MAINSTREAM NEGLECT OF SEXUAL HARASSMENT

Aysan Sev'er

The goal of the present research is to discover the response of mainstream social sciences to sexual harassment as a social problem. I will first discuss the aspects which define social problems. Then, I will review the existing literature on sexual harassment which clearly locates it as a social problem. Thirdly, I will measure the mainstream versus gender-based responses to this problem through a content analysis of the number of articles published in scholarly journals.

Despite some variation, early definitions of social problems entail 1. an objective situation of social/personal disorganization, 2. a social value system of a sizable portion of the population endangered by this disorganization, and 3. recognition that the situation requires some social action (Laskin, 1964; Freeman and Jones, 1973). Social problems include an element of "frustration" when prevailing relationships hinder the personal goals of a substantial number of people (Raab and Selznick, 1959; Merton and Nisbet, 1961). Explicit in the above criteria is the assumption that social problems are factually definable entities. Implicit in the above criteria is the assumption that such problems will be objects of social scientific attention when they exist. In Laskin's (1964:9) words "[t]he problem could not be too severe if not much is written on it; it is likely to be severe if a great deal is written on it."

More recent approaches to social problems recognize the social construction aspect that earlier definitions have missed. For example, Hilgarten and Bosk (1987) highlight the dynamic competition among social problem claimants, the environments in which these competitions take place, and the powerful networks that promote or block the visibility and salience of problems. Within academic circles, Gillespie and Leffler (1987:491) argue that there are methodological road blocks set against social problem claimants when they receive "more critical scrutiny than those in favour of the [status quo]." They discuss how methodological requirements (generalizability, operational definitions, measurements, etc.) are intimately linked to the politics of scrutinizing problem making efforts. Moreover, they suggest that methodological over-scrutiny may even alter the nature of the problem which eventually gets reflected in the literature (Gillespie and Leffler, 1987: 498). They use the case of sexual harassment as an example.

In this paper, I argue that social construction overlaps with gendered priorities. Through underscoring the socially constructed nature of social problems, one can understand why most academics consider racism, delinquency, and addictions as social problems while being more cautious on others that subjugate women (i.e., sexual harassment). I will empirically show that there is a reluctance in academia to address sexual harassment. This reluctance persists in spite of the fact that the topic has been escalated into a social problem status by others (i.e., mass-media, government, human rights commissions, etc.). I will explore the reasons behind the academic blind spot.

According to Harding (1983: 311-312), gender is an "organic" variable in the sex/gender system, and affects the daily life practices, the character of social institutions, as well as all patterns of thought. In that sense, gendered reluctance in problematizing women's problems go deeper than being an affliction of the general public. Indeed, blind spots can exist even within disciplines that are entrusted
with some responsibility of shedding light onto social problems. A case in point is social sciences in general, and sociology and social psychology in particular.

Feminist scholars focus on who defines reality, for whose benefit and to what end (Harding, 1983; Smith, 1974, 1987; Stanley and Wise, 1985). They point out that thought, theorization and research have long been under the hegemony of men (also see Eichler and Lapointe, 1985; Harris, 1991; Keller, 1983; Lips, 1991; Sydie, 1988). Until very recently, women have been systematically excluded from institutions that propagate knowledge, just as issues that pertain to women's lives have been excluded from mainstream inquiry. Even disciplines directly related to the study of people and their interrelations (i.e., sociology and social psychology) have been tainted by androcentric biases from their inception, despite claims of "objectivity," "impartiality," and "gender-neutrality." Glaring examples of androcentric biases are found in a priori assumptions of culture as "male culture," of work as "waged work of men," of gender-exclusive language as "generic," of men as "normative," and exclusively male samples as representative of "people in general" (for details, see Bernard, 1973; Eichler and Lapointe, 1985; Mackie, 1991). Traditionally, social sciences have been blind on women, and mute on giving voice to their problems.

In addition to simply reacting to them, social scientists also help define which issues are worthy of identification as social problems, a mandate often taken for granted by theorists and researchers alike. As Emerson and Messinger (1977) point out, identifying social problems have implications because of prefiguring some solutions and removing others. Through selective attention, scientists can and do bestow legitimacy upon certain topics, and proscribe ways to ameliorate them. By selected omission, they can condemn other problems to social, political and intellectual neglect. In the gender based shuffle, women's issues may get neglected.

