
A Narrative Study of Qualitative Data on Sexual Assault, Coercion and Harassment

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Abstract

A narrative analysis of 159 stories of unwanted sexual attention written by residents in single student residence halls is provided. Four story types are reviewed with separate consideration of the contributions of female and male residents. The patterns of sexual harassment in residence and their consequences for residents are described and discussed with particular reference to the implications for counselling and recommendations concerning the content and process of preventive education.

Résumé

Cette étude présente une analyse narrative de 159 histoires, dont le contenu porte sur une attention sexuelle non voulue, écrites par des résidents demeurant en résidence pour personnes seules. Quatre types d'histoires sont revues en utilisant des considérations différentes selon qu'elles s'appliquent aux contributions faites soit par des résidentes ou par des résidents. Les caractéristiques de l'harassment sexuel en résidence et leurs conséquences pour les résidents sont décrites et discutées. Elles se réfèrent particulièrement aux implications au niveau du counseling et des recommandations sont présentées concernant le contenu et le processus d'une éducation préventive.

INTRODUCTION

In their recent review of research on sexual harassment in the workplace, Fitzgerald and Shullman (1993) concluded that reported cases of harassment accounted for only about 5% of actual incidents, and that "sexual harassment represents a social problem of enormous proportions" (p. 7). A number of new Canadian studies have also identified very high incidence rates of sexual harassment and assault, both on university campuses and in public schools (Finkleman, 1992; Staton & Larkin, 1993). A recent survey of unwanted sexual attention in single student residence halls (Cairns & Wright, 1993) also reported sexual harassment incidence and prevalence rates which were virtually interchangeable with previously published rates from other Canadian and American samples (Koss, Gidycz & Wisniewski, 1987; Stanko, 1990). Such repeated, consistent findings of high rates of sexual harassment across diverse workplace and education samples sufficiently confirm the fact that sexual harassment and assault represent very real and important problems for young men and women in various educational settings in Canada and the United States (Cairns, 1993a, 1993b, in press; Fitzgerald & Shullman, 1993; Gutek & Koss, 1993), and imply that programs for preventive education and counselling related to sexual harassment are essential elements of

counselling services for these populations. This paper, therefore, uses the qualitative data obtained from a study of sexual harassment in student residences (Cairns, 1993a) to provide counsellors with guidelines for developing effective prevention and treatment strategies.

The survey instrument used in this study has been described in detail in previous articles (Cairns, 1993a, 1993b, in press). It contained several subsections dealing with residents' attitudes and beliefs about sexual harassment as well as sections documenting the occurrence rates of various harassment behaviours in residence. The survey also included a final question: "Please describe the single incident of unwanted sexual attention that you remember best or that affected you most strongly." Of the original study sample of 397 students (207 women and 190 men) living in single student residences, 159 (99 women and 60 men) wrote narrative descriptions in response to this question. This article is based on an analysis of these 159 narratives.

NARRATIVE ANALYSIS

All of the stories provided by the participants were transcribed from the original questionnaires onto two separate computer files by gender, with all other demographic information removed. The narratives were examined separately by gender because the quantitative data analyses based on numeric sections of the survey showed pervasive gender differences in beliefs about, attitudes toward, and experiences of sexual harassment. Once the stories had been collected in this way, they were reviewed using narrative analysis procedures (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Sarbin, 1986) to elicit common elements and patterns of behaviour across stories. The initial analysis indicated that, in terms of content, the participants had written four types of stories, three of which were common to both male and female narratives. These three common types included stories about coping with experiences of sexual assault, about coping with experiences of sexual coercion and about the importance of adherence to personal moral standards as a means of avoiding or coping with sexual harassment. The fourth type of story was written only by male residents, and concerned their reactions to incidents of harassment or assault against their female friends.

The narratives were next separated into the four content types so that each type could be separately analysed for common story elements. Each narrative was assumed to represent the lived moral experience of the participant and to contain interdependent elements associated with cognition, affect and connotation (Tappan, 1990). The stories were read and re-read in an effort to understand the thoughts they conveyed, the affective responses they described, and the individual's desired action and actual action in response to the events or plot contained in the story. The researcher using this analysis approach assumes that the narratives

will contain “a complex and complicated pattern of relationships between these three dimensions” (Tappan 1990, p. 243) and seeks to illuminate the pattern and its elements through successive readings.

