Sexual Harassment in Small-Town New Zealand: A Qualitative Study of Three Contrasting Organizations

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This research investigates women’s experiences of sexual harassment in three different organizations in the same New Zealand town. Women working at the local meat-processing plant, a retail store and a local bank were interviewed about their personal experiences of sexual harassment. The interviews revealed that sexual harassment took different forms and was interpreted and responded to differently in each organization. Women at the meatworks were often socially isolated from other women and had few effective strategies for combating the verbal and physical harassment collectively perpetrated by male employees. In contrast, women at the store had a range of collective coping strategies which enabled them to regard harassment from fellow-workers and customers as an irritant rather than a serious threat. Women at the bank also had various collective coping strategies, but were more constrained by customer service norms in the organization. These findings are discussed in relation to three key themes; firstly, the influence of the local environment on organizational life; secondly, the effects of differing organizational structures and cultures on the expression and interpretation of sexual harassment and thirdly, the effectiveness of the various ‘communities of coping’ which women develop to combat sexual harassment in the workplace.

Keywords: sexual harassment, local context, organizational cultures, collective coping

Introduction

This study investigates women’s experiences of sexual harassment in three contrasting organizations in the same New Zealand town. It differs from...
the majority of published research since it emphasizes the influence that the local environment exerts on the nature of harassment.

Mott and Condor (1997) point out that over 85 per cent of published research into sexual harassment has been conducted in the US and over 70 per cent has used either academics or students as respondents. Most published research has been quantitative and has paid little attention to specific social contexts, implicitly assuming that research findings are generalizable across a range of contexts and cultures (Arvey and Cavanaugh, 1995; Welsh, 1999). Large-scale survey data from a variety of countries demonstrates the ubiquity of sexual harassment in organizations (see Timmerman and Bajema, 1999; Wilson and Thompson, 2001; Wirth, 1997 for overviews). However, such research reveals relatively little about the ways in which sexual harassment is enacted in specific organizational contexts. A growing body of literature shows that harassment takes different forms in different cultures and organizational contexts and may well be interpreted and responded to differently by women from different social backgrounds (Brant and Too, 1994; Dellinger and Williams, 2002; Gruber, 1998; Lee, 2001). Thus, while it is obviously important to recognize that sexual harassment is a widespread organizational problem, it is also necessary to describe and interpret harassment in specific localized contexts in order to recognize and understand the many different forms it takes.

This study focuses on the influence that both the organization and the local environment have on the nature of sexual harassment. Writing from a symbolic interactionist perspective, Fine (2003) argues that the specific forms which social order takes are always locally constituted within a framework of macro-level structural conditions. Based on this, he advocates a research strategy which seeks to balance the twin demands of description and theorizing by supplying readers with detailed vignettes of specific settings from which more general conceptual insights can be developed. While the interview methodology used in this study differs from the ethnographic methods used by Fine, the aims are similar.

The research explores three main themes. Firstly, it locates respondents’ descriptions of sexual harassment in the wider geographical and historical context of the small town in which they live. The detailed study of small, often isolated communities used to be common in social anthropology but it occurs relatively infrequently in organizational research, which tends to concentrate on descriptions of specific organizations and to discuss the wider social context in fairly abstract terms (Gellner and Hirsch, 2001). One commonly cited reason for this trend is that increasing globalization makes the effects of place increasingly amorphous (Clifford, 1997). Consequently, it makes sense to conceptualize social context in generalized, rather than specifically localized, terms.

While large-scale social trends impinge on even the most isolated communities, local context remains an important, albeit often neglected, shaper
of organizational life in small communities. In large cities, people and organizations are often fairly loosely connected to the surrounding area and the physical separation between people’s work and their private lives is often quite distinct. However, in small towns the relationship between organizations and community is likely to be closer. The number of organizations is generally limited and local inhabitants often share common perceptions concerning them. People tend to know each other, either personally or by reputation, and to interact in a variety of contexts outside the work environment. The boundaries between work and non-work settings are therefore less distinct in small communities, which may mean that people’s experiences of work differ from the experiences of those in large urban metropolises. The specifics of organizational life are therefore likely to be locally constituted, even though macro-level structural conditions cannot be dismissed from consideration. One of the main reasons for carrying out this research was therefore to explore the ways in which a small town environment might influence the expression of sexual harassment in local organizations.

The second aim of this research was to examine the ways in which different organizational structures and cultures influence the expression of sexual harassment in the workplace. Few studies have explicitly compared harassment in different types of organization, although recent research shows quite clearly that women in different types of occupation experience different forms of harassment and utilize different coping strategies (Adib and Guerrier, 2003; Collinson and Collinson, 1996; Miller, 1997). This research examines the effects of differing organizational environments by comparing and contrasting women’s experiences in the male dominated, blue-collar enclave of the local meatworks with their experiences in the female-dominated service environments of a small retail store and bank branch office.

Research into women’s experiences in male-dominated organizations such as the military (Chandler et al., 1995), police (Prokos and Padavic, 2002), fire service (Yoder and Aniakudo, 1996) and mines (Eveline and Booth, 2002) demonstrates that harassment in these organizations is not only common, it is frequently systemic and often collectively perpetrated. There is a widespread consensus in the literature that sexualized male behaviour in these organizations is often a means of exerting power over female workers and serves two main functions. Firstly, it reaffirms male solidarity and masculine worth in situations where the working conditions are alienating and men are objectively vulnerable as a class of worker. Secondly, it helps to prevent the encroachment by women into all male domains and to protect male labour market dominance from female incursions (Cockburn, 1991; Wilson and Thompson, 2001). Women in these occupations are often more cognizant of the various ways in which sexual harassment and gender discrimination are perpetrated than women in service organizations, although they may be
unwilling to complain for fear of worsening their working environment (Di Thomaso, 1989).