One may argue that there has been a major shift since the 1970s. Increasing numbers of women in the field, teaching, doing research, and developing new methods and theories, compounded by gains through the grassroots Women's Movement may be seen as eroding the patriarchal grip on social sciences. New inquiries are no doubt closer to both sexes rather than remaining under the hegemony of men and their vested interests.

One may also argue that the changes are slow, and do not go far enough. Despite the gains since 1970s, mainstream social inquiry is still quite dismissive of issues that relate to women. The term "chilly climate" refers to this amorphous reality that surround women's issues as well as reflect the experiences of female academics and students in academe. Progress is mostly in pockets which fall outside of the mainstream, and appear in parallel (but not necessarily equally valued) women's studies, and feminist journals. In other words, inquiry into women's issues are localized, rather than permeating and taking their rightful place within the mainstream (Heald, 1989; Lewis and Simon, 1986; Pagano, 1990).

Therefore, although the fit between intellectual focus and social problems may be desirable, it cannot be assumed to exist. One needs to evaluate the artifacts of intellectual activity in order to gain an understanding of what social scientists see as problems, and more importantly, what they omit.

One noteworthy artifact of social sciences is journal publications. Publications in peer-reviewed and professionally sanctioned journals help define the scope of disciplines and which topics they embrace through which agreed-upon methods. Publications also confer institutional recognition and esteem upon researchers and theorists through tenure and promotions. Publications pave the way for research funds and thus assure further publications. Mass media exposure, and public and political
awareness on the issue may be a bonus. In sum, professional publications engender a cycle of visibility and legitimacy for authors and their chosen topics of interest. Thus, it is crucial to evaluate what goes on in these journals, and what is left out. The general question is: how responsive and inclusive is mainstream social inquiry of social problems that affect women? I am going to use sexual harassment that disproportionately affects women as an index of change versus stagnation since mid 1980s.

Sexual Harassment as a Social Problem

A 1989 Canadian Supreme Court Ruling defines sexual harassment as "the gamut from overt gender based activity, such as coerced intercourse, to unsolicited physical contact, to persistent propositions, to more subtle conduct such as gender based insults and taunting, which may reasonably be perceived to create a negative psychological and emotional work environment" (Canadian Human Rights Annual Report, 1991:39). Feminist scholars propose similar definitions and see sexual harassment as a means for men to subordinate women in the workplace and in education (Backhouse and Cohen, 1978; Kadar, 1982; Glass, 1988; Grahame, 1985; MacKinnon, 1979). Despite small variations, the scope of all definitions include pressures women experience that chill their environment and violate their right to safe working conditions (Crull, 1982; Grahame, 1985).

Albeit few, existing studies indicate that sexual harassment is pervasive. For example, in a study of the U.S Merit System Protection Board files, 42% of women reported having been sexually harassed at work in the preceding 24 months (Tangri, Burt and Johnson, 1982). A 1981 Women in Trades questionnaire found that 92% of women felt that they were sexually harassed on the job (Kadar, 1982: 171). More recently, an Angus Reid-Southam news survey found that 37% of women who work outside of the home believe that they suffered some form of sexual harassment (Canadian Human Rights Annual report, 1991:39). In another study, 61.4% of a representative sample of over 1,200 women claimed that they were sexually harassed at work over the past year. A staggering 78.8% reported that they were sexually harassed at work in their life-time (Smith, 1993). Although less widespread, sexual harassment even taints university settings (Osborn, 1992). For example, according to a Berkeley study, 55 Berkeley women reported close to 100 incidents of sexual harassment (Benson and Thomson, 1982:241). In another study, 47.6% of female professors claimed to have experienced a variety of sexually harassing behaviours from their male students. Of those, 60% reported more than one incident (Gruerholz, 1989:793).