The narratives belonging to each story content type were read through repeatedly to identify the patterns of cognition, affect and connotation described by the participants. The resulting descriptions of common story elements are presented below. A discussion and recommendations section follows each story type in order to keep the connection between the story patterns and the implications and recommendations as clear as possible. These recommendations and implications should be understood as tentative hypotheses intended to suggest directions for future research and to highlight important issues for counsellors to consider in working with clients of either gender who are dealing with (telling stories about) experiences of sexual assault, coercion and harassment.

Story Type 1: Responses to Sexual Assault

Thirteen of the 99 women and 4 of the 60 men who wrote narrative responses used these to describe their personal experiences of sexual assault. These figures suggest a lifetime sexual assault prevalence rate for the survey population of about 6% for women (13 of 207 total) and 2% for men (4 of 190 total). Twelve of the assaults on women had occurred prior to the woman’s moving into residence; only one had occurred on campus while the woman was living in residence, and none involved childhood assaults. In contrast, three of the men’s narratives described assaults which had occurred during childhood: the fourth story concerned a rape perpetrated by another adult male, which occurred when the respondent was living in residence but was off campus on vacation.

Women’s stories of assault. Women’s vulnerability to assault tended to continue into young adulthood in comparison to men’s experiences which tended more usually to be a childhood phenomenon. Two patterns predominated in women’s stories about assault; a pattern of describing assaults without identifying them as such, and a related pattern of confusion over the nature of consent to sexual activity. Both patterns tended to be associated with over-consumption of alcohol; for example, one male resident stated that:

When girls are drunk, which happens all the time in res, they are less resistant and boys are more aggressive. Sex sometimes occurs when an individual is passed out from drinking alcohol or drugs and does not realize it is happening.

Confusion about the nature of consent to sexual activity, and about whether she had failed to make her refusal sufficiently clear often characterized women’s accounts. The fact that a woman was drunk, and that her assailant generally was not, did not seem to help her to see the event as an assault. Some illustrative excerpts from the stories of female residents include the following: “. . . my boyfriend forcefully engaged in inter-

course with me. It occurred because I think he felt he 'needed it.' I was scared and felt I had to comply . . . later I vomited, cried, felt ashamed and awful"; and "I went back to the room of a guy I knew after a cabaret. We were both drunk. Things got steamy. I tried to stop him but it had gone pretty far and he wouldn't listen to me. I felt cheap and humiliated afterwards . . ."

Many of these young women were left with feelings of personal violation, which they then discredited and tried to disown because of their anger, disgust, and disappointment with themselves. The incidents were often clearly still very upsetting, painful, and confusing to the women involved: ". . . it made me feel really really bad and disgusting. I have tried hard to forget this incident. I have cried and felt I was a very unworthy person."

These patterns parallel findings elsewhere in the literature which indicate that women under-report assault and avoid seeking help in dealing with its effects (Lach & Gwartney-Gibbs, 1993; Gutek & Koss, 1993). Rather, they typically try to use indirect coping responses to deal with many forms of sexual harassment, including attempts to understand, excuse, or accept these behaviours in men. This pattern, however, is related to a continued or increased incidence and severity of harassment behaviours directed at the woman (Hotelling, 1991). Finkelman (1992) also noted the need to assist women in correctly assessing and labeling experiences of unwanted sexual attention.

With a few important exceptions, both female and male residents suffered many of the same after-effects of assault and attempted to use similar coping methods. Women, however, were particularly likely to struggle with self-blame, trying to understand "how I let this happen," and describing negative effects on self-esteem, loss of trust, withdrawal, depression, and feelings of shame, humiliation, and self-disgust. Often, these negative effects were accompanied by the women's efforts to find a reason for the experience having happened, or to find a "lesson" in it. One female resident, for instance, stated that: "It made me wiser about reality." Women seemed particularly inclined to look for such reasons if they could be used to re-establish some sense of personal control over future vulnerability, or enable them to understand the experiences of others more fully.

