



“HE DIDN’T SEXUALLY HARASS ME, AS IN HARASSED FOR SEX. . . HE WAS JUST HORRIBLE”: WOMEN’S DEFINITIONS OF UNWANTED MALE SEXUAL CONDUCT AT WORK

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Synopsis — The definition of sexual harassment has always been a key topic for feminists who seek to provide women with a political vocabulary with which to resist male oppression. Therefore, recent contributors to the sexual harassment debate have been concerned by women’s apparent non-labelling of “sexual harassment.” This article, however, suggests that the construction of “sexual harassment” as the only meaningful conceptualisation for unwanted male sexual conduct is unhelpful: it means that women’s alternative interpretations for such experiences are not respected. I draw from qualitative interviews to explore the ways in which women interpret unwanted male sexual conduct. My proposition is that “sexual harassment” should be understood as only one of many meaningful interpretations for unwanted male sexual conduct: a recognition of a range of terms for unwanted male sexual conduct, rather than just one term, will enable more women to name and perhaps challenge unwelcome experiences. © 2001 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

INTRODUCTION

In this article, I explore women’s definitions of unwanted male sexual conduct at work with reference to conduct that is conceptualised as heterosexual. The focus upon definitions has been chosen because while the definition of sexual harassment has always been a key topic for feminists (e.g., Wise & Stanley, 1987) who seek to provide women with a political vocabulary with which to resist male oppression, recent contributors to the sexual harassment debate (e.g., Brant & Too, 1994; Thomas & Kitzinger, 1997b) have expressed concern about how sexual harassment is being defined: for example, it is argued that many women have never accepted the interpretation of “unwanted conduct of a sexual nature or conduct based on sex which is offensive to the recipi-

ent” (Rubenstein, 1992, p. 2) as “sexual harassment.”

The research from which this article is drawn is a feminist study of men’s and women’s experiences of workplace bullying and sexual harassment in the United Kingdom. My main data source is 50 qualitative, semi-structured interviews with workers (21 men and 29 women) who have suffered, perpetrated, observed, or intervened against these forms of workplace harassment. Interviewees were self-selecting, contacted through newspaper articles, trade union newsletters, and radio broadcasts. They work in a wide variety of occupations (e.g., teaching, factory work, management, and secretarial work). Forty-eight informants were White. Two were Black. One interviewee identified himself as gay. No-one mentioned disabilities. Informants’ ages ranged from early 20s to late 60s.

My informants in this article are: Louise, a university research assistant registered for a PhD, who interpreted her experiences of unwanted male sexual conduct as “working in a sexist environment”; Joanna, a school teacher,

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who termed her experiences of unwanted male sexual conduct as "working in a sexualised environment"; and Elizabeth, an office junior, who conceptualised her experiences of unwanted male sexual conduct as "sexism." The women presented their experiences in these ways rather than as "sexual harassment," even though the incidents they described did appear consistent with arguably widely accepted definitions of what counts as sexual harassment (e.g., Rubenstein, 1992). I was, therefore, concerned to discover why the women had rejected the label "sexual harassment" and, as such, a significant part of each interview explored how the women defined "sexual harassment" and in what ways they felt that their own experiences did not fit into this definition.

Collinson and Collinson (1996) have analysed women insurance sales managers' experiences of conduct which could easily be described as sexual harassment (e.g., unwanted sexual propositions). Most of their interviewees were, however, reluctant to interpret their experiences as sexual harassment. Collinson and Collinson (1996, p. 50) observe that the women's reluctance to recognise themselves as victims of sexual harassment appears to reflect identity concerns as both managers and women with maintaining an image of being in (hierarchical/sexual) control. The women did not want to define themselves as "victims" (see also Mott & Condor, 1997, p. 78). As Kelly (1988, p. 146) explains in her study of women's experiences of sexual violence, "either the influence of dominant meanings or the desire to not see themselves, or be seen by others, as someone who had been assaulted resulted in the events being minimised . . . Through comparing one's own experience with something "worse" . . . women feel less threatened and more able to go about their daily lives." My three women interviewees, though, were not necessarily expressing a generalised reluctance to deploy arguably "serious" terms to describe experiences. Joanna, for instance, had interpreted experiences she had previously encountered while working as a sales assistant as "sexual harassment." Joanna and Elizabeth defined the experiences analysed below as "workplace bullying" as well as "working in a sexualised environment/sexism." Instead, the three interviewees had thought carefully about their experiences and wanted to define them in ways that they felt captured

the dynamics of what had happened. Consequently, while commentators such as Herbert (1997) (see below) would perceive the women's unwillingness to perceive sexually harassing experiences as "sexual harassment" to be an indication of women's ignorance of what counts as "sexual harassment," I take the women's accounts as opportunities to critically reflect upon how women interpret unwanted male sexual conduct in the workplace. This article will argue that a recognition of how women understand their experiences of unwanted male sexual conduct has important campaigning implications.

As indicated above, the interviewees whose accounts are analysed here are women who encountered unwanted male heterosexual conduct. I would stress, however, that whilst the heterosexual woman victim/heterosexual male perpetrator scenario is the most well-known manifestation of conduct that might be interpreted as sexual harassment, it is, of course, not the only scenario: indeed, two of the informants in my research were heterosexual men who had encountered verbal allegations of child abuse/rape and poor sexual performance perpetrated by a group of heterosexual men and a heterosexual woman respectively (see Lee, 2000, for a full discussion). Equally, Kitzinger (1994) has drawn attention to anti-lesbian harassment: she suggests that lesbian women may feel harassed by having to live in a society where heterosexuality is flaunted (e.g., church wedding bells; het couples walking unselfconsciously down the street entwined in each other's arms); and Epstein (1997) has interviewed gay men who spoke of being harassed by men because of their sexuality, harassing other men through a presumption of their gay sexuality (harassment that functioned to define the harasser as heterosexual), as well as harassing women to avoid accusations of homosexuality.

