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## *Sexual Harassment: A Discursive Approach*

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The term 'sexual harassment' is both a triumph and a problem for feminism. A triumph because the phrase, invented in the mid-1970s by North American feminists (Farley, 1978; MacKinnon, 1979), seems to describe and label an experience common to most women, and so enables us to identify and organize against this form of male violence. One of the earliest to use and publicize the term was Lin Farley (1978) in *Sexual Shakedown*: she identified a form of male behaviour in the workplace which, she said, 'required a name and sexual harassment seemed to come about as close to symbolizing the problem as the language would permit'. Before the 1970s, then, the label didn't exist and the behaviour it identified was 'just part of life' – a problem without a name. The term 'sexual harassment' is a word invented as part of women's renaming of the world, reflecting and constructing *women's* experience and labelling a form of behaviour newly recognized as something which women need not passively endure, but can actively protest against, and resist.

Since the 1970s, there has been a wide range of surveys documenting the incidence of sexual harassment and testifying to its frequency and pervasiveness. Many public bodies and institutions world-wide now regard 'sexual harassment' as a serious cause for concern, and have formulated specific codes of practice and grievance procedures to deal with it. 'Sexual harassment' is now deemed illegal in British law, in so far as it can be construed as an act of sexual discrimination under the provisions of the 1975 Sex Discrimination Act (the first successful case, *Porcelli v. Strathclyde Regional Council*, reached the Employment Appeal Tribunal in 1986); and in 1991, following a report by Rubenstein (1987), the European Economic Community issued a Recommendation and Code of Conduct on Sexual Harassment (Lester, 1993). The 'triumph' lies, then, in the extent to which organizations have been forced to take on board, and to incorporate into their policies and codes of conduct, concerns initially raised by feminists.

But the term 'sexual harassment' is not an unalloyed success story for feminist theory and practice. First, effective as the label 'sexual harassment' has been in drawing attention to the problem of sexualized male power, there is considerable evidence that the codes of conduct and policies designed to prevent the behaviour so labelled are less effective than had been hoped. The majority of UK and North American surveys of workplace harassment indicate that around 50 per cent of all women report experiencing sexual harassment in their workplace (for example, Alfred Marks Bureau, 1982; Canadian Human Rights Commission, 1983; Industrial Society, 1993). Moreover, many of those women who identify their experiences as 'sexual harassment' are unwilling to take action against their employers, or to use the policies designed to ameliorate their situation, believing (often correctly) that they will suffer further as a result (see, for example, Name Withheld, 1992).

Second, despite decades of work surrounding sexual harassment issues, surveys repeatedly find that many women are uncertain as to which behaviours properly qualify as 'sexual harassment', and are unwilling to label male behaviour in this way. For example, whereas 49 per cent of the women interviewed in a study carried out by the Canadian Human Rights Commission reported one or more instances of 'unwanted sexual attention', only 30 per cent of them (that is, 15 per cent of the total number of women interviewed) identified their experience as 'sexual harassment'. Had the only question asked been 'Have you ever experienced sexual harassment?', the number of positive responses would have provided a serious underestimate of the actual number of women suffering 'unwanted sexual attention' – a phrase commonly used as a definition of sexual harassment (for example, in Herbert, 1989). While most women can describe incidents they personally experience as sexual harassment, there are huge areas of disagreement between women about which behaviours the term legitimately covers.

Third, given that the term 'sexual harassment' is a word invented as part of women's renaming of the world, it is perhaps not surprising that men seem to be less ready to identify actions or situations as constituting sexual harassment. Women consistently define more experiences as sexual harassment than do men, and the factor which most consistently predicts variation in people's identification of what constitutes sexual harassment is the sex of the rater (see, for example, the overview by Riger, 1991). Overall, men tend to label fewer behaviours as sexual harassment (Kenig and Ryan, 1968; Powell, 1986) and, in particular, are less likely to see behaviours such as sexual teasing, looks or gestures as harassment (Collins and Blodgett, 1981; Adams et al., 1983). In sum, the term 'sexual harassment' is subject to

different interpretations both within and across the sexes, and these different interpretations account, in part, for the problems associated with the development of effective policies and procedures to deal with the behaviour.

