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Abstract

A significant number of women who experience sexual conduct in the workplace do not define it as sexual harassment. This has caused a discrepancy between social science measures of sexual harassment and women's perceptions and experiences. As a consequence, studies have begun to examine how workers distinguish between wanted and unwanted sexual behavior. Through in-depth interviews and ethnographic fieldwork with women who work in the building trades, this study examines how tradeswomen interpret and respond to the sexual conduct of their coworkers. Using a micro-politics of trouble framework, the author shows how interpretations of sexual conduct are shaped up exactly in the process of responding to problematic interactions. The analysis finds that many initial responses to unwanted sexual conduct attempt to restore good relations between coworkers. However, if the sexual conduct is considered extreme or if initial attempts to resolve the trouble are unsuccessful, the actions may be reinterpreted and responded to informally as actions that "cross the line" even as tradeswomen face constraints in exercising formal punitive measures.

Keywords

sexual harassment, sexual behavior, social control, gender and work, nontraditional work

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Numerous studies find that women's experience and labeling of sexual harassment differs from both legal and social science definitions (Welsh 1999). For example, while women in male-dominated and blue-collar jobs experience more prevalent and aggressive forms of sexual conduct (Gutek and Morasch 1982; Ragins and Scandura 1995), women in these settings "are not necessarily more likely to label their experiences as sexual harassment" (Welsh 1999, 178-79). Welsh (1999) notes that surveys measuring the prevalence of sexual harassment derive survey items from legal definitions of sexual harassment and "define all unwanted sexual behaviors as sexual harassment, whether the respondent defines them as such" (p. 173). A second focus of research identifies organizational characteristics that affect the frequency of sexual harassment (for a review, see Welsh 1999). While these studies can provide estimates of the frequency and distribution of sexual harassment, they do so in ways that ignore the meaning of sexual harassment to the women involved (Dellinger and Williams 2002).

One response has been a call for research that examines how "workers distinguish between wanted and unwanted sexual advances" (Williams et al. 1999, 75). A growing body of qualitative studies find that women may not interpret experiences as sexual harassment due to the characteristics of the harasser, the severity of the harassment, a desire for inclusion, a lack of awareness of the illegality of the offense, a fear that they will not be believed, or the experience of some sexual behavior as enjoyable (Collinson and Collinson 1996; Giuffre and Williams 1994; Jensen and Gutek 1982). Yet a limitation of qualitative studies is that they often do not include women's responses to sexual behavior in the analysis, thereby circumscribing the process through which interpretations of sexualized conduct are formed. Second, when responses are included in the analysis, scholars have privileged assertive over passive responses, arguing that women who fail to "name and claim" harm unwittingly participate in its continuation (Hinze 2004; Quinn 2002; Watts 2007).

This article decenters both the legal and scholarly definitions of sexual harassment in order to understand how tradeswomen construct the meaning of everyday sexualized experiences at work. Doing so addresses the "question of under what circumstances, and through what processes, might the law fail as either an instrument (to pursue claims of harm) or a source of meaning (a way in which one can interpret our interactions and construct identities) or both" (Quinn 2000, 1152). In addition, the analysis moves beyond previous qualitative studies by showing the relationship between "assertive" and "passive" responses as women shape up intra- and interpersonal meanings of sexual conduct over time. The article proceeds by first reviewing the literature on

workplace sexual harassment and presenting theoretical frameworks for examining the process of interpreting and responding to sexual conduct. After a discussion of the research method, the findings section examines how tradeswomen distinguish between actions that do and do not “cross the line” and shows how tradeswomen’s responses to sexual conduct are important in the interpretive process.

Sexual Conduct and Sexual Harassment at Work

Those who urge moving beyond legal and/or social science definitions of sexual harassment have begun to explore how the meaning of behavior as sexual harassment can be “shaped by organizational context” (Dellinger and Williams 2002, 244), examining how workers interpret sexual conduct within particular workplace cultures. Rather than treating the workplace as gender neutral, this research demonstrates how the workplace and work culture are gendered and how this shapes experiences of sexual harassment (Acker 1991; Connell 1998). “Whether a particular interaction is identified as harassment will depend on the intention of the harasser and the interpretation of the interchange by the victim, and both of these perspectives will be highly influenced by workplace culture and the social context of the specific event” (Giuffre and Williams 1994, 380).

For example, the role of organizational culture is striking in Dellinger and Williams’ (2002) study of two magazine publishers, one of male pornography and the other of feminist work. In the first, “bawdy depictions and discussions of sex” (p. 248) were acceptable as long they were not personal; while at the feminist publisher personal disclosures were encouraged. The different “locker room” and “dorm room” cultures of the publishers led to different definitions of sexual harassment. While survey research often assumes that sexual harassment events have a fixed meaning, this study and others (Handy 2006; McCabe and Hardman 2005) demonstrate that interpretations of sexual conduct vary by work context (Williams et al. 1999).

Furthermore, studies have shown that work environments where sexual harassment is commonplace or the institutionalization of sexuality is a requirement of the job can encourage women’s acceptance of sexual harassment at work (Dellinger and Williams 2002; Firestone and Harris 2003; Giuffre and Williams 1994; Loe 1996; Salzinger 2000). These studies address the question of “women’s seeming rejection of sexual harassment law by refusing to apply the label ‘sexual harassment’ in the face of incidents that would easily qualify as such” (Quinn 2000, 1151). Hegemonic norms of acceptable sexual activity and their reinforcement in masculine-defined work cultures minimize sexual

harassment and treat it as a problem of women's sensitivity, overreaction, or inability to take a joke (Giuffre and Williams 1994; Hinze 2004; Quinn 2002; Thomas and Kitzinger 1994; Watts 2007). In response, due to either normative pressures or fears of retaliation or in an attempt to resist these meanings and prove their trustworthiness to the work group, women often refuse to label or report "sexual harassment" and define unwanted sexual conduct as "small stuff" that can be ignored (Fitzgerald et al. 1988; Fitzgerald et al. 1995; Gutek and Koss 1993; Hinze 2004; Knapp et al. 1997; Near and Miceli 1985). Numerous studies across a variety of occupations, ethnic groups, and social classes have found that women prefer individual, informal, or "passive" measures such as avoidance, acceptance, denial, or joking as a way to cope with sexual harassment (Firestone and Harris 2003; Hinze 2004; Quinn 2002; Salzinger 2000; Wasti and Cortina 2002; Watts 2007). Furthermore, in ignoring or denying sexual harassment and refusing to name and claim harm, some scholars argue that women become disempowered and unwillingly complicit in its continuation (Hinze 2004; Quinn 2002; Watts 2007).

