Boundary Lines: Labeling Sexual Harassment in Restaurants

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Sexual harassment occurs when submission to or rejection of sexual advances is a term of employment, is used as a basis for making employment decisions, or if the advances create a hostile or offensive work environment (Konrad and Gutek 1986). Sexual harassment can cover a range of behaviors, from leering to rape (Ellis, Barak, and Pinto 1991; Pryor 1987; Reilly et al. 1992; Schneider 1982). Researchers estimate that as many as 70 percent of employed women have experienced behaviors that may legally constitute sexual harassment (MacKinnon 1979; Powell 1986); however, a far lower percentage of women claim to have experienced sexual harassment. Paludi and Barickman write that "the great majority of women who are abused by behavior that fits legal definitions of sexual harassment—and who are traumatized by the experience—do not label what has happened to them ‘sexual harassment’" (1991, 68).

Why do most women fail to label their experiences as sexual harassment? Part of the problem is that many still do not recognize that sexual harassment is an actionable offense. Sexual harassment was first described in 1976 (MacKinnon 1979), but it was not until 1986 that the U.S. Supreme Court included sexual harassment in the category of gender discrimination, thereby making it illegal (Paludi and Barickman 1991); consequently, women may not yet identify their experiences as sexual harassment because a substantial degree of awareness about its illegality has yet to be developed.

Many victims of sexual harassment may also be reluctant to come forward with complaints, fearing that they will not be believed, or that their charges will not be taken seriously (Jensen and Gutek 1982). As the Anita Hill-Clarence Thomas hearings demonstrated, women who are victims of sexual harassment often become the accused when they bring charges against their assailant.

There is another issue at stake in explaining the gap between experiencing and labeling behaviors "sexual harassment": many men and women experience some sexual behaviors in the workplace as pleasurable. Research on sexual harassment suggests that men are more likely than women to enjoy sexual interactions at work (Gutek 1985; Konrad and Gutek 1986; Reilly et al. 1992), but even some women experience sexual overtures at work as pleasurable (Pringle 1988). This attitude may be especially strong in organizations that use and exploit the bodies and sexuality of the workers (Cockburn 1991). Workers in many jobs are hired on the basis of their attractiveness and solicitude—including not only sex industry workers, but also service sector workers such as receptionists, airline attendants, and servers in trendy restaurants. According to Cockburn (1991), this sexual exploitation is not completely forced: many people find this dimension of their jobs appealing and reinforcing to their own sense of identity and pleasure; consequently, some men and women resist efforts to expunge all sexuality from their places of work.

This is not to claim that all sexual behavior in the workplace is acceptable, even to some people. The point is that it is difficult to label behavior as sexual harassment because it forces people to draw a line between illicit and "legitimate" forms of sexuality at work—a process fraught with ambiguity. Whether a particular interaction is identified as
harassment will depend on the intention of the harasser and
the interpretation of the interchange by the victim, and both
of these perspectives will be highly influenced by work-
place culture and the social context of the specific event.

This article examines how one group of employees—
restaurant workers—distinguishes between sexual harass-
ment and other forms of sexual interaction in the work-
place. We conducted an in-depth interview study of
waitpeople and found that complex double standards are
often used in labeling behavior as sexual harassment: iden-
tical behaviors are labeled sexual harassment in some
contexts and not others. Many respondents claimed that they
enjoyed sexual interactions involving co-workers of the
same race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, and class/status
backgrounds. Those who were offended by such interac-
tions nevertheless dismissed them as natural or inevitable
parts of restaurant culture.1 When the same behavior
occurred in contexts that upset these hegemonic hetero-
sexual norms—in particular, when the episode involved inter-
actions between gay and heterosexual men, or men and
women of different racial/ethnic backgrounds—people
seemed willing to apply the label sexual harassment.

We argue that identifying behaviors that occur only in
counterhegemonic contexts as sexual harassment can poten-
tially obscure and legitimize more insidious forms of domi-
nation and exploitation. As Pringle points out, "Men control
women through direct use of power, but also through defini-
tions of pleasure—which is less likely to provoke resis-
tance" (1988, 95). Most women, she writes, actively seek
out what Rich (1980) termed "compulsory heterosexuality"
and find pleasure in it. The fact that men and women may
enjoy certain sexual interactions in the workplace does not
mean they take place outside of oppressive social relation-
ships, nor does it imply that these routine interactions have
no negative consequences for women. We argue that the
practice of labeling as "sexual harassment" only those
behaviors that challenge the dominant definition of accept-
able sexual activity maintains and supports men's institu-
tionalized right of sexual access and power over women.

METHODS

The occupation of waiting tables was selected to study the
social definition of sexual harassment because many restaur-
ant have a bluntly sexualized workplace culture (Cobble
magazine that caters to restaurant owners, "Restaurants . . .
are about as informal a workplace as there is, so much so as
to actually encourage—or at the very least tolerate—sexual
banter" (Anders 1993, 48). Unrelenting sexual banter and
innuendo, as well as physical joking, create an environ-
ment of "compulsory jocularity" in many restaurants (Pringle
1988, 93). Sexual attractiveness and flirtation are often insti-
tutionalized parts of a waitperson's job description; conse-
quenty, individual employees are often forced to draw the
line for themselves to distinguish legitimate and illegitimate
expressions of sexuality, making this occupation an excel-
ent context for examining how people determine what con-
stitutes sexual harassment. In contrast, many more sexual
behaviors may be labeled sexual harassment in less highly
sexualized work environments.2

