



Whisper networks: Sexual harassment protection through informal networks

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My story

How did I come to study
whisper networks?

Overview



PURPOSE OF
STUDY



RESEARCH
QUESTIONS



METHODS



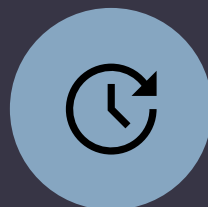
FINDINGS FOR
R1



FINDINGS FOR
R2



DISCUSSION



MOVING
FORWARD



Q&A

Purpose of Study

To examine the phenomenon of whisper networks, or the informal communication networks women use to warn each other about sexual harassment and sexual harassers.



Definitions

- Purpose: why a phenomenon happens. It differs from function which is how a phenomenon operates.
- Network: a web of connections through which information passes. A message between two people is a dyad.
- Network connections: communication happens as messages are passed by nodes (individuals) through edges (communication connections).
- #MeToo: A social movement that helps women to share experiences with sexual harassment, assault, or rape.
- Sexual harassment: Unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, and other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature



R1: What purposes do whisper networks serve in organizations?

R2: How are whisper networks formed in organizations?

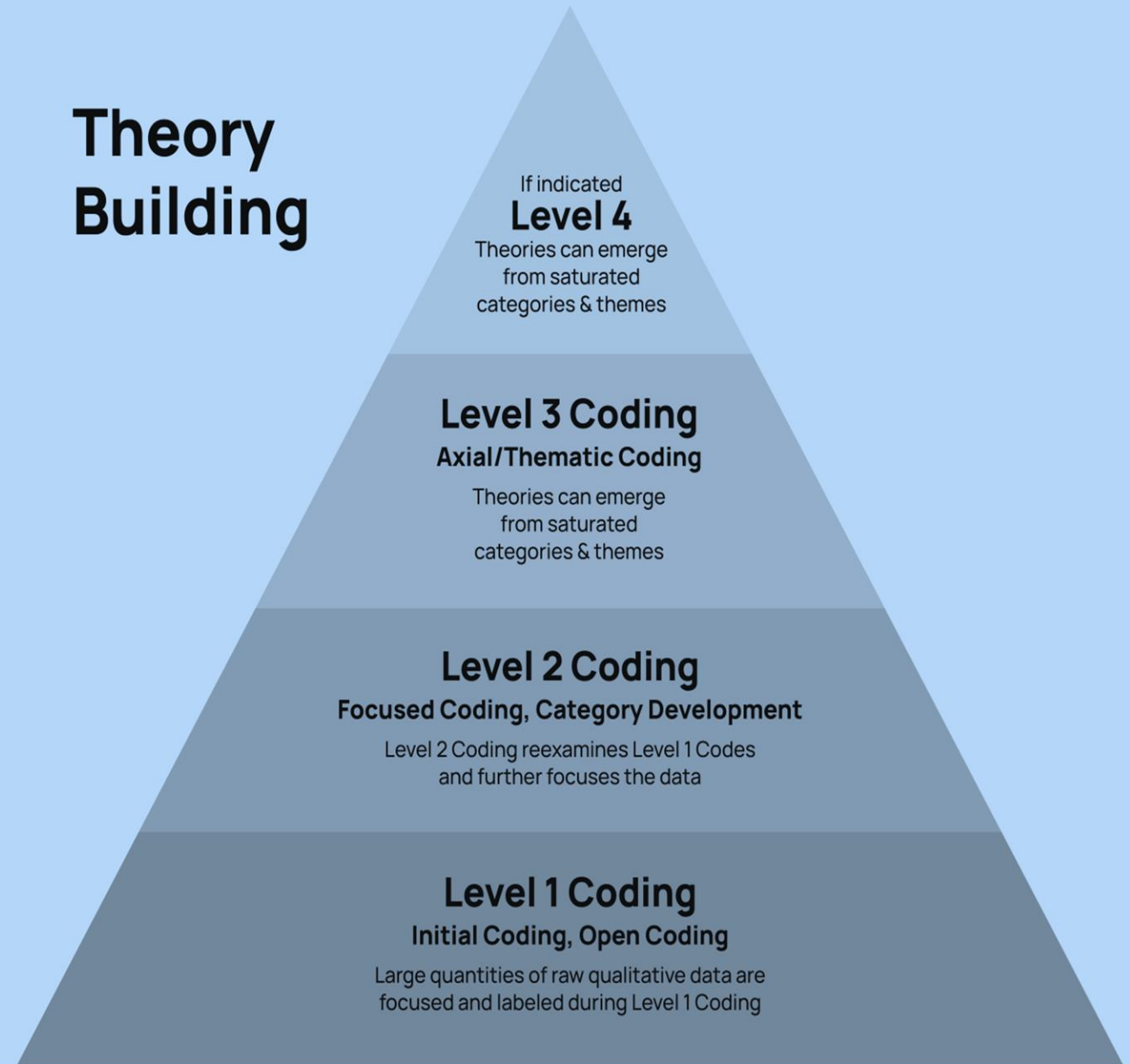
Methods

I used *Thematic Analysis* to examine the data through open, axial, and selective coding to look for patterns and categories.

I used *Grounded Theory* to find emergent theories about whisper networks for

- how they work
- how they develop
- how they compare to other networks
- and why they happen under certain conditions (Saldaña, 2021).

Theory Building



R1: What purposes do whisper networks serve in organizations?

**Purpose
Theory
1**

Whisper networks serve the purpose of protection in organizational cultures of harassment.

**Purpose
Theory
2**

Whisper networks serve as a sensemaking mechanism when sexual harassment happens in organizations.

**Purpose
Theory
3**

Whisper networks serve as identification mechanisms because it is difficult to know who a harasser may be if you have not directly experienced it.

Theory of Purpose 1:
Whisper networks
serve as protective
mechanisms in
organizational
cultures of
harassment.

- Cultures of harassment form when:
 - Sexual harassment is not taken seriously
 - Happens from a young age
 - Turned into a joke
 - Expected
 - Lack of accountability
 - Reporting is risky for the victims and bystanders
 - Victim blaming
 - Loss of connections
 - Reputational damage

*Whisper network communication is taken seriously
and sidesteps some of the risk.*

Theory of Purpose 2:
Whisper networks help women make sense of their experiences with sexual harassment.

Sensemaking is the process of interpreting and giving meaning to new information and experiences such as sexual harassment.

- Sexual harassment is often a surprise, and it doesn't make sense when it is happening
 - Shame and silence
 - Shared experiences
 - Support
 - Should I report

Whisper network communication is a sensemaking mechanism when women experience sexual harassment in their organizations.

Theory of Purpose 3:
Whisper networks serve the purpose of helping women identify harassers in their organizations.

“Harassers look and sound like everyone else. They come from all income levels and educational levels. They can be outgoing, charming, sweet, and friendly. Harassers can be any age—old, young, or in-between. They hold many positions, some powerful and some less powerful. They can be religious or secular. They can be drinking or sober” (p. 154).

Whisper networks serve as identification mechanisms because it is difficult to know who a harasser may be if you have not directly experienced it.

R2: How do whisper networks form in organizations?

Entering the conversation: Asking questions and sharing information

Theory of formation 1:

Women form whisper networks with other women at risk of sexual harassment.

Theory of formation 2:

The formation of whisper networks relies on trust.

Theory of formation 3:

Women form whisper networks with others based on their observations of actions and interactions in the organization.

Theory of formation 4:

Whisper networks form through the use and understanding of verbal, non-verbal, and coded messages.

Theory of formation 5:

Some women are not protected by the formation of whisper networks

Formation theory 1: Women form whisper networks with other women at risk of sexual harassment.

Whisper networks are formed as women sense that other women are at risk for sexual harassment.

