

Sexual Harassment and Sadomasochism

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Although many women experience harmful behaviors that fit the legal definition of sexual harassment, very few ever label their experiences as such. I explore how psychological ambivalence expressed as sadomasochism may account for some of this gap. Following Lynn Chancer, I argue that certain structural circumstances characteristic of highly stratified bureaucratic organizations may promote these psychological responses. After discussing two illustrations of this dynamic, I draw out the implications for sexual harassment theory and policy.

Sexual harassment is a vexing problem for social science researchers. Surveys show that a huge proportion of women encounter unwanted and distressing sexual behaviors at work, with current estimates ranging between 42 and 90 percent (Terpstra and Baker 1989; Welsh 1999). But when women are asked specifically if they have experienced sexual harassment, a very different story emerges. Michele Paludi and Richard Barickman write that “the great majority of women who are abused by behavior that fits legal definitions of sexual harassment—and who are traumatized by the experience—do not label what has happened to them sexual harassment” (1991, 68).

Why are so many women reluctant to label their experiences as sexual harassment? One explanation popular among some feminist researchers is that women subjected to these behaviors are too oppressed, hopeless, or brainwashed either to recognize the problem or to do anything about it. This perspective is often attributed to Catharine MacKinnon (1979), whose work on the topic was crucial in characterizing sexual harassment as a form of illegal discrimination. MacKinnon and other radical feminists see sexual harassment as a stark expression of male domination and control over women’s sexuality. These theorists question whether a feminist heterosexual desire is even possible under conditions of patriarchy (Hollway 1996). Any woman who purports to enjoy (hetero)sexualized

interactions, especially in work organizations controlled by men, is suspected of being a victim of false consciousness.

The other major explanation that some feminists give for the discrepancy between researcher reports and self-reports of sexual harassment is the “libertarian” view. According to Wendy Chapkis (1997), libertarians, who include Camille Paglia and Katie Roiphe, consider sexuality an underrated and untapped source of women’s power. Libertarians criticize MacKinnon’s so-called “victim” feminism for failing to recognize the control women actually wield in their (hetero)sexual relationships, and the pleasure that they derive from being the objects of men’s sexual desire. From this “pro-sex” perspective, sexual harassment is a relatively uncommon occurrence, and when it does happen, it is more like a temporary (albeit inevitable) lapse of good manners than an institutionalized expression of male domination. Thus, women don’t label their experiences as sexual harassment because unlike “heterophobic” researchers (Patai 1998), they mostly enjoy their sexual relationships at work, even those encounters that turn out badly. (Excellent discussions of the radical feminist and libertarian perspectives on sex are found in Chancer 1998; Chapkis 1997; and LeMoncheck, 1997a.)

One problem with both of these perspectives is that they ignore the fact that sexual behaviors rarely have unambiguous meanings, and they typically evoke ambivalent responses (Fiske and Glick 1996; Hollway and Jefferson 1996). Sexual interactions can be both empowering and diminishing to women. Workers who are subjected to sexual innuendos, requests, and touching may feel simultaneously degraded and admired, and they may respond with both shame and longing. Confronted with these contradictory feelings, it is not surprising that some people would be hesitant to label their experiences as sexual harassment.

In this paper, I discuss psychological ambivalence and how it may shape women’s responses to sexual harassment. I employ the technical meaning of ambivalence from psychoanalytic theory as the conflicting feelings of love and hate that typically arise in situations of extreme dependency (Smelser 1998). When alloyed with eroticism, ambivalence is sometimes expressed in the form of a sadomasochistic relationship, wherein the dominant partner takes pleasure in behaving brutally and callously toward the subordinated one, seemingly with full consent. I will argue, following Chancer (1992), that many workplaces are organized in ways that promote such forms of erotic domination. I will discuss two scenarios that may be especially prone to the formation of these relationship dynamics: students involved with their professors, and workers engaged in sexualized service work. I argue that understanding these dynamics can help to explain why some women might refrain from formally resisting sexual harassment.

I realize that psychoanalytic theory has its own ambivalent relationship to feminism, and that by using it I am taking an unconventional approach to understanding sexual harassment. (For an excellent historical overview of the relationship between feminism and psychoanalysis, see Buhle 1998.) I argue in this paper that psychoanalytic theory can help to shed light on the special cases of women students and workers who consent to their sexual subordination. It is important to emphasize that using this theory to explain why some women might seek out and even desire relationships of erotic domination does not deny the fact that some—perhaps even the majority—of women are sexually harassed without their consent. We know that this is an all-too-common experience of employed women. As Adrienne Rich (1980) has argued, heterosexuality is compulsory in our society, and it is enforced by men's domination of women in all the major social institutions, including most workplaces. But in this paper I am interested in investigating those specific cases where women are not forced into sexual subordination. Why is it the case, as Rosemary Pringle writes, that many women are not “yanked screaming into compulsory heterosexuality” (1988, 95), but instead voluntarily submit to relationships of erotic domination?

