



Vocational students in the hospitality industry explain guests' sexual harassment

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Abstract

This study's purpose is to contribute knowledge which can be used as a basis for vocational teachers in hospitality when they discuss sexual harassment with their students. We therefore explore how students in training for vocations in the hospitality industry explain why some guests subject staff to sexual harassment. The empirical material consists of focus group interviews with students in the Swedish Hotel and Tourism programme and the Restaurant Management and Food programme. Twenty-two focus group interviews were conducted, 2-8 students participated in each group. The interviews took place in ten different municipalities in southern Sweden. The students' explanations are that the sexual harassment is an issue linked to the generation, an issue of information, an issue of personality, an issue related to alcohol, an issue to do with male nature, and an issue of guests taking advantage of their status. These different explanations are linked to overarching discourses. Several of these are historical discourses that have been repeated for a long time. For teachers in the hospitality vocational education programmes a pedagogical point can be to highlight all the explanations and discourses in order to examine together with the students the assumptions on which their explanations rest.

Keywords: discourses, hospitality industry, sexual harassment, vocational culture, vocational students



Introduction

A key aspect of vocational education is that the student is socialised into the job and is expected to become part of the vocational culture (Colley et al., 2003). Vocational cultures however can contain problematic elements. One such example is the sexual harassment from guests in the hospitality industry. In the Swedish Discrimination Act (2008), sexual harassment is defined as behaviour of a sexual nature that violates someone's dignity. Examples of common types of sexual harassment are unwelcome comments, and messages and pictures with sexual content. Other examples are physical touching (groping) and leering (Universitets- och Högskolerådet [UHR], 2019). Sexual harassment is not permitted in Swedish workplaces; yet if an employee reports an incidence of sexual harassment, the employer is obligated to investigate the matter and take appropriate measures (Arbetsmiljöverket, 2019).

In the hospitality industry sexual harassment is so common and normalised that it is considered to be part of the job and vocational culture (Bråten, 2019; Svensson, 2020; Zampoukos et al., 2020). In the two Swedish upper secondary school vocational programmes for students preparing to work in the hospitality industry, namely, the Hotel and Tourism programme and the Restaurant Management and Food programme, a large part of the training is devoted to customer interaction and hospitality. Despite this, the issue of sexual harassment is not always addressed in the education. Nonetheless, studies have highlighted the opportunity teachers in schools have to address and counteract sexual harassment (Conroy, 2013; Gillander Gådin & Stein, 2019; Wood & Moyland, 2017).

Vocational education teachers can have a significant role and important function in terms of preparing students for work in occupational areas where sexual harassment commonly occurs (Wood & Moylan, 2017). If the issue of sexual harassment from customers and guests is not dealt with in vocational education, it means that the students risk being socialised into a vocational culture where sexual harassment appears as an unavoidable part of the job and something they have to deal with on their own. In addition, this can mean that the students make use of everyday and often repeated discourses in order to understand incidents such as how it can happen that a guest subjects a practicum student or an employee to sexual harassment. Vocational teachers thus need to give their students more knowledge about the issue. In teaching however, to be aware of the students' prior knowledge is often crucial. From an educational perspective, it therefore seems important to gain more information about how students in vocational education understand and explain sexual harassment from guests and why the violations occur. In this study, we investigate how young people who are training for vocations in the hospitality industry explain why some guests subject staff to sexual harassment. Further, through a discourse-

theoretical perspective, we investigate how the young people's explanations are part of overarching discourses since the discourses entail beliefs and presumptions with significance for the possibility of dealing with sexual harassment. By making visible the explanations and discourses that emerge in students' descriptions of sexual harassment by guests, the results of this study can be used in vocational education to prevent students being socialised into a vocational culture where sexual harassment is considered part of the job.

We begin with the purpose of the study and the background below. Thereafter, we explain the method and then present the results that emerged. In the last section, we present a discussion about the results and how different explanations and discourses lead to different consequences.

Purpose

The purpose is to contribute knowledge which can be used as a basis for vocational teachers in hospitality when they discuss sexual harassment with their students. We therefore explore how students in training for vocations in the hospitality industry explain why some guests subject staff to sexual harassment. In order to understand the students' explanations and the basic assumptions they rest on we examine how the explanations can be linked to more comprehensive discourses. The questions that guide the study are:

- How do students explain why some guests subject staff to sexual harassment?
- How can these explanations be tied to more overarching discourses?

Background

Sexual harassment is a widespread and global problem (Lim et al., 2018). It mainly occurs in unequal relationships. Perpetrators usually subject someone of lower status, whose subordinate position makes it difficult to act. The harassment can thus be used as a means to strengthen a superior position (Deery et al., 2011; Good & Cooper, 2014).

