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**Moving Past Powerlessness? An Exploration of the Heterosexualisation of Sexual  
Harassment**

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## **Abstract**

In exploring the discursive constitution of sexual harassment in academic and participant accounts in my PhD research, the construction of victimhood has been a key concern. The accordance of victim status to recipients of sexual violence has been viewed as critical in challenging normalising constructions of sexual violence as 'just sex' (e.g. Burt and Estep, 1981). The legitimisation of victim positionings for recipients of sexual coercion has been treated as particularly important for women since dominant representations of sexual violence position women as the victims and men as perpetrators (Brewis and Linstead, 2001). While this gendered construction of victim-perpetrator relations is crucial in raising awareness of male victimisation of women, the presentation of victimhood as a tool for resisting sexual violence has been questioned. For example, representations of women as victims reproduce versions of femininities that posit women as powerless/passive which works to re-inscribe male dominance and female subordination.

Using interviews on the topic of sexual harassment conducted as part of my PhD project, this paper explores how heterosexualised gendered relations become interwoven in constructions of victim and perpetrator. 18 semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants who were recruited via strategic sampling. Foucauldian discourse analysis of this data highlighted how women victims/male perpetrators, women offenders/male victims, and same-sex victims/perpetrators become constructed through a heterosexualised gaze. Constructions of victim-perpetrator relations in both heterosexual and same-sex sexual harassment (re)produce versions of heterosexualised femininities as passive/powerless and heterosexualised masculinities as active/powerful. This paper explores the following question raised by these constructions: how can the construct of the victim status of women be legitimised whilst moving past powerlessness?

## **Introduction**

Historically, sexual violence in general, and sexual harassment in particular, have been trivialised in social/political discourses as ‘just sex’. For example, sexual harassment has often been constructed as the product of men’s natural drive for sex (Mackinnon, 1979; Tangri, Burt and Johnson, 1982; Talbot, 1997; Crouch, 2001; Kurth, Spiller and Brown Travis, 2001). Such constructions position harassing behaviour as a ‘natural’ problem in sexual encounters which functions to normalise manifestations of sexual harassment (Tangri, Burt and Johnson, 1982; Samuels, 2003).

The construct of ‘victim’ has been strategically deployed as a crucial political step for legitimising forms of sexual violence such as sexual harassment as a serious problem for many individuals, particularly women (Ryan, 1992; Nolan, 1998; Reich, 2002). It has been argued that the construct of victim status can function to undermine normalising constructions of masculinised sexual dominance and (re)positions such acts as violence. Thus, victim status has been treated by some researchers as important for the destabilisation of gendered power relations in which sexual violence is positioned as ‘normal’ sex (Burt and Estep, 1981, Ryan, 1992; Nolan, 1998).

Despite the ways in which victim status can legitimise women’s experiences of sexual violence, predominant representations of women as victims have been problematised because victim positionings have connotations with weakness and passivity. More specifically, within normative versions of heterosex, feminine sexualities are predominantly represented as weak and passive in relation to active masculine sexualities (e.g. Hollway, 1998; Gavey, 2005). The construction of women as passive victim in sexual violence may (re)produce such normative heterosexualised power relations (Meadows, 2001; Brewis and Linstead, 2001). In turn, the (re)production of such sexualities may contribute to the perpetuation of sexual violence. For example, normative active – passive positionings in heterosex may maintain the conditions under which extreme versions of gendered dominance/subordination are made possible (Gavey, 2005).

