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Millennials Making Meanings: Social Constructions of Sexual Harassment regarding Gender and Power by Generation Y

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MILLENNIALS MAKING MEANINGS: SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONS OF
SEXUAL HARASSMENT REGARDING GENDER AND POWER AMONG
GENERATION Y

by

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ABSTRACT

The term sexual harassment was brought to light by legal scholar Catharine MacKinnon during the second wave feminist movement in the 1970s, and has since changed in its meaning over the past four decades, influencing policy, legal action, and the way we, as a society, treat this social problem. Millennials, or those born between 1980 and 2000, will be the next generation of working adults that will influence the way sexual harassment is understood and defined both legally and socially. The Millennial generation is typically considered liberal and socially conscious, prompting the research question of "How do Millennials socially construct sexual harassment in terms of gender and power?" Eighteen semi-structured interviews with adult Millennials up to age 33 were conducted. Analysis was informed by feminist theory, social constructionism, and critical race theory. Results showed while Millennials are quick to speak about inclusion of men as targets of sexual harassment, they did so at the cost of frankly discussing that women are targeted more often than men. Combined with the ability to discuss individual causes of sexual harassment compared to the structural, this led to my findings of "gender-blind" sexual harassment attitudes describing postfeminist beliefs among Millennials.

This is dedicated to my partner, Shannon, who is above all else, "my person". Her love, help, and support makes me stronger. To my brother, Michael, who inspires me with his creativity and his love. To my grandparents, Shelvie, William, and Angela, who supported my college education, thank you, and I am incredibly grateful, always. Finally, thank you to the 2012 Sociology M.A. cohort for all the sanity. Ohana means family!

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Sexual harassment is a known social issue that has been defined, redefined, and socially constructed in a myriad of ways since the 1970s. As it stands, 40-50 percent of girls and women report it in the workplace, high schools, and colleges (Crawford and Unger 2004), leaving victims feeling angry and powerless (Esacove 1998). However, the way people understand, construct, and view sexual harassment differs. Understanding these constructions of sexual harassment is a step in understanding how sexual harassment as a social issue can be approached by academics, activists, and policy-makers alike. As both gender and power are researched and contested among academics, this study investigates how Millennials construct ideas of sexual harassment in regards to gender and power.

Literature and previous research surrounding sexual harassment studies have largely been on workplace harassment. While scholars generally agree that power plays a part in sexual harassment, it is contested how much of a part it plays. Viewing sexual harassment as a workplace issue and a feminist issue has evolved out of its origins, however, for those out of academic spaces, sexual harassment may have taken on new meanings. With the focus on sexual harassment as defined through institutions, few sexual harassment studies have focused on how people make sense of the issue and talk about it. This prompts the following questions: What is the role of power and gender in sexual harassment? Who is involved in sexual harassment and why does it happen?

Cohort studies seem to be altogether lacking in the sexual harassment literature, but understanding young adults' views on sexual harassment is important. Young adults, who are

gaining an education or entering the workforce and building families, are making uses of new technologies and shaping the world. These are the Millennials, those born from the start of the 1980s to the turn of the century (Pew Research Center 2010). This age cohort has lived through the very onset of legal anti-sexual harassment laws beginning in the early 1980s. For Millennials, sexual harassment has been a known social issue, and the heart of the sexual harassment discourse coincides with the Millennials coming of age. If Millennials are the next generation to enact social change, it is imperative to understand their beliefs and how they construct meanings.

In this study, I interviewed 18 Millennials in the age range of 18-33 and used grounded theory methods to provide a greater understanding of how this generation creates meanings of sexual harassment. My findings suggest that while Millennials have inclusive views about who experiences and does sexual harassment, they explain individual factors with more frequency than structural factors, and talk more about men experiencing sexual harassment than women, leading me to find this as a result of gender-blind sexual harassment.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE

Sexual Harassment and its Origins

To understand the social constructions of sexual harassment today, it is important to understand its beginnings. Beginning in the 1970s, second-wave feminists gave name to several social problems which allowed the public to adopt and form narratives. One of those social issues was sexual harassment. In 1979, Catharine MacKinnon gave name to sexual harassment, though the issue had been long known among women. In MacKinnon's legal analysis, she identified two components of sexual harassment in the workplace: "condition of work," now known as "hostile environment," and "quid pro quo" (MacKinnon 1979). Condition of work sexual harassment describes unwanted sexual attention, verbal or behavioral, such as sexual comments, touching, leering, or sexual manipulation and coercion without threat or promise to anything explicitly linked to position of work. Quid pro quo sexual harassment included an explicit exchange of sexual favor for advancement, or the opposite, with forfeit of opportunity for denial of sexual exchange. This workplace definition of sexual harassment flourished in the 1980s and onward, becoming the central point to the understanding and construction of its meaning in years to come.

In 1980, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) declared that sexual harassment was a form of sex discrimination in the workplace, violating Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which prevents employers from discriminating based on "race, color, religion, sex, or national origin." This transformed policy into a legal requirement in the workplace. The EEOC defines sexual harassment as:

Unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual behaviors, and other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature...when submission to or rejection of this conduct explicitly or implicitly affects an individual's employment, unreasonably interferes with an individual's work performance or creates an intimidating, hostile, or offensive work environment (EEOC 2010).

The beginnings of sexual harassment discourse occur parallel to the beginnings of sexual harassment as a legal workplace definition. However, as sexual harassment in the workplace was explored, questions arose as to what conditions and actions were sexual harassment, where it could take place, and between whom and for what reasons. These inquiries subjected the EEOC definition to debate. Since the 1980s, the definition of sexual harassment has been continually changed and challenged (Birdeau, Somers, and Lenihan 2005).

In 1987, in *Meritor v. Vinson*, the Supreme Court amended that the sexual harassment must be severe enough to interrupt work, making it so an individual instance or a series of lesser incidents would not qualify as sexual harassment. This amendment left sexual harassment policy up to individual debate and interpretation, though perhaps more insidiously creating a perception that although some actions are bothersome and offensive, they are not horrible enough to constitute the workplace definition of sexual harassment. Furthermore, in 1990, the EEOC amended their definition to sexual harassment to include unsolicited actions. The EEOC would then determine on a case-by-case basis whether the harassment was truly unsolicited. Then, in 1993, in *Harris v. Forklift Systems Inc*, the Supreme Court stated that behaviors that were considered sexual harassment were not only defined by what the victim deemed abusive, but additionally what a "reasonable person" would perceive.

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These rulings formed the backdrop into investigations of what behaviors constitute sexual harassment. Researchers identified multiple frames of sexual harassment, extending it to topics of unwanted sexual attention (UWSA) and how this differs from hostile work environments, and sexist, inflammatory gender-based comments as promoting hostile work environment. UWSA includes behaviors such as looks and comments, and may not qualify for the EEOC's interpretation. However, unwanted sexual attention has been shown to have the same deleterious effects as sexual harassment, including shame, humiliation, and a "diminishing of self" (Esacove 1998). Did these experiences not count as sexual harassment? And what of sexist or misogynist commentary? If sexual harassment was about power (Dougherty 1999), did comments need to be lustful in nature? Though sexual harassment began as a workplace definition, researchers and victims of sexual harassment found the phenomena was multi-dimensional.

By the 1990s, nearly every workplace had adopted a sexual harassment policy. The policy also expanded to schools, broadening where it could take place (Dobbin and Kelly 2007). Feminists and scholars began to notice that the actions and effects of sexual harassment were not solely confined to the workplace, but to virtually any place. Street harassment became the term to identify sexual harassment in public (Thompson 1999), often envisioned as catcalling. With the onset of the Internet, sexual harassment found its way onto the World Wide Web bolstered by vicious anonymity and bravery through physical distance. As discussed later, from sending unwanted emails or texts with pornographic images, to cooperative online video game play, online sexual harassment has been documented and researched. However, sexual harassment online has ceased to be called sexual harassment, rather gender harassment or cyber harassment are more common terms. While sexual harassment began as a workplace definition, it has been expanded and constructed as a variety of unwanted sexual or sexist attention in virtually any

location.

Since the mid-1990s to the early 2000s, there has been a significant lack of literature and research on sexual harassment. The discourse of sexual harassment has dissipated from its rise in the 1980s and 90s and has shifted course to be constructed as something else if not in the workforce. Sexual harassment may be seen as a problem conquered since the aftermath of the second feminist wave. This evolution of sexual harassment and its meanings has brought researchers to note several key aspects of the sexual harassment constructions today.