In the hospitality industry, the harassment of staff by guests is a major problem (LaLopa & Gong, 2020; Ram, 2018). The restaurant sector, and particularly waiting on tables, is an area where personnel are especially vulnerable. Regardless of how demanding the work is, the employees are expected to be accommodating and attentive to the guests' needs. Studies have underlined that the service staff's subordinate position, i.e., that the staff's role is to meet the guest's wishes, contributes to the fact that service staff often have difficulty assessing whether a guest's actions should be considered as sexual harassment.

Hospitality staff is expected to work according to the motto 'The customer is always right'. This can be taken advantage of by the customer, who is far from always right (Yagil, 2008). It is not unusual for customers and guests to be disrespectful towards staff and sexual harassment is part of every day for many who work in the hospitality industry. Although all staff in the industry can be subjected to sexual harassment certain employees are at particularly high risk of being exposed. Gender, age, and type of employment are significant factors. Young women with uncertain employment terms are particularly vulnerable (Bergold & Vedin, 2015; Fisk & Neville, 2011; Good & Cooper, 2016).

Sexual harassment can be of different kinds, both verbal and physical. Examples of sexual harassment can be someone groping or sending unwelcome text messages and images with sexual content. It can also involve unwelcome comments, sexual allusions, or gestures of a sexual nature. In the hospitality industry sexual invitations and offensive comments are not uncommon. Guests also subject employees to groping and other close physical contact (Bergold & Vedin, 2015; Mulinari, 2007; Svensson, 2020).

In the Nordic countries both the hospitality industry and the hotel and restaurant employees' trade union have been working on the issue for many years, but it has proven difficult to resolve the problem (Borchorst & Agustin, 2017; Bråten, 2020; Svensson, 2019). According to many employees in the industry, incidents of sexual harassment from customers and guests are part of the workplace culture and thus not something that attracts attention. The persons who are subjected are expected to be able to handle the situation skilfully on their own (Bråten, 2019; Siverbo et al., 2018; Svensson, 2020).

In summary, research shows that sexual harassment from customers and guests commonly occurs in the hospitality industry. Young women in particular are subjected. Sexual harassment can even be normalised and included as part of the job, meaning that the young people who are in training or who work there are socialised into a vocational culture where sexual harassment is accepted. However, researchers have highlighted the role that vocational training can and should play in preparing future personnel in occupational fields where sexual harassment is common (Wood & Moylan, 2017). In all teaching, it is important to have knowledge of the students' prior knowledge and how they understand the teaching content. For vocational teachers planning teaching about sexual harassment, it can be essential to know how students understand and explain the sexual harassment that guests may subject staff to. With such knowledge, teachers and teaching can problematise these explanations and consider which of them that can be useful to counteract sexual harassment in students' future vocations. In this study we will investigate how students in training for vocations in the hospitality industry explain why some guests subject staff to sexual

harassment and through a discourse-theoretical perspective, we will explore how the young people's explanations is part of overarching discourses.

Method

The study is based on interview material from a project where we investigated how students in the Swedish upper secondary school Hotel and Tourism programme and Restaurant Management and Food programme perceive the sexual harassment that can occur by guests in the vocational areas that the students are training for. With few exceptions, the young people spoke about sexual harassment from guests as something that occurs often. After the students had stated that sexual harassment occurs, they were asked which guests subject staff to sexual harassment and which staff are subjected. According to the students' perceptions, male guests are the ones who engage in sexual harassment and female staff are the ones who are subjected. That men are the perpetrators and women are the victims is in line with the research in the field (Conroy, 2013; Latcheva, 2017; Tolman et al., 2016; Witkowska & Menckel, 2005). Later on, however, we saw in the material that the students have different explanations for why the guests engage in sexual harassment, and the students' explanations were something we wanted to investigate more closely.

The empirical material consists of focus group interviews with male and female students in the Hotel and Tourism programme and the Restaurant Management and Food programme. Focus group interviews were deemed to be a particularly appropriate method, because richer data is provided when the participants get to listen to each other's discussions (Wibeck, 2010). In total, there were 22 focus group interviews with 2–8 students in each group. In addition, two individual interviews were conducted; the reason that these two interviews were held individually is that all interviews were conducted in 2021, a time affected by various pandemic restrictions.