The construct of ‘survivors’ of sexual violence has been treated by some researchers as creating space within which recipients of sexual violence can be positioned as agentic (e.g. Dunn, 2005; Hampton, Jenkins and Vandergriff-Avery, 1999). However, the construct of

survivor is not without issue. For example, representations of the ‘survivor’ can produce and reproduce a false dichotomy within which women are either passive objects or active agents (Reich, 2002; see also Alcoff and Gray, 1993; Spry, 1995). Importantly, in contrast to other forms of violence such as rape, the construct of survivor is not widely used in sexual harassment discourses, particularly in cases where harassment is constituted as less extreme. The problem of passivity raised by feminised versions of victimhood raised the following question: how can the construct of the victim status of women be legitimised whilst moving past powerlessness in the context of sexual harassment? This question was explored in relation to a range of constructions of perpetrator-victim relations in accounts of sexual harassment that included men/women, women/men and same-sex perpetrators/victims.

## **Method**

In this exploration of the problem of passivity, I focused on accounts from people who had not necessarily experienced sexual harassment. None of the participants self-identified as ‘victim’, ‘survivor’ or ‘perpetrator’. Whilst direct accounts of victimisation/perpetration are constructed in and through manifold discourses (see, for example, Kitzinger and Thomas, 1997), I wanted to maximise the possibility of accessing stories of sexual harassment which employed a range of versions, including those which constructed the initiator/recipient relation in ways other than ‘victim’/‘perpetrator’. In this study, I conducted semi-structured interviews with 13 women and 5 men from diverse backgrounds in terms of self-identified class, sexualities and occupation.

The interview schedule aimed to tap into broad perspectives on the issue of sexual harassment. The term ‘unwanted sexual attention’ was employed as an alternative to ‘sexual harassment’ because some previous research suggests that the former term tends to produce responses which focus on a broader spectrum of manifestations of sexual harassment whereas the latter phrase tends to elicit extreme versions of such behaviour (e.g. Thomas and Kitzinger, 1997; Herbert, 1997). The schedule consisted of four interview questions with a series of prompts which focused on the issues of definition, causes and policy interventions. Interviews lasted between approximately 30 and 60 minutes and were subsequently transcribed for analysis.

My reading of the data is informed by Foucauldian discourse analysis as described by Parker (1994). From this analytic stance, discourse is not merely descriptive of sexual harassment but produces and reproduces versions of this phenomenon and victim/perpetrator relations therein. In line with Foucauldian analytical approaches, this analysis makes connections between constructions identified and broader social and cultural practices (e.g. Burman and Parker, 1993)

## **Analysis**

This section focuses on three constructions identified: (1) sex as a male preserve; (2) emotional women; and (3) not 'real' women/not 'real' men. I will unpack the ways in which versions of active masculine and passive feminine heterosexuality are deployed in these constructions to produce women as 'true' victims and men as 'true' 'perpetrators' of sexual harassment. This reading also draws attention to how 'deviations' from normative gendered sexualities are used to present women as 'improper' perpetrators and men as 'improper' victims. Whilst there were a number of examples of these constructions in the data set, for the purposes of this paper I have selected those which are the most illustrative of these points.

### ***1: Sex as a male preserve***

The sexuality of heterosexual men is predominantly constituted in and through biological discourses which position men as 'naturally' geared towards seeking sex. (Hollway; 1998). Throughout the interviews, sex was framed as a male preserve where men 'naturally' want/need sex. For example, this can be seen in Gillian's account of perpetrators/victims of sexual harassment below:

*G: ... it's nasty gropey men groping up young women ... I think occasionally it might happen in reverse but that would be very odd occasion, whereas I think it's very common for blokes to give unwanted sexual attention to women ... because blokes are all bastards, and they have testosterone hurtling around their system and think of nothing but sex for 99% of time*

The gendered relation of men as initiators and women as recipients is constituted through use of the male sex drive discourse where men are compelled by biological processes to seek (hetero)sex (Hollway, 1998). The construction of these 'male' biological processes as universal locates sexual harassment from men as common, highlighted here by the extreme

case formulation “blokes are *all* bastards”. Here, the predatory nature of the perpetrator is also (re)produced through his implicit positioning as older than the “young women” he targets. This construction of the age relation draws attention to the association of youth with vulnerability.

