported the sexual harassment to someone in their organization. This is unusual because many targets do not report harassment (Kirkner et al., 2020; Smith & Freyd, 2014; Scarduzio et al., 2020). Second, although these participants worked in different industries, the organizational members responded to their reports in unique but troubling ways. The similarities and differences allowed us to compare and contrast how each organization's members responded and how those responses impacted the targets' sensemaking, sensegiving, and sensebreaking processes. Third, and finally, these targets provided extensive detail about their reporting experiences. Their narratives resulted in more than 300 single-spaced pages of rich interview data to analyze.

In terms of demographics, 16 participants identified as cisgender women, and three participants identified as cisgender men. Fifteen participants identified as heterosexual, one bisexual, and three were not comfortable reporting their sexuality. Their ages

ranged from 23 to 56 ($M = 38.5$). The participants represented a range of races and ethnicities including Black; Black, Mexican, and white; Black and white; Indigenous; Mexican; and white. All participants worked in organizations in the U.S., and participants worked in a variety of organizations, such as academia, government, K-12 education, retail, mental health, manufacturing, and advertising/sales. Thirteen participants were harassed by male coworkers, four by female coworkers, one by a male and female coworker, and one by a male coworker and a male student. All participants formally reported the harassment to organizational members, such as HR, Title IX, and/or a supervisor.

Data analysis

We analyzed the data in several phases and used an iterative approach (Tracy, 2020). As this is a collaborative project and as the second and third authors completed the interviews, the first author took the lead in analyzing the data for this study. First, each author listened to the audio-recorded interviews, printed the interview transcriptions, and read the transcriptions to familiarize themself with the data. After this, all authors individually engaged primary-cycle coding with about 20% of the data set (Tracy, 2020). As we each individually engaged in primary-cycle coding, we each created our own codebooks that listed each code. Examples of these codes included, "fear," "power," or "setting of harassment"—meaning that the setting of harassment occurred in person or through mediated contexts.

After primary-cycle coding, we met to discuss our codebooks and emergent findings. We then engaged in secondary-cycle coding, where we critically examined existing codes and began to "organize, synthesize, and categorize them into interpretive concepts" (Tracy, 2020, p. 225). To begin the process of secondary-cycle coding, we engaged in hierarchical coding to "systematically group together various codes under one hierarchical 'umbrella' category that [made] conceptual sense" (Tracy, 2020, p. 226). For example, we grouped the first-level codes "Fear of retaliation" and "Fear of not being believed" into the hierarchical code "Emotions about reporting." The hierarchical coding resulted in 14 hierarchical codes.

After hierarchical coding, the first author used an iterative approach to connect the hierarchical codes with existing theory (Tracy, 2020). After the hierarchical coding process, the first author realized that when we asked the participants in the interview, "Did you come forward to the organization or to anyone else and tell them what happened? What response did you receive? Were you satisfied with the response?," the way the organizational members responded seemed to help the participant make sense of themselves, the situation, or the larger organization. At this point, the first author realized the targets' narratives of reporting sexual harassment related to sensegiving and sensebreaking. Next, the analysis focused on how aspects of the data related to and extended current theory on sensegiving and sensebreaking and created secondary-cycle codes. The first author then added these secondary-cycle codes to the codebook, and she used this codebook to code the entire data set.

In the final stage of data analysis, we wrote analytic memos to organize our thoughts on how the codes related to each other, explicated each code's properties, specified the conditions under which the code arises, and described the code's consequences

(Tracy, 2020). After extensively analyzing the data, we recognized that we had reached theoretical saturation. Theoretical saturation occurred "when gathering fresh data no longer sparks new theoretical insights, nor reveals new properties of your core theoretical categories" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 113). After reaching saturation, the analysis resulted in findings that extend theory related to sensegiving and sensebreaking.

Author positionalities and self-reflexivity

Before discussing the findings of the study, it is important for us to discuss how we engaged in self-reflexivity. Self-reflexivity is "people's careful consideration of the ways in which their past experiences, points of view, and roles impact their interactions with, and interpretations of, any particular interaction or context" (Tracy, 2020, p. 2). Each of the authors identify as white women who work in the academy. Identifying as women could be seen as a strength because it helped us build rapport with participants during interviews. In addition, our familiarity with the academy helped us better understand the experiences some of the participants discussed. That is, because we are familiar with practices like tenure and university structures, we can have a better understanding of their experiences than someone who is not in the academy.

In addition, participants knew that we work at universities, so they did not have to spend time during the interview explaining typical university practices to us. However, we had to be careful that we did not force our familiarity with academic structures and practices to the participants' experiences outside the academy. In other words, we had to question how the experiences participants described outside of the academy were similar or different from the experiences participants described in the academy. We had to be careful not to force similarities between the two groups only because of our familiarity with academia.

Lastly, as we identify as white women, we had to be mindful of this during data collection and analysis. For example, some participants of color may not have felt comfortable fully sharing their experiences with sexual harassment to a white interviewer. In addition, during data analysis, we had to be mindful and question our privileged assumptions.

Findings

This study first asked how participants who reported sexual harassment described the intentional or unintentional process of sensegiving (RQ1), and participants in this study only explained how organizational members engaged in unintentional sensegiving during the reporting process. We realized that participants were referring to sensegiving when they explained how after they reported, the organizational member's response(s) helped shape how they made sense of themselves, the situation, or the organization. Second, this study asked how participants who reported sexual harassment described the process of sensebreaking (RQ2). We realized that participants were referring to sensebreaking when they explicitly stated in the interview what they expected to happen when they reported, and how the organization failed, met, or exceeded those expectations. In the following paragraphs, we describe how organizational members in this study facilitated unintentional ambiguous and implicit sensegiving for

participants, and we then discuss how organizational members facilitated two types of sensebreaking for participants, which we name either positive or negative sensebreaking.