Despite repressive work contexts, studies also identify the circumstances under which women are more likely to use externally focused "assertive" or formal responses. One such circumstance is the organizational climate and its effects on definitions of sexual harassment. For example, Yoder and Aniakudo (1996) found that pranks became harassing for African American firefighters "when they occur in a context of exclusion rather than ultimate inclusion" (p. 253). Here, the meaning of sexual conduct as sexual harassment is determined by the specific uses of sexualized conduct with the workplace (inclusion/exclusion) rather than just the work culture itself. Similarly, sexual conduct that continues or persists despite resistance confirms its hostile and exclusionary intent, thus strengthening perceptions of sexual harassment (Knapp et al. 1997; Osman 2007; Wasti and Cortina 2002; Yoder and Aniakudo 1995). In addition, women in physical lines of work and those who feel especially marginalized (such as black women firefighters) may feel that a confrontational style is more effective (Yoder and Aniakudo 1995). Last, Handy (2006) found that in addition to work culture, social support shapes women's definitions and responses to unwanted sexual conduct. Women who are isolated (meat packing plant) had very few and highly individualized strategies for coping, whereas women who could form "communities of coping" (store and bank) had a wide range of more effective collective responses.

Yet a limitation of many studies that focus on interpretations of sexual conduct is that they do not fully analyze the process through which interpretations are formed. This is caused, in part, by not including workers' responses to sexual behavior in the analysis or by not following women's experiences

over time. Interpretations are inextricably linked to responses so that the outcome of a response (cessation, resolution, persistence, escalation) often leads to reinterpretations of the sexual conduct (R. M. Emerson 2008; Fitzgerald et al. 1995). "Harassment is generally not a onetime event but rather unfolds across time, as do victims' responses" (Fitzgerald et al. 1995, 124). Furthermore, the literature on "victim response" often documents the frequency of various responses to sexual harassment, but these measures are derived from the perspective of the social scientist, rather than identifying locally meaningful types of response, and have a bias toward "assertive" responses such as confrontation and reporting (for a review see Fitzgerald et al. 1995).

Recently, scholars have called for more research to address these issues. "Future research should seriously consider the possibility (in conceptualizing coping as well as in collecting data on coping) that these patterns of coping behaviors over time might be what is important in understanding women's coping with sexual harassment" (Magley 2002, 943). This article contributes to the literature by examining how women in the male-dominated building trades experience sexual conduct and how they develop interpretations of it exactly in responding to coworkers in the everyday practice of work. Specifically, I build on previous work by looking beyond perceptions to the interactive processes through which these perceptions are formed.¹

Frameworks for Examining Responses to Sexual Conduct

The dominant frameworks for examining responses to sexual harassment conceptualize responses as a form of individual coping with stressful life situations. For example, Fitzgerald and colleagues' (1995) "cognitive-behavioral stress and coping" framework links appraisals of sexual conduct with externally focused (attempts to manage or alter the situation) and internally focused (managing cognitive and emotional reactions to the situation) coping. I adapt their framework and readers will notice similarities between internally and externally focused coping and what I call "relief efforts" and "remedies," respectively. However, coping frameworks are focused on creating typologies of responses; they do not provide a theoretical framework for analyzing interactional processes. For my purposes, I need to shift the direction of the framework from psychological concerns with individual coping to social-interactional processes of managing social relationships.

Robert M. Emerson's "micro-politics of trouble" framework offers a grounded approach to analyzing interpretations and responses and can be used to look at relational concerns within a specific work context. Emerson's

work on social control examines how actions become “defined or constituted as problematic in the process of ‘dealing with’ troubles” (R. M. Emerson 2004, 1; see also R. M. Emerson and Messinger 1977). This model distinguishes informal responses that attempt to remedy troubles by reestablishing a livable order from formal responses that use official mechanisms to sanction offenders. This approach can be elaborated by recognizing two types of informal responses: relief efforts that attempt to unilaterally provide relief from troubles, for example, through avoidance or self-modification; and remedies that involve bilateral efforts to fix the trouble or change the behavior of the other (R. M. Emerson 2004).

R. M. Emerson’s (2008) framework improves on previous research in a number of ways. First, it explicitly theorizes the processual character of interpretations and responses as “response cycles.” These consist of persistent troubles that are subject to multiple frustrated attempts to remedy the situation leading to a possible escalation of the response (R. M. Emerson 2008). Emerson also improves on Fitzgerald and colleagues’ (1995) externally focused coping category by distinguishing formal responses that seek to enforce rules or sanction offenders by involving official third parties (such as filing a sexual harassment complaint) from informal responses that seek to remedy and restore order to a troubling situation (R. M. Emerson 2008). Formal responses are often viewed skeptically by others and are treated as a “last resort” that is justified only by the seriousness of the offense or a lack of alternative ways to respond (R. M. Emerson 1981). The distinction between informal and formal responses allows for greater appreciation of social relationships: informal responses are designed to produce order and maintain relationships while formal responses typically indicate a failure or giving-up on the relationship (R. M. Emerson 2008). For example, Macaulay (1963) found that businesses rarely go to court to enforce contracts because such an action ends the business partnership. Similarly, legal action is the “rarest of all responses” to sexual harassment and it similarly occurs after the dissolution of many work relationships: “In a review of cases filed in California, Coles (1986) found that half the victims lost their jobs and an additional 25% quit in fear and frustration” (Fitzgerald et al. 1995, 121).

The experiences of tradeswomen are well-suited to the micro-politics of trouble framework because they encounter many “troubles” working in a male-dominated occupation and must figure out how to interpret and respond to problematic interactions with coworkers. Tradeswomen’s interpretations of sexual conduct are constituted through a process in which they define and give meaning to actions exactly in attempting to respond to problematic actions and troubling persons. Unlike the abstract principles measured

in survey research and broader than the psychological focus on coping, in defining sexual harassment tradeswomen are pragmatically concerned with resolving problems and creating a livable order that facilitates getting along with coworkers, learning their craft, and staying on the job.

Method

Materials for this article draw from a larger study of women in the building trades in Southern California. The materials include in-depth interviews with tradeswomen, apprentices, and preapprentice job-seekers as well as ethnographic fieldwork with the last group of preapprentice job-seekers and at job fairs, tradeswomen's conferences, and tradeswomen's picnics. The fieldwork was conducted prior to the interviews and these experiences informed the interview questions, particularly my observations of conference sessions on sexual harassment where tradeswomen discussed on-the-job experiences and strategies. However, the bulk of the fieldwork was conducted during a ten-week preapprenticeship training program and these data do not include accounts of sexual conduct at work because the women had not yet entered a trade. Furthermore, I was unable to conduct observations at construction worksites due to insurance and liability concerns. Therefore, this article primarily draws on thirty-seven tape-recorded in-depth interviews—fourteen with experienced journey-level tradeswomen and twenty-three with apprentices. I used purposive and snowball sampling to gain contacts with both groups of women including those in union apprenticeship programs, in a support and advocacy group, as well as with tradeswomen outside of these groups. One interview was conducted with a personal acquaintance.

