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Talking past each other about sexual harassment: an exploration of frames for understanding

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ABSTRACT. Sexual harassment, a form of violence against women, occasions considerable debate but little communication. Using newspaper reports as texts, the authors identify four common media *frames* that not only raise different expectations about defining behavior as harassing and people as harassers, but also suggest different courses of action in response to the behavior. The *judicial frame* compares behaviors to legal policies or statutes and suggests reactive strategies. The *victim frame* emphasizes harm or injury to the victim(s), suggesting social change. The *initiator frame* defines the (mis)behavior as acceptable and implies that no change in behavior is necessary. The *social science frame*, structured around reliable and valid operational definitions, integrates the other approaches.

KEY WORDS: cognitive dissonance, critical discourse analysis, definitions, frame analysis, language and gender, language and violence, power, print media, public discourse, sexual harassment

In the past decade, the topic of sexual harassment has received considerable public discussion in the United States, partly because of extensive media coverage of the Thomas/Hill hearings, the Robert Packwood charges, the Navy Tailhook incidents, the Paula Jones allegations against Bill Clinton, and increasing reports of harassment in the public schools.¹ On television, in board rooms, in classes, and in everyday conversation, discussions of sexual harassment often end with disagreement. In college women's studies and criminal justice classes concerned with television and newspaper coverage, we noticed how much difficulty students had with discussions about sexual harassment. When the topic is sexual harassment, people often 'talk past' rather than 'talk to' each other, as if they were discussing different issues. Because of this, we investigated print media coverage of this topic in order to see what public discourse reveals about possible different perspectives on sexual harassment.

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RESEARCH PROCESS

Our original hypothesis was that different media reports about sexual harassment bring different frameworks of understanding, reflecting the frames characteristic of different audiences. We proposed that where there is no common socially defined way to discuss an issue, public discourse of that issue becomes difficult and confusing (Goffman, 1974; Tannen, 1993). In this study, we use the concept of *frame* to explore the reporting and analysis of allegations of sexual harassment in mainstream newspapers and news magazines in the United States. If different frames raise different questions and issues, it would not be surprising that they lead to different conclusions, and to miscommunication. In order to identify frames, we selected texts published from 1989 to 1995 in mainstream newspapers and news magazines including newspaper articles, editorials, and op-ed pieces from *The New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Virginian-Pilot*, *Newsweek*, *Time*, and *U.S. News and World Report*. During this period the Thomas/Hill hearings, Robert Packwood's case, and the US Navy's Tailhook incidents focused public discussion on issues of sexual harassment.²

The articles in the sample examined address questions of whether particular behaviors constitute sexual harassment and/or whether particular people are sexual harassers. We read and discussed news/editorial/commentary reports and then organized them into categories that represented consistent approaches to these questions. Using this process we identified different frames that structure the selection of which information is chosen to answer the questions. Our purpose was not to determine the frequency of various frames³ nor the biases of different text sources, but rather to identify and describe the frames most commonly used to discuss issues of sexual harassment.

Frames

The term *frame* has been used in a variety of disciplines, not always with the same meanings. We use the term in the tradition of Bateson (1972), Goffman (1974), Chafe (1977), and Tannen (1993). In discussing the literature on framing, Tannen (1993, 20–1) notes a variety of applications of framing and provides the following summary:

What unifies all these branches of research is the realization that people approach the world not as naive, blank-slate receptacles who take in stimuli as they exist in some independent or objective way, but rather as experienced and sophisticated veterans of perception who have stored their prior experiences as 'an organized mass,' and who see events and objects in the world in relation to each other and in relation to their prior experience. This prior experience or organized knowledge then takes the form of expectations about the world, and in the vast majority of cases, the world being a systematic place, confirms these expectations, saving the individual the trouble of figuring things out anew all the time.

Unlike analyses that assume a reality 'out there' reflected by language, this approach to frame analysis assumes that perception is influenced by individuals' experience and beliefs and shaped by the model of the world they have adopted. Tannen (1993: 21) explains that with framing 'one forms a general impression . . . and furnishes the details which one builds from prior knowledge'.

In the present research, we assume that if a journalist or columnist uses a frame, that frame creates expectations about what is relevant or irrelevant to discussions of sexual harassment. A frame is more specific than a *schema*, a more general term describing the worldview brought to an event; both the writer's frame and schema help construct the understanding of an event. Items that fit a particular frame or schema are noticed and remembered, but those that are inconsistent tend to be omitted, forgotten, or minimized; the perceiver may even add details on the basis of an existing worldview.