Researchers and policy-makers in the area of sexual harassment are well aware of the difficulties associated with clearly defining their topic of concern. It is generally agreed that 'there is no universally accepted definition of sexual harassment' (Aggarwal, 1987). As Gruber (1992) comments, 'despite the pervasiveness of the problem and the considerable number of studies that have been published over the last decade and a half, there is nevertheless substantial confusion over definitions of sexual harassment'. The positivist literature on sexual harassment, feminist and non-feminist alike, continues to describe cases of 'sexual harassment', to document the scope of 'the problem', to develop improved codes of practice, and to demand changes in institutional policy. It shares an assumption that the concept of 'sexual harassment' is – in and of itself – unproblematic. The concept may need to be more clearly defined; women and men may need to be educated about its 'real' definition and meaning, its negative consequences, and how to act so as to prevent its occurrence; and institutions may need to develop, implement and monitor better policies and codes of practice; but the concept of sexual harassment itself is not rendered problematic, nor subjected to sustained analysis.

From a positivist perspective, then, the solution to the 'problem' of confused or conflicting understandings of 'sexual harassment' is seen to lie in clearer policies, more draconian penalties for breaching them, and in the development of working definitions of sexual harassment and typologies which operationalize these definitions into mutually exclusive and exhaustive empirical categories of harassment. So, for example, Gruber (1992) reviews the research literature and derives from it three general forms and eleven distinct categories of sexual harassment, concluding with the suggestion that 'these categories could . . . be used in surveys to derive a more general understanding of harassment frequencies and correlates'.

Many feminists welcome as politically advantageous the kinds of clear definitions offered by positivist researchers. As Gruber (1992) points out, such definitions enable us accurately to answer questions such as 'How many women have experienced harassment?' and also to 'provide the courts or policy makers with clear and concise information'. Some feminist researchers have denied that there is any real confusion about definitions of sexual harassment, describing any apparent uncertainty as part of a male strategy of oppression. According to the authors of a study on harassment in academia

(Dziech and Weiner, 1984: 18), sexual harassment 'is not, in the vast majority of cases, ambiguous behaviour': some men simply 'find it convenient to make sexual harassment a confusing topic' and the confusion is often 'transparent pretence'. In parallel manner, women who resist using the term 'sexual harassment', or who hesitate in applying it to their own experiences, have sometimes been treated with exasperation by feminists – as dupes of patriarchy, unable to recognize their own oppression and in dire need of having their consciousnesses raised. According to this type of positivist feminist argument, questions about definitions are seen as diversionary tactics, distracting attention away from male abuses on to abstract philosophical concerns or trivial issues, undermining feminist and trade union campaigns to stop sexual harassment.

Whereas the positivist approach sees differing definitions of sexual harassment as a problem for research design and policy implementation (how, after all, do you assess the incidence and frequency of sexual harassment if people can't agree on what sexual harassment is?), the discourse analytic approach, by contrast, sees the failure to establish universally accepted definitions of sexual harassment not (purely) as a Machiavellian male plot, nor simply as a technical problem for research design, but rather as a research topic in its own right. A discourse analytic approach to sexual harassment enables us to address precisely that which is assumed and that which is obscured in positivist research: that is, questions about the social construction of sexual harassment, and the ways in which it is discursively defined and maintained, ignored or minimized. Language does not simply reflect a pre-existing reality; it is not a transparent medium through which unchanging 'facts' or 'accurate' definitions are conveyed. Rather, through language, we actively construct our experience – a simple claim that lies at the basis of discourse analytic research. Sexual harassment is socially constructed and discursively negotiated. This is not to say that it is not 'real'. It *is* to say that its reality is in large part constituted by language, and by the symbolic meanings we attach to parts of our bodies and to male/female interactions, and by the ways in which we interpret social reality.

The research reported here explores the way in which 'sexual harassment' is constructed through discourse, and, in particular, the mechanisms through which the erasure of sexual harassment (by both women and men) is accomplished. We conducted semi-structured tape-recorded interviews with six men and fifteen women. Since the specific purpose of these interviews was to elicit discourse about ambiguities in the very concept of sexual harassment, and we were not concerned with reporting its incidence, we did not seek a 'random sample' but rather recruited participants primarily on the basis of

their willingness to spent time discussing this topic. Interviewees ranged in age from twenty to sixty-five, and included middle-class and working-class, white, Asian and Afro-Caribbean participants. Interviewees were given a written version of the key questions several days before the interview. These questions read as follows:

- 1 Please describe a *typical* example of sexual harassment from your own experience. What made it typical? What does the term 'sexual harassment' mean to you?
- 2 Can you think of an incident which you didn't think was sexual harassment at the time, but now, looking back, you think that's what it was?
- 3 Can you think of an incident which you thought was sexual harassment at the time, but now, looking back, you realize it wasn't?
- 4 Can you think of an incident which, at the time, you weren't sure whether or not it was sexual harassment, and now, looking back, you're still not sure about?
- 5 Can you think of a time when something happened and you thought it was sexual harassment, but someone else didn't?
- 6 Can you think of a time when something happened and you didn't think it was sexual harassment, but someone else did?