Even so, examining the internal side of sexual harassment is a potentially dangerous move for feminists because it may seem to condone male violence. Feminist psychoanalyst Nancy Chodorow cautions that “there is always a danger that a focus on internality shifts the blame and relieves those with power and authority from the burden of instituting change” (2000, 1). Likewise, Jessica Benjamin writes,

A major tendency in feminism has constructed the problem of domination as a drama of female vulnerability victimized by male aggression. Even the more sophisticated feminist thinkers frequently shy away from the analysis of submission, for fear that in admitting women's participation in the relationship of domination, the onus of responsibility will appear to shift from men to women, and the moral victory from women to men. (1988, 9)

By investigating the internal side to sexual harassment, my goal, like that of these other feminist psychoanalytic sociologists, is not to deny or justify the existence of men's institutionalized power over women. Rather the aim is to deepen our understanding of gender domination by going beyond simple depictions of women as either agents of free choice or as passive victims. From the psychoanalytic perspective, “choice” is a problematic term. The choices we make—about love, work, and anything else—are always constrained by inner as well as external conditions; as Chodorow writes, “any choice or behavior is

a complexly created compromise formation that attempts to manage anxiety or other threatening affects" (2000, 7). Yet even as it acknowledges these constraints, psychoanalytic theory emphasizes active subjectivity over victimhood. From the psychoanalytic perspective, we as individuals respond creatively and imaginatively—although not always consciously—to the social environments that we encounter. While the material world impinges on us in ways we cannot always control, we are not merely responsive or adaptive creatures. Psychoanalytic sociologist Jeffrey Prager describes human subjectivity as "interpretive, meaning-making, symbolizing"; we "respond creatively and positively to difficult, even horrible pasts" (1998, 132, 174). This theoretical approach thus preserves a place for women's agency and rationality without denying the prevalence of sexual harassment and exploitation in many women's working lives.

To those feminists who argue that psychoanalysis is irredeemably sexist and can do nothing but reinscribe male domination, I can only offer references to feminist writers who disagree. A full-fledged feminist defense of the theory is beyond the scope of this short paper.

PSYCHOLOGICAL AMBIVALENCE AND SADMASOCHISTIC DESIRE

In situations of high dependency on another, it is not uncommon for people to experience extreme feelings of both love and hate. The quintessential expression of this ambivalence is the child's feelings toward his or her parents and siblings (Smelser 1998, 176). These relationships are not optional for the child; children are "trapped" in their families on whom they depend for their very survival. Consequently, childhood is characterized by intense ambivalence. As Freud noted, "Early object-cathexes are regularly ambivalent to a high degree. A powerful tendency to aggressiveness is always present beside a powerful love, and the more passionately a child loves its object the more sensitive does it become to disappointments and frustrations from that object" (1965, 109). Although childhood is an extreme case, Freudians argue that these intense feelings of ambivalence are likely to arise in any relationship where people are not free to leave for any number of reasons, including political, ideological, and emotional ones (Smelser 1998, 181).

When these "mandatory" relationships are eroticized (which Freud believed they always were in childhood, but are not necessarily so in adulthood), they may elicit a sadomasochistic dynamic. This typically occurs if one person feels strong sexual desire for another, but that desire is not reciprocated or it is trivialized or ignored. In a sadomasochistic pairing, one partner (the sadist) is considered by both to be stronger, smarter, or somehow more talented, gifted, and loveable than the other. The person in the masochistic position is deemed weaker, dependent, and less worthy than the sadist. Importantly, both partners share these perceptions of each other. In the classic sadomasochistic scenario,

the “weaker” or subordinate person longs for the love of the stronger, more deserving and worthy other, and is willing to do anything to obtain that love. The sadist typically refuses to grant this love, or grants it only sparingly and intermittently, which makes the masochist try even harder to please the sadist. (Ideal romantic love, which entails longing for a perfect, powerful, yet aloof lover, is a paradigmatic expression of this dynamic). The sadist participates in this push-pull dance because he or she hopes to prove his or her superiority and omnipotence by dominating the other person. But as long as the subordinated person is considered unworthy, any confirmation of power garnered in this fashion is ultimately unsatisfying, and results in further efforts by the sadist to punish, diminish, and dominate the other. Masochists accept this mistreatment because they consider themselves fundamentally unworthy of love and respect (they have very low self-esteem), and because they see the sadist as their only hope for redemption from their wretched condition.