Women as active seekers of sex are rarefied because the norm prescribes active sexualities as masculinised. This description coupled with the ‘naturalness’ of men wanting sex positions women initiators of sexual harassment as an aberration. This construction re-inscribes heterosexualised gendered positionings in which ‘real men’ are active pursuers of sex and ‘real women’ are passive sexual objects (Brewis and Linstead, 2001).

In the above excerpt, sexual harassment is simultaneously problematised and naturalised. There is a clear sense of the unacceptability of such behaviour through descriptions of it as “nasty” and perpetrators as “bastards”. However, whilst, it appears that notions of victimisation are in operation as is alluded to by constructions of perpetrators as predatory, the (re)constitution of women as victims is implicit. The absence of explicit reference to victimisation coupled with biological discourses of men’s sexuality can be read as working to normalise/naturalise (hetero)sexual harassment. The positioning of sexual harassment as a heterosexualised relation is evident in Gillian’s discussion of this behaviour in gay relationships.

*G: ...I do understand that a lot of um gay men are far more promiscuous ... men are naturally polygamous and perhaps persuaded to be monogamous because of the connection with the female ... it’s probably statistically more common for, you know, gay men to be more promiscuous...so as far as gay blokes are concerned I suppose, yes, if they didn’t fancy if a bloke, didn’t fancy somebody, suppose that might be just as possible. But yes I think I would be less often that it would be rejected ... because of blokes being sex obsessed and more up for it ... as far as lesbians are concerned ... I would imagine there’s less, there would be less, um, unwanted sexual attention because I don’t think that, I don’t think they’d persevere in the same way because of not having testosterone*

The construction of gay men’s sexuality draws on the male sexual need discourse. This discourse resonates with the male sex drive discourse in that men are biologically driven to

seek sex. However, unlike the male sex drive discourse, this need for sex is not governed by procreation. Within the male sexual need discourse, sex is about desire and is not tied to relational investment as this is constructed as a female concern.

In contrast, women's relationships are constructed through the have/hold discourse (Hollway, 1998), where sex occurs in the context of committed relationships. This is reflected in the presentation of heterosexual women as concerned with monogamy. Heterosexual women are also constructed here as regulative of heterosexual men's sexual behaviour because they "persuade" men to be "monogamous". This positions women as responsible for men's 'good' behaviour and thus allows them to be blamed if men behave 'badly' (e.g. Kurth, Spiller and Brown Travis, 2001).

Sexual harassment in gay relationships is described as unlikely because the male recipient is located in the male sexual need discourse which positions him as "up for it". The use of the male sexual need discourse here locates sexual harassment as 'normal' sex and also works to undermine claims that gay men can be victims of sexual harassment because, in this discourse, sex is 'always' wanted by men. Lesbian perpetrators are also constructed as unlikely because they cannot be positioned in the male sexual need discourse by virtue of being women.

The absence of perpetrators and victims of sexual harassment in gay/lesbian relationships (re)produces the notion of sexual harassment as a heterosexualised relation. The male sexual need discourse constitutes men as the only possible initiator because they need sex and women as the only possible recipient because they lack this need.

## ***2: Emotional Women***

Unlike the constructions of masculinised sexuality mentioned above, representations of feminised sexuality were saturated with notions of emotionality. This can be seen in Philip's account of his work as a carer where he discusses his own experiences of sexual harassment from a client:

*P: ... a young lady was, ah, she came on more than strongly, um, and she obviously wanted sexual favours from myself, and um, it wasn't embarrassing in that sense, but it was, um (.) it*



*was, um, I was very concerned about it because of the ah problems I could have got into, and um it was of a particular concern to myself because of the way she went about it. And it was obvious that you know the whole thing was planned ... it was obvious that this particular female was after, she she was, it was more attention seeking than anything*