Eighteen in-depth interviews were conducted with male
and female wait staff who work in restaurants in Austin,
Texas. Respondents were selected from restaurants that
employ equal proportions of men and women on their wait
staffs. Overall, restaurant work is highly sex segregated:
women make up about 82 percent of all waitpeople (U.S.
Department of Labor 1989), and it is common for restaur-
ants to be staffed only by either waitresses or waiters, with
men predominating in the higher-priced restaurants (Cobble
1991; Hall 1993; Paules 1991). We decided to focus only on
waitpeople who work in mixed-sex groups for two rea-
sons. First, focusing on waitpeople working on integrated
staffs enables us to examine sexual harassment between
coworkers who occupy the same position in an organiza-
tional hierarchy. Co-worker sexual harassment is perhaps
the most common form of sexual harassment (Pryor 1987;
Schneider 1982); yet most case studies of sexual harass-
ment have examined either unequal hierarchical relation-
ships (e.g., boss-secretary harassment) or harassment in
highly skewed gender groupings (e.g., women who work in
nontraditional occupations) (Benson and Thomson 1982;
Carothers and Crull 1984; Gruber and Bjorn 1982). This
study is designed to investigate sexual harassment in
unequal hierarchical relationships, as well as harassment
between organizationally equal co-workers.

Second, equal proportions of men and women in an
occupation implies a high degree of male-female interac-
tion (Gutek 1985). Waitpeople are in constant contact with
each other, help each other when the restaurant is busy, and
informally socialize during slack periods. In contrast, men
and women have much more limited interactions in highly
sex-segregated restaurants and indeed, in most work envi-
ronments. The high degree of interaction among the wait
staff provides ample opportunity for sexual harassment
between men and women to occur and, concomitantly, less
opportunity for same-sex sexual harassment to occur.
The sample was generated using "snowball" techniques and by going to area restaurants and asking waitpeople to volunteer for the study. The sample includes eight men and ten women. Four respondents are Latino/a, two African American, and twelve white. Four respondents are gay or lesbian; one is bisexual; thirteen are heterosexual. (The gay men and lesbians in the sample are all "out" at their respective restaurants.) Fourteen respondents are single; three are married; one is divorced. Respondents' ages range from 22 to 37.

Interviews lasted approximately one hour, and they were tape-recorded and transcribed for this analysis. All interviews were conducted by the first author, who has over eight years' experience waiting tables. Respondents were asked about their experiences working in restaurants; relationships with managers, customers, and other co-workers; and their personal experiences of sexual harassment. Because interviews were conducted in the fall of 1991, when the issue was prominent in the media because of the Hill-Thomas hearings, most respondents had thought a lot about this topic.

FINDINGS

Respondents agreed that sexual banter is very common in the restaurant: staff members talk and joke about sex constantly. With only one exception, respondents described their restaurants as highly sexualized. This means that 17 of the 18 respondents said that sexual joking, touching, and fondling were common, everyday occurrences in their restaurants. For example, when asked if he and other waitpeople ever joke about sex, one waiter replied, "about 90 percent of [the jokes] are about sex." According to a waitress, "at work . . . [we're] used to petting and touching and hugging." Another waiter said, "I do not go through a shift without someone . . . pinching my nipples or poking me in the butt or grabbing my crotch. . . . It's just what we do at work."

These informal behaviors are tantamount to "doing heterosexuality," a process analogous to "doing gender" (West and Zimmerman 1987). By engaging in these public flirtations and open discussions of sex, men and women reproduce the dominant cultural norms of heterosexuality and lend an air of legitimacy—if not inevitability—to heterosexual relationships. In other words, heterosexuality is normalized and naturalized through its ritualistic public display. Indeed, although most respondents described their workplaces as highly sexualized, several dismissed the constant sexual innuendo and behaviors as "just joking," and nothing to get upset about. Several respondents claimed that this is simply "the way it is in the restaurant business," or "just the way men are."

With only one exception, the men and women interviewed maintained that they enjoyed this aspect of their work. Heterosexuality may be normative, and in these contexts, even compulsory, yet many men and women find pleasure in its expression. Many women—as well as men—actively reproduce hegemonic sexuality and apparently enjoy its ritual expression; however, in a few instances, sexual conduct was labeled as sexual harassment. Seven women and three men said they had experienced sexual harassment in restaurant work. Of these, two women and one man described two different experiences of sexual harassment, and two women described three experiences. Table 1 describes the characteristics of each of the respondents and their experiences of sexual harassment.

We analyzed these 17 accounts of sexual harassment to find out what, if anything, these experiences shared in common. With the exception of two episodes (discussed later), the experiences that were labeled "sexual harassment" were not distinguished by any specific words or behaviors, nor were they distinguished by their degree of severity. Identical behaviors were considered acceptable if they were perpetrated by some people, but considered offensive if perpetrated by others. In other words, sexual behavior in the workplace was interpreted differently depending on the context of the interaction. In general, respondents labeled their experiences sexual harassment only if the offending behavior occurred in one of three social contexts: (1) if perpetrated by someone in a more powerful position, such as a manager; (2) if perpetrated by someone of a different race/ethnicity; or (3) if perpetrated by someone of a different sexual orientation.

Our findings do not imply that sexual harassment did not occur outside of these three contexts. Instead, they simply indicate that our respondents labeled behavior as "sexual harassment" when it occurred in these particular social contexts. We will discuss each of these contexts and speculate on the reasons why they were singled out by our respondents.

Powerful Position

In the restaurant, managers and owners are the highest in the hierarchy of workers. Generally, they are the only ones who can hire or fire waitpeople. Three of the women and one of the men interviewed said they had been sexually
## TABLE 1 DESCRIPTION OF RESPONDENTS AND THEIR REPORTED EXPERIENCES OF SEXUAL HARASSMENT AT WORK

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>SO</th>
<th>MS</th>
<th>Years in Restaurant</th>
<th>Sexualized Environment</th>
<th>Sexually Harassed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kate</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>H</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beth</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>H</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ann</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>H</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>1*</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cathy</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>H</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>8 mos.*</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carla</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>H</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>5 mos.*</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diana</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>L</td>
<td>H</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maxine</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>L</td>
<td>H</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laura</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>2*</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brenda</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>L</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lynn</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>L</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>5*</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jake</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>H</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Al</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>H</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frank</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>H</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>H</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trent</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>G</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>1*</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rick</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>H</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>L</td>
<td>H</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>L</td>
<td>G</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>1*</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>no</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


b. SO = sexual orientation: B = bisexual, G = gay, H = heterosexual, L = lesbian.

c. MS = marital status: D = divorced, M = married, S = single.

d. Years in restaurant refers to length of time employed in current restaurant. An asterisk indicates that respondent has worked in other restaurants.

e. Whether or not the respondent claimed sexual banter and touching were common occurrences in their restaurant.

f. Responded yes or no to the question: 'Have you ever been sexually harassed in the restaurant?' Number in parentheses refers to number of incidents described in the interview.