The interviewees are a diverse group in terms of age, tenure in the building trades, construction trade, and race and ethnicity. Seven of the interviewees are African American, four are Mexican American or Latina, two are Asian-American, and twenty-four are white. They range in ages from eighteen to sixty-five with most interviewees between twenty and forty years of age. Among the interviewees eleven are electricians, six are surveyors, six are sheet metal workers, five are carpenters, two are ironworkers, three are painters, one is a brick mason, two are laborers, and one is a pipefitter. The length of time the women worked in their trades ranged from one to twenty-two years.

The interviews were open-ended and addressed issues related to the work career including questions about finding work, relations with coworkers and supervisors, and descriptions of training, work processes, and job tasks. A series of background questions (age, race, and education) were included. All

but one of the tradeswomen were interviewed away from the job site at parks, restaurants, and homes. The interviews ranged in length from two to four hours and were audiotaped and transcribed.

I analyzed the interview transcripts using a “grounded approach” that emphasizes generating conceptual categories and theory from analysis of the data (Charmaz 1983, Glaser and Strauss 1967). For this article, I focused the analysis on tradeswomen’s accounts of troubles and harassment in their apprenticeship programs or on the jobsite. In the analysis, I also looked for factors that have been considered in previous research especially the relationship between intentions, motivations, workplace culture, and social context. Regarding the characteristics of the harasser, I consider organizational position and sexual orientation when they are mentioned by the interviewee, but I do not consider race due to a methodological limitation: I did not consistently ask tradeswomen about the race and ethnicity of the men with whom they worked.

The use of in-depth interviews provides analytic advantages as well as limitations. The data presented here focus on the perspectives of tradeswomen and are, therefore, uniquely suited for understanding how they interpret and respond to the sexual conduct of their coworkers. The in-depth interview data also provide important analytic possibilities including insight into tradeswomen’s perceptions of events, how these perceptions shape their interactions with coworkers, and access to tradeswomen’s feelings (Kleinman et al. 1994). The accounts presented in this article illustrate tradeswomen’s perspectives on social relations at work as well as the process through which they manage unwanted sexual conduct.

Interpreting and Responding to Sexual Conduct in the Building Trades

Tradeswomen interpret sexual conduct in light of workplace norms but this is a complex, often ambiguous and sometimes anxiety-provoking process. Some sexualized behaviors are enjoyed as part of the freedoms that come with a blue-collar work environment especially when compared with expectations to be nice and kind in many white-collar and service occupations (Martin 1996). The ability to swear, to tell someone off if you don’t like them, and not to smile were mentioned as positive aspects of the work culture in the building trades. At other times tradeswomen are troubled by their coworker’s sexual actions but despite believing that their coworkers behaved in problematic ways, tradeswomen still interpreted many such acts as acceptable in this work context. And yet in other instances tradeswomen felt that their coworker’s actions “crossed the line.” These varied interpretations of

tradesmen's actions are shaped up in a complex process where tradeswomen consider many interactional and relational concerns. In the following, I present the three primary ways that tradeswomen interpret sexual conduct as: doesn't cross the line, I don't know where the line is, and crosses the line.

I also analyze the primary ways that women respond to unwanted sexual behavior by distinguishing between informal responses such as: (1) relief measures that unilaterally seek to prevent, avoid, or manage troubles by changing aspects of oneself or the situation, (2) remedies that bilaterally seek to restore order through pragmatic requests that the coworker change his behavior, and (3) informal sanctions that involve moralistic efforts to stop and/or punish wrongdoing. A second category, formal responses, invokes sexual harassment law or policy either as a threat or in an official complaint. Similar to processes of trouble escalation in other contexts, tradeswomen treat official complaints as a "last resort" mechanism justified by the seriousness of the offense or behavior and when there is a lack of alternative ways to respond (R. M. Emerson 1981, 6). Informal social control mechanisms that seek to relieve or remedy a situation are generally preferred and used more frequently by tradeswomen than formal sanctions and punitive measures. The following analysis thus proceeds by presenting "doesn't cross the line" and "I don't know where the line is" followed by tradeswomen's relief efforts before turning to actions that "cross the line" and women's attempts to remedy, sanction, or make an official complaint in response.

Doesn't Cross the Line

The work culture in the building trades often involves a range of sexual conduct including pornography, foul language, and sexualized stares, comments, gestures, pictures, and jokes. I begin by briefly presenting a few actions that tradeswomen said could be considered harassment but they did not define them as such. Tradeswomen have an awareness of sexual harassment laws and workplace policies, sometimes through general cultural sources but also from sexual harassment training in apprenticeship programs. Therefore, they sense that certain actions might fit legal definitions of sexual harassment. However, tradeswomen consider additional factors, such as the potential for harm, their coworker's intentions, and the surrounding work climate, in making their interpretation. In the following, Toni and Catherine are not offended by swimsuit calendars in their workplace.

Catherine (apprentice): Right behind my area there's a calendar. They're not nude. They're like in their bathing suits but that doesn't bother me. I

know it's probably been there for years. If I was working there and then they put it up like right in my area I might be offended by that. But it's been there for a long time. It doesn't really bother me. (Author [AD]: Does it affect your work or how they view you?) I don't think so. Nobody's mentioned it or said anything. I don't think they realize that the calendar is there and I'm there, you know. I don't think they get it.

Toni (apprentice): They have [a] *Sports Illustrated* calendar. Those are like women wearing almost nothing on the walls. It was funny because I told Steve when I first came in here, that's really offensive to me. And he goes, "Shut up, Toni, you know you like it." (AD: So did you find it offensive or were you joking?) If I was a straight woman, I would probably find it offensive. But I like to look at them so I can't say that I find it offensive.

For Catherine (who is heterosexual), the swimsuit calendar is largely irrelevant because it does not factor into the social interactions of the group. Catherine is treated well by her coworkers and they do not seem to pay any special attention to the calendar. Furthermore, the calendar's posting preceded Catherine, facilitating her interpretation that it was not directed at her. For Toni, the calendar is a source of enjoyment both in viewing the images and, because she is openly gay and accepted at her workplace, as a source of joking and fun. Tradeswomen described other sexual behaviors that did not cross line including: foul language, pornography (*Playboy*), sexualized talk about other women, sexualized jokes, teasing and/or playing around (such as walking behind a tradeswoman with a pipe as a phallus), and nicknames (such as sweetheart and princess). These actions are not defined as sexual harassment typically because they are not personalized or because they occur within work relations that are seen as accepting and respectful.

"I Don't Know Where the Line Is": Ambiguity and Self-Doubt

While some sexual conduct is enjoyable, tradeswomen also experience behaviors that cause ambivalence and self-doubt. These actions are troublesome enough that tradeswomen become unsure, at least temporarily, whether they should accept and tolerate them or resist them as actions that have crossed the line. Ambiguity can be intentionally produced by tradesmen who use "weapons of the weak" or masked strategies of protest (Miller 1997). It is further created by the difficulty of applying abstract sexual harassment rules and laws to lived experience, the complexity of considering multiple

interpretive criteria simultaneously, the social expectations of humor, and by the occupational sex-typing of the building trades as a “man’s world.” The following accounts illustrate how these forms of interpretive ambiguity cause self-doubt and complicate the interpretive process.