Before the interviews began, the students received oral and written information about the purpose and implementation of the study, and they had the opportunity to ask questions. They were informed that their participation was voluntary and could be discontinued at any time. We also explained that the material would be anonymised. The study uses fictitious names, and any details that could lead to identification have been changed or removed. The students were also informed that the material would only be used for scientific purposes.

A total of 69 students were interviewed, of which 34 attended the Restaurant Management and Food programme and 35 attended the Hotel and Tourism programme. Since most of the students, even those who attended the programme for the hotel industry, had experience working in food service, there is no distinction made in the analysis according to which programme the students

attended. The students were 18–20 years old and were in their third and final year. Fifty-two of the interviewed students identified themselves as girls, and 17 identified themselves as boys. No one identified oneself in any other way. The interviews took place in ten different municipalities in southern Sweden. They were conducted on the school premises or in a café near the school. The interviews were conducted in Swedish and took 1–2 hours. The interviews were recorded on a dictaphone, and they were transcribed within a week. The excerpts in this article were translated into English.

Before the topic of sexual harassment was raised in the interviews, general questions were asked about the students' career choices, their occupations, and customer service. Since we did not presuppose that the young people considered sexual harassment to be a problem in the hospitality industry, the subject of sexual harassment began with open questions about the informants' spontaneous thoughts and reflections regarding sexual harassment in the hospitality industry.

We carried out a thematic analysis of the empirical material (Bryman, 2008; Ryan & Bernard, 2003), which took place in several stages. To get an initial overview, we read through all interviews several times and took notes on the thoughts that were raised. Then the parts that were relevant in relation to the first research question were marked, i.e., what explanations could be deduced on the topic of some guests subjecting staff to sexual harassment. Then these explanations were coded in such a way that they were given a label capturing their content. The different codes and the excerpts that belonged to them were compared and brought together into preliminary themes. Finally, these preliminary themes were compared, which involved further adjustments (Rännstam & Wästerfors, 2015; Widerberg, 1997).

When the different themes or explanations were finished, we moved on to the second question, which involved linking the explanations to overall discourses. The concept of discourse is understood as a specific way of understanding and talking about the world, a way based on certain premises and thus carrying certain consequences. Discourses can also be defined as competing ways of describing reality (Bakhtin, 1999; Laclau & Mouffe, 2001). Jørgensen and Phillips (2000) define discourse as a socially constructed system of meaning that could have been different. The basic idea is that the way we see the world is always clearly dependent on the time and culture we live in. We need a certain measure of order to be able to orientate ourselves at all in our present existence, but at the same time the social aspect could have been constructed in another way. That things could have been constructed in other ways does not mean that the social aspect can be shaped in any kind of way in a given situation, because of the inertia of social constructions.

Laclau and Mouffe's (2001) discourse theory places the constitutive dimension of language at the very centre. They start from the post-structuralist assumption

that language is characterised by a fundamental instability, which means that concepts and discourses cannot be fixed once and for all. Even if there exists a physical and highly tangible reality, the question of how we should understand it is a matter of social construction. Laclau and Mouffe talk about discursive struggles where different ways of describing reality or explaining an event are opposed to each other. The discourses offer different explanations and thereby different solutions to problems. Certain descriptions and meanings gain ground, while alternatives are obscured or not even perceived as possibilities. The discourses that expand then become opposed to other discourses, which constitute reality in other ways, and which threaten to undermine the established discourses. Laclau and Mouffe speak of a quest for discursive hegemony. This means that discourses based on incorrect assumptions and explanations, for example about sexual harassment, risk gaining ground if they are not challenged (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001). We are thus not analysing the 'truthfulness' of students' talk about sexual harassment, but the explanations the students give in their talk and the discourses that these explanations are constituted within.

The different explanations that emerged from the empirical material and the talk surrounding them could each in turn be linked to overarching discourses. Several of these are historical discourses that have been repeated for a long time. Below we present the various student explanations and the discourse in which the explanation is constituted.

Results and analysis

Six different explanations for the sexual harassment crystallised, namely, that the sexual harassment is an issue linked to the generation, an issue of information, an issue of personality, an issue related to alcohol, an issue to do with male nature, and an issue of guests taking advantage of their status. The explanations will be discussed below.

An issue linked to the generation - discourse of modernity

An explanation that frequently arises when students discuss why some customers and guests subject staff to sexual harassment, is that older men still hold onto the outdated views of previous generations. The older men who subject staff to this type of harassment are described as old-fashioned and still living in past gender patterns. The younger males, on the other hand, are first and foremost portrayed as modern men who know that the behaviour is wrong. In the excerpt below, such description appears.