Unintentional sensegiving

Organizational members in this study facilitated unintentional sensegiving for participants when they seemed to communicate in ways that they did not intend. Because we did not interview the organizational members who responded to the participants' reports of workplace sexual harassment, we cannot make claims about intentionality of the organizational members. However, we argue that unintentional sensegiving occurred when there was an incongruity between what the organizational member said and how the participant interpreted, or made sense of, the response. Participants then described how these unintentional messages influenced their meaning making process. In this study, participants described how organizational members seemed to engage in two types of unintentional sensegiving: ambiguous and implicit sensegiving.

Ambiguous sensegiving

As previously mentioned, ambiguous sensegiving has been examined in past research, and it occurs when leaders send vague or contradicting messages (Wong, 2019). Ambiguous sensegiving in this study seemed to occur when the organizational members sent vague or contradictory messages to the target after they formally reported the harassment. For instance, Donna, a white, female, heterosexual, 20-something graduate student, faced a complex situation with her harasser, a fellow graduate student of a different race/ethnicity with a differing ability[1]. The harasser would follow her around, make sexual comments (e.g., "I could just kiss you right now"), obsessively text her, and look at pornographic images in their shared office space. Donna was hesitant to report the harassment because she "wasn't sure what [others] level of understanding would be about the fact that he has a mental disability," and she "didn't want people to think that I was targeting him … because I didn't like him because he was [a different race/ethnicity]." However, she did disclose the harassment to another graduate student who then made an anonymous comment to a mandated reporter (i.e., a professor). Donna was then encouraged to formally report the harassment. When she did, she explained, "What was weird about the [organizational] response, um, was that it sort of felt like nobody really knew how to handle it because of [the harasser's] disability." When Donna reported to the graduate director:

> The grad director, she, um, notified the professors that taught our classes [about the harassment] … And then I went and talked to them individually and just told them like, "Hey, this is what is happening." They were like, "This is terrible. I'm so sorry. I don't know what to do."

Donna expressed her confusion about the reporting process by saying:

> In the process of being harassed, my identity had gotten really confused … I didn't understand what I meant in the situation, like who I was in relation to my cohort. And in relation to these professors, would they believe me? You know, why is he allowed to continue getting away with this?

In other words, when Donna reported, from her perspective, organizational members unintentionally sent vague messages when multiple people expressed that they did not know how to handle the situation and kept passing Donna along to the next person. By doing so, it appears that it was almost as if the organizational members had little sense to "give" Donna. Thus, Donna then explained how the vague responses created further uncertainty for her, and she articulated how she struggled to interpret and make sense of her situation and her organizational identity because of the vague messages. In addition, from an intersectionality standpoint, Donna's experiences highlight how it was not just her identity as a woman that impacted her experience. Rather, it was the combination of her own identity markers and her harasser's race/ethnicity and ability status that shaped how she viewed the situation and how she perceived the organizational members' responses (Crenshaw, 1989). Ultimately, although sensegiving should decrease gaps in meaning, Donna's experience illustrates how unintentional ambiguous sensegiving created more gaps in meaning and complicated her process of sensemaking when she reported.

In a different university context, Birdie, a 40-something, white, female, heterosexual, faculty member, experienced harassment online and face-to-face from her male supervisor and his female domestic partner, who was also a faculty member at the university. The dyad harassed Birdie by asking her about her sex life, inviting Birdie and her husband to participate in group sex, and sending her suggestive social media and text messages. According to Birdie, the university's position on sexual harassment said, "The university takes these things very seriously and will not tolerate any form of it." However, when she provided the transcripts of the online harassment to the organization, Birdie explained:

> The Title IX Office told me that because [the online harassment] was personal text messages, um, it wasn't evidence. It wasn't organizational … even though it talks about meetings that I'm having with my chair [the harasser] in a professional context.

Birdie continued to explain, "[The Title IX Office] declared that [her] harassment was not sufficiently vulgar," and "at one point my Title IX … investigators said to me, 'Well, it's not like you were raped.' Um, and I was like, 'Excuse me?' She's like, 'It could be worse.'" Later in the interview, when asked how severe the harassment was, Birdie said, "I would say four … it could have been worse. I could have been raped."

In this example, the organization's policy against sexual harassment and the organizational members' (e.g., Title IX Office) enacted response to Birdie's report appear to directly contradict each other. Interestingly, even though the messages seem to contradict each other, these contradicting messages did "give" Birdie some sense about the situation. This act of unintentional sensegiving is evident when Birdie internalized how the organizational member downplayed her experience, as she articulated that her experience could have been worse, which is exactly what the Title IX investigator told her. Ultimately, even though we cannot claim that the Title IX investigator unintentionally contradicted the university policy, the contradicting messages from the organization (e.g., the organizational policy) and the organizational member (e.g., the title IX investigator) shaped Birdie's sensemaking process.

Like Birdie, Sam experienced a similar situation where the organization's policy contradicted how organizational members responded after he reported. Sam, a 50-something male from outside of the United States, who described his sexuality as "complicated," experienced harassment from a male coworker at his university. According to Sam, the harasser not only harassed him, but the harasser also regularly harassed the academic department by making sexist, homophobic, and suggestive sexual comments in meetings, on shared online documents, and in conference presentations. Although Sam himself directly experienced harassment and bullying from the harasser, Sam initially reported the harasser to Title IX for harassing a student. He explained:

> And the response [to my report] was …, "Yes, he did this to a student, but you can't report it, the student has to report it" …. It's like there's this institutional protection going on. I mean, telling me that a student, that I can't report on behalf of a student. That student was terrified. … The guy is a walking Title IX disaster, and they've done nothing but coddle. They've done nothing but enable …. They violated their own policy right there themselves in saying this.