Men's stories of assault. As noted above, there was considerable commonality in male and female victims' descriptions of their responses to assault. One male victim, for example, recounted this incident: "As a child of 8 or 9 I was assaulted by a [male] baby-sitter. It occurred because [after continual pressure] I finally gave in. I felt strongly responsible because I had finally said 'yes'." However, there was also an important gender difference, in that male experiences of assault were same-sex experiences. As a result, the men questioned their own sexuality or

sexual orientation after being assaulted. Two men stated, for example, that the assault “. . . has made relations of a sexual nature with women difficult” and “. . . made me question my own masculinity and caused me to be more promiscuous toward women.”

Discussion and Recommendations Concerning Sexual Assault

The gendered differences in responses to sexual assault described above imply that campus-based services for victims of sexual assault may need to be differently focused for male and female survivors. Residence personnel should expect that there will be a small number of people in residence, both males and female, who have histories of sexual assault and who may still be suffering significant psychological distress as a result of these experiences. It could be useful to ensure that all notices concerning university support or counselling services available to survivors are phrased in gender-inclusive ways. If possible, counselling referrals for men could be made to individuals who have a knowledge of the unique characteristics of same-sex sexual assault. In the case of female disclosures, the most important focus of intervention may be the clarification of the incident as assault in order to alleviate the woman's self-blame. Preventive education in residence on these issues should be accompanied by information on the close connection between assault and alcohol abuse, especially for women. Additionally, such programs should assist young men and women towards the development of a stronger understanding of the definition of consent.

Story Type 2: Experiences of Sexual Coercion

Both women and men living in residence told numerous stories of experiencing sexual coercion. Again, the content of the stories showed some interesting areas of overlap as well as important differences in the students' stories about their experiences.

Women's stories of coercion. For women, the experience of male persistence and coercion was complex. Where men, in most instances of female persistence, seemed quite unambivalent about their right of refusal, many women expressed strong ambivalence and uncertainty about refusing male advances. This pattern was especially marked in instances where male persistence occurred within the context of a continuing relationship. While it was not a usual part of male experience to engage in unwanted sex due to a woman's persistence or coercion, either within committed relationships or in casual encounters, this pattern was very commonly reported by women in continuing relationships. Many women in this sample clearly saw the provision of sexual activity as a woman's obligation in a relationship with a man. They expected to have to provide sex as a condition of relationship maintenance and accepted

that this duty would sometimes need to be performed without reference to their own sexual interest at the time (Cairns, 1993b). Nevertheless, they felt demeaned by such encounters. The following sample statements from female respondents illustrate these problems and concerns: "We [her boyfriend] were in his room talking and he started to kiss me and more and I wanted him to stop but I just couldn't say no. I felt terrible and I hated it" and "It [experience of coercion] hurt emotionally because it felt like a betrayal of trust between us. . . . I also felt guilty after wondering how I could let someone talk me into doing something I really did not want to do."

The comments of a few women who had a stronger sense of their right to define their own sexuality and to refuse sexual access when their interest was not aroused make an interesting contrast to this pattern. One woman, for example, stated quite confidently; "If I am unsure of my feelings, I'll say no, no matter how persuasive the guy is."

Men's stories of coercion. Several men reported incidents in which women were clearly and inappropriately persistent and where they felt that the woman's behaviour constituted sexual harassment. The manner in which a man coped with this problem seemed to depend on the context in which it occurred. If the incident had been a relatively private one, limited to conversations or events which were not overheard by others, men generally reported that they either tolerated the attention but did not comply with it, or that they gave the woman a straightforward, unequivocal refusal. One man gave the following example:

There have been several propositions that I have received from women, especially after they have had a few drinks. Some gave up after a while . . . but others have persisted all night. In the end I have walked a few home, but never slept with them. I have felt pressure from both male and female friends for "not going for it."

