

SEXUALITY, POWER, AND CAMARADERIE IN SERVICE WORK

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Many have argued that sexualized banter is indicative of “masculine” culture, serving as a mechanism by which men construct masculine identity and dominance and create a climate of sexual harassment. While this claim has much empirical support, sexualized banter among women remains undertheorized. Furthermore, many contemporary scholars agree that the meaning of a sexual exchange may vary widely between cultural and material contexts, but this insight has only recently been applied to studies of workplace sexuality. This article considers the issues of gender, sexuality, power, and context in light of ethnographic data collected in two service work (waitressing) establishments. Within these organizations, many workplace sexualized interactions emerge as facilitating camaraderie and empowerment between workers. The article concludes that the sexual particularities of a workplace should be interpreted as one of its many cultural features, reflective more of its organizational conditions than of a static sexual symbolism.

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Activists and scholars have problematized the idea of sexualized workplace encounters, exposing the ways that some sexual expressions between coworkers—particularly when directed at women employees from men employees—are not simply private forms of sexual expression but actually harassment through which male dominance is exerted and perpetrated (Gutek 1989; MacKinnon 1979). While the injustice of sexual harassment is now commonly recognized, few social researchers have investigated women’s participation in consensual, nonharassing workplace sexual interactions (Gutek 1989; Williams, Giuffre, and Dellinger 1999). Some studies have described women using sexual banter as a means of achieving interactional power over their customers (Loe 1996), but there has been

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little attention to women's use of sexual banter with their coworkers. Some studies indicate that both women and men can interpret their sexual interactions with coworkers as a form of camaraderie (Williams, Giuffre, and Dellinger 1999), but these findings are typically reported without comparative analysis and often inadequately integrated into theories of workplace sexuality.

There are undoubtedly several reasons for the lack of documentation of women's benefiting from workplace sexualized interactions with their coworkers, the most obvious being that the social organization of labor has typically privileged men. Despite the fact that women make up nearly half the labor force (Reskin and Padavic 1994, 25), rules against sexual harassment have only recently been institutionalized while the majority of paid labor continues to be either owned and managed by men or sex segregated. Such inequities constitute a mandate by feminist researchers to address the hazards of workplace sexuality for women. Concurrent feminist gains in institutional and cultural influence, at times underscored by sex-negative cultural logics, may in turn explain widespread scholarly suspicions about workplace sexuality.

Indeed, scholarship on workplace sexuality now originates from a wide variety of disciplinary sources—predominately business, law, and feminist social science—but most scholars seem to implicitly assume that sexuality has no place at work. When sexualized interactions occur, they are seen to result in negative consequences for employees (especially women employees) and for the organization as a whole. Contemporary business literature almost uniformly portrays workplace sexuality as a threat to productivity (Williams, Giuffre, and Dellinger 1999); contemporary law literature focuses on the need to create uniform definitions of sexual harassment (Pinkston 1993; Wood 2000);¹ contemporary feminist social scientists have observed that (men's hetero)sexualized practices can act as a mechanism of male dominance, a set of practices that are structured and supported by particular work organizations (Acker 1990; Salzinger 2000).

While the idea that workplaces are dangerous places for sexualized interactions has gained scholarly, legal, and cultural currency, a quiet challenge to this idea has come from a transdisciplinary body of sexualities literature, an approach that bridges postmodern and queer theories with historical and social scientific approaches (Foucault 1978; Rubin 1984; Weeks 1995). A basic assumption of this perspective is that sexuality is a social formation; as such, it is not a natural, predictable, and potentially destructive force (as the business scholars imply), nor is it always a vehicle of male domination (as some feminists imply), nor are its boundaries stable enough to allow for fair and consistent litigation (as many legal scholars imply).

Possibly in response to the increasing cross-fertilization of sexualities scholarship, contemporary social scientists have begun to conceptualize workplace sexuality as an "interactional achievement" (van Leuven 1998) as well as recognize that "in the study of sex at work, context is paramount" (Williams, Giuffre, and Dellinger 1999, 90). In recent years, a growing number of social scientists have also investigated the organizational and cultural conditions that promote sexual harassment (Welsh 1999) and/or broader capitalistic processes by which sexualized

interactions are used as a mechanism of controlling women workers (Salzinger 2000). For example, sexual harassment appears to be especially prevalent in male-dominated occupations (Deux and Ullman 1983; Gruber and Bjorn 1982; Yount 1991), but women who work in a men-oriented atmosphere such as a sports or cocktail bar may also be subjected to sexual harassment by the few men employees (who are generally in charge) as well as by the customers, who are mostly men (Loe 1996; Spradley and Mann 1975). In light of the rich understandings provided by contextual analyses, several authors have called for more ethnographic investigations of the meanings of workplace sexual exchanges (Welsh 1999; Williams, Giuffre, and Dellinger 1999).

Within this emerging academic atmosphere, questions such as the following have become increasingly welcome and needed: Under what conditions is sexuality at work a problem, and for whom? Under what conditions does workplace sexuality act as a mechanism of exclusion and harassment? Under what conditions does workplace sexuality act as something else altogether? Furthermore, while contemporary feminist researchers understand that sexual harassment is facilitated by "organizational norms of heterosexuality and power" (Welsh 1999, 181), might alternative organizational norms facilitate alternative social processes? For example, if heterosexist norms facilitate sexual harassment, what social processes might a lack of heterosexist norms produce?

To explore these questions, I conducted a comparative ethnographic study of worker/customer power dynamics within service work, in particular, the work of serving food and drink within three female-dominated environments. As with other forms of "women's work," waiting tables is often gendered, sexualized labor and hence an arena of potential sexual exploitation for women. Despite the social, economic, and psychological disadvantages of this type of labor for many women, my ethnographic research concurs with the constructivist or postmodern proposal that workers' interpretations of sexualized interactions at work vary considerably by institutional and cultural context. In some circumstances, sexualized banter between coworkers can assist a process of heightened morale and worker camaraderie, just as in other circumstances, it can facilitate sexual harassment, cultural isolation, and the social control and exploitation of workers. In particular, I have found that the meaning of sexualized practices² for workers may depend on at least three organizational dimensions: (1) The degree to which workers share the same cultural values, ideologies, and purpose; (2) the hierarchical structure of the organization (from flat and egalitarian to vertical and stratified); and (3) the degree to which workers closely coordinate their labor.