Interviews were transcribed orthographically by the authors and we have reported various aspects of our findings elsewhere (Thomas and Kitzinger, 1994). In this chapter we focus on the denial of sexual harassment, that is, on discourses which explain why the label 'sexual harassment' is (or was) an inappropriate label for a particular incident. Our interest is not whether a particular incident is, or is not, 'really' sexual harassment, but rather the discursive mechanisms through which incidents and experiences are actively excluded from the category of 'sexual harassment'. We draw attention to the different ways in which our male and female participants construct these denials, and relate our findings to contemporary writing on sexual harassment in the media and in popular books.

### Victimhood

Most women we interviewed were able to describe events which they had labelled 'sexual harassment' only in retrospect, and a common reason given for initially refusing the label was a rejection of victim status. In striking contrast with these women's accounts, none of the men we interviewed explicitly rejected the 'victim' label in describing experiences of sexual harassment. Men, whether describing being accused of sexual harassment, or whether describing their experience

on the receiving end of sexual harassment, tended to emphasize their own 'victim' role.

One woman participant describes experiences which took place at her boarding school when she was in her late teens:

Boys will be boys, you know. There were times when they put broomsticks between their legs and made holes in my study unit with the broomstick handles, and there was sexual innuendo about 'invading Wendy's hole'. I don't think I would have called it sexual harassment. I see now that it was sexual harassment, but when you're in a situation in which nobody else labels it that way, you get persuaded into their way of thinking, that it's 'only a bit of fun'. When we went sailing, they took Anna's bra off and hoisted it up the mast, and there was no one else would've called that sexual harassment. I'd've been looked at really strangely and they'd've thought I was off the rails if I'd've called it that. Sexual harassment meant someone wanting to go to bed with you, and they'd've said, 'Ha ha, there's no way we'd want to go to bed with you, Wendy.'

Another woman describes working as a barmaid, pawed and leered at by 'lecherous men':

I just felt that it couldn't really be bad enough to be sexual harassment, because everyone else put up with it. I think I saw it as something in me that I must be oversensitive to it. And now I don't think *I'm* oversensitive: I think *they're* overintrusive. (Laura)

It is hard to see what either of these women had to gain by labelling their experiences as sexual harassment at the time, in situations in which no one would have supported their perceptions. In fact, both were quite explicit about having decided to avoid defining their experience as sexual harassment:

If I imagined that it was sexual, it made me feel nasty. If they weren't just putting their arms around me in a friendly way, if there was more to it than that, it made me feel horrible. So I tried to dismiss it from my mind. It was mainly for my own benefit that I didn't label it. It would've made me feel horrible if I'd carried on doing the job and letting myself stay in a situation where that was happening. So I told myself it wasn't happening to make it easier to stay in the job. (Laura)

I couldn't have got away from them. I was stuck at the school. So I didn't want to see it as sexual harassment because if you're in a situation you can't get away from you'd rather defuse the situation, and you do that by labelling it in personal terms – like 'this is just Bloggs having fun'. If I'd labelled it sexual harassment I'd have had to feel really angry and hurt

and upset and distressed, and those were all the feelings I was trying *not* to have. (Wendy)

Both Wendy and Laura, then, seem to have been making a rational choice *not* to label their experiences as sexual harassment: they were coping with their situations by refusing to acknowledge what was happening. While the label 'sexual harassment' obviously offers survival strategies for some women in some situations, in other circumstances it labels too clearly, and too painfully, the extent of their oppression. As Laura said, 'It's labelling yourself a victim'.