David: It is disrespectful toward those who work; you should be able to feel safe and secure in the workplace and not have to be subjected to such things. You get quite angry, even if the guys are younger, but it's not so often that you see that.

Lina: There should be zero tolerance, no matter how old you are. You should not behave like that.

David: We have seen when an older [man] has sat with some younger [men] and they have told the older one who has been doing it. 'Now shape up, stop'.

Interviewer: So you mean that it was guys who told the older man? They have said that? 'Now you have to shape up.'

David: Yes.

(David and Lina, Restaurant Management and Food programme)

In the excerpt above, Lina says that there should be zero tolerance; the age of the perpetrator should not matter. With this remark, she implies that the sexual harassment of older men is allowed or overlooked. David says that the men who engage in sexual harassment are mainly older male guests. The difference between different generations of men is thus emphasised here. Men who are younger rarely behave this way, according to David, rather the younger men's role is to keep after the older men and tell them when they misbehave. In contrast to what is usually expected, that older men look after and socialise younger men into different contexts, David describes the reverse situation. Thus based on this description, there is a big difference between the behaviour of younger men and that of older men when it comes to sexual harassment. David positions himself and his peers as modern, responsible, and mindful of gender equality, in contrast to the older men who behave in accordance with outdated norms of masculinity.

A similar way of looking at the matter is expressed when Erik, Per, and Ida discuss who are the ones that subject staff to sexual harassment. The problem is thought to be that the older men have not understood that such behaviour is no longer acceptable.

Erik: What I have heard is that it is mainly older men.

Per: It is often those who think they have the right to do that. In our age group, there are probably not many who do that at a restaurant. One knows that it's wrong, so it's more the older men.

Erik: But, so, we also grow up in a society where it's not okay, but I think they grew up in a society where it was okay to slap the waitress on the rump. It was more okay then.

Ida: Yes, it was a narrower worldview then and some still live in those old patterns.

(Erik, Per, and Ida, Restaurant Management and Food programme)

In the excerpt above, the students say that most young people know that these kinds of acts are not acceptable, while older men are accustomed to how it was before and then it was considered more normal 'to slap the waitress on the rump', as Erik puts it. In the past, because of his superior position, a male guest could act disrespectfully towards the waitress. At that time, it was considered acceptable that he, as a man and a guest, could take advantage of his superior position over a woman in a low-status service occupation. The customers and guests who subject staff to sexual harassment are first and foremost portrayed as

older men who are not keeping up with the times. Thus, sexual harassment appears to be much of an issue of the generation. The explanation that sexual harassment is an issue of the generation, also means that sexual harassment will decrease over time. According to this explanation, the issue does not really require any action taken. The older generation is thought to be incapable of changing their thinking, and the problem of sexual harassment seems to be solved eventually. Harassment will diminish in step with the older men, who continue to live in old behaviour patterns, but are becoming fewer and fewer.

The way of thinking described above is linked to what can be called *a discourse of modernity*. Modernity refers to the social order that replaced the pre-modern society, when people placed their trust in religion and folklore with regard to solving problems. The idea of progress is central within the concept of modernity. This concept contains a strong sense of development; modernity is associated with the positive advance of human beings and existence. Within the discourse of modernity, such things as positive renewal are often posed against the primitive way of thinking and habits of earlier times. A fundamental idea is that humans are rational, meaning that the future appears bright. According to this way of viewing, things develop for the better. The younger generation will behave better than the older generation (Lyon, 1998; Mouzakitis, 2017). Öhlund (1994) talks about a discourse of modernity, where young people are contrasted with the older generations who are associated with being backward. Young people are portrayed as representatives of progress, modern thinking, and positive development based solely upon their youth. This way of understanding sexual harassment is prominent in the above excerpt. Ida says that 'it was a narrower worldview then and some still live in those old patterns'. Per also emphasises that 'in our age group, there are probably not many who do that at a restaurant'. In doing so, they position themselves and peers of their generation as representatives of a modern and gender-equal mind-set that has left old gender patterns behind.

An issue of information – communication discourse

Another explanation for the occurrence of sexual harassment is that the person who subjects others does not know that the action is wrong. This explanatory model also links sexual harassment mainly with bygone times; however, there is a very big difference compared to the explanation above where the students express that sexual harassment is an issue linked to the generation. The difference is that according to this way of explaining sexual harassment, the solution to the problem does not come by itself. Instead, basically, the problems that arise can be solved through knowledge and communication. With this way of explaining, the harassment has stopped, because the right information has now reached the former perpetrators. Since the problem received a lot of attention, the fact spread

that sexual harassment is not allowed, reaching those who previously lacked the information.