Elena (apprentice): [There were] little murmurs, little comments like, “Ooh I wonder what you’re wearing under there.” When I first heard it, I just kinda stared and said maybe it’s me. Maybe I heard wrong. But I didn’t react. And I questioned it: is this sexual harassment? Maybe I’m just exaggerating? I’ve never been harassed before so I wouldn’t know.

Carrie (journey): It’s just guys talking. It’s complimentary but it’s sexual. Cause I don’t know where the line is and I don’t know where their mind is.

Ambiguity is intentionally produced in the first account when Elena’s co-worker “murmurs” sexualized comments causing her to doubt whether she heard him correctly. An additional source of ambiguity is a primary concern in both accounts with whether the actions meet the criteria for sexual harassment. Carrie considers additional criteria: normative gender behavior (“just guys talking”), deference (complimentary vs. derogatory comments), and motivation (“I don’t know where their mind is”). Intentionally produced ambiguity on the part of tradesmen, the difficulty of applying sexual harassment law, and the complexity of considering numerous criteria contributes to Elena’s and Carrie’s doubts in determining the meaning of their coworkers’ actions.

The interactional expectations surrounding humor may also create ambiguity in how tradeswomen interpret the sexual conduct of their coworkers. Many of the comments that tradeswomen encounter at work are presented in the form of a joke and carry with them the expectation that they will be responded to lightly (J. P. Emerson 1969). If tradeswomen attempt to reinterpret sexualized comments as trouble or harassment, they may be labeled socially inept for responding out of frame, i.e., misunderstanding the joke or failing to have a sense of humor (J. P. Emerson 1969). On the other hand, responding “in frame” can serve as a way to gain inclusion in the work group.² Collinson and Collinson (1996) found that men in insurance sales “try to justify their degradation and harassment of women on the grounds that it was ‘just a joke’” and could further exploit “the inherent ambiguities and multiple meanings of humor” (p. 47). The interactional expectations of a joking framework are evident in the following:

Kim (apprentice): One guy really wants to get hooked up with me, even though he knows that I'm married. I'm like, that's kind of strange. But I think he's a pretty nice guy, too. He just can't get hooked up with anybody, I guess. I don't know. I'm not sure if he's trying to be funny or if he's actually serious or desperate. He knows that I'm married so he stops with the "Can I get together with you" and now he's asking for my sister. (AD: Is this sexual harassment?) No, not harassment. I think it's kind of funny.

Kim seems unsure about how to interpret these incidents, in part because she is unsure about the apprentice's motives. Nevertheless, she considers two possible interpretations: (1) he is trying to be funny or (2) he is serious and desperate. These sympathetic interpretations forestall any attribution of intentional harm to his actions. Note, however, that although Kim thinks the apprentice's actions are "strange," in the end she interprets them in line with how she thinks the coworker presented himself—as "funny."

In addition, tradeswomen's interpretations of their coworker's actions are shaped by the intersection of broad cultural beliefs and local workplace norms evident in the gender-typing of the building trades. Tradeswomen, as tokens, are limited in the extent to which they participate in defining work culture. Therefore, ambivalence can also be created by a disjuncture between tradeswomen's experiences of discomfort and the masculine-defined work culture.

Sarah (apprentice): They can say a few things and you know, that they know, they shouldn't be saying it. But if it doesn't bother me, I won't say anything. If it bothers me, maybe I would. I'm not going to make a big deal about it because it's true; you're walking into a so-called man's world.

Thus, some actions may bother tradeswomen, but may be ultimately perceived as something that must be tolerated in a "man's world." In the following, a coworker's sexualized talk is also interpreted in light of the understanding that the building trades are a "man's world" but the ambivalence is resolved differently.

Kim (apprentice): If they're saying something sexual, innuendos or whatever, it doesn't bother me. [Construction] workers talk about stuff like that all the time and it doesn't really bother me as long as they don't use it in context of me.

For Kim, sexualized talk is acceptable because it occurs in a “man’s world” yet she draws the line at comments that are personalized. Thus, tradeswomen recognize that men define workplace culture and norms, but they still set limits on some practices.

Tradeswomen’s decision to accept or place limits on normative actions is part of a social, rather than a purely individual or cognitive, process. “Man’s world” is a belief that is held and enforced by the dominant group. The decision to regard interactions as something you have to get used to in a “man’s world” is a reflection of tradeswomen’s understanding of their accountability within the work culture.

Monique (apprentice): I was talking to one guy and his partner and he said “Don’t talk to her, she’s going to sue you for sexual harassment.” So, I think that’s the threat that’s out there. I think a lot of women take advantage of that. (AD: So did that tradesman stop talking to you?) No. We were talking later on and I said I’m not like that, don’t worry about it. But I guess the threat is there for the guys, they have to worry about it.

Similarly, Carrie describes why she is reluctant to express complaints about her coworkers.

Carrie (journey) “The last thing you want to do is cause a scene. You get a reputation and then no one wants to work around you. You’re the sexual harassment lady and you just don’t want that, it doesn’t help at all.”

Many tradeswomen are concerned with avoiding stigmas associated with sexual harassment and establishing a reputation as someone who accepts the masculine work culture. In one case a tradeswomen (Monique) demonstrates this acceptance by “promising” not to file sexual harassment charges, but more often they do so by adopting masculine-defined workplace norms so that they don’t feel or express discontent. Notice that the sexual harassment stigma that Monique seeks to avoid is so strong that the “threat” is reversed: it is the men who fear the threat of a sexual harassment claim.³ The lesson for Monique is that women who complain about sexual harassment will be ostracized from the work group. This creates social pressures to resolve ambiguity and doubt by interpreting sexualized actions as acceptable in a “man’s world.”

Relief Measures

Tradeswomen have a variety of means for responding to the various troubling actions that they encounter, both those that are considered tolerable as well as those that cross the line. Walshok (1981) suggests that women in blue-collar jobs may, in fact, have an easier time coping with sexual harassment due to less restrictive workplace norms on aggressive language and actions. Nevertheless, tradeswomen's responses to problematic situations were often fraught with anxiety and indecision.

Elena (apprentice): What do I do? If I go off and I lose my top and if I tell him [the offending coworker] something, he might cuss me out or something. If I tell my foreman, he might think I'm overexaggerating. What do I do? Do I keep to myself and see how it goes for the rest of the week? And if he keeps bugging me then what?

Job tenure also influences how tradeswomen respond to their coworker's actions because the task of establishing a good reputation is concentrated at particular points in a tradeswoman's career: when they start out as apprentices and when they encounter a new group of coworkers. The second situation occurs frequently because construction work entails moving from one building site to another.