Other women expressed similar views:

I think I sometimes don't label it because you have more emotional freedom that way. I feel more liberated if I *don't* think of someone else as harassing me. You're defining your own oppression. The word 'harassment' is sort of setting yourself up as an object. (Dipti)

I have this idea that if I refuse to acknowledge it as sexual harassment, then it's *not* sexual harassment, because I'm refusing to relate on those terms. And by ignoring it, that means he's not going to get the benefit of knowing that I'm scared. (Rita)

I just refused to see what was happening because I wanted to insist on my own rights as an academic. I wanted to see our conversation as an academic discussion, so I insisted to myself that's what was happening – which, at one level, it was. But by refusing to acknowledge the other level until it was too late, I nearly got myself raped. (Barbara)

I know this is going to sound daft, but I'm the sort of person who is known to stand up for herself and her rights. If I was sexually harassed, I would be expected to . . . I would expect *myself* to direct complaints down all the appropriate channels and bring my harasser to justice. I know I would have to do that – I couldn't allow myself to be harassed and not kick up a fuss about it. I've never occupied the passive victim role! Now, when I think of what is involved in taking a sexual harassment case to an industrial tribunal – the hours it would take, the commitment and energy it would need – I just know I don't want to do that. So I have a huge vested interest in *not* seeing myself as having been sexually harassed. If I'm honest, I think there's a sense in which I can't afford to notice that I'm being sexually harassed, because the consequences would be too horrific. (Eve)

The term 'sexual harassment' describes female subordination. When women say, to themselves or to other people, 'I am *not* being sexually harassed', one of the things they are saying is, 'I am *not* a victim. I am *not* a subordinated person'. Unable to change the situation they are in, women gain what little power they can by insisting on defining that situation in their own terms. Women who 'make a joke of it' or 'play along' succeed in avoiding the blatant demonstration of their own victimhood: they are 'choosing' what would otherwise be forced

upon them. They, like women who simply try to ignore sexual harassment, can also, of course, be accused of encouraging it. There are costs attached to rejecting the 'sexual harassment' label – costs potentially as severe as the costs of accepting it. All women can do is decide in any given situation whether the label is likely to be in their own interests or not – and decisions made on the basis of personal interest may or may not be in the interests of women as a group.

The whole concept of so-called 'victim feminism' has been criticized in the media and in popular books which suggest that in its concern about rape, sexual harassment, and male violence against women, feminism has positioned women as victims. Reflecting on the Supreme Court case between Judge Clarence Thomas and Professor Anita Hill, journalist Chrissy Iley (1991) complains that 'Hill has turned every woman into a victim incapable of fighting her own corner', and writer Naomi Wolf (1993: 205) has said that 'we must be wary of new definitions of sexual harassment that leave no mental space to imagine girls and women as sexual explorers and renegades'. Women's unwillingness to present themselves as victims is clearly a feature of their refusal to use the 'sexual harassment' label.

### Pervasiveness

The question of definition is closely tied in with the issue of the pervasiveness of sexual harassment: obviously, the more inclusive the definition, the greater the frequency of incidents which can be logged. One man described how very rare sexual harassment was in his experience.

*Robert:* In more than thirty years in higher education I've only ever come across one case.

*Celia:* Does that surprise you?

*Robert:* No. No, it doesn't surprise me. I've only ever managed universities or international organizations, and I suppose both are more civilized than some institutions, and people are more considerate, and possibly more controlled, than in some other places.

*Celia:* What sort of other places?

*Robert:* Oh, I don't know. . . . Places like cotton mills. . . . The university sent round some piece of paper about sexual harassment, but I didn't read it. I didn't think it was needed in our organization.

*Celia:* Other people say they've seen lots of sexual harassment: why do you think that is?

*Robert:* Well, people of your generation seem to complain of it more than people of my generation. I think manners have got worse. Some of us were brought up to be polite to people and to think there are

things you do, and things you don't do. So I think it's partly a generation problem, and partly a class problem.

*Celia:* A class problem?

*Robert:* Well, a working-class problem.

*Celia:* You think there's more sexual harassment in the working classes?

*Robert:* Must be. I mean, there's a lot of talk about sexual harassment, and I don't see it amongst my own class, so it must be happening in other classes.

In a survey conducted by the National Union of Students (NUS) amongst students at the elite academic institution to which this male interviewee is referring, 61 per cent of female students claimed to have experienced sexual harassment, and a college Women's Officer is quoted as saying:

My main anxiety is that what I call sexual harassment is just an accepted part of the social life in college. When I try to define it, people say, 'that's ridiculous – it goes on all the time!' *Well exactly!* (Watts, 1990)

In contrast to the male interviewees, many of the women who spoke to us described sexual harassment as a pervasive feature of social interaction between men and women:

Retrospectively I understand that *all* of my sexual interactions with boys and young men as a child and as a teenager . . . *all* of those I define, in retrospect, as sexual harassment. It was the pressure to go further than you wanted to go – the assumption of access. I remember the first time my boyfriend kissed me, and really disliking it, and thinking I was going to choke . . . And just thinking . . . It really did come into my head . . . 'I asked for this . . . this was what I wanted.' And he didn't have to say *anything*. It was just scripted in my head that made me not go 'ugh!' You know, I actually got used to it, and liked it afterwards, but this first experience I felt to be very intrusive and very insensitive and, you know . . . yuk. (Jackie)