It is important to distinguish my use of the term sadomasochism from other definitions and usages. In the clinically based psychoanalytic literature, “sado-masochism” refers to a complex character disposition in which an individual gains sexual pleasure from punishing or by being punished by others; sometimes this condition is treated as a psychological pathology. Another use of the term is to describe theatrical play-acting involving props such as whips and chains and leather clothing. Individuals who enjoy this play or incorporate these elements in their dress may or may not be driven by underlying sadomasochistic character dispositions. In the 1980s, some feminists defended lesbian sadomasochism by pointing out that they were merely acting out fantasies. In lesbian sadomasochism, they argued, both parties acknowledge each other’s limits, which they typically indicate to each other by some “time-out” signal or maneuver that they agree beforehand to respect (Chancer 1998, 212). In contrast, I am using the term to refer to a specific relationship dynamic that does not necessarily involve either the character traits labeled “pathological” by clinicians, or the mutually respectful sex play defended by some feminists. Following Chancer and Benjamin, I am using the term to describe an erotically charged relationship in which one individual assumes a dominant and controlling position, and the other willingly submits to sexual subordination.

The opposite of a sadomasochistic relationship is one that involves mutual recognition. To recognize another is to “affirm, validate, acknowledge, know, accept, understand, empathize, take in, tolerate, appreciate, see, identify with, find familiar . . . love” (Benjamin 1988, 15–16). In relationships involving mutual recognition, the partners experience profound respect, desire, and appreciation for each other. According to Benjamin (1988), we actually have a built-in psychological need for mutual recognition, but achieving it in a sexual relationship is very difficult. It requires both partners to accept and acknowledge our ambivalent feelings toward each other. It demands a willingness to always

consider the other person's needs and desires as we pursue our own satisfaction. And it requires an appreciation of our paradoxical dependency on the other person to acknowledge our independence and separateness from them.

Ironically, both partners in a sadomasochistic dynamic are seeking recognition. But they are unable either to recognize or to be recognized by each other because they cannot accept or even acknowledge their feelings of ambivalence. Instead they engage in the psychological defense of splitting. To vastly oversimplify this important concept, splitting occurs when people project their aggressive feelings and loving feelings onto differentiated objects. Instead of accepting that there are good and bad qualities in all people, sometimes we divide the social world into "good guys" and "bad guys," which finesses our uncomfortable ambivalent feelings. Sadomasochism is a form of splitting in which the partners agree that the masochist is "all bad" and the sadist is "all good." Benjamin labels this splitting "false differentiation." Although the self and other are treated as separate and distinct beings—they are "differentiated" from each other and not merged into one—this is accomplished by falsely denying all of the good qualities in the masochist and all the bad qualities in the sadist. True differentiation, by contrast, occurs when mutual recognition is achieved and the partners accept both the shortcomings and the virtues of each other.

Unfortunately, the "true differentiation" of mutual recognition is much harder to achieve than the "false differentiation" of sadomasochism. In a sexual relationship the temptation is always great to try to force one's will on the other, or to give oneself over entirely to the will of the other. There is something deeply gratifying about these possibilities. They are psychologically analogous to the drive for omnipotence on the one hand, and total merging and assimilation on the other. These two goals, which have their origins in infancy, correspond to "the zero point of tension between self and other" (Benjamin 1988, 67). To illustrate this idea, imagine a see-saw: The "at rest" position is one person up; the other down. In contrast, the mutual recognition that occurs when the two partners are "in balance" requires a commitment to constant negotiation and communication. Because sadomasochism is psychologically "easier" to achieve than mutual recognition, sexual relationships are always vulnerable to breaking down into subordination and domination.

SADOMASOCHISM IN THE WORKPLACE

Lynn Chancer (1992, 1998) argues that sadomasochistic dynamics can be found throughout society, and not only in intimate personal relationships. Workplaces are especially prone to producing these dynamics. It is commonplace to find sadistic bosses who seem to enjoy harassing workers and sycophantic employees who cater to their bosses' arbitrary whims. Sylvia Gherardi writes about such emotionally intense and often highly sexualized workplace relationships. She

finds in many workplaces an “ambiguous and uneasy relationship between violence and pleasure, between unjustified command and the complicity that encourages it, the seduction of violence sublimated in the ordinary enactment of authority” (1995, 62).

According to Chancer, such sadomasochistic relationships are sometimes elicited by bureaucratic organizations. She finds elements of sadomasochism in both erotic and nonerotic forms of domination, but I will use her analysis to focus on the conditions that promote the expression of specifically erotic domination in work organizations.