When tradeswomen interpret their coworkers' conduct as not crossing the line or when they are uncertain of the interpretation, they often seek some measure of relief from problematic interactions without having to confront the offending coworker. One form of relief can be accomplished by changing one's expectations and learning to accept and tolerate sexualized actions that were previously experienced as disturbing. Tradeswomen may also seek relief by modifying aspects of themselves or by situationally withdrawing from or permanently leaving a problematic situation. I begin with tradeswomen who transform their emotional response or perceptual awareness of the sexual conduct.

Cognition and emotion management: "Ignore it" and "get used to it." Tradeswomen can respond to actions that they interpret as something that shouldn't bother them by learning to "ignore" or "get used to" it. This includes altering their emotional response and sometimes their perception of the interaction. Zerubavel (2002), in an article on the social organization of denial, defines ignoring as "an active process of deliberately not noticing" (pp. 21-26). This can take two forms: first, disattending what is seen and known but ignored and, second, blocking information that "could have entered awareness yet nevertheless does not" (Zerubavel 2002, 21-26).

It was not unusual for tradeswomen to disattend certain aspects of the work environment. Alexis, for example, cannot tell me what kinds of comments her coworkers make about women passersby.

Alexis (apprentice): [Tradesmen] will joke around and tell dirty jokes or tease like, not make references to me, but they're talking about girls. It doesn't bother me. (AD: What do they say about girls?) Alexis: I don't know. Normal comments. Just, see a girl walk by. I can't even remember lots of that stuff. It goes in one ear and out the other. I don't get bothered by that stuff.

Alexis works at not being bothered by a sexualized work environment in large part by letting the comments go "in one ear and out the other." She has learned to manage her emotions by ignoring the comments either concurrently as they are said or by retrospectively forgetting them over time. Either way, Alexis learns to accept her coworkers' sexualized comments by not paying attention to them. Monique manages her emotional response in a similar way:

Monique (apprentice): You got to like let it go in one ear and out the other. You can't be uptight about it, you know.

Monique evokes desired emotions through self-prompting (Hochschild 1983) such as when she tells herself to not "be uptight about it." The use of emotion management, however, is in part shaped by the extent of cognition management.

Actions that are deliberately left out of awareness are obviously difficult to discuss with tradeswomen because they tend to be unaware that they are doing it. Instead, they simply report that they have not experienced any problems. In extreme cases, it is only when a third party tells them about the actions that they become aware of them.

Dana (apprentice): You feel kind of vulnerable like you're naked at work. You'll look and they'll already be looking at you. I had always thought it was them getting used to me until I asked one of my foremen. He's like, they always stare at you. And I'm like, no they don't. Well they did when I first got here. And he's like, Dana they still do; you're just used to it now.

While it is possible that the staring became less frequent or blatant over time, Dana's account suggests that she has "gotten used to it" because she is no longer aware that she's being watched. This is the foreman's explanation as

Dana presents it. Dana is able to ignore her coworker's stares by blocking her awareness or cognitively disconnecting from her surroundings in order to manage the pressure and discomfort of being watched.

Modifying one's own appearance and actions. Sometimes tradeswomen attempt to change the situation in which the trouble occurs by changing themselves. They may modify their appearance or other aspects of self that are the target of the coworker's comments.

Elena (apprentice): It (sexual comments) was mainly if I would bend down or move or jump. It got to the point where I didn't even want to bend down because I thought, oh my god he's gonna be looking at my ass. I felt really insecure. I would stop and think like, what am I gonna wear to work? If I wear this long shirt will it cover me up? If I wear this is it too tight? Sometimes it would be hot as hell and I would keep my sweater on. It became a big problem.

Elena tries to alter her appearance by covering the parts of her body that the comments target and restricting her movements at work. This was a common topic in the interviews and many tradeswomen commented on their own and other tradeswomen's appearance because of the perceived impact on their coworkers' perception and behavior.

Situational withdrawal. Tradeswomen who are bothered by a coworker's actions may avoid the offender, leaving situations in which trouble is likely to occur. Situational withdrawal is an attractive remedy because it can be implemented unilaterally (R. M. Emerson 2008) and can be effective in response to incidents that aren't transparent enough to warrant a direct response.

Alonna (apprentice): He was walking by and he touched my breast. It wasn't so blatant that I could say something to him so I just wrote it off. But it appeared to be intentional because I let it slide and it kept happening. I made sure I was out of his way.

Katie (journey): If the guys are screaming and cussing and using foul language, you don't pay attention to them or you just walk away. (AD: Did you find yourself being alone a lot?) Katie: Yeah, I was alone a lot. But I've always been independent.

This remedy is "visible" to the other party and has the potential of producing either a resolution or resentment and retribution (R. M. Emerson 2008). Yet for tradeswomen, the drawback of situational withdrawal seems to be exclusion from the work group (see also Eisenberg 1998).

Quitting. Whereas situational withdrawal entails avoiding particular situations or people at work, quitting involves a complete exit from the job. This is somewhat easier to do in the building trades where workers regularly move from job site to job site. Even so, most workers prefer to remain on the job for as long as possible and others may have expected a long-term relationship with their employer.

Kim (apprentice): Steve Miller [the owner] was quite upset that I drugged up [quit] from his company and wanted to know why. I was very hesitant to tell him because the guy who had done it [a foreman who made sexual advances] has two other brothers in the company and I didn't want harassment from them. So I reluctantly told him because they were threatening to take away my sponsorship [in the apprenticeship program]. They said that they would take care of the problem and the guy would be fired. But he never got fired. No reprimand, nothing. So I decided not to go back. (AD: How do you feel about that?) I didn't want to file any complaints because of course I knew the guy just had gone too far. It wasn't that he meant to be gross or that he meant to be offending. He simply didn't know when to stop. I knew that I didn't want to get him in trouble.

In response to the sexual advances of the foreman, Kim and her husband left the company. Her response is constrained by interconnected masculine relational structures: a masculine work culture, familial ties between coworkers that increase the likelihood of retaliatory harassment, and a husband who may jeopardize his job out of chivalry (he wants to "beat the living crud" out of the foreman). Facing these constraints, Kim interprets the foreman's actions benevolently and restricts her responses to those that will not get him in trouble. The corrective action she seeks is practical but impacts her training because she must find a new sponsor.

Quitting as a way to remedy mistreatment in the workplace is common (Eisenberg 1998) and temporarily effective but it comes with a price. It means giving up one's livelihood, at least for a time, something that workers are typically loath to do. Even if the out-of-work list is moving quickly and another job is assured, tradeswomen may be concerned about the effect of being fired on their reputation and future employability.

Elena (apprentice): It doesn't look good, especially for a woman, to get fired because then other contractors hear about you and they don't want you.