Indeed, Epstein's (1997) contribution to the sexual harassment debate demonstrates the relationship between sexual harassment and the wider institution of heterosexuality. Epstein argues that sexual harassment is a key way through which heterosexuality is institutionalised. She says that to develop a fuller understanding of unwanted sexual conduct, this needs to be seen within the context of "compulsory heterosexuality"—i.e., the ways in which heterosexuality is rewarded (e.g.,

though social approval) while lesbianism and gay sexuality is punished (e.g., through social stigmatisation) (Epstein, 1997, p. 155). Epstein (1997, pp. 165–166) argues that the options open to women in response to sexual harassment are limited in ways which tend to reinforce heterosexuality: for example, if women adopt styles and behaviours that try to avoid harassment through being quiet and “well-behaved,” this can seem to signify a particular kind of heterosexual femininity in which women are seen to be passive, waiting for men’s attentions.

PREVIOUS RESEARCH

The identification of sexual harassment

Although women workers have always encountered unwanted male sexual conduct, the interpretation of such experiences as “sexual harassment” only finally took place in the late 1970s. As Thomas and Kitzinger (1997b, p. 1) explain in their introduction to a collection of feminist perspectives on sexual harassment, sexual violence in the form of prostitution, rape, and child sexual abuse were key targets of first-wave feminism at the turn of the century, and with the rise of second-wave feminism in the 1970s, the identification of date rape and sexual harassment grew out of and extended these concepts.

The term and interpretation “sexual harassment” was coined by radical feminists in the United States (e.g., Backhouse & Cohen, 1979; Farley, 1980; MacKinnon, 1979) to problematise women’s experiences of unwanted male sexual conduct in the workplace. In her pioneering legal analysis, MacKinnon (1979) identified two broad types of sexual harassment at work: “condition of work” (also now known as “hostile environment,” and, in Canada, “chilly climate”) and “quid pro quo” sexual harassment. She explained that in condition of work sexual harassment, a woman may be constantly felt or pinched, visually undressed and stared at, surreptitiously kissed, commented upon, manipulated into being found alone, and generally taken advantage of at work—but never promised or denied anything explicitly connected with her job (MacKinnon, 1979, p. 40). In contrast, quid pro quo sexual harassment at work is defined by a more or less explicit exchange: the woman

must comply sexually or forfeit an employment benefit: for example, MacKinnon reports that a woman who declined to join her employer in his bed while on a business trip was reminded at lunch the next day that she was soon to be reviewed for reappointment, that her chances depended largely upon his support and recommendation, and that she would be well served if she linked both her professional work and her personal life more closely with his own needs. She did not do so and subsequently she was not renewed (MacKinnon, 1979, p. 34). While “quid pro quo” and “condition of work” constitute two broad types of sexual harassment, MacKinnon was concerned to stress that the threat of loss of work explicit in the quid pro quo sexual harassment may be only implicit in condition of work sexual harassment without being any less coercive (MacKinnon, 1979, p. 40). This naming of unwanted male sexual conduct as sexual harassment was a very important development for women workers. For while women had always talked amongst themselves about unwanted male sexual conduct, the interpretation “sexual harassment” had now publicly established the unacceptability of men conceptualising women workers as sexual objects.

As a result of influential feminist activism and research in the United States in the late 1970s, “sexual harassment” migrated first to Canada and Australia (Hadjifotiou, 1983, p. 2) and then to the United Kingdom in approximately 1981 (Wise & Stanley, 1987, p. 29). Subsequently, “sexual harassment” has gained world-wide currency. Wirth (1997, p. 136), in an international overview of sexual harassment at work, reports, for example, that a 1988 study commissioned by the Government of The Netherlands found that an overall 58% of women working in a small business, a large municipality and an industrial company had experienced workplace sexual harassment. A government survey in Japan in 1993 showed that 26% of working women in Tokyo had suffered at least one unpleasant sexual experience at work in the past 2 years. Wirth explains that until recently most surveys had been conducted in industrialised countries. However, she reports that a few surveys carried out in developing countries are now revealing similar statistics to those produced in industrialised countries: for example, in Tanzania a survey of 10,319 women in 135 workplaces found that

sexual harassment was a common problem affecting women workers (Wirth, 1997, p. 136).

Wise and Stanley (1987, pp. 30–31), in their analysis of sexual harassment in everyday life, explain how sexual harassment became established as a significant issue in the UK. They report that NALGO (the National Association of Local Government Officers) carried out surveys of sexual harassment in local government in London and Liverpool. The Liverpool survey revealing the prevalence of sexual harassment in the workplace attracted considerable media attention. For example, in October 1981 a television documentary (*TV Eye*) on workplace sexual harassment, made with the help of NALGO, was broadcast. Subsequently, EPOC (the Equal Pay and Opportunities Campaign) presented guidelines on workplace sexual harassment at the annual conference of the Institute of Personnel Managers. The National Council for Civil Liberties (NCCL) published a pamphlet on workplace sexual harassment in 1982 (all cited in Wise & Stanley, 1987, pp. 30–31). These events allowed women workers in the United Kingdom to begin to conceptualise their experiences of unwanted male sexual conduct as “sexual harassment” and thus as conduct which is incontrovertibly unacceptable because it undermines the status of women as workers.