Men's accounts of these experiences did not usually include comments on the feelings of the harasser; that is, whether or not the woman felt rejected by his refusal was not usually considered relevant or important. There were, in fact, no instances of a man giving in to a woman's pressure for unwanted sexual contact when the coercive behaviour occurred in private circumstances. Men's feelings in such instances typically involved distaste for the woman and maintenance or improvement of self-esteem and sense of control. In some of these instances, however, the woman involved subsequently engaged in public taunting and humiliation of the man for having refused her advances. This type of public behaviour, which often included accusing the man of being gay, had very negative effects on the male victim, in marked contrast to the relatively minor impact of the original offense. One such resident stated that:

. . . the next time I saw her she loudly exclaimed that I was "a geek, a virgin or something." I felt uncomfortable when she first propositioned me and I felt violated and humiliated after her comments to her friends. I was careful not to talk

to girls I didn't trust after that. I felt insecure about my ability to have the kind of life I wanted.

When the woman's sexual demands or accusations were made in a public context, they were often reinforced by male peers' observation of the incident and encouragement for the young man to comply with the harasser's demands. Peer pressure for sexual performance was reported exclusively by male residents. Several men had agreed to unwanted sexual activity in these circumstances, as well as in other situations where the original pressure came from the peer group rather than directly from a woman. In contrast to the private incidents described above, where the man refused and his refusal was accepted, those where sexual activity occurred due to pressure from the woman or from peers were much more likely to result in the man developing negative feelings about the woman or about himself.

Discussion and Recommendations Concerning Sexual Coercion

The qualitative data from the study provide some useful insights into the idiosyncratic nature and impact of the sexual harassment experiences which lie behind the usual, detailed statistical presentations of quantitative sexual harassment research. For example, no simple relationship was apparent in residents' stories of their experiences between the type of event the individual was describing and its reported personal consequences. Apparently the "averaged" or mean results of quantitative studies may be less than useful to counsellors and residence personnel. The time elapsed since an incident, and the type of incident were, however, sometimes important in the residents' stories. Psychological outcome for a particular individual, however, was not a simple function of "what happened," but a multifactorial blend of to whom it happened, at what developmental stage, and in what social or personal context. Gutek and Koss (1993), in their review of the literature on the effects of sexual harassment in the workplace, suggested that sexual harassment incidents may, for some individuals, trigger unresolved issues from earlier victimization experiences. Thus, regardless of the assumed severity of a harassment experience, counsellors and educators must be alert to the potential for multifaceted impacts upon the individuals involved.

Women's problems with self-blame and with understanding the issues involved in consent also suggest that an important, central focus of preventive education and counselling may need to be the continued reinforcement of this concept and of the definition of assault to both genders. The establishment of full equality for women and its accompanying certainty of ownership of one's own body may be critical to curbing the presence of sexual harassment both on the university campus and elsewhere, just as it is critical to the success of "safe sex" campaigns.

Given these gender differences in patterns of response to sexual coercion, differential interventions may be needed when counsellors and educators work with male and female clients around sexual harassment issues. While both men and women may benefit from learning that “no means no” applies in long term relationships as well as casual dates, men may benefit most by learning tactics to deal with public harassment and peer pressure for sexual performance, while women may benefit from education in privately-focused refusal skills.

It is important to remember as well that alcohol consumption was a contributing factor to both men’s misperceptions of women’s feelings and women’s decreased ability to act in a self-protective manner. Similar findings of a relationship between alcohol abuse, sexual misperceptions, and sexual assault were noted by Stockdale (1993). The fact that a woman had been drinking seemed to contribute to her greater self-blame and make it very difficult for her to label her experience as sexual assault. Prevention of sexual harassment is likely to continue to rely substantially on effective companion programs targeting substance abuse.

While the need for individually focused and gender sensitive preventive education programs is supported by these qualitative data, it is also important to keep in mind that the public harassment behaviours may reflect a problem with organizational norms as well as problems with individual behaviours and skill deficits. As Fitzgerald and Shullman (1993) point out in their review of organizational and environmental factors which affect the prevalence of sexual harassment, changes in organizational variables may hold the greatest promise for reducing overall rates of harassment. Thus, while these issues of individual deviance and victimization:

... cannot be ignored either in counseling or in education, sexual harassment is clearly also an ecological problem ... training becomes (or should become) more an organizational and sociocultural intervention than an individual skill building or information dissemination task. (Fitzgerald & Shullman, 1993, p. 17)