Some feminist theorists have suggested that *all* social and sexual interactions between female and male are forms of sexual harassment, and that the term 'sexual harassment' itself is politically problematic, because the concept of sexual harassment (coercive and power-maintaining sexual behaviour) relies upon the possibility of non-coercive and egalitarian heterosexual relationships. It implicitly assumes that there are conditions under which women can voluntarily assent, of our own free will, to sexual activity with men, and that this sexual activity will not establish or perpetuate power differentials (see Holloway, this volume). In a world in which women are controlled by 'the institution of compulsory heterosexuality' (Rich, 1980), these conditions for voluntary and non-coercive

heterosex are hard to imagine (but see the contributors to Wilkinson and Kitzinger, 1993).

Discursive moves like these which make sexual harassment very pervasive – an almost inevitable part of social relationships between women and men – were firmly resisted by most of our male interviewees. As one man said:

Some women have such a broad notion of sexual harassment that even talking to a woman, or holding a door open for her, is sexual harassment. Well, that's just silly. You can't define everything that happens between men and women as sexual harassment. Sexual harassment has got to be sort of at the far end of a continuum of coercion – well, rape's at the far end and sexual harassment is somewhere in the middle. Things that happen all the time between men and women, those can't be called sexual harassment. (James)

In much of the discourse we collected from men (and from some heterosexual women), sexual harassment, because it is seen as a problem, was defined as clearly separable from 'normal', ordinary, taken-for-granted social relationships between men and women – and, in particular, as clearly distinguishable from 'consensual' heterosexual relationships. The logic of this discourse demands that if anything is pervasive in Western culture, if it is a taken-for-granted aspect of social life, then it cannot, by definition, be a problem. Therefore, it cannot be sexual harassment ('You can't define everything that happens between men and women as sexual harassment') – because, in this discourse, everyday life is not problematized. What in (some) women's discourse is seen as 'everyday dripping tap sexual harassment' (Wise and Stanley, 1987) is, in this discourse, not sexual harassment at all. It has to be 'at the far end of a continuum of coercion' to be sexual harassment. It is a logical extension of this line of reasoning for a judge to rule that sexually explicit language and pornographic posters displayed in an office do not amount to sexual harassment 'when considered in the context of a society that condones and publicly features and commercially exploits open displays of written and pictorial erotica' (cited in the *Guardian*, 15 March 1988). Thus the very same feature of sexual harassment, its sheer pervasiveness, can be used both (by, for example, feminists) to stress the importance of acting to stop it, *and* (by for example, the male interviewee and judge cited above) to discount its existence.

The final twist in this discourse about sexual harassment comes with the claim that, if sexual harassment is not very common, then there is no need to act. A male business administration dean says:

If it's an 80–90 per cent problem, then we have to do something, but if it's say, only a 7 per cent problem, I would give it less priority. (Quoted in Dziech and Weiner, 1984: 15)

Given that many men discount any definition of sexual harassment which makes it a '90 per cent problem', the double bind is this: if it's commonplace, it isn't really sexual harassment; if it's rare, then it isn't really a problem. It has to be rare to be real; but if it's rare, then there's no need to worry about it.

In sum, then, feminist discourse on sexual harassment has drawn attention to its pervasiveness ('it happens all the time'), and this is reflected in the discourse offered by many women who spoke to us. The discursive move which then functions to annihilate sexual harassment goes something like this: if it happens all the time, if it's a regular feature of social relations between men and women, if it is inherent in heterosexual relationships, if it's utterly pervasive in society, then it *isn't* sexual harassment: it can't be, because sexual harassment is – by definition – a problem, and we can't render problematic the whole of our society. Sexual harassment, according to this discourse, is a discrete, clearly definable, manageable and separable part of social life which can be eradicated by means of institutional policies and procedures while leaving the social structure otherwise intact.