As discussed, an important component of defining social problems is the recognition that some social action is required. Indeed, there is increasing public recognition of sexual harassment as a social issue. For example, almost every major University in Canada and the U.S. by now has sexual harassment policies. Government agencies, professional organizations and reputable businesses have already instituted bodies to look into allegations of harassment of this nature (Benson and Thomson, 1982; Kenig and Ryan, 1986; Powell, 1986; Pryor, 1987; Pryor and Day, 1988). In 1990, one of the most significant developments was a ruling by the Ontario Worker's Compensation Board that sexual harassment may be a legitimate cause for workplace injury (Canadian Human Rights Annual Report, 1991:34). More recently, the Canadian Auto Workers Union has been seeking unification on anti-harassment policies among the largest three auto manufacturers (Toronto Star, July 15, 1993).

In Ontario, the Human Rights Commission has heard increasing numbers of cases. Whereas there were 130 sexual harassment related complaints in 1989-90, in 1990-91, there were 157 complaints. In 1991-92, this number climbed to 256 (see Ontario Human Rights Annual Reports 1989-90; 1990-91; 1991-92, pages 33, 45 and 64 respectively). If one considers the fact that only very perilous cases reach the Human Rights forum, these numbers become more meaningful.
Sexual harassment also "frustrates" the personal goals and aspirations of a substantial number of women. There is growing recognition that the psychological effects may range from depression, irritation, and sleeplessness, to substance abuse, physical or mental health problems, and difficulties in sustaining relationships (Crull, 1982; Hadjifotiou, 1983; Pryor and Day, 1988). The senior vice-president of Imperial Oil estimates harassment costs to his company to be around $8 million a year in absenteeism, employee turnover and lost productivity. The turnover rate is two to four times higher for women "because we haven't yet achieved a workplace that is wholly harassment-free" (Canadian Human Rights Annual Report, 1992:47).

In 1990, the general public's awareness was jolted when Professor Anita Hill brought sexual harassment charges against Judge Clarence Thomas. Millions of mass media consumers saw for themselves that even the highly desirable characteristics Professor Hill possessed (intelligence, education, academic excellence, occupational prestige) may not insure a safe environment for women. Audiences also saw that men who are highly respected in all other dimensions of their lives may still create a degrading workplace for women. The unprecedented media coverage of this event (ranging from sensationalized reporting to respectable and insightful social analyses) helped problematize sexual harassment, while the all white/male/affluent members of the Senate Judiciary Committee closed ranks to trivialize the charges.¹

The goal of the present research is to find out the response of mainstream sociology and social psychology to sexual harassment which is no doubt a serious social problem. In 1971 Bart bluntly asked "[w]ho really gives a damn about reading studies, particularly feminist studies about women, their dilemmas, their problems, their attempts at solution?" (1971:735). To provide a more recent answer to Bart's question, the number of articles published in mainstream journals will be compared with those journals that focus on women.

Methods

This study is based upon a longitudinal analysis of sexual harassment articles published in selected academic journals. In this study, a sexual harassment article is operationally defined as a. if the term "sexual harassment" occurs in its title and/or b. if the term appears as one of the key-words in the CD-ROM version of the Social Sciences Index and/or c. if the term appears in the abstract. Since not all journals have them, book reviews were excluded from the analysis.

Overall, 20 journals were analyzed.² Journals were selected from mainstream (either sociological or social/psychological) and gender-based journals in Canada and the U.S. In Canada, Canadian Journal of Sociology (CJS), and Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology (CRSA), Canadian Journal of Psychology, and Canadian Psychology constituted the mainstream while Atlantis, and Canadian Woman Studies were used to represent the gender-based category. In the U.S., American Journal of Sociology (AJS), American Sociological Review (ASR), Human Relations, Journal of Social Issues; Social Forces, Social Problems, Sociological Inquiry and Sociological Quarterly were selected as examples of mainstream sociology. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology (JPSP), Journal of Social Psychology (JSP) and Social Psychology Quarterly (SPQ) were used as examples of mainstream social/psychology. Psychology of Women Quarterly, Sex-Roles, and Signs constituted the gender-based category. Although this list is by no means exhaustive of all journals in the selected areas, it includes official journals from both the American Sociological/Psychological and the Canadian Sociological and Anthropological/Psychological Associations.