By investigating the social processes by which sexualized practices are a debilitating and degrading force for some workers and an innovative, empowering force for others, this article contributes to sociological and interdisciplinary understandings of sexuality at work. In the concluding discussion, I suggest how these findings can be usefully integrated into theories and policies related to workplace sexuality.

METHOD AND DATA

This article is derived from my ethnographic research over the course of 14 months (June 1998 to August 1999) in three jobs related to the serving of food and drink. I waited tables at a high-end restaurant that I refer to as Blue Heron, waited tables at a strip club referred to as Club X, and hosted at a family diner referred to as Annie's. I chose these organizations in an attempt not to achieve a representative sample of all waitressing work but rather to compare the cultural and organizational features of three predominately female service environments. In all three sites, my role as a researcher was approved of by the managers/owners, and I discussed my research with several coworkers, including but not limited to those I interviewed.

In all, my time as an employee and participant observer totaled approximately 700 hours (240 hours at Blue Heron, 100 hours at Annie's, and 360 hours at Club X). In all three settings, I took extensive notes on my observations and conversations at work as well as the basic organizational features of each establishment. Some notes I jotted while at work and during work meetings; I wrote the remainder of my field notes directly after each shift. In addition, I conducted 20 in-depth interviews, all of which I tape-recorded and transcribed. Sixteen of the interviews were with coworkers (6 from Blue Heron, 5 from Club X, and 5 from Annie's), and 4 with workers in closely related jobs (conducted for analytical comparison). Of the coworkers interviewed, 11 were women (6 lesbian or bisexual), 5 were men (1 gay), 15 were white, and 1 was African American and Native American—a sample that roughly reflected the overall demographics of the work sites. I also interviewed workers with a range of work positions, including 9 servers, 3 managers, 2 dancers, 1 chef, and 1 barista. Most interviews lasted about two hours and were conducted in locations convenient to the interviewees, including at work after their shifts, in public parks, and in their homes. I organized interview questions around three topics: interactions with coworkers, interactions with customers, and the structural and cultural similarities and differences of the interviewees' current jobs and their previous jobs. I analyzed these data by looking for common patterns in my transcribed field notes and interviews, taking careful note of how these patterns overlapped and diverged between each organization. I viewed these data reflexively, noting my own subject positions (e.g., middle class, credentialed, white, lesbian, woman) and the impact these factors may have had on my data collection and interpretation. For space purposes, I focus this article on just two of the three field sites studied (Blue Heron and Club X, excluding Annie's), an analytic choice that allows for more ethnographic depth. Despite my exclusion of Annie's from this analysis, my field-work experiences at Annie's and my interviews with Annie's workers have also informed the emergent theoretical framework presented here.

Description of Field Sites

Blue Heron is a relatively upscale restaurant located on Cape Cod in an area popular among artists, gay men and lesbians, and wealthy East Coast bluebloods. Blue

Heron is a medium-size restaurant (18 tables, seating about 70 people) serving dinner from 5 to 10 P.M., with a staff of mostly women and with more than half of the workers being lesbian/gay/bisexual. This included the owner, Andrea, a 32-year-old bisexual woman (all names are pseudonyms). All of the front-end workers (servers, bartender, host) were either women or gay men, while the only heterosexual men worked in the back end (as a chef, a prep cook, and a dishwasher). The only person of color employed by Blue Heron was a Jamaican man who worked as the dishwasher. The age of Blue Heron staff ranged from early 20s to late 30s, with the majority being 30 to 35.

Club X is a Seattle-area exotic dance club operating under the rubric of a national chain. The club is open from noon to 2 A.M., with shifts from 12 P.M. to 7 P.M. and 7 P.M. to 2 A.M. I worked the night shift, which, due to clean-up responsibilities, actually ended around 2:30 or 3 A.M. There were three main groups of workers at Club X: Management, staff, and dancers. Management included a regional manager (man), a general manager (woman), and two assistant managers (one man, one woman). The staff included the DJs (two men; one woman), bartenders (mostly men), waitresses (all women), floor managers (all men), cashier/door person (men), and parking lot manager (man). Dancers (all women) were not official employees of the club but rather were independent licensed contractors, as is common in this industry. Most of the staff and dancers at Club X were young, ranging from 18 (the minimum legal age to work in a strip club in Washington state) to 24. The managers were also relatively young, ranging from mid-20s to 30. The majority of Club X employees were white, with a few dancers who appeared to be of Chinese, Japanese, Philippine, and African descent. To my knowledge, none of the workers at Club X identified as gay or lesbian, although some dancers did have sexual relationships with women and homoeroticism was a fairly standard feature of many of the dancers' shows.

BLUE HERON

In all three of my fieldwork sites, sexualized comments and behaviors were common, a well-known feature of restaurant work (Giuffre and Williams 1994). But in my three sites, employee relations at Blue Heron had the highest degree of sexual camaraderie. As detailed below, I explain this finding as a result of the high degree of shared culture among the workers, the relatively flat hierarchy of the organization, and the close coordination required of workers.

Sexual-Cultural Understanding at Blue Heron

As I began my work at Blue Heron, I was immediately struck by the high level of backstage sexual bantering between many of the workers. Being relatively new to the restaurant industry, I was at first a bit disorientated by this sexualized talk, a cultural feature that was made even more striking by its distinction from my

coworkers' front-stage displays of professionalism. Another striking feature was that eight of the workers (nearly half of the total) were involved in a committed domestic partnership with another staff member (three lesbian couples, one heterosexual couple), but the sexual bantering easily crossed over and between these lines of domestic alliance.