Harassed by their restaurants’ managers or owners. In addition, several others who did not personally experience harassment said they had witnessed managers or owners sexually harassing other waitpeople. This finding is consistent with other research indicating people are more likely to think that sexual harassment occurs when the perpetrator is in a more powerful position (e.g., Ellis et al., 1991).

Carla describes being sexually harassed by her manager:

One evening, [my manager] grabbed my body, not in a private place, just grabbed my body, period. He gave me like a bear hug from behind a total of four times in one night. By the end of the night I was livid. I was trying to avoid him. Then when he'd do it, I'd just ignore the conversation or the joke or whatever and walk away.

She claimed that her co-workers often give each other massages and joke about sex, but she did not label any of their behaviors sexual harassment. In fact, all four individuals who experienced sexual harassment from their managers described very similar types of behavior from their co-workers, which they did not define as sexual harassment. For example, Cathy said that she and the other wait-
people talk and joke about sex constantly: “Everybody
stands around and talks about sex a lot.... Isn’t that
weird? You know, it’s something about working in restau-
rats and, yeah, so we’ll all sit around and talk about sex.”
She said that talking with her co-workers about sex does
not constitute sexual harassment because it is “only jok-
ing.” She does, however, view her male manager as a sex-
ual harasser:

My employer is very sexist. I would call that sexual
harassment. Very much of a male chauvinist pig. He
kind of started [saying] stuff like, “You can’t really wear
those shorts because they’re not flattering to your figure.
. . . But I like the way you wear those jeans. They look
real good. They’re tight.” It’s like, you know [I want to
say to him], “You’re the owner, you’re in power. That’s
evident. You know, you need to find a better way to tell
me these things.” We’ve gotten to a point now where
we’ll joke around now, but it’s never ever sexual, ever. I
won’t allow that with him.

Cathy acknowledges that her manager may legitimately
dictate her appearance at work, but only if he does so in
professional—and not personal—terms. She wants him “to
find a better way to tell me these things,” implying that he
is not completely out-of-line in suggesting that she wear
tight pants. He “crosses the line” when he personalizes his
directive, by saying to Cathy “I like the way you wear those
jeans.” This is offensive to Cathy because it is framed as
the manager’s personal prerogative, not the institutional
requirements of the job.

Ann described a similar experience of sexual harass-
ment from a restaurant owner:

Yeah, there’s been a couple of times when a manager
has made me feel real uncomfortable and I just removed
myself from the situation. . . . Like if there’s some-
thing I really want him to hear or something I think is
really important there’s no touching. Like, “Don’t touch
me while I’m talking to you.” You know, because I take
that as very patronizing. I actually blew up at one of the
owners once because I was having a rough day and he
came up behind me and he was rubbing my back, like
up and down my back and saying, you know, “Oh, is
Ann having a bad day?” or something like that and I
shook him off of me and I said, “You do not need to
touch me to talk to me.”

Ann distinguishes between legitimate and illegitimate
touching: if the issue being discussed is “really impor-
tant”—that is, involving her job status—she insists there be
no touching. In these specific situations, a back rub is inter-
preted as patronizing and offensive because the manager is
using his powerful position for his personal sexual enjoy-
ment.

One of the men in the sample, Frank, also experienced
sexual harassment from a manager:

I was in the bathroom and [the manager] came up next
to me and my tennis shoes were spray-painted silver so
he knew it was me in there and he said something about,
“Oh, what do you have in your hand there?” I was on
the other side of a wall and he said, “Mind if I hold it
for a while?” or something like that, you know. I just
pretended I didn’t hear it.

Frank also described various sexual behaviors among the
waitstaff, including fondling, “joking about bodily func-
tions,” and “making bikinis out of tortillas.” He said, “I
mean, it’s like, what we do at work. . . . There’s no holds
barred. I don’t find it offensive. I’m used to it by now. I’m
guilty of it myself.” Evidently, he defines sexual behaviors
as “sexual harassment” only when perpetrated by someone
in a position of power over him.

Two of the women in the sample also described sexual
harassment from customers. We place these experiences in
the category of “powerful position” because customers do
have limited economic power over the waitperson insofar
as they control the tip (Cruall 1987). Cathy said that male
customers often ask her to “sit on my lap” and provide
them with other sexual favors. Brenda, a lesbian, described
a similar experience of sexual harassment from women cus-
tomers:

One time I had this table of lesbians and they were
being real vulgar towards me. Real sexual. This woman
kind of tripped me as I was walking by and said, “Hurry
back.” I mean, gay people can tell when other people
are gay. I felt harassed.

In these examples of harassment by customers, the line
is drawn using a similar logic as in the examples of harass-
ment by managers. These customers acted as though the
waitresses were providing table service to satisfy the cus-
tomers’ private desires, instead of working to fulfill their
job descriptions. In other words, the customers’ demands
were couched in personal—and not professional—terms,
making the waitresses feel sexually harassed.