Kalle, who is in training for work in hotels, does not believe that sexual harassment occurs in the hotel industry, nor in the city where he lives. He also assumes that sexual harassment is something that happens in other countries, but everyone is informed and enlightened in Sweden.

I can imagine that it happened before, but not within hotels directly, and not in Sweden. It certainly happened outside of Sweden. But it probably happens in films and maybe it happened a lot in the past, but as I said, now it has received attention and you know that of course it's wrong. Maybe there were some who didn't know before, but now they do. (Kalle, Hotel and Tourism programme)

In the excerpt, Kalle says that sexual harassment can happen in films, which further underscores how far sexual harassment is from Kalle's own reality. He also says that 'maybe it happened a lot in the past', a past when people were ignorant and did not understand that sexual harassment was wrong, in contrast with today's situation with informed and enlightened people. With this explanation, he positions himself as a representative of the idea of Swedes as equal and egalitarian and very far from the occurrence of this type of harassment (Brunila & Edström, 2013). A discourse of modernity can be perceived with this way of speaking, but at the same time, knowledge and information emerge as the key components of the explanation. Kalle explains that if sexual harassment happened in the past, it was because of a lack of information and knowledge. Those who subjected others to sexual harassment did not know that their actions were wrong. According to the logic of Kalle's description, those who know that a certain action is wrong will not do it. According to this way of looking at the situation, almost any problem can be solved with information. Even older people can therefore change as long as they receive information about right and wrong. In Kalle's explanation, power structures are completely absent.

The explanation above connects to what can be called a *communication discourse*. There is a particular kind of communication model that was prevalent some time ago. At the beginning of the 1900s, it was assumed that people exposed to advertising campaigns and informational messages simply absorbed the messages in a similar way as medicine is absorbed by the body. It was assumed to be easy to influence and change people's attitudes in intended ways. Researchers who describe this way of looking at communication call it an injection model. Communication was presented as a simple linear process, and people were assumed to react all in a similar way. Those reached by a message were supposed to be passive recipients; the effect was thus assumed to be immediate and direct (Fiske, 1990; Gripsrud, 2011).

An issue of personality - psychology discourse

A third explanation appearing in the material takes its point of departure in the one individual who subjects someone to sexual harassment. Central to this explanation is the individual's personality. When the young people explain sexual harassment with reference to the perpetrator's personality, it appears regrettable but unavoidable that women have to put up with sexual harassment if they choose to learn to work in the hospitality industry. When Henry and Lisa are asked about the role of their education programme in terms of teaching the students how to deal with the sexual harassment of guests, their response is pessimistic.

Interviewer: Can the education programme do something about preparing the future employees?

Henry: I think we talked about it during the first year actually. But it is more difficult for girls and that may mean that many do not choose this education programme, precisely because they know that they will have to put up with sexual harassment. It's too bad; of course it's supposed to be equal.

Interviewer: What did you think, Lisa?

Lisa: It's hard to say anything about the education and what they could do, even about the industry. I think it's a lot about the personality. Some people think that it's okay to grope and all.

(Henry and Lisa, Restaurant Management and Food programme)

Lisa is hesitant about whether the education and the industry could do anything about the sexual harassment towards female personnel from certain guests. She states that she believes it is a matter of the perpetrator's personality. 'Some people think that it's okay to grope.' This makes it appear that people who carry out sexual harassment cannot be influenced, and they are unchangeable in their nature. This is also similar to Henry's explanation. He says that the women who are learning to work in the restaurant industry 'will have to put up with' sexual harassment. The guests who harass female staff are thought to confront the women with a choice of only two options, either not to train for vocations in the industry or to put up with the guests' sexual harassment. This means that the guests' behaviour, which is perceived as fixed and unchangeable, requires that the female staff, on the contrary, is flexible and adaptable.

This explanation and its consequences are opposed to the belief in knowledge and information that the communication discourse in the section above contains. Understanding personality as innate and static is in line with how personality is commonly understood. The talk about personality is clearly linked to a *psychology discourse*. Within psychological research, however, there is a discussion about whether not only heredity but also the environment affects the individual's personality. At the same time, personality is more about character traits than specific behaviours. A certain character trait, such as having an extroverted disposition, does not mean that the person has to subject other people to sexual

harassment. In everyday talk, however, references to personality usually mean that the person referring to someone's personality to explain a behaviour also claims that both the personality and the behaviour are fixed and unchangeable due to biological and genetic roots (Dåderman & Kajonius, 2022; Edvardsson, 2002).