News reports and frames

Newspaper texts are particularly well suited for the purpose of identifying frames, since journalists often organize their writing around a simple story line told from a particular angle. Journalists' understanding of what readers want will often influence how the 'facts' in news stories are presented, despite the goals of most reporters to be objective. As Althieide and Snow (1979: 62) point out, taking events and organizing them within a frame is an essential element in news writing. 'Journalists begin with predefined notions about the *form* of their report which in turn leads them to shape the *content* of the message. The content, in turn, is often derived from a simple story line, organized around a *theme or angle*'.

Romero's (1986: 72) discussion of 'facts' as they are presented in news stories also reflects the framed nature of news presentations:

... for if facts are made of words, and words are soft and vague, and journalists control their softness or vagueness, then the journalists' freedom of coverage expands. Regardless of the events he [or she] attends, his [or her] flexibility in characterizing them remains. From the exercise of this freedom, and from such influences on his decisions as habit, ideology, and his understanding of what readers want, come the 'facts' that we conventionally accept as such in the press.

Editorial and commentary texts are even more clearly designed to reinforce a particular frame or point of view, sometimes explicitly referring to and arguing against other frames.

RESULTS

Based on our examination of the various texts, we identified four frames most commonly used to discuss the issue of sexual harassment in the data

we collected. We label these frames the: (1) judicial, (2) victim, (3) initiator, and (4) social science frames.

The judicial frame

Authors using the judicial frame compare behaviors to predetermined legal policies or statutes and assume judicial and legal understandings of guilt, responsibility, and blameworthiness, discussing the weight, factual basis and quality and quantity of evidence and noting the credibility of witnesses. In lawsuits, plaintiffs are required to demonstrate a perpetrator's intent to harm. In addition, intent and burden of proof are often issues when the judicial frame is being used.

The informal judicial frames used in the print media are generally imperfect personal understandings of more formal frames such as appellate court decisions and published sexual harassment policies and statutes, such as Section 703 of Title VII, which is the legal definition of sexual harassment most often used in the United States. The informal judicial frames create and reflect expectations that individuals have about behavior and punishment based on preconceptions about the legal system.

In news media reports using the judicial frame, the following issues characteristically occur: a listing of penalties or remedies, a matching of existing behavior to predetermined policy or statutes, and references to judicial procedures or to credibility, truth and fairness. Terms typically found in the judicial frame include: *grounds*, *dismiss*, *sufficiently proven*, *presumption*, *burden of proof*, *preponderance of evidence*, and other terms characteristic of legal proceedings.

For example, excerpts (1)–(4) all come from news articles and commentaries written within the judicial frame. These articles sometimes raise issues such as whether there is sufficient evidence to indicate that the reported behavior meets a legal definition of sexual harassment or whether the defendant acted with malice.

(1)

On Friday, the jury awarded Coughlin \$1.7 million in compensatory damages, ruling that the Hilton failed to provide adequate security at the convention. Because it also determined that [the] Hilton had acted with malice, the jury returned Monday to deliberate punitive damages, aimed at punishing a wrongdoer and deterring any such conduct in the future. (DeArmond, 1994: A1)

In the judicial frame, as in the courts, there is the assumption that an accused person is innocent until proven guilty, as in:

(2)

At a certain point it simply stopped. I believe that given this circumstance, the charge had not been sufficiently proven and that the presumption thus had to stay with Thomas. But I sure didn't believe we had found the truth. (Greenfield, 1991: 82)

There is also the assumption that the burden of proof lies with the plaintiff, as in:

(3)

That leaves the question, what kind of hearing: Who has the burden of proof, and how much? Must Professor Hill remove all doubt that her former boss, after unsuccessfully trying for a date, regaled her with unwanted sexual talk about pornographic movies and bizarre acts? Or must Judge Thomas utterly demolish *her* story? ('Finally, a Proper Hearing', 1991: A26)

Within the judicial frame, issues such as 'preponderance of evidence' presume the standards for 'truth' accepted in legal contexts.

(4)

In his 1993 book, *The Real Anita Hill*, reporter David Brock came to this conclusion: 'By any reasonable evidentiary standard, Clarence Thomas should be fully vindicated of Hill's charges'. In their just-published book, *Strange Justice*, reporters Jane Mayer and Jill Abramson come to the opposite conclusion: 'If Thomas did lie under oath, as the preponderance of evidence suggests, then his performance . . . raises fundamental questions'.