Crossing the Line: "I Don't Have To Take That"

Despite the potential costs of not accepting the work culture, tradeswomen define their coworker's actions as something they "don't have to take" if it "crosses the line." This occurs in circumstances common to "trouble escalation" generally: when the persistence of the problem and the failure of efforts to relieve the problem "leads the actor to cast about for other understandings of the causes of the problem and hence leads to new interpretations" and when the actions constitute a single dramatic escalation in the troubling interactions (R. M. Emerson 2004, 21). Tradeswomen's criteria for determining persistence are rather straightforward: the offensive actions continue unabated and fail to "respect" previously communicated wishes and boundaries. Escalations in offensive conduct are identified as those that become negative, hostile, or threatening and those that are personalized and directly target the tradeswoman. I further identified a third circumstance in which troubling conduct is reinterpreted: when a third party (often a male family member) interprets the actions as offensive. While there is often more than one criterion at work in tradeswomen's efforts to make sense of their coworker's actions, I analytically separate the accounts to highlight the effect of each one on the interpretive process.

Persistence. Troubling actions can take the form of a onetime isolated incident or a sequence of persistent actions that continue despite a discouraging response. Isolated incidents are more likely to be ignored or tolerated especially if they are seen as not particularly harmful and not likely to be repeated (the second is difficult for tradeswomen to predict and becomes a source of stress and anxiety). The second type of trouble contains within it a history of problematic behavior and the enduring character of such trouble is more likely to be interpreted as crossing the line. Persistence "tends to increase the aggrieved party's sense of suffering deliberate offense; after all, the other continues to engage in the troubling behavior despite having been asked not to do so" (R. M. Emerson 2004, 16). In the following, a tradesman's persistent sexual advances fail to acknowledge boundaries that a tradeswoman set by refusing him.

Anna (apprentice): He was saying, "[Let's] go to your house and have some dinner." I was like, "No dude, it ain't happening." [He replied] "Oh, come on girl." I'm like, "No, dude, really." I asked him [to stop] three times, alright, cool. [But] he kept trying to have this conversation and trying to be funny. He wouldn't knock it off.

Here, the sexual advances become intolerable when they continue despite Anna's consistent refusals and she responds to the situation by going to the foreman.

Escalation. Actions that sexualize the work environment or work relationships in a distinctly negative or hostile way are often seen as more extreme or escalated than those that are interpreted as "funny" or "complimentary." The following is a graphic example.

Carrie (journey): He went into the bathroom and came back with a handful of "forensic evidence." (AD: Was it semen?) Yeah. [He] said, "Here's what you do to me." I was like, sick. I was scared. What's a guy like that going to do next? That can't go on.

Carrie perceives these actions as threatening ("scared"). While the handful of semen is "sick," it is the sense of unpredictability about what "a guy like that" would "do next" that is particularly troubling. Carrie insists that "that can't go on" to prevent anticipated future escalated actions.

In the following, a pinup calendar is made pointedly offensive and hostile by a foreman. Here, the escalation of a troubling situation is due primarily to the surrounding climate and the organizational position of the offending coworker rather than simply in the offense itself.

Janette (journey): The foremen had a calendar of scantily clad women [put up after Janette began work]. It was the atmosphere, a lot of cat-calling. I had experienced that before but you take it up to here and then there's something that happens and you feel like it's within your rights to say something. The foreman had it displayed in the office so that everybody walking by could see it. It just irritated the hell out of me.

This is a workplace where catcalling and a general atmosphere that was hostile to Janette predominates. The calendar is put up by a foreman giving it greater symbolic importance that serves as an "official" sanctioning of the hostile environment. The calendar is thus considered personalized and distinctly offensive and is interpreted accordingly as crossing the line.

Third party support. In previous accounts the interpretation of actions as crossing the line is a result, in part, of a dramatic escalation in the sexualized actions. In the following, Elena's interpretation of a coworker's consistent sexual comments is shaped by the support of a third party.

Elena (apprentice): He was really perverted. When I was taking my sweater off, he would talk about my chest. Or if I would bend down he would talk about my ass. I came home and I would ask my Dad. "Is that harassment?" I mean, "Is that proper?" And he said, "No, they shouldn't talk to you like that, you know, you have your rights."

Elena initially doubts her interpretation of these comments but as the sexualized comments continue she seeks the advice of her father who supports her interpretation of the actions as sexual harassment.

In sum, tradeswomen are careful in their consideration of the potential consequences that their interpretations may have for their job and their relations with coworkers. When determining if actions cross the line, ambiguity in coworker's intentions leads tradeswomen to look to the characteristics of the actions in forming their interpretations. Tradeswomen define persistent actions as well as those that escalate through hostility or personalization as unacceptable. They may also resolve ambiguity by seeking confirmation of the reasonableness of their interpretation from a trusted third party. Tradeswomen can then press their claims by asserting that these actions cross the line. While the "sexual harassment lady" stigma is a strong disincentive to challenging the dominant work culture, indigenous terms such as "crossing the line" constitute an alternative claim of sexual harassment that allows tradeswomen to challenge the work culture.

Remedies and Sanctions

When relief efforts fail and the sexual conduct persists or escalates to the point where tradeswomen define it as crossing the line, their responses typically became more externally focused and assertive although this does not mean that they will pursue an official complaint. Remedies consist of efforts to fix the trouble by trying to get the offender to change his behavior. This can be accomplished in two ways: direct complaints and appeals to the coworker or through appeals to a third party who can intervene on one's behalf (R. M. Emerson 2004). Because remedies constitute an open and direct response, they are vulnerable to ridicule, resentment, and an escalation in hostility (R. M. Emerson 2008). Therefore, some tradeswomen use remedies only after attempts to tolerate or change the situation have failed. Yet, others prefer a direct response because it is best to "nip it in the bud."

Stephanie (apprentice): I'll straight up say something to him like, "Don't call me that at work, I'm not your babe."

Dana (apprentice): [I tell them] don't say anything to me that you wouldn't tell your own sister. If your sister's gonna take offense to a joke or whatever, I probably would too.

Here, tradeswomen provide a standard of behavior and direct their coworkers to follow it. In the first, Stephanie tells a coworker that treating her in a sexualized manner, calling her "babe," is not acceptable. In the second, Dana instructs her coworkers to think of her as a sister, a nonsexualized role that men are familiar with, as a guide for getting along and preventing trouble. Tradeswomen can also respond assertively by "telling off" an offending coworker.

Elena (apprentice): You have this vibrator plate that you smash the asphalt. He said; "That must bring you flashbacks." I was puzzled like what the hell are you talking about? He goes; "You know, every night with your vibrator." I just exploded. I said, "You fucking asshole." But they don't take that as a threat. They're just like, oh whatever.

Elena "explodes" after her initial responses (ignoring her coworker's sexualized comments and modifying her behavior) fail to bring relief from her coworker's actions. While this is an escalation in Elena's response, she says that her coworker did not take her "threat" seriously.