It is not difficult to understand why waitresses singled
out sexual behaviors from managers, owners, and cus-
tomers as sexual harassment. Subjection to sexual advances by someone with economic power comes closest to the quid pro quo form of sexual harassment, wherein employees are given the option to either “put out or get out.” Studies have found that this type of sexual harassment is viewed as the most threatening and unambiguous sort (Ellis et al. 1991; Fitzgerald 1990; Gruber and Bjorn 1982).

But even in this context, lines are drawn between legitimate and illegitimate sexual behavior in the workplace. As Cathy’s comments make clear, some people accept the employers’ prerogative to exploit the workers’ sexuality, by dictating appropriate “sexy” dress, for example. Like airline attendants, waitresses are expected to be friendly, helpful, and sexually available to the male customers (Cobble 1991). Because this expectation is embedded in restaurant culture, it becomes difficult for workers to separate sexual harassment from the more or less accepted forms of sexual exploitation that are routine features of their jobs. Consequently, some women are reluctant to label blatantly offensive behaviors as sexual harassment. For example, Maxine, who claims that she has never experienced sexual harassment, said that customers often “talk dirty” to her:

I remember one day, about four or five years ago when I was working as a cocktail waitress, this guy asked me for a “Slow Comfortable Screw” [the name of a drink]. I didn’t know what it was. I didn’t know if he was making a move or something. I just looked at him. He said, “You know what it is, right?” I said, “I bet the bartender knows!” (laughs). . . . There’s another one, “Sex on the Beach.” And there’s another one called a “Screaming Orgasm.” Do you believe that?

Maxine is subject to a sexualized work environment that she finds offensive; hence her experience could fit the legal definition of sexual harassment. But because sexy drink names are an institutionalized part of restaurant culture, Maxine neither complains about it nor labels it sexual harassment. Once it becomes clear that a “Slow Comfortable Screw” is a legitimate and recognized restaurant demand, she accepts it (albeit reluctantly) as part of her job description. In other words, the fact that the offensive behavior is institutionalized seems to make it beyond reproach in her eyes. This finding is consistent with others’ findings that those who work in highly sexualized environments may be less likely to label offensive behavior “sexual harassment” (Gutck 1985; Konrad and Gutck 1986).

Only in specific contexts do workers appear to define offensive words and acts of a sexual nature as sexual harassment—even when initiated by someone in a more powerful position. The interviews suggest that workers use this label to describe their experiences only when their bosses or their customers couch their requests for sexual attentions in explicitly personal terms. This way of defining sexual harassment may obscure and legitimize more institutionalized—and hence more insidious—forms of sexual exploitation at work.

Race/Ethnicity

The restaurants in our sample, like most restaurants in the United States, have racially segregated staffs (Howe 1977). In the restaurants where our respondents are employed, men of color are concentrated in two positions: the kitchen cooks and bus personnel (formerly called busboys). Five of the white women in the sample reported experiencing sexual harassment from Latino men who worked in these positions. For example, when asked if she had ever experienced sexual harassment, Beth said:

Yes, but it was not with the people . . . it was not, you know, the people that I work with in the front of the house. It was with the kitchen. There are boundaries or lines that I draw with the people I work with. In the kitchen, the lines are quite different. Plus, it’s a Mexican staff. It’s a very different attitude. They tend to want to touch you more and, at times, I can put up with a little bit of it but . . . because I will give them a hard time too but I won’t touch them. I won’t touch their butt or anything like that.

[Interviewer: So sometimes they cross the line?]

It’s only happened to me a couple of times. One guy, like, patted me on the butt and I went off. I lost my shit. I went off on him. I said, “No. Bad. Wrong. I can’t speak Spanish to you but, you know, this is it.” I told the kitchen manager who is a guy and he’s not . . . the head kitchen manager is not Hispanic. . . . I’ve had to do that over the years only a couple of times with those guys.

Beth reported that the waitpeople joke about sex and touch each other constantly, but she does not consider their behavior sexual harassment. Like many of the other men and women in the sample, Beth said she feels comfortable engaging in this sexual banter and play with the other wait-
people (who were predominantly white), but not with the Mexican men in the kitchen.

Part of the reason for singling out the behaviors of the cooks as sexual harassment may involve status differences between waitpeople and cooks. Studies have suggested that people may label behaviors as sexual harassment when they are perpetrated by people in lower status organizational positions (Grauerholz 1989; McKinney 1990); however, it is difficult to generalize about the relative status of cooks and waitpeople because of the varied and often complex organizational hierarchies of restaurants (Paules 1991, 107–10). If the cook is a chef, as in higher-priced restaurants, he or she may actually have more status than waitpeople, and indeed may have the formal power to hire and fire the waitstaff. In the restaurants where our respondents worked, the kitchen cooks did not wield this sort of formal control, but they could exert some informal power over the waitstaff by slowing down food orders or making the orders look and/or taste bad. Because bad food can decrease the waitperson’s tip, the cooks can thereby control the waitperson’s income; hence servers are forced to negotiate and to some extent placate the wishes and desires of cooks to perform their jobs. The willingness of several respondents to label the cooks’ behavior as sexual harassment may reflect their perception that the cooks’ informal demands had become unreasonable. In such cases, subjectivity to the offensive behaviors is a term of employment, which is quid pro quo sexual harassment. As mentioned previously, this type of sexual harassment is the most likely to be so labeled and identified.

Because each recounted case of sexual harassment occurring between individuals of different occupational statuses involved a minority man sexually harassing a white woman, the racial context seems equally important. For example, Ann also said that she and the other waiters and waitresses joke about sex and touch each other “on the butt” all the time, and when asked if she had ever experienced sexual harassment, she said,

I had some problems at [a previous restaurant] but it was a communication problem. A lot of the guys in the kitchen did not speak English. They would see the waiters hugging us, kissing us and pinching our rears and stuff. They would try to do it and I couldn’t tell them, “No. You don’t understand this. It’s like we do it because we have a mutual understanding but I’m not comfortable with you doing it.” So that was really hard and a lot of times what I’d have to do is just suck punch them in the chest and just use a lot of cuss words and they knew that I was serious. And there again, I felt real weird about that because they’re just doing what they see go on everyday.