Most of the sexual jokes and banter at Blue Heron happened before and after the peak serving periods and were instigated by, and transpired between, the women employees, both lesbian and heterosexual. There was also a high amount of such banter between the women employees and two of the men employees (neither of whom were involved with any of the staff). One of these men was a chef named Travis, a 28-year-old heterosexual man whom the servers deemed an "honorary lesbian" and affectionately referred to as "Mama T"; the other was Ronny, a gay man in his mid-30s who worked as a host and bartender.

By and large, the sexual banter between these women and men employees was intended, taken, and returned in jest. For example, when Ronny addressed the servers (all women) in a high, teasing voice as "you prostitutes," he knew he was pushing the boundary line of acceptable behavior, but most of the servers responded with laughter or additional teasing insults. (One heterosexual women server found Ronny's style to cross the line of acceptability; as a result, she refused to engage in Ronny's banter and addressed him in formal terms.) For most of these women, however, this teasing was interpreted within the context of a broader gay male culture, one where such "bitchy" behavior was seen as a recognizable and endearing characteristic. Similarly, when Jesse, a butch-identified lesbian server, would announce to Travis that she would give him a blow job if he would do her a favor, or when the women servers would refer to Brett, a lesbian woman who made appetizers, as "the kitchen wench," these phrases were interpreted by all as absurd but light-hearted terms of endearment.

While the arena of acceptable banter was fairly broad at Blue Heron (e.g., common use of sexual innuendos and puns, references to sex toys and specific sex acts), one evening, Alex, a young lesbian waiter, appeared to me to traverse the collective sensibility of appropriate behavior. In the kitchen with nearly all the staff present, Alex joked that she would have to "rape" Travis if he did not "shape up." This statement was followed by a couple of silent, uncomfortable seconds, but the incident quickly passed and the night proceeded as if nothing had happened. When I later asked Travis about this incident, he laughed it off as inconsequential and juvenile.

In a sense, this ability to brush off such a potentially threatening personal statement is remarkable, as employees across occupations tend to define personalized sexual comments—in contrast to abstract sexual statements not directed to anyone in particular—as sexual harassment (Dellinger and Williams 2002; Dougherty 2001). In Travis's case, the ability to laugh off the comment may be traced to gendered patterns of what can be construed as humorous. Not only are men and boys at a disproportionately lower risk of being raped, but part of the construction of masculinity entails "being able to 'take' a joke without losing one's cool" (Dellinger and Williams 2002, 248).

Kristin Yount's (1991) conceptual distinction between "razzing" and harassment amongst coal miners also brings interpretive insight to this scene. Yount found that the interactions between miners (most of whom were men) were "highly sexual and jocular," including "horseplay that was often sexually suggestive" (1991, 399). Most men and some women miners in this setting interpreted such interactions as signs of camaraderie or "razzing"—defined by Yount as "playful, humorous teasing that was kept at a level considered tolerable to the recipient," an action that was "directed toward accepted crew members and, in fact, signified a miner's inclusion" (p. 400). This lies in contrast to harassment, described by Yount as actions "intended to exceed the target's threshold of manageable distress and to designate the person as an outsider" (p. 401). As Mama T, Travis was clearly part of Blue Heron's inside culture; hence, the interaction seemed to have been interpreted by those present as the equivalent of razzing, even as Alex may have been inadvertently testing Travis's insider status.

While the women at Blue Heron nearly always instigated the most blatant sexual comments, Travis and Ronny contributed with varying degrees of approval (the other men on staff rarely tried). For example, one evening in his nightly routine of announcing the evening specials to the servers, Travis took on an affected French accent, telling the servers about the "watercress and pubic hair soup" and the "grilled swordfish with a special sauce." In earnest, I asked, "What's in the sauce?" Travis winked and said, "It's a secret, but it's creamy, and I always put a little bit of myself into my cooking." This brought about a collective moan and exclamations of, "Oh that's gross!" to which Travis retorted, "Oh don't *even* give me that. . . . Every day, I have to listen to you guys talk about sticking things into every orifice. . . . and the *one* time I say *anything*, you girls give me this attitude!" In the midst of the ensuing uproar, Jesse said, "But that's because we're dykes and we rule this place!" Travis rolled his eyes, but everyone appeared to agree: It was not that men's sexuality or heterosexuality was not allowed; it should simply be less visible. Travis later told me, "It's kind of funny. . . . Every night, it's got to be something about dildos or whatever . . . but it's kind of interesting that if I say something like that, I notice that it receives more of an uptight, step back [response], depending on who I say it to."

Regulating the Sexual Boundaries of Blue Heron

Due to the constant sexualized banter, it is surprising that anyone at Blue Heron would have an uptight sexual attitude. However, boundary incidents like the one described above illustrate important connections between social power and sexual norms: In other words, the sexual expressions of the economic and social elite become construed as natural and unremarkable, while the sexual expressions of those outside this group come to be seen as unnatural or deviant. What is interesting about Blue Heron is its reversal of the usual privileging of men's heterosexuality. As Dellinger and Williams (2002) observed, the boundaries of acceptable sexual

expressions are drawn in accordance with workplace cultures that usually privilege heterosexual men; as a result, “we rarely find men who must negotiate a female culture” (Dellinger and Williams 2002, 248). In contrast to the demographic and cultural dynamics of most workplaces, the men at Blue Heron needed to assimilate into a woman’s culture, in this case a lesbian-centered culture that prioritized the women workers’ sexual expressions and desires. The fact that several of the employees were straight women did not matter: They were publicly claimed as honorary lesbians and hence insiders.