Sexual Harassment and Gender

When the dominant discursive formation is of workplace sexual harassment, many people would undoubtedly imagine a man harassing a woman. Given that sexual harassment is more often experienced by women and more often perpetrated by men (Cortina and Berdahl 2008), this belief would be true. Feminist researchers especially focus on the power difference between men and women in sexual harassment. In fact, Berdahl, Magley, and Waldo (1996) insist that analysis on sexual harassment *must* be done under the social context of power disparity between men and women. However, sexual harassment can be perpetrated by either gender, and both genders can be victimized. With these social constructions solely focused on sexual harassment between men and women, this silences and ignores that sexual harassment can occur between members of the same gender. This heterosexism in sexual harassment constructions may point to theories on how power is perceived within the discourse, not necessarily solely hierarchical in the workplace or in gender, but also through other privileges. If the popular narratives are that sexual harassment is heterosexual, gendered, and about power it is unlikely that many would

identify sexual harassment as something that occurs between friends or between members of the same gender.

While these constructions (that it occurs in the workplace, is based on lust and/or power, is a result of hierarchical power, and it occurs between men and women) are the most popular, sexual harassment is perceived differently by different groups. For example, younger women are less likely to report sexual harassment and less likely to define their experience as sexual harassment than older women (Fitzgerald et al 1988). Additionally, men and women perceive sexual harassment differently. According to Kitzinger and Thomas (1995), women believe sexual harassment is about "doing power" and for men, sex and power are conceptually separate. This, in turn, offers an account for why men generally don't consider joking to be a part of sexual harassment (Biber et al 2002), and women have a broader interpretation of what actions constitute sexual harassment (Rotundo, Nguyen, and Sackett 2001). Older research also suggests that men do not pick up on more subtle forms of sexual harassment (Gutek and O'Connor 1995) and instead are more likely to view quid pro quo and sexual assault as the clearest forms of sexual harassment. Researchers have suggested that the reason for this may be a result of gender socialization (Quinn 2002). Men who grow up in concordance in patriarchal norms, sexually aggressive behavior, belief in rape myths, and a misogynist view of women are less likely to view actions as sexually aggressive or behavior as sexual harassment (Stockdale 1993).

Golden et al. (2002) found that appearance and attractiveness strongly affected perceptions of sexual harassment. Both men and women's responses showed that if the female victim was more attractive than a male harasser, the situation was more likely to be perceived as sexual harassment. The opposite was also shown to be true: if the male harasser was more attractive than a female victim, the situation was less likely to be perceived as sexual harassment.

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Researchers also found that participants found the less attractive men were less dominant. In all cases, the woman's attractiveness influenced ratings more strongly. These findings are consistent with gendered norms about appearance: women's appearances and attractiveness are important and defining of women, while unattractiveness is equating gender violation. Castellow, Wuensch and Moore (1990) and Pryor and Day (1988) found similar results as Golden et al. (2002), where sexual attractiveness is a contributing factor to the perceptions of sexual harassment.

Pryor (1987) developed a measure to assess the likeliness to sexually harass, called the Likelihood to Sexually Harass scale (LSH). The scale employs 10 hypothetical scenarios where participants self-report how likely they are to act in a sexually harassing behavior or how likely they are to sexually harass others. According to a study by Perry, Schmidtke, and Kulik (1998), male undergraduates scored higher on the LSH than women. LSH scores are also related to other gendered beliefs (Pryor et al. 1995) such as attitudes towards sexual violence, sexual behavior, rape myths, and interpersonal violence. Pryor found that LSH scores is also correlated with dominance and power. Men scoring high on the LSH also had a higher likelihood to rape, and had difficulty with perspective (Driscoll et al. 1998). Researchers also found that high authoritarianism, which correlated to high LSH scores, was intrinsically linked between sexual aggression and authoritarianism.

Although some academics are divided on power's importance, many academics agree that power in sexual harassment is central (Wayne 2000). Cleveland and Kerst (1993) posit structural power plays an important role in how sexual harassment is perpetuated, and many academics do find that sexual harassment is about power (Conrad and Taylor 1994; Dougherty 1999). Given gender role stereotypes that are often prescribed to men are associated with dominance and strength, and women with submissiveness and passivity (Allgeier and

McCormick 1983; Eagly and Mladinic 1989), all power exercised by men, on an individual or organizational basis, could be backed by structural power on the basis of institutional sexism. This line of thinking supports the idea that sexual harassment is a structural force that aims to keep women in a subordinate social position, even when men in lower positions sexually harass their female superiors. This power differential, which has been has been documented by Grauerholz (1989), is called "contrapower harassment" (Benson 1984). However, given the pervasiveness of these gendered norms and the social privileges afforded to men, as well as those who prescribe to gendered norms, Millennials may not distinguish between types of power in sexual harassment.

Millennials and Sexual Harassment Constructions

According to Howe and Strauss (2000), Millennials are individuals born between 1982 and 2002, though other researchers consider the lines to be drawn from the onset of the 1980s to the late 1990s (Pew Research Center 2010). Millennials are also known as the "Net Generation", comprised of individuals who have experienced adolescence or young adulthood at the turn of the century and have grown up with the Internet at their disposal. As a generation, Millennials are occupying many different social position and spaces, from Millennials just now graduating high school, to students studying at every degree level, and to those who have moved on into professional realms. For Millennials, sexual harassment has been constructed, socially, culturally, and legally in the workplace since they were born. These constructions have been birthed at the very onset of the generation, and have grown and evolved since. When it comes to examining sexual harassment narratives among Millennials, they may offer unique constructions of the issue.

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Millennials are the most culturally diverse generation (Howe and Strauss 2003), the most socially liberal generation with an overwhelming tendency to vote Democratic (Pew Research Center 2010), and on track to becoming the most educated generation (Pew Research Center 2010), providing them with unique experiences that set them apart from previous generations. In general, Millennials are optimistic, happy, positive, and confident (Howe and Strauss 2003). Theorized to be a result of their close connections to their parents, Millennials have a trusting view of the government, and are cooperative and compliant, striving for a balance of personal achievement, individuality, and interpersonal harmony. According to a survey, sexual orientation, gender, and race are "no big deal" (Howe and Strauss 2003). Leyden, Teixeira, and Greenberg at *The New Politics Institute* (2007) claimed Millennials show a serious concern towards social inequalities.

However, most of Howe and Strauss's (2003) work came from two surveys focused on a sample comprised of public schools in Fairfax County, Virginia. The first survey was taken by 200 K-12 teachers by twelve public schools, while the other taken by 660 high school seniors in four public schools using various opinion questions. As a result, they may have not captured a representative sample of socioeconomic standing. Howe and Strauss (2003) admitted that the median income in Fairfax County is almost double national average. Though Howe and Strauss's findings are not universally true for all those born in the generation, the socioeconomic status of those who live in and/or around the University of Central Florida may be close to those in the study, rather than outliers.

Helen Fox, author of *Their Highest Vocation: Social Justice and the Millennial Generation* (2012) makes an important distinction between valuing social justice and enacting it in everyday life. This requires not only introspection about power and privilege, but also critical

education about history involving inequalities, and the reality of contemporary social issues. She writes:

> When Millennials say, for example, that "race is no big deal", they may have never thought about their own contributions to the racist atmosphere that persists in so many communities, much less question why their high schools were so divided among racial lines, or why their circle of friends are so monocultural, even though they may be racially diverse. When Millennials say they take women's leadership as a given, they may not recognize how deeply sexism is still embedded in U.S. society or see their vulgar endearments ("Hey, bitches!") as perpetuating gender inequalities (Fox 2012:14-15).

Fox (2012) discusses that while Millennials may seem culturally diverse as a whole, where 20 percent of all Millennials are children of immigrants (Howe and Strauss 2000), income segregation has isolated whites and wealthy immigrants. As a result, schooling and home life for young Millennials will likely remain monocultural. Fox quotes a white psychologist as saying, "I wouldn't go so far as to say we live in a post-racial era. But there's less race consciousness, less sensitivity. Millennial students have grown up in an age when they can take diversity for granted in ways that we didn't in my generation" (p. 100). Indeed, in a study where college students replied to researcher's questions in the style of simulating facebook pages, students with color-blind racial beliefs were more likely to express racist views rather than students who recognized the importance of racial identity (Tynes and Markoe 2010). Considering how Millennials construct ideas of power in regards to race, their constructions of power in regards to gender may be similar.

Millennials who have grown up during the 1990s were undoubtedly inundated with cultural messages of girl power. Girl power was a result of both feminist and post-feminist

messages, promoting individuality, independence, and personal responsibility. For young girls, this was an especially potent message. In a study conducted by Pomerantz, Raby, and Stefanik (2013), teenage girls were asked if they experienced sexism in their schools to determine if sexism existed within these girls' lexicon. The study found that these girls denied the idea that sexism existed, but struggled to name the gender bullying and inequality in their lives. The researchers theorized that postfeminist discourse, including girlpower created ideas that sexism was far in the past. For adult Millennials in this study, this discourse may dissuade some from acknowledging or naming sexual harassment practices.

Millennials cast a wide net with their access to provide new narratives through social media and through the creation of knowledge in educational settings. They are a diverse and open generation. Identifying sexual harassment constructions will be beneficial in not only fully understanding these narratives, but identifying these narratives that the newest generations of adults will reproduce in society.