As shown in the example, the organization sent one message through their policy, and a contradictory message through their Title IX Office by dismissing Sam's complaint. After filing other complaints that have also been dismissed, Sam made sense of these conflicting messages between the policy and the Title IX Office's response by saying, "So there's nobody I can trust … [The organization has] been duplicitous. They've circled the wagons to protect him." That is, Sam expressed his frustration and anger from the contradictory messages, and he articulated how even though the contradictory message only came from one organizational member (i.e., the Title IX Office), this shaped his sensemaking process about the organization as a whole—that the institution was trying to protect the harasser.

Sam's case shows how organizational structures and policies may enable the protection of harassers. Title IX policies and procedures, which are designed to prevent misconduct in academia, added complexity to the reporting process. That is, Sam tried to report on behalf of the student, but the way the organizational members enacted the policy, which should protect and prevent harassment, forbade him from reporting. Previous research has shown that bystanders can be destructive to sexual harassment by normalizing predatory behaviors, believing harassers are too important to sanction, or treating the targets who report as villains (Clair et al., 2019). Sam's situation extends this finding by showing that Title IX representatives can serve as bystanders, and they can further protect harassers by hiding behind meticulous bureaucratic policies.

Once again, we cannot claim to know that the Title IX response unintentionally meant to shape Sam's sensemaking process about the organization. However, the discrepancy between what the organization outlined in their policy, the ways the organizational members enacted that policy, and Sam's subsequent sensemaking illustrate how the organizational members seem to unintentionally give Sam the message that the organizational culture will protect the harassers, and that he, the person who he believed was trying to do the right thing, was actually the villain who needed to isolate himself.

As these examples show, when organizational members appeared to unintentionally give conflicting or vague answers through ambiguous sensegiving, targets explained how this shaped their sensemaking process about themselves, the situation, or the organization. Without clear messages from the organization about their reports, participants were left to fill in the gaps for themselves. For Donna, ambiguous sensegiving resulted in her being confused about her organizational identity, and from her perspective, "From the point of [the situation] being resolved, it never really got resolved." For Birdie and Sam, they expressed frustration and anger about ambiguous sensegiving and explained how their interpretation of this resulted in them having a negative view of the reporting process and their larger organizations. In addition, this sensegiving shaped their sensemaking process about their own identities and situations, as they described how it made them question the severity of their experiences or alienated them from others, as they feel they cannot trust anyone in the organization.

Implicit sensegiving

As we analyzed the data, we realized that the data not only revealed ambiguous sensegiving it also reflected a different, new type of unintentional sensegiving, which we name implicit sensegiving. Implicit sensegiving refers to situations when an organizational stakeholder seems to unintentionally imply or suggest a message, but never explicitly and directly says it. In addition, we suggest that implicit sensegiving often gives targets a sense about the organization's culture or values. For example, Cindy, a white, female, heterosexual professor in her 50s, experienced online and face-to-face sexual harassment from a white, male, junior professor at her university. The harasser would send her handwritten letters, suggestive emails, and kissed her on the neck without her consent. When formally reporting the harassment, Cindy gave her university the emails and the letters. In response to her report, Cindy explained:

> They said that they can't move forward with the grievance because I'm a full Professor and he was an Assistant Professor, so I was in a position of power and it didn't, so it didn't fit the definition of sexual harassment. And I said, you are thinking about organizational power. You're not considering gendered power. And these men didn't know what I was talking about …. They said there was no evidence that I didn't want it …. Oh and they said I let it last too long … it was essentially my fault.

After hearing their response, Cindy articulated that she felt like "they were just trying to brush me under the rug and make me go away." To get outside support that would not dismiss her complaint, Cindy then reported a second time to a union representative. However:

> They told me that they couldn't do anything because it was a faculty on faculty, and we were both union people and that they had to protect us both …. If they want to protect him against me, fine. But they should've also protected me against him, but they didn't want to deal with it at all.

Later in the interview, Cindy articulated, "I realized that university counsel, they'll never work in your best interest. They're working to protect the university …. The organization seems to be only worried about the organization, not the people in it."

Cindy's situation reflects how power, cultural narratives, and organizational structures can shape sexual harassment and the reporting, sensegiving, and sensemaking process. First, Cindy, a female, had to report to all men. She articulated how she felt like the men she reported to were not able to understand patriarchal cultural narratives in the U.S. where men have more power than women. In addition, Cindy's case challenges stereotypes that workplace sexual harassment is between a male superior and female subordinate. In the way Cindy describes the first response from the men, it appears that the men were trying to make sense of her report by basing it on what they know about sexual harassment and interactions between men and women. In doing so, once they made sense of her report, they came to believe that she wanted it, and they communicated this message to her. Lastly, Cindy's situation shows how bureaucracy in the form of academic structures and unions can shape the sensemaking process. Structures, such as mandated reporting in academia and unions, should theoretically protect targets. However, in Cindy's case, the structure of the union and the structures of tenure hindered the organizational members' ability to make sense of her situation and respond appropriately.