However, even at Blue Heron there was a striking and complete absence of sexualized interactions with one worker, Thomas, the Jamaican man who worked as the dishwasher. Several explanations may be offered for this anomaly, including the fact that Thomas was both physically and culturally separated from the rest of the workers. Thomas’s dishwasher station was physically removed from the other workers, with much less need for close coordination with the other workers. Perhaps more important, Thomas also remained culturally and linguistically separate from the rest of the Blue Heron crew. As one of many Jamaican seasonal workers in the region, Thomas essentially lived in segregated housing. These organizational and cultural factors may have been underscored by racialized notions such as the idea that Black skin signifies outsider status (Lamont 2003), as well as the perception among many of the workers that Thomas was hostile and mentally unstable. Given Giuffre and Williams’s (1994) discovery that cultural outsiders in the restaurant industry may be at greater risk of being accused of sexual harassment, Thomas’s disengagement from the rest of the workers’ sexual banter is understandable. While I can only speculate as to what would have happened had Thomas attempted to join the sexual banter, I would imagine that the other workers would have responded with confusion and possibly dismay.

Conditions Conducive to Sexual Camaraderie at Blue Heron

The fact that most workers participated in lesbian-centered culture was undoubtedly not enough on its own to maintain a sense of worker camaraderie. Lesbians, and those who appreciate them, are of course not immune from the sources of conflict and division that threaten all social groupings. As Gordon Allport (1954) theorized, people from different social positions (in this case, women and men, heterosexual and homosexual/bisexual) are less likely to have conflict if they work within a group as economic and social equals and can agree on and work collectively on a common goal. Similarly, sharing a common goal or ideology is an essential factor in creating a sense of group cohesion or camaraderie (Bormann 1996).

Much more so than my other sites of investigation, the social conditions of Blue Heron fostered a sense of working together for a common goal. Indeed, Travis, the chef, likened Blue Heron to “a club, like a fraternity or a sorority,” which has a “common mythology that we all seem to embrace”: “You know we all get through this; it’s like a war. We all get through this summer, and then it’s over, and we’ve

shared a common experience . . . so I think everybody's a little more comfortable with each other. Because you have to be. We're all in each other's business all the time. It's a very, very hands-on—it's a very person-oriented—profession. Which is why when you get along, it's great, and when people don't get along, it's brutal. It's completely brutal."

The group cohesion that resulted from this common goal was also fostered by the fairly flat economic and social hierarchy of Blue Heron, a condition specified by Allport (1954) as important for group cohesion, and by Williams (2002) as conducive to humane and relatively egalitarian employee relations. The relatively flat economic and social hierarchy at Blue Heron is perhaps best represented by the multiple roles played by Andrea, the owner of Blue Heron, who worked the line as a chef and also occasionally acted as a host. Andrea's willingness to do the same work as her employees, combined with her long-standing friendships with many of her employees, brought about a more egalitarian atmosphere than is probably found in many contemporary workplaces. Andrea's approach to her work may also have set the stage for smoother relations between her employees. For example, in her interview with me, Alex distinguished her relationships with the chefs at Blue Heron as far better than her relationships with chefs in many of her previous jobs. In these other jobs, Alex reported, "You have to kiss ass to the chef. . . . If the cooks are pissed at you, you're not going to get your food as fast, and if they favor you, you're going to get your food faster than the other waitresses." In contrast, Alex reported that she had to act this way at Blue Heron only "a couple times."

Another point that cannot be overlooked is the physical nature of the work at Blue Heron, where workers had to tightly coordinate their work in close physical proximity with each other. For instance, servers worked in teams of two (and pooled tips between all four servers); the cooks needed to inform servers about nightly (and sometimes hourly) menu changes; servers needed to verbally ask the bartender and appetizer person for each drink, salad, appetizer, and dessert order, and they frequently needed to ask cooks for special orders; and the host needed to consult and coordinate with servers in planning for reservations. Indeed, given the need for such close coordination, it was indeed brutal when coworkers did not get along, not unlike the stress of living in close quarters with an incompatible roommate.

Seen in this light, sexualized banter can be seen as enabling employees to work together quickly and efficiently, in good faith that it was a team effort. Not all of these interactions were explicitly sexual. For instance, Andrea playfully addressed the servers as "kitty cats," and staff members routinely called each other "babe," "darlin'," or "sweetie pie." Servers would wink suggestively to Brett, the "app" (appetizer) person, and ask her to put a special "edible pansy" on their desserts. Although not explicitly sexual, these quick phrases, winks, and so on were based in an undercurrent of sexual innuendo and flirtation, made both more thrilling and less serious due to their highly public display.

Sexual Camaraderie in Other Workplace Settings

While some may wonder whether the sexualized camaraderie found at Blue Heron is an anomaly of a unique subcultural setting, similar patterns can be found in other organizational settings. In their study of a feminist magazine referred to as “Womyn,” Dellinger and Williams (2002) found a similar form of friendly and explicit sexual talk between straight and lesbian employees. Despite vast differences in the actual work performed as well as differences in the social and occupational class associated with restaurant work and white-collar professional work, we can see overlaps here between the workplace cultures of Blue Heron and Womyn. In both cases, a high level of graphic sexual talk by women workers operated within, and potentially produced, a culture of workplace camaraderie.

Williams, Giuffre, and Dellinger (1999), in addition, pointed out that certain occupational niches or industries seem to defy the assumption that sexual alliances between employees should be prevented. For example, “historically black colleges” and “universities in remote rural areas” have been more welcoming of dual-career couples, family businesses like Amway “explicitly seek out and invite the employment of family members,” and “dating and fraternization” appears to be more welcome in industries such as natural food and high tech (Williams, Giuffre, and Dellinger 1999, 84). Williams, Giuffre, and Dellinger quoted a manager from Ben & Jerry’s—a natural foods ice cream company known for its support of progressive political causes—as saying, “we expect that our employees will date, fall in love, and become partners” (p. 84). While these work cultures vary considerably by class, race, and region, each with its own distinct set of norms of acceptable sexual behavior, workers within each of these arenas may constitute higher levels of cultural coherence than in other workplaces (e.g., around race/ethnicity, family, and politics), hence making conditions more conducive to sexual and/or sexualized alliances.