“Sexual harassment” has, however, always been a contentious subject. Wise and Stanley (1987) explain that the NALGO, NCCL, and EPOC activities and publications described above were reported by the English press in a generally straightforward and sympathetic fashion. Yet Wise and Stanley say that workplace sexual harassment was also beginning to be reinterpreted, initially in local newspapers, as the conduct of the “office Romeo.” Although the office Romeo was depicted as oversexed and also misplaced in his attentions, he was presented as a man engaging in normal male responses to sexually attractive women (Wise & Stanley, 1987, p. 32). The press insisted that conduct that feminists and trade unionists were increasingly perceiving as “sexual harassment” was “fun” not “harassment.” The *Sun*, for example, observed that, “while serious minded union officials . . . are getting their knickers in a twist about sexual harassment at work, the workers themselves say “Carry on groping” . . . “it makes the day more pleasant . . .” (22 March 1982; cited in Wise & Stanley, 1987, p. 34).

One reason why the concept of sexual harassment was available for undermining in this way by salacious British tabloid press reporting in the 1980s was the way in which sexual harassment was then frequently presented as “sexual” conduct. MacKinnon (1979), in the ground-breaking analysis referred to above, conceptualised workplace sexual harassment as conduct in which men use power to gain sex. This theorisation of sexual harassment was clearly underpinned by MacKinnon’s identification of quid pro quo sexual harassment. For in quid pro quo sexual harassment a woman must comply sexually or forfeit an employment benefit (MacKinnon, 1979).

A strong critique of the theorisation of sexual harassment as conduct in which men use power to gain sex was subsequently made in the late 1980s by Wise and Stanley (1987). In direct contrast to MacKinnon’s argument, Wise and Stanley perceive sexual harassment as conduct in which men use sex to maintain power. This conceptualisation is underpinned by Wise and Stanley’s (1987, p. 94) assertion that, “sexual harassment can be described as ‘sexual’ only in the sense that one sex, male, does it to another sex, female.” They see sexual harassment as not necessarily “sexual” behaviour, but rather, “any and all unwanted and intrusive behaviour of whatever kind which men force on women (or boys on girls, or men on girls, or boys on women)” (Wise & Stanley, 1987, p. 8). Although this latter argument is not yet commonly accepted (see below), the argument that men use sex in order to maintain power has now been widely adopted by feminists. Feminist analyses have, therefore, demonstrated the sheer implausibility of the press reclassification of sexual harassment as fun.

Rethinking sexual harassment

Although the starting point for the rethinking sexual harassment debate is a recognition that the sexual harassment discourse is a success story for late 20th-century feminism because it has attracted attention and support and effected considerable political and social change (Brant & Too, 1994, p. 1), in the 1990s many feminists have been drawn to reflecting critically upon the sexual harassment discourse.

One reason for this reassessment of the sexual harassment discourse is a realisation of the threat of the antifeminist backlash. Thomas

and Kitzinger (1997b, p. 6) report, for example, that students at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology burned copies of the booklet *Dealing with Harassment at MIT*, which they described as a total abrogation of free expression. Indeed, a radical challenge to the theorisation of sexual harassment as unacceptable conduct has been presented by some writers within an increasingly heterogeneous feminist debate. In a text on feminism and sexuality, Roiphe (1994)—who Thomas and Kitzinger define as an antifeminist backlash spokesperson—seeks to reconceptualise sexual harassment as sexual interaction. This does not mean that she agrees with MacKinnon (1979) that men use power to gain sex. Instead, Roiphe argues that to find reciprocated sexual attention, women and men have to give and receive a certain amount of unwanted sexual attention (Roiphe, 1994, p. 87). She feels that rules and laws based on the premise that all women need protection from all men, because they are so much weaker, serve only to reinforce the image of women as powerless (Roiphe, 1994, pp. 89–90). Roiphe reports that a female teaching assistant at a U.S. university was offended by the sexually harassing content of a male student's essay, and argues that the idea that a male subordinate can sexually harass a female superior, overturning social and institutional hierarchy, solely on the basis of some primal or socially conditioned male power over women is insulting (Roiphe, 1994, p. 89). She proposes that instead of learning that men have no right to do terrible things to women, women should be learning how to deal with such incidents with strength and confidence (Roiphe, 1994, p. 101).

These antifeminist backlash arguments have explicitly prompted a number of feminists to make a careful restatement of the dynamics of power and resistance in gender relations. Brant and Too (1994, p. 6), for example, observe that whilst many feminists might agree that a culture of dependency should be avoided, Roiphe's line of argument is an oversimplification that assumes that for feminists the right to say "no" to undesired sexual initiatives means an unwillingness to say "yes" to desired sexual activity. Kelly, Burton and Regan (1996), in an analysis of the meaning of sexual victimisation, are particularly critical of Roiphe's (1994) analysis of sexual harassment because they say that Roiphe has reworked

the ideology of coercive heterosexuality in men's favour. This demonstrates that many feminists find Roiphe's analysis simplistic. However, many feminists do still remain concerned by the threat posed by the antifeminist backlash. For example, this provides one rationale for Thomas and Kitzinger's (1997a) collection of contemporary feminist perspectives on sexual harassment.