CHAPTER THREE: THEORY

This study utilizes two theoretical perspectives—social constructionism and feminist theory—both of which have provided insight on how sexual harassment has been theoretically constructed for the past five decades. Meanwhile, constructivist grounded theory provides the methodological and theoretical framework for the study.

The social construction of sexual harassment

In understanding how Millennials socially construct ideas of sexual harassment, social constructionism must first be understood. In 1964, Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann co-authored *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*. This served as an academic primer on social constructionism and sociology of knowledge. Berger and Luckmann describe how reality is socially constructed, and it is the sociology of knowledge that analyzes *how* reality is constructed. Berger and Luckmann assert that it is the sociologist that must understand how these constructions are accepted as reality. The sociology of knowledge is therefore concerned with the relationship between knowledge and its resulting social context. Ultimately, these social constructions become knowledge and "common sense", depending on the distribution of these constructions.

This means reality is subjective. Given the social context, society members constantly interpret meanings. From these interpretation, ideas about what is real, what is knowledge, what is important or unimportant, what is a problem or what isn't, becomes formed. Sexual harassment is no exception. It was the second wave feminists of the 1970s that interpreted sexual harassment as a problem. Prior to this, while some may have viewed sexually harassing behaviors as cruel, uncomfortable, or damaging, it was not enough to create sexual harassment

laws. Until the second wave feminist movement, sexual harassment was not constructed as a *social issue* to the point where policymakers had to create legal protection against sexual harassment.

Sexual harassment as a legal issue became legitimized by legal institutions. Berger and Luckmann refer to this as institutionalization, or reciprocal typification. As feminists like Katherine MacKinnon raised the issue of sexual harassment in the workplace around the country, this construction became well-known. Sexual harassment became a phrase with a shared meaning. Berger and Luckmann describe that this typification is solidified through language, signs, and shared meanings. These recurrent patterns, when reinforced by institutions, become part of everyday life. Millennials became the first generation to grow up with sexual harassment policies and knowledge of sexual harassment history. Constructions of sexual harassment are socialized into the next generation. From there, this process repeats if new popular constructions arise. According to Berger and Luckmann, this is how shared meanings become knowledge and integrated into our understanding of reality.

The literature review outlines the history of how sexual harassment has been socially constructed. From the rise of feminist thought in the 1970s to the rise of postfeminist thought in the 1990s, ideas of sexual harassment have changed. Who experiences sexual harassment, where it happens, and the policies that aim to provide protection and consequence have evolved with the cultural paradigms regarding women, gender inequality, and sexuality.

Feminists typically construct sexual harassment as a result of patriarchy, and more recently, rape culture (a by-product of patriarchy). Rape culture (New York Radical Feminists 1974) is a feminist theoretical concept in which a society supports sexually aggressive behavior such as rape through the normalization of ideas of gender inequality, rape myths, and victim

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blaming. Given the connection between the feminist movement, gender inequality, sexually aggressive behavior, and sexual harassment, it is important to view sexual harassment through not only a lens of social constructionism, but through a feminist lens as well.

Feminist theory vs Postfeminist thought

Unlike social constructionism, feminist theory typically concerns itself with viewing reality as objective. As sexual harassment itself was born out of the second wave feminist movement, it is still seen and studied as a feminist issue. Workplace sexual harassment arguably deprives women of opportunities available to men, from lack of advancement without sexual favor, to hostile work environments that deter work ability, performance, safety and well-being (MacKinnon 1979). Stanley and Wise (1983) conclude that the most common and central belief in feminism is the idea of women as oppressed. As feminism critically examines power difference between genders, these ideas of sexual harassment as oppressive gendered phenomenon have been reproduced outside the workforce. According to Holland and Cortina (2013), men who were surveyed were less likely to mark feminist's sexual harassment as such, leading the researchers to theorize that sexual harassment was used to punish women who violated patriarchal gender norms. This theory affirms MacKinnon's (1979) idea that sexual harassment is about maintaining power over women. However, this theory makes several assumptions about gender and gender dynamics, primarily the heterosexist idea that only women are harassed, and that sexual harassment is between a man and a woman.

One of the biggest detriments to the spread of feminist theory is the recurrence of postfeminist thought. Postfeminist thought, or the idea that feminism has solved issues of sexism, is a recurring thought that repeats in response to, and often after, a resurgence in feminist

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thought. This ultimately stalls progressive and critical beliefs of feminist theory to the general

public by promoting the idea that equality has been achieved. With postfeminist thought on the

heels of the resurgence of feminism, ideas of feminism and gender inequality in the public sphere

may be at odds. Both feminist theory and postfeminism may be present in Millennials'

constructions of sexual harassment given third-wave feminism in the early 1990s, and more

recently, the appearance of a fourth-wave of feminism in the early 2010s. Likewise, those who

identify as feminist will more than likely construct sexual harassment in line with feminist

theory's beliefs of gender inequality, whereas those who do identify as feminist not may

construct sexual harassment with connections of gender and power.

Constructivist Grounded Theory

As I investigated Millennials' social constructions of sexual harassment, my research

adopts a constructivist grounded theory approach. Grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967)

uses inductive investigation to discover and build a theory from data. Charmaz (1995, 2002)

identifies features that all grounded methods use. Those include, but are not limited to

simultaneous data collection and analysis as a reflexive practice, the inductive discovery and

creation of analytic codes and categories, theoretical sensitivity, and the formation of categories

that will inform a theory about the topic. It is important in using grounded theory to practice

theoretical sensitivity through concurrent data collection and analysis. This allowed me to be

immersed in the research and inductively connect and create meanings as information was

received.

In using Kathy Charmaz's work on constructivist grounded theory as an approach, she

stresses that data do not simply reflect a reality. In fact, there is no objective social reality in

which to garner data (Charmaz 2000). Instead, Charmaz's constructivist grounded theory allows the researcher to delicately use subjectivism to show a narrative and maintain an author-like presence. This not only reflects the social and cultural context, but also an interpersonal context from the relationship with the research participants (2000). This allowed both the participants' views and my own framework to be accurately reflected and be an active part in the construction of the theory.

CHAPTER FOUR: METHODS

This research utilizes qualitative methods for an analysis using 18 in-depth interviews of Millennials aged 19 to 33. Using a semi-structured interview schedule, I asked what, how, why, to whom, and where sexual harassment occurs, and whom between, as well as invited participants to make connections between the role of power and gender. In following Kathy Charmaz's use of grounded theory (1995), she labeled coding as a two-step process: first line by line coding, then focused coding. It is this model that I adopted.

Sample/Sampling

As of 2014, the year in which I collected the data, Millennials were aged 14 to 34, however, only those 18 to 34 were considered eligible for participation. Anticipating gendered differences in responses to sexual harassment (Fitzgerald et al 1988), the sample contained an equal number of men and women. Additionally, due to the age differences of the sample, participants were recruited by age groups (18-25, 26-34). Younger Millennials are more likely to still be in college, whereas older Millennials may be at a stage in life where they are focused on family, career, or both. Still, the cohort is unified by similar cultural values.

Participants were recruited through social media on both various groups and shared statuses on Facebook, and the Orlando and UCF Reddit.com pages. Reddit is a social media site focused on forum thread-based communication and media sharing according to the topic's page. Unfortunately, during the recruitment phase, I encountered some harassment of my own. One Reddit user replied to my call for participants with, "Can we give a demonstration of sexual harassment among Millennials by sexually harassing you during the interview?" However, no further contact with this individual was made. Other than this user, there were no additional

harassment situations. Participants, as well as those who responded online and through email, exercised civility and respect. Like the Orlando and UCF reddit, I used UCF and local store-based groups in an attempt to find a diverse group of local participants.

Of the 18 participants, there are 9 men, 5 of whom were between the ages of 26 and 33, and 4 of whom were between the ages 19 and 25. Of the 9 women, 4 were between the ages of 27 and 33, while the other 5 were ages 21-23. Only two of the participants had children (one child each). At the time of the interview, two of the participants were divorced, while five were engaged or married, and the rest single. All 18 participants had at least some college education. Some were not old enough to have graduated yet with even a two-year degree, but three participants held bachelor's degrees and three held a master's degree. All but three participants were working at least part-time, some with up to three jobs. In fact, the only participants who were not employed were enrolled full-time in school. Interestingly, 5 of the 18 (27 percent) identified as pansexual, bisexual, or gay, while 2 identified as "mostly straight." The other 11 identified as heterosexual. Only three participants were people of color, with the rest white. Those three participants identified as Black, Asian, and Hispanic.

Data Collection

Semi-structured, face-to-face one-on-one interviews were conducted with the 18 participants over the course of five months. Interviews lasted between 12 minutes to nearly an hour, with most interviews lasting roughly half an hour in length. Questions I asked the participants were broad, focusing on sexual harassment in general, but were then narrowed down to theorizing ideas of gender and power. Although opening and closing questions were used, they were not very helpful in directing the conversation. Instead, participants were often confused on

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where to start when put in the spotlight, and generally seemed more comfortable and open being asked more direct questions. Though the interview schedule was followed, new questions were posed according to the participants' responses to either better understand their responses, or to follow a unique line of thought.