In the adversarial nature of things, the burden of proof lies with Hill and her defenders. (Kilpatrick, 1994)

When writers evoke the judicial frame, they sometimes imply that legal proceedings are relatively fair. In reference to the Thomas/Hill hearings, some columnists noted that the hearings were performances rather than judicial proceedings that might have led to 'the truth':

(5)

What's more, it is quite likely that without the benefit of further investigations, legal proceedings or psychiatric insights, the Senate Judiciary Committee will never learn who is telling the truth . . . Lawyers would look into 'every moment of this woman's life' if the case were being decided in court, Rothstein said. Thomas's relationships with other women would be scrutinized and the credibility of witnesses would be challenged. (Vobejda, 1991: A30)

Victim frame

The victim frame, in contrast to the judicial frame, focuses on the experience of harassment, with primary emphasis on the degree of harm or injury from the harassing behavior on the alleged victim (who is always assumed to be a victim in this frame). Within the victim frame, definitions of harassment are not limited to those fitting legal guidelines, but are based on the negative impact of the behavior on the recipients, regardless of the behavior's congruence to particular legal definitions.

Accounts using the victim frame frequently include sympathetic descriptions of victim(s), specific descriptions of behavior harmful to the victim(s), descriptions of the results of harmful behavior (including memories after a period of time), descriptions of power differentials between victim and perpetrator, reminders of the penalties to victims who resist the perpetrators, and reports of the victims' perceived lack of power to alter the reported situation. When the victim frame is used, descriptions of humiliating or demeaning behavior are often graphic:

(6)

Agent Power-Anderson said that in separate incidents, Mr. Carpenter had massaged her shoulders, had kissed her on the back of the neck and had torn her dress while forcing his hand onto her upper thigh. ('Sex-Harassment Suit', 1994: A23)

(7)

Phoebe Ellsworth still remembers the night in 1973 when a drunken professor showed up at her door. As a senior faculty member at Yale, the man held tremendous power over whether Ellsworth, a young assistant professor, would be granted a permanent appointment.

'He wanted me to sleep with him and reminded me that tenure time was coming,' said Ellsworth, 50, a professor of law and psychology at the University of Michigan. ('One of Seven College-Faculty Women' 1994: A4)

When the victim frame is used, the focus is not on whether or not the legal definition has been met, if there had been evil intent, or even if the perpetrator had understood the effect of the behavior. The emphasis is on how the behavior has harmed the victim.

(8)

'Before this sexual harassment I was a successful attorney with an impeccable reputation,' she told the committee, 'and now I am regarded as a "troublemaker" with no future in the Navy'. ('Women Warriors', 1994: 20)

When the victim frame is assumed, the question of whether or not sexual harassment has taken place rarely arises; the injustice of the situation is simply assumed to be self-evident. The implied questions suggested by the victim frame are more likely to be 'Will this situation be changed?' or 'Will these wrongs be redressed?'. News stories or editorials commenting on behavior affecting young children often adopt the victim frame:

(9)

The leers and lurid comments started as soon as Cheltzie Henz left home in the morning—teasing, foul language, lewd remarks aimed at her and at her friends. It continued throughout the day: jokes about body parts, taunts and demands for sexual acts. It sounds like a textbook case of sexual harassment. But consider this: Chelzie Hentz was 6 years old ('Girls Sick of Harassment' 1993).

The victim frame is not limited to the media, of course. Some academic definitions of harassment such as Kramarae's (1992) description of verbal harassment and Gardner's (1981) and Kissling's (1991) of street harassment adopt the victim frame. Even the courts sometimes adopt the victim frame. In the 1993 *Harris v. Forklift Systems, Inc.* (510 US—, 126 L Ed 2nd 295), the Supreme Court adopted what is essentially a victim frame as it attempted to find a middle ground between 'tangible psychological injury' and 'merely offensive behavior' in defining what constitutes sexual harassment and the conditions under which it occurs. In doing so, the Court concentrated on 'an environment that a reasonable person would find hostile'. To quote the court:

(10)

... moreover, even without regard to these tangible effects, the very fact that the discriminatory conduct was so severe or pervasive that it created a work environment abusive to employees because of their race, gender or national origin offends Title VII's broad rule of workplace equality ... so long as the environment would reasonably be perceived and is perceived, as hostile or abusive, there is no need for it to be psychologically injurious. (*New York Times* summary of *Harris v. Forklift*)

The initiator frame

In contrast to the victim frame, the initiator frame focuses on the behavior of the alleged perpetrator rather than on damage to the alleged victim, redefining the reported behavior as something other than harassment. In the initiator frame, responsibility for the initiator's behavior is shifted to the recipient ('she misunderstood'), and justifications for the behavior are provided ('boys will be boys'). The effect of the behavior on the recipient is minimized, and the recipient's perception is contrasted to that of more reasonable people who would have foreseen or tolerated the behavior and exercised their choices. In most cases, evidence is presented that redefines the initiator in socially acceptable ways, including evidence showing that the initiator is admirable in other arenas (such as having a fine record of service). In many cases, there is the implication that an alleged victim is using the claims of sexual harassment as a strategy for ruining the career of a prominent political figure or for advancing some cause. At best, the recipient is portrayed as a pawn who is being manipulated by others in a political power game.