Even in industries where leaders are explicitly attempting to reduce sexualized interactions, there may be cultural/occupational pockets where some workers welcome sexualized interactions. For example, while health care professionals increasingly call for tighter regulations against sexual banter (Dowd, Davidbizar, and Davidbizar 2003), empirical studies of sexual banter in the medical field have produced contradictory interpretations. In summarizing Giuffre’s (1995, 1997) research on employee sexual dynamics in the medical field, Williams, Giuffre, and Dellinger wrote that “several men and women interviewed considered the frequent sexual bantering and touching an important part of their job because it helps them to cope with the stressful nature of their work” (1999, 86). Dougherty (2001) also found stress to be a common explanation for sexual banter among health care workers but found a striking gender difference around interpretations of sexual banter. Men generally saw sexual comments and behavior as a way of relieving stress and achieving camaraderie. Women saw sexual comments and behavior as something that caused them stress (even as it may have relieved men’s stress), occurring only in the absence of worker camaraderie.

In accounting for this tremendous discrepancy where some women medical workers report that they experience sexualized camaraderie (Giuffre 1995, 1997) while other women medical workers report that sexualized work interactions diminish their morale and sense of camaraderie (Dougherty 2001), the explanation may be an issue of study design. Giuffre (1995, 1997) investigated the work relations between doctors and nurses (as well as their patients), while Dougherty (2001) interviewed people from a wide range of organizational positions, including janitorial, administrative, technical, and nursing staff, and excluded doctors from her study. If camaraderie is indeed more likely among people working together toward a common goal among economic and social equals, then it is unlikely that Dougherty would have found as much evidence of camaraderie as Giuffre did, sexualized or not.

After accounting for differences in study design, it becomes apparent that sexualized interactions at work may reflect either sexual harassment or sexual camaraderie, leaving workers with either a deflated or a boosted morale. Sometimes "men's morale and solidarity" is "achieved directly at the expense of women" (Cockburn 1991, cited in Welsh 1999, 181), a pattern found in both Dougherty's (2001) and Yount's (1991) studies. Other times, women employees within the same organization may have very different experiences, and this may correspond with their rank, their immediate working conditions, and their individual personalities. Finally, in some organizations, such as Blue Heron, the majority of women and men may experience sexualized interactions as a form of camaraderie.

CLUB X

As was the case at Blue Heron, a central feature of the worker culture of Club X was the sexualized interactions between coworkers. However, the more complex culture and steeper hierarchy at Club X meant that workers had a variety of cultural understandings and work agendas, which in turn meant that sexualized interactions served a number of purposes. As I explain below, sexual camaraderie did exist at Club X, but the foundations of this camaraderie were at times more precarious than at Blue Heron.

Sexual-Cultural Understandings at Club X

Unlike at Blue Heron, where most sexualized exchanges between employees were relegated to the backstage, out of the view of customers, at Club X, they also occurred in front of the customers and sometimes for the customers' voyeuristic benefit. They also took on a more physical character. Front-stage demonstrations of affection or intimacy between workers was common at Club X, particularly between dancers but also between dancers and some other workers. The common denominator for sexualized attention was that a dancer was usually involved in the exchange, a pattern that may be explained by the fact that dancers were the key

players in all Club X activity, literally at the center of attention as well as every employee's finances.

Dancers publicly demonstrated their intimacy with one another in a number of ways, some more casual, some more purposefully displayed. Casual displays were more likely to occur when business was slow. During these times, it was common to see two or three dancers hanging out together on a couch, legs sprawled over each other, massaging each other, and generally having a lot of body contact (especially since their work outfits typically consisted of G-strings and tank tops or bras). Only the dancers who were friends would behave in this manner, yet their intimacy sent a strong message of alliance to other workers as well as customers, who after all would have to pay a lot of money for such attention.

When business was fast, or when the manager or DJ signaled that workers should heighten the energy, public displays of intimacy took on a more staged appearance. Examples of this type of intimacy were plentiful and were also more likely to involve waitresses. For instance, Delila, the de facto head waitress, would whistle and holler her approval at her favorite dancers doing stage shows and tease dancers working the floor—putting cold drinks against one leg, rubbing up from behind, and simulating sex against another. Once I became a familiar and friendly face at Club X, some of the dancers and I would also engage in brief public sexualized dances. These dances would typically last no longer than a few seconds and would happen only in passing, yet they demonstrated both a more public sexual performance and a public recognition of alliance and mutual admiration.

Dancers also had several staged occasions to display sexualized affection to one another. One opportunity came in the form of “shower shows,” scheduled twice an hour on Friday and Saturday evenings. A shower show consists of a performance on a stage with a shower in a smaller, more intimate venue than the main stage. Most often, a shower show consisted of one “girl,” but at least once or twice a night there would also be “two-girl” shower shows. Shower shows were a way of drumming up interest for lap dances, but unlike the stage shows, they were voluntary, with the two-girl shows reflecting the dancers' personal alliances. Sometimes the two women showering together were also lovers, sometimes they were not lovers but were interested in exploring their bisexuality, and sometimes they may have simply enjoyed or felt more comfortable sharing the spotlight with a friend. An additional opportunity for staged sexualized affection occurred once an hour on weekend nights when the DJ would call all the dancers up on stage for a “Texas Teaser,” whereby they would pose, smile, flirt with the crowd, and suggestively drape themselves around their girlfriends. Once again, the explicit purpose of these performances was to heighten customers' interest in lap dances.

Much of this public sexual display, especially between dancers and/or waitresses, can be explained as simply catering to (or exploiting) the stereotypical heterosexual man's fantasy. However, it is a mistake to abandon the analysis at this level. Such staged displays generally resulted in a lifted energy among dancers, waitresses, and other workers. Indeed, during the two-girl shower shows and Texas Teasers, most of the other workers would stop their work to watch and cheer. As

well, the casual, light-hearted intimacy that dancers demonstrated with each other (and with some waitresses) portrayed the equivalent of a unified front. It was a presentation that was staged for the customers' voyeuristic benefit, yet it was also a flaunting of an intimacy, a "we-ness," from which customers were ultimately excluded.