Even though no one explicitly communicated to Cindy that the organization was only protecting itself, not employees, Cindy concluded this about the culture while trying to make sense of the organizational members' responses to her report. We cannot know for sure that the organizational members did not intend to convince Cindy that organizational members will only protect the organization, not the people. However, the dismissing of her complaint and inability to understand non-stereotypical workplace sexual harassment tacitly gave Cindy sense about the organization's key concern—protecting the institution.

Implicit sensegiving also influenced how harassment targets made sense of reporting and made future reporting decisions. Heather, a 30-something, white, female, university staff member was harassed by a married colleague twice her age, who many perceived as "a nice old man." Her harasser repeatedly commented on her appearance, suggested they run away together, and the harasser had told a colleague he would take care of Heather with his "Roman hands and Russian fingers," a pun on "roaming hands and rushing fingers" that euphemistically refers to unwanted sexual contact. Eventually, Heather brought up the harassment in a departmental meeting with her harasser's supervisors. In the meeting, Heather recalled:

> I said "[The harasser] said a really inappropriate comment to me, and it made me feel really uncomfortable." … And [one of the managers] responded with "Well, you two are always teasing each other." Like really, basically, "You kind of asked for it, like you two are always going at each other. It's like a sibling kind of thing."

In response to that meeting, Heather said, "I honestly felt so shattered when that was kind of the response that I didn't feel like I could say anything, and even if I went to HR, there was no one to back me up."

Although no one in the organization directly communicated or said that Heather would not be supported if she reported the harassment, the comments from the managers signaled to her that her experiences would not be taken seriously by organizational members and could be dismissed as mere jesting. In the way Heather describes the meeting, when she disclosed or reported that she felt uncomfortable, the managers

made sense of the situation by referencing Heather and the harasser's past interactions that they perceived as teasing. The manager's process of sensemaking then allowed them to give the sense to Heather that her report would not be taken seriously. We cannot claim that the manager intended to dismiss Heather's complaint and influence her sense that reporting would be futile. However, given the discrepancy between "you are always teasing each other" (the manager's response) and "I didn't feel like I could say anything" (Heather's interpretation), it appears that the mangers and coworkers unintentionally implied that Heather would not be supported if she reported. Ultimately, the implicit sensegiving shaped the way Heather viewed the situation and helped her decide to manage the harassment in other ways besides formally reporting to HR.

Although implicit sensegiving had negative implications for some targets in this study, implicit sensegiving had positive implications for Ashleigh. Ashleigh, a white, female, 30-something graduate student who was uncomfortable reporting her sexuality, experienced unwanted sexual comments and innuendos from a white, female coworker. During the interview, Ashleigh explained, "I told my advisor [about the harassment] …. And my advisor took me seriously …. I told the chair that I was being sexually harassed, I didn't really go into like the whole narrative." She continued to say:

> I told our new Department Chair kind of like, "I'm not going to deal with [the harasser]. I'm going to deal with you. If she like sends me any emails, I'm gonna email you instead of her." Um, and she's kind of facilitated that a little bit.

By telling the Chair, Ashleigh said:

> I also have like incredible like support systems and stuff …. And I know that, um, like the Chair knows like that I'm kind of distancing myself from anything to do with [the harasser]. Um, it's not like an active frustration anymore I guess because those people are intervening.

In this situation, Ashleigh tried to make sense of how to respond and cope with the harassment. Because the Department Chair did not know the full details of her harassment experience, they could not fully make sense of the situation themselves, and thus the department chair was not able to fully respond or give complete sense about how to deal with the situation to Ashleigh. However, even with a limited ability to make sense of the situation, the Department Chair helped facilitate separation between Ashleigh and the harasser without knowing the details.

Even though the Department Chair has never been able to fully explicitly respond to the situation since they do not have the full story, the act of facilitating separation between the two was tacitly communicated and gave Ashleigh the sense that other organizational members would intervene and support her if necessary, and that the organization's culture is one that wants to prevent sexual harassment. As with the other examples in this section of the results, we cannot say that the Department Chair intended to give Ashleigh that sense that the organization wants to prevent sexual harassment and will support those who report it. In other words, there seems to be a disconnect between the Department Chair's response (facilitating separation based on very limited information) and Ashleigh's interpretation (the larger organization will support me if I formally report the harassment). Even though there is a disconnect, still the implicit sensegiving has positive implications, as Ashleigh describes how her feelings of frustration have decreased.

In addition, Ashleigh's case demonstrates how organizational culture is enacted in everyday sensegiving interactions (Benbenisty & Luria, 2021; Smith et al., 2010). That is, Ashleigh did not formally report the harassment to the organization, and so the response from the organizational members is not a formal organizational response. Nevertheless, the way the organizational members (e.g., advisor, department chair) have responded has given Ashleigh the sense that the department's culture will support targets who report harassment. Overall, as these examples show, targets articulated how implicit sensegiving impacted how they made sense of the organization after they reported. Implicit messages from organizational members gave targets a larger sense about the organization's culture or values, like that their organization did not value women or, in one case, that their organization supported and valued them.

In sum, considering both forms of unintentional sensegiving together, we acknowledge that we cannot make explicit intentionality claims from the organizational members. That is, since we did not interview the organizational members, we cannot know for sure if they intended to communicate these messages to the targets. However, the mismatch between what the organizational members said (or did) after the target reported sexual harassment and how the participant interpreted this response still has value. That is, when organizational members responded to reports of sexual harassment, their responses gave sense to, or reflected, the organization's culture or values related to sexual harassment.

Sensebreaking

Organizational members in this study facilitated sensebreaking when their response to the target's sexual harassment claim did not meet or, conversely, exceeded the target's expectations. In this study, sensebreaking had a positive or negative outcome, which we term positive or negative sensebreaking.