The second rationale for Thomas and Kitzinger's (1997a) book is that although a key achievement of second-wave feminism was to single out sexual harassment as a part of women's personal everyday experience and to give it a political definition and name, they feel that many women and men have never accepted the feminist interpretation of women's experiences of unwanted male sexual conduct as sexual harassment (see also Brant & Too, 1994). As such, in Part I of their book, four contributors—Herbert; Nicolson; Mott and Condor; and Cairns—analyse the ways in which women are apparently, "refusing the label, declining to protest" (Thomas & Kitzinger, 1997b, p. 19). Although Thomas and Kitzinger (1997a, 1997b) feel that women reject the interpretation "sexual harassment" because they are reluctant to identify themselves with a "feminist" issue during an antifeminist backlash, the other contributors develop a somewhat more diverse cluster of arguments. Thus, Herbert (1997) argues that women workers and students do not label sexual harassment as sexual harassment because they are ignorant and confused about what counts as sexual harassment. Nicolson (1997) believes that women doctors learn not to be concerned by sexual harassment in the process of developing an occupational identity. Mott and Condor (1997) say that the sexual harassment of women secretaries is so routine that it becomes invisible, and that naming such everyday forms of sexualisation as sexual harassment may become a cause of pain for those women who achieve a sense of self-worth through the "good" performance of the secretarial role. Cairns (1997) argues that women have accommodated to male-defined norms of femininity, and have consequently developed a very circumscribed sense of personal agency: as such, they may not believe that their experiences are "real," or may think that they are in the wrong.

The topic of women's non-labelling of sexual harassment seems to be becoming increas-

ingly popular in contemporary analyses of sexual harassment. For example, Monson (1997), in an edited collection focusing on “everyday sexism” (Ronai, Zsembik, & Feagin, 1997), draws from observational data to show that while White women shop assistants in the U.S. encounter regular insults and repeated requests for unwanted dates from their white male customers, the frequency of these experiences and their perpetration by customers rather than employers leads the women to label them as “ordinary inconveniences rather than personal or social injustices” (Monson, 1997, p. 143). This is illuminating, yet the conclusion Monson draws: “defining sexually harassing behaviour as normal undermines efforts to prevent it” (Monson, 1997, p. 149), worryingly both denies women’s right to define male behaviour in whatever ways they think most appropriate, and suggests that only the label “sexual harassment”—rather than, for example, “everyday rudeness”—can precipitate efforts to prevent oppression. Although I agree that encouraging more women to define unwanted male sexual conduct as sexual harassment is a valid project, this article will argue that emphasising women’s non-labelling of unwanted male sexual conduct as sexual harassment is unnecessarily pessimistic. Even when women do not interpret unwanted male sexual conduct as sexual harassment, they may still conceptualise unwanted male sexual conduct as unacceptable. As such, my argument will be that the existence of a range of terms—for example, “everyday rudeness”—rather than just one term “sexual harassment”—might enable more women to recognise and perhaps challenge unwelcome experiences.

This argument will extend the important insights made by Epstein (1997) in her analysis of “hetero/sexist harassment” and the enforcement of heterosexuality. Epstein makes an argument that—at first glance—has less radical implications than Wise and Stanley’s (1987, p. 4) assertion that sexual harassment includes all “male behaviour forced on women” (see above), but that actually contributes very significantly to the important project of making visible and unacceptable the minutiae of men’s oppression of women. Epstein thinks that the word “sexual” in “sexual harassment” obscures the experience of “sexist harassment,” which is not overtly or obviously sexual in content or form. To illustrate the implications of

this, Epstein describes the experiences of Rebecca, a lesbian on a temporary contract in a university department. A senior colleague, William, would frequently invade Rebecca’s space, but his touches could not really be said to be “sexual.” Instead, she perceived them more as an infantilising process—they would occur if she disagreed with him and he would touch her in a way that indicated that he found her immature, not to be taken seriously. Rebecca did not make a formal complaint against William because she felt that in the course of a disciplinary hearing she would have to agree that the touches she had endured while being harassed were not specifically “sexual.” At no time had William made “sexual advances” to Rebecca. As Epstein observes, it is difficult to define harassment as “sexual” when, in common-sense terms, it is not. She says, therefore, that the term “sexist harassment” is a useful way of making visible a form of unwanted male conduct towards women, which is currently not always visible in common-sense understandings of “sexual harassment.”

As my contribution to rethinking definitions of unwanted sexual conduct, I begin in this article by analysing Louise’s experiences because she encountered problems that are extremely close to common-sense conceptualisations of workplace sexual harassment. I then discuss Joanna’s situation because her experiences are slightly less consistent with common-sense conceptualisations of workplace sexual harassment. I conclude with an analysis of Elizabeth’s experiences because she encountered problems that are the furthest away from common-sense conceptualisations of workplace sexual harassment. I stress, however, that my discussion is not meant to imply that all women with similar experiences to my informants should interpret their experiences in the same ways as my informants. Indeed, after explaining the three women’s experiences, I supply a discussion section that makes clear that women’s interpretations of their own experiences matter.

THREE WOMEN’S EXPERIENCES

Louise: “Working in a sexist environment”

As soon as Louise, my first informant, started her new job as a research assistant reg-

istered for a PhD in a university physics department, she discovered that “sexism was pretty much the culture of the department.” Most of the academic staff were men, whose “main topic of conversation isn’t their work or current events, but football.” As Louise had no interest in football, she had felt excluded. One male professor was particularly sexist: “I’ve heard him stand in the corridor, and say very loudly, when he knows that doors are open, that there shouldn’t be women in the department and if there are then they should be secretaries.” As I discuss below, sexism was so prevalent in this department that it had become commonplace (Thomas & Kitzinger, 1994).