This feeling of we-ness was also facilitated by the coordinated effort—especially between the DJs, dancers, and waitresses—of constructing and maintaining a fantasy atmosphere, one where customers were made both excited by the dancers and compliant to their demands. A combination of excitement and compliance was encouraged, for example, by the DJ's teasing customers about their heterosexual virility ("What are ya, a bunch of wussies?! What's wrong with you, don't ya like naked chicks?!"), teasing them about their lack of manners ("Didn't your mother teach you any manners?! Show some appreciation and buy a dance"), and consistently emphasizing the sexual attractiveness of the dancers (introducing them as a "beautiful showgirl" or a "hottie"). When a dancer was spotted sitting next to a customer, waitresses were trained to ask customers, "Would you like to buy the lady a drink?" a practice that further contributed to the overall effort to regulate customers' behavior (Lerum 2001, 282-84).

The gendered nature of these coordinated efforts (encouraging customers to demonstrate their heterosexual virility and chivalry by spending money) is an obvious cultural feature of Club X, a feature that also affected the differential meanings dancers attached to their sexualized interactions with women coworkers versus women customers. This distinction was made especially apparent when Club X sponsored a "Ladies-4-Ladies night," an evening where lesbians were officially welcomed as customers.³ On this evening, more than half of the customers (33 out of about 60) were women, many of whom knew each other and all of whom sat together on one side of the main stage. The remainder of (men) customers stayed to the other side of the stage, most sitting alone or in groups of two. While the women customers demonstrated a great deal of appreciation for the dancers (and camaraderie with one another), reactions from the dancers were mixed. Some appeared to have a great time (and also reported this to me independently), but several avoided the women customers even though they had previously expressed excitement to me about the event. This included some of those who enthusiastically took part in the two-girl shower shows. One dancer, for instance, told me that it was just "too weird to treat a woman like a customer," a comment that appeared to reflect her discomfort with treating women in the same strategic manner as was required with men customers.

Thus, while Club X dancers routinely engaged in sexualized practices with both their coworkers and their customers, for many dancers, the meanings attached to these practices were very different. Some sexualized practices were meant for cultural insiders (coworkers, who were mostly women), while others were meant for cultural outsiders (customers, who were mostly men). While the workers at Blue Heron also differentiated between cultural insiders and cultural outsiders, and coworkers and customers, the sexual camaraderie between coworkers at Blue

Heron was not directly related to customer relations. In contrast, the sexual camaraderie at Club X was more directly contingent on the identification of customers as outsiders and the need to manage these outsiders.

Conditions Conducive to Strategic Sexual Exchanges at Club X

In addition to the use of sexualized practices as a way to demonstrate camaraderie and influence over customers, workers under some circumstances at Club X also employed sexualized techniques as a strategy for gaining influence over their coworkers. Both managers and employees utilized this strategy at various points. Research has shown this tactic to be both treacherous and relatively uncommon, at least among workers with little organizational power. Among the coal miners studied by Yount (1991), the women workers who were seen as “flirts” (as opposed to “tomboys” or “ladies”) were resented by both men and women coworkers because they were suspected of using their sexuality to get out of work. Gutek (1989) also noted that using sexuality to get one’s way with coworkers is both risky and extremely rare. Furthermore, Gutek found even less evidence for the success of a sexualized approach: “Only one woman out of over 800 said she used sex to help her achieve her current position, and she said she was ‘thankful’ that she did not have to do that any more” (p. 63).

Despite the risks and low success rate of strategic sexuality on the part of subordinates, in circumstances where the worker is in a risky, unstable, or dependent position vis-à-vis her or his coworkers, strategic sexual interactions may seem a logical course of action. Of the three sites studied, this tactic was most often observed at Club X. As stated earlier, sexualized interactions between workers were quite common at Club X, and when they occurred between women employees of the same or similar rank (dancers with dancers, dancers with waitresses), they often exhibited an alliance that excluded customers from the inner circle. However, when sexualized interactions occurred between other employees, particularly between managers and dancers or waitresses, these interactions varied in tone and intent, suggesting a wider variety of meanings.

The following exchange, which occurred while I was in the Club X manager’s office with several other employees, demonstrates one of these more complicated scenarios. The exchange was between Lyle, a conventionally attractive, financially successful dancer in her 20s, and Jim, a heavily tattooed, quick-witted assistant manager around the same age:

Lyle: Jimmie, we need to talk.

Jim: Why? Did you break up with that asshole boyfriend of yours?

Lyle: No [laughing].

Jim: Well, forget it then.

Lyle: Hey, isn’t that sexual harassment or something? I don’t know the law very well, but it seems like it . . . you just want to get me into bed.

Jim: No, I just want you to get me into bed. I need to be desired.

Having diverted attention from Lyle's imminent request, Jim was able to accomplish a different sort of work, including avoiding an unwanted negotiation, reminding Lyle of his sexual interest in her, maintaining interpersonal control over the situation, and simultaneously suggesting that she switch roles with him, with her taking the role of desiring subject and his taking the role of desired object.

A couple of minutes after her first try, armed with a smile, Lyle tried addressing Jim again. She wanted to leave her shift immediately, 30 minutes before scheduled. She and another dancer, Star, who by then had joined us in the office, had been working all day, just the two of them for the first part of the shift, with a scarcity of customers. They were tired. Lyle said, "We've had to do so many stages. . . . I don't want to do another stage!" Jim looked unimpressed. He and all the managers were feeling pressure to bring in more dancers (or "up their girl count"), a tricky task since dancers are independent contractors, not official employees. Jim and the other managers would spend the first part of their shift calling dancers at home, sweet-talking them into coming to work (especially on less lucrative shifts), but once the dancers were at work, they were expected to stay. At this point, I had to leave the scene to continue my work duties, but it appeared that Jim was going to neither let Lyle and Star leave nor send them back out on the floor. Rather, in an unspoken compromise, it appeared as if Jim would keep his girl count and Lyle and Star would get a needed break.