### Sexualizing

One explanation that has been offered for the apparent intractability of sexual harassment is differences in social perception. According to this theory, men perceive more 'sexiness' in the social behaviour of women than do women: women are (without knowing it) behaving in ways men interpret as provocative (Abbey, 1982). Implicit in this theory is the idea that sexual harassment is caused by, or related to, a man's sexual attraction to the woman he is harassing. It would, of course, be possible to define sexual harassment in such a way that it could only be said to have taken place if the male harasser was, in fact, sexually attracted to his victim, and some of our male interviewees did just this. Sexual harassment was identified by most of the men we interviewed in terms of some underlying sexual interest on the part of the harasser:

Sexual harassment is trying to get a woman into bed with you after she's made it clear she doesn't want to. It's not taking no for an answer. (Fred)

My definition of sexual harassment would be people pressing unwanted attentions on someone else with a view to carnal collaboration when it has been made clear that these are unwelcome. (Robert)

Some men explained that this sexual interest may be unconscious:

*Chris:* Well, it might be something to do with hormones but . . . well, like it or not, I think that . . . whether you, I mean I, like it or not, I'd like to put forward a belief that . . . that adolescents, because of pubertal changes, are much more prone to that sort of thing, particularly when they're sexually naive, as in this case.

*Alison:* You're not going to say that men have a sort of drive to sexually harass women – or are you?

*Chris:* On an unconscious level, yes. If you go through puberty not knowing about sexual relationships (which most people do) and then you find yourself attracted to women, yet unable to recognize that as an attraction, then you're more likely in those circumstances to channel your sexual attraction through ways which are potentially pathological but defensive.

*Alison:* Like?

*Chris:* Well, I always used to tease women or girls . . . I'm talking about when I was thirteen now . . . I always teased the girls that I fancied, but I'd never admit to myself that I fancied them and that was what I was doing . . . I was immature, as I think most boys are at that age.

When sexual harassment is defined in terms of sexual interest, it opens the way for men to talk, not just about their hormones, their sexual drives and their uncontrollable urges, but also about the difficulty of knowing whether or not a woman is willing, and how to tell in a culture in which men are supposed to take the initiative.

It's a big problem, because quite often, if I haven't taken the initiative, nothing happens. I've found it quite equal between men and women at a friendship level, but when the relationship changes from friendly to sexual, it's been mainly up to me. (Andrew)

Sometimes women give out sexual messages non-verbally, but then when you make it explicit they claim that's not what they wanted. I don't think that's sexual harassment – it's just mixed messages. (James)

Many women, by contrast, were explicit in stating that the events they were describing as sexual harassment were not sexual *per se*. One woman responded to the interviewer's question about her experiences 'What made it sexual harassment?' like this:

It was sexual harassment although there was no sexual thing, because he was employing his masculinity against me because I wasn't male. It wasn't sexual in the sense that, you know, if I'd dropped my knickers that would have solved it. That wasn't what he was after. (Teresa)

Another participant used, as illustration of the fact that sexual harassment 'isn't always about sex', her experience of sexual harassment from a gay man:

I was with Dave and Tony, who are both gay, and Tony went out saying 'I'll leave you two alone together'. Dave raised his eyebrows and said archly to Tony, 'Well, there's an offer I can't refuse.' I saw that as sexual harassment, and of course it was nothing to do with his sexual attraction to me: it was male bonding, with me used as glue. (Carol)

Women's complaints of sexual harassment are seen as being off-target (or even self-congratulatory) by those who construct sexual harassment as rooted in sexual attraction. The man who is not sexually attracted protests his innocence:

I didn't intend any sexual invitation. I thought it was a friendly compliment. So I don't see how it can have been sexual harassment. (Fred)

More indignant males, subject to accusations of sexual harassment which they read as allegations of their sexual attraction to the woman concerned, respond with phrases like 'Fancy yourself, don't you?' or 'You should be so lucky!' But from some women's point of view:

Most situations of sexual harassment are nothing to do with sex. I mean, that suggests that if women said, 'Take me, I'm yours', the problem would be dealt with. I don't think that's true. I think most men would be horrified if the woman they were sexually harassing turned round and said, 'Okay, let's go to bed'. The whole point of what he's doing is that he knows she doesn't want sex with him. (Mary)

In sum, the question of whether or not 'sexual harassment' is, by definition, 'sexual' – and what we mean by 'sexual' – is contested. For many people (especially, it seems, for men) sexual harassment without sexual attraction doesn't count as the real thing.

### Power

As some of the quotes from women in the preceding section illustrate, sexual harassment is often discussed primarily in terms of power, and *this is part of the definition of sexual harassment*. It is not just that sexual harassment happens because men have power and women don't: more fundamentally, sexual harassment is itself a way of 'doing' power:

I think they do it . . . for power over somebody, to show their mates that they're somebody, they're one of the lads. I think sex is one way you get power over somebody else if you're a man. (John)

Sexual harassment seems to me to be about ownership and control. It's a man saying, 'Your body belongs to me. I have the right to ogle and grope

you, and you have to put up with it.' And it's a way of saying to other men, 'Look what I possess.' It's to do with power. (Tina)

Campaigns against sexual harassment have also stated very clearly that sexual harassment is to do with establishing and maintaining male power.