Early research into sexual harassment concentrated primarily on co-workers and employers but neglected other possible perpetrators. More recent studies of female-dominated service industries such as tourism, waitressing and retailing have broadened this focus and highlighted sexual harassment by customers. Several studies of women engaged in these occupations have found that workers expect to have to deal with sexual advances from customers and are therefore reluctant to complain to management for fear of being seen as incompetent (Adkins, 1995; Folgero and Fjeldstad, 1995; Hughes and Tadic, 1998). They may also label as sexual harassment only those behaviour which is severe enough to deviate from their daily work experiences (Folgero and Fjeldstad, 1995). Women who stay in this type of work therefore tend to develop their own informal strategies for dealing with harassment (Hughes and Tadic, 1998). These strategies are clearly influenced by organizational characteristics, but may also be influenced by the characteristics of the local environment. For example, the customers in Hughes and Tadic’s study of Canadian shopping malls were unknown to the staff, whereas the women who took part in this research knew most of their customers. The study therefore sought to discover whether the relative lack of anonymity which characterizes small-town service organizations influenced men’s expressions of, and women’s reactions to, customer harassment.

The final aim of this research was to explore the social and collective dimensions of women’s coping strategies. There is a large body of research which shows that individual women’s responses to sexual harassment are shaped by various organizational and social features of their work environment, such as the clarity of the company’s policies, the availability of sympathetic and effective figures to complain to, the status of the perpetrator and the availability of social support from other women (Gutek, 1985; Stockdale, 1996; Thomas and Kitzinger, 1997). However, women do far more than simply support other women who are suffering individual harassment. They may also respond collectively to both individually targeted and systemic harassment, developing a range of collective strategies for containing or eliminating unwelcome behaviour. Korczynski (2003) has argued that the communities of coping that arise when workers deal collectively with the stresses of their work are a key feature of many service organizations. This research seeks to illustrate the relationship between women’s collective coping strategies and the gendered nature of organizational and small town life. By so doing, the study seeks to reveal the complex, and often subtle, interweaving of the structural and psychological elements of social reality. As the study shows, structural and cultural conditions in both the wider town environment and each workplace shaped not only male behaviour towards female workers but also the women’s perceptions of, and reactions to, harassment.
Context and methodology

The town

While New Zealand, in common with most countries, is becoming increasingly urbanized, small rural communities are still an important feature of the landscape, often acting as a focal point for the surrounding farms. Census data show that approximately 10 per cent of the population live in towns of between one and 10,000 people (Statistics New Zealand, 1997). The town studied in this research has a population of approximately 5000 and is reasonably typical of small-town New Zealand.

The local economy had been relatively depressed since the economic restructuring of the rural economy in the mid 1980s and regional unemployment was around 9 per cent when the study took place. Like other small rural towns, the educational and income levels of the population were below average (Statistics New Zealand, 2001). The ethnic composition of the town was approximately three-quarters of European descent and one-fifth Maori. A smattering of other ethnic groups, such as Asians and Chinese, also inhabited the town (Statistics New Zealand, 2001).

Socially, the town was clearly stratified along ethnic, occupational, gender and historical lines. Local Maori often had tribal links to the area which pre-dated European settlement. Many farming families were direct descendants of the first settlers and had extended family living in the area. Such families had a relatively high status in the community and tended to socialize with each other in close-knit groups which continued from childhood into adult life. Adults socialized in different places depending on their ethnicity and social position, with unemployed men drawing state benefits, factory workers and casual farm labour frequenting one set of pubs while the local farmers and businessmen frequented other clubs and bars. Female socializing was more often located in the home but also tended to be stratified according to social position.

Although the town was divided by ethnicity and social class, people tended to know each other by sight or reputation and there were fairly clear local perceptions of the type of people who did particular jobs. Such stereotypes may not have been accurate but were important, as they had a strong influence on the types of work local women were prepared to consider and tended to steer many women away from jobs in typically male enclaves. Employment opportunities for women were limited to a few openings in the local milk-processing plant or meatworks, work in the retail and service sectors and seasonal fruit picking. All jobs were highly sought after and all the women interviewed were aware that female employment was scarce.

The organizations

The three organizations studied were chosen for their contrasting organizational characteristics. The meatworks provided a quintessentially New
Zealand example of a long-established, male-dominated blue-collar industry. In contrast, the local branch of a well-known national chain store was a female-dominated blue-collar organization servicing mainly female customers. Finally, the local branch of an international banking conglomerate exemplified a female-dominated, quasi-professional white-collar service organization, with a predominantly male client base consisting mainly of local business men.

Although the research was primarily concerned with the effects of organizational structure and context on women’s experiences of sexual harassment, no research was carried out in the workplace itself. There were several reasons for this, ranging from the purely pragmatic to the need to protect respondents from harm. Informal discussions with the managers of the bank and store indicated that both were willing to allow access to their branches, provided their head offices approved. This was problematic, as consent seemed unlikely to be obtained in the time frame available for the research. All women at the bank and all full-time female customer assistants at the store were willing to be interviewed outside work and the managers of both organizations were comfortable with this. It was therefore decided to conduct the research solely through interviews rather than interviews and observation.