Chancer maintains that individuals are not psychologically fated to assume either a sadistic or masochistic position. Following Freud, she argues that all people are capable of both roles and that shifting back and forth is common, although some people may lean towards prevailing sadism or prevailing masochism due to prior experience and socialization. (There is a gendered component to these experiences, which I will return to shortly.) Chancer argues that bureaucracies with the right mix of structural features can bring out sadistic and masochistic impulses in all of us. Among the features she lists are:

- Strict hierarchy, coupled with the belief that those in higher positions are more deserving, worthy, or essential to the organization than those at the bottom ranks.
- Restrictions on autonomy and freedom of expression. The subordinates feel they cannot complain to the boss, or break away at will without suffering some sort of punishment or reprisal. This can be seen in cases where efforts to start a union result in dismissal or intimidation.
- Although all levels of the hierarchy are necessary and all members of the organization are interdependent, the superordinates refuse to acknowledge their dependency on the subordinates. Workers are treated as replaceable and inessential, when in fact, the organization could not function without them. Workers on the other hand admit their dependency on their bosses, and strive for their approval, but their efforts are rewarded only arbitrarily and intermittently.
- Supervisors are made to feel insecure in their power. They may be required to meet unrealistic production quotas or work schedules. Consequently, they are never satisfied with the efforts or abilities of those working for them. They are encouraged to seek out new methods of control, such as hiring management consultants and investing in new surveillance technologies, to procure more power over workers. (1998, 216–19)

Chancer argues that organizations with these qualities are likely to elicit sado-masochistic dynamics. Under these conditions, workers are likely to assume the masochistic position, and bosses, the sadistic one. In complex bureaucracies, individuals may find themselves both bosses and subordinates. The lawyer may be the boss of the paralegal, who in turn is the boss of the secretary. The shifting between the sadistic and masochistic modes that this can entail serves to tie individuals even more tenaciously to bureaucratic structures, because it permits them to experience the social psychological gratifications associated with both positions (Chancer 1992, 100).

Chancer lists these and other characteristics of sadomasochism-inducing bureaucracies to distinguish them from organizations less likely to elicit these dynamics. In other words, she believes that not all bureaucracies provide the conditions conducive for sadomasochism to emerge. But the conditions she lists are common enough in capitalist societies for her to conclude that they are the rule rather than the exception. She writes, "Like the sadist and the masochist, boss and workers under capitalistic conditions have a relationship that by its very structure discourages mutual recognition" (1998, 224).

EROTIC DOMINATION IN UNIVERSITIES

One type of bureaucratic organization that exhibits many of the characteristics Chancer describes is the university. When interpersonal relationships between faculty and students take on a specifically sexual or erotic character, they often develop sadomasochistic aspects. This potential is there because in colleges and universities professors are more powerful than students, their opinions are considered more valuable, and their demands more credible and reasonable. Students often idealize their professors and seek recognition from them, sometimes in sexual ways. Likewise, some male professors seek confirmation of their power and omniscience, including sometimes their sexual virility, from their students. These conditions make sexual relationships between students and professors vulnerable to developing sadomasochistic dynamics, especially if the student's needs and desires are not considered on a par with the professor's demands. If the student is considered less worthy than the professor, then no matter how intensely she (or occasionally he) worships the professor, the professor is unlikely to be satisfied by the attention, and will move on to other conquests. Not surprisingly, then, professor-student affairs tend to be brief and often end badly, leaving one of the parties—usually the student—angry, bitter, and emotionally devastated (Schulhofer 1998, 189).

Not all professor-student affairs end in this way. Some academics (including some feminists) defend these relationships, calling them consensual and mutually fulfilling, or at least, no different than the vast majority of other sexual relationships that involve individuals with different amounts of power (see

Schulhofer 1998, 194–95). These arguments are plausible, since mutual recognition is always a possible and desirable goal in any relationship. But granted the structural conditions of university bureaucracies, the chances of achieving mutual recognition between faculty and students are not high, and damage to students is very likely.

In those instances when faculty-student affairs do turn out badly, a charge of sexual harassment is sometimes appropriate. College campuses throughout the country have undertaken concerted efforts to raise awareness about this possibility, and to implement procedures to deal with the problem. Some campuses have instituted “amorous relations” policies, in addition to their sexual harassment policies, to prohibit consensual unions between faculty members and students under their direct supervision. These policies are designed in part to diminish the possibility of sexual harassment (they are also meant to discourage favoritism and conflict-of-interest).

Still, even if there are policies in place, when painful break-ups and clear evidence of mistreatment by the professor occur, many students do not complain of sexual harassment. In fact, students often feel responsible for what happened. Billie Dzeich and Linda Weiner describe this typical scenario:

Some students are either too naive or too self-deluded to admit that sexual exploitation can occur in their relationships with teachers. The students explain their intimate relationships with faculty in idealistic terms. They use hyperbole to describe the professor—he has “given life meaning,” he has taught them “what it is to be an adult.” They may know the definition of harassment, but what happens to them is “different” or “special.” A woman engaging in this type of denial would be wounded if anyone suggested that a forty-year-old professor who works in a highly cerebral environment must have interest in something other than the stimulation of her mind. Confronted with her hero’s record of previous lechery charges, she would refuse to accept the accusation. This naivete makes her especially vulnerable to manipulation. (1984, 84)

The theory of sadomasochism may help to explain some students’ unwillingness to step forward and complain about sexual harassment under these circumstances. Typically, the student has entered the sexual relationship with a professor in a search for recognition; that is, an acknowledgment of personhood, agency, and respect from an idealized other. But instead of receiving recognition, the student may be treated as an inferior “sex object” unworthy of the professor’s love and respect. If the student truly believes that the professor is the more worthy and deserving partner (a point of view that is institutionalized in universities), then a downward spiral of self-respect may ensue.