In my time at Club X, I observed, and eventually participated in, dozens of public, joking sexual interactions among coworkers, but this was the only incident I witnessed where sexual harassment was mentioned as a possible interpretation, even in a joking manner. From a legal standpoint, the behaviors described here constitute the basic elements of quid pro quo sexual harassment (boss tells employee she must sleep with him or she will be punished), yet since such sexualized joking was common, and since it was not always clear whether managers or dancers held the most power at Club X, a standard quid pro quo interpretation is inadequate.

The uncertain power hierarchy at Club X is a feature of less developed bureaucratized systems where authority may be granted on the basis of charisma—to "holders of specific gifts of the body and spirit" (Weber 1968, 19)—regardless of organizational status. As a national chain, Club X was highly bureaucratized on many dimensions, yet at the local club level, many organizational decisions were a matter of personal negotiation involving the employee's physical attractiveness and charisma, a feature that potentially benefited dancers.

Most contemporary strip clubs are also both dependent on and exploitative of successful dancers such as Lyle. As a DJ in a recent study of strip clubs admitted, "you got to realize that we're all leeches in this business. I'm sorry, but we're leeching off y'all" (Frank 2002, xiii). Despite their economic centrality, exotic dancers are also precariously situated as independent contractors, ineligible for worker benefits yet still subject to workplace rules and sanctions (Fischer 1996). While dancers at times benefited from opportunities for charismatic authority at Club X, as Weber observed, "by its very nature, the existence of charismatic authority is specifically unstable" (1968, 22). All this is to say that in assessing the degree of

harassment found in this scene, it is essential to consider the cultural and organizational factors that surround these particular words and actions. In the words of Dellinger and Williams, “taking a closer look at the workplace norms regarding sexuality that shape interactions and ritual at work will be a more fruitful avenue than focusing on individual behaviors or definitions of sexual harassment taken out of context” (2002, 254).

While the lines of prestige and authority were often blurry between dancers and management, it was always clear that the waitresses (and other staff members) had much less symbolic, monetary, or bureaucratic power. These differences in power in turn affected the range of meanings attached to various sexualized exchanges in the club, with greater differences in power leaving those on the lower end more vulnerable to exploitation and harassment. Since the managers at Club X had competing agendas with those of their employees, sexual camaraderie between managers and workers was unpredictable, especially if one was not a dancer. Ironically then, it was the inconsistency of sexual interactions with managers—not their presence, per se—that seemed to create the most anxiety and reflect the instability of workers’ position in the organization.

Given their organizational vulnerability and a lack of shared purpose, it is not a coincidence that when staff flirted with managers, they were more consciously utilitarian. Jennifer, a Club X waitress, confided that she flirted with many employees but that she always flirted with “the manager first.”

Jennifer: With Paula and Jim, you don’t have to flirt with them. But there’s been managers that I’ve flirted with to keep my job before. And the DJ, if you flirt with him, he’ll say [to the customers], “take care of the waitresses.” If you flirt with the doorman, he’ll make sure you get out safely at night or help you take care of your garbage or whatever, but, I mean, it’s all just a game.

Kari: And you think of it that consciously? Like, “If I flirt with this person then he’ll give me this?”

Jennifer: Yeah. I will flirt with whoever’s friends with Dan [the general manager] first, you know what I mean?

Kari: Yeah. Yeah, it’s smart.

Jennifer: But I don’t do it at my other job. I don’t have to.

Lacking other job experience, job contacts, and higher educational credentials, the stakes of keeping this job, and making tips at this job, were relatively high for Jennifer and many of the other staff members. At the time of this interview, Jennifer had recently found a new job as a bartender in a national chain restaurant. Although she was making less in tips, she said she preferred the new job because “if I do a good job, then I know I’ll be rewarded for it. At Club X, if you do a good job, you might get slapped on the hand still. Just because the numbers [of customers] are down.” Apparently, it was this lack of consistent, fair treatment at Club X that inspired Jennifer to flirt in a strategic manner, as a sort of insurance against moody managers and rocky work conditions, while the fairer, more consistent treatment at her new job made such conscious strategizing less necessary.

The flirtation found at Club X differed from that found at Blue Heron in terms of its expression, motivation, and capacity for exploitation, but strategic sexualization also occurred at Blue Heron. The difference was that more of the favors being asked at Blue Heron—such as bussing a table or making a dessert—were going to happen regardless of flirtation. In other words, since the workers at Blue Heron labored more as a team with relatively egalitarian roles, the stakes of most negotiations were very small.

In sum, many of the sexual interactions between Club X workers may be interpreted as sexual camaraderie. This feature was undoubtedly facilitated by the sharing of a “deviant” (hence exclusive) and a sexualized subculture, as well as the need for coordination between workers, especially between dancers, waitresses, DJs, and bartenders. Yet the lines between sexual camaraderie and harassment between workers at Club X were at times blurry, an element that may be related to the organization’s relatively steep but inconsistent power structure.

DISCUSSION

In this article, I have suggested that sexualized interactions can communicate and construct a sense of worker camaraderie, especially when these interactions occur between interdependent workers and/or workers with comparable job statuses. Some sexualized interactions among coworkers are also a demonstration of a personal resource strategy, especially for workers in organizationally dependent positions. Coming from the perspective that workplace sexual expressions are generally detrimental to women’s interests, one would assume that the less explicit the sexuality at work, the better. However, as discussed throughout this article, this assumption overlooks several organizational considerations, including the degree to which the workers operate within a shared culture, the shape of the organization’s hierarchy, and the degree to which the organization requires the close coordinated effort of workers.