Aside from the frequency of sexual harassment articles, how many issues per year the journal is
published is reported. The number of issues range from 2 (Atlantis) to 12 (JPSP and Human Relations). The total number of articles per issue varies substantially from journal to journal. Some journals publish four to five articles per issue (i.e., CJS, SPQ), some 10-20 articles (i.e., JPSP, Atlantis), and some more than 50 per issue (i.e., Annual Convention issues of Canadian Psychology; Canadian Woman Studies). I will consider an extremely conservative average of five articles per issue (as well as a more realistic average of 10 articles per issue) as estimates of the total number of publications in the following analysis.

The period of investigation covers all issues of the listed journals from January 1986 through December, 1993. The choice of timespan is roughly based on the burgeoning interest in women's work related experiences in general. More importantly, it covers a heightened interest in sexual harassment issues. Keeping the September, 1990 sexual harassment charges of Professor Anita Hill against the then Senate Appointee Clarence Thomas as a key point in awareness, the study spans four years before and after this noteworthy event. If social sciences in general and sociology and social psychology in particular are par excellence disciplines of social relations, one would expect them to address, problematize and thus help legitimize a social ill that affects vast numbers of women.

Results and Discussion

Tables 1 and 2 summarize the number of sexual harassment articles published between January 1986 and December 1993 in 20 scholarly journals (14 American and 6 Canadian). The analysis includes 640 issues of U.S. journals, and 176 issues of Canadian journals, for a total of 816 issues. Using the extremely conservative estimate of five and the more realistic estimate of 10 articles per issue respectively, the reported results summarize anywhere between 3,200 to 6,400 U.S and between 880 to 1,760 Canadian journal articles. Even with the extremely conservative estimate of five articles per issue, the present study covers more than 4,000 scholarly articles.

In American journals, there were a total of 43 articles (1.3% of the conservative estimate of 3,200), and in Canadian journals, 12 articles (1.3% of the conservative estimate of 880) mentioning sexual harassment. Indeed, the total number of articles that deal with sexual harassment is very low in the selected journals of both countries, despite the apparent rise in numbers since 1990. The respective distributions of these articles between the two time periods (1986-89 and 1990-1993) were 18 versus 25 in the U.S., and 3 versus 9 in Canada.

What is more disturbing is the scarcity of sexual harassment related articles in the mainstream journals. During the criterion period of eight years, only four such articles appeared in mainstream U.S. journals (one before 1990, three since). The neglect is focused, and by no means generalizable to other work related issues. On the contrary, mainstream journals have published a myriad of articles about work, covering diverse sociological topics like unemployment, mobility, alienation, pay equity, and social/psychological aspects of work-related stress, burnout, absenteeism, and turnover. Yet, only four articles have addressed sexual harassment which ails anywhere between 35 to 90% of working women (Kadar, 1982; Tangri, Burt, and Johnson, 1982; Smith, 1993). Existing articles have mostly found their way to Sex Roles, Psychology of Women Quarterly, and Signs. Gender-based journals thus account for the largest proportion of sexual harassment inquiries (17 before 1990, and 22
In Canada, mainstream coverage appears equally grim. Indeed, only three entries in a single mainstream journal appeared over a period of eight years. Moreover, these "entries" in Canadian Psychology (Table 2) are quite misleading. Each represents a one paragraph summary of a paper presented during the annual Canadian meetings (among hundreds of summarized papers). They are not complete articles or reports. In Canada, like in the U.S., the forum to deal with sexual harassment as a serious social problem seems to be exclusive to gender-based journals (Atlantis, Canadian Woman Studies). Moreover, there seems to be a sharp rise in the number of sexual harassment related articles that appear in these journals (one before 1990, and 8 since).

Implications and Conclusions

The present analysis clearly shows the neglect of sexual harassment as a topic of interest in the selected mainstream journals. Moreover, the neglect is long-term and equally true in Canada and the U.S. However, the reasons why mainstream journals are systematically neglecting the topic cannot be deciphered from the current findings. They are conjecture.