An issue related to alcohol – disclaimer discourse

The fourth explanation that the participants bring up is about the alcohol that is often served in the hospitality industry. The idea that sexual harassment is an issue related to alcohol means, just like the reference to the perpetrator's personality, that it is difficult to influence the perpetrator's behaviour. Alcohol can be used as an explanation for why sexual harassment occurs. Alexandra and some other girls discuss how a male guest who sexually harasses a woman can be perceived in different ways depending on his age. The conversation then turns to how even alcohol can affect how the male guest is perceived. In this context, Alexandra says that the serving of alcohol can explain the incidents of sexual harassment in the industry. Alexandra says that those who have drunk a lot of alcohol do not always mean to offend the staff.

Yes, but at the same time, you also understand that we serve alcohol, and when people drink a lot of alcohol, then they can't handle what they are doing. So sometimes maybe that was not the meaning or something. It is the alcohol that is affecting them. So we also knew what we were going to work with. Sometimes you have to... well, you can't tolerate it, but I mean ... that's the kind of thing that happens. (Alexandra, Restaurant Management and Food programme)

Alexandra says that she and other staff were aware of what it would be like when they chose occupations where alcohol is served. In this description, the responsibility is shifted from the perpetrators to those who are subjected. Even when Lars and Olof talk about who subjects staff to sexual harassment, alcohol comes up as an explanation. Lars believes that sexual harassment is unusual in the hotel industry, but that it can occur if a hotel guest has stayed several nights and gets drunk on the last night.

Lars: Yes, and then I can imagine, if it's a late evening, maybe the last day if you're away for several days, then maybe someone drinks a little extra and gets drunk. Then maybe that person would behave that way. You become someone else when you are drunk; you are not yourself.

Olof: Not really yourself.

Lars: No, not really yourself.

(Lars and Olof, Hotel and Tourism programme)

Just as in Alexandra's explanation, the responsibility disappears from the drunk person. Lars and Olof however do not place the responsibility on the person who is subjected. Instead, the responsibility seems to dissolve, because the drunken

perpetrator is not himself, but as expressed by Lars, 'becomes someone else'. Research has shown how alcohol can be used to let go of control and break norms, though not infrequently in a certain way. Alcohol makes it permissible to behave in a manner that in other situations would be considered unacceptable (Banister & Piacentini, 2008; Hayward & Dick Hobbs, 2007). Even in legal contexts, it happens that an offender who was drunk is considered less responsible for the sexual crime he has committed (Finch & Munro, 2007).

The explanation above can be linked to a *disclaimer discourse*. It is no coincidence that it is men who are relieved of responsibility and the responsibility instead is placed on women (Jeffner, 1998). The explanation is in line with the 'double standard' that characterises many judgments about sexual situations, meaning that the behaviour of men and that of women are judged according to completely different standards. A typical example is that a man and a woman who boast about their sexual escapades in a similar way will not be perceived in the same way. Similarly, it is also common for a man's sexual abuse to be assessed in a mitigating way, while the female victim is blamed (Manne, 2020; Thomas, 1959; cf. Finch & Munro, 2007). Manne (2018) talks about 'himpathy' to denote the 'sympathy' that men can often count on, for example, when they have subjected a woman to abuse.

An issue to do with male nature - gender dichotomous discourse

The fifth explanation that appears in the young people's talk is that men subject female staff to sexual harassment, because they are stronger and more primitive than women. When the student Thomas is asked about the reason for certain male guests taking the liberty to harass women, he refers to male nature, the Stone Age, and men's brains.

Interviewer: Mm, why do they think that, do you think? That they take this liberty?

Thomas: It's probably male nature really. Back all the way to the Stone Age. We have eoraptor brains, as they say!

(Thomas, Restaurant Management and Food programme)

Thomas expresses himself jokingly, but regardless of what he 'really' believes, his explanation is about male nature. In connection with this, he refers to the Stone Age and the brain of eoraptor dinosaurs. This evokes a stereotypic image of what it was like a long time ago. The Stone Age man is a stereotype that often symbolises a hyper-masculine man (Hall, 1997). This reference to the Stone Age man suggests an image of a strong, aggressive, well-built, and animal-like masculinity. The description is linked to ideas that men are more primitive than women in regard to sexual interest in 'the opposite sex', who are perceived precisely in an opposite way in this idea.

Also when My and Zoe are asked about the typical perpetrator and who engages in sexual harassment, the answer is directly men, without describing the typical perpetrator beyond that.

Interviewer: What do you think about the typical perpetrator – if you think about the type who does this kind of thing?