Positive sensebreaking

Positive sensebreaking occurred when an organizational member's response exceeded the target's expectations. For instance, Gabrielle, a mixed-race, heterosexual, 20-something, female, who worked at a sporting goods store during school holidays, was harassed by a Black male coworker online. More specifically, the harasser harassed Gabrielle on Snapchat when he said, "I'm trying to see how much dick you can take while you're at home." When deciding whether to report the harassment, she explained:

> I didn't want to have to start any kind of HR mess for him because he was … Black. And I feel like that just would look a lot worse for him. And it would reflect poorly on a community that I also identify as part of … it just felt like it was gonna get bigger than him and me if I did that.

In addition to considering race, Gabrielle factored in workplace culture into her reporting decision:

> Being a girl in a male dominated work environment … is really difficult in terms of sexuality, because it's … a really tight line to try and manage talking about sexual activity with my coworkers, um, while still like not, well, not being branded like a ho that they can't hang out with or something.

In line with these gender stereotypes, when she did end up reporting the harassment to her manager and a few coworkers, but not HR, Gabrielle explained:

> When I told him, he was like laughing about it at first … and then I was like, "Well, funny story, it was [the harasser]." And he was like, "Wait, he's one of our men?" … and he was like, "Are you okay? What can I do to help you in this situation?"

Gabrielle continued to explain, "I was really happy that [my coworkers] were very supportive of me and they didn't take this as a moment to like defend their friend who they'd known longer."

As this example shows, organizational culture and race intersected to shape her experiences. It was not just her identity as a woman that shaped her experiences with sexual harassment. Rather, the intersection of gender stereotypes, a male-dominated work environment, and race, weaved together to help Gabrielle make sense of how to handle and report the harassment. When Gabrielle reported the harassment, she was worried her coworkers would defend the male harasser due to the male-dominated culture where she worked. However, the manager's response to her report positively broke Gabrielle's sense of how she believed the organization would respond. Indeed, because her manager provided her with support and said that the harassment was unacceptable, this was positive sensebreaking, and this positive sensebreaking facilitated the sensemaking process for Gabrielle as she felt supported at work from her coworkers and manager.

Similarly, Faye, a heterosexual, female, Indigenous, female professor in her early 50s, experienced harassment from her male coworker who eventually became her boss. Faye initially reported the harassment to her Dean, but he dismissed her report. However, positive sensebreaking occurred when Faye reported a second time to HR. She explained:

> Reporting [to HR] was a last-ditch effort … I was the new hire. The cards were stacked against me. Um, so it was more of desperation. I've got to report this. If nothing else, he and I will go to arbitration. … That was what I thought the outcome was going to be.

Faye continued to explain, "My complaint had resulted in him being removed as Chair," and:

> [The new] Chair did a very good job of trying to keep [the harasser] away for me. We … never served on the same committee again. We, our offices were literally, literally at opposite ends of the hall. Um, we were never sent out to do that sort of glad-handing together that you have to do in the academic world.

Thus, Faye said, "When my new Chair was brought on, my stress level dropped dramatically. I felt like somebody had my back, finally …. He knew what was going on and he was trying to protect me." In these examples, Faye expected her report to HR to result in arbitration. Instead, HR broke Faye's sense in a positive way when the office removed the harasser as her Chair and replaced him with someone who facilitated separation between Faye and the harasser. This positive sensebreaking ultimately guided Faye's sensemaking process, as after positive sensebreaking occurred, Faye made sense of the situation by feeling protected and less stressed at work. In addition, positive sensebreaking shaped how Faye made sense of the organization. That is, HR's

response broke her sense about the old boy's culture she had formulated when she first reported. This resulted in Faye feeling protected and supported, but sometimes the sensebreaking process led to targets feeling like the organization was actually protecting the harasser.

Negative sensebreaking

Negative sensebreaking in this study occurred when the target reported the harassment to an organizational member, and then the organizational member's response did not meet the target's expectations. For example, negative sensebreaking occurred when Tee, a government employee, reported the harassment to HR. Tee, a 30-something-year-old African American female who was uncomfortable defining her sexuality, experienced harassment from her Black and white heterosexual coworkers. The harassers would harass Tee on social media, invade her personal space, make suggestive sexual comments about her body, and one of the harassers called Tee the "N" word. During the interview, Tee explained:

> I had reported [the harassment] to HR. [I] did not appreciate how they handled it. I didn't think, or there was just a lot of jest in it … I figured out after a while that my HR sort of reports where they were, I was on speaker phone so people could hear it. Disgustingly inappropriate.

Tee continued to explain:

> And I just feel like they didn't take it as seriously and appropriately [as] I thought they would … I even had an email that I sent to HR explaining, you know, sort of like studying, uh, explaining that was evidence to prove my point, and … I felt like [they] didn't really regard it very seriously.

Trying to make sense of this, Tee thought, "As little regard as I was showed to my … issue … I feel like nobody really appropriately handled the situation, and it's some sort of game."

Tee's example once again illustrates how sexual harassment is not only about gender between men and women. Her example shows how sexual harassment can be between women, and it shows how race and gender intertwine to form her experiences with harassment. Regarding sensebreaking, Tee clearly explains that she expected her report to be handled better than it was. In other words, she had an expectation of how the organizational members would handle her claim, and they failed to meet this claim. Negative sensebreaking occurred through the lack of regard Tee felt the HR representatives had for her claim prompted her sensemaking process about the organization. After negative sensebreaking, she engaged in the sensemaking process to realize that her organization had an irreverent culture regarding sexual harassment.

