

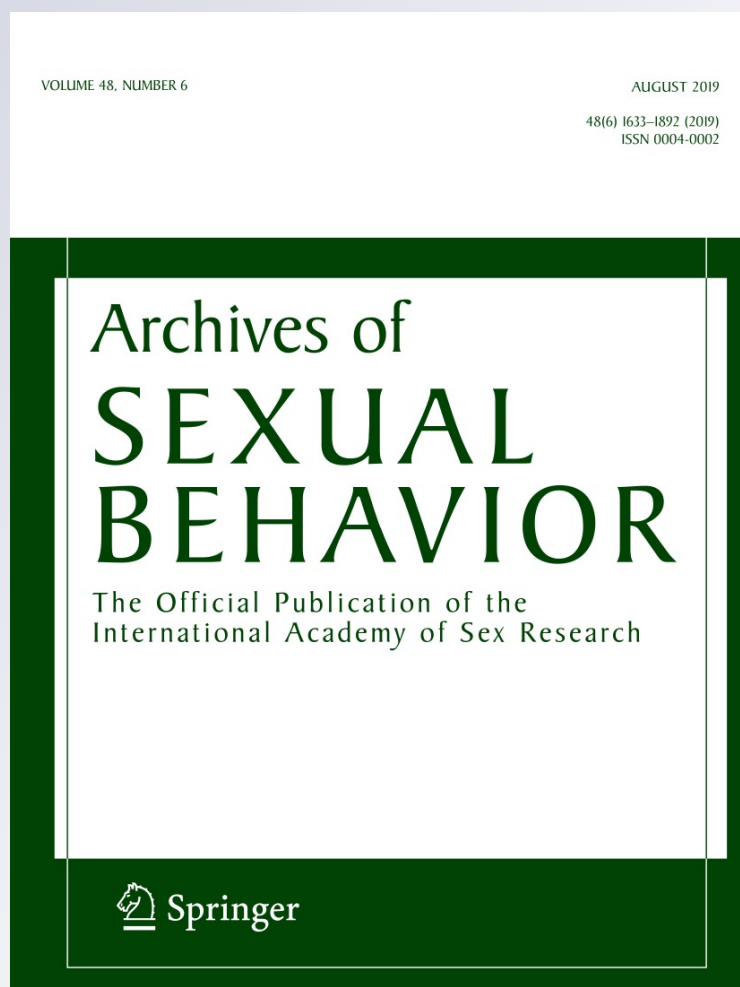
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Sexual Harassment: “I Just Do Not Feel Safe”

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Herbenick et al. (2019) correctly identify sexual harassment as a significant problem in our field and the need to address it. Nevertheless, sexual harassment is complicated, enmeshed in our culture, and effective solutions have been elusive for the sex field as well as the rest of society. Herbenick et al. may not realize it, but many of their proposed solutions have been tried before without much impact on the problem.

On November 3, 1994, the Board of Directors of the Society for the Scientific Study of Sexuality (SSSS) passed three motions (sexual harassment policy statements). The motions included the statement that SSSS “discourages in the strongest way any pattern of unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, and other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature that has the effect of creating an intimidating, hostile or offensive environment at functions that are sponsored by The Society” (SSSS, 1997, p. 77). In response to the policy, the SSSS Western Region Council mandated that conference registration packets include flyers, which detailed the sexual harassment policy and information on how to make a complaint (personal communication, M. Bontorin, O. Perez-Stabile Cox, March 31, 2019). After a few years, the flyers were abandoned. It seemed they created the impression that the conferences were not safe and policy was stifling appropriate interactions among conference attendees, but without much effect on the incidence of sexual harassment. I expect the Herbenick et al. suggestions will have a similar effect. The belief that we will all change now that the sexual harassment problem has been pointed out—yet again—seems improbable and naïve.

The tone of the Guest Editorial seemed angry and condescending to me. I believe Herbenick et al. would galvanize more interest in changing the culture at our conferences with a positive approach (i.e., how to do it right) rather than the negative approach (i.e., this is what you are doing wrong).

Herbenick et al. define sexual harassment as “derogating someone on the basis of their gender/sex or violations of their gender/sex norms.” They list a number of possible examples of how one group may sexually harass another group, but oddly there is no mention of the possibility that women could harass men. That omission is glaring.

Are women who flirt with men to get something they want (be on my dissertation committee, can I work on that grant, will you supervise me) also guilty of sexual harassment? Does someone who observes the flirting get to accuse either or both of them with sexual harassment for lost opportunities, real or imagined? Does the outrage of an observer take precedence over the rights of the individuals to explore a connection? Do we assume that if the “victim” or the bystander feels an interaction is inappropriate, it is the “perpetrator” who needs to change? Herbenick et al. are silent about how to approach these complex situations.