During the interview process, which was audio recorded via a recording application on a Kindle device, note taking on pen and paper was an important part of the process. This allowed me to remember key topics during times where the participant was discussing what would become multiple themes, or turned the interview in a new direction. While I also occasionally recorded body language, long pauses, and sighs, I did not incorporate body language or gestures into the analysis or results.

Locations were negotiated between participants and me via email. The most common locations where interviews took place where at the University of Central Florida, or at local coffee shops. Public locations were used for the safety of myself and the participants, as everyone, including myself were young adults, all strangers to one another, meeting for the first time from online communications. In line with safety and ethics, all participants were reminded that their identities would remain anonymous and their personal information confidential.

Lastly, interviewing, transcription, and data analysis were solely completed by myself, a CITI-certified and IRB-protocol approved researcher.

Coding and Data Analysis

As previously mentioned, I analyzed my data through the use of grounded theory. Grounded theory builds up a theory from emergent data, linked together by a constant process of reviewing and comparing the data. The data speak for themselves, which for understanding

social constructions, was necessary in this study. Grounded theory relies on several steps of coding, reflexivity, and theoretical sensitivity. I employed the following analytic strategies while reviewing the transcripts and practiced memo-writing through the use of both pen and paper and word document computer programs.

Line by line coding was the first step of analysis taken. Glaser (1978) suggests that this method is a strong choice when analyzing interview data. According to Glaser, line by line coding includes summarizing and naming each line of transcription, hence creating "codes." This identifies tacit assumptions, explicit statements, and implicit concerns. By breaking up the data into lines and labelling them, it helps the researcher identify gaps, new concepts, and relationships. This allowed me to compare data to data, creating a constant comparative method. Comparative methods allow the researcher to compare the researcher's own ideas to the data and make distinctions between the two (Glaser and Strauss 1967). Line by line coding was particularly useful because participants would often list many different reasons or responses to a question. Coding per paragraph would not have been a sufficient analytical choice with sometimes up to 5 different responses in one breath of explanation. Line by line coding allowed me to break down and compare on a more accurate level.

The second stage of coding was focused coding, which according to Glaser (1978) is a more direct and selective coding process. With my initial codes, I could sift through large amounts of data. As the line by line coding only examined each line, which was at times less than one sentence, focused coding allowed for synthesizing entire concepts. Using the codes, I connected the dots of the datum, stringing together to find new concepts to analyze. This process was not linear. Continuously, I checked for not only the accuracy of my initial codes as new knowledge became apparent, but I also took the new knowledge to check back to find new

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emergent data previously missed or mistaken. Focused coding served to make the codes even more accurate through comparative measures, but also made the responses easier to interpret and synthesize.

Theoretical saturation is reached when a researcher can make no changes in the codes (Glaser 1978). The data was analyzed over a course of nine months, beginning with the first interview. This time allowed me to consider the data, memo write, and practice reflexivity to comb through the data and synthesize these codes from seemingly separate ideas to a firm theory.

In addition, Glaser (1978) states that memo writing in writing theory is absolutely critical. In memo-writing, I often made connections between ideas. Indeed, this was a vital part of the research, without which, the research would have been lacking. Often times, participant dialogue was hard to follow, and I had to question whether they simply lacked the language to communicate their thoughts, or if they were going in a unique direction that many other participants did not go. Memo-writing enabled me to make connections, question lines of thought, and interpret the data.

When saturation was reached and the memo-writing process was completed, theories became be self-evident as to how these Millennials construct ideas of gender and power in relation to sexual harassment.

CHAPTER FIVE: RESULTS

Four topics were analyzed, including, who experiences harassment, why it happens, if participants saw connections between gender and sexual harassment, and whether participants identified as feminist. When discussing who experiences sexual harassment, participants discussed how sexual harassment is an "everyone" issue, rather than explicitly a women's issue. While this is positive for inclusion, it does raise questions about whether Millennials see power in sexual harassment. When asked why it happens, responses were split into two categories, structural and individual causes for sexual harassment. Structural reasons include socialized gender roles or the media, while individual reasons include lust, a desire for power, and ignorance. When asked if they identified as feminist, half the respondents said they take issue with the definition of feminism, claiming it is not oriented as a movement for everyone, and that causes it to be associated with female supremacy or being anti-male. Finally, when asked if gender played a major role in sexual harassment, half of the respondents framed gender as completely incidental. These responses, which lack an understanding of how power or systemic gender differences affect sexual harassment, I call "gender-blind" responses.

Who experiences sexual harassment?

When asked "Who experiences sexual harassment?" and "Who does sexual harassment happen between?", every participant answered that everyone, with few exceptions, could be the target or the harasser. This was most often the first answer participants gave, in a tone suggesting it was obvious, as if correcting me for implying that there was a 'who' to begin with. For these Millennials, it seemed an obvious answer that sexual harassment could involve any combination of people. When asked who experience sexual harassment, one participant, Dave, replied

"Humans." When asked who it happened between, I received the same response. "Humans." This type of response occurred everywhere. Long was the thought that sexual harassment happened only to women. The participants wanted to make that clear that sexual harassment was not limited to gender.

> *All people, all ages, all genders. All gender dynamics, so male to female, male to male, female to female, female to male and any other non-binary genders or whatever. -Scout(F)*

> *I mean, like, males approaches females, females approaching males, um, males approaching males, females approaching females. So, I don't think sexual harassment is limited to one gender, or one sex. -Amy(F)*

Some participants -- interestingly only men, noted that while it is possible for anyone to experience sexual harassment, there would likely be some exceptions, such as the elderly or the undesirable, reinforcing the notion that sexual attraction is a necessary prerequisite for sexual harassment.

> *Everybody. Well… almost everybody. I'm sure there's some people who don't [experience sexual harassment]… someone out there. . . . somebody who is generally repulsive, probably. -Mark(M)*

> *Age, I don't know, I have trouble conceiving a very young person sexually harassing a very old person. -Omar(M)*

As shown in the quotes above, many participants listed possible dynamics in which sexual harassment could take place, most of which included examples of harassment between the same gender.

Because I think it can go either way, like in my own example, there's male-to-male. And I'm sure there's female-to-female, and I see male-to-female all the time, and I've had female-to-male in other offices too, where, you know, I've been touched unwantedly. So it definitely happens both ways. Well, all sorts of ways. -Sean(M)

However, participants listed men harassing men as an example more often than women harassing men, or women harassing women. Only one participant mentioned men being victims of harassment with some uncertainty.

I would have a hard time thinking men experience it, but I'm sure there's an exception to everything. They might... experience it sometimes. -Stephanie(F)

One of the most interesting findings regarding the subject of men as victims of sexual harassment, is that there were more personal stories of men experiencing harassment compared to women's stories. Four men and one woman recalled times when they or a male friend had been subject to sexual harassment, and even sexual assault and domestic abuse. Two participants recalled when it happened in their workplace, one who experienced female co-workers primarily referring to him as pet names. Another participant, Mark, experienced many coworkers being assaulted in the workplace.

In a past line of employment, there was this owner of a company who would walk up and punch people in the crotch. He did that to the people in the company. He thought that was acceptable, and most people tolerated it. -Mark(M)

In fact, there were only two stories about women experiencing harassment, neither of which were the participant. One man talked about intervening when he saw a group of women harassed. Another participant, Anne, talked about a coworker of hers who had told her about sexual harassment. Alice theorizes that place where sexual harassment occurs could influence the

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perception of the experience. This could explain why women did not share personal stories of harassment during the interviews, while men did.

> *A lot of places where people, I don't think they call it sexual harassment, but it happens at bars and stuff. Like you walk by a group of guys and they like grab you or whatever. That's, like, "please don't touch my butt when I am walking by you," like, I think that is, but nobody ever says "oh I was sexually harassed at the library last weekend." Nobody ever says that, but it's the same thing as unwanted sexual approachment or advancement. -Alice(F)*

This construction of "sexual harassment is an issue that affects everyone" was more prevalent than the idea that sexual harassment is a women's issue. Jay sums this construction.

> *I feel that it may not necessarily be equal to each gender but I do think that it is, it is a human issue. I don't think it's a female issue or a male issue. I think that there is just too much of it going on and I don't think it's necessarily, strictly, a female issue. -Jay(F)*

Regardless of this prominent dialogue, many participants did admit that sexual harassment likely affects more women than men, and it is primarily thought of as a women's issue. Participants, like Jay, may have stressed sexual harassment as a "human issue" first and foremost to frame it to pronounce inclusion. However, as a result, the focus moved away from women, who have historically been the overwhelming majority of sexual harassment victims. Yet 72 percent of the participants still made some mention of women.