Negative sensebreaking also occurred for Donna, the graduate student who was harassed by another graduate student. When Donna reported, she said, "I had hoped that they would kick [the harasser] out of the [graduate] program." Instead, Donna was given a separate office, and she explained:

> I think that it was unfair that *his* experience was not impacted as much as mine was. So, he was still able to socialize and, you know, use our regular rooms and his schedule didn't change. But for me, you know, it did kind of feel like I was a criminal, and they were like putting me off in a different room [emphasis added].

Donna reveals how she expected organizational members to do one thing, but the enacted response from the organizational members failed to meet that expectation. This then negatively "broke" her sense. Donna then articulated how this negatively broken sense engendered her sensemaking process about her identity and the situation as she explained it made her feel like a "criminal" and that it was "unfair" that the harasser's organizational experience was not impacted as much as hers was after she reported. Additionally, she thought that she would be treated as the target and the harasser would be treated as if he was doing something wrong, but her perception was that this did not actually happen because he stayed in the graduate program, and she had to move her office but he did not.

Similarly, Lucy, a 40-something-year-old Black woman, was sexually harassed, stalked, and bullied by a Latino colleague at the direct mail advertising agency where she worked when she was younger. The harasser would perpetually keep tabs on Lucy via direct supervision, instant messaging, email, and phone, and he became hostile when she was not working fast enough. Eight months into their working relationship, the harasser's behavior shifted to include a daily barrage of lewd comments and one day, physical touch. "It was every day, and I think what pushed me over the edge … he tapped my tramp stamp [a tattoo on the lower back, just above her buttocks] … he's like you know what else is beautiful? The brown skin, those brown panties, and those brown little hairs down there," referring to her pubic hair. After this, Lucy decided to go to HR. She said, "There's a strong woman in HR … I remember thinking whatever her name was she's gonna take care of it because her father is [in law enforcement] in this town."

After talking with HR, the harasser was suspended, but he was still allowed on the premises and started stalking Lucy. Lucy reported this behavior as well, but at one point after Lucy's manager asked, "I heard what's going on. Can't you and [the harasser] just get along?" Furthermore, Lucy overheard a phone call where an organizational member told the harasser he would be able to come back. At this point, Lucy said, "I realized [the HR representative] wasn't the advocate that I thought she was." In addition to the disappointing responses from the HR representative and her manager, one of Lucy's coworkers broke her sense as well. When Lucy confided in one of her coworkers, Dante, a Black man, about the harassment, he said "I can't get involved." This broke Lucy's sense because "He went to my church. [And] in our culture, Black men are the protectors of Black women," but Dante let her down. Ultimately, Lucy's situation was resolved when the harasser was fired for other reasons, but she was discouraged because he was never fired or disciplined for everything he did to her.

Overall, Lucy's situation shows how race, culture, and gender can impact the sense-breaking process. That is, Lucy explains how she expected the HR representative, a "strong woman," to advocate for her, another woman. However, when this did not happen, this negatively broke Lucy's sense. Additionally, because of her race and

culture, Lucy expected Dante to protect her because "Black men usually protect Black women." When he refused to do so, this also negatively broke Lucy's sense. Because of this broken sense, when Lucy engaged in the sensemaking process to interpret the organizational members' responses, she came to have a negative view of the organization as she described the company's culture as a "vile sense of harmony" that conspired to perpetuate her harassment, protect her harasser, and only level punishment for theft behavior that directly hurt the organization's bottom line.

As these examples reveal, when organizational members' responses did not meet the target's expectations, this broke their sense, and they went through the process of negative sensebreaking. During the process of negative sensebreaking, the targets deidentified with their organizations because they felt like they were the ones being punished for reporting, not the harassers being punished for harassing them. In addition, to interpret and make sense of the "broken" sense, participants explained how they viewed themselves as the "criminal" or they experienced realizations about the culture of their organization, such as a bureaucratic culture that does not allow "good people to win."

Discussion

Like past research, the findings of this study reiterate that workplace sexual harassment does not have to be about sex, and instead has more to do with power, whether that be gendered, racial, or cultural power (Keyton et al., 2001; McDonald, 2012; Richardson & Taylor, 2009). Furthermore, like others, the targets in this study were reluctant to report their sexual harassment experiences because they did not think the issue was serious enough, feared retaliation, feared that they would not be believed, and/or were uncertain about what would happen to the harasser (Kirkner et al., 2020; Lindquist & McKay, 2018; Scarduzio et al., 2020). Despite their fears and uncertainties, each of the targets reported the harassment to an organizational member, and each of the organizational members responded in similarly problematic ways. This study then examined how the responses from the organizational members facilitated sensegiving and sensebreaking throughout the reporting process for the participants, including via what seemed to be unintentional sensegiving. We determined a new type of unintentional sensegiving, which we termed implicit sensegiving. We also examined two types of sensebreaking, which we termed positive or negative sensebreaking. In the following paragraphs we discuss theoretical and practical implications, limitations, and directions for future research.

Theoretical implications

The results of this study extend theory on sensegiving and sensebreaking in unique ways. Sensegiving is typically conceptualized as an intentional act when organizational stakeholders attempt to influence how others make sense of a situation (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Maitlis, 2005). However, we found that organizations and organizational members in this study did not engage in intentional sensegiving, and instead they seemed to engage in unintentional sensegiving. Because we did not directly interview the organizational members who responded to reports of workplace

sexual harassment, we can only speculate about their intentionality when giving sense to the targets in this study. However, given the discrepancies in how the organization members responded and how the targets interpreted the response, it appears that the organization members were unintentionally giving sense after a report.