University sexual harassment policies that require students to renounce any responsibility—indeed any agency—in their experiences with the harassing professor may unwittingly promote this sadomasochistic dynamic. These policies define the student as a weak, vulnerable, dependent person victimized by the stronger, smarter, more manipulative and autonomous professor. As the above quoted passage suggests, administrators of sexual harassment policies may expect students to accede to their “naivete” for thinking that they are intellectual equals of professors in order to pursue a charge of sexual harassment. Students also may have to prove that they were hurt and distressed by the professor’s behaviors for their claim to be taken seriously. Some students may refuse this depiction of themselves and refrain from pressing charges against their professors. Calling the relationship “sexual harassment” would force the student to concede that she was seduced by a professor who really didn’t care about her, which would confirm that she is indeed unworthy of recognition, leaving her potentially more diminished than before the experience. Students may decide instead to simply walk away, resigned to deal with their ambivalent feelings, in the hope of salvaging some self-esteem.

INSTITUTIONALIZED SADMASOCHISM IN THE WORKPLACE

The professor-student relationship is not by definition an erotic one (although some writers disagree, for example, Gallop 1997; Kincaid 1997). In any case, professional ethics increasingly forbid such sexual liaisons. But there are organizations that explicitly promote a sexual dimension between supervisors, clients, and workers. Such is the case in sexualized service work, jobs that cover the range from prostitution and stripping to working for organizations that emphasize and exploit the sexual attractiveness of employees. These jobs may institutionalize the conditions that produce erotic domination.

Sexualized service work involves a type of emotional labor, the term that Arlie Hochschild (1983) coined, to describe those jobs that require employees to manipulate their feelings. Her classic example is the case of airline attendants, who have to pretend that they deeply care about their customers. They are required to be solicitous, cheerful, and attractive (in the past, the job of airline attendant was more explicitly sexualized than it is today). The key to successful performance of this role is to appear absolutely sincere. Emotional labor performed at this level of intensity can have insidious effects, leading some workers to lose sight of their own true feelings, and instead assimilate the feelings expected of them by their jobs.

Occupations that intentionally blur the boundaries between the worker’s personality and the requirements of the job may be prone to producing sadomasochistic dynamics, especially when they involve a sexual element. When individuals are hired for jobs on the basis of their sexual attractiveness, the worker’s sexuality is objectified. In the case of the airline attendant, she (and

occasionally he) becomes an object of desire, and no longer a desiring subject. This may not be an altogether unpleasant experience for some workers. Of the “sexy woman,” Benjamin writes, “She expresses not so much *her* desire as her pleasure in being desired; what she enjoys is her capacity to evoke desire in the other, to attract” (1988, 89). However, the loss of subjectivity entailed in being a sex object is a key element in the masochistic position: the masochist experiences no agency of his or her own, but identifies instead with the powerful subjectivity of the controlling sadist. Masochists willingly self-abnegate in order to secure access to the glory and power of the other. This of course, makes these individuals extremely vulnerable to exploitation and abuse from those on whom they’ve conferred the power of recognition. Benjamin writes, “If a woman has no desire of her own, she must rely on that of a man, with potentially disastrous consequences for her psychic life.” Once people give up on their own desire, she argues, and accept the other’s will and desire as their own, it is just a step to surrender to the other’s will (1988, 89, 122).

Although most sexualized jobs in the service industry employ and exploit the sexuality of young, heterosexual women, it would be a mistake to conclude that these women are somehow more desirous of masochistic working conditions than men are. Ambivalence and its split sexual form, erotic domination, are human responses that occur in situations of extreme dependency. If the desire for recognition is thwarted, then interactions tend to break down into domination and subordination. Yet it is undeniably true that women are more likely than men to confront situations of sexual subordination in the workplace. There are structural reasons for this: work organizations in our society, which are mostly controlled by men, tend to objectify and commodify women’s sexuality much more than men’s sexuality (Bordo 1999). Moreover, women continue to be evaluated more in terms of their sexual attractiveness than men are, and many women are brought up to equate their self-worth with their looks. These experiences may make women more vulnerable to assuming the masochistic position in these workplace interactions; as Chancer notes, they may develop tendencies in this direction. But there is nothing essential or absolute about the association between women and masochism, and between men and sadism. Even Freud acknowledged that “feminine” masochism is largely a product of socialization, and could be found routinely in men (1965, 102).