Kate, Carla, and Brenda described very similar racial double standards. Kate complained about a Mexican busser who constantly touched her:

This is not somebody that I talk to on a friendly basis. We don’t sit there and laugh and joke and stuff. So, when he touches me, all I know is he is just touching me and there is no context about it. With other people, if they said something or they touched me, it would be funny or . . . we have a relationship. This person and I and all the other people do not. So that is sexual harassment.

And according to Brenda:

The kitchen can be kind of sexist. They really make me angry. They’re not as bad as they used to be because they got warning. They’re mostly Mexican, not even Mexican-American. Most of them, they’re just starting to learn English.

[Interviewer: What do they do to you?]

Well, I speak Spanish, so I know. They’re not as sexual to me because I think they know I don’t like it. Some of the other girls will come through and they will touch them like here [points to the lower part of her body]. . . . I’ve had some pretty bad arguments with the kitchen.

[Interviewer: Would you call that sexual harassment?]

Yes, I think some of the girls just don’t know better to say something. I think it happens a lot with the kitchen guys. Like sometimes, they will take a relleno in their hands like it’s a penis. Sick!

Each of these women identified the sexual advances of the minority men in their restaurants as sexual harassment, but not the identical behaviors of their white male co-workers; moreover, they all recognize that they draw boundary lines differently for Anglo men and Mexican men: each of them willingly participates in “doing heterosexuality” only in racially homogamous contexts. These women called the behavior of the Mexican cooks “sexual harassment” in part because they did not “have a relationship” with these men,
nor was it conceivable to them that they could have a relationship with them, given cultural and language barriers—and, probably, racist attitudes as well. The white men, on the other hand, can "hug, kiss, and pinch rears" of the white women because they have a "mutual understanding"—implying reciprocity and the possibility of intimacy.

The importance of this perception of relationship potential in the assessment of sexual harassment is especially clear in the cases of the two married women in the sample, Diana and Maxine. Both of these women said that they had never experienced sexual harassment. Diana, who works in a family-owned and -operated restaurant, claimed that her restaurant is not a sexualized work environment. Although people occasionally make double entendre jokes relating to sex, according to Diana, "there's no contact whatsoever like someone pinching your butt or something." She said that she has never experienced sexual harassment:

Everybody here knows I'm married so they're not going to get fresh with me because they know that it's not going to go anywhere, you know so . . . and vice versa. You know, we know the guys' wives. They come in here to eat. It's respect all the way. I don't think they could handle it if they saw us going around hugging them. You know what I mean? It's not right.

Similarly, Maxine, who is Colombian, said she avoids the problem of sexual harassment in her workplace because she is married:

The cooks don't offend me because they know I speak Spanish and they know how to talk with me because I set my boundaries and they know that . . . I just don't joke with them more than I should. They all know that I'm married, first of all, so that's a no-no for all of them. My brother used to be a manager in that restaurant so he probably took care of everything. I never had any problems anyway in any other jobs because, like I said, I set my boundaries. I don't let them get too close to me.

[Interviewer: You mean physically?]

Not physically only. Just talking. If they want to talk about, "Do you go dancing? Where do you go dancing?" Like I just change the subject because it's none of their business and I don't really care to talk about that with them . . . not because I consider them to be on the lower levels than me or something but just because if you start talking with them that way then you are just giving them hope or something. I think that's true for most of the guys here, not just talking about the cooks.

. . . I do get offended and they know that so sometimes they apologize.

Both Maxine and Diana said that they are protected from sexual harassment because they are married. In effect, they use their marital status to negotiate their interactions with their co-workers and to ward off unwanted sexual advances. Furthermore, because they do not view their co-workers as potential relationship "interests," they conscientiously refuse to participate in any sexual banter in the restaurant.

The fact that both women speak Spanish fluently may mean that they can communicate their boundaries unambiguously to those who only speak Spanish (unlike the female respondents in the sample who only speak English). For these two women, sexual harassment from co-workers is not an issue. Diana, who is Latina, talks about "respect all around" in her restaurant; Maxine claims the cooks (who are Mexican) aren't the ones who offend her. Their comments seem to reflect more mutual respect and humanity toward their Latino co-workers than the comments of the white waitresses. On the other hand, at least from Maxine's vantage point, racial harassment is a bigger problem in her workplace than is sexual harassment. When asked if she ever felt excluded from any groups at work, she said:

Yeah, sometimes. How can I explain this? Sometimes, I mean, I don't know if they do it on purpose or they don't but they joke around you about being Spanish. . . . Sometimes it hurts. Like they say, "What are you doing here? Why don't you go back home?"

Racial harassment—like sexual harassment—is a means used by a dominant group to maintain its dominance over a subordinated group. Maxine feels that, because she is married, she is protected from sexual harassment (although, as we have seen, she is subject to a sexualized workplace that is offensive to her); however, she does experience racial harassment where she works, and she feels vulnerable to this because she is one of very few nonwhites working at her restaurant.

One of the waiters in the sample claimed that he had experienced sexual harassment from female co-workers, and race may have also been a factor in this situation. When Rick (who is African American) was asked if he had
ever been sexually harassed, he recounted his experiences with some white waitresses:

Yes. There are a couple of girls there, waitpeople, who will pinch my rear.

[Interviewer: Do you find it offensive?]

No (laughs) because I’m male. . . . But it is a form of sexual harassment.

[Interviewer: Do you ever tell them to stop?]

If I’m really busy, if I’m in the weeds, and they want to touch me, I’ll get mad. I’ll tell them to stop. There’s a certain time and place for everything.