The first type of unintentional sensegiving in this study, ambiguous sensegiving, occurred when organizational members sent contradicting messages to the target when they reported the harassment (Wong, 2019), such as when the organization's policy against sexual harassment said one thing, and then the organizational member's response directly contradicted the policy. Sensegiving should fill gaps in meaning, yet what appears to be unintentional sensegiving did the opposite by creating further gaps in meaning that engendered confusion and frustration for the targets about their experiences and the organizational culture. In addition, some participants articulated how they internalized the ambiguous sensegiving messages, which they explained affected how they made sense of the organization after reporting, such as viewing the organization as one that protects harassers or punishes targets who report.

Furthermore, this study extends theory on unintentional sensegiving by exploring a new type of unintentional sensegiving, which we are calling implicit sensegiving. Implicit sensegiving happens when an organizational member seems to unintentionally imply or suggest a message but does not ever explicitly say it. In other words, implicit sensegiving happens when organizational members tacitly act, or fail to act, in a certain manner that creates, sustains, or changes organizational culture. Although implicit sensegiving led to targets having a negative view of themselves or the organization, this is not always the case. One target articulated how implicit messages gave her the sense that she was supported, which contradicts past research by showing that unintentional sensegiving can be beneficial and could possibly have a positive outcome (Wong, 2019). However, this finding should be interpreted with caution, and future research should continue to explore the occurrences of this type of sensegiving. Nevertheless, implicit sensegiving is important to add to the literature on sensegiving because it shows how organizational members can inadvertently communicate messages that create, sustain, or challenge the organization's culture and values—perhaps sometimes without even realizing it.

In addition to extending theory on sensegiving, this study extends theory on sensebreaking by exploring two types of sensebreaking, which we called positive and negative sensebreaking. Similar to past research, both types of sensebreaking occurred when there was a dichotomy between expected and enacted organizational messages (Hoelscher et al., 2016). Both types of sensebreaking called into question the target's accepted beliefs about their organization, which shaped how a target made sense of the situation, their organizational identity, or the organization's culture (Aula & Mantere, 2013; Pratt, 2000). Positive sensebreaking occurred when the organizational member's response exceeded the target's expectations, and negative sensebreaking occurred when the organizational member's response to a report did not meet the target's expectations.

Taken together, the findings about sensegiving and sensebreaking have interesting implications for sensemaking and organizing. First, the findings in this study seem to show how an intersectional approach can better inform the sensemaking, sensegiving, and sensebreaking process when reporting sexual harassment. That is, many of the

participants described how their intersecting identities, not just their identities as women, wove together to impact their experiences with workplace sexual harassment. Participants explained how gender, race, status within the organization, workplace cultures, and workplace policies wove together to construct their sense about being harassed, reporting, and the organization. This means that reporting and responding to sexual harassment is not just about gender. Rather, when organizational members experience, report, and respond to reports of sexual harassment, they may also be enacting and giving sense about the organization's values and culture regarding power, gender, race, and/or status.

Furthermore, the findings of this study show how the sensegiving and sensebreaking process can be constitutive of organizing and organizations. That is, the processes of sensegiving, sensebreaking, and sensemaking seem to work in a continuous loop that creates, maintains, or challenges organizational cultures. In the case of sensegiving, when a target reported the harassment to an organizational member, the organizational member had to also make sense of the situation before being able to "give" sense to the target. This means that the organizational members may have made sense of the plausibility of the report in the context of larger social or organizational norms about sexual harassment, such as by relying on cultural stereotypes that sexual harassment only happens between a higher-ranking man and a lower-ranking woman. After that organizational member made sense of the report, they then gave sense to the target who reported, who then engaged in the sensemaking process to interpret the response to the report. Throughout this process, the organizational members may have relied on organizational or cultural norms about sexual harassment to make sense of the situation, but once they communicated a response to the target, they created the organizational culture about sexual harassment into being.

Regarding sensebreaking, when the targets had an idea or expectation of how the organizational members would respond to their report, they enacted one organizational culture. That is, with both positive and negative sensebreaking, the target initially enacted one type of organization, but after the process of sensebreaking and subsequently sensemaking, they communicated in a way that created a completely different type of organization. For positive sensebreaking, targets initially communicated and behaved in a way that created a culture that tolerated sexual harassment, such as by staying silent. However, after organizational members responded to their reports in a way that support them, participants explained how this process resulted in them coming to positively identify with their organizations and believe that their organization values them. Thus, they would then communicate in a way that enabled a different organizational culture, such as one that does not tolerate harassment.

For negative sensebreaking, targets initially communicated in a way that created a culture that they wanted to prevent sexual harassment. In this case, the targets were trying to act out an organizational culture that did not tolerate mistreatment. However, through negative sensebreaking, participants explained how they deidentified with their organizations and came to believe the organization was protecting the harasser and punishing the targets. Through the sensemaking process, they came to realize that they were the ones being "punished" for reporting, not harassers, and/or they isolated themselves because they could not trust anyone in the organization. This then created a very different type of organizational culture than the one before the target's sense

was broken. Overall, the process of sensebreaking allows organizational members to challenge and transform their notions of the organization and its culture, for better or for worse.