The participants who mentioned women in their explanations of who experiences sexual harassment often explained that while everyone could experience sexual harassment, women commonly come to mind first, although not all framed it as women experiencing it more often

than men. Rather, it was framed as men do not recognize sexual harassment or they do not report it.

> *Men, because of culture, or society, or whatever, haven't been brought up to think of some things as sexually threatening. Or they don't feel threatened in the same way that women do by the same behaviors. -Donna(F)*

Allen theorized that men do not bring up these threatening behaviors because sexual harassment is perceived as sexual attention, and therefore positive. He also theorized that men face ridicule if they speak out, so they are more likely to remain silent about their experiences.

> *. . .Many guys tend to joke about that being a good thing, but it really isn't. . .while it is more often heard that a woman is the victim, men rarely speak up because their other male peers would mock him. -Allen(M)*

Participants readily recognized that women are typically associated with sexual harassment, though it is not discernable for all of these participants whether this comes from knowledge they are aware of, cultural stereotypes or educated guesses. Only one participant connected the common discourse of the workplace harassment and the historical context of the issue.

> *. . . You tend to gravitate towards male-on-female, as opposed to female-on-male, and you think of workplace. . . . I think that, historically, men tend to sexually harass women in the workplace, and it's not until fairly recently that that started to change. . . -Sean(M)*

A recurring theme I found was that of mentioning the theme of "everyone can experience sexual harassment, ***but***..." with the follow mention of women, and if the subject was on women, participants would use the qualifier again, to include men. When women were discussed,

participants defaulted back on the the importance of inclusion. Throughout the responses of participants who did mention women, it was often in the same breath in comparison to others.

> *I feel like if all the men spoke up, it will still have women as a victim more often, but I'm not sure on that. -Allen(M)*

> *Honestly, everybody. It's probably predominantly thought of as women, but I think men get sexually harassed as well. -Donna(F)*

When mentioning women being victims of sexual harassment, participants often included constructions of men as the harasser and women as victims. This was by the most common construction among participants who mentioned a gendered relationship between victim and harasser.

> *In terms of gender, it's usually male to female, I mean there would be exceptions, where maybe the woman is the boss, and the male is her employee, where she can harass him because she has power over him in the workplace, but beyond that, I would say it's mostly male to female. [Both in and out of the workforce] statistically, it will happen more, male to female, than any other like gender combination. -Stephanie(F)*

Lastly, participants theorized why women are often the recipients of sexual harassment. This included, but was not limited to designated cultural roles, history, smaller body size, and women typically occupying lower positions in society.

> *Women, basically. Sometimes men, but because women and girls don't have power in a lot of situations, they experience the brunt of the harassment. -Araby(M)*

> *They're seen as subservient so therefore you can do whatever the hell you want to them, you know. -Anne(F)*

<u>Why does sexual harassment happen?</u>

In response to "Why does sexual harassment happen?", two prominent themes arose from the data: individual and structural causes of sexual harassment. Sub-themes were also found. Participants who listed structural reasons as to why sexual harassment happens (72 percent), included the effect of social norms and the culture one is brought up with, as well as peer group influence and maintaining the status quo, the power of media influence, and more. Participants who cited a desire for power, a lack of communication, ignorance, and sexual attraction as playing a role in the cause of sexual harassment were considered individual causes of sexual harassment (88 percent).

Participants generally lacked the language to describe many of the structural effects of a patriarchal society, but many did describe how culture, norms, and socialization can shape views and expectations of others. When asked to discuss causes of sexual harassment, 72 percent of the respondents gave at least one response tracing it back to some sort of institutional cause. Araby, who had majored in women's studies, gave this response:

As for why that behavior develops and propagates itself, probably because...I don't know. Patriarchy, systems of oppression. A whole bunch of bad shit. . . . Cultural factors. Life. - Araby(M)

"Life", as Araby put it, was coded under social norms, as well as culture and history, as the combination of these things are both dictated as well as form social norms. However, participants approached how social norms and socialization has impacted people in various ways. Some participants claimed that since there has been a historical precedent of violence against women, sexism, and workplace harassment, this now dictates a cultural standard, or at the very least, a cultural acceptance, of sexual harassment.

Now it's just a cultural thing, taken from so many thousands of years of treating women

like they are nothing more than objects to make more people with, and so I think you see

more obvious cases of sexualizing and sexual harassment toward women. -Scout(F)

Participants also included parental involvement and childhood socialization. This tied into responses that harassing behaviors are seen as acceptable because of the gender roles society raises children and adults on.

Just the basic gender roles that we grow up with that as…Americans.. . .Gender roles

states that if a female has power over you, then you are a weak male. -Sean(M)

I think the desire for people to fit gender stereotypes, or like the um, the sort of conscious

or subconscious adherence to these sort of cultural gender roles might have an influence

on the prevalence in certain demographics, um, and then demographics themselves will

have an influence on the prevalence or occurrence. -Mike(M)

Araby gave a particularly poignant theory on doing masculinity.

Sexual harassment is an easy way to, um, do that. To do masculinity. And then when

women sexually harass, they basically are being "one of the guys" or doing something

that they themselves have experienced, and they go "oh, this is normal, this is what

people do to each other." -Araby(M)

Participants less frequently cited peer influence as a way to maintain the status quo (16 percent). Araby touched on this before, and the same is echoed with Sam, who discussed his military experience as an example. He said sexual harassment was (and still is) a severe problem. He attributed this to a male-centered atmosphere. He mentioned that a desire to serve the power of the status quo reinforces masculinity, but also silences those who would bystand if it were not for the company of other men.

A lot of grouping and a lot of peer pressure and the ratio of women to men in the military is like crazy, there are obviously... for every woman there is at least ten guys, I would imagine, depending on the branch I guess. But, I think it's that kind of atmosphere that propagates that. -Sam(M)

Interestingly, it was only male participants who offered this perspective.

You know, people [who] are in a group and one person is acting that way, and in order to maintain that status quo, other people go along with it, and that may not have initiated that kind of behavior on their own -Isaac(M)

Media influence was also given as contributing to the cause of sexual harassment (16 percent). Though this could also be coded as socialization, this was specific to warrant it's own sub-theme. Participants cited unequal or violent representations in the media, as well as the objectification of women. Jay cites the Bechdel test as a measure for female representation in film. The test refers to a term coined by Allison Bechdel, where a film must have at least (1) 2 women in the film, (2) who are named, (3) and discuss something other than a man (Bechdel 1985).

There is a name, the Bechdel test? Yes, the Bechdel test, of movies that have strong female characters that are not driven by their relationships with men. I think that's a good part of it. I think there is a lot, even in standard television, I think there is a lot of imagery of violence and the women that are there are not portrayed in a good way, or there is physical violence. -Jay(F)

Araby discusses how video games and other media can shape viewpoints of women, where women are objectified, not only sexually, but exist as props and goals in media.

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I was raised on a diet of media where women were objects. Like in Super Mario

Brothers, Princess Peach is literally the win state for the game. Once you get her, you've

won. There's all these stories going on media, mass media where women become the

trophy to be won. and this has been going on for a very long time, like so lo---ng! -

Araby(M)

Only one participant listed a reason outside these examples. Sean theorized that family make-up (5 percent) could contribute to supporting or enacting sexually harassing behaviors. He spoke of how being raised by a single-mother informed his views on gender. He implied that being raised by a single-father could have potentially different results.

I think that it is part, um… parenting. Especially when you have things like …single

mothers that may be a factor, single fathers that may be a factors. . . . Well, I was

brought up by a single mother. And I've always been very egalitarian to the point where

I've had women in my life say "Why can't you just be the man?" like-- just "make a

decision!" and I'm "No, I don't! I want it to be 50/50!" -Sean(M)

Participants discussed individuals causes of sexual harassment (88 percent), including, but not limited to the desire for power (55 percent), sexual attraction (38 percent), ignorance or a lapse in judgment (38 percent), a lack of communication (16 percent), and other reasons (11 percent). Both the frequency and types of individual causes were listed more than structural causes, though many participants saw the issue as being caused by both structural and individual causes. Scout connects biology, history, and culture, while Isaac considers it can not only be caused by individual factors.

It goes all back to our basic biological factors. Now that's really kind of silly, to hear

I'm sure, but it's true. Back a bazillion years ago it was likely women were treated in

such a way because they could get pregnant and continue the line. So sexualizing them

just to make them mothers made sense on a biological level. Now it's just a cultural

thing, taken from so many thousands of years of treating women like they are nothing

more than objects to make more people with. -Scout(F)

I'm attempted to say, it's like because the person is insecure or whatever, but also, like,

it's so systemic that it has to go beyond that. -Isaac(M)

However, not all participants painted such a holistic picture. Some participants did not

mention structural power at any given point during an interview. Most participants saw sexual

harassment stemming for someone's need to be in control, be in power, or maintain power.