- Graduate school
- Temporary work
- Service jobs
- Immigrants

They also form as women with some power protect other women who are at more risk

- Tenured professors
- Women in management

Formation theory 2: Whisper network formation relies on trust.

Network trust is built through a generalized positive expectation of

- Motives
- Intentions
- Goodwill

(McEvily et al., 2021).

“I also felt that it was, it was true. It was coming from an honest place, and I had no reason not to believe her” (Leah).

“I don't know anyone...why there would be reasons to lie to each other” (Claire).

Whisper networks form as women share information out of care, concern, and protection, and as women trust in the information that is shared.

Formation theory 3:
Women form whisper
networks based on
observable (inter)actions
of other women.

- Planned or situational
- Proximity and relationship to harasser
- How they treat others
- Consistency of action
- Personality/character
- Personal relationships

Formation theory 4: Whisper networks form through the use and understanding of verbal, non-verbal, and coded messages.

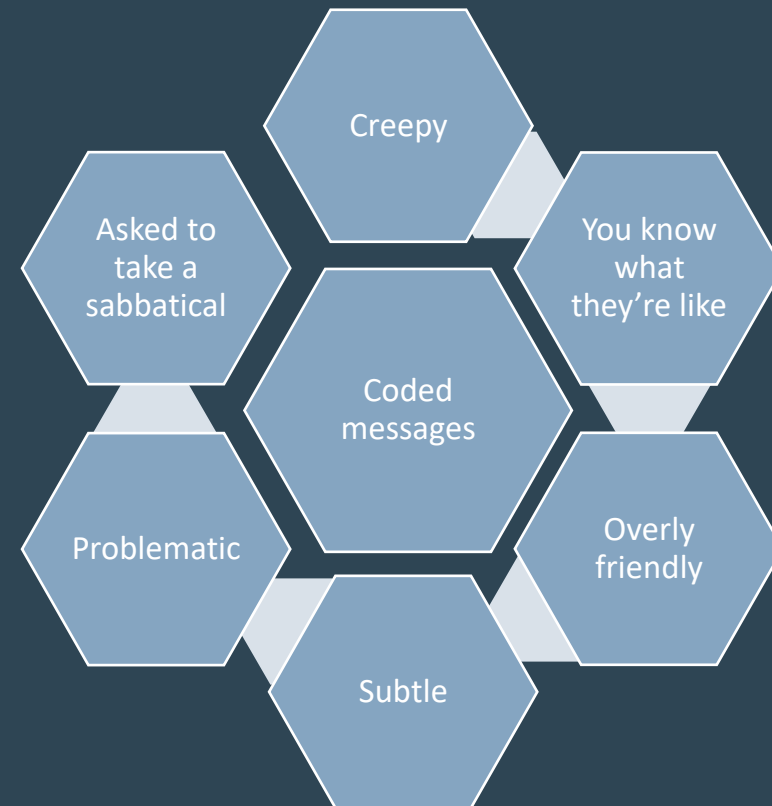
Coded Messages

Verbal

- Behind closed doors
- Pauses

Nonverbal

- Looks
- Energy shift
- Body language



Formation theory 5: Whisper networks do not protect all women

To form a whisper networks women

- need to perceive that someone is at risk
- trust the motives and intentions of other in the network
- make decisions based on observations
- be able to send and receive messages that have been coded for a specific audience

At risk:

- Women who are too close to the harasser
- Women who do not know or understand the codes (i.e., cultural background, neurodivergences)
- Women who are perceived as risky (i.e.) nosy, gossipy, too direct)

The formation of whisper networks is contingent on several overlapping factors, so whisper networks do not protect everyone.

Discussion



Sexual harassment is still a big problem.

Women are aware of whisper networks.

Whisper networks are not an organizational solution.

It is important to differentiate silence from under-the-radar communication.

Whisper networks can lead to change.

Whisper networks are worthy of academic study.

Moving forward

- Impact
- Limitations
- Future research





Thank you!

If there is time: I would love your ideas about re-framing this for a non-academic audience.