Unlike those using the legal frame (where the issues include whether or not the behavior even occurred), those using the initiator frame often admit the behavior in question. However, the behavior is redefined as merely a case of misunderstanding or misperception. The issues emphasized in this frame are whether or not the initiator is *really* a harasser and whether or not the initiator's behavior was, in fact, harmful to the victim(s).

For example, when discussing alleged harassment by Senator Bob Packwood, Richard Cohen (1993) compares him to a childhood friend, Jeff, who 'was a geek'. Cohen claims that 'there has to be a difference between sexual harassment, which is plenty serious, and being a geek' and says:

(11)

Let's examine one incident. It involves a reporter for *The Oregonian*, the senator's hometown newspaper. The reporter said that after interviewing Packwood and sharing a glass of wine with him in his office, he suddenly kissed her on the lips. Now what are we to make of this? In this case, the reporter had at least as much power as Packwood did. After all, he was running for re-election at the time. (Cohen, 1993)

Cohen concludes that Packwood's 'foisting himself—in sudden, Jeff-style—on a number of women over the years', was not harassment, but merely inept, geek behavior.

Blaming the recipients is common in commentaries about the Packwood accusations, and the tone of articles written using the initiator frame can be quite cynical. Journalists speculate about the motives of the alleged victims, suggesting that charges have been brought or publicized for political or financial reasons and pointing out that such politically motivated behavior is nothing new. For example:

(12)

In l'affaire Packwood, justice, democracy and honest government are not really at stake. What's at stake is political currency. Packwood's fall won't leave much of an ethical chasm in the U.S. Senate. Yet there's little glee in joining the throng to push him over, either, given the transparent motives of his accusers. (Redden, 1994: C3)

Quite often questions are raised in the initiator frame about why alleged victims didn't act differently or object more vigorously to the behavior of the initiator or, at the very least, report it. Within the initiator frame, political ill will seems to be the *only* possible motive.

(13)

What is noteworthy is the growing clamor for Senator Packwood's resignation—mainly from Democrats, the Senator's home state adversaries and other politically interested parties ... Moral fervor notwithstanding, the odor of a political hit is heavy in the air. How else can one explain the selectivity of the outrage in these matters? ('The harassment card', 1992)

Even when discussing sexual harassment policy, motives can be suspect. In making fun of the sexual harassment policy of Antioch College, a policy that requires that all sexual contact and conduct between any two people to be done with verbal consent, George Will belittles the problem of sexual violence on campuses and decides that Antioch College's 'extreme' policy serves the interests of the 'caring professions'. He writes:

(14)

The rules, and the assumption of 'crisis' that they reflect, give the 'caring professions,' as they like to be called, lots of victims to care for. These professionals include counselors, 'gender equity' bureaucrats, sensitivity 'facilitators' who conduct 'safe sex workshops,' and others. (Will, 1993: 92)

In the initiator's frame, criticism of alleged victim(s) can be quite severe. In a review of David Brock's book *The Real Anita Hill*, the reviewer reports the following:

(15)

In later chapters, Brock's portrait of Hill becomes increasingly diabolic. Relying frequently on anonymous sources, he describes her at Oklahoma State University as obsessed by racial and gender grievances. He repeats the claim by two of Hill's former students that she returned papers to them in which they found her pubic hair sprinkled among the pages. The story is useful for demonizing Hill and fun for Brock to tell in his main text. Perhaps too much fun. Only in a footnote buried in the back does he acknowledge that the whole tale may have been a racist joke about the only black woman on the faculty. (Lacayo, 1993: 72)

In contrast to harsh criticism of the alleged victims, journalists writing in the initiator frame often include favorable descriptions of the alleged perpetrator, as in a news story about a theology professor accused of sexual harassment: he was tenured, he had taught at a seminary for more than eight years, he had written an apology to the woman who complained about him, and he had not named the victim in a lawsuit he had filed against the seminary. The news story begins:

(16)

Theology professor Graydon Snyder told the same ancient tale to students for 34 years to illustrate a difference between Judaism and Christianity: A roofer falls on a woman and they accidentally have sex. He used the story, that is, until one student complained. She was offended, not enlightened. ('Professor sues', 1994: A2)

The omissions in this story are worth noting. There are no statements from the staff of the seminary, where a sexual harassment task force had found Professor Snyder guilty of harassment, placed him on probation, ordered him to get therapy, and advised him not to be alone with students or staff members. The only questionable behavior mentioned in the news story was the incident of the 'ancient tale', suggesting either that the faculty of this seminary is quite capricious or that some relevant information had been omitted.