Jessica Benjamin pushes this argument further, arguing that our current gender arrangements militate against the achievement of mutual recognition in heterosexual relationships. She writes that “the splitting that is so typical in sadomasochism is in large part a problem of gender” (1988, 81). To the extent that women *in general* are denied the ability to confer recognition on others, and to the extent that men are valued and respected more highly than women *simply because they are men*, all of our gender relations are vulnerable to erotic domination, with women more likely to assume the masochistic position, and men, the sadistic one.

An excellent illustration of how gendered sadomasochism can be institutionalized in the workplace is provided by Meika Loe's (1996) ethnography of the euphemistically renamed "Bazooms" national restaurant chain. Bazooms only hires young "attractive" women to wait on its mostly male customers (1996, 403). The waitresses are required to wear skimpy uniforms (tight jogging shorts and cropped t-shirts), and their figures, make-up, and hair styles are strictly monitored by male managers (1996, 404). In addition to serving food, the "Bazooms Girls," as they are officially called, are required to play with hula hoops, to dance with customers on their birthdays and special occasions (while giving instructions on how to shake salt-and-pepper containers like maracas), and to place their orders by reaching up to a string extending into the kitchen (which exposes their midriffs) while singing (1996, 400). Calendars featuring Bazooms Girls wearing bikinis are prominently displayed, as are jokes that characterize the waitresses as stupid and gullible ("Caution: Blondes Thinking" is printed on cash register receipts) (1996, 412). Before they are hired, the waitresses must sign waivers promising not to sue the company for sexual harassment (1996, 412). Remarkably, there is a great deal of competition for these jobs: Loe writes that she was one of sixty "lucky" women hired out of an applicant pool of 800! (1996, 400)

Why do women want to work at Bazooms? Are they brainwashed or desperate, as radical feminists might predict? Or are these women creatively using their sexuality to exploit a vulnerable and pathetic male clientele, as the libertarians might argue? Loe finds evidence for both of these views. Some women indeed are motivated by economic need and limited prospects, but many come to Bazooms to affirm their femininity:

Working at Bazooms can be "a huge self-esteem boost" (Lori), because Bazooms girls are getting what some consider to be positive attention in the form of flirting, flattery, and daily affirmation that they are indeed sexy, desirable women. Not only do Bazooms girls get attention and affirmations, but they are making commission as well. (1996, 418)

In psychoanalytic terms, the waitresses are seeking sexual recognition in a situation of economic dependency. The male managers who evaluate them have the power to confer this recognition by hiring them, and customers convey it through their appreciative looks and tips. Because this job pays a relatively high wage, the women who work there do not feel free to leave.

These are precisely the conditions that Chancer sees as promoting sadomasochism. There is a strict hierarchy overlain with complete sex segregation. Male supervisors make all of the rules, and have total discretion to punish or reward the waitresses. Supervisors' ideas of what is sexually attractive are institutionalized, and they enforce these ideas through constant surveillance.

Women workers are not allowed to protest. They are made to feel that they are dispensable because if they don't like the job, there are many others waiting to take their place.

These facts alone do not mean that every man who works at Bazooms is a sadist, and every woman a masochist. That possibility arises when women approach these jobs with a desire for recognition, but instead find that they are treated with disdain and disrespect, and internalize this message. According to Loe (1996, 412–20), this frequently happens at Bazooms. Loe reports that the waitresses constantly struggle with managers and customers to protect their autonomy and agency. They are offended by the sexist jokes and the assumption that they are all “bimbos” (1996, 416). Some women suffer emotionally from the constant surveillance; she describes how many feel hurt and humiliated when their bosses publicly criticize their appearance (which they often do) (1996, 402). But instead of resisting, which Loe claims is difficult if not impossible, many women eventually internalize the values of Bazooms (1996, 414). The emotional labor required of them effectively gets under their skin, blurring the distinction between their working self and their authentic self: Loe reports that some waitresses incessantly monitor themselves and their coworkers' appearance; they worry that they do not look good enough; they are genuinely concerned and apologetic if they respond too negatively to lewd and obnoxious customers (1996, 417).

In this example of sexualized service work, workers experience sexualized interactions as simultaneously degrading and affirming of self-esteem. They enjoy the public recognition of their sexual desirability, but they complain of the punishing and often dehumanizing rules imposed by the managers—and sometimes even by themselves. This is the essence of psychological ambivalence expressed as sadomasochism. Bazooms girls enjoy being desired by others, but any effort to assert their own desire is thwarted. Over time, many of those who stay working there come to think of themselves as never good enough to deserve respect. Like masochists, they have become dependent on the intermittent recognition of men who mostly treat them with disdain. Those theorists who focus exclusively on either the positive or the negative affects elicited by this working environment would completely miss the reason why these businesses continue to operate so successfully: They seduce workers with the opportunity for achieving sexual recognition, but then trap them into the masochistic position in erotic domination.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SEXUAL HARASSMENT POLICIES