At the beginning of the academic year, a group of research/teaching assistants and postgraduates (eight men and two women) went out for a drink. One male postgraduate used the word “cunt” in what Louise perceived to be a “harsh and aggressive way.” The man’s friend said to Louise, “you don’t like that word, do you?” and Louise agreed that she did not. The postgraduate “launched into an attack on women, extreme feminists and fascists. He went on about women wanting to control men, thought police.” The second woman postgraduate student did not hear the incident, but later agreed with Louise that “it was out of order.” The seven male students, however, laughed about it. They said, “That’s what you expect when you come out for a drink with the boys!” At a subsequent social gathering several months later, male postgraduates asked Louise: “When did you last have sex?” When I interviewed her, Louise reflected retrospectively upon the meaning of such questions:

It wasn’t a joke. They really wanted to know. I get the impression you get that because they would like to have sex with you. They’re very intrigued by my sex life. Because I go out with men from other departments, there’s always a bit of jealousy: because you’re in their department you should be going out with them. . . . There’s also the attitude that if you have a boyfriend, then it must mean that you’re not taking your work seriously enough. It’s OK for the men to have girlfriends, though. . . . And if you do socialise with them [men in the department], you have to be guarded: because they want to know what’s going on in your personal life

they want you to get drunk [i.e. so that you will tell them personal details].

Louise felt that this interest in asking women students for the details of their sex lives was underpinned by the male research students’ growing realisation that they had joined a university department where sexism was acceptable:

When you’ve got professors saying women should only be secretaries, for instance, then it [sexism] filters down. You get the feeling that the PhD students, before they arrive they might think twice about saying certain things, and then they arrive in the department and find that it’s great, you can talk about sport, go out and get pissed, you can say whatever you want to in front of a woman and if she complains, then it’s her fault. . . . PhD students get socialised into the ethos of the department. They know they’ll be here for 3 years so they take it on board.

Louise interpreted the men’s conduct as a form of aggressive competition to see who could make the most outrageous remarks. She explained that aggressive competition was rife among the men in the male-dominated physics department. Graduate research seminars where PhD students give presentations on their work, for example, were not supportive events: Louise explained that, “it’s even been said that, ‘First somebody gives a talk, then we ask questions and then everybody launches into an attack on that person. This is how we do things.’” Louise found this very unpleasant, and rarely attended the seminars. On one occasion when she did attend, she asked a question but, “I came in for attack as well. It’s almost like: ‘How dare she ask a question!’”

Later in the year, Louise encountered the male postgraduate who had accused her of being an “extreme feminist” in the student’s union, “I don’t know if he was very drunk, but he was running his hand up and down my back.” This would appear to be a very definite instance of sexual harassment. Louise, however, did not interpret this experience in this way. She said that she had felt vaguely amused by the incident because the male postgraduate had always been extremely unpleasant towards her. Louise explained that:

I tend to see sexual harassment as something to do with making a move on somebody sexually. To do with sex, rather than sexism. Because they [male postgraduates/teaching and research assistants] are my age, it's not really sexual harassment.

As the antifeminist male postgraduate was Louise's peer rather than a more senior member of the academic staff and evidently disliked her so much that he would not be "making a move" on her, Louise saw his actions as part of the sexist atmosphere of the physics department rather than as sexual harassment. Wise and Stanley (1987, p. 4) are, therefore, correct to say that we have become accustomed to interpreting sexual harassment as harassment carried out by a man in a superior organisational position that involves sex in the sense of "doing or having sex" or lust or desire. However, Louise's assertion that her experiences were not sexual harassment because they were not consistent with this conceptualisation suggests that women may reserve the interpretation "sexual harassment" for experiences that do involve unreciprocated sexual attention perpetrated by a man in a superior organisational position.

Joanna: "Working in a sexualised environment"

The experiences encountered by my second informant show that even when women do encounter conduct that does conform to the conventional interpretation of workplace sexual harassment (i.e., conduct involving sex "in the sense of 'doing or having sex,' or lust or desire" (Wise & Stanley, 1987, p. 4)), they do not always interpret such experiences as sexual harassment. Joanna was appointed to a new job as a teacher in a special school. The school, she soon discovered, was "saturated with sex. Everyone was being screwed by everybody else. Whoever the headmaster was having sex with the head of department was having sex with." Joanna explained that this caused problems because "there were loads of people who had had relationships and had split up and were jealous of their ex's current partner." The staffroom was awash with innuendo, instigated by male members of staff—particularly the headmaster. On one occasion the headmaster was sticking abstract paintings on a wall and observed, "Look everybody, this is [a painting

of] so-and-so's penis." Joanna said that women staff "were sort of going along with it [the sexualisation], and some of them were feeling really uncomfortable about it." One woman member of staff had been distressed when a male teacher had made jokes about "large-breasted women," which she had felt were directed at her. Joanna herself felt that the situation was "really unpleasant."

These experiences could easily be interpreted as sexual harassment. The male staff did have "lust or desire" (Wise & Stanley, 1987, p. 4) for the women staff, which informed their engagement in the constant innuendo—i.e., "unwanted sexual conduct" (Rubenstein, 1992)—which the women frequently did not enjoy. Joanna, however, said that she could not perceive her experiences in this school as sexual harassment. Although she said that the experiences "felt like sexual harassment," she decided that "it would be difficult to call it sexual harassment because it was more that there was a generalised sexualisation going on throughout the workplace." The sexualisation was, then, so prevalent that it had become commonplace (Thomas & Kitzinger, 1994) and Joanna's comment (above) that "everyone was being screwed by everybody else" suggests that at least a certain percentage of the sexualisation must have been consensual rather than coercive. Joanna's distinction between "sexual harassment" and "working in a sexualised environment" was also informed by her perception of whether or not the unwanted male sexual conduct was directed at one individual woman or directed at all women. Joanna said that she had not experienced sexual harassment at the school because, "the headteacher wasn't actually harassing me *per se* because his behaviour was fairly similar to everybody." This distinction was perhaps informed by Joanna's earlier experiences working as a sales assistant: when a male shop manager made a joke simulating anal sex with her in front of male customers, Joanna had felt personally humiliated. She explained that this was because, "he did it in such a dramatic, theatrical way so that everybody in the shop looked . . . it was because he grabbed hold of me . . . it felt really invasive." In the school, however, all women were being humiliated, and Joanna's experiences there had not involved unwanted physical contact. Thus, Joanna's assertion that her experiences were