Such differences in the culture and structure of an organization are important when attempting to determine the implications of workplace sexual interactions. If one accepts the basic sociological premise that knowledge is socially produced, then one should expect that workers’ interpretations of their sexualized interactions would vary depending on their organization’s cultural and structural features. The data collected for this study support the idea that if workers share cultural assumptions, maintain relatively egalitarian power relations, and coordinate their work closely, then workplace sexualization can help maintain coworker loyalties and camaraderie. Sexual camaraderie may also exist within an organization with a steeper hierarchy and multiple competing agendas, but the sexual camaraderie in these situations will undoubtedly be more precariously maintained, as seen at Club X.⁴

Given the risks of sexualized interactions in many workplaces, it seems sensible to conclude that owners and managers should cut their losses and simply strive to

desexualize all employee interactions. While in some cases, employees may view desexualization as a welcome reprieve, in other cases, a desexualized workplace may primarily benefit bureaucratic agendas in the name of professionalism. Since “‘professional’ usually connotes an attitude toward work that is knowledgeable, trustworthy, and *asexual*” (Williams, Giuffre, and Dellinger 1999, 86, emphasis added), managers who pressure their employees to act in a professional manner would also invariably strictly regulate their sexual expression—an agenda that may be more geared toward the standardization of work and workers’ identities than toward enhancing workers’ well-being. In this article, I have argued that under some conditions, a sexualized dynamic between workers may act as a bonding agent or work adhesive, a way to smooth over differences and show respect and allegiance to one’s coworkers. There are certainly other types of bonding agents (e.g., religious, ideological, familial) that may work better in some settings,⁵ but in others, such as Blue Heron and to some extent Club X, sexualized work dynamics can facilitate worker camaraderie and at times can even tip the service power dynamic with customers in the workers’ favor.

Implications for Theorizing Workplace Sexual Interactions

In the cases of both Blue Heron and Womyn (Dellinger and Williams 2002), workers shared common cultural as well as economic/occupational niches, and as a result, relations between workers were more likely to be sexually carefree, bawdy even, yet relatively free of sexual harassment. Yet even if the cultural and organizational conditions are relatively safe for sexualized interactions (based on the conditions outlined here), some workers in such environments may not wish, or be able, to fit into the prevailing sexual culture. Some workers may feel uncomfortable with frank sexual talk or razzing and experience it as harassment; others may attempt to join in on a culture of sexual talk or razzing but be interpreted by coworkers as being harassers.

It is clear that the existence/creation of cultural outsiders within the workplace will increase the likelihood of sexualized trouble, and the question of what to do about such situations is of great legal and moral importance. It is in these cases that we should especially examine the cultural and organizational norms of the workplace in question. In their study of the impact of organizational culture on workers’ perception of sexual harassment, Timmerman and Bajema (2000) found that the workers least likely to report instances of unwanted sexual behavior fall into three categories: Those who feel happy about the social climate of their workplace (as opposed to those working in less “socially oriented” workplaces), those who believe that their management tries to treat women and men equally, and those who believe management to be family friendly. These findings complement the advice of legal scholar Vicki Schultz, who argued that we should “reshape sex harassment law to offer employers the incentive to desegregate their workplaces—rather than desexualiz[e] them” (2003, 2172). According to Schultz, this legal reshaping would involve “a more humanistic, and more appealing, vision in which sexuality

and intimacy can coexist with, and perhaps even enhance, gender equality and organizational rationality" (p. 2193).

Building on Timmerman and Bajema's (2000) findings and Shultz' (2003) vision, general feminist guidelines—such as affirming the benefits of community building; affirming the equality of women, gays/lesbians, and ethnic/racial minorities; and affirming the need for work/family balance—may create a social climate that is not conducive to sexual harassment. Such social climates may be relatively free of sexual banter or (as in the case of Blue Heron) may have sexual banter as a ubiquitous force. The point is that in applying the theoretical framework outlined here, the sexual particularities of a workplace can be interpreted as one of its many cultural features, reflective more of its organizational conditions than of any static sexual symbolism. Hence, for those interested in creating work environments that are nonoppressive yet allow workers to engage in a range of creative expressions (including but not limited to those that are sexualized) rather than attempting to construct and implement a desexualized behavioral formula, more attention should be paid to creating cultures of community and social justice while tailoring sexual norms to the unique cultural, demographic, and organizational features of each workplace.

NOTES

1. One striking exception to this legal scholarship is the work of Vicki Schultz (2003), who offered a feminist critique of the trend toward "sanitizing" workplaces through standardized and antisexual measures of sexual harassment.

2. By "sexualized practices," I am referring to the range of verbal and physical activities that workers may encode as sexual. In this article, I often employ the term "sexualized" rather than "sexual" as this helps signify sexuality as a moving category, meaningful not in itself but only in relation to those who interpret it as such in particular contexts.

3. This "Ladies-4-Ladies" night was the first of its kind at Club X and may not have happened had I not been an "out" member of the staff. In an attempt to expand their customer base, a manager at Club X approached me with the idea of creating a special night for lesbians. I agreed to help spread the word by passing out fliers to women at lesbian bars and events. While the event did bring in revenue, ambivalence from some of the managers, dancers, and men customers made this a one-time-only event.

4. Christine Williams (2002) offered a complementary conceptual framework, theorizing that organizations with "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" (p. 112) are more likely to facilitate sexual harassment, whereas organizations with "flatter hierarchies, democratic participation, job security, just rewards and equitable punishments, and acknowledgment of mutual dependency, and a more trusting attitude between supervisors and workers" are more likely to produce a culture of "mutual recognition" (p. 112).

5. For example, Annie's, the third site, exhibited a fair amount of cultural cohesiveness yet a relative lack of sexualized banter. Instead, the workers (who reflected diversity in age, race/ethnicity, sex, and sexuality) were bonded by long-term, quasi-familial loyalties, especially with the owner, a lesbian woman in her fifties.

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