THE ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM: THE ACCIDENTAL PROSTITUTION OF HOSPITALITY SERVICE WORKERS

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates sexual harassment in hospitality work, by interviewing women working in customer service roles. It explores their experiences and views on sexual harassment in hospitality service work. Semi-structured interviews were used to understand the relationship between women's experiences and their views of harassing behaviours, as well as influences on the incidence of harassment. Findings showed that participants co-operated with harassing behaviours because of their role view, and that older women were less prone to harassment, mostly because they were more skilled at rejecting unwanted advances. The study concludes by outlining management's responsibility to prevent harassment by recognising the assumptions implicit in servers' roles. These assumptions effectively prostitute the innate skills of young women who are keen to please management and customers, but not at the risk of assault and abuse.

Keywords: *hospitality; sexual harassment; service work; sexual labour; interpretivism; women.*

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Studies conducted about twenty years ago identified sexual harassment as a particular issue in hospitality workplaces (e.g. Eller, 1990; Woods & Kavanaugh, 1994), and subsequent research (European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, 2000; Hoel, 2002; Poulston, 2008a) indicates that the problem persists. While the power structures in labour intensive environments such as service work are probable influences (Brackenridge & Fasting, 2005; Ilies *et al.*, 2003), as banking and retail businesses do not report high levels of harassment, hospitality specific factors such as alcohol and the sexualisation of labour are implicated.

This study contributes to the growing literature exploring the relationship between sexualised labour and harassment, as until this is understood, women in service roles are likely to be exposed to high levels of unwanted sexual behaviour.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Various causes for harassment in hospitality have been proposed, but the explicit power structures and emphasis on consumption are amongst the major causes, exacerbated by the blurred demarcation lines between flirtation, harassment and assault. In a meta-analysis of American studies, Illies et al. (2003) noted that of over 86,000 respondents in 55 samples (24% of women overall) had experienced sexual harassment at work, with the highest levels (36%) being in the military, where power relationships are particularly explicit.

Gutek and Nieva (1981) proposed that harassment is the result of a sexualised working environment by utilising the inherent sexuality of women's sex role in their work, and Folgerø and Fjeldstad (1995) and Guerrier and Adib (2000) further noted that women's effectiveness in frontline positions can be enhanced using sexualised behaviour to please customers.

Employees are particularly vulnerable if their role is to serve and satisfy, and success is rewarded monetarily. Paying for service creates a power differential between customers and servers (Yagil, 2008) that is particularly potent because of the uncertain nature of what the customer thinks he or she is paying for. As many hospitality service workers consider sexual harassment an unavoidable part of

their work (Folgerø & Fjeldstad, 1995), it seems likely that many customers consider sexual behaviours to be part of what they pay hospitality workers for.

Many believe sexual harassment is unavoidable if labour is sexualised; that is, if staff are encouraged to flirt or otherwise use their sexuality at work (Worsfold & McCann, 2000). Furthermore, management's preoccupation with customer satisfaction may explicitly condone inappropriate behaviours from customers in settings that offer alcohol and a degree of anonymity (Poulston, 2008a; Pritchard & Morgan, 2006; Worsfold & McCann, 2000). Female employees often tolerate inappropriate comments, touching, harassment and physical abuse from customers for fear of losing their jobs (Poulston, 2008b; Rosenthal *et al.*, 2008); complaining about harassment is pointless if sexual behaviours are implicit in their role.

This study examines the nature of hospitality service work to explore female employees' views of harassment, with the aim of clarifying managers' and employees' roles and expectations in a sexualised working environment. Prostitution is the provision of sexual activity for financial or other reward. Service workers who provide sexualised labour are therefore prostituting their sexuality, whether or not they realise this. Ignoring the link between sexualised labour and prostitution is somewhat akin to not noticing an elephant in a room, whereas recognising this may encourage managers to reflect more on their roles and responsibilities.

METHODS

An emic interpretivist approach (see Maoz & Bekerman, 2010) to descriptive data was used to probe participants' experiences of harassment without becoming a detached (and therefore potentially prurient) bystander. Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2011) describe the interpretive style as a subjective and personal approach in which the researcher feels part of the participant's experiences. With a sensitive issue such as harassment, interactions needed to be personable and comfortable for both interviewer and interviewee.

Twenty participants were recruited using snowball recruitment, a non-probabilistic sampling method useful when sourcing participants is difficult (Monette *et al.*, 2010). Initial participants were acquaintances of the researcher and recruited further participants, who also acted as recruiters. Female Women (both staff and managers) were chosen because they are the most vulnerable to sexual harassment (Rosenthal *et al.*, 2008). Participants were twenty or older and had worked in hospitality for six months or more. Using semi-structured interviews, questions probed the effects of and contributors to harassment, such as the behaviours of participants, managers and customers, specific experiences of harassment, and how participants felt about and responded to their experiences. Interviews took 10 to 40 minutes, and were fully transcribed; transcripts were reviewed repeatedly to identify trends, and to enable the manual segmenting, coding and organising of data.

RESULTS

The overwhelming theme was the conflation of service and sexual behaviour. Although participants recognised the fine line between harassment and flirtation, they did not seem to question or particularly resent their implicit role as sexual teases, but viewed this as part of their job.

> It's quite a fine line in this industry because we are all ... expected to flirt to sell beer and beer is generally sold to men. ... I think sexual banter is okay but probably not in another industry (Joanne).

However, many recognised the problems arising from consensual sexual banter and touching. Youth and lack of experience made some vulnerable to harassment, whereas older participants were more adept at defending themselves.

>*Younger staff are in the firing line a lot more. I've been in my job a long time and people have tried it on but not much anymore. With the new staff they do (Caroline).*

Younger participants confirmed this:

>*I got stopped at the stairs by a young guy…he would not let me go … the bouncers were watching anyway, so I just tried to push him out of the way and walked back down the stairs. That's what you get when you're a young person (Sarah).*

Participants recognised their responsibility to attract customers to increase income and generate tips.

>*[Management] wanted women to draw the guys in, get the bar pumping, get the money going over the bar, and they told us that is how we got our rewards – our tips – (Rebecca).*

While some managers acted on complaints about harassment, their motives were somewhat mercenary.

>*We don't have any problems here with sexual harassment, and that's because my staff know that I will back them up. They're not afraid to come to me and tell me… [If I evict the harasser] that's only twenty dollars walking out the door compared to a staff member that I would have to replace (Lauren).*

Managers' preference for young and attractive employees was apparent. Half the participants believed they were hired for their appearance, but their choice of clothing influenced how much they were harassed. They did not talk of a preference to be less admired, but just to be protected from inappropriate behaviours, even though they could not necessarily define these.

>*I worked with a girl that wore really low-cut tops and push-up bras and she would get comments all night but that is something they're asking for whether they think about it or not (Catherine).*

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Five major reasons were identified for tolerating sexual harassment:
1) Some women do not necessarily find sexual behaviours inappropriate;
2) Younger and less experienced workers may lack the skills to reject sexual behaviours;
3) Management's support of sexualised labour is implicit in their staffing preferences, and insistence on customer satisfaction;
4) Workers are not always confident that complaints about customers will be upheld; and
5) Many hospitality service workers consider sexual behaviours part of their job.

Participants aged under 30 generally thought that flirting and being sexy was part of their role, whereas older participants would not tolerate inappropriate behaviours, believing that too much tolerance just encouraged customers to seek reciprocation from the employee.

Many participants thought that their role required them to flirt and tolerate sexual undertones to increase alcohol consumption and return business (see Gilbert *et al.*, 1998; Korczynski, 2002; Warhurst, 2007). Flirting was considered part of their job, and some enjoyed it, while others found it inappropriate, perhaps creating difficulties for customers, who would not know who they could flirt with.

This study concludes that responsibility for stopping sexual harassment lies with managers, as it is they who prefer attractive young women as employees, and in some cases, insist they dress provocatively. Many fail to protect staff when sexual harassment occurs, and until employees are absolved of the implicit requirement to flirt, harassment will always be part of hospitality service work.

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