The situation at the meatworks was somewhat different. Some women who worked there were approached informally. During these discussions it became clear firstly, that management were unlikely to agree to any study of sexual harassment at the plant and secondly, that the women themselves were worried that research in the plant could trigger increased harassment. Only three women from the meatworks were willing to be formally interviewed, although several others talked confidentially about conditions at the plant.

Methodology

This study is based primarily on interview data with the women who formally consented to be interviewed for a project on sexual harassment in organizations. Thirteen women were interviewed; three from the meatworks, all four full-time female customer assistants from the store and all six staff from the bank. These data have been supplemented by information garnered from informal discussions with women at the meatworks and informal observational data of the town.

The interviews, which had a semi-structured format with open-ended questions, were taped and took place in the women’s own homes, generally lasting between an hour and 90 minutes. Respondents were asked to describe their jobs, their reasons for working, the general organizational structure and atmosphere and their relationships with male and female co-workers,
supervisors and customers. Towards the end of the interview women were asked how they defined sexual harassment; whether they had experienced it and how they dealt with it. All tapes were transcribed and in some cases respondents were contacted again at this point and asked to clarify or expand on comments they had made in the initial interviews. All women were offered copies of their own transcript and the return of their own tape and invited to comment on, or request deletion of, any part of the material.

The interview transcripts were analysed in three stages. Initially, each woman’s story was examined individually to see how her personal history was shaped by the specific organizational, historical and environmental conditions she had experienced. The next stage of the analytic process searched for common patterns in the women’s accounts, identifying six key issues. These were as follows: the effects of gender distribution on sexual harassment in the three organizations; the nature of the women’s professional relationship with harassers; female concepts of ‘normal’ versus ‘deviant’ male sexuality and perceived differences between personal and generalized harassment. The fifth key issue was differences between overtly sexual and non-sexual harassment and the final issue was the effects of organizational context on the coping strategies women utilized. The final part of the analysis explored the links between these six issues and the three key themes of the research. To give an example, the concept of normal versus deviant male sexuality was examined in relation to the wider context of the town environment, each organization’s history, structure and culture and the development or absence of female communities of coping in each workplace.

Findings

The meatworks

The meatworks was the largest organization in the town, employing approximately 200 permanent staff and an additional pool of seasonal workers. The men at the plant were unskilled, easily replaceable labour working in an economic environment of increasing uncertainty. Seasonal farmwork in the area was being cut back and the meatworks themselves, while not under an immediate threat of closure, were vulnerable as similar plants were closing throughout the country. The plant had a local reputation for being harsh and misogynist, which deterred many women from working there. For example, during their interviews all respondents from both the retail store and the bank explicitly rejected the suggestion of ever working at the meatworks or becoming sexually or socially involved with the male workers at the plant. Clearly, the town was socially stratified in ways which helped perpetuate the dominant culture of the organization.
Although the meatworks had been open for only six years, many of the attitudes and practices permeating the organization reflected the fact that meat-processing was one of New Zealand’s earliest industries and a traditionally male domain. The management were entirely male and were recruited from other meatworks in New Zealand. Most of the 160 shopfloor employees at the plant were male and the 20-odd women on the shop-floor were mainly in the low-status occupation of packing. In terms of the local economy, the meatworks paid well for unskilled labour, offering rates higher than at either the bank or the retail store. The plant was therefore an attractive job option for women with limited educational attainments who were prepared to endure a hard working life in return for reasonably high wages.

The interview data suggest that harassment in the plant had three main strands. Firstly, there was individualized and overtly sexual harassment in which sexual favours were demanded of specific women by individual men. Secondly, there was a generalized environmental intimidation that was often collectively perpetrated by male employees and sometimes, but not always, sexual in content. Thirdly, there was a structural context in which management, the unions and the regulatory bodies were seen by respondents as tacitly colluding with harassment. In combination, these forces created an environment in which respondents found it extremely difficult to develop effective coping strategies.

Yount (1991) has noted that young, single women working in male-dominated blue-collar environments frequently experience persistent attempts to engage them in sexual relationships and may become the objects of sexual competition between men. In the meatworks, women who entered into stable relationships with male workers were seen by respondents as gaining some protection from further harassment, provided they were careful not to challenge male workers. However, women who gained a reputation for being sexually available were reported as suffering increased harassment, particularly if they accepted the advances of some workers and rejected others. The ubiquity of the male power hierarchy in both plant and town and the ways in which male patronage was selectively employed to protect or victimize women was clearly described by Holly, a packer in her early twenties. Holly was unusual in being a farmer’s daughter working temporarily at the plant and therefore having family connections to the town’s business elite:

There was this guy who fancied me and he wouldn’t take no for an answer. So I told my dad and he had a word with the manager who told him to lay off me — probably told him to pick on someone else — usually they don’t do anything to help. There was another women and she’d just finished with one guy and his mate expected her to put out for him next but she wouldn’t, so a load of them poured paint stripper over her car. Nothing happened to them though.
In addition to individually focused demands for sexual relationships, all women had to tolerate a generally hostile work environment. In contrast to the women described in Eveline and Booth’s (2002) study of the Australian mining industry, women at the meatworks reported that they did not object to swearing, dirty jokes or pin-ups, reluctantly accepting such behaviour and artefacts as expressions of normal male sexuality and therefore part of the price of working in a male-dominated industry. What they were not prepared for was the constant, collectively perpetrated harassment they had to endure. The morning intimidation ritual for the all-female packing table provides a good example of the organized and relentless nature of harassment in the plant. As Holly described it,

The guys don’t have to come anywhere near our table because we’re in a different part [of the factory] . . . but every morning they walk right around our table, making comments about us to each other, or they chat us up, or maybe they’re all singing or whistling or clapping . . . but it’s like . . . ‘hey girlie, we’re the bosses here’.