My: It's men! [they laugh a little]

Zoe: I think so, from my own experience, it's men who do that. There are of course women, but they are a significantly smaller percentage of those who do that.

My: Yes! And women often have... say, in the majority, women are more defenceless.

Interviewer: Mm, exactly.

Zoe: Women are weaker, they're smaller, they can't speak up... so we don't have a say in this in any way. You are made a bit lower by the men, so that is probably a little why women are subjected.

(My and Zoe, Hotel and Tourism programme)

In the excerpt above, My and Zoe are not explicitly talking about male nature, but they talk about women as weaker, more defenseless, and not being able to speak out. With these typical signs of femininity being highlighted, these descriptions contain masculine-coded ideas as implied contrasts. Men with opposite masculine characteristics that women must defend themselves against, are implied in this description. In the description men thus appear as both stronger and more aggressive. They do as they please at the expense of women. Similarly to Thomas, this explanation relates to the idea of male nature.

The above explanation is formulated within a traditional *gender-dichotomous discourse*, where women and men are described as two different kinds of people with opposite dispositions and character traits. Connell (2003) speaks about the principle of character dichotomy within this discourse to denote how women and men are bound together with opposite characteristics. In this discourse, the foundation is that men and women are mainly seen as different and therefore should be described as having different natures. Men's nature is described as rational, analytical, taciturn, confident, strong, aggressive, virile, and promiscuous. Women's nature is thereby assumed to be the exact opposite, i.e., irrational, emotional, talkative, impressionable, weak, passive, nurturing, and sexually loyal. Furthermore, men are said to belong in public life, in society and the public, while the woman's place is in the home, the household and the family. This gender dichotomous discourse gained wide attention when it was put forward by Jean-Jacques Rousseau in the 18th century, and it still has strong roots in everyday thinking. It is also called the gender-complementarian discourse, because Rousseau argued that it was wrong to regard women as men's equals. According to him, the woman should instead be seen as a complement to the man (Schiebinger, 1989).

An issue of guests taking advantage of their status – discourse of power

The material contains a sixth and last explanation in that some guests take advantage of their superior status. This is about guests who based on their position as a guest, a man or an elder, take advantage of the fact that they have more space in which to act than the young women who work in the hospitality industry. When Julia and Fanny discuss sexual harassment, they talk about male guests who objectify them and treat them disrespectfully. Julia describes that the men put her down. They look down on her, because the waitressing vocation has low status. Julia says that they think they are 'higher' than she is. She tells of an episode where a man called her by snapping his fingers and whistling at her.

Julia: There was an old man who came in; usually you go up to the cash register and you are given a table. And then we come and serve. But he comes in, sits down at a table, without having been given that table, and then he snaps his fingers [makes a whistling sound], looks at me and just, 'Come here sweetie!' [...]

Fanny: Yes, that is very disrespectful.

Julia: Yes, they put you down. Just because you work in this occupation and work serving tables, they think, 'I'm higher than you are'.

(Julia and Fanny, Restaurant Management and Food programme)

It is not just that the vocations the respondents train for are service occupations with low status (Mulinari, 2007); gender also plays a role in how women are treated in the hospitality industry. Susanne, who is in training to become a waitress and attends the Restaurant Management and Food programme, explains that male guests take up space, think they are 'above' female waitresses, and treat them in a way that male waiters don't have to experience. Taking up space and prioritising one's own needs are typical masculine-coded behaviours, which means that these male guests often do not attract significant attention, but rather pass as normal (Vera-Gray, 2018). Correspondingly, the female waitresses are expected to give way to men and submit to men's needs, which goes along with the vocational role of the waitress (Mulinari, 2007).

In addition, with regard to older male guests, the subordinate position of the young women can become more pronounced, something that makes it particularly difficult to deal with unwanted behaviour. In the excerpt below, Lova initially says that she does not understand how the older male guests think, when they treat young female staff in a flirtatious manner. After a moment's thought, however, it emerges that Lova perceives that older men can exploit their superior position and subject a young woman to sexual harassment based on a certainty that she will not dare to speak up.

Mo: It's like this in hotels; it can be old men looking at young girls. There are those who think they can kind of just, 'Hey!' [in a flirtatious way]

Lova: I don't understand how they think.

Interviewer: Do you think that as a young girl you are somehow extra...

Lova: Yes!

Moa: Yes!

Interviewer: You think so?

Lova: I think it's hard to contradict someone who is older. So it can be something at work; it can be small things. But it feels like they can do more than I can, even though I can tell the difference between right and wrong. So, oh my goodness! But about sexual harassment, they think: 'She's young - she won't dare say anything!'