Rick is reluctant about labeling this interaction “sexual harassment” because “it doesn’t bother me unless I’m, like, busy or something like that.” In those cases where he is busy, he feels that his female co-workers are subverting his work by pinching him. Because of the race difference, he may experience their behaviors as an expression of racial dominance, which probably influences his willingness to label the behavior as sexual harassment.

In sum, the interviews suggest that the perception and labeling of interactions as “sexual harassment” may be influenced by the racial context of the interaction. If the victim perceives the harasser as expressing a potentially reciprocal relationship interest, they may be less likely to label their experience sexual harassment. In cases where the harasser and victim have a different race/ethnicity and class background, the possibility of a relationship may be precluded because of racism, making these cases more likely to be labeled “sexual harassment.”

This finding suggests that the practices associated with “doing heterosexuality” are profoundly racist. The white women in the sample showed a great reluctance to label unwanted sexual behavior sexual harassment when it was perpetrated by a potential (or real) relationship interest—that is, a white male co-worker. In contrast, minority men are socially constructed as potential harassers of white women: any expression of sexual interest may be more readily perceived as nonreciprocal and unwanted. The assumption of racial homogamy in heterosexual relationships may protect white men from charges of sexual harassment of white women. This would help to explain why so many white women in the sample labeled behaviors perpetrated by Mexican men as sexual harassment, but not the identical behaviors perpetrated by white men.

Sexual Orientation

There has been very little research on sexual harassment that addresses the sexual orientation of the harasser and victim (exceptions include Reilly et al. 1992; Schneider 1982, 1984). Surveys of sexual harassment typically include questions about marital status but not about sexual orientation (e.g., Fain and Anderton 1987; Gruber and Bjorn 1982; Powell 1986). In this study, sexual orientation was an important part of heterosexual men’s perceptions of sexual harassment. Of the four episodes of sexual harassment reported by the men in the study, three involved openly gay men sexually harassing straight men. One case involved a male manager harassing a male waiter (Frank’s experience, described earlier). The other two cases involved co-workers. Jake said that he had been sexually harassed by a waiter:

Someone has come on to me that I didn’t want to come on to me. . . . He was another waiter [male]. It was laughs and jokes the whole way until things got a little too much and it was like, “Hey, this is how it is. Back off. Keep your hands off my ass.”. . . . Once it reached the point where I felt kind of threatened and bothered by it.

Rick described being sexually harassed by a gay baker in his restaurant:

There was a baker that we had who was really, really gay. . . . He was very straightforward and blunt. He would tell you, in detail, his sexual experiences and tell you that he wanted to do them with you. . . . I knew he was kidding but he was serious. I mean, if he had a chance he would do these things.

In each of these cases, the men expressed some confusion about the intentions of their harassers—“I knew he was kidding but he was serious.” Their inability to read the intentions of the gay men provoked them to label these episodes sexual harassment. Each man did not perceive the sexual interchange as reciprocal, nor did he view the harasser as a potential relationship interest. Interestingly, however, all three of the men who described harassment from gay men claimed that sexual banter and play with other straight men did not trouble them. Jake, for example, said that “when men get together, they talk sex,” regardless of whether there are women around. He added, “people find me offensive, as a matter of fact,” because he gets
 SECTION 5 WORK

“pretty raunchy” talking and joking about sex. Only when
talk was initiated by a gay man did Jake label it as sex-
ual harassment.

Johnson (1988) argues that talking and joking about sex
is a common means of establishing intimacy among hetero-
sexual men and maintaining a masculine identity. Homo-
sexuality is perceived as a direct challenge and threat
to the achievement of masculinity and consequently, “the
male homosexual is derided by other males because he is not
a real man, and in male logic if one is not a real man, one is a
woman” (p. 124). In Johnson’s view, this dynamic not only
sustains masculine identity, it also shores up male domi-
nance over women; thus, for some straight men, talking
about sex with other straight men is a form of reasserting
masculinity and male dominance, whereas talking about sex
with gay men threatens the very basis for their masculine
privilege. For this reason they may interpret the sex talk and
conduct of gay men as a form of sexual harassment.

In certain restaurants, gay men may in fact intentionally
hassle straight men as an explicit strategy to undermine
their privileged position in society. For example, Trent
(who is openly gay) realizes that heterosexual men are
uncomfortable with his sexuality, and he intentionally
draws attention to his sexuality in order to bother them:

[Interviewer: Homosexuality gets on whose nerves?]

The straight people’s nerves. . . . I know also that we
consiously push it just because we know, “Okay. We
know this is hard for you to get used to but tough luck. I’ve had my whole life trying to live in this
straight world and if you don’t like this, tough shit.” I
don’t mean like we’re shitful to them but it’s like,
“I’ve had to worry about being accepted by straight
people all my life. The shoe’s on the other foot now. If
you don’t like it, sorry.”

[Interviewer: Do you get along well with most of the
waiters?]

I think I get along with straight women. I get along
with gay men. I get along with gay women usually. If
there’s ever going to be a problem between me and
somebody it will be between me and a straight man.

Trent’s efforts to “push” his sexuality could easily be expe-
rrienced as sexual harassment by straight men who have
limited experience negotiating unwanted sexual advances.
The three men who reported being sexually harassed by
gay men seemed genuinely confused about the intentions of

their harassers, and threatened by the possibility that they
would actually be subjected to and harmed by unwanted
sexual advances. But it is important to point out that Trent
works in a restaurant owned by lesbians, which empowers
him to confront his straight male co-workers. Not all
restaurants provide the sort of atmosphere that makes this
type of engagement possible; indeed, some restaurants have
policies explicitly banning the hiring of gays and lesbians.
Clearly, not all gay men would be able to push their sexual-
ity without suffering severe retaliation (e.g., loss of job,
physical attacks).

