

**SEXUAL BEHAVIOUR AND HARASSMENT IN HOSPITALITY: 'JUST GOOD FUN – NOTHING SERIOUS'**

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**ABSTRACT**

This study examines hospitality workers' comments about sexual behaviour in hospitality to help understand the relationship between their attitudes to sexual behaviour and the nature of harassment. The traditions of sexual behaviours are discussed, along with the nature of hospitality work, workers' characteristics, the customers' role and the preoccupation with meeting customers' needs. Customer contact is found to be a firm predictor of sexual harassment, but the characteristics of staff and the traditions of the industry are also considered important causes.

**Keywords:** hospitality, sexual harassment, sexual behaviour, service, food and beverages

**INTRODUCTION**

Sexual harassment is more prevalent in hospitality than elsewhere, both in New Zealand (Human Rights Commission, 2001a) and overseas (e.g. European Commission, 1998; Hoel & Einarsen, 2003). Although various causes have been proposed, such as workers' low status (Guerrier & Adib, 2000), the gendered work environment (European Commission, 1998) and the particular characteristics of service work (Folgerø & Fjeldstad, 1995), these do not adequately explain why young women in hospitality are harassed more than those elsewhere. While serious harassment is a form of abuse and harms those concerned, harassment levels vary with tolerance thresholds, and are therefore likely to be higher where staff are inherently resistant, or perhaps weary of customers' sexual behaviours.

This study examines comments about sexual behaviours in hospitality workplaces in Auckland New Zealand, identifying the attitudes of hospitality workers, in an effort to understand their part in the sexual games played out at work. The discussion is predicated on the understanding that although sexual behaviours are widely accepted in hospitality, harassment is none-the-less pervasive, because of variations in levels of tolerance, and because harassment also occurs in varying levels of intensity. Recommendations to industry include the improvement of training, the use of codes of ethics, and the recruitment of staff who are particularly suited to the nature of hospitality work.

**THE PROBLEM WITH HARASSMENT IN HOSPITALITY**

The New Zealand Human Rights Commission defines sexual harassment as sexual behaviour as using 'physical, verbal or visual means, which is unwelcome or offensive and is either repeated or so significant that it has a detrimental effect on another person' (2001b, p. 8). Woods and Kavanaugh extend this to the creation of an 'intimidating, hostile, or offensive work environment'

(1994, p. 21). Both definitions rely on the individual's reaction; where one person finds prolonged eye contact disturbing and uncomfortable, another will happily tolerate touching, pinching, or even grabbing.

Sexual harassment is an international issue for hospitality, and with the apparent exception of Scandinavian workers, at least one in four hospitality staff can expect to be harassed. The inconsistency of harassment data (Table 1) suggests the influence of cultural and national characteristics, particularly in Agrusa et al.'s (2002) study, which used the same research instrument in two locations. Influences such as low response rates (Human Rights Commission, 2001a), and the use of respondents returning from work experience (Lin, 2006; Worsfold & McCann, 2000) are also evident.

**Table 1: Sexual harassment in hospitality: a global summary**

Author	Year	%	Country
Lin	(2006)	92	Taiwan
HORECA Report	(2003)	6	Denmark
Hoel	(2002)	25	Britain
Agrusa et al.	(2002)	25	Hong Kong
Agrusa et al.	(2002)	75	New Orleans
Worsfold & McCann	(2000)	57	Britain
Human Rights Commission	(2001a)	26	New Zealand
Einarsen, Raknes & Matthies	(1993)	18	Norway

Harassment levels in hospitality are certainly higher than those in other industries (Einarsen, Raknes, & Matthiesen, 1993; European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, 2000; European Commission, 1998; European Foundation for the Improvement of Working and Living Conditions, 2003; Hoel, 2002; Human Rights Commission, 2001b). Young, low status women are the most at risk group, and 'the stereotypical scenario of a young female waitress or barmaid being sexually harassed while working in the service industry' is common and was substantiated by (amongst others) the New Zealand Human Rights Commission's (NZHRC) research (2001b, p. 30)

By definition, harassment is harmful. The NZHRC (2001b) found that most victims left their jobs after being harassed, and a significant number reported absenteeism was becoming a problem for them, indicating a considerable expense and inconvenience to their employers. Their report cited 'monetary damages, legal costs, increased worker sick days and general absenteeism, staff losses, the cost of hiring and training new staff, negative publicity and lower staff productivity and morale' as employer's costs of sexual harassment (p. 4). Further to these financial costs, the personal costs to victims can be profound, because of the abusive nature of harassment.

## **HOSPITALITY AND SEXUALITY**

### **Sexual behaviours**

Sexual behaviours can be unwittingly promoted by managers, in their attitudes to service and the types of uniforms they choose for staff. Gilbert, Guerrier and Guy (1998) found that 39% of hospitality personnel directors in their study did not allow female staff to wear trousers, 7% thought flirting was part of the service, and 29% considered sexual jokes and teasing a minor issue. However, attempts to sexualise the service encounter were not necessarily enjoyed by staff. Several managers (19%) reported that staff had left their workplace because of harassment, and some were pursuing legal action following sexual harassment incidents.

Sexual behaviour in hospitality is associated with the characteristics of employees and the nature of service, which necessarily involves close relationships between employees and customers. However, Folgerø's and Fjeldstat's (1995) suggestion that the characteristics of service create a prime breeding ground for sexual harassment does not recognise the possibility of acceptable levels

of sexual behaviour, nor the need to differentiate between these and harassment. The literature tends to conflate sexual behaviour and sexual harassment, implying that any sexual behaviour is unwelcome, whereas this may not necessarily be the case. Agrusa et al. (2002) alluded to this, noting that agreement on acceptable levels of sexually oriented behaviour is difficult in the catering industry, where the environment is informal, the hours long, and contact between fellow employees and customers close. Although they did not support their views with data, their logic is widely accepted anecdotally, yet the grey areas between non-invasive sexual behaviour and harassment remain unclear. As sexual behaviour is not always sexual harassment, the characteristics and attitudes of employees are likely to be contributing factors to reported harassment (e.g. Lin, 2006), especially where there is a climate of extreme political correctness or perhaps a religious obsession with eliminating pleasure (such climates are reminiscent of the Victorian habit of covering the legs of pianos and tables (Fryer, 1963) in case their resemblance to the innocuous human ankle is considered offensive). Sexual advances from those in power (such as managers or customers) are also more likely to be construed as harassment, than are advances from peers or juniors (Bourgeois & Perkins, 2003).

### **The role of customers**

Hospitality's known links with sexuality extend back to 1700 B.C. Early taverns were originally brothels in which the landlady acted as both barmaid and prostitute (White, 1968) and descriptors for brothels and inns were at one point, the same. Although sexual favours (once a sign of excellent hospitality) have persisted as a customer expectation, they have been reconstructed as sexual harassment, reflecting the values of contemporary hospitality workers, who are in the main, less obliging than their ancestors.

Customers sometimes presume more of hospitality service providers than is implied in the products and services sold, and expectations may range from the cheerful façade of emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983) to sexual favours and adult movies (Guerrier & Adib, 2000). While consumers of banking, retail and leisure services may expect little more than friendly and efficient service, expectations seem to escalate when customers purchase services associated with physical replenishment and pleasure, such as accommodation, meals, and drinks. Hospitality's role as a provider of food and shelter, also implies the provision of psychological comfort (Cassie, 1983; King, 1995; Nailon, 1982), with the intangible elements of satisfaction and pleasure. For some, these elements connote an opportunity to introduce sexuality into the service exchange, resulting in flirtatious behaviours such as prolonged eye contact or touching. Furthermore, business and holiday travellers have a sense of anonymity while away from home, and otherwise upright citizens often enjoy a moral holiday when staying in a hotel (Hayner, 1928, p. 784), or dining out.

### **The role of staff**

Hospitality workers have long been (and still are) treated with suspicion. Their low status is threatened by the ease with which service and servitude can be conflated, commodifying staff and providing opportunities for disrespectful treatment from those in power, such as managers and customers.

The personalities of the workers further increase their vulnerability. Many are bright and gregarious young people, thriving on pressure, customer contact, and a constantly changing environment. In an early study of human relations in catering, Whyte (1948) noted that restaurants attract those who enjoy a high rate of social activity and changes in physical activity. Such obvious enjoyment of a socially stimulating environment is likely to attract sexual attention, which is not always repelled. The reasons for this vary, and clearly include the need to maintain a professional façade, but may also reflect an unusually high tolerance of anti-social behaviour.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Research design**

The research design for this study addresses the need to identify the characteristics, workplace types and attitudes of harassment victims and the major sources of harassment. A questionnaire was therefore developed to measure the incidence of harassment, identify harassers from both victims' and harassers' perspectives, and gauge tolerance of harassment. It was anticipated that harassment levels would match those found elsewhere, and some rationalisations for tolerance would be found in answers to open-ended questions soliciting general comments.

Questionnaires were distributed amongst staff, supervisors and managers in 27 Auckland hospitality workplaces, and to hospitality staff and students at AUT University. Of the 1848 questionnaires distributed, 28% were returned as reusable, 42% lost, and 29% completed, nine of which were discarded as unusable. Of the 534 remaining, 55% were from AUT, 38% from hospitality businesses, and 7% from a postal survey to managers.

### **Questions**

Sexual harassment was defined in the questionnaire as 'unwanted behaviour of a sexual nature'. Likert-scale questions were used, with graded responses offered to match the question. Questions enabled respondents to identify harassers as well as themselves as victims, and the incidence levels associated with each. Nine questions tested incidence, and one tested tolerance of sexual banter (it's okay (ethical) for customers to make sexual jokes and tease the staff). Harassers and victims were identified as employees of the same status, lower rank or status, higher rank or status, or as customers.

## **RESULTS**

While the study provided extensive quantitative data as part of a wider doctoral study of workplace problems, this paper concentrates on the written comments, as these provided valuable insights into the differences between sexual behaviour and harassment. However, because data were collected on workplace issues such as training, it was possible to measure the relationships between sexual harassment and training, as noted in the results and subsequent discussion.

### **Quantative data**

The sample reflected a low status population, with more women (57%) than men, and a majority of young people. The largest cohort was the 20 – 24 year old group (35%), followed by teenagers (23% were under 20). Just over two thirds (67%) identified as staff, most (57%) were paid under \$15 an hour (the minimum wage at that time was \$8.50), and worked in food and beverages departments (58%). The dominant ethnic groups were European (50%) and Asian (20%).

Harassment was caused by customers, peers and supervisors (including managers) respectively, with customers being the most significant cause. Young people, Europeans, women, casual and part-time employees in food and beverages or front office were those most susceptible, and customer contact was identified as a firm predictor of harassment. Harassment was significantly more common in food and beverages businesses than in hotels, possibly because they are less well organised in terms of their human resources policies.

Although harassment was associated with workplaces where staff had their own codes of ethics, this may be related more to the nature of large well organised workplaces where codes of ethics are common, than to the codes of ethics per se. Responses on harassment were also associated with responses on training (eta of .203), indicating that those who said they had been harassed, were also likely to say that training was inadequate. Overt opposition from management was shown to reduce

sexual harassment, suggesting that if managers actively opposed harassment, it would occur less.

Although only 7% of respondents reported that they had been harassed regularly, a further 17% had been harassed once or twice, resulting in a cumulative 24% that had been harassed, a result consistent with that of Hoel (2002) and the NZHRC (2001a).

### **Qualitative data and observations**

#### **Tolerance of sexual behaviours**

Many respondents associated sexual behaviour with joking and having fun, writing that it 'relieves a stressful situation', and 'we are all an open minded bunch of people'. Many also insisted that no harm was caused, commenting that it's 'all in good fun, nothing serious', 'it doesn't mean anything', and 'no one has a problem with it'. However, as one respondent noted, 'when a game turns sour ...then it turns nasty, then becomes a complaint or sexual harassment'. Tolerance of sexual behaviours seemed to be just that; they are tolerated rather than enjoyed, and are fun only sometimes, and only for some people. The respondent who wrote that 'people in the hospitality industry are prone to more sexual comments than other industries,' was well informed. However, the same person's explanation that 'we tend to be more social people' conflates social and sexual relationships, just as they are conflated in the workplace.

#### **Intolerance of sexual behaviours**

Several respondents wrote that sexual harassment is unacceptable, while others provided a personal emphasis such as 'I'm not like that', or 'I'm not into that sort of thing', implying perhaps that others were. Comments from those less tolerant of sexual behaviours fell into two main categories of expressions of dislike or distaste, and expressions of support for recognising harassment as a workplace issue.

A work place is a work place and should be kept at that. But if any indecent behaviour might happen the company/ workplace management should get rid of the person harassing the staff.

#### **Intolerance of customers' sexual behaviours and harassment**

Comments reflecting intolerance often revealed a weakness of defence associated with the subservient nature of hospitality roles.

Customers (middle aged men) have a bad habit of touching my backside. Verbal harassment is common place by customers! Really quite disgusting at times. Owners often feel they have 'rights' to give you a 'peck' on the cheek or hug you whilst trying to touch your body' (25 – 29 year old European female)

Respondents also revealed their inabilities to defend themselves from abusive behaviour: 'I have to keep smile and polite. Sometimes it is not easy to do', and 'not intentionally trying to hurt me, but guests saying things to make me uncomfortable'. One described harassers as 'drunks, old idiots ... act like this to you all the time anyway – no different at work', exposing a congruence between the social and working environment of the writer. While several thought that 'it's a really fine line and hard to define', others were clear about what caused them discomfort: 'they said just a joke but sometimes I don't like it' (25 – 29 year old Asian male). Harassment was certainly not restricted to women.

Some intolerance was moderated by a professional willingness to oblige. In response to questions about unethical behaviours, respondents listed

- encouraging female staff to put up with sexual harassment from customers as it increases sales;
- customers asking very personal questions. Flirting with me;
- putting up with sexual harassment; and

- flirting with customers to get tips.

Some comments reflected a strong sense of duty to both customers and employers, but underpinned by a vagueness about their personal rights. The youth of many respondents suggests that this apparent submissiveness may be a factor of their age and consequent lack of life experience.

### **Intolerance of management's sexual behaviours and harassment**

One incident of sexual harassment by a manager was resolved, although it was not clear how:

I had a manager that used to make gestures at me and other staff that were sexual and when he dropped me home one night because my bus was late he asked me to give him a kiss. I told him to bugger off and got out of the car. I then told another manager and a lot of girls also said the same thing happened to them. He was then fired.

Although this incident appears to involve a middle manager, General Managers were also causing problems:

- General Manager informing me he is in love with me and one day he will get me. Left notes for me.
- Ex General Manager having sex in the boardroom with his PA
- Manager has a weakness for girls – particularly blondes – and promotes them over better qualified men

Managers (or at least senior employees) were identified as a significant cause of harassment in the quantitative data, which is disappointing from the perspective of those seeking ways to address power imbalances between staff and customers, as these same imbalances exist between staff and managers, where they can be similarly abused.

### **Intolerance of sex workers**

Several comments were received about sex workers, with one respondent wondering if this was 'perhaps prostitution – but I don't think this is unethical'. Some were uncomfortable about helping 'guests who want sexual favours from staff/ prostitutes', or just 'getting prostitutes', and another complained that 'concierge have helped call girls up to the guest floors'. The acceptance and frequency of sex workers in hotels was revealed in one respondent's explanation of personal values.

The hotel turns a blind eye to sex workers accompanying guest to their room. This is of course standard practice and I'm not really adverse to it so long as it's done discreetly and no other guests or employee is harmed or deliberately offended by it.

This supports Hearn and Parkin's comment (1987, as cited in Guerrier & Adib, 2000, p. 261), that hospitality workers have to 'turn a blind eye, make arrangements for blue movies, call girls' etc.

## **DISCUSSION**

Quantitative data indicated significant links between high levels of sexual harassment and poorly trained staff. However, while this indicates that training is likely to reduce harassment, reliance on this association would be a facile approach to understanding harassment, which appears to be more problematic in poorly organised workplaces. The characteristics of such workplaces include poor training, but also, high levels of theft, high staff turnover stimulated by unfair dismissals, and (not surprisingly) persistent under-staffing (Poulston, 2007).

Tolerance of sexual behaviour was associated with enjoyment and the nature of the industry, and implied a behavioural norm extending well beyond limits accepted elsewhere. Many respondents seemed happy to go about their duties knowing that sexual 'harassment' (sic) could be part of their

working day, suggesting that a fine line exists not just between harassment and enjoyment, but also between the expectation of being harassed, and a willingness to solicit sexual behaviours. High levels of harassment were associated with high tolerance, suggesting that those overtly opposed to harassment will be harassed less. A variety of rationalisations was offered, ranging from stress relief to enjoyment.

Some thought harassment was being appropriately addressed, writing 'it's good to see that hotels in NZ take sexual harassment seriously' and 'our company has strong guidelines on this type of harassment which makes it easier to complain'. One manager commented that 'some work environments can be very sexually charged – it comes down to setting boundaries and at times these may take time to be established or can be misinterpreted', echoing Agrusa et al's (2002) comment that agreement on acceptable levels of sexual behaviour in hospitality is difficult.

Both quantitative data and written comments indicated that sexual behaviours are common in hospitality, but not all are considered offensive. The potential to offend seems to vary not just by the type of behaviour, but also, by the individual. For example, one respondent was ambivalent about having sex workers at a hotel, while others clearly did not approve. Similarly, many respondents were very tolerant of sexual behaviours at work, while others found these distasteful or objectionable. Intolerance was illustrated with examples of unpleasant behaviours, some of which were clearly serious, such as the example given of a manager who tried to kiss staff when taking them home after work. Overall, the picture suggests that many hospitality workplaces are sexually charged, and the onus is therefore on management to find ways to manage, rather than eliminate sexual behaviours, (which would be very difficult and probably not necessary). As harassment occurred less where staff were more satisfied with training and where codes of ethics were more recommendations include the improvement of training and the use of codes of ethics. Similarly, as participants to the study demonstrated a wide variance in their responses to sexual behaviours, the recruitment of staff who are naturally suited to the hospitality industry and its particular idiosyncrasies is recommended.

## **CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS**

The findings of this study have implications for both staff and managers, particularly in relation to recruitment and training. Managers' responsibilities relate to the types of staff they recruit, and the emphasis they place (consciously or unconsciously) on promoting sexual behaviours, in the uniforms they choose, and the type of training given to front-line staff. Sexual harassment could be reduced by discouraging behaviours and appearances associated with harassment, such as the use of sexuality in server - customer relationships (some organisations train employees to use physical contact to improve tips). Training would also help young staff develop their ability to discriminate between acceptable and unacceptable behaviours, as well as the skill to deflect difficult questions or advances. The importance of maintaining a harassment-free workplace could be promoted through codes of ethics (visible to both staff and customers), pamphlets and posters, which are also likely to reduce sexual harassment (Poulston, 2007).

Staff need to be cognisant of the risks implied in front-line hospitality work, and address these at a personal level. This may include thinking about their own values, and what they are and are not prepared to accept in terms of sexual behaviour. Some younger staff may also require coaching to understand the connection between their own behaviour and appearance, and the likelihood of being harassed. Sexual behaviour is widely accepted by some hospitality workers, and to some extent, welcomed and enjoyed. However, as long as some workers accept behaviours that others find unacceptable, customers (and other staff) will behave as they want, rather than as they should. Some guests expect favours that current values no longer accommodate, and many employees seem happy to oblige, tolerating relatively high levels of sexual behaviour and harassment. For those less tolerant, working in hospitality will have limited appeal, and will always account for some staff

turnover.

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