Story Type 3: Adherence to Personal Moral Standards

A narrative thread running through many of the descriptions of sexual coercion given by men and by women was the sense many victims experienced of having acted against their personal standards for appropriate sexual behaviour. A strong sense of personal standards acted as a central component in self-definition; one which allowed young women, in particular, to “own” their bodies and resist pressure for non-consensual sex. A number of comments to this effect were made by residents who had been able to refuse unwanted sexual experiences and who felt very strongly about the importance of individuals learning to develop and stick to their own moral principles with respect to sexual behaviour. One such woman

commented on how this development of a stronger sense of self and of personal values affected the sexual experiences of young women living in residence:

Lots of girls in residence are experimenting with their own values, wants and expectations during their first year. Once girls come to realize what they do/don't want, this changes and they only find themselves in situations they want to be in. For the most part, sexual harassment happens to women who are vulnerable due to their own questions and uncertainties about sex.

Similarly, a male resident, commenting on what he had learned from a negative personal experience where he had succumbed to peer pressure to have sex with a woman he didn't even like, described his realization that, "Inappropriateness can have as much to do with violation of one's own principles as with the violation of the principles of another." When residents were successful in resisting pressure and behaving in ways that were consistent with personal values, they often spoke of how their action had strengthened their personal self-esteem and interpersonal relationships. One man wrote:

... [because] I let her know that I preferred to end there while we were both drunk ... we're still good friends. Shows that my women friends don't have to worry about advances from me when we are drunk. Makes for better, stronger, and healthier relationships.

These comments concerning guiding principles are important for understanding the difficulty that so many of the young women who responded to this survey had in sorting out the issues of consent and self-blame described in the previous section. In many instances, these women's comments demonstrated a confusion that occurs because of conflict among competing sets of personal standards, rather than to an absence of such standards. The moral dilemma was between relationship maintenance and personal autonomy, a pattern which reflects the struggle of young women toward the development of an autonomous self within the context of relationship (Cairns, 1993b; Miller, 1988).

Discussion and Recommendations Concerning Adherence to Personal Standards

It is evident from the comments of many women in this study that they have internalized negative beliefs and appraisals about female/male relationships. The belief that sexual relationships between men and women are inherently adversarial (Stockdale, 1993), found here in women's stories about sexual obligation and lack of self-determination, may be understood as a reflection of on-going sociocultural messages directed at both men and women. These same messages may contribute to the unwillingness of victims to disclose their experiences or to take actions against offenders. Helping young men and women to clarify and strengthen their personal belief systems may assist them to develop

the self-assurance necessary to support refusal or unwanted sexual attentions.

Residents' represent a young and values-hungry group: many are away from home for the first time and facing their first values-related challenges in a new and complex social context. Preventive interventions that allow for mixed-group discussion of choice points in moral behaviour could be useful forums for practicing self-determination. The incidents used to focus such discussions may not need to be related to sexual harassment; rather, they could range across a variety of moral decision-making contexts. A more inclusive content might encourage broader attendance at such discussions and assist in the development of skills which would be useful across a variety of interpersonal situations.

Story Type 4: Men's Reactions to the Harassment of Female Friends

A number of male respondents described how their women friends had confided in them about their experiences of having been harassed, assaulted, or raped and how these discussions, and/or their personal observation of harassment, led to a gradual sensitization process for the men. Taken together, their descriptions suggested a three-staged process, with each successive stage associated with an increase in the man's awareness of the implications of sexual assault for women and in his development of personal resistance to a climate of harassment.

Stage 1. Anger, retaliation fantasies, helplessness. The initial stage was marked by a wish to retaliate against the offender, often combined with a sense of helplessness when the response could not be carried through. Two male residents described this stage as follows; "... after [she] told me ... I got the urge to find out who the guys were and go strangle the living shit out of them"; and "Female friends have told me about their being raped ... I have experienced instantaneous fury, but since the culprit wasn't around, this faded. I would then feel cold and numb. I would feel ashamed that I was not there to prevent it."