This behaviour continued throughout the day, quite often with one particular woman singled out for concerted harassment. Irene, a single parent in her late thirties, explained:

This job’s boring so to liven the job up they’ll all just, you know, be, ‘let’s all hassle her today’. I’ve seen it: they’re a pack, they’re very close, and yet none of them like each other much really.

The two respondents who had broken out of the packing table ghetto and attempted to fill traditionally male jobs were subjected to even more aggressive harassment, which they believed was designed to prove their incompetence and to drive them out of their jobs. Irene, who had successfully advanced from the packing table to the mid-status male domain of the boning table described facing tactics ranging from ostracism to having knives and 50 kg slabs of meat thrown at her while her back was turned. Similarly, Nora, the only female meat inspector, described behaviour ranging from the withholding of information necessary for her to do her job properly to being locked in pipe shafts and having her equipment sabotaged.

All three respondents argued that the only way in which women could combat this type of harassment successfully was to prove themselves competent workers who could deal with these issues without recourse to management. As Irene explained,

I personally don’t get harassed to my face . . . if a guy comes up and grabs me by the butt, and they do it all the time, I turn round and grab them, but not nicely, you know. You’ve got to be what they are, which is arseholes.

Irene believed her strategy had earned her the grudging respect of her male colleagues and would enable her to stay in her job. However, the costs in
terms of both her physical health and family relationships were high. Describing her physical health and family life she commented:

I’ve got this rash on the back of my neck because I’m so tense. I just scratch it till its raw . . . you know, to destroy your own body, because you’ve had it at work. . . . I get home and I’m just ready to explode, you know; it’s built up so much and I just want time out and it’s straight back into family life.

Nora, the meat inspector, had utilized an alternative approach and tried unsuccessfully to get management, her union and an outside regulatory body to intervene on her behalf. When all three proved unsupportive, her harassment escalated to include behaviour such as following her outside work and taunting her in shops and cafes. After repeated warnings from management about her absenteeism, caused by her inability to face her male colleagues, Nora eventually left her job. She required several months of counselling before summoning up the courage to apply for unskilled and lower-paid work in a different organization.

Although women at the meatworks experienced repeated harassment, they rarely made collective complaints to the management or collectively opposed the men in any way. In part this reflects the multi-faceted and subtle nature of sexual harassment and the difficulty women have in framing complaints. However, it may also reflect divisions between the women themselves. Yount’s (1991) account of women miners revealed antagonisms between the women that often related to the different ways in which they dealt with the problems of working in a male environment. Discussions with the women at the meatworks suggest that they were also divided, with some women responding positively to the expression of sexual desire by the men and others simply being too terrified to act. Bryson (1994) noted that women subjected to intense harassment often try to remain as inconspicuous as possible and avoid supporting other women for fear of a male backlash. In consequence, the possibilities of successful collective action are seriously diminished.

The respondents’ reluctance to complain formally was linked to their perception that management was generally unsupportive of them. All the respondents felt that the management tacitly colluded with the men’s actions, despite distancing themselves from the more overt expressions of harassment. Certainly, the management seemed, on occasion, to tolerate structural barriers which impeded women’s careers. For example, Nora described in graphic detail the indignities she endured when the management denied her access to the female plant-workers’ facilities and forced her to share the changing rooms and toilets of the male meat inspectors, despite the fact that this clearly contravenes New Zealand employment legislation. Similarly, Irene explained the management’s refusal to give her additional training or upgrade her permanently, despite frequently upgrading her temporarily when the factory was short staffed, by quoting a manager’s remark:
'the only reason we’ve kept you women on is because its hardened the men up’.

The pervasiveness of harassment in the plant could demoralize even the strongest women. When she first started working, Irene fought vigorously against sexism in the plant, often tackling the management on behalf of the other women and attempting to mobilize collective resistance amongst the women. Six years later, she had developed a rather cynical view of other women and was simply concerned with self-preservation. In her words, ‘I can’t see any way of making it better. We’re our own worst enemy. If we could all just stand up to them. . . .’

In conclusion, the interviews and informal discussions with women from the meatworks suggest that sexism was endemic and deeply entrenched in the attitudes and daily practices of both the management and the male workers. They also reveal a situation where the women were so divided, demoralized and concerned with their own daily survival that they had few effective means of changing the situation.

The retail store

The retail store was a small branch of a downmarket national chain selling a variety of household goods, clothing and toys. It was the largest store in the town and occupied a dominant position in the local economy. The store employed nine full-time and five part-time staff. The six full-time women were four sales assistants and two clerical assistants. The three full-time male staff were a married storeman in his fifties, a sales assistant in his late teens and the manager, who was in his mid-twenties and who was being fast-tracked through the town as part of the company’s management training scheme.

Social dynamics in the store were very different from those in the meatworks, due partly to the differences in gender distribution and size between the two organizations. At the lower levels retailing is essentially a low-status, poorly paid, female-dominated occupation (Kemp, 1994). In consequence, the men in the store were in the minority and in disparate organizational roles which limited their power and cohesiveness. In contrast, the women formed a cohesive group who supported each other in the work situation. This ensured that the collectively perpetrated harassment which was such a pervasive feature of the meatworks was absent from the store environment. The women’s perceptions of the local and head office management also differed markedly from those of the women at the meatworks. Both the head office and the young manager were trusted by the women, who all believed they would be supported if they complained of serious harassment by either their colleagues or the customers.