In contrast to the reports of the straight men in this
study, none of the women interviewed reported sexual
harassment from their gay or lesbian co-workers. Although
Maxine was worried when she found out that one of her co-
workers was lesbian, she claims that this fact no longer
troubles her:

Six months ago I found out that there was a lesbian girl
working there. It kind of freaked me out for a while. I
was kind of aware of everything that she did towards
me. I was conscious if she walked by me and accidentally
brushed up against me. She’s cool. She doesn’t bother
me. She never touches my butt or anything like that.
The gay guys do that to the [straight] guys but they
know they’re just kidding around. The [straight] guys
do that to the [straight] girls, but they don’t care. They
know that they’re not supposed to do that with me. If
they do it, I stop and look at them and they apologize
and they don’t do it anymore. So they stay out of my
way because I’m a meanie (laughs).

Some heterosexual women claimed they feel more com-
fortable working with gay men and lesbians. For example,
Kate prefers working with gay men rather than hetero-
sexual men or women. She claims that she often jokes about
sex with her gay co-workers, yet she does not view them as
potential harassers. Instead, she feels that her working con-
ditions are more comfortable and more fun because she
works with gay men. Similarly, Cathy prefers working with
gay men over straight men because “gay men are a lot like
women in that they’re very sensitive to other people’s
space.” Cathy also works with lesbians, and she claims that
she has never felt sexually harassed by them.

The gays and lesbians in the study did not report any
sexual harassment from their gay and lesbian co-workers.
Laura, who is bisexual, said she preferred to work with
gays and lesbians instead of heterosexuals because they are
“more relaxed” about sex. Brenda said she feels comfort-
able
The possibility that they med by unwanted point out that Trent which empowers workers. Not all things that make this ne restaurants have gays and lesbians. push their sexual—(e.g., loss of job, straight men in this ad reported sexual—workers. Although it that one of her co—this fact no longer re was a lesbian girl me out for a while. I that she did towards my and accidently. She doesn’t bother anything like that, aight] guys but they. The [straight] guys they don’t care. They do that with me. If and they apologize they stay out of my.

Brenda enjoys flirtatious interactions with both men and women at her restaurant, but distinguishes these behaviors from sexual harassment. Likewise, Lynn, who is a lesbian, enjoys the relaxed sexual atmosphere at her workplace. When asked if she ever joked about sex in her workplace, she said:

Yes! (laughs) All the time! All the time— everybody has something that they want to talk about on and it’s got to be funny. We have gays. We have lesbians. We have straights. We have people who are real Christian-oriented. But we all jump in there and we all talk about it. It gets real funny at times… I’ve patted a few butts… and I’ve been patted back by men, and by the women, too! (laughs).

Don and Trent, who are both gay, also said that they had never been sexually harassed in their restaurants, even though both described their restaurants as highly sexualized.

In sum, our interviews suggest that sexual orientation is an important factor in understanding each individual’s experience of sexual harassment and his or her willingness to label interactions as sexual harassment. In particular, straight men may perceive gay men as potential harassers. Three of our straight male respondents claimed to enjoy the sexual banter that commonly occurs among straight men, and between heterosexual men and women, but singled out the sexual advances of gay men as sexual harassment. Their contacts with gay men may be the only context where they feel vulnerable to unwanted sexual encounters. Their sense of not being in control of the situation may make them more willing to label these episodes sexual harassment.

Our findings about sexual orientation are less suggestive regarding women. None of the women (straight, lesbian, or bisexual) reported sexual harassment from other female co-workers or from gay men. In fact, all but one of the women’s reported cases of sexual harassment involved a heterosexual man. One of the two lesbians in the sample (Brenda) did experience sexual harassment from a group of lesbian customers (described earlier), but she claimed that sexual orientation is not key to her defining the situation as harassment. Other studies have shown that lesbian and bisexual women are routinely subjected to sexual harassment in the workplace (Schneider 1982, 1984); however, more research is needed to elaborate the social contexts and the specific definitions of harassment among lesbians.

The Exceptions

Two cases of sexual harassment were related by respondents that do not fit in the categories we have thus far described. These were the only incidents of sexual harassment reported between co-workers of the same race: in both cases, the sexual harasser is a white man, and the victim, a white woman. Laura—who is bisexual—was sexually harassed at a previous restaurant by a cook:

This guy was just constantly badgering me about going out with him. He like grabbed me and took me in the walk— in one time. It was a big deal. He got fired over it too… I was in the back doing something and he said, “I need to talk to you,” and I said, “We have nothing to talk about.” He like took me and threw me against the wall in the back… I ran out and told the manager, “Oh my God. He just hit me,” and he saw the expression on my face. The manager went back there… and then it got fired.

This episode of sexual harassment involved violence, unlike the other reported cases. The threat of violence was also present in the other exception, a case described by Carla. When asked if she had ever been sexually harassed, she said,

I experienced two men, in wait jobs, that were vulgar or offensive and one was a cook and I think he was a rapist. He had the kind of attitude where he would rape a woman. I mean, that’s the kind of attitude he had. He would say totally, totally inappropriate [sexual] things.

These were the only two recounted episodes of sexual harassment between “equal” co-workers that involved white men and women, and both involved violence or the threat of violence.
Schneider (1982, 1991) found the greatest degree of consensus about labeling behavior sexual harassment when that behavior involves violence. A victim of sexual harassment may be more likely to be believed when there is evidence of assault (a situation that is analogous to acquaintance rape). The assumption of reciprocity among homogamous couples may protect assailants with similar characteristics to their victims (e.g., class background, sexual orientation, race/ethnicity, age)—unless there is clear evidence of physical abuse. Defining only those incidents that involve violence as sexual harassment obscures—and perhaps even legitimizes—the more common occurrences that do not involve violence, making it all the more difficult to eradicate sexual harassment from the workplace.

**DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

We have argued that sexual harassment is hard to identify, and thus difficult to eradicate from the workplace, in part because our hegemonic definition of sexuality defines certain contexts of sexual interaction as legitimate. The interviews with white men in Austin, Texas, indicate that how people currently identify sexual harassment singles out only a narrow range of interactions, thus disguising and ignoring a good deal of sexual domination and exploitation that take place at work.