The description of the perpetrator as a “young lady” positions her within the dichotomy of lady/whore. This description works to *desexualise* her sexual behaviour which can be seen further in the framing of her actions as ‘attention seeking’. This construction of the woman initiator’s actions resonates with DSM IV classifications of histrionic personality disorder. As Hale and Yudofsky (2003) note, this disorder is characterised in the DSM IV by a “pattern of excessive emotionality and attention seeking” and “inappropriately sexual or provocative behaviour” (p. 819). Historically, active feminine sexualities have often been positioned as deviant through recourse to hysteria and extreme emotionality (e.g. Kaplan, 1983; Wirth-Cauchon, 2001). Here, the woman’s sexual behaviour is similarly constituted as emotional neediness - invoked by the term ‘attention seeking’. Thus, the positioning of the woman initiator as an active subject is mitigated by the feminisation of her behaviour as dependent and emotional. This can be seen further in Philip’s discussion of why the woman initiator was behaving ‘provocatively’ towards him:

*P: I think the strain she was under at the time of this. I think it was, er, self induced ... she was trying to play two residents off one against the other. Um and I think she was trying to um force an issue with one in particular, as to how their relationship would develop ... from all accounts was just um enjoying himself ... he didn't put any great store in the relationship that they had. She wanted a lot more from him ... apart from you know the attention aspect with myself, I think she wanted also to use me as a as a extra tool against this the one guy that she really fancied*

The have/hold relationship discourse is drawn on to construct the woman’s sexual behaviour as a means to achieve a *committed* relationship. In contrast, the man with whom she wants a committed relationship is constructed through the male sex drive discourse (Hollway, 1998) where he is positioned as simply wanting sex. The woman initiator is also located in the feminine wiles discourse, in which she needs to ‘bait her man’ by attempts to position herself as desirable to other men. Her role as ‘pursuer’ is constructed as unsuccessful; her attempts to

secure a committed relationship are rejected as are her advances towards Philip. These positionings undermine her active sexuality and locate her as an 'improper' perpetrator.

Philip does not position himself as a 'victim' of sexual harassment. As with the construction of sex as a male preserve mentioned above, there is an absence of explicit reference to victimisation which (re)produces the phenomenon of sexual harassment as normalised in the sense that he is not constituted as a *victim* of a sexually *violent* act. Instead, sexual harassment is constructed as an occupational hazard which might have implications for his professional identity as he says:

*P: I was very concerned about it because of the, ah, problems I could have got into.*

*P: there's always the danger they could ... say, you know, I've molested them*

As potentially accused, Philip is positioned as both a possible victim of lies and as a possible sexual threat. This positioning of Philip coupled with constructions of other men in the above excerpts work to (re)produce representations of men as wanting/needing sex and the possibility that they might take it by force. This serves to consolidate men as 'true' perpetrators and women as 'true' victims of sexual harassment.

### **3: Not 'Real' Women/ Not 'Real' Men**

When men were constituted as victims, they were constructed as falling short of being 'real' men. This can be seen in Mike's description of male sexual harassment by women:

*M: ... I've had examples of um young, sort of males, young males um, being intimidated by a group of older women*

*L: oh right*

*M: um, you know, talking about um sex and stuff, him in particular, and yes it did make him feel very uncomfortable ... this kid didn't want to go in to work at the end of it because he was, he was so, he felt so intimidated by it*

Here, the male recipient is infantilised through use of the term “kid” which draws attention to his vulnerability and positions him as not *fully* masculine; he is not a *fully grown man*. As with the constructions identified in the previous two sections, a victimisation discourse appears to be in operation through reference to both the recipient’s vulnerability as “kid” and feelings of intimidation. However, discourses of victimisation are not explicitly drawn on since he is not described as ‘victim’. The representation of the recipient as not fully masculine and the absence of an overt victim identity here works to (re)produce the notion of masculinity as resistant to victimisation (Epstein, 1997; Lee, 2000). Similarly, women initiators were constructed as falling short of normative femininity. This can be seen in Gillian’s description of female-to-male sexual harassment below:

*G: ... older women going around chasing men. I mean possibly they have too much testosterone, because we all have testosterone too and particularly when you get to a certain age your hormones start going berserk ... because your female hormones become less, testosterone levels in comparison are higher ... there was this friend that I worked [with] ... in his twenties, he got chased round the desk when he stayed, when he was the one person that stayed late at work this one night and he got chased round the desk by the cleaner ... who must have been 55 plus ... she wanted sex with him on the desk sort of thing apparently, I mean he may have exaggerated it to make it a funny story ... but he did swear blind that, you know, he dodging round the desk to escape this woman ((laugh))*

The woman initiator is constructed as menopausal which has been characterised in bio-medical discourses as a dysfunctional state (Dillaway, 2005). This construction of the menopause resonates with Gillian’s account, in that women are depicted as irrational as implied by the descriptions of their hormones “going berserk”. Menopausal women have also been represented as falling short of being ‘real’ women because normative femininities imply the ability to bear children (e.g. Ussher, 1989). This construction serves to distance the woman initiator from ‘real’ women which in turn undermines her sexuality as active.

The woman initiator is also constructed as masculinised through reference to “testosterone”. The positioning of sexual harassment as stemming from masculinised biology (re)locates it as a ‘male’ behaviour which works to maintain men as the ‘proper’ perpetrators of sexual harassment. This construction coupled with representations of the woman initiator as a

deviation from normative femininities work to position ‘real’ women as recipients rather than initiators of sexual behaviour.

What further undermines the notion of women as sexual subjects is the construction of the “cleaner” as desperate and clumsy in her sexual advances. Her ridiculousness is compounded through the construction of her as older. As Fullmer, Shenk and Eastland (1999) argue, older women are seen as both asexual and sexually unattractive. This image of the woman initiator makes it impossible for the recipient to take sexual harassment seriously. This serves to construct the recipient as not a ‘true’ victim and the woman initiator as not a ‘true’ perpetrator because she is seen as laughable rather than as a ‘real’ threat.

## **Discussion**

In the constructions outlined above, the gendered dynamic between perpetrators and victims of sexual harassment appears to (re)produce heterosexualised power positionings of the feminine as passive and the masculine as active. Importantly, discourses of victimisation appear to be in implicit operation. As discussed above, victimisation discourses position sexually violent acts as non-normative and the absence of overt reference to victim identities works to locate sexual harassment as more normalised. However, the implicit circulation of victim/perpetrator positionings in these constructions normalise men as the only ‘true’ sexual aggressor and women as the only ‘true’ victim. As mentioned earlier, the connotations of both femininity and victimhood with passivity functions to reinforce images of women victims as powerless. As can be seen in the above constructions, this serves to constrain articulation of agentic sexual subjectivities for women as well as possibilities for resistance against sexual harassment. Similarly, the representation of masculine sexuality as always-already active leaves little room for men to withhold consent or acknowledge personal victimisation (see also, Lee, 2000; Gavey, 2005).

To move past powerless positionings for women victims, it seems pertinent to question the construction of women as always-already ‘true’ victims. The exploration of spaces where femininity and victimhood are decoupled in accounts of sexual violence may have transgressive potential. For example, whilst constructions of male victimisation presented here (re)produce heteronormative versions of masculine and feminine sexualities, there may also be potential space within such accounts for the articulation of passive versions of

masculine sexualities. It should be noted that in contrast (for example) to Felson (2002), I am not arguing for a gender-neutral approach to be taken to the problem of passivity. As illustrated in the above analysis, non-typical versions of victim/perpetrator relations do not imply that a gender-neutral power relation is in operation. Rather, I would argue that opening up spaces for further exploration of both male victims and woman perpetrators may contribute to the destabilisation of discourses which position men as always-already active agents and women as always-already passive recipients of (hetero)sex.

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