No initiator could wish for a more flattering frame than the one Senator Danforth used for Clarence Thomas:

(17)

'In all but the physical sense, the person I saw ... was dead,' Danforth writes of Thomas. But by the time Thomas testified and denied all of Hill's charges, Danforth says, 'Clarence had risen.' (Mauro, 1994)

The question frequently asked when the initiator frame is assumed, 'Why didn't she do something?', defines the coping behavior of recipients as either manipulation or political opportunism. By pretending that women have all the opportunities and power of men, those using the initiator's frame can find no 'reasonable' explanation for accusations of sexual harassment other than political opportunism. The women making accusations must be manipulative, ambitious, politically motivated or, at best, the tools of cynical, ambitious politicians.

When the initiator's frame is used, there is no way to represent the Stockholm Syndrome (survivor behavior), the result of long-term victimization (Graham et al., 1988). Because of powerlessness and learned helplessness, victims of terrorists, battered women and the harassed accept components of the initiator's frame and blame themselves for the perpetrators' behaviors. For example, Kati Marton's (1991) report of how she fended off her boss, who took her to a hotel after she had been awarded the Peabody Award, is a familiar story to many working women, but would be unintelligible within the initiator's frame:

(18)

Irrational feelings of guilt regarding my conduct began to nag at me. Had I given the wrong signals? He seemed such a nice, square sort of family man. And why had I not walked out on him? The minute a woman decides to stay and stay silent, in her own mind at least, she loses the moral edge. Like thousands of women in newsrooms, offices and factories, I had swapped the moral edge for job security. I did not think I had the luxury of choice in the matter. (Marton, 1991: 8)

The Stockholm Syndrome is inconsistent with the initiator's frame because of the questionable assumption that women have as much freedom of choice, as many opportunities, and as much potential earning power as men. If these assumptions were true, then the behavior of women who remain in situations where they are harassed would indeed be inexplicable. However, in frames that acknowledge that women are often confined to low-paying jobs, have limited choices, and feel they will be penalized if they complain, the willingness of some women to tolerate sexual harassment makes more sense.

Issues similar to those raised by the initiator's frame have been widely discussed in the literature on excuses and justifications for violence against women (Ptacek, 1988; Scully and Marolla, 1984). As Scully and Marolla (1984) show, even convicted and admitted rapists and murderers attempt to redefine themselves with 'nice-guy' images. The initiator frame defends the current power structure in society and labels any threats to this as politically motivated. As Henley and Kramarae (1991), Williams (1981) and many others have noted, the making of public definitions and classifications is the prerogative of those in power and 'is a primal political act' (Williams, 1981: 24).

The social science frame

The fourth major frame occurring in the print media is the social science frame. In this frame, the point of view is that of 'objective' observer rather than victim, initiator, or judge; authors of newspaper articles using the social science frame tend to remain outside the specifics of particular cases and explore the issue of sexual harassment in a more general and abstract way. The first characteristic of articles in this frame is that they tend to focus on the problem of finding a shared definition of sexual harassment.

(19)

A lot of people are not sure what constitutes sexual harassment. Is it someone repeatedly looking at you in a suggestive way or is it someone making comments? (Tipton, 1991)

The definitional struggle reflected in the social science frame is further refined in discussions of the contextual nature of definitions, a discussion commonly found in academic writing on sexual harassment. For example, in an article on cross-cultural and cross-linguistic perspectives on sexual harassment in university settings, Tyler and Boxer (1996) identify particular

teacher–student interactions that were judged to be appropriate by members of some cultures, but defined as sexual harassment by those from other cultures. Similarly, when used in the print media, stories using the social science frame are often structured around the problems and difficulties of establishing operational definitions of sexual harassment in different situations (such as businesses or universities) and times (childhood or adulthood).

(20)

Once more, America has been plunged into a national seminar on sexual harassment, a migraine issue full of subjectivity, gray areas and her-word-against-his contentions. (Dowd, 1994: 12)

(21)

'Law firms' policies used to be a one-paragraph boilerplate statement in a handbook no one read saying that "sexual harassment won't be tolerated at this firm," said Freada Klein, president of Klein Associates, a Boston-based consulting company that helps employers deal with workplace bias. 'That is starting to give way to detailed statements, offering examples of what constitutes sexual harassment and many options for dealing with it.' (Slade, 1994: A19)

Another component of the social science frame is the reporting of social science research on sexual harassment. References to prevalence (how widespread the experience), and incidence (how frequently the behavior occurs) are characteristic of this frame. Newspaper and magazine articles written in this frame often report data from current research studies about sexual harassment and cite statistics from those studies:

(22)

Last year the US Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) received 5,694 sexual-harassment complaints. In one of many surveys taken by various groups during the last 10 days, the National Association of Female Executives found that 77 percent of women executives queried consider it a problem in the workplace. More than half reported that it had happened to them, but most said they never reported it. In an ABC News/*Washington Post* poll last week, 5 percent of the men polled said they had been sexually harassed. (Foster, 1991)

References to a lack of consensus about whether specific behaviors are or are not sexual harassment are common in the social science frame. Newspaper articles written in the social science frame often report the results of surveys, sometimes noting that definitions of sexual harassment change over time. Quote (21) continues with reports of surveys on the increase in both the establishment and enforcement of sexual harassment policies in law offices.

(23)

Two months ago, for example, 73 percent of the lawyers responding to a survey by *The National Law Journal* said the firms where they worked had adopted detailed sexual harassment policies, almost double the 38 percent who so reported in a survey by the publication four years earlier. (Slade, 1994: A19)

Although behaviors such as touching and grabbing may be reported in the social science frame as well as in the victim frame, the tone in the social science frame is different, with more emphasis on operational definitions and less on damaging effects.

(24)

A nationwide survey of high school and junior high students released last month found that a high number of girls and boys said that they had been grabbed, groped and subjected to sexually explicit put-downs. The study, conducted by Louis Harris & Associates for the American Association of University Women Educational Foundation, found that more than two-thirds of girls and 42 percent of boys reported being touched, grabbed or pinched on school grounds. (Henneberger, 1993)

The social science frame reflects and reports on issues being raised in academic discourse, where a consensus operational definition of sexual harassment is still elusive. In 1979, Catherine MacKinnon wrote that, 'Until 1976, lacking a term to express it, sexual harassment was literally unspeakable, which made a generalized, shared and social definition of it inaccessible' (p. 27). As Fitzgerald (1987: 21) points out, this still remains true. Empirical studies, like that of Till (1980) have made it clear that a definition of sexual harassment must specify a continuum of behaviors rather than clear-cut categories. These studies show that multiple variables influence the judgements about sexual harassment, including sex of rater, status of initiator, explicitness of behavior, degree of connection to a work situation, and cultural context (Fitzgerald, 1987: 26; Tyler and Boxer 1996).

Unlike the three previous frames, which usually reflect a single point of view, the social science frame incorporates multiple perspectives to establish a shared definition:

(25)

The nation's new sensitivity to sexual harassment is stirring men to rethink the protocols of working with women . . . Some rules now seem clear, said more than three dozen men interviewed here recently, including business owners, laborers, clerks and students preparing to join the work force. Female co-workers are not to be propositioned, pinched or fondled. (Kilborn, 1991)

Responding to an earlier version of this paper, Chamallas (1994: 2) observed that the frames we have identified occur not only in the media, but also in the courtroom. The plaintiff's attorney will probably use the victim frame and the defense attorney the initiator frame, but the social science frame, in many cases, 'will be interjected into the lawsuit by an expert witness . . . who will attempt to educate the court and jury on the dynamics of sexual harassment, drawing upon empirical studies and surveys'. Judges and jurors will then have to apply the judicial frame in making decisions. In a similar way, when the social science frame is used by the media it suggests that multiple perspectives must be considered in issues of sexual harassment.

Consistency of frames

Journalists, particularly columnists, are aware consciously or unconsciously of the importance of framing. In writing about the Thomas/Hill hearings, Greenfield (1991: 82) comments that 'we [the public] all were free to move with our own principal biases, interests, worries' and 'we could judge the proceedings from any framework we wished'. Because of this awareness of the role of framing, columnists writing in one frame sometimes refer to another frame as a rhetorical device. We originally considered identifying these as a 'rhetorical frame', but decided against this because of the small number of examples and the fact that this particular frame was found only in opinion columns and never in news stories. These rhetorical commentators explicitly identify the strategic use of frames by those with specific agendas.

For example, writing from the victim frame, Ehrenreich mocks the initiator's frame:

(26)

One can just see them sitting there, when Hill's charges first came to their attention, stroking their chins and clearing their throats. Well, he didn't actually touch her. (Harrumph, harrumph.) She waited all this time. (Shifting in seats.) She seems to have kept in touch with him for years afterward. (Rolling of eyes.) Pretty vague anyway, this sex-harassment business: one woman's 'harassment' could be another one's turn-on. (Snickers and elbowings, man to man.) (Ehrenreich, 1991: 104)

In the opening sentences of a column about the Thomas/Hill case, Trilling (1994) at first seems to be using the victim frame:

(27)

It is difficult to think about the issue of sexual harassment without recalling my mother's account of her first job in America. At 18 she had come to this country alone, from Poland. With no knowledge of English, but a good figure, she had become a model in the New York City garment district. But she soon wearied of having to fend off the advances of the male buyers. She gave up modeling to become a milliner's apprentice. There was no note of insult or injury in my mother's report of this experience. She even seems to have been mildly flattered by the overtures that had been made to her. But she had found them a nuisance to handle.