> *[Power] just gives them that boost. Internally, they're thinking "you know, I can control*
>
> *this person", essentially, through sexual harassment, through blackmail, through*
>
> *whatever means. -Amy(F)*

When I asked Anne why people would do with that power, and why they feel like they would

need it, she said that some with power need to flex it to know they have it. Participants not only

believed sexual harassment gave people a sense of power, but resulted from an excess of power.

Anne offered a particularly striking metaphor of power and sexual harassment.

> *It's the same reason bullies bully. Let me see them squirm, let me push their buttons. they*
>
> *want to see how they'll react. It's the same reasons why kids sit there with magnifying*
>
> *glasses on ants. -Anne(F)*

Over a third (38 percent) of participants found sexual desire or sexual attraction to be at

least, some cause for sexual harassment. Some participants considered this a starting point for

sexual harassment, that someone doing the harassing would not initiate contact with the recipient

if they were not sexually attractive.

I would guess it is more about lust or a desire has more to do with it than involving power or authority figures. -Mark(M)

You more than likely won't hit on somebody that you don't think is attractive or if they eventually said, "yes, I'll sleep with you," you'd be like, "actually I'm not really attracted to you, it's just fun to make you feel weird." Like I think it is lust. Maybe like creepy love. -Alice(F)

Another prominent part of individual explanations for sexual harassment was ignorance or a lapse in judgement (38 percent). Participants painted this in various ways, from harassers just not considering boundaries (personal or romantic), to things that may cause a lapse in judgment. When asking Patricia why she thought sexual harassment happened, she put the full onus of it on the harasser, stating they just did not consider boundaries or consider what was proper for a normal conversation. When I probed further, she mentioned no other possible cause to sexual harassment.

They don't think. Boundaries! -Patricia(F)

Sam reflects on a personal experience where he intervened with a group of college men who were drunk and harassing a group of women. He believed that alcohol may have been a contributing factor to create a lapse in judgment.

I want to say it's more impulse you know. I think it can be very circumstantial. I think someone can sexually harass someone once and never necessarily do it again. -Sam(M)

That does not mean that a lapse in judgment or ignorance goes entirely without fault, according to Araby. He described how self-serving personalities may not believe themselves to be a harasser.

I think the person doing the harassing doesn't think of themselves as a harasser. They are just going about their day and find themselves thinking they can get away with something, or that they misread signals in a situation. I think the person doing the harassing is someone that subconsciously or unconsciously looks at a person and has a feeling to do something that could be considered boundary crossing. but like...they don't realize that there is even a boundary in the first place. -Araby(M)

Some participants (16 percent) believed that sexual harassment happened in part due to a lack of communication. Ultimately, this puts the onus on both the harasser and the person feeling harassed. No participant constructed this as problematic, and all who mentioned a lack of communication were men. Dave explained that all harassing behaviors are only communication-based, because one person is interpreting it as offensive, bothersome, or harassing.

I think people that generally tend to be submissive in those cases are probably more likely to feel harassed and I think that people that are generally dominant in those situations are probably more likely to harass, but that's just because of .. because it all comes back to your feeling of the situation, it all comes back to how you feel about your interaction with another human and I think certain personality types have certain proclivities to certain feelings. . . . I think it's all communication based. You know without communication you can't harass somebody, right? -Dave(M)

Allen implies that communication is blurry when attraction is involved. He did not explain what kind of communication would resolve the issue, or help dismantle situations where sexual harassment takes place.

I kinda think that is because, uh, when someone is attracted to someone they may not be sure where the line between flirting and harassment is with someone. [It's] A mix of ignorance and a lack of communication. -Allen(M)

One participant, Donna, theorized two other reasons (11 percent) why sexual harassment happens. One, she believed, was the physical size difference between participants, that could cause an intimidation factor. She also believed that past trauma or experience could influence whether or not someone saw a behavior as threatening. Both of these constructions ultimately place the onus on the one perceiving the harassment, not the person who may or may not be the offender.

It might just be a level of comfort. Say the threatening behavior is being exhibited by the man, and the woman feels harassed. . . . Even physically, the difference is, a women will be smaller on average than a given man, so they may feel threatened that they won't be able to stop them if it goes any further. -Donna(F)

<u>I'm not a feminist, but...</u>

I also asked participants if they identified as feminists. Though I did not probe as much as I should have in retrospect, it became increasingly relevant as I analyzed the data. As a result, I found that participants had three answers when it came to whether or not they identified as feminist: unequivocally yes (28 percent), not in any way (22 percent), or they sympathized or agreed with parts of the feminist movement, but identified with it conditionally or under another name, such as humanist, equalist, etc (50 percent). This is incredibly relevant when considering the responses of how gender and power are considered.

Those that responded, without elucidation, "yes" when asked whether they were a feminist or not, were not divided by gender. In fact, two of the five identified as male. Of the five, four of the participants did not identify as heterosexual. Those that responded "no", also did not give any reason as to why they did not identify as feminist, although one participant did seem confused and surprised that I asked the question to begin with. Of the four who responded "no", three of them were male, and those three men were also heterosexual. All four respondents who did not identify as feminist were the oldest (3 33-year olds) and youngest respondents (a 19 year old).

Perhaps the most interesting theme is that half of those interviewed did not give a direct yes or a no response, but something in-between. Some participants did not explicitly identify as feminist because they felt like feminism had changed, or thought some feminism was too radical. They associated some feminism with man-hating, or female supremacy.

> *I think it gets convoluted between women's rights/equality and women's supremacy in*
> *every sense of the word. -Alice(F)*

Amy asked me to define feminist. When I told her that it was up to her interpretation, she gave the following answer, but later corrected herself that she identified as a feminist only as it meant women should be equal.

> *Like say in the business place, promotion-wise, salary-wise, and I think it's something*
> *really important, but I don't like extreme… feminism. They're almost like man-haters.*
> *Like everything has to do with the man putting us down, that kind of stuff. So I wouldn't*
> *go as far as to say that's me, because I feel like extremists in every faction ruin*
> *everything. -Amy(F)*

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Participants like Sean did not like the word feminist, and believed it promoted values that were not inherently equal.

> *I align with feminist ideals to a certain extent. I know that sounds weird, but uh, I think of the word feminist and uh, it seems like counter-intuitive an equal society would be. - Sean(M)*

This tip-toeing around offending or excluding men, or likewise ignoring power differential and systematic power plays in many of themes presented here, especially when exploring the relationship of gender in sexual harassment.

Gender-blind responses to sexual harassment

In response to "some people believed gender plays a big role in sexual harassment, do you agree?" and other primary and probing questions about gender, two themes emerged. Participants either believed that gender did play an important role in sexual harassment (52 percent). They found gender, whether it involved the harasser or recipient's gender, or gender politics, to be central to sexual harassment, or at least influenced by gender differences. Other participants (47 percent) discussed that gender had nothing to do with sexual harassment. This was framed as incidental or having nothing to do at all with sexual harassment, and led me to code these as "gender-blind" responses.

When those who responded (52 percent) that gender does, indeed, play a role in sexual harassment, participants automatically framed it as men typically being the harassers, and women typically being the recipients of sexual harassment. This dynamic, influenced by the structural reasons participants discussed, often portrayed men as being influenced by social norms regarding masculinity, and women being subjugated by cultural and historical gendered

expectations. Sam discusses how patriarchy sets up men to feel inherently privileged, which can be abused.

> *I think it's, uh, the way that humans have grown up as a whole collectively, it's the guys, you know, the men have always been the provider, the leader, the protector. Uh, very patriarchal society is the term for it. Um, I think that has a big impact, on like, okay, I feel entitled to do this because I am a man, or I am in a position of power. Not necessarily just a man, but men tend to feel more [like this]. -Sam(M)*

> *I think men, like, want to establish power and authority and so one way they can do that, is by intentionally harassing you so that you feel small. . . . So from my narrow 'lil window of experience, it's guys showing off, or showing you how big they can be. How powerful. -Alice(F)*

Half of the participants (47 percent) did not see gender impacted sexual harassment in any way. This gender-blindness was often illustrated in interviews where discussions of structural power were absent, and where sexual harassment was framed as happening to everyone, with no regard to gendered differences. Sean explains how gender plays a role in sexual harassment, in which it incidentally plays a role in sexual attraction.

> *I think gender plays a role because most sexual tension or whatever, would build from male-to-female or female-to male just because there's more heterosexual people than homosexual people. -Sean(M)*

Other participants believed that, per their explanation that sexual harassment is based primarily on lust, and not power differences, that any gender can experience lust, and therefore, has nothing to do with gender.

No [gender does not play a role]. . . . I think women want the same thing guys do. -

Mark(M)

No [gender does not play a role]. . . .Because I think that it's more about a desire for

sexuality between two humans, and I think that can fall into a pile of genders. -Dave(M)

Perhaps the most striking quote was the following, highlighting the theme of gender-blindness among participant responses. Despite theorizing that most sexual harassment is male-to-female, Omar claimed this had nothing to do with gender.