Sexual harassment in the store was perpetrated by three sets of people; the women’s colleagues; employees of other organizations and male customers.
Behaviour which was categorized by the respondents as ‘normal’ male sexuality frequently caused them irritation but seldom distress, while the behaviour the women regarded as ‘deviant’ caused them more concern.

The actions of the storeman were regarded by all the women as typical examples of normal male behaviour. His patronizing remarks, touching them and making frequent comments on their appearance were explained away as typical age-related acts by Ellen, one of the older women, who commented,

It’s an impression thing, you know, ‘there’s still life in me’ . . . men, they just take a lot longer to get through the aging process because they don’t like not being able to keep up.

In addition to dealing with their colleagues, the women also had to deal with the male employees of other firms, for example, security guards and sales representatives. The behaviour of these men was also conceptualized as ‘normal’, although relationships with these men could be fraught and were often described with irritation during the women’s interviews. Their irritation often seemed to stem from the fact that these men pushed sexist behaviour to lengths which would not have been tolerated on a daily basis from co-workers, but which the women felt obliged to tolerate on a less frequent basis. For example, Anne, who was in her late twenties, described the sexist remarks, leering and unwanted physical proximity of one of the security guards who visited the store in the following terms:

He just does it to see how far he can push you . . . last week I came bloody close to complaining [to the manager] but then it got to Friday and the weekend and then I didn’t see him for a whole week and by the time he came back it didn’t affect me so much.

The women dealt with these men using a variety of strategies, such as avoidance, rudeness, always having another woman present and, as they all noted in their interviews, by reminding themselves that these interactions were short-term ones which often were not repeated for several days or weeks.

The women also had to deal with male customers. The dominant North American literature on retailing suggests that women frequently conceptualize sexist behaviour from male customers as an ‘everyday inconvenience’ (Monson, 1997, p. 143) rather than harassment. It also suggests that the ‘cult of the customer’ (Du Gay and Salaman, 1992, p. 621) severely constrains the ways women can deal with harassment (Fuller and Smith, 1991; Hughes and Tadic, 1998). While the women in this study tended to subscribe to the view that appropriate job performance entailed being polite to customers and tolerating a degree of mild verbal harassment, they were less constrained in their responses than the American literature implies, often delivering quite sharp rejoinders to men who overstepped the boundaries. The small size of the town was a factor here, as several women mentioned that they could deal more forthrightly with customers they knew socially than with unknown
customers. The relative dominance of the store in the local economy and the fact that most customers were women were also important, as that meant that male customers were not regarded as essential to the economic viability of the enterprise. These factors, combined with relatively lax staff surveillance mechanisms and a local culture which meant that the customers were unlikely to complain formally, enabled the women to respond to harassment rather more assertively than other studies imply.

The simple fact that they worked in a setting where they interacted with strangers did, however, mean that the women were vulnerable to unwanted attention from strangers which could be quite frightening. Linda described a past customer by saying:

We used to have this guy come into the shop when we used to work till nine o’clock at night and you were always frightened to go home . . . you were never sure whether he’d be outside . . . waiting . . . he’d come into the shop and sort of stand there and giggle . . . weird, you know.

In contrast to the other customers, who were often known to the women, this customer was both unknown and perceived as potentially dangerous because his behaviour deviated from expected male behaviour patterns. As this example shows, the women at the retail store had a clear image of ‘normal’ male behaviour and regarded harassment which fell within these parameters of being predictable and relatively innocuous, even if infuriating. In contrast, behaviour which fell outside these parameters was often experienced as threatening and uncontrollable.

In conclusion, the pattern of sexual harassment in the retail store differed considerably from that in the meatworks. This is partly due to the fact that the male staff and customers were in the minority and acted in isolation rather than collectively. This shifted the balance of power between the sexes and enabled the women to combat harassment more effectively both as individuals and as a group. Nevertheless, routine harassment still occurred. The levels of harassment appeared to be very finely gauged by the perpetrators to remain just within the limits of the women’s tolerance. In addition, all women reported that they felt they had colluded with the establishment of some unwanted behaviour patterns by initially tolerating them. With hindsight they realized that their initial and reluctant tolerance was interpreted by males as a tacit acceptance of this behaviour. In Goffman’s (1971) terms, there was a ‘negotiated order’ concerning sexual harassment: however, the boundaries were frequently drawn in places which were unsatisfactory for the women concerned.

The bank

The bank was a small, but well-established branch of an international institution that dealt mainly with the personal banking needs of the town’s
professionals, farmers and business people. The majority of the customers were male, most of whom had been with the bank for years and most were personally known to the staff, both as clients and as inhabitants of the district. The branch hierarchy was fairly flat and the workforce consisted of six women; the manager, a personal banker and four cashiers. The manager had worked in the branch since it had opened 20 years before and had recently replaced a much younger male manager who, like the retail store manager, was ‘fast-tracked’ into the town and then moved on to a larger branch after 18 months. She was unusual in having achieved a managerial position, as most higher-level positions in the organization were held by men. She was determined to run her branch professionally and ensure not only that her staff were not sexually harassed, but also that they responded to harassment in a professionally appropriate manner.