One reason could be that there is no interest in the area, and thus these journals may not have received submissions. Although a possibility, this particular explanation seems quite weak. As the previous review indicates, there is a growing concern in the area if one considers the coverage in the mass media, and preventative efforts undertaken by universities, business and government on sexual harassment. More importantly, the second half of the period of this study (1990-93) is very unique and renders a lack of interest argument unlikely. As mentioned, the Senate Committee hearings of Clarence Thomas turned into one of the most widely publicized events of the decade; newspapers, prime time TV and magazines covered the hearings ad nauseam. The interest is continuing. Recently, close to 200 scholars, lawyers, university administrators and status of women/sexual harassment officers attended a national sexual harassment conference held in Ottawa (CAASHHE, 1993), to share their work, concerns and experiences in the area.

A different reason for the lack of coverage may be that researchers who work on sexual harassment may be avoiding mainstream journals. Given the long term silence, it is easy to understand a form of self-exclusion. The track record of mainstream journals on sexual harassment may signal a cold reception for even a hot topic. A more cynical variation of this explanation may be the gate-keeping role played by mainstream journals in defining the scope of the disciplines through male biases. Since men still grossly outnumber women on all aspects of academic life (including editorial boards and article review processes) there may be a hesitation to see sexual harassment as deserving "mainstream" journal space. After all, sexual harassment disproportionally victimizes women.4

The real reason for the long-term neglect may be more complex than the simpler viewpoint of "no interest" or the cynical viewpoint of androcentric gatekeeping. It is possible that the observed neglect of sexual harassment may reflect social scholars' discomfort with claims-making activities. As early as Becker's (1963:9) definition of deviance as "behaviour that people so label" social scholars are weary of the labelling and finger-pointing processes of moral entrepreneurs (Ben-Yehuda, 1986). Stanley Cohen's (1972) cornerstone work on labelling hypes and creation of moral panics personifies this stance when he states "the students of deviance must question and not take for granted the labelling
by society or certain powerful groups in society of certain behaviour as deviant or problematic." (Cohen, 1972: 13). Indeed, social scholars feel more justified in seriously questioning the claims-makers, rather than feeding into their often exaggerated, distorted, manufactured prophecies of doom (Cohen, 1972: 31, 41, 53). This debunking stance has been successfully applied in varying topics of interests (i.e, nuclear arms race; the environment (Ungar, 1990), and of course, crime and deviance, Clarke, 1980; Fishman, 1978). Furthermore, the same stance is used by feminists when they challenge inhospitable rape laws (Backhouse, 1983) that are rooted in androcentric panics of being wrongly accused. Critical feminists also challenge fear waves about black women's sexuality which is deemed morally inferior (Carby, 1992; Gardner, 1984), or single female parents being breeders of delinquents (Sev'er, 1992).

As praiseworthy as the Becker/Cohen stance against many sorts of claims-makers has been, there remains the possibility of its own over use. Under unique circumstances, it is possible that the claims-makers are indeed justified and need a receptive forum to demonstrate the legitimacy of their claims. It is in these unique cases that academic prerequisites of a cut and dry methodology (generalizability, operational definitions, instruments, etc., see Gillespie and Leffler, 1987) may translate into a neglect of the issue. Moreover, gender is a powerful social axis that may itself engender a blindness toward legitimate claims-makers, rather than a critical stance toward their claims. Sexual harassment may be one of these unique topics, where the debunking tendency may have gone too far.

Which one of the proposed reasons or possible others account for the long-term absence of sexual harassment publications in mainstream journals is anybody's guess. However, I argue that in this particular case, reasons are less important than the actual facts and their consequences. Even in the 1990s, sociological and social/ psychological journals seem to be quite oblivious to a social problem that injures countless women.

We need to consider the circular implications of the neglect clearly shown in the present results. Funding agencies may be reluctant to support submissions that propose novel approaches to the study of an elusive topic such as sexual harassment. The tension between the amorphous nature of the topic and rigid methodological demands about "generalizability" and "operationalizations" may hinder research efforts. Those who carry out research on smaller samples without the comfort of large research grants may find the mainstream overly critical of lack of generalizability. Scholars competing for research funds may avoid research in an area that has little precedence in the mainstream literature. Reviewers may be particularly harsh in their criticisms due to general fears about claims-makers. The vicious cycle may thus silence a real social problem, hinder investigative efforts, and obstruct publication. The outcome of these complex processes is the gap in the literature that coincides with the historic neglect of women.