I have argued elsewhere that businesses such as Bazooms are forms of organizationally mandated sexual harassment (Williams 1998). Subjection to sexual objectification and degradation is part of the job description. Workers are

required to put up with sexual behaviors that are unwanted and that make them uncomfortable. However, Bazooms workers, like most workers employed in sexualized service work, rarely label their experiences as sexual harassment. I.S. Folgero and I.H. Fjeldstad (1995, 311), who studied workers in service jobs, point out that “in a cultural setting where sexual harassment is generally accepted as part of the job, feelings of harassment may be suppressed to a degree where the victim actively denies that the problem exists.” Actually, workers in these jobs may not feel like “victims” at all, since they agreed to work there, and maybe even competed for the opportunity. As Loe’s case study of Bazooms suggests, they probably feel complicit in their own domination. But there is no place for complicity, let alone ambivalence, in many sexual harassment policies; there are only roles for innocent victims and guilty harassers (Williams 1999).

How can sexual harassment policies be designed to acknowledge ambivalence and prevent its manifestation in sadomasochistic dynamics? One way to approach this question is to return to Chancer’s discussion of the conditions that promote sadomasochism in bureaucratic organizations. Recall her argument that organizations are conducive to sadomasochism if they have a strict hierarchy, permit no dissent, issue rewards and punishments in an arbitrary fashion, treat workers as dispensable, instill insecurity in all employees, and subject workers to tight supervision. To promote the possibility of mutual recognition, then, would require forming organizations with the opposite characteristics: flatter hierarchies, democratic participation, job security, just rewards and equitable punishments, an acknowledgment of mutual dependency, and a more trusting attitude between supervisors and workers. Workplaces organized in this fashion would promote greater autonomy and self-respect among the workers, making them less vulnerable to masochistic self-abnegation and willful surrender to another person’s desire.

A meaningful sexual harassment policy would have to be part of this more general effort to empower workers. Workers have to feel secure enough in their own boundaries to resist their violation. They must feel it is their right and entitlement as persons deserving of respect and dignity to set their own limits. Workers who are fearful of losing their jobs, and who are constantly subjected to degrading attitudes from their “superiors” and customers (who are “always right!”), generally do not feel this way. Consequently, it is understandable why so few workers subjected to sexual exploitation complain or even label their experiences as sexual harassment.

To be truly effective, sexual harassment policy would have to enable workers to resist both individual and organizational forms of harassment. It would provide relief from the individual boss or coworker who refuses to respect another’s boundaries, but it also would give workers the authority to negotiate their job descriptions. One example of this latter approach can be seen in the recent efforts of unions of flight attendants and other service workers to institute

policies to prevent abusive server-customer relationships (Cobble 1996). These worker-driven initiatives treat service workers as rational, desiring subjects, not as abject victims needing protection, which is the more typical managerial point of view that is embedded in many existing sexual harassment policies (Gherardi 1995; Gutek 1997).

This model for reorganizing workplaces to enhance mutual recognition is consistent with the ideas of some legal and political theorists who recently have begun to rethink conventional legal approaches to sexual harassment. Drucilla Cornell (1995), for example, has argued that freedom from sexual harassment depends on the protection of the “imaginary domain,” which she defines as our internal experience of sexual desire, including our fantasies and imagination. She writes that “no one [should] be forced to have another’s imaginary imposed upon [him/herself] in such a way as to rob him/her of respect for her/his sexual being” (1995, 8). In her view, people should be permitted to pursue their sexual desires, even in the workplace; they simply should not be permitted to control the sexuality of others. This is the problem at Bazooms, where managers and customers dictate the sexual behavior of the objectified workers. “As sexual beings,” Cornell argues, “we [should] all be treated as worthy of the right to pursue sexual happiness” (1995, 11).

Similarly, Linda LeMoncheck (1997b) argues that rules against sexual harassment should be designed to enhance the self-respect of workers. In her view, the current legal approach to sexual harassment is flawed because it focuses too much on whether the behavior in question was unwelcome or unreasonable, criteria that often cannot be successfully demonstrated by the victim. As the case of Bazooms illustrates, these terms can be problematic from the vantage point of workers who had to compete for their job and agree to sign a sexual harassment waiver. LeMoncheck argues that questionable behavior ought to be evaluated instead according to whether or not it respected the sexual integrity of the defendant. She writes that every individual should be treated as “a moral equal whose sense of herself as a sexual subject in the world is as worthy of empathy and respect as any other person’s” (1997b, 59). She endorses an “ethic of care respect” that acknowledges the moral worth of all individuals, and the right to pursue sexual desires as long as the sexual needs and desires of others are appreciated and honored.