However, Trilling suddenly changes to the initiator's frame and goes on to compare Anita Hill unfavorably to her mother:

(28)

Charming in speech and manner, backed by parents of incontestable respectability, Miss Hill was the very image of maidenly modesty. Yet the forthrightness with which she repeated to the Committee and to an audience of untold millions of television listeners Judge Thomas's dirty jokes in all their tasteless detail would have done credit to a truck driver. (Trilling, 1994: 12)

Only within the initiator's frame would lack of modesty be considered a more serious offense than the behavior reported by Anita Hill.

In a column discussing Senator Bob Packwood's attempts at 'spin

doctoring', Masters (1994) evokes the judicial, victim, and initiator's frames and even quotes Packwood as recognizing perspectives other than his own: 'I realize now that you have got to view things the way the woman views them. Not the way you view them' (Masters, 1994: C9). In another column recognizing how different frames are used for different purposes, Goodman (1992: C8) notes that Clarence Thomas used the word 'lynching' in 'a calculated way', presumably to evoke the victim frame on his own behalf. A third column not only refers to different frames, but notes that in public discourse the predominant frames used to discuss an issue can change over time.

(29)

From this day forth, the mere mention of Anita Hill's name will conjure an authentic moment, one of those flashes of reality that are seared in the collective consciousness. Brought immediately to mind by a name or place, such instances are rare. Typically, the conditions they connote have long plagued a minority. Then, as epiphanies normally experience through visual images, they are apprehended by the majority. And then, when an expression of national outrage follows, the attendant demands for redress carry the day. (Kramer 1991: 46)

These few 'rhetorical' commentaries suggest that although the general public may not be consciously aware of the different frames, many columnists are.

The use of more than one frame in the news articles collected for this study was rare. Although several columnists did make reference to a second frame, no examples were found of news stories where this occurred. In almost all the articles, reporters established one frame and did not change, choosing their 'facts' to reinforce the particular point of view.

Implications for action

Each of the identified frames has different implications for how best to deal with the problem of sexual harassment. The judicial frame suggests essentially reactive strategies, that is, after-the-fact legal actions (civil or criminal) and the application of appropriate sanctions. Intervention takes place only when a legally defined standard of proof has been met. Prevention would result only from the deterrence effects of applied sanctions.

The initiator frame leads to inaction with regard to sexual harassment. Because of the definition of the admitted behaviors of instigators in socially acceptable terms and the justification of such behaviors, action usually shifts from the instigator to the target of harassment; the alleged victim is urged to either be more accepting and understanding or to remove herself from the situation.

The victim frame leads to an emphasis on prevention rather than punishment. With an emphasis on the outcome of problem behaviors rather than legal culpability, the focus of action shifts to increasing personal and social understanding and responsibility related to behaviors and conditions that foster sexual harassment.

The social science frame is the most integrative approach. It tends to bring together the different frames, allowing for changes in attitudes, knowledge, and legal grounds in search of what MacKinnon (1979) seeks, a 'generalized social definition'.

CONCLUSIONS

Linguists have criticized frame analysis in other contexts (such as artificial intelligence and discourse analysis) because, in theory, an infinite number of frames is possible. In theory, this is also possible for the print media; in fact, in the data collected for this study, most articles and columns fit one of the four frames described or, as in examples 25–28, made reference to the different frames. Our preliminary investigation of print-media reports of sexual harassment reveals only four major identifiable frames, each suggesting different questions. In the judicial frame the question is whether there is sufficient evidence to indicate that some alleged behavior fits pre-determined standards. In the victim frame the question is usually how much harm the victim has suffered. In the initiator frame, the question is often: 'Does the initiator merit the label *harasser* or is there another, more socially acceptable explanation?'. In the social science frame the question is often: 'What is a valid and reliable definition of sexual harassment?'. In response to these different questions, journalists bring different 'facts' and standards of judgment.

As Robert Packwood (1994) knows all too well, the media 'play a significant role' in the debate on sexual harassment: 'the media are largely responsible for the way these allegations are characterized, no matter who is being accused' (Packwood, 1994: A10). We suspect that the media influence both public attitudes and public debate; and the use of different conflicting frames by the media probably adds to public confusion about sexual harassment.