not sexual harassment suggests that women may reserve the interpretation “sexual harassment” for unwanted male sexual conduct that involves physical contact and that they perceive as a personal humiliation.

Elizabeth: “Sexism”

The experiences of my third informant, Elizabeth, show that “the further away a woman’s experience was from the limited definition offered by the stereotype [in this case the stereotype is that sexual harassment involves being harassed for sex], the most likely it was that she would not define it as sexual violence” (Kelly, 1988, p. 148). Elizabeth began a new job as a receptionist in a small travel agency. She soon discovered that the male travel agency owner was a “chauvinist.” He would never make a drink for himself: he expected women staff to bring him cups of tea. He would frequently look out of the window and exclaim:

Look, a man pushing a pushchair! Good God, what is the world coming to! Men don’t push pushchairs! By all means stand by your wife while she pushes the pushchair. What is the world coming to? These men should be at work. Women should be doing this sort of thing.

On one occasion when he said this, Elizabeth and her two female co-workers asked, “Would you like us to leave, then?” but he replied, “That’s completely different.” Elizabeth explained that she thought he wanted to employ female staff because he enjoyed having power over women. Elizabeth heard that once, for example, he had asked a woman to go and get a file. She replied that they were waiting for more files to be supplied from the stationers. He then said that he wanted a file now, so the woman sent another woman across to a nearby stationers to get a file. The travel agency owner then said, “I asked you to get that file,” and picked her up by the arm and frog-marched her across to the stationers and made her get the file and then frog-marched her back again, literally grabbing hold of her arm and escorting her every step of the way. He said, “When I tell you to do something, I expect you to do it.”

The travel agency owner clearly preferred to deal with male customers, not their wives. When a male customer visited the agency, he would tell Elizabeth, “speak nicely to Mr Smith and hopefully, if he gets a legover tonight he might come back in and book a holiday tomorrow.” If a woman customer came in wearing clothes he considered not to be “lady-like,” the travel agency owner would say, “I’m surprised you’ve got the money to go on holiday, coming in dressed in such a way.” There were, therefore, regular complaints from customers who felt that they had been treated discourteously. When women wearing pretty dresses came in and appeared to be “submissive females,” however, the travel agency owner was very pleasant towards them. Elizabeth felt that he was, “obviously one of these blokes that had decided that he didn’t want to face coming into his mid-life crisis. He liked to think he was a hit with women.” She told me that he often went into neighbouring shops to chat with the women workers. Elizabeth heard on the grapevine that he had asked one woman to dinner but she had said, “Oh no, I wouldn’t go out with you. You’re old enough to be my father.” While Elizabeth was working at the travel agency, however, she said that the travel agency owner had never flirted with the women staff.

Another example of this man’s sexism, which Elizabeth said that she “did not think was very nice,” were the jokes he made about female travel agents in front of his women staff. On one occasion, the travel agency owner failed to receive an invitation to the local travel agency association dinner. He decided that this was because a female travel agent had been elected as chairperson of the association and spent time on the telephone to his male friends saying that:

It’s because that bloody stupid woman invites her women friends. It used to be a good laugh when I went in the old days: men sitting around having a joke, talking about women. Of course, you can’t do that these days because you have to be politically correct, which I don’t believe in. Men are men and women are women. They know their place and we know our place.

Elizabeth explained that women staff in the travel agency were not allowed to wear trou-

sers. In the summer, the travel agency owner told Elizabeth and her two female co-workers, "Let's have those hems a little further up, shall we, ladies?" The travel agency owner told Elizabeth, "You are employed by me, to look pretty on the front desk, it's something attractive, and hopefully it'll make business pick up." Elizabeth responded, "Do you want me to take my clothes off and prance around nude?" The travel agency owner's perception of Elizabeth as a sex object does appear to be an instance of workplace sexual harassment. However, Elizabeth explained, "I didn't feel sexually harassed, but I thought it was quite unnecessary." Elizabeth did not interpret any part of her experiences in the travel agency as sexual harassment:

Apparently, one young woman who used to work for him left because of sexual harassment. I don't know how strong it actually got. He didn't sexually harass me, as in harassed for sex. . . . Most people think of sexual harassment as a boss or a member of the opposite sex pestering you for sex, but I wasn't pestered for sex. He was just horrible.

Elizabeth subsequently added that, "I think it is a form of sexual harassment in the fact that it was a power game: a man getting power over a younger female," but she nevertheless concluded that, "if it was sexual harassment then it was a very strange form of sexual harassment." This demonstrates that while Elizabeth did draw on feminist understandings of sexual harassment, she did not do so readily. In particular, she was not comfortable referring to sexist conduct as "sexual harassment." As such, it seems that her reluctance to interpret her experiences as sexual harassment is a consequence of the word "sexual" in "sexual harassment." This suggests that women may reserve the interpretation "sexual harassment" for conduct which they immediately perceive to be "sexual."