Legal scholar Stephen Schulhofer (1998) also maintains that the most effective approach to eliminating sexual harassment is to legally guarantee the right to sexual autonomy. Currently, he argues, the law does not go far enough in protecting our right to make our own sexual choices. His exhaustive study of case law shows that the current prohibitions against rape, sexual assault, and sexual harassment actually “permit men to assume that a woman is always willing to have sex, even with a stranger, even with substantial physical force, unless the evidence shows unambiguously that she was *unwilling*” (1998, 276).

Typically, if a worker fails to aggressively resist a sexual behavior, that is taken as evidence of his/her consent. Schulhofer argues that sexual consent should be affirmatively given, and that any questions that arise about it in sexual harassment lawsuits should take into account the constraining context of workers' lives. This point is also made by Linda Hirshman and Jane Larson (1998), who argue that people in superordinate positions should be forced to bargain with those in the weaker position for explicit sexual consent. They write, "A vigorous definition of consent would place the burden of silence or ambiguity on the more powerful player, usually the male. That subset of sexual transactions in which a man thinks a woman's silence means consent would move from the currently permissible to the potentially criminal, a heavy deterrent. Those unwilling to take the chance will either hold off or ask" (1998, 302). In the case of sex work, they argue that "asking" should take the form of collective bargaining for written contracts guaranteeing fair working conditions and pay. If workers got to write the contracts, they would probably defend workers' rights to humane treatment, not undermine them, which is currently the case in places like Bazooms.

There are important differences among these theorists, but they all share in the commitments to sexual autonomy, respect and dignity of workers, and the values of democracy and equality. These are some of the conditions necessary for the achievement of mutual recognition, which, if built into workplaces and sexual harassment law, would mitigate the widespread sadomasochism that is currently promoted by so many work organizations.

The achievement of these goals may seem radical or utopian, but they are not unprecedented. Some businesses in the sexualized service sector do provide workers with a great deal of autonomy and agency, or at least more than is the norm at businesses such as Bazooms. One example of this is the strip club "Lusty Lady" in San Francisco. In 1997, the women dancers there organized and became affiliated with the AFL-CIO, and were the first strip club workers in the country to win a contract. According to Wendy Chapkis, their contract with management guarantees "work shifts, protection against arbitrary discipline and termination, automatic wage increases, sick days, and a contracted procedure for pursuing grievances with management" (2000, 198). Similar organizing efforts are underway in a handful of sex-oriented establishments in cities around the country.¹ These fledgling reforms can enhance the autonomy, respect, and democratic participation of sex workers, thereby undermining the conditions that promote erotic domination in sexualized service work.

These ideas for institutional reform might also be applied to the university environment. Some colleges have instituted a requirement and expectation of explicit consent for each successive level of sexual intimacy. The policy at Antioch College has garnered the most publicity (and notoriety) for their efforts in this direction (Soble 1997). At Antioch, those involved in sexual

interactions are required to ask for and obtain verbal consent for each sexual act that they initiate. Moreover, consent obtained at a prior occasion is not considered valid for future sexual acts. While not perfect by any means, the impetus behind Antioch's policy goes further in attributing sexual subjectivity, and thus personhood, to students than many of the sexual harassment policies currently in place. As previously argued, university sexual harassment policies that emphasize the students' immaturity and inability to make responsible decisions on their own behalf can reinscribe the sadomasochistic dynamic through essentializing the characteristics of these relationships, in particular, by denying students any subjective desire, and portraying them as weak and vulnerable. Policies such as the one at Antioch aspire to empower students to draw their own sexual boundaries more effectively.

No workplace can be entirely free of ambivalence. (As the joke goes, that's why they call it "work"!) But if organizations are structured in ways that promote the achievement of mutual recognition, then workers would have more tools to resist the splitting of that ambivalence into sexual domination and subordination. Under these new conditions, workplaces would still be sexual, but hopefully they would be less prone to producing the sadomasochistic relationships that normalize sexual harassment and make it so difficult to eradicate.

NOTE

I gratefully acknowledge Paula England for motivating me to write this article and for providing helpful comments and criticisms. I also appreciate the thoughtful comments of Julie Nelson, Patti Giuffre, and Kirsten Dellinger. These ideas germinated when I was a fellow at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences at Stanford, where I was supported by NSF Grant #SES-9022192.

1. The move to unionize has not been without its detractors, however, including some dancers who regret the change in their status from independent contractors to employees brought about by unionization. (Employee status has given managers more control over their earnings than was the case when dancers mostly worked for tips.) Protecting worker rights and securing even better benefits is an ongoing struggle, just like mutual recognition in any sexual relationship. Even more important than continual negotiating, Chapkis argues, is the necessity of providing opportunities for women to leave sex work: "For sex workers to be best positioned to control their work they must also be able to leave should conditions become unsatisfactory" (2000, 200). Only if women are free to leave and pursue equally lucrative work elsewhere will they enhance their bargaining power over their working conditions and hence their respect and dignity as workers.

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