Stage 2. Surprise/realization. Men who have experienced this anger next began to recognize harassment incidents as they saw these occurring, independently of a close personal relationship with the victim. They were still shocked when they encountered an incident, but they had lost their ability to "not see" these events. However, their stories still retained a distancing tone, placing themselves as observers and lacking a sense of personal involvement in the incident. The following quotations illustrate these stories: "... learning a girl I knew was being sexually and physically abused by her boyfriend. I was pretty shocked to learn that my 'world' could be tainted by that problem. It was a rather eye-opening experience," and "In lab there is one fellow who puts females down ... saying

they are not capable of the work. His persistence lab after lab bothers me . . . I simply don't get involved."

Some of the men at this stage were made very uncomfortable by their growing awareness of the ongoing reality of women's experiences of harassment and assault. They had become fearful of inadvertently behaving in offensive ways. They saw that women were often reluctant to speak up when they found a behaviour offensive, and they expressed the hope that their women friends would tell them about any of their own behaviour which might be seen as harassment. Two residents commented that, "If I am giving unwanted sexual attention, probably unaware of it as such, I would like to be told so that I can learn not to do the same thing again," and "I am truly afraid of letting a girl know I like her as I do not want to appear to be sexually harassing. I am avoiding relationships partly due to this."

Stage 3. Personalization and empathy. A small number of male residents told stories about how they had moved past anger and realization to develop a fuller, deeper sense of what assault and harassment experiences are like for women. This understanding was accompanied by greater empathy with victims and greater anger at men who were insensitive on these topics. Typically, a man who had again observed a woman being harassed suddenly felt intensely ashamed of the behaviour of the harasser. He then identified across gender lines with the female victim instead of with the male harasser. Where this identification occurred, he usually then spoke of the victim as "a person" rather than as "a woman." An example of this pattern was a man who said: ". . . accumulation over the years of incidents I've seen . . . I do all I can to see her as a person with exactly the same rights and aspirations as I have."

Discussion and Recommendations Concerning Story Type 4

Support for the importance of the process of male empathy development is also found in Stockdale's (1993) work, where an inverse relationship was found between the presence of empathic perspective-taking in men and the adversarial attitudinal and belief systems which seem to predispose some men towards sexual harassment. The process of empathy development may also involve the alteration of the young man's perceptions of women from an "other" orientation to one which makes the woman part of the man's "moral community"; a subject in her own right. In discussing this aspect of male/female relationships, Vaux (1993) for example, has suggested that: "Sexual harassment is an instance of moral exclusion, whereby members of a relatively powerful group conduct their lives in their own interest, sometimes at the expense of a relatively less powerful group, in such a way that any harm is denied, diminished, or justified" (p. 132).

The development of empathy by some men in this study as a result of direct exposure to the experiences of female residents is an encouraging sign and suggests that counselling interventions or educational programs aimed at increasing such exposure may result in greater understanding of women's experiences and a consequent change in men's attitudes toward harassment and in a reduction in harassment behaviours. The research literature on harassment indicates that, in general, men typically hold more victim-blaming attitudes than women do, and more often perceive incidents of unwanted sexual attention as simply part of normal "dating" or sexual interactions between men and women (Cairns & Wright, 1993; Reilly, Lott & Gallogly, 1986). Stockdale (1993), writing about the role of men's misperceptions of women's friendliness, suggests that certain attitudinal or belief systems may lead men to perceptually distort women's behaviour and words in ways that allow them to rationalize their own sexually aggressive behaviour.

Educational interventions, then, could focus both on fostering men's recognition of the behaviours associated with sexual harassment, and on challenging men's attitudes and belief systems associated with their lack of recognition or accurate assessment and labeling of such behaviours (Finkelman, 1992). Again, the data from this study imply that small group discussions, where men and women can discuss their own experiences of harassment, may be a useful educational strategy for overcoming dysfunctional attitudes and behaviours. Such groups would be in sharp contrast to the more usual lecture-based approaches to prevention of sexual harassment, and to standard discussion groups which tend to be based on simulated "cases." The greater effort required to provide such small, mixed gender group discussion formats could be justified however, if many males find it difficult to accept or to learn from the more traditional approaches to preventing harassment.

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