Lastly, our data show that the sensegiving and sensebreaking process regarding reporting sexual harassment can happen between any organizational members, and it does not have to occur between an organizational leader, HR representative, or Title IX officer. Indeed, in our study, many participants did not go through formal channels of reporting the harassment. Instead, they may have only reported the harassment to a supervisor or fellow employee. Nevertheless, the organizational members, even if they were not an HR representative or Title IX officer, were able to give sense to the target that enacted the organization's position regarding sexual harassment. This finding suggests that individual employees can enact macro-organizational cultural stances on sexual harassment through micro-practices of communication surrounding sensegiving and sensebreaking. Overall, the findings of this study suggest that an organization's actual culture towards sexual harassment—not just what is espoused on paper through policies or values statements—is tacitly communicated through how organizational members respond after the harassment has been reported and throughout the reporting process.

Practical implications

In addition to theoretical implications, this study provides practical implications for organizations. First, it may be helpful for organizational members to accurately enact the organization's sexual harassment policies as well as update them to include online harassment between co-workers (Herovic et al., 2019; Mainiero & Jones, 2013). For instance, if an organization has a zero-tolerance policy against sexual harassment, then if a target reports harassment, organizational members should take the report seriously. Failing to diligently enact written policies could create more confusion and frustration for targets and other organizational members. In addition, failing to take a report seriously when the organization has a zero-tolerance policy would undermine the written policy and potentially reinforce a culture that tolerates sexual harassment.

However, we recognize in Sam's case that meticulous organizational policies hindered the reporting process and allowed mistreatment to continue in the organization. Instead, like others, we suggest that organizations focus on creating a culture that does not tolerate mistreatment (Clair et al., 2019). If an organization focuses on engendering a culture of respect, this will focus on addressing the problems that perpetuate sexual harassment, such as patriarchy, sexism, racism, or homophobia. As this study shows, organizational cultures can be communicated through interpersonal interactions between organizational members. So, employees could start to build a culture of respect by being mindful in their everyday interactions with others.

Furthermore, our findings highlight the importance of individual responses and reactions from organizational members outside of HR/Title IX when reporting sexual harassment. Thus, for coworkers and managers, they need to critically reflect on the reasoning behind their intended response. For example, are they wanting to dismiss the complaint because it goes against cultural stereotypes that sexual harassment only happens between a higher-status man and a lower-status woman, not between two

people of any gender? As Clair et al. (2019) suggests, bystanders, such as coworkers and managers, have an important role in either perpetuating or preventing workplace sexual harassment. If managers and coworkers can be mindful of how their responses will contribute to the organization's culture toward sexual harassment, they may be able to better support targets and create a culture of support for those who report. Lastly, when a target reports harassment, organizational members need to be careful to discipline the harasser and not the target, taking careful considerations to ensure they do not further isolate or silence targets after they report.

Limitations and directions for future research

This study provides important theoretical implications for organizational sensegiving and sensebreaking, as well as provides practical implications for organizations and organizational members, yet it is not without limitations. Although this study included a relatively small number of participants, the participants in this study represented several underrepresented populations, as half the sample represented people of color, with several experiencing same-sex harassment. However, the majority of the sample was cisgender women, and all of the participants worked in the U.S. Even though cisgender women are more likely to experience and report sexual harassment (EEOC, 2024; Mitchell et al., 2014), future research could explore the reporting experiences of men, as well as continue to explore the experiences of additional underrepresented populations (e.g., sexual and gender minorities, Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC), people from outside the U.S.). These intersecting identities influence a target's experience of sexual harassment (e.g., Clair, 1994; Scarduzio et al., 2018; Shelton & Chavous, 1999; Stockdale et al.,1999), and as this study shows, these intersecting identities also shape the reporting process. Future research should continue to explore the reporting process with an intersectional lens to better understand how to support targets when they report.

Another study limitation is that we could not interview the people who responded to sexual harassment reports. Thus, we cannot know for sure about the intentionality aspect about our findings on unintentional sensegiving. Given that there was a discrepancy in how the organization members responded and how the participants interpreted this response, it seems like the organization members were being unintentional when they gave sense after a report. However, future research should ask organizational members how they decide to respond to see if the messages are intentional or not.

In addition, future research could continue to explore the role of sensemaking, sensegiving, and sensebreaking throughout the reporting process in different types of organizations. As the majority of the targets in this study worked in academia, the results of this study may primarily reflect academic structures and practices, such as tenure. Indeed, many of the findings, such as that universities appear to be ineffective at stopping harassment from tenured faculty, align with the plethora of research on sexual harassment in the academy (Tenbrunsel et al., 2019). However, the academy has structures and policies, like Title IX, that require mandated reporting that private organizations do not have. Future research should continue to explore how organizational structures, like mandated reporting, constrain or aid the reporting process.

Even though most participants worked in academia, the other participants who did not work in academia worked in male-dominated (e.g., sporting goods store) or bureaucratic (e.g., government) organizations. Because male-dominated organizations and bureaucratic organizations have similar gender stereotypes and organizational structures to the academy, and because the participants' narratives were similar to those in the academy, this study tentatively suggests the findings about sensegiving and sensebreaking may transfer to other organizational contexts, especially those with strong gender stereotypes and similar organizational structures. Ultimately, it would be worthwhile to continue to explore how other types of organizations respond to reports of sexual harassment to check for transferability, which is when findings from one study transfer to another context (Tracy, 2020).

In summary, this study explored the narratives of 19 targets who formally reported sexual harassment to organizational members. The results showed how sensegiving and sensebreaking can sustain or challenge organizational cultures related to sexual harassment. Future research should continue to explore the narratives of underrepresented populations during the reporting process. Additionally, when a target formally reports sexual harassment, organizational members should be careful to respond in a way that demonstrates they do not tolerate harassment, and that they are supportive of the target.

Note

1. According to Donna, her harasser had a differing ability.

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ORCID

Madison Adams http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4014-0062

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