I am aware of male sexologists who have been harassed by women and a few incidents of false accusations. I am aware of men who have been fired or disciplined by their departments for consensual sexual contacts, for condoning consensual sexual interactions, or for speech that was ambiguous.

Herbenick et al. appropriately identify sexual harassment as a reason students do not attend our conferences. I am also aware of young professionals who were told by more established professionals that their dress was inappropriate for a scientific meeting. Their skirt was too short, neckline too plunging, pants too tight, or other fashion faux pas. These established sexologists intimated that no one would take the younger professional seriously “dressed like that.” Some of these younger professionals also decided not to attend future conferences, indicating that they felt they were being scolded and harassed for expressing themselves. Sexual harassment comes in many flavors. For the record, I am unaware of any of the Guest Editorial authors participating in this behavior.

Many years ago, I had a discussion with a female leader of a sexuality organization about how to evaluate sexual harassment accusations. I posed this hypothetical: If an observer complains that a male co-worker is sexually harassing a female co-worker by repeatedly inviting her to lunch (with others), is that sexual

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harassment? The woman said “probably.” Then, I asked, if it were a female co-worker repeatedly inviting another female co-worker to lunch (with others), is that sexual harassment? The woman said “possibly.” And finally, I asked if the female co-worker were a lesbian, would that make it more or less likely that the invitations were sexual harassment? The woman said “more.” So, I told her “You are judging people on the basis of their gender and sexual orientation.” The woman was obviously embarrassed as she tried to backtrack. None of us, including Herbenick et al., can make these judgments without accessing our own biases about race, gender, sexual orientation, age, etc.

I do not want to call what I often experience at conferences sexual harassment. Nevertheless, I often experience ad hominem attacks, anger over my research (Why would you study that? Why are you defending those people?), and comments denigrating my presumed sexuality. Some presentations at our conferences have disparaged gratuitously the sexuality of my patients, friends, colleagues, and those that participate in my research. Just imagine the outrage if I studied gay sexuality. These sex negative attitudes which abound at our conferences are yet another form of harassment, no less hurtful than the sexual harassment outlined in the Guest Editorial. If we are serious about confronting sexual harassment, we need to confront all of it.

As a self-identified sexologist, I recognize that people may overly sexualize any act or statement I make. Maybe a hug that lasts a moment too long, a comment taken out of context, could lead the sexual harassment police looking askance at me. If I want to be taken seriously, I need to avoid all of that, so I do. I have decreased the number of conferences I attend. When I do go, I avoid interactions with students and anyone I do not know well. Any interactions that I cannot avoid, I strive to have others present and always meet in public places. I routinely turn down offers to be on dissertation and thesis committees. I go to dinner with old friends and rarely make any new contacts at a conference. I am always on guard, it is not enjoyable, and I do not feel safe. The Herbenick et al. Guest Editorial has snuffed out any thought I might have had of attending conferences this year, or maybe ever.

Some of you may know that I have degrees in both physics and social work. After a big examination in physics, we partied. We invited the professor, drank a lot, and discussed physics. After a big examination in social work, we sipped wine

and bitched about the department without any faculty in sight. When I started in sexology, it was more like physics. It is now more like social work.

Before the Internet, conferences were a place to make professional (and yes, personal) contacts, find out about new research, debate with colleagues, and connect with people who share your interests. Now they have become places where a misconstrued comment can end a career. So why would people want to spend thousands of dollars and their precious time to attend?

It is not clear what Herbenick et al. hoped to achieve with their Guest Editorial. Remind us once again that this is a problem, intimidate conference attendees to accept some code of conduct promulgated by the elders of the field, or just bitch about the inequities of life? I am not suggesting any of their complaints are frivolous, but I am more interested in what will result in substantive change. I would prefer we not repeat failed strategies or impose dogmatic solutions.

When I first read the Herbenick et al. Guest Editorial, I thought I must be crazy to respond. All that could happen is my getting trashed as another clueless privileged white male who does not understand the problem. Herbenick et al. should be careful not to ignore the input of men—ignoring the input of women led to the entrenchment of sexual harassment in our conferences and society. I doubt that my comments will be taken seriously; the anger generated by this issue is just too pervasive. Herbenick et al. might surprise me, but I doubt it.

What do I suggest? I think we should do what we do best: study sexual harassment scientifically, and study what works to combat it. Study sexual harassment objectively and from all perspectives.

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