

**“Generationally Bound Rationality”  
Perceptions of Sexual Harassment**

**By L. Jeff Seaton  
Murray State University**

There is a growing consensus among generational researchers that truly significant and consequential differences exist between the four generations in today’s workforce (cf. Becton, Walker, & Jones-Farmer, 2014; Lyons & Kuron, 2014; Schullery, 2013).

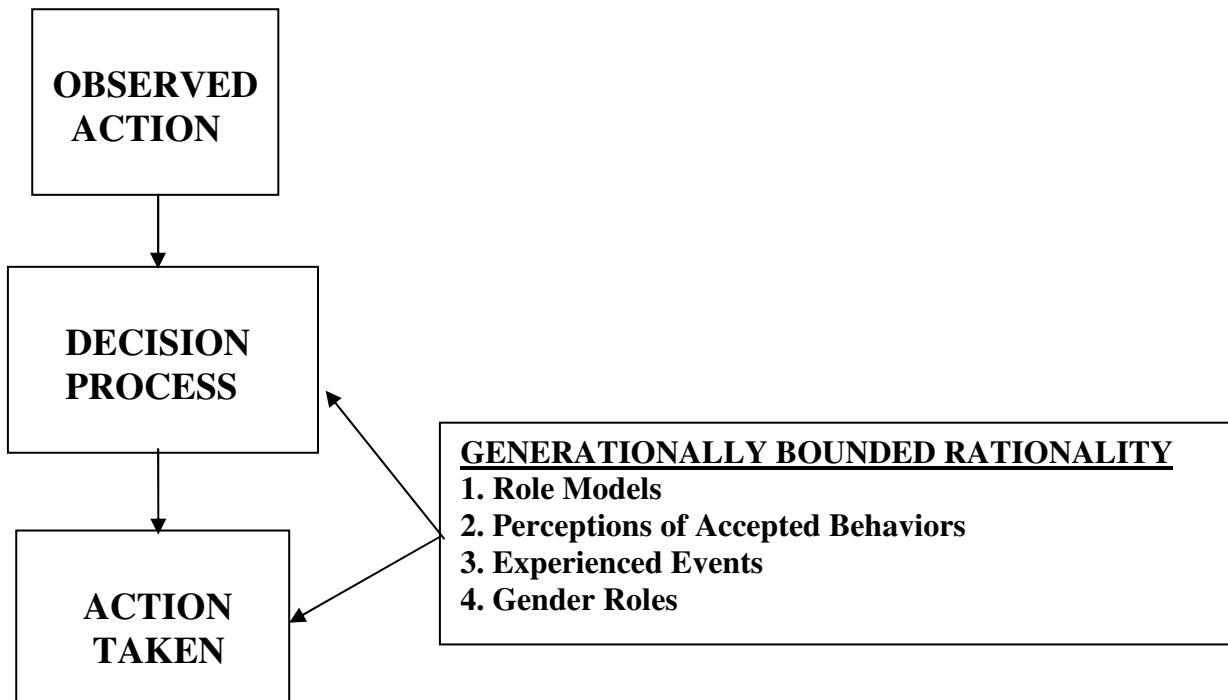
Differences in job attitudes, values, work ethic, and work/life balance are just a few of the many differences that have been observed and researched within the Traditional, Baby Boomer, Generation X, and Millennial generations. One difference that seems highly significant but has garnered little research focus is perceptual differences of sexual harassment among the generations. While “quid pro quo” (i.e. this for that) type of sexual harassment is much less subjective in nature, “hostile work environment” sexual harassment has much less consensus on the required elements for this type of harassment. Some research suggests that the determination of whether or not an act constitutes “hostile work environment” sexual harassment is based on a “rational decision” made by a “normal person.” Other research has pointed out that sexual harassment may be subjectively defined by the observer of the behavior in question (Guttek, 1995). The old adage, “beauty is in the eye of the beholder”, might be changed in this perspective to state that “sexual harassment, or not, is in the eye of the beholder.” In 1955 Simon Herbert suggested that the lack of complete information and the cognitive capacity of the individual makes true and pure objective “rationality” an impossibility. Simon offered “bounded rationality” as a more correct level at which individuals make decisions. He

stated that decision makers rely on experiences and established premises when making behavioral decisions (Newell & Simon, 1972). The current paper proposes that there will be a significant difference in sexual harassment perceptions between generations due to the elements associated with particular generations such as role models, perceptions of accepted behaviors, experienced events and gender roles. A baby boomer for example might rely on the “Anita Hill/ Clarence Thomas case as guidelines of what might constitute sexual harassment, while the younger members of Generation X and the Millennial generations might not have any knowledge of the case and therefore, would not have that as a learning experience. The current paper will define this type of subjective reasoning among the generations as “generationally bound rationality.” The paper will propose that this “generationally bound rationality” will have an effect on both the decision of whether an action constitutes a sexual harassment and the actions an individual will take as a result of sexual harassment.

## MODEL

The current paper will present the following model as a reference of the sexual harassment decision process:

### SEXUAL HARASSMENT DECISION PROCESS



## **PROPOSED STUDY METHODOLOGY**

It has been shown in past research that when information is gathered by describing a situation and asking the individual to respond to how they feel or what they would do in this particular situation the information is often skewed by “socially desirable responses.” Steenkamp, Jong & Baumgartner (2010) describe this as a phenomenon where the respondent may not respond truthfully but simply provide answers that make them look good or answers they think the surveyor is expecting. To offset this extraneous variation in the results, I will use a video presentation of the sexual harassment scenarios. While this type of methodology does not ensure completely truthful responses, it should reduce the frequency of “socially desirable responses” as this methodology brings the respondent closer to the actuality of such an event.

## REFERENCES

- Becton, J., Walker, H., & Jones-Farmer, A., 2014. "Generational Differences in Workplace Behavior." *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* 44(3): 175-189.
- Gutek, B., 1995. "How Subjective Is Sexual Harassment? An Examination of Rater Effects." *Basic and Applied Social Psychology* 17(4): 447-467.
- Simon, H., 1955. "A Behavioral Model of Rational Choice." In H.A. Simon (Ed.) *Models of Bounded Rationality; Behavior Economics and Business Organization*. Cambridge, MA. MIT Press. V2.
- Lyons, S., & Kuron, L., 2014. "Generational Differences in the Workplace: A Review of the Evidence and Directions for Future Research." *Journal of Organizational Behavior* 35: 139-157.
- Newell, A., & Simon, H., 1972. *"Human Problem Solving"*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall.
- Schullery, N., 2013. "Workplace Engagement and Generational Differences in Values." *Business Communication Quarterly* 76(2): 252-265.
- Steenkamp, J., Jong, M., & Baumgartner, H., 2010. "Socially Desirable Response Tendencies in Survey Research." *Journal of Marketing Research* 47: 199-214.