DISCUSSION

The three accounts analysed in this article show that Wise and Stanley's (1987, p. 94) assertion that "sexual harassment can be described as 'sexual' only in the sense that one sex, male, does it to another sex, female" has

not so far really affected the common-sense understanding of what counts as "sexual harassment." Wise and Stanley's intention was to broaden the meaning of an established term:

Including within the term "sexual harassment" the entire spectrum of sexism, rather than just one extreme of it, has great advantages and provides great strengths. It enables us to analyse sexual harassment using the already developed framework provided by feminist thinking about "sexism" and "sexual politics" (Wise & Stanley, 1987, p. 113).

As Kelly, Burton, and Regan (1996, p. 85) explain, feminists have often attempted to extend the meanings of words; to use them as "collective nouns" covering a range of experiences. They report that the rationale for this approach is that it constitutes an explicit challenge to definitions embodied in the law, and provides validation of violation through the powerful meanings that these words carry. Indeed, Wise and Stanley felt that this stance was justified because otherwise:

By picking out particular behaviours (those supposedly "sexual") for inclusion within the definition of sexual harassment, and picking out particular kinds of men as "the men who do" sexual harassment, the impression is given that sexual harassment is extraordinary, clearly sexual and always clearly objectionable, and so quite different from usual male behaviours and quite different from women's run-of-the-mill everyday experiences of men (Wise & Stanley, 1987, p. 61).

The three accounts analysed above, however, suggest that women workers may remain reluctant to extend the meaning of "sexual harassment" in the way advocated by Wise and Stanley. This should not be taken to imply, for example, that women do not understand what counts as sexual harassment (as Herbert, 1997, would suggest) or that they are frightened by the power of antifeminism (as Thomas & Kitzinger, 1997b, would argue) or that they have constructed a hierarchy of seriousness in which their own experience does not appear serious enough to merit interpretation as sexual harassment. These interviewees clearly did think the experiences described above were impor-

tant. They would not have come forward to be interviewed for my research had they not thought so. Instead, the accounts demonstrate that women often want to make distinctions between “sexual harassment,” “sexism” and “working in a sexualised environment” based on, for example, whether or not they perceive an incident to indicate unreciprocated sexual desire. The prevalence of sexism and sexualisation in the university department, special school, and travel agency also significantly informed the women’s interpretation of their experiences as “sexism” and “working in a sexualised environment” rather than “sexual harassment.”

This suggests that new ways to describe unwanted male sexual conduct might need to be adopted so that women are able to name and challenge the practices which they find unacceptable. As Kelly, Burton, and Regan (1996, p. 86) report, creating new concepts with which to name the variation of experience, extending language itself, rather than widening the meaning of words is another feminist naming strategy—an alternative to the strategy exemplified above by Wise and Stanley’s (1987) broad definition of what counts as sexual harassment. Wise and Stanley’s definition of sexual harassment is, of course, an important campaigning tool against unwanted male sexual and nonsexual conduct. It is important to remember, however, that Wise and Stanley do not intend their definition of sexual harassment to be adopted uncritically. They explain that, “we shouldn’t take on trust anything, but critically examine it for ourselves; and of course we should do this with feminist naming as with any other” (Wise & Stanley, 1987, p. 201).

At present, however, the outcome of Wise and Stanley’s (1987, p. 4) assertion that all “male behaviour forced on women” is sexual harassment is that “male behaviour forced on women” is only really firmly defined as unacceptable when it is defined as sexual harassment. As such, my three informants’ decisions not to interpret their experiences as sexual harassment is problematic. As explained above, the supposed problem of women’s non-labelling of unwanted male sexual conduct as sexual harassment is now becoming a popular theme of sexual harassment analyses. Herbert (1997), for example, has discussed women’s

non-labelling of sexual harassment. She quotes a female sixth form student who received anonymous sexual fantasy letters. The woman says, “I think he was a pervert but I don’t think it was sexual harassment” (Herbert, 1997, p. 26). Another woman reported that her male manager made comments about her recent marriage and said “If . . . my husband couldn’t keep up he would oblige,” but says that, “I don’t consider what he did was right but I don’t think it’s sexual harassment” (Herbert, 1997, p. 27). The content of these experiences does indeed make it surprising that the women did not interpret them as sexual harassment. Herbert’s argument is that statements such as these demonstrate the “ignorance of women and girls about what constitutes sexual harassment” (Herbert, 1997, p. 26). I think, however, that Herbert’s interviewees’ observations that, “He was a pervert” and “I don’t think what he did was right” are more important than the women’s reluctance to call these experiences sexual harassment. This is because these comments clearly demonstrate that the women found these experiences unwelcome. Although Joanna, Elizabeth, and Louise did not interpret their experiences as “sexual harassment,” it is evident that they too did not welcome these experiences: Joanna said the atmosphere in the school was “unpleasant”; Elizabeth felt that the travel agency owner’s conduct was “unnecessary”; and Louise felt “excluded” in her university department. The women’s willingness to define unwanted male sexual conduct as “unacceptable” even though they did not interpret this conduct as “sexual harassment” demonstrates another important achievement of the feminist discourse of workplace sexual harassment: women do not believe that unwanted male conduct is unproblematic.

I think that if Wise and Stanley (1987) had not been so concerned to use an already developed framework, they might have proposed “gendered harassment” rather than “sexual harassment” as a category to cover unwanted male sexual and nonsexual conduct. This may have been more successful, as it would have removed the problem with the word “sexual.” As mentioned above, Epstein (1997) has advocated the term “sexist harassment” because she says that “the term ‘sexual harassment’ obscures the experience of sexist harassment

which is not overtly or obviously sexual in content or form" (Epstein, 1997, p. 157). An adoption of the interpretation "sexist harassment" need not imply that "sexist harassment" is completely different from "sexual harassment." Instead, the concept offers a way in which women can interpret their experiences in the way they chose.