Elena's account demonstrates that direct complaints to an offending coworker may not lead to corrective action. Coworkers of equal professional status may not feel obligated or even inclined to respond to each other's complaints. This is exacerbated for tradeswomen who may not be considered equals due to their gender. In response, women may try to exert more pressure on an offending coworker by involving a third party, particularly one that has power within the organization hierarchy such as a foreman. This type of informal complaint asks that something be done to remedy the situation but does not request official sanctions. In the following, Stephanie wants to end to the offensive conduct, not punish her coworker.

Stephanie (apprentice): If I'm sick of this guy and he's persistent. I will go to the foremen and tell them: I'm having a little problem with this person, could you not put me directly working with them.

Remedial actions such as responding directly to the coworker or requesting the help of a third party can be an effective way to stop unwanted sexual behavior. However, tradeswomen are also concerned with the potential costs and sometimes put off saying something, or decide not to say anything at all

because they must negotiate the response of coworkers and supervisors who may question, reject, or counter their complaint. In the following, Elena has determined that her coworker's actions cross the line and has reported the problem to her foreman.

Elena (apprentice): He says, "Aw, he's like that. Don't worry about it. I'll talk to him and see what's going on. It's just little comments that we make, don't take it to heart."

The foreman's response to Elena's complaint supports the tradesman in making sexualized comments by reinterpreting the comments as normal and acceptable. Eisenberg (1998) also found that tradeswomen could not rely on supervisors for support. Elena further describes how the offending coworker confronts her about the complaint.

Elena: He goes; "Why are you making a big deal out of this? It's just comments." He would say; "You know you like it. Don't all girls like when they tell them they're pretty?" And I go yeah, but being pretty is one thing, you goggling over my ass and my chest is another. That's just being perverted. He laughed.

Here, Elena's informal complaint leads to confrontation, attempted "negotiation," and counteraccusations. The offending coworker claims that his sexualized talk is acceptable and suggests that Elena should enjoy sexualized comments. Elena responds by differentiating between types of conduct: compliments are acceptable but "goggling" is not. She then reinterprets the actions and possibly the coworker as deviant by calling them and/or him "perverted." The coworker laughs suggesting that his actions, or Elena's interpretation of them, are not serious matters. This illustrates a potential cost of claiming that a coworker's actions have crossed the line—they can be countered by the claim that one's interpretation is extreme or irrational (R. M. Emerson 2008) such as when Elena's coworker asks why she's "making a big deal out of this."

Tradeswomen could also respond with informal sanctions. These differ from remedies in that they seek to punish an offending coworker or stop his actions by threatening to punish him without turning to official persons and laws. This can come in the form of "backup" such as a male relative who is used to punctuate a request.

Elena (apprentice): When I told him, if you don't stop I'm gonna tell my husband to come kick your ass, I think he was like, oh shit, she is

married and her husband is gonna kick my ass. After I said that he wouldn't even look at me.

Elena "lies" to the backhoe operator, claiming that she is a married woman. This produces an immediate improvement perhaps because Elena is viewed as a sexual object that belongs to man or she is seen as incapable of defending herself. Irrespective of the motivation, Elena was not an equal player in the interaction and had to create a fictive husband to protect herself at work.

Formal Responses

Formal responses that invoke official rules and laws are rarely used (Fitzgerald et al. 1995). Previous research on troubles suggests that the use of these sanctions will only be seen as appropriate if they are presented as a last resort (R. M. Emerson 1981). In the following, Katie is careful to establish her response as a last resort. Previously, Katie described a coworker whose verbal harassment was punctuated by gesturing with his genitals. In response, Katie filed a complaint with her employer (a public institution).

Katie (Journey): He was suspended [and] they had a meeting with the whole department using me as an example. After the incident they trained everybody in sexual harassment and these guys changed a lot. (AD: For the better or worse?) For the better. (AD: You didn't mind being the example?) No, I didn't mind it at all 'cause I had already gained respect.

Katie successfully names her coworker's actions as sexual harassment by establishing the severity of the offense (not included here) and by pointing out that the offender had sexually harassed other women. She further established the failure of remedial efforts and had gained her coworker's respect by previously "taking the crap" and not using formal sanctions. The success of Katie's claim is also due to her employer's response. In suspending the offending coworker and conducting sexual harassment training, the employer supports Katie's claim and provides institutional legitimacy for her definition of sexual harassment.

However, tradeswomen also fear making a sexual harassment complaint. They weigh the costs of any likely retribution against the benefits if they are successful at stopping the offensive actions. Tradeswomen described retaliatory acts such as being laid off, isolation, pornographic materials in their locker, tools glued together, feces in their hardhat, or urine in their thermos. Eisenberg (1998) describes similar escalations in hostility in her study of

tradeswomen. In the following, Elena considers filing an official complaint when the foreman proves ineffective.

AD: So how did you feel after you talked to the foreman?

Elena (apprentice): I thought it was gonna get fixed. It's not gonna happen anymore and you'll be able to work good. But it didn't stop, then I took it to my union.

But the experience of a coworker serves as a cautionary tale:

Elena: Mary [the truck driver] reported it and sued [the company for sexual harassment]. She got fired and she never won the case. (AD: How did you feel when that happened?) I felt degraded in a sense because I felt like a woman's voice is not heard. No matter what, you know how they say, harassment, a woman's hurt, and if you're in trouble do this. What are you gonna do? So at that point I didn't believe anything.

While Elena was considering a formal sexual harassment complaint in discussions with her union, she testified on behalf of Mary's sexual harassment complaint, detailing the sexualized comments that she had endured. According to Elena, the offending coworker remained on the job and was told to "not to say it out loud" while Mary was fired. The retribution that Mary faced and the effects of job loss on Elena's reputation in the trade were overwhelming disincentives against the likelihood that Elena would risk taking any of the official options offered by the union. For the remaining four months on this job Elena did not pursue her sexual harassment complaint again. Eisenberg (1998) also found that tradeswomen "chose not to report even very serious harassment" because they fear "getting blackballed" and because "it was not unusual for a tradeswoman to be transferred or laid off after attention was called to harassment" (pp. 69-70).

Conclusion

The building site is a male-dominated, blue-collar environment where sexual conduct is common and tradeswomen experience some of these behaviors as entertaining or fun. This supports previous arguments that not all sexual conduct is harmful to women and that some forms of sexuality at work can be enjoyable and empowering (Dellinger and Williams 2002; Schultz 1998). At other times, tradeswomen stress that since the building trades are a "man's

world” they must be willing to accept, ignore, or go along with workplace interactions that make them uncomfortable. It is here that the influence of interpretive ambiguity, the social expectations of humor, and the male-dominated work culture are most apparent as tradeswomen sometimes change their expectations and perceptions to fit the work context. It was only when sexualized actions were hostile or escalated through personalization or persistence, or when a third party supported their perspective, that tradeswomen interpreted actions as crossing the line. In this way, tradeswomen reject some aspects of the dominant work culture and try to create change.