The standards which the manager set regarding staff conduct meant that the boundaries of acceptable staff behaviour were drawn in a slightly different place to that in the store. In the store the women would sometimes deal with sexual harassment by swearing, sexual putdowns or other forms of rudeness towards the perpetrators. They would also, on occasion, tell or enjoy hearing risqué jokes, which were considered an acceptable way of livening up the working day. Such behaviour was tacitly condoned by the young manager, who appeared to manage staff behaviour with a relatively light touch. In contrast, the bank manager disapproved of any form of sexualized behaviour in the workplace and attempted to curtail such behaviour even when it appeared consensual. A clear example of this occurred when a male employee of another firm faxed through a sexually explicit cartoon which the other women found amusing. This was immediately shredded by their manager, on the grounds that such behaviour breached professional standards in the bank. While none of the other women had been offended by the cartoon, they all accepted the manager’s argument that sexualized behaviour between employees was inappropriate in the work environment.

In contrast to the meatworks, the bank’s official code of conduct set out clear guidelines for dealing with sexual harassment between employees of the organization. Since this particular branch was all female, women could not be harassed by their male colleagues. However, like the women at the store they could be harassed by the male employees of other organizations which were contracted to supply services to the bank. While the bank’s official procedures did not specifically cover this issue, the manager was clear that she would not tolerate the harassment of her staff by employees of other organizations and had complained formally about the behaviour of one of the security guards to his employer. The situations which the women at the bank described were strikingly similar to those described by the women at the store and their feelings and responses were very similar. Several of the examples given by the women at the bank concerned the very same security guards who had been identified as harassers by the women at the store. The fact that these men
harassed most women they met during their working day was well-known to the women and was a source of annoyance to them, since they realized that these men were frequently able to escape official censure solely because the women they harassed worked in a range of organizations. The picture which emerged from these examples was one of men who deliberately exploited their marginal position on the fringes of several organizations to harass successfully a wide range of women with relative impunity.

The bank’s official code of conduct concerning sexual harassment also ignored the problem of harassment by customers. During her interview, the manager herself seemed somewhat reticent on this issue, suggesting that harassment by customers was generally mild and was therefore a problem which competent staff ought to be able to deal with through informal mechanisms operating at either the individual or branch level. Her role as a sympathetic manager was to facilitate the smooth operation of these informal methods of containment while ensuring that they were not apparent to the bank’s customers.

The women’s relationships with the customers were, in some respects, more complicated than the relationships which women at the store had with their customers. In contrast to the store, where relationships, even with regular customers, were regarded by staff as a series of discrete transactions, the women at the bank had long-term and continuous relationships with customers, which often constrained their ability to deal successfully with sexual harassment. On the one hand, the women were expected to maintain a professional relationship which was polite and asexual. On the other hand, they had to deal with customer behaviour which was often sexualized, without either acknowledging the sexual content of the behaviour or giving offence through overt rudeness. In the case of Kelly, the personal banker at the branch, the organizational structure was deliberately designed to graft a personal element onto the institution’s transactions with customers. This, and other elements of organizational design, such as the wearing of first-name only name tags, created a situation of false intimacy in which male customers would sometimes assume a degree of rapport which the women resented. The types of customer behaviour which the women experienced was often similar to the behaviour of the male customers at the retail store, but also included behaviour more closely related to the long-term nature of the relationship, such as always asking for a specific teller, arriving with bunches of flowers or asking women out for drinks or meals.

The women occasionally responded to unwanted behaviour with overt rudeness, but in all cases this was justified by their acquaintance with the customer outside the workplace. In such cases small-town norms on dealing with sexual harassment often over-rote professional obligations. As Nancy explained, ‘If it’s Bill making some stupid remark and [the manager] isn’t around, I just tell him to piss off. I’ve known him for years and I know he’ll take it alright’.
Where the customer was not personally known in a non-work context the most common response was stoic endurance. A fairly typical example was given by Trisha who commented:

I’ve got one customer who winks at me all the time and, oh, that just sends the crawlies up me. I mean, I’m never rude to him but I just can’t stand him.

Like the women at the store, the women in the bank dismissed the behaviour of many customers as essentially harmless ‘acting out’ by men unable to accept their encroaching years. While this rationale had the advantage of trivializing the men’s behaviour and thus enabling the women to dismiss it more easily, it also had the disadvantage of giving these acts a spurious legitimacy as typical age-related phenomena besetting the male sex.

In addition to individual strategies for dealing with harassment by customers, the women at the bank had a range of collective coping strategies. These included behaviour such as arranging to take their lunch hour when particular customers were likely to enter the bank, deliberately closing their counter and asking other tellers to cover for them while they retreated to the back office and pre-arranging to be interrupted by telephone calls when particular customers entered the bank. While such strategies were evidence of group solidarity similar to that amongst the women at the store, they were essentially informal solutions to the problem of sexual harassment by customers.

The manager’s reluctance to acknowledge the problem of customer harassment may have been linked to her stated desire to prove herself as a woman manager. In her view, this meant she had to set professional standards which were as high, or higher, than those of her male colleagues. Since sexual harassment by customers was not an issue which was raised in the bank’s management-training courses, the implicit message was that it did not exist. To identify a problem would have required her to step outside the conventional framework of bank management and risk censure from her superiors as a manager who was unable to handle the internal problems of her own branch. In addition, the manager was aware that many of her customers enjoyed the personal relationship they had with bank staff. Discussions about their families, hobbies and general events were a common corollary of transactions with clients and were seen by the staff as a key feature of the branch’s identity as part of the local community. To formally acknowledge problems in the staff-customer relationship would challenge this image and could lead to a decline in the customer base. This outcome would obviously be viewed negatively by her superiors and could affect not only her own position, but also that of the other staff, all of whom were aware of the trend towards the closure of small branches of international banks.

In conclusion, the bank data illustrate some of the subtleties of gendered organizational power relationships and the pressures upon female managers.
to adopt the prevailing organizational culture. As Benschop et al. (2001) observe, banking as an institution emphasizes professionalism and equality of opportunity irrespective of gender, but remains heavily male dominated in its upper echelons. In consequence, female managers need to conform to the organizational standards developed by men if they want to succeed. For this manager, conforming entailed down-playing the issue of client harassment and treating it as something which should be managed, without loss of face to the client, as part of the ongoing process of maintaining good customer relationships.

Discussion and conclusion

This research investigated three key themes: the effects of local context on sexual harassment in organizations; the effects of different organizational structures and cultures and the individual and collective coping strategies used by women. The interview data show clearly that all three factors are important in understanding the forms that sexual harassment takes in different organizational contexts.

The small-town setting ensured that people encountered one another in a variety of different contexts. This made the boundaries between people’s work and non-work environments more permeable than they are in large cities. In consequence, there were reciprocal influences between specific organizational cultures and different sub-cultures in the local community. For women at the meatworks this made it easier for their male colleagues to continue their harassment outside the work environment. During their interviews all three respondents described instances where women were harassed when shopping, socializing or with their families. The ability of male workers to continue to act collectively outside the work environment meant that women could, in the worst instances, be literally trapped in their own homes, knowing they would experience harassment if they ventured into town. In addition to being highly debilitating for the victims, this type of harassment was clearly visible to other women in the town and acted as an effective deterrent to female employment at the plant.

The effects of the small-town location were more benign at the store and the bank, although there were clear differences between the two organizations which can be traced back to different models of customer relationships in the two settings. The women at the store rarely experienced work-related sexual harassment in the town environment. This was partly due to the store’s predominantly female customer base, but was also due to the store branding itself as a volume retailer of low-priced household goods and emphasizing the value of the items sold, rather than the quality of customer services. In consequence, neither staff nor customers expected transactions to involve more than everyday civility and the women felt relatively free to deal
with harassment by their customers as they saw fit, both in and outside the work setting.

The women at the bank had a more complex relationship with their customers, which was played out in both their work setting and the local community. There is a large management literature which highlights the increasing importance of the customer–worker relationship as a key site of organizational profit in many service organizations (Edwards, 2000; Ritzer, 1999). Organizations utilizing this approach frequently structure interactions to give customers the illusion that they are in control of an on-going relationship which has personal as well as commercial elements. As a result of this, the women at the bank were highly constrained in their ability to deal with the harassing behaviour which occurred in the town locale. Several women mentioned the requirement to be polite to customers when they met them outside the bank and described the exportation of mildly harassing behaviour into their non-work setting. Since the bank’s clients mainly consisted of the upper echelons of local society, the customer service norms of a large international institution thus helped to reinforce and reproduce the strictly local level of social stratification in the town.

The second aim of this research was to compare the effects of differences in organizational structures and cultures. One of the primary differences between the meatworks and the other two organizations was the predominantly male gender distribution in the organization. Empirical research has consistently shown that women who work in contexts which are male dominated, either in numerical terms or because of the gendered nature of the work, are more likely to experience harassment (Gutek, 1985; Timmerman and Bajema, 1999). However, this effect is moderated by the degree of organizational tolerance of harassment, with women in organizations which are highly tolerant experiencing more harassment than women in less tolerant organizations, even when the sex ratios and organizational tasks are similar.

It is clear from the interviews that the three respondents at the meatworks not only worked in a numerically male-dominated organization but also in an environment which they perceived as highly tolerant of their harassment. From their perspective, the acceptance of harassment not only permeated all levels of the organization, but also affected their union and the official meatworks’ regulatory bodies. They therefore experienced themselves as facing a monolithic edifice in which both informal coping strategies and formal channels of complaint were unlikely to be successful. This helped to perpetuate these conditions at the plant by ensuring that the women did not make legal complaints, or in particular, file collective grievance procedures which might have resulted in legal sanctions against the company.

Given that the meatworks had been open for only six years when this research took place it is worth analysing how such a harassment-tolerant culture had become entrenched in a relatively new organization. Discussions with women at the plant suggest that the company had essentially imported
the working practices of other, older meatworks in New Zealand to this factory rather than trying to develop a new organizational structure and culture in the plant. In consequence, the marginalization of women was built into the plant’s very framework, through such basic features as the failure to supply adequate female toilets and changing rooms initially and by management warnings to prospective female employees that the plant was likely to be a tough place to work in. Similarly, external regulatory bodies appear to have followed their traditional path of being primarily concerned with ensuring that the plant met production standards, rather than with labour-relations issues, despite the fact that some labour issues faced by women were technically in their remit. The role of the unions is also worth considering. Bulger (2001) has argued that unions can help to attenuate the impact of organizational tolerance by highlighting sexual harassment as a union issue and by acting as advocates for those women who experience harassment. This assumes unions do not experience conflicts of interest between their members and also that union officials are sympathetic towards women. As Collinson and Collinson’s (1989) case study of the sexual harassment of a female trade-union representative by her male colleagues shows, union officials do not necessarily support female encroachment into traditionally male enclaves. In the meatworks the majority of members and all local union representatives were male. In consequence, the women found that their union tended to side with the male members in specific disputes and that it had little interest in more general anti-harassment measures, such as educational campaigns or changes in company policy.

The re-creation of familiar working practices in the meatworks does not mean that entrenched industry practices are immutable. However, it does suggest that in situations such as this, familiar organizational structures and cultures are likely to re-emerge unless the management, the regulatory bodies and the unions make a clear and genuine commitment to develop and implement policies which prevent harassment-tolerant organizational cultures from becoming established.

In contrast to the meatworks, the women at the retail store and the bank all perceived their organizations as relatively intolerant of sexual harassment perpetrated by fellow employees and believed that their organizations had clear policies and procedures for dealing with this source of harassment. However, neither organization had clear policies for dealing with sexual harassment by either the customers or the employees of other organizations contracted to supply services to them.

The problem of sexual harassment by customers is receiving increasing attention in the literature, (Guerrier and Adib, 2000) although policies for dealing with this issue clearly need further attention in many organizations. So far, the problem of sexual harassment by employees of other organizations has received little attention in the sexual-harassment literature, although this source of harassment is likely to become increasingly prevalent as
organizations move towards the flexible labour force, with increasing reliance on contract labour and outsourcing. In this research it was clear that employees such as security guards, itinerant salesmen and delivery staff were able to engage in higher overall levels of harassment than employees who worked in one location, because of their ability to spread their behaviour over a wider sample of women. The respondents also had difficulty in dealing with their behaviour and thus often tolerated actions which they would not have accepted from the men they worked with on a daily basis. The increasing use of a contingent labour force therefore raises issues concerning the mechanisms by which contracting organizations can control the behaviour of employees from other organizations.

The final aim of this research was to explore the ways in which women’s collective coping strategies are influenced by organizational context. Psychological research into sexual harassment has focused primarily on the coping strategies of individual workers (Gutek and Koss, 1993; Stockdale, 1996). In contrast, several writers have suggested that workers in a wide range of occupations utilize various collective mechanisms to cope with the stresses of their work (Newton et al., 1995; Sturdy and Fineman, 2001). According to Korczynski, (2003) these communities of coping are important not simply as coping mechanisms but as sets of workplace practices which may simultaneously enforce or undermine the management control of the workplace.

One of the most obvious ways in which the women in this study had developed shared understandings was in their interpretations of sexual behaviour. The meaning of sexual harassment varied considerably depending on the organizational context, with the boundaries between acceptable and unacceptable behaviour differing markedly between the meatworks and the other two organizations. However, in each organization the women had similar views on ‘normal’ and ‘deviant’ male sexuality. In all three organizations the harassment that was generalized in focus, commonly perpetrated and relatively low grade for that particular organization tended to be conceptualized as ‘normal’. In contrast, harassment which had a clearly personal focus or was extreme for that organization was often experienced as deviant and upsetting by the women involved. While these shared understandings normalized and implicitly legitimized some forms of harassment, they also helped women cope by supplying informal guidelines for interpreting different behaviour.

Women at the meatworks had few other collective strategies for dealing with harassment, although many chose to remain in the comparative anonymity of the packing-table collective as a way of avoiding harassment. Women who competed for male jobs in other parts of the factory had to adopt highly individualized coping strategies. One tactic which the respondents used was to try and prove themselves better than the men at their jobs. Many studies have found that women believe they need to be better than men to gain and maintain traditionally male jobs (Gruber and Bjorn, 1982; Yoder and
Aniakudo, 1996). Such tactics are highly threatening to men in unskilled occupations, partly because they involve an element of ‘rate-busting’ which highlights various unofficial ways in which blue-collar workers typically manipulate their workloads but, more importantly, because they threaten their job security. Such tactics can therefore trigger an escalating spiral of harassment which is often specifically aimed at sabotaging women’s work. When such tactics are successful, they not only force the woman involved from her position but also reinforce organizational beliefs that women in general are ill-suited to the work in question, thus protecting male dominance into the future.

Women at the store and bank had far more effective communities of coping which enabled them to generate a range of collective responses. While many coping strategies were similar across the two organizations, the differing organizational settings still had a noticeable effect on the ways in which women responded. As Williams et al. (1999) have noted, sexualized behaviour may be a source of entertainment for employees, rather than necessarily being harassment. In the store the women formed a close-knit group from which the young male manager was excluded and over which he had fairly limited control. Group norms were relatively tolerant of sexual behaviour in the workplace and, while it was often the cause of considerable irritation, it could also be a source of amusement which enlivened the working day. In the bank, the female manager was part of the group and had a stronger influence on group behaviour. While she facilitated the smooth operation of team strategies enabling the women to contain harassment she discouraged any form of sexualized behaviour in the workplace. Her presence in the group therefore tended to mean that the community of coping in the bank functioned in a more managerial framework than the store women’s more loosely regulated group.

In conclusion, this study of sexual harassment in a small town in New Zealand shows that organizations do not exist in a geographical vacuum. In small towns, geographical proximity renders the interface between organizations and the local environment relatively permeable and ensures that organizational life is influenced by the context of the local environment in ways which are both complex and variable. As at the meatworks, geographical proximity can act to intensify harassment by enabling the harassers to organize effectively both within and outside the work environment and by limiting the women’s ability to escape harassment. Alternatively, as at the store, locale can render harassment less intimidating by facilitating the development of supportive networks among women and making customers and their families known and their behaviour more predictable.

Organizations are, however, only partially connected to their environment, retaining their own internal dynamics which ensure that sexual harassment in the workplace takes many forms and has multiple meanings and consequences. As this study shows, the boundaries which women draw
between acceptable and unacceptable male behaviour are highly context specific and vary between different settings. The ways in which they deal with harassment are also highly context specific and are heavily influenced by both the amount of social support available from other women and the wider organizational structure and culture. It is only by paying attention to the specifics of sexual harassment in particular organizations and locales that we can understand the many different forms that harassment takes. Such knowledge is important not just to highlight what is, but also, crucially, the ways in which things might be different.

Note

1. All names are pseudonyms.

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