Is There Nothing to be Done? Sexual Harassment, Emotional Empathy, and the Role of Men

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As an ethics professor, I more than occasionally am asked if I think ethics can "really" be taught. One of the assumptions behind this question is that once a student gets to college, grad school, or the workplace, his/her moral compass is pretty well fixed and there's probably nothing either I or anyone else can do to change whatever positions he/she holds. While understanding that being compelled to take a class aimed at the critical examination of one's moral reasoning can result in some defensive behavior, nonetheless the position that "people don't change" always strikes me as odd. It usually only takes a few questions (or a few examples from my own moral life) to surface topics where the inquisitor him or herself has changed his or her mind. There is a genesis to our moral perspectives and positions in both nature and nurture, and it is an admirable quality of human nature that we can employ both reason and emotion to change our minds about things.

I want to look at sexual misconduct, generally, and sexual harassment, specifically, to illustrate, since, along with money, sex gets more people into trouble at work than any other factors combined. Unwelcome remarks, inappropriate touching, and quid pro quo propositions—even in this #MeToo era—proliferate. The costs of that proliferation are enormous, both financially and in terms of individual health and the health of a business, which is why no business leader can afford to ignore it. Estimates range from between $18,000 to over $22,000 for every case that is brought to light and litigated in one way or the other, and the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), in FY 2017, took in $46.3 million in monetary benefits for employees who brought sexual harassment charges (and keep in mind the EEOC litigates only a handful of the cases it investigates). While reporting of incidences has increased, nonetheless the consensus of studies seems to suggest that questionable behavior has increased as well.[i] So if I'm right, and people can change their thoughts and behaviors around ethical issues (the presumption is "change for the better such that over time less physical, emotional and financial harm is done"), why is it that sexual harassment has proven to be so intractable, so pervasive, and so resistant to training, to threats, to pleas, to even the loss of career and reputation?

By way of answering, allow me to go back in time. When I first began teaching business ethics courses at Seidman, especially at the MBA level (2006), my approach to the issue of sexual harassment and misconduct was (a) we need to acknowledge it, and (b) students need to know the definitions, terms, relevant court cases, and prohibitions that surround it. It was a largely intellectual exercise, which is what ethics professors often defer to since we do not wish to be accused of foisting our views on unsuspecting students. Here's the information and here are some reasoning tools—now you decide.

But, from the start, among the few women in those early classes, there was a perhaps surprising willingness—however tentative, however difficult—to tell the rest of us there was much more to this issue than statistics and court rulings. A 28 year-old engineer, one of two women in an early class, talked of how she had to develop a "thick skin" and "faux sense of humor" to deal with the daily barrage of remarks, often along the lines of "you're too attractive to do this, you're built for other things…." She spoke of what it took to get up every day to go to a job she loved in an environment she loathed. A would-be Finance major talked of how she finally, tearfully, switched to Accounting simply because "I really couldn't imagine a life trying either to be one of the boys on one hand, or fending them off on the other." I don't have the space here to recount every story I and the others heard just from those working here in West Michigan—they would easily fill a book. But what did dawn on me, finally, was that most of the women in my classes and those I worked with in the businesses where I was consulting, were having a qualitatively different life experience at work than men. It was a far worse, more difficult, and more psychologically draining and damaging life in ways neither I nor the other men in the room had ever likely appreciated or fully understood. After a while, I started paying more attention to the expressions on the faces of the men in the room as the women talked. They ran to what was to become a predictable gamut: bewilderment, consternation, discomfort, disbelief, maybe some hint of embarrassment. Listening to their female peers recount various types and degrees of unwelcome attention, touching, and remarks over the course of their schooling or careers, many of the men were left looking as if they simply wanted this particular part of the class to be over with. *They're not talking about me. Well, it's a lot better for them than it used to be. Maybe they just need to be a little tougher and not so sensitive*…turned out to be not atypical thoughts I heard when debriefing with the men in class (this is not to discount those handful of men in any setting who take the stories they are hearing seriously; yet, in our experience, those willing and able to intervene is a percentage that mirrors what one finds in national studies—maybe 17% or so).[ii]

When debriefing with the women, whether they've told their stories or not, (the number here also reflects the national averages of 40-80% of women who recall having been sexually harassed)[iii] they shake their heads and say that, regrettably, the men in the room really have no idea. And, in having no idea, men allow sexual harassment in its many forms to persist in the workplace despite all of us living in a #MeToo world. Most men are not "bad guys" they say; rather, they are oblivious, willfully or otherwise. They don't see, and in not seeing, they don't really know.

So, where did that leave me? Should I continue with my lessons on harassment as before, pretending that they somehow addressed the very real emotional distress in the room, semester after semester? I looked at what had been done to address harassment, from videos to elevated legal threats to zero tolerance policies to various forms of sensitivity and bystander training. But as one Seidman MBA student put it, "short of changing human nature," we should expect "this sort of behavior between men and women to always be an issue" (here, I am not addressing same-sex harassment, which I recognize occurs). I disagreed. So I began using affective role plays in my classes, putting myself in the role of the "bad guy-harasser" and asking everyone in the class to think about how they would respond as I "harassed" a woman who had nominally volunteered. I thought this would be far more effective, maybe even the solution, as now we could all see and, perhaps more importantly, feel the terrible dimensions of the behavior in real time, regardless of the artifice. I fooled myself into thinking I was turning out generations of managers and leaders who would be a good deal more sensