

Enjoyment, tolerance, or rejection: responses to sexuality in the workplace

Author:

Jill Poulston, BA, DipTchg, MHosp, PhD.

Position:

Head of Department (Hospitality), School of Hospitality and Tourism, AUT University

Contact details:

School of Hospitality and Tourism

AUT University

Private Bag 92006

Auckland, New Zealand

Email: jill.poulston@aut.ac.nz

Telephone: +64 9 921 9999 extension 8488

Facsimile: +64 9 921 9962

Affiliations:

Head of Department (Hospitality), School of Hospitality and Tourism, AUT University

Associate Director, New Zealand Tourism Research Institute

Working paper abstract

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Sexual harassment in hospitality workplaces is endemic, with more hospitality employees reporting incidences of harassment than in any other private sector industry. Various causes have been proposed, but the sexualisation of hospitality labour seems a likely and major cause, exacerbated by the blurred demarcation lines between flirtation, harassment and assault. This paper explores the common features of sexually charged working environments, and reveals different attitudes to sexual behaviours at work. The study draws on qualitative data collected from hospitality workers, and offers recommendations for reducing harassment by sanctioning both refusal and acceptance of sexual behaviours at work.

Around 5% of women report that they have been raped or assaulted, and an estimated 40% to 50% are harassed at work (European Commission, 1998). However, determining the incidence of harassment in hospitality compared to that of other industries is problematic, because of the subjective nature of harassment, and the influence of specific work climates and cultural mores. For example, a collation of data from five national studies completed in 1998 found 11% of Danish women had been harassed (European Commission, 1998), but a study undertaken just five years later found harassment levels were at 2% nationally, but 6% in the hotel and catering industry (European Foundation, 2003). Such disparities cast doubt on both the actual levels of sexual harassment, and the ability to measure these effectively.

Two major meta-analyses have been undertaken on sexual harassment, one in Europe (European Commission, 1998), and the other in America (Illies, Hausman, Schwochau, & Stibal, 2003), and help researchers understand harassment by identifying where it is most prevalent. Several interesting factors emerged from these studies, including that young women (between 20 and 40) are overwhelmingly in the majority of those who feel sexually harassed, and men are overwhelmingly in the majority of those who harass. Although colleagues and supervisors comprise the majority of harassers overall, in the service industry, harassers are more likely to be customers than colleagues. Harassment is more common where there are power inequalities, and where there are more men than women (European Commission, 1998; Illies et al., 2003). In the American studies, Illies et al. (2003) noted that of 86,578 respondents in 55 samples, 24% of women overall reported having experienced sexual harassment at work, with the military having the highest levels of harassment (36%), which they attribute to the explicit power relationships in the armed services.

Identifying industries in which harassment is most common does not so much identify the cause, but the types of locations in which it flourishes. Similarly, associating harassment with power and gender imbalances identifies a persistent but not necessarily causal relationship between these variables. If

sexual behaviour is used to deliberately insult someone, then it is likely to be an expression of power. However, if it is intended to be provocative, and perhaps friendly, then it is only harassing because of a misunderstanding about the acceptability of the behaviour. Calling a waitress a 'slut' is insulting, but calling her 'sexy' might be construed as complimentary, depending on the mood and personality of the waitress, and her attitude towards the harasser (sic).

Harassment in hospitality is often attributed to the close relationships between employees and customers, as well as between employees working in close physical proximity. However, the industry's obsession with physical satisfaction (Y. Guerrier & Adib, 2000; Hoel & Einarsen, 2003) and the transient nature of its customers (Pritchard & Morgan, 2006) (and arguably, its employees) provides opportunities for sexual behaviours that are not always welcome. Difficulties in determining the boundaries between enjoyable interactions and accusations of harassment or assault are commonly faced by participants in hospitality service interactions (Y Guerrier & Abid, 2000), and widely acknowledged as a particular difficulty in resolving problems. In Handy's (2006) study of small-town harassment, participants reported that 'they had colluded with the establishment of some unwanted (sexual) behaviour patterns by initially tolerating them' (p. 13), suggesting that tolerance changes not just by person, but also, over time.

The hospitality industry attracts and supports sexual behaviour (Y. Guerrier & Adib, 2000; Hearn & Parkin, 1987; Warhurst & Nickson, 2009), and some studies suggest that around one in four employees are likely to be harassed (Hoel & Einarsen, 2003; Poulston, 2008). Victims may feel ashamed (Lin, 2006), and suffer from various physical, emotional, and psychological affects (Theocharous & Philaretou, 2009), and many leave their place of work (Human Rights Commission, 2001). Sexual harassment therefore represents a major problem for both the victims and the industry in which they are harassed.

This study examines comments collected from hospitality workers about sexual harassment, to determine whether their views are sufficiently disparate to warrant customised approaches to controlling harassment. Data were extracted from a larger study of ethical issues in hospitality, and which included questions on harassment. Questionnaires were distributed amongst staff, supervisors and managers in 27 hospitality workplaces such as restaurants, bars and hotels, and to hospitality students. After answering ten questions on sexual harassment (e.g. have you been harassed in the past 12 months?), many respondents added comments and views about harassment and sexual behaviour generally. Perhaps most revealing was the discrepancies in views, not just between staff and managers, but also, amongst staff. Although preliminary analysis supports the view that intolerance of sexual behaviours is strong, there is also ample evidence of enjoyment, with some participants initiating flirtations with customers, as presented in the following selection of comments.

Comments from hospitality employees about sexual harassment	
Intolerance	
A work place is a work place and should be kept it at that.	
Harassment is common place by customers! Really quite disgusting at times.	
I'm not into that sort of thing.	
Sexual harassment is disgraceful and people should voice their rights more often.	
Sexual harassment is totally unacceptable.	
Tolerance	
In our restaurant we all get along, and sexual jokes are common place, and not discouraged.	
It's taken as having fun and as far as I know, no one has a problem with it.	
Joking comments between staff does exist, and I have no problem with this.	
Staff often flirt with each other. I would say 90% of the time it is reciprocal.	
Enjoyment and evidence of initiating sexual behaviours	
A little light hearted banter often relieves a stressful situation and is harmless.	
I actually enjoy being flirted with now and then.	
If it happens to me I won't have any problem with that!	
On occasion I have asked my joke victim if offence was taken. It never has and if it ever is, I would be told.	

Figure 1: Comments from hospitality employees about sexual harassment

A model is therefore suggested (Figure 2) to help managers and staff reach agreement on what is and what is not acceptable in sexual behaviours, rather than taking a proscriptive approach, which is neither achievable nor necessarily desirable. Sexual harassment may be a manifestation of misunderstandings between managers, customers, and staff, resulting in different attitudes towards sexual behaviours, and a fragmented approach to resolving difficulties. Harassment can only occur if the behaviour is unwelcome, as welcomed behaviours are by definition, complimentary.

		Management	
		Tolerant	Intolerant
Staff	Tolerant	Permissive	Harassment prone
	Intolerant	Harassment prone	Controlled

Figure 2: Sexual Tolerance Matrix

It is likely that harassment can be reduced by sanctioning not just refusal, but also acceptance of sexual behaviours at work. In a controlled workplace (where sexual behaviour is not tolerated), flirting with customers cannot be permitted, as it encourages them to reciprocate, and perhaps cause

offence. Conversely, in a permissive workplace (where specified sexual behaviours are tolerated), staff can manage individualised responses to sexual behaviours, but need to feel comfortable working in a sexually charged environment. While it may seem unpalatable to openly accept sexual jokes, teasing and flirtatious behaviour, in reality these are common social behaviours, and attempting to remove them from all workplaces is unrealistic, just as it is unrealistic to prohibit prostitution. The key to controlling reactions to behaviours that are not universally welcomed, lies in identifying the different attitudes of employees and customers, and creating spaces for them to express themselves without fear of offending or being offended.

Tolerance to sexual harassment is likely to change quickly, so something that starts as an interesting flirtation may become harassment within a few seconds of the interaction starting. Flirtations and other sexual behaviours are consensual activities, but perhaps due to fatigue, abuse of power, or some souring of the relationship, if one person's response to the behaviour changes, the interaction becomes harassing and offensive.

Recognition and acceptance of differing levels of tolerance is likely to reduce subjectivity, and help employees select workplaces appropriate to their personal boundaries. Clarity about appropriate and inappropriate behaviour is considered a pre-requisite to maintaining a harassment-free environment, as this allows sexually based communications that do not offend.

Caution is urged however, before working with the concept of sexual tolerance. Not all employees or managers at a particular workplace will have the same levels of tolerance, and tolerance exists on a continuum, rather than in a neatly packaged box. Research is therefore recommended to identify a range of potentially harassing behaviours, and create a working tool for measuring individual employees' and managers' tolerances of sexual behaviour. It is expected that this will offer the ability to 'take the pulse' of an organisation, as well as helping prospective employees decide whether or not their attitudes are appropriate to a particular place of work.

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