Most of the respondents in this study work in highly sexualized atmospheres where sexual banter and touching frequently occur. There are institutionalized policies and practices in the workplace that encourage—or at the very least tolerate—a continual display and performance of heterosexuality. Many people apparently accept this ritual display as being a normal or natural feature of their work; some even enjoy this behavior. In the in-depth interviews, respondents labeled such experiences as sexual harassment in only three contexts: when perpetrated by someone who took advantage of their powerful position for personal sexual gain; when the perpetrator was of a different race/ethnicity than the victim—typically a minority man harassing a white woman; and when the perpetrator was of a different sexual orientation than the victim—typically a gay man harassing a straight man. In only two cases did respondents label experiences involving co-workers of the same race and sexual orientation as sexual harassment—and both episodes involved violence or the threat of violence.

These findings are based on a very small sample in a unique working environment, and hence it is not clear whether they are generalizable to other work settings. In less sexualized working environments, individuals may be more likely to label all offensive sexual advances as sexual harassment, whereas in more highly sexualized environments (such as topless clubs or striptease bars), fewer sexual advances may be labeled sexual harassment. Our findings do suggest that researchers should pay closer attention to the interaction context of sexual harassment, taking into account not only gender but also the race, occupational status, and sexual orientation of the assailant and the victim.

Of course, it should not matter who is perpetrating the sexual harassing behavior: sexual harassment should not be tolerated under any circumstances. But if members of oppressed groups (racial/ethnic minority men and gay men) are selectively charged with sexual harassment, whereas members of the most privileged groups are exonerated and excused (except in cases where institutionalized power or violence are used), then the patriarchal order is left intact. This is very similar to the problem of rape prosecution: minority men are the most likely assailants to be arrested and prosecuted, particularly when they attack white women (LaFree 1989). Straight white men who sexually assault women (in the context of marriage, dating, or even work) may escape prosecution because of hegemonic definitions of “acceptable” or “legitimate” sexual expression. Likewise, as we have witnessed in the current debate on gays in the military, straight men’s fears of sexual harassment justify the exclusion of gay men and lesbians, whereas sexual harassment perpetrated by straight men against both straight and lesbian women is tolerated and even endorsed by the military establishment, as in the Tailhook investigation (Britton and Williams, forthcoming). By singling out these contexts for the label “sexual harassment,” only marginalized men will be prosecuted, and the existing power structure that guarantees privileged men’s sexual access to women will remain intact.

Sexual interactions involving men and women of the same race and sexual orientation have a hegemonic status in our society, making sexual harassment difficult to identify and eradicate. Our interviews suggest that many men and women are active participants in the sexualized culture of the workplace, even though ample evidence indicates that women who work in these environments suffer negative repercussions to their careers because of it (Jaschik and Fretz 1991; Paludi and Barickman 1991; Reilly et al. 1992; Schneider 1982). This is how cultural hegemony works—by getting under our skins and defining what is and is not permissible to us, despite our material or emotional interests.

Our findings raise difficult issues about women’s complicity with oppressive sexual relationships. Some women obviously experience pleasure and enjoyment from public forms of sexual engagement with men; clearly, many would resist any attempt to eradicate all sexuality from work—an
impossible goal at any rate. Yet, it is also clear that the sexual "pleasure" many women seek out and enjoy at work is structured by a hierarchical, racist, and heterosexist norms. Heterosexual, racially privileged relationships are privileged in our society: they are institutionalized in organizational policies and job descriptions, embedded in ritualistic workplace practices, and accepted as legitimate, normal, or inevitable elements of workplace culture. This study suggests that only those sexual interactions that violate these policies, practices, and beliefs are resisted and condemned with the label "sexual harassment."

1. It could be the case that those who find this behavior extremely offensive are likely to leave restaurant work. In other words, the sample is clearly biased in that it includes only those who are currently employed in a restaurant and presumably feel more comfortable with the level of sexualized behavior than those who have left restaurant work.

2. It is difficult, if not impossible, to specify which occupations are less highly sexualized than waiting tables. Most occupations probably are sexualized in one way or another; however, specific workplaces may be more or less sexualized in terms of institutionalized job descriptions and employee tolerance of sexual banter. For example, Pringle (1988) describes some offices as coolly professional—with minimal sexual joking and play—whereas others are characterized by "compulsory jocularity." Likewise, some restaurants may de-emphasize sexual flirtation between waitstaff and customers, and restrain informal interactions among the staff (one respondent in our sample worked at such a restaurant).

3. We thank Margaret Andersen for drawing our attention to this fruitful analogy.

4. It is also probably significant that this episode of harassment involved a gay man and a heterosexual man. This context of sexual harassment is discussed later in this article.

5. It is true that both cases involved cooks sexually harassing waitresses. We could have placed these cases in the "powerful position" category, but did not because in these particular instances, the cooks did not possess institutionalized power over the waitresses. In other words, in these particular cases, the cook and waitress had equal organizational status in the restaurant.

REFERENCES


Families are developing a sense of belonging to a group of people, a sense of identity, and a sense of place in the world. We are defining ourselves by our relationships with others, and these relationships are becoming more complex and diverse. As we move through life, we develop a sense of identity and a sense of belonging that is shaped by our experiences and by the people in our lives. This sense of belonging is important because it helps us to understand our place in the world and to feel connected to others. It is through these relationships that we develop a sense of self and a sense of purpose.

It is worth noting that the development of a sense of belonging is not just a personal experience. It is also a social experience, in which we are influenced by the people around us and by the culture in which we live. This is particularly true for children, who are often exposed to a variety of influences from different sources, including their families, their schools, and their communities. It is through these influences that children develop a sense of identity and a sense of belonging that is shaped by their experiences and by the people in their lives.