When reader and writer do not share the same frame, a reader may misunderstand or reject a writer's evidence and opinions. Readers are often selective, reading only what reinforces already-held opinions and rejecting what is contrary to existing beliefs. The use of certain frames may hinder discussion by hardening positions on the issues at hand rather than facilitating communication between people holding diverse views. (See Ball-Rokeach and Cantor, 1988 for discussions of media utilization and selectivity research.)

When a person's schema, or worldview, is challenged with 'irrelevant' information (i.e. information relevant to a different frame or schema), 'cognitive dissonance' and/or a 'closed mind' may be the result. Schaff (1984) defines *cognitive dissonance* and offers a summary of some of the research about it. He says:

I mean the experimentally verified fact that in conflict situations, if the opinions and attitudes (in the sense of readiness to act) of a human being concerning certain issues, primarily social ones, are at variance with the

realities of life and if neither those realities can be brought into agreement with the said opinions nor those opinions modified without ruining the ideology of their carrier, then a psychological defense mechanism is put into operation to make one's mind immune against inconvenient information. This leads to paradoxical situations, which, however, do occur often in practice, in which certain knowledge that has apparently been assimilated intellectually is emotionally blocked and practically erased from one's consciousness because it is inconvenient. (Schaff, 1984: 94)

This cognitive dissonance can lead to a 'closed mind' if the listener is unaware of being locked into a particular frame. Schaff explains:

Such situations are in a sense schizophrenic because a given person at the same time knows something and does not know it, which, while it must appear strange, often does occur in practice. This in turn breeds specific forms of dogmatism and the phenomenon of 'closed mind,' deaf to all arguments. (Schaff, 1984, 94)

An overt identification of frames and schemata is one way for those who wish to break through dogmatism and closed minds and enhance communication, rather than simply argue for a particular point of view. When those who disagree about an issue recognize that they are assuming different frames, this recognition can help them communicate better. This was demonstrated when one of the authors described the four frames in a course on violence against women. After a discussion of the frames, hostility between those with different viewpoints was reduced, and the quality of student dialogue dramatically improved because students were able to identify and offer alternatives to the frames being evoked. Once students recognized the framed sources of differing perspectives, they were able to discuss issues in more integrative ways.

Perhaps framing can be used not only for issues of sexual harassment, but also for other issues of violence against women, children, and ethnic minorities so that there can be more 'talking with' and less 'talking past' each other. The public discussion of an issue like sexual harassment is related to more a general continuum of attitudes regarding violence (see Stanko, 1985). There are striking parallels between the frames used in the media to discuss sexual harassment and the general literature on linguistic processes of definition, redefinition and rationalization utilized by perpetrators of violence against women more generally, as shown by Scully and Marola (1984) for rapists and by Ptacek (1988) for wife batterers. Different frames consider different evidence and provide different kinds of institutional support for socially approved language related to violence. For example, the judicial frame recognizes only violence that is institutionally sanctioned, but the victim frame draws from and provides support for feminist analysis of a more general pattern of violence, and validates and gives voice to women's experience of violence (see Bart and Moran, 1993). We hope that identifying and describing predominant frames and making explicit the expectations they create will help clarify public discourse not only on sexual harassment, but on other issues as well.

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NOTES

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1. Some readers may not be familiar with some of these events, all of which were widely discussed by the US media. During the US Senate hearings to confirm Clarence Thomas to the Supreme Court, Anita Hill, who had worked with Thomas, alleged that he had sexually harassed her. Robert Packwood is a former US senator who was accused of sexual harassment over an extended period by a number of different women (including employees), and was investigated for this behavior by the Senate Ethics Committee. He resigned from the US Senate under pressure from his colleagues. At a convention of Navy pilots, the Tailhook Convention held at a Hilton hotel, a number of women, including Paula Coughlin, accused the pilots of sexual assault and harassment. Paula Jones claims that while Bill Clinton was governor of Arkansas, he made crude sexual advances to her in a Little Rock hotel room.
2. Data were collected by a computerized search using the Pro-Quest database focused on *sexual harassment*, *Clarence Thomas*, *Anita Hill*, and *Robert Packwood* as key terms. Articles and editorials listed by title in the text and bibliography were published with no author listed.
3. Of the 86 pieces examined, 26 were written in the judicial frame, 23 in the victim frame, 11 in the initiator frame, and 14 in the social science frame. There were 11 articles that we classified as 'rhetorical'. These refer overtly to the use of frames in order to put a 'spin' on events; five of these were reports of Robert Packwood's attempts to control the damage caused by sexual harassment accusations. Only two of the 86 articles made no reference to the frames we discuss.

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