

CHAZEN INSTITUTE RESEARCH BRIEF

Monitoring Harassment in Organizations

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- ✓ In soliciting more transparent reporting of harassment, the practice of “**hard garbling**” survey responses—which involves automatically recording a random subset of responses as complaints, regardless of whether they were in fact complaints—was found to be highly effective. When respondents were informed about the garbling process (i.e., some “no” responses would automatically be changed to “yes” responses, guaranteeing that there will already be a baseline number of “yes” responses in the system), hard garbling was seen to increase reporting of physical harassment by 288%, sexual harassment by 269%, and threatening behavior by 46%.
- ✓ Other alternate methods for encouraging increased reporting—including the introduction of “rapport building” techniques between interviewers and interviewees, and the removal of personally identifiable information—were found to have a significantly smaller effect on respondents’ willingness to report harassment.
- ✓ When used in conjunction with hard garbling, the combined effect of multiple methods would appear to be greater than the sum of the effects as observed individually.

Workplace harassment is a serious issue across virtually all sectors and around the globe, yet incidents of harassment remain widely underreported. In the context of developing countries in particular, sexual harassment in the workplace and in public spaces is considered to be a key barrier to women’s labor market participation.

Even as organizations become increasingly serious about addressing harassment within their ranks, their ability to do so is limited by their ability to elicit critical information about the harassment that might be taking place. In many cases, victims of or witnesses to harassment remain silent, fearing retribution or other reputational impacts. This leaves organizations with no clear means of evaluating the prevalence of harassment within their teams, and even less insight into the specific nature of the harassment that individuals within their organizations may face.

In “[Monitoring Harassment in Organizations](#),” co-authored by **Chazen Senior Scholar Laura Boudreau**, Sylvain Chassang of Princeton University, Ada González-Torres of Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, and Rachel M. Heath of the University of Washington, and issued as a National Bureau of Economic Research Working Paper, the authors examine the effects—both individual and combined—of three distinct methods for facilitating increased reporting of harassment. They present evidence that providing plausible deniability to survey respondents, through a process they refer to as “hard garbling,” yields the most significant benefits in terms of encouraging greater reporting of harassment.

Research

The study was designed to assess the degree to which respondents who were willing to provide transparent information about harassment could be impacted by survey methods. The research was conducted via a telephone-based survey implemented in partnership with a large Bangladeshi apparel manufacturer. The resulting survey data was then used to draw policy-relevant inferences about harassment.

The researchers surveyed 2,245 workers with a response rate of 63%. The researchers randomly assigned each survey respondent to one of nine different combinations of three different treatment conditions:

- “Hard garbling” recorded information, a process that involves automatically recording a random subset of responses as complaints of harassment, regardless of whether they were in fact complaints. This process was intended to provide apprehensive respondents with a degree of plausible deniability, thereby increasing their willingness to provide accurate information without facing retribution. The researchers then applied statistical formulas to the garbled reports to recover policy-relevant statistics about the prevalence and nature of harassment at the apparel manufacturer.
- “Rapport building” by the survey enumerator to build trust with the respondent. This included chatting

about family and hobbies in a natural but pre-specified manner beyond the minimum small talk typical of a social science survey.

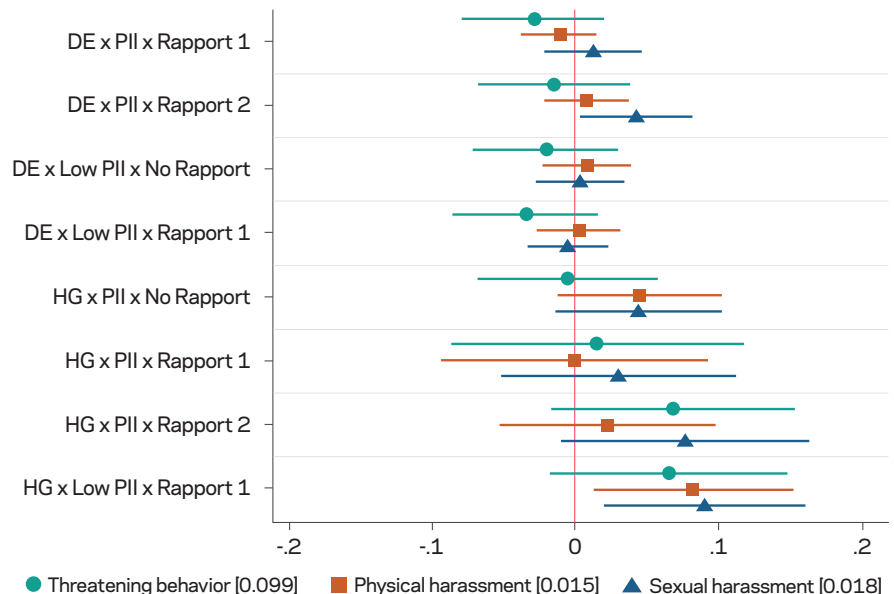
- Reducing the amount of personal identifying information (PII) collected during the survey to alleviate concerns about the perceived likelihood of leaks.