As with rape, sexual harassment is not a sexually motivated act. It is an assertion of hostility and/or power expressed in a sexual manner. (Alliance Against Sexual Coercion, 1981: 17)

Lesbian sociologists Sue Wise and Liz Stanley (1987: 64) make the same point: sexual harassment, they say 'may sometimes involve "sexual" behaviours of one kind or another, but this "sexual" is the means to an end and not an end in itself. Power is the desired element involved; and females and sex are merely means of enabling them to "do power".'

There is a central irony here. Women say: it was about power, it was sexual harassment. Men say: it was about power, therefore it *wasn't* sexual harassment. In many men's discourse, sexual harassment is about sex, and sex has nothing to do with power. Several men explained that women misunderstand the situation:

I think women often don't realize that it's not basically sexual; it's to do with power and status. A young attractive woman has a very high status among men – they know that this cute young thing is the sort of thing movie stars are willing to risk their fortunes over. Her status is way above that of the balding forty-five year old man in our looks- and sex-based society. It isn't really sex he's after – the aim is to bring her down a peg or two, so I wouldn't call it sexual harassment. (James)

Harriet said it was sexual harassment, but I still don't see it as sexual harassment. I would class it as being a status-related thing. It was a status thing, not a sexual thing. (Fred)

They do it as part of the power relations between boys and girls in school or wherever. . . . I wouldn't really call it sexual harassment. (Chris)

These men, then, are explaining women's experience of sexual harassment in terms of power: 'the aim is to bring her down a peg or two'; 'it was a status thing, not a sexual thing'; 'part of the power relations between boys and girls'. It isn't to do with sex; it is to do with power. *And therefore it isn't sexual harassment.*

### The advantages of a discursive perspective for feminism

To sum up, we have explored four discursive mechanisms through which the erasure of sexual harassment is achieved. The first of these is most commonly used by our female participants: the refusal of



victimhood ('I can't have been sexually harassed because I'm not a victim'). The remaining three, while available as discursive moves to women, seem more often to be used by our male participants. These involve (i) the claim that frequently occurring, taken-for-granted behaviours comprising 'normal' or 'natural' social interaction between men and women cannot count as sexual harassment; (ii) the claim that only behaviours motivated by sexual desire, with the goal of sexual intercourse, can count as sexual harassment; and (iii) the claim that behaviours the primary aim of which is to assert power and dominance are not fundamentally sexual and cannot count as sexual harassment. These strategies together work a form of magic – and with the sleight of hand of a vaudeville conjurer, sexual harassment simply disappears by definitional fiat.

Positivist researchers (feminist and non-feminist alike) have expended a great deal of time and energy on the attempt to devise watertight definitions of sexual harassment. We have argued here that these are largely futile. From a discursive perspective, the assertion of one construction of reality over another is one of the techniques employed by any dominant group in order to maintain its position of power (Berger and Luckmann, 1967). In the examples cited above, everyday discourse functions to render insignificant or invisible precisely those actions which feminist discourse constructs as routine instances of sexual harassment. As Collinson and Collinson (1992) point out:

An uncritical belief in the power of either codes of practice or employment legislation to change attitudes and practices on sexual harassment reflects a highly mechanistic, non-sociological understanding of organisations. The complex *social* relations and practices of organisations cannot be reduced to narrow, legally constructed and/or formally defined rules of conduct.

What is needed instead is an understanding and deconstruction of the discursive techniques used to render sexual harassment invisible or non-existent, and an understanding of how it is that the 'victims' of sexual harassment are themselves complicit in this process.

At a time of backlash against feminism, when feminist gains are being attacked as 'political correctness' and when students at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, acting for 'freedom of speech', burned copies of the sixty-eight-page booklet *Dealing with Harassment at MIT*, which they described as 'a total abrogation of free expression' (Davies, 1994), we cannot, even if we wanted to, impose a single 'right-on' feminist definition of sexual harassment. Charges of exaggeration, oversimplification, inadequacy or inflexibility beset any such attempts. Nor do such definitions enable us to understand the complexities of recent widely publicized cases, such

as the accusations and rebuttals of sexual harassment at Simon's Rock College in Massachusetts (Botstein, 1990), or the accusations of sexual harassment by two lesbian graduate students against feminist theorist and literary critic Jane Gallop (Talbot, 1994). As feminists striving to understand and to tackle abuses of power, we need to understand the mechanisms through which incidents and experiences are constructed as or actively excluded from the category of 'sexual harassment', and to develop a more sophisticated understanding of the complexities within which the definition and discursive management of 'sexual harassment' is enmeshed.