In conclusion, if social sciences fail to address social problems, non-scholarly factions (i.e., media or vested interest groups) are likely to fill in the void and shape public policy and opinion. The problems with this are obvious. First, the media is not likely to be moved by the suffering of obscure individuals. For example, the media would not have responded to the suffering of waitresses or secretaries, yet it capitalized on Professor Hill's predicament. Neither the media nor interest groups are trustworthy claims-makers because even when they act in good-faith, they are likely to be driven by gains other than the truth. Thus, their whimsical claims on issues that are either not deserving, or extremely unique justifies the fears of Becker (1963) and a host of others.

However, there is a more complex twist to the above analysis. The media also creates "panics" about legitimate social problems (such as sexual harassment), and in so doing raise the spectre of academic distrust toward the topic that has lent itself to the panic.
The present findings point to yet another problem. It is not desirable to leave the study of sexual harassment exclusively to gender-based journals. First, the audience of such journals are probably already aware of the problems women face. Second, by relegating problems that are entrenched in power relations between men and women to women's journals alone, makes the problems appear as if they belong to women. By removing the relational control aspect of harassment, the issue is confined and marginalized. After all, sexual harassment involves at least 95 male perpetrators for every 100 victims (Frize, 1993). Mainstream journals ought to do their share in addressing such a widespread social ill.

Although the present study was primarily concerned with a particular social problem of a particular group, much can be asked about whether social sciences adequately address the dilemmas faced by other groups (such as blacks, people with disabilities, gays/lesbians, etc.). If they systematically overlook relational problems that stem from power-based frictions, social sciences cannot avoid being obsolete themselves.

### Table 1. Frequency of sexual harassment articles in American Journals by type and year.

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* These entries are not journal articles. They are one-paragraph summaries of papers on sexual harassment presented at Canadian Psychological Association Meetings.

1 In 1987 and 1988, issues 1 and 2 were combined.

2 In 1992, issues 1 and 2 were combined.

3 In 1986, 1988 issues 1 and 2, and in 1989, issues 2 and 3 were combined.

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**End Notes**

1 Attempts to defame Hill are continuing (see Brock, 1993 as an example of a recent attack, and Toronto Star, July 17, 1993 for a critical analysis).

2 Most of the Canadian journals in the study are not indexed in the CD-ROM version of the Social Sciences Index. These journals were manually searched for the occurrence of articles with "sexual harassment" in their titles, and subject indexes for annual editions.

3 The following information contrasts sharply with the total omission of sexual harassment coverage. During the same eight year span, there were exactly 185 articles that used the key-word "employment" in the American mainstream sociological journals alone (36 in AJS; 41 in ASR; 22 in Human Relations; 8 in Journal of Social Issues; 31 in Social Forces, 16 in Social Problems, 7 in Sociological Inquiry, and 24 in Sociological Quarterly). Moreover, 47 articles used the key-words "women and work" (16 in AJS; 3 in ASR; 8 in Human Relations; 10 in Social Forces; 6 in Social Problems, and 4 in Sociological Quarterly.) In the Canadian mainstream, CRSA published 10 articles in "employment" and 6 that used the key-words "women and work" during the 1986-1993 span. Overall then, the eight American and at least one Canadian mainstream journals extensively dealt with different dimensions of labour force participation. These unmistakably contrast with the number of sexual harassment articles (see Tables 1 and 2). They also contrast sharply with the fact that only four articles among the sociology mainstream dealt with "pay-equity" during the eight year span (1 in AJS; 1 in Journal of Social Issues; 1 in Social Problems in the US., and 1 in CRSA in Canada. More pointedly, in the eight year study period, there was only a single article published on gender-based job discrimination (AJS) among all the mainstream sociological journals investigated.
4 There are still those who would prefer that women were not seen or heard, shrouding their biases under the veil of preserving "academic excellence." A few still express their misogyny with no apparent consequences. In a recent letter to the CAUT Bulletin (June, 1993), an academic wrote "I am tired of the barrage of meaningless statistics (proportion of women doing this, that, or the other...) tired of fundamentally silly proposals ("gender neutral language in all aspects of campus life"), and tired of the same faces smiling at me from the pages of the Status of Women Supplement."

BIBLIOGRAPHY