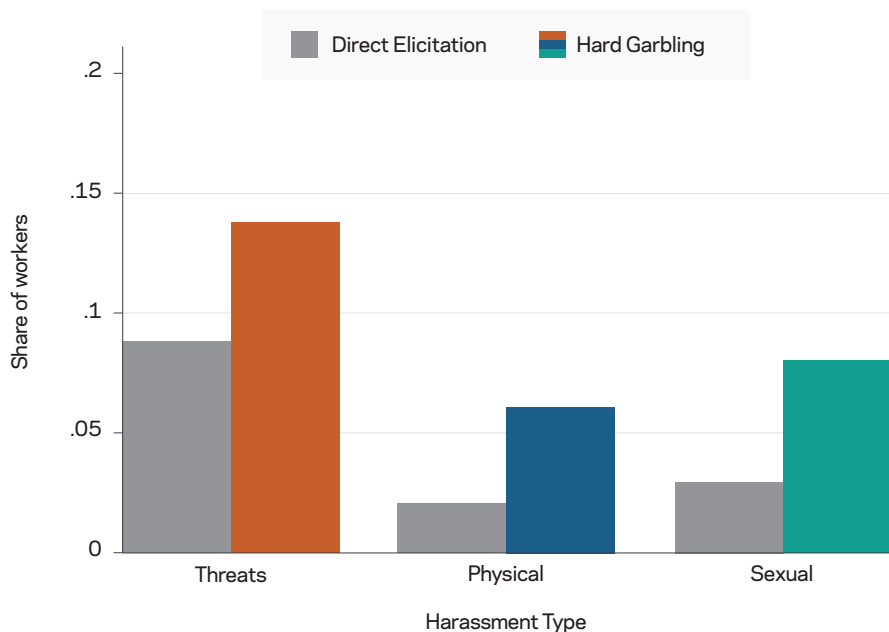
The researchers analyzed the impact of different combinations of treatments on reporting of threatening behavior, physical harassment, and sexual harassment by respondents’ direct supervisors. In addition to drawing conclusions about the effectiveness of each of the three treatments, the results were also used to gather broader insights about how prevalent harassment is, who is doing the harassing, and who is being harassed.

The researchers note that all three of these survey methods come at a cost. Hard garbling limits the severity of organizations’ interventions following reports, since some innocent actors will be the target of a realized noisy complaint. Rapport building 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 this implementation, the organization no longer learns the name of the manager responsible for the harassment.

Effects of Treatments in Various Combinations

In Figure 1, the researchers compare the effects of each of the different combinations of the treatments to the “baseline” group, or the control group, which is omitted from the chart. Across all combinations of survey parameters (including the presence or absence of hard garbling, personally identifying information, and various degrees of rapport building), surveys that employed hard garbling (labeled “HG” in the chart) were uniformly demonstrated to solicit greater rates of reported harassment than those that did not (labeled “DE” for “direct elicitation” in the chart). However, the combined effect of rapport building and removing identifying information, when used in conjunction with hard garbling, appears to be greater than the sum of the effects as observed individually.





Share of Workers Who Report Victimization, by Survey Method

Figure 2 summarizes the harassment rates that the anonymous apparel producer would detect under a direct versus a garbled mechanism. The key takeaway is that in this organization, harassment is meaningfully more widespread than standard surveys would suggest. While not shown, this is true for both men and women, indicating that addressing the harassment would have much larger benefits for both male and female employees than prior evidence would conclude.

Results

The researchers found that the hard garbling treatment significantly increases the reporting of threatening behavior, physical harassment, and sexual harassment. Hard garbling was seen to increase reporting of physical harassment by 288%, sexual harassment by 269%, and threatening behavior by 46%. The other two treatments (rapport building and the removal of PII) were found to have a less significant effect on respondents' willingness to report harassment, though they do still present some value.

Next, using the improved reporting data gathered as part of this study, the researchers were able to estimate several statistics about the prevalence and nature of harassment among employees at the apparel manufacturer that appear to be highly relevant in evaluating and updating the organization's policies. Notably, they found that harassment is much more prevalent than filed complaints would suggest; that it affects both men and women; that it occurs at a moderate intensity but is widespread across teams, suggesting widespread training and behavioral changes may be necessary; and that the extent to which victims are isolated in teams varies substantially by type of harassment, which raises potential implications in terms of how the organization addresses specific incidents.

This research contributes to existing literature on the detection and deterrence of collusion, corruption, and other forms of misbehavior in organizational settings—specifically, by bringing “hard garbling” into a real-world organizational setting. The large experimental effect of hard garbling on information transmission in this study's setting suggests that this class of mechanisms deserves further exploration in other environments where credible threats or reputation costs limit information transmission.

Conclusion

Having access to accurate data on incidents of harassment is crucial for organizations seeking to address the issue on an individual and systemic basis. Treatments such as hard garbling of survey responses can help to alleviate employees' concerns about information leaks and personal retribution, and thereby encourage the more transparent sharing of critical information.

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