However, though "sexist harassment" has an important consciousness-raising role in highlighting the similarities between sexual harassment and sexist harassment, it may be that the word "harassment" will still remain problematic for many women. Elizabeth, Joanna, and Louise, for example, did not use the word "harassment" to describe their experiences. "Harassment" is a very powerful way in which to draw attention to the unacceptability of particular experiences. As such, the women's reluctance to use this particular word is a cause for concern. Nevertheless, faithful naming is equally important, for as Kelly (1988, p. 139) explains in another context, "where names are not available, the extent and even existence of forms of sexual violence cannot be acknowledged." Kelly found that she had to introduce two new interpretations of women's experiences of sexual violence to cover the range of women's experiences:

[The category] "pressurised sex" . . . was introduced to take account of the fact that women do not simplistically define heterosexual sex as either consenting or rape, between these two is a range of pressure and coercion. Pressurised sex covers experiences in which women decided not to say no to sex but where they felt pressured to consent (Kelly, 1988, p. 82). [The category] "coercive sex" covers experiences which women referred to as being like rape. Specific pressure was always used by the man, often involving the threat of, or actual, physical force (Kelly, 1988, p. 84).

Kelly's introduction of these two new categories does not undermine the established category "rape." Instead, the introduction of these categories recognised that, over time, women's definitions of their experiences may change. This is also true of women's definitions of sexual harassment. Thomas and Kitzinger (1994, p. 155), for example, interviewed a woman who said that she had not interpreted

wolf-whistling as sexual harassment in the past, but said, "when you think about it, it is [sexual harassment]." I argue, therefore, that feminists should embrace "sexism" and "working in a sexualised/sexist environment" as well as "sexual harassment" and "sexist harassment" as interpretations for unwanted male sexual conduct at work. This is important, because if women's terms for unwanted male sexual conduct are not incorporated into feminist discourse, women will not be able to clearly state the unacceptability of the experiences they have encountered. This may result in women abandoning the discourse of unwanted male sexual conduct in favour of, for example, the workplace bullying discourse.

Indeed, Elizabeth and Joanna both stated unproblematically that they had encountered workplace bullying ["persistent, offensive, abusive, intimidating, malicious or insulting behaviour, abuse of power or unfair penal sanctions which makes the recipient feel upset, threatened, humiliated or vulnerable, which undermines their self-confidence and which may cause them to suffer stress" (Manufacturing, Science & Finance (MSF), 1995)]. While Joanna's experience involved a single incident in which she was locked in a cupboard by a female teacher, Elizabeth interpreted all her experiences in the travel agency as "sexism"/"workplace bullying." In particular, she said that the travel agency owner had bullied her when he shouted at her for arriving at work at 1 minute past 9 o'clock on one occasion, made her type out a letter six times even though there was nothing wrong with it, and accused her of wasting money when photocopying, "It's eight pence a sheet!" When she objected on these occasions, she was told, "You are a very impertinent young lady!" Elizabeth's readiness to interpret these experiences as workplace bullying contrasts sharply with her reluctance to conceptualise the travel agency owner's conduct as sexual harassment. As such, Elizabeth's account demonstrates the danger mentioned above that women may interpret experiences that involve unwanted male sexual conduct as workplace bullying because they do not perceive these experiences to be sexual harassment, and do not possess any widely accepted alternative terminology with which to name such experiences. This is problematic because the majority of the experiences Elizabeth described must be understood as unwanted male sexual/sexist conduct

to highlight the unacceptability of unwanted male sexual/sexist conduct.

CONCLUSION

In this article, I have expressed concern that many feminists have constructed "sexual harassment" as the only meaningful conceptualisation for unwanted male sexual conduct (e.g., Herbert, 1997; Monson, 1997; Thomas and Kitzinger, 1997b; Wise & Stanley, 1987), and as such, women's alternative interpretations for men's unwanted workplace sexual conduct are not currently respected (except by Epstein, 1997). Of course, I agree that it is important to talk to women "about male oppression, patriarchy and masculine myths of sexual prowess, uncontrollable sexual urges and other such tales. . . . to provide them with a political understanding of their gendered situation, to help them understand how power has been appropriated by men and masculine institutions . . ." (Herbert, 1997, p. 28), but there is no reason why this must mean advocating only one interpretation for unwanted male sexual conduct.

I have argued that women's understandings of their own experiences must matter. When women do not interpret their experiences as sexual harassment, but instead refer to incidents that could be defined as sexual harassment as "sexism" and "working in a sexualised environment," this need not always be perceived as an indication that the women perceive these experiences as unproblematically "just part of everyday life." Instead, the women I interviewed did recognise sexual harassment, but sought to make distinctions between sexual harassment and sexism on the grounds of, for example, whether or not they perceived a given incident as an indication of unreciprocated male sexual interest.

The most important aspect of the experiences analysed, however, is that although the women did not interpret these experiences as sexual harassment, they were not saying that they welcomed these experiences. My argument, then, is that the workplace sexual harassment discourse must incorporate new terms, for example, "sexism." This does not necessarily mean that feminists should cease to strive for a very wide definition of sexual harassment. Instead, I think that a recognition of a range of terms for unwanted male sexual

conduct rather than just one term will enable more women to name and perhaps challenge unwelcome experiences.

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