

**Submitted to *American Sociological Review* but rejected as “mean spirited” and “not up to the standard of ASR articles.” But no specific criticisms given!!**

## **Theorizing Sexual Harassment: Comment on Uggen and Blackstone**

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In their article “Sexual Harassment as a Gendered Expression of Power” (*ASR* 69:64-92, 2004), Uggen and Blackstone draw on social constructionist theory in general, and Catharine MacKinnon in particular, to argue that sexual harassment is a social construct and an expression of power relations. They do not consider other possible theoretical interpretations, including the rather obvious notion that sexual harassment is motivated by the desire for sex. Their argument thus closely parallels the classical feminist theory of rape, which holds that it is an expression of power rather than a sexual motive. The authors attempt to test their argument through quantitative analyses of the Youth Development Study, a longitudinal investigation of approximately 1,000 ninth-graders in St. Paul, Minnesota, that began in 1988. It is my contention that the arguments and results generated by these authors are either obvious, trivial, or more logically interpreted from one or more alternative theoretical perspectives.

One hypothesis tested by the authors is that females are more likely to report sexual harassment than males. Results here are mixed. When respondents were asked to report experiencing any of six behaviors during high school – offensive jokes, remarks, or gossip; direct questioning about one’s private life; invasion of one’s personal space; unwanted touching; offensive pictures, posters, or other materials; or physical assault by a co-worker, boss, or supervisor – males were actually slightly more likely than females to report such behavior (38% vs. 33%). When respondents were asked whether they experienced any of these behaviors since high school, females were just slightly more likely to report one or more of them (60% vs. 58%). These data are not consistent with the general hypothesis.

However, when respondents were asked about what the authors refer to as “core indicators” of harassment – unwanted touching or invasion of personal space – then females were more likely to report them (32% vs. 18%). Females were also more likely to *subjectively feel* that the behaviors they reported constituted harassment (33% vs. 14%). But is there anything surprising in these results, since numerous studies (reviewed in Browne, 1997) have already found even larger male-female differences in reported sexual harassment than what Uggen and Blackstone find? Regarding the next to last set of results, in his book *The Evolution of Human Sexuality* (1979), the anthropologist Donald Symons reports that males are the more sexually aggressive sex in all known societies, so it is entirely predictable that males would be more likely than females to engage in more explicit forms of sexual behavior, in the workplace or anywhere else. Symons uses Darwinian evolutionary biology to guide his thinking about male-female differences in sexual behavior, and that mode of thinking would seem to be appropriate here. In this light, the male-female differences reported by Uggen and Blackstone are not gendered constructions at all, but simply behaviors that spring from biological differences between the sexes (cf. Studd and Gattiker, 1991; Browne, 1997). The last set of results makes perfect sense in Darwinian terms as well. Females in all known societies are, on average, more reticent concerning sexuality, and thus would be more likely to resist and “find offensive” male advances than males would be to resist and “find offensive” female

advances. From this perspective, it is only too obvious that females would be more likely than males to report sexual overtures as unwanted and harassing. The authors, of course, will disagree with this interpretation, but nothing in their data shows that it is any less compelling than their constructionist interpretation. They provide no data at all to demonstrate the superiority of the latter over a Darwinian interpretation, or indeed over other possible interpretations.

The authors also report an age effect in sexual harassment. About 25 percent of adolescent females were placed within the category that Uggen and Blackstone labeled “high harassment,” but when they reached adulthood 31 percent of the females were placed in this category. Similarly for males: 23 percent of adolescent males were placed in the high harassment category, but 31 percent of adult males were. But, again, what can be surprising or even interesting about such findings? The age differences are relatively small and therefore of modest significance. And *of course* young adults would be more likely to report more sexual harassment, *since they have lived longer and thus had more time for that behavior to be directed toward them*. The greater the number of “person-years,” the greater the likelihood of people experiencing a wide range of behaviors, sexual harassment included. Somewhat more interestingly, the authors report that as females enter adulthood they are more likely to experience the classic markers of sexual harassment, but males are not. Again, this is perfectly interpretable from the Darwinian perspective of men’s greater interest in actual sexual behavior rather than just talk or jokes. Nothing in the authors’ data suggests the superiority of a constructionist perspective.

A key part of Uggen and Blackstone’s article is their argument for the role of workplace power. The authors hypothesize that persons with lower workplace status and less workplace power will be more likely to experience sexual harassment. Here they get inconsistent results. They find that individuals with less financial security in the workplace are more likely to report harassment, but, contrary to expectations, individuals report more sexual harassment if they have greater *authority* in the workplace. The first finding is easily interpretable from a rational choice perspective: persons higher in a social hierarchy will experience fewer costs of risky behavior – are less likely to be reported and punished – than persons lower in that hierarchy. But the second finding makes no obvious sense from that perspective, and even less sense from the authors’ constructionist perspective, which makes power differences critical to gender relations.

In conclusion, Uggen and Blackstone’s article seems to be guided more by political ideology and preconceived theoretical preferences than by an objective scientific analysis of data with the conclusions suspended until the data are in. The philosopher Maurice Mandelbaum once said that philosophers put in at the beginning the assumptions they need to get out at the end what they know in advance they want. Sociologists often do the same, as Uggen and Blackstone have demonstrated here. But their findings, to the extent that they are not trivial and obvious (or, in one case, internally contradictory), lend no more support to a constructionist view of sexual harassment than to other possible views, such as a Darwinian evolutionary view. The authors bemoan the lack of attention to sexual harassment in the mainstream sociological journals. Their attempt to redress that problem is, to say the least, hardly an auspicious start.

## References

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