(Moa and Lova, Hotel and Tourism programme)

In the excerpt above, both age and gender appear as factors that contribute to older men taking advantage of their status in relation to young girls. This explanation is tied to a *discourse of power*. Unlike the gender dichotomous discourse, the men's behaviour is not explained by the fact that women are defenseless by nature or that men have an 'eoraptor brain' so that they cannot act in any other way. In the present discourse, various social categories appear as significant, such as gender, age, and the status of the vocation, with the male guests consciously judging that the girls will not dare say anything, because they have less room to act due to prevailing power structures. Within the discourse of power, change is possible because society is permeated by power structures where discursive categories such as gender, age, ethnicity, and class are culturally created power orders that are not stable but can be challenged, influenced and changed. These categories interact with each other and appear in different ways in different contexts (Korczynski & Evans, 2013; Lykke, 2003; Vera-Gray, 2018).

Discussion and conclusions

Researchers have highlighted the role that vocational education and training can and should play when it comes to counteract and prepare future employees to handle sexual harassments in occupations where sexual harassment is likely to occur (Wood & Moylan, 2017). For teachers however, it is often essential to be aware of the students' prior knowledge and how they understand the teaching content. Therefore, for vocational teachers planning teaching about sexual harassment, it is important to know how students understand and explain the sexual harassment that guests may subject staff to. Above we have presented six different explanations that emerge when students preparing for vocations in the hospitality industry explain why some guests subject staff to sexual harassment. The students' explanations are that the sexual harassment is an issue linked to the generation, an issue of information, an issue of personality, an issue related to alcohol, an issue to do with male nature, and an issue of guests taking advantage of their status. Below we discuss how teachers can address and problematise these explanations in their teaching to prevent students being socialised into a vocational culture where sexual harassment is normalised.

The explanation that sexual harassment is an issue linked to the generation is connected to a discourse of modernity and implies that the problem of sexual harassment will solve itself, more or less, because young people do not engage in such things as much as the older generations. One problem with this explanation is that it is not supported by research in the field. Studies show, on the contrary, that sexual harassment is a fairly widespread problem among young people in Sweden as well as other countries (Mellgren et al., 2018; Stefansen et al., 2014; Stein & Taylor, 2023; Valik et al., 2023). The students' explanation that sexual harassment is an issue of information can be interpreted as part of a communication discourse, but this explanation is based on the assumption that such problems can be solved with active measures; the problem can simply be informed away. Changing unwanted behaviour through information measures, however, has proven difficult, which means that also this explanatory model is not very useful as a basis for teachers who want to address the issue of sexual harassment (Gripsrud, 2011).

Also, the talk about sexual harassment being an issue of personality, alcohol, and male nature can be tied to discourses where sexual harassment is connected to behaviour that is hard to change. The violations rather seem to be something that girls and women are forced to accept as more or less unavoidable. Such a fundamental idea runs counter to the policy valid in Swedish schools and workplaces, which, on the contrary, have an obligation to work toward ensuring that sexual harassment does not occur (Discrimination Act, 2008; UHR, 2019; Utbildningsdepartementet, 2021).

The only one of the students' explanations that is grounded in a way that can be used to counteract sexual harassment is that the violations are a matter of harassers taking advantage of their status. In contrast to the explanations and discourses that are based on ideas that the persons who subject staff to sexual harassment cannot act otherwise, this assumption instead is that the harassers consciously judge that the targets will not dare to speak up. Due to the prevailing power structures, the targets of sexual harassment have less space in which to act and will often not speak up. In addition to the fact that this assumption is supported by research (Bogart & Stein, 1987; Gettman & Gelfand, 2007; Good & Cooper, 2016; Hedlin & Klope, 2024; Korczynski & Evans, 2013; Yagil, 2008), it can also be met by the policy that applies to the Swedish education system.

We believe that the results of this study can serve as a useful basis for the task of vocational teachers to address the issue of sexual harassment. For teachers a pedagogical point can be to highlight all the explanations and discourses in order to together with the students examine the assumptions on which their explanations rests. Laclau and Mouffe (2001) speak of discursive struggles where different ways of describing existence and phenomena compete for space. Based on the discourse theoretical basic assumptions, each of the different ways of

explaining sexual harassment could gain ground and have an increased influence on how students in school view sexual harassment. By highlighting and discussing the explanations and discourses that have been reported in this article, teachers may have a way to increase the scope for approaches that have the possibility to contribute to positive change and counteract the occurrence of sexual harassment, while at the same time reduce the acceptance of the views that deem the violations to be inevitable.

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