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## 3

## *'What is it?' Masculinity and Femininity in Cultural Representations of Childhood*

*Erica Burman*

What is it? Well, I know it's a baby. The question, of course, is whether it's a boy or a girl, and the persistence of this question flies in the face of many a firm commitment to antisexist practices. It withstands the conviction that gender is not somehow fully emergent or functioning from birth, and even that gender demarcations are, or should be, irrelevant to the early psychological life of infants. The first, obvious reason why this question spills out of my mouth is that this is the conventional question to ask; it constitutes the 'appropriate' response to a new birth. Secondly, cultural practices for marking and constructing gender go way beyond the pink and blue, to enter into interpretations of foetal movements in the womb, or of the polaroid print-outs from the ultrasound scans, as in the declaration of mothers-to-be that 'He's waving at me'. But more than this, given the highly gender-divided and stratified nature of social practices, establishing if 'it's' a boy or a girl is relevant to knowing how to deal with, interpret, come to terms with this new addition to humanity. It reflects how, within current social arrangements, gender is central to our definitions of human subjectivity. To treat a baby as gender-neutral, as an 'it' rather than a 'he' or a 'she', therefore, is tantamount to denying its (or perhaps I should say his or her) humanity.

I open with this example to highlight how there is a certain ambivalence within our resistance to gendering babies, and perhaps children too. In this paper I want to explore a range of cultural representations of children, and to consider the significance of the gendered associations these hold. My emphasis will be on the varieties of, and tensions between, these differing gendered representations. I am going to evaluate something of the significance of the ways gender representations enter into contemporary discussions in the UK of children and childhood. The implications of these extend beyond how we look at and treat children. I will be suggesting

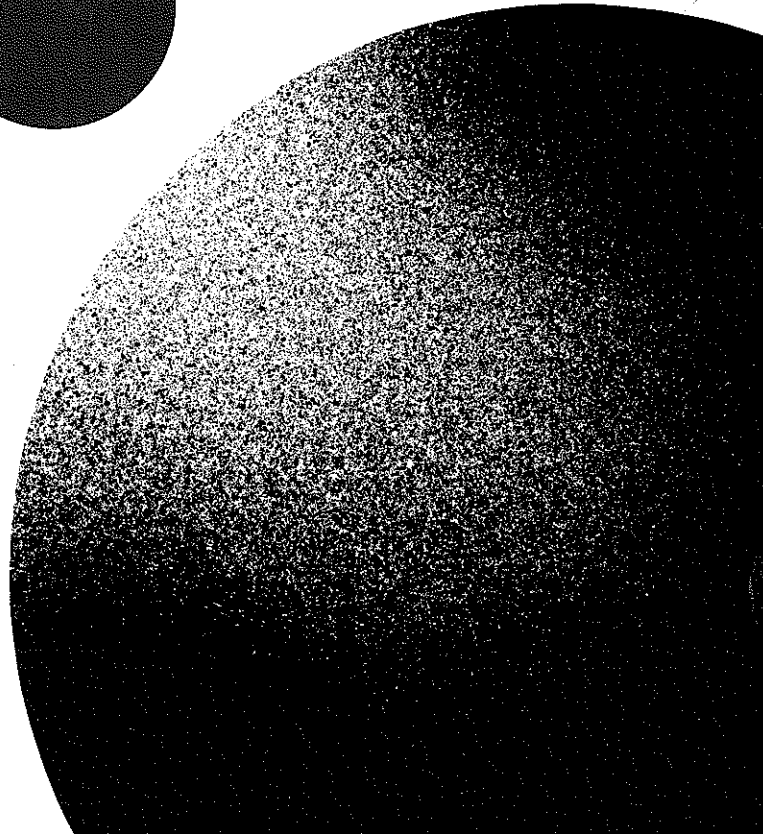
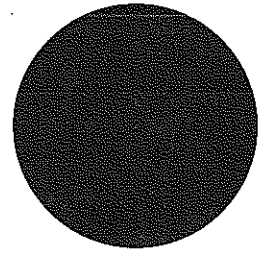
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