I don't know the statistics, I don't know, so it's entirely possible that 90 percent of sexual

harassment is guy on girl, and I suspect that's the dominant form. . . . Is gender playing a

role there? . . . Nah, I take it back. I don't think [gender] plays a role. -Omar(M).

CHAPTER SIX: DISCUSSION

From the results, it's apparent that around half of those interviewed do not see structural power, and therefore, gender inequality, in issues of sexual harassment. From discussing who experiences sexual harassment to identifying whether or not they were feminist, most participants wanted to stress the inclusion of men over discussing what has historically been a women's issue. This inclusion may not be inclusive at all, if it erases critical discussion of gender, power, and privilege from conversation.

Contextualizing gender-blind constructions of sexual harassment

In discussing who experiences sexual harassment, 100 percent of participants made it clear that everyone can experience sexual harassment. In comparison, 72 percent of participants mentioned, at least in some capacity, women experiencing sexual harassment. These inclusive viewpoints may reflect Millennials' values of tolerance and acceptance (Pew Research Center 2010). This is a mostly positive finding. If the next generation of leaders believe that any person may experience sexual harassment, or that it is indeed an "everyone" issue, victims of sexual harassment that do not fit conventional stereotypes may be able to be heard and legitimized. Participants theorized that men may be less likely to speak up because of gender norms and stereotypes. If society expands it's understanding of sexual harassment and sexually aggressive behavior, ideas of victimization can also be changed.

However, the mention that everyone could experience sexual harassment was met with a caveat by a few participants. This was linked to the idea that sexual harassment was, in part, caused by sexual attraction or lust. Participants claimed some "undesirable" people, such as elderly or the unattractive, would be unlikely to experience sexual harassment. This disassociates

the overwhelming literature that sexually aggressive behavior is about power (Dougherty 1999; Jansma 2001). The idea that sexual harassment is about sexual attraction de-legitimizes victims who are not considered conventionally sexually attractive. This idea also does not typically place responsibility on the harasser, because as participants discussed this issue, if one is attracted to the harasser, it ceases to be considered sexual harassment.

Men's stories of sexual harassment were more common than women's stories, despite women being most frequently the victims of sexual harassment (Cortina and Berdahl 2008). Similar to the focus of "everyone" experiencing sexual harassment to include men, men's experiences may be brought up more frequently in an attempt, by these participants, to right a past erasure of men as victims. However, in this attempt, men were the focus of conversation more often than women. When participants say "Men experience sexual harassment, too" instead of "Men experience harassment", it moves the conversation away from women, instead of indepently discussing men. Additionally, the "Men experience sexual harassment, too" frames sexual harassment happening as often as it happens to women.

Men's stories may have been more prevalent than women's due to the normalization of sexual harassment in women's lives. If sexual harassment is less likely and less frequently happening in men's lives, a single incident of sexual harassment may stand out more than continuous sexually aggressive behavior and unwanted sexual attention. However, men's stories may have been more prevalent due to the willingness to participate in this study. The call to participants during recruiting may have brought in men who had experiences of sexual harassment, and made them more likely wanting to discuss the issue. It is also possible that men drastically under report their experiences of sexual harassment, and men experiencing harassment may be more common than previously expected.

This idea that sexual harassment is an "everyone" or a "human" issue is mostly positive, with the exception that is has the possibility to shift attention away from women, who overwhelmingly experience sexual harassment (Cortina and Berdahl 2008). These constructions support the idea that Millennials generally adopt gender-blind perceptions about sexual harassment and gender politics.

When asked to discuss causes of sexual harassment, participants more often cited individual causes (88 percent) than structural causes (72 percent). Participants also discussed various individual causes with more frequency and detail than structural causes. Participants could critically discuss the individual causes, such as sexual attraction/biological imperative and a need for power far more easily than they could with structural causes. These structural causes were largely explained very generally as "culture" or basic gender roles. Despite all participants having at least some college education, most lacked both the vocabulary and critical thinking ability to discuss structural causes of sexual harassment at length. This could be due to a sufficient lack of education in the social sciences, or it could reflect participants beliefs about the topic at hand. It is important to note that nearly three-quarters of participants did find gender roles to be, in part, the cause of sexual harassment.

Many participants discussed men gleaning unhealthy messages about masculinity and women. Nearly all participants (88 percent) discussed sexual harassment to be caused by individual factors. Over a third (38 percent) believed that ignorance was a factor, as well as sexual attraction. As discussed earlier, this is particularly problematic, as it displaces responsibility on the harasser. Lack of communication was also cited, which was not framed as the harasser's fault. "Fault" was not discussed enough or consistently enough with participants,

although many discussed that intention on behalf of the harasser did not matter in defining the moment as sexual harassment.

These constructions of sexual harassment may be linked to whether the participant identified as feminist, and vice versa. One participant declined to answer. However, out of 17 participants, one-third (28 percent) identified as feminist. This may be due to the resurgence of feminist thought throughout the Internet and in discussions in news and media. Half of the participants identified as feminist in only some part, or identified as egalitarian or humanist.

These constructions emphasize that men's issues should be equally included in feminism compared to women's issues. It also emphasizes that feminism should be palatable to men and reject feminism that promotes hatred towards men. This includes rebranding feminism under a different name, and as one participant pointed out, feminism is inherently about women in its own name, and therefore, promotes inequality towards men. This response may seem inclusive at first, but it presents a deep misunderstanding of feminism and a resistance to having both critical discussions about patriarchy and men, as well as having a discussion centered on women. It is in these constructions, from which gender-blind responses stem. As feminism concerns itself with liberation against inequality as the result of structural power that favors men over women (patriarchy), participants who do not identify as feminist, or take issue with feminism may not see structure as a critical part of sexual harassment. It also may inform their mention of women (or lack thereof) as sexual harassment victims. This hyper-focus on inclusivity at the cost of mentioning women hinders critical and feminist discussion among Millennials. This stalls sexual harassment from being most effectively discussed and addressed as a social problem.

This resistance to feminism and feminist values may be a result of post-feminist messages. In the study by Pomerantz, Raby, and Stefanik (2013), they found that teenage girls

strongly adhered to post-feminist messages despite experiencing sexism. The authors theorized that girls growing up in the 1990s often experienced strong messages of girl power and successful girls, and that these messages contributed to their ideas of sexism, identity, and gendered power. Although this study was on junior and high school girls, many of the Millennials were children and young adults during the early 1990s where post-feminist messages via girl power and equality were given. This gave the message that sexism was over by showing this narrative of women in powerful positions without acknowledging the difficulties that women still face. These post-feminist messages may inform willingness (or lack thereof) to adopt a feminist identity, as well as influence learning about critical gender theory, or at least, foster basic empathy and understanding of women's lives.

gender-blind responses become most apparent in the analysis of questioning the role of gender in sexual harassment. Half the participants found gender to have no role or to be completely incidental. This implies that participants do not acknowledge the reality, or even the history of women's harassment, let alone structural forces that reinforce sexism at work. If they had mentioned gender roles before as a potential cause for sexual harassment, their need to defend men for inclusivity was more at play than their recognition of sexism or structural power. One participant, Omar, said that even if 90 percent of harassment is directed at women, gender has nothing to do with sexual harassment. He followed up by saying it was incidental; that men are attracted to women, and nothing more. Of course, this conjures so many follow up questions I failed to ask at the time -- Why is that number so disproportionate? Why are men so much more likely to perform sexual harassing behaviors? Doesn't gender have something to do with that? This begs the question of Millennials' supposed progressive attitudes. If their adherence to

tolerance and equality is only considered progressive when defending those in power, it is not progressive at all.

Gender-blind sexism

In Bonilla-Silva's *Racism Without Racists* (2010), the author publishes the results of his study focusing on colorblind racism and post-civil rights era ideologies about racial inequality. He discusses that whites believe in post-racial belief systems as a result of seeing past progress as transformative. Bonilla-Silver argues that racism is reflected in this cover of liberalism that embraces colorblindness. Like Bonilla-Silva's findings, I believe that gender-blind ideology in sexual harassment works similarly in the Millennials' constructions. As a result of the feminist movement in the 1970s, through the feminist movement in the 1990s promoting messages of girl power, these participants may believe that sexism hardly exists, or if it does, it is directed towards men. Like colorblindness, gender-blind sexism towards sexual harassment and other issues that are gendered social problems, will not result in progress. As long as structural inequality exists, it is important to look at sexual harassment while considering gender and structural power. The Millennials in my study ultimately defended the status quo by shifting the conversation towards men at the cost of debunking it as a women's issue. Just like those in Bonilla-Silva's study who discussed "reverse-racism", the narrative in this study became about "men experience sexual harassment, too" or claiming that sexual harassment is a result of lust, sexual attraction, ignorance, miscommunication, or bullying that exists outside of sexism.