Tradeswomen’s experiences of sexual conduct at work extends previous research that shows that the meaning of sexual harassment is not fixed or inherent in a particular event or object, but is shaped through a complex process that is influenced by work context (Dellinger and Williams 2002; Fitzgerald et al. 1995). However, work context is only part of the interpretive process and cannot fully explain variations in the meaning of seemingly similar events. Dellinger and Williams (2002) do not make such an argument, but their comparison of pinup calendars is meant to illustrate the role of different work cultures: “sometimes an offensive nude pinup is sexual harassment; sometimes it isn’t” (p. 225). Yet, the different meanings of pinups, such as the three calendars that tradeswomen encountered, can occur both across and within work cultures. In other words, even within similar work contexts a pinup calendar may or may not cross the line depending on the surrounding climate and the particular use of that calendar within a work group (see also Yoder and Aniakudo 1996). Akin to Dellinger and Williams’ (2002) editorial workers, tradeswomen share a similar understanding of what crosses the line. While the meaning of pinup calendars (or other events) can vary, the definition of sexual harassment and therefore tradeswomen’s interpretations of the calendars is consistent—a calendar only crosses the line when it is personalized and is part of a persistently hostile environment.

These accounts also show the importance of conceptualizing interpretations of sexual conduct as a process rather than a singular event (Fitzgerald et al. 1995). Troubles have histories characterized by remedial cycles of interpretations that are reappraised in light of new or persistent actions including the outcomes of initial response efforts (R. M. Emerson 2008). For example, Elena’s interpretation of a coworker’s sexualized comments shifts over time from believing she heard him incorrectly, to questioning whether the actions constitute sexual harassment, to determining that the actions are disrespectful, perverted, and are sexual harassment. Elena’s reappraisals occur after informal relief and remedial efforts fail to stop her coworker’s actions (including ignoring the comments, situational withdrawal, modifying her clothing and

actions, telling the coworker to stop, and complaining to the foreman) and with the support of a third party. As the situation escalates, Elena considers taking formal action but is dissuaded by the firing of a coworker. Instead, she turns to informal sanctions, threatening that her “husband” will take action against the offending coworker. In this case, similar actions (sexual comments) become more egregious over time because they persist despite appeals, at first subtle and then increasingly overt, that they stop.

A processual analysis of interpretations reveals a second explanation for women’s preference for informal responses. Previous research on sexual harassment has found that the most common reason for why women rarely report sexual harassment is “fear—fear of retaliation, of not being believed, of hurting one’s career, or of being shamed and humiliated” (Fitzgerald et al. 1995, 121). My data suggest that this is an accurate but partial explanation. Fear of negative outcomes plays an important role in restricting women’s options for responding to sexual harassment. The use of informal relief and remedial responses do not by themselves prevent legal recourse when these informal responses fail. However, combined with a hostile work culture the interactional pressure to respond to all unwanted sexual conduct in informal ways can become significant barriers to the use of official or formal sanctions. Cultural, workplace, and interactional norms make the costs of interpreting unwanted sexual conduct as sexual harassment quite high and, therefore, limit tradeswomen’s options for responding to actions that cross the line. Of the tradeswomen who defined their experience as sexual harassment, one did not pursue a complaint out of fear of losing her job while another left the job out of fear of retribution and continued harassment. When tradeswomen encounter unwanted sexual conduct that is too serious to ignore, some report that their efforts to speak out against harassment are unsupported by coworkers and supervisors while the men who harass tradeswomen are allowed to remain on the job. Tradeswomen who feel uncomfortable or threatened and are considering a response are pressured to accommodate men who harass. They are expected to quietly tolerate or ignore comments and stares, avoid harassers on the job site, or, as the token numbers of women in the building trades suggest, leave the job altogether.

Yet, tradeswomen’s preference for informal interpretations of unwanted sexual conduct (crossing the line) does not automatically result in their disempowerment nor are these responses necessarily complicit in allowing sexual harassment to continue. Instead, I found that tradeswomen’s use of informal responses, particularly remedies and informal sanctions, also reflects their success at managing problematic interaction with informal social controls. Previous research has found informal remedies more

effective than official control measures for college roommates and contract disputes (R. M. Emerson 2008; Macaulay 1963). Litigation, in particular, is regarded as an option of last resort because the costs of using it, including the oftentimes irreparable damage to the relationship between the disputing parties, are too high (Macaulay 1963). On one hand, then, focusing on legal concepts and processes such as sexual harassment law may obscure the effectiveness of informal mechanisms for resolving problematic sexual behaviors at work. Informal interpretations allow tradeswomen to shape up problematic interactions as unacceptable or deviant without immediately invoking formal laws and legalistic accusations of criminality. Furthermore, they do not by themselves preclude tradeswomen from turning to formal social control measures and, in fact, may be crucial for creating a rationale that legitimates a "last-resort" sanction. Perhaps more importantly, unlike sexual harassment, informal interpretations leave open the possibility of a wide range of informal responses that may produce the desired results better than official workplace sexual harassment policies or confrontational court proceedings. Oftentimes, tradeswomen simply want the troubling behavior to stop and do not seek to punish tradesmen that they may have to work with again in the future.

In sum, this study provides further support for Fitzgerald and colleagues' (1995) argument that the courts are misguided in equating coping (informal responses) with consent to the sexual conduct. Not only does such an assumption misrepresent tradeswomen's experiences and intentions, the resulting expectation that women respond "appropriately" (i.e., assertively by making a complaint) precludes the use of informal responses that can sometimes stop unwanted sexual conduct while preserving the working relationship. This legal expectation disregards interactional expectations in the everyday experience of troubles and disputes. Oftentimes, tradeswomen prefer informal responses because they want to give their coworkers the benefit of the doubt and a chance to correct their behavior before making a formal accusation or complaint. Informal responses also provide women with a chance to confirm their interpretation of unwanted sexual conduct and to build up a rationale for a last resort sanction. By precluding informal responses, the law and scholars who insist that women name all unwanted sexual conduct as sexual harassment, restrict the full range of options that women have available to them for responding to unwanted sexual conduct. Informal responses are not a substitute for sexual harassment law, but informal responses can be effective tools for responding to unwanted sexual conduct when combined with more strongly enforced sexual harassment laws.

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Notes

1. Sexual and racial-ethnic identities are also important but are beyond the scope of this article. For an examination of the experiences of sexual minority tradeswomen and for a discussion of race and ethnicity in tradeswomen's experiences, see Denissen 2006.
2. Previous research has found that women also use joking to deflect sexual harassment (Welsh 1999) or to reconcile tension caused by sexual conduct (Dellinger and Williams 2002).
3. This bears some resemblance to gender relations in the Army where some men "believe that women, not men, are the privileged and powerful group These men then act as 'an oppressed group' on the basis of those perceptions" (Miller 1997, 32-33).

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Bio

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