There are more similarities between these gender-blind results and the styles of colorblindness that Bonilla-Silva describes in his work. Bonilla-Silva describes the "yes and no, but..." style of responses where whites take an ambivalent approach on controversial issues. This

"yes and no, but..." can be seen in discussion of women experiencing sexual harassment, discussing the role of gender in sexual harassment, and discussing feminism. He also describes rhetorical incoherence, where participants stumble over their words so much that they never form a clear stance or statement. I also found this among my participants when discussing feminism, where one participant stumbled over describing his issue with the phrase feminism, and talked himself into circles until he finally stated he just didn't like the sound of the word. Bonilla-Silva drives home the point that these styles, among others that can be found when studying power blindness, are hard to identify in everyday life, which furthers the inequality reflected today.

<u>Producing change</u>

These results can contribute to multiple fields in sociology, social work, education, and social justice. Millennials' views can be further studied now that the youngest of the cohort is nearly 18 years old. Similarly, sexual harassment studies are in the need of a resurgence. If this study identifies anything, it is that constructions of sexual harassment have changed since its inception as a social issue. Finally, scholars and educators can benefit from studying the connect of a sociological and feminist education on the perception of social issues.

Receiving a sociological and/or a feminist education can also help students critically examine their media messages. Two participants mentioned media as a factor that could influence one to sexually harass. Both the lack of women's stories and narratives in films as well as the objectification and commodification of women in media. Jay(F) mentions the Bechdel Test (Bechdel 1985) tests whether named women discuss something other than a man in a film or TV show. Creating positive and realistic portrayals of women is one step in combating sexism, and by extension, will slowly eliminate the idea that sexually aggressive behavior is good.

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Education about thinking sociologically is critical to understanding how structure affects everyday life. This, in turn, can inform views about not only gender inequality, but race, class, and other issues to be considered critically in everyday life. Understanding feminism is important to the everyday life of not only girls and women to understand and de-normalize the harassment that happens to them, but important to teach boys and men as well. Understanding structural power may even shift views from thinking that sexual harassment is primarily a result of individual factors. Understanding structure can enable one to take both responsibility for their actions if they are the harasser, and understand how privilege and toxic masculinity messages can produce entitlement. Likewise, a victim can understand how it is not their fault for being a subject of harassment or unwanted sexual attention. This can enable conversation where their experiences are both legitimized and respected, but can also exist in a conversation about power and privilege.

Limitations and future research

The primary limitation to this study was the homogenous sample. This, in part, was primarily due to the nature of participant recruitment. As I live in a large urban area with a major university, all of my participants had at least some college education. Many of them were just outside my social circle, friends-of-friends who responded to Reddit and Facebook posts on the call for participants. As a result, several participants identified as feminist, or LGB in some part, and may have been more likely to understand gender and power dynamics. This could have been solved by increasing the sample size, which is a strong recommendation for further research. Secondly was the limited and inconsistent questions asked regarding power and gender. Further questions regarding the relationship between power and gender, and the hypothesizing of types

of power. One participant was not asked a key question, which reduced the sample for one question to 17 responses. These limitations were ultimately avoidable, and can be solved in future research. A larger, heterogeneous sample that extends out of bounds of college areas may reach religious and rural populations.

Questions focusing directly on the intersection of gender and power can bring Millennials to bring about stronger connections between gender and power. Survey questionnaires can also be useful in determining how this generation understands dynamics of sexual harassment. Including correlations for feminist identity and gendered myths, sexual harassment myths, and explanation of power could yield promising results. Lastly, the results raise an important question: Is this gender-blind attitude only found in Millennials? If not, is it social progress, or age that has shaped these viewpoints? How do other generations construct sexual harassment? These questions can be furthered investigated with critical questioning, opening up answers to educators and policy makers who can shape the future of sexual harassment education and policy.

CHAPTER SEVEN: CONCLUSION

As a generation, millennials are considered more socially liberal, culturally diverse, and civic-minded. Considering this, the objective of this study was to determine how millennials socially construct sexual harassment, particularly in determining the role of gender and power, and its relationship to sexual harassment. Data consisted of 18 in-depth semi-structured qualitative interviews with millennials between the ages of 18 and 33, in which there were an equal number of men and women. Participants were asked to openly discuss and define sexual harassment how, when, where, why, and between whom it took place. This paper identified participants' responses to questions on gender and power regarding sexual harassment, including but not limited to the questions, "who experiences sexual harassment?", "what role does gender play in sexual harassment", and "what role does power play in sexual harassment?". Participants were also asked if they identified as feminist during a demographics questionnaire, which became relevant to this research question.

The participants agreed that anyone could be a victim of sexual harassment, but the narrative that sexual harassment is a women's issue was mostly lacking from their interpretations. Despite the inclusiveness of the issue, it was largely depoliticized, with participants claiming sexual harassment is a result of lust, personality, or happenstance, and not out of power or gender inequality. This "gender-blind" perspective is surprising, given the millennials' generation to be particularly liberal. However, this may be indicative of postfeminist ideology. While the inclusivity narrative of "anyone can experience sexual harassment", is a positive one, the post-sexism constructions stalls sexual harassment from being discussed as a result of gendered power and sexism. Many participants noted an instance of a man they know who was sexually harassed. This is a positive inclusion to the sexual harassment narrative, but

ironically, women's experiences were less reported in interviews. This may be because men's experiences are uncommon, and therefore more likely to be noticed, whereas harassment against women has become normalized. Participants were also asked if they identified as feminist. Those who unequivocally identified as feminist were likely to discuss gender and power as playing a significant role in sexual harassment, and linked the cause of sexual harassment to be a societal one. They linked sexual harassment to being a cause of socialization, media messages, and masculinity. Participants who did not identify discussed sexual harassment to be a result of lust, situation, or poor social judgment.

In conclusion, while these Millennials had tolerant and open beliefs about gender and sexual harassment, their constructions of power and gender are largely "gender-blind", which silences and slows honest and critical discussion of gendered power in sexual harassment.

APPENDIX A: IRB APPROVAL LETTER

University of Central Florida Institutional Review Board
Office of Research & Commercialization
12201 Research Parkway, Suite 501
Orlando, Florida 32826-3246
Telephone: 407-823-2901 or 407-882-2276
www.research.ucf.edu/compliance/irb.html

Approval of Exempt Human Research

From: **UCF Institutional Review Board #1**
        FWA00000351, IRB00001138

To: **Nicole B. Stark**

Date: **March 31, 2014**

Dear Researcher:

On 3/31/2014, the IRB approved the following activity as human participant research that is exempt from regulation:

Type of Review:	Exempt Determination
Project Title:	Millennials Making Meanings: Social Constructions of Sexual Harassment among Generation Y
Investigator:	Nicole B Stark
IRB Number:	SBE-14-10169
Funding Agency:	
Grant Title:	
Research ID:	N/A

This determination applies only to the activities described in the IRB submission and does not apply should any changes be made. If changes are made and there are questions about whether these changes affect the exempt status of the human research, please contact the IRB. When you have completed your research, please submit a Study Closure request in iRIS so that IRB records will be accurate.

In the conduct of this research, you are responsible to follow the requirements of the Investigator Manual.

On behalf of Sophia Dziegielewski, Ph.D., L.C.S.W., UCF IRB Chair, this letter is signed by:

IRB Coordinator

APPENDIX B: ETHICS STATEMENT

This research abided by an ethical code, as approved by the University of Central Florida's Institutional Review Board to be conducted by myself, a CITI-certified researcher. IRB approval ensured that harm to participants is minimized and beneficence outweighs the harm. Interviews were confidential and anonymous. Participants chose their own pseudonyms to ensure anonymity. Participants were informed of the study and their participation, and did not begin until they gave consent. Participation was voluntary with no compensation. In line with treating participants with care and respect, I exercised great sensitivity as the interviewer, and informed participants that they could decline to answer any question, pause, or end the interview at any time. There was always an open line of communication between the participants and myself to ensure their well-being and to engage in mutual understanding.

APPENDIX C: INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

Opening question:

● When you think or hear about sexual harassment, what comes to mind?

Probes:

● Where would you say sexual harassment happens?

● Who do you think experiences sexual harassment?

● Who do you think sexual harassment happen between?

● Why do you think sexual harassment happens?

● How does it happen?

● What actions do you believe constitute sexual harassment?

● Do you think technology can be used in sexual harassment?

● How did you learn about sexual harassment?

● Some people think gender plays a big role in sexual harassment -- Do you agree? Why/

Why not? What does the role of gender play in sexual harassment?

● Some people think power plays a big role in sexual harassment -- Do you agree?

Why/Why not? What does the role of power play in sexual harassment

Demographic questions:

- How old are you?

- What is your ethnicity? Race?

- What is your level of education? Have you taken a course in gender?

- What are your parents' occupations?

- Do you mind disclosing your sexual orientation?

- Do you use social media and technology? What? How much?

- Do you work? What do you do?

- What is your marital status? Do you have children?

- Do you consider yourself a feminist?

Closing questions:

● Do you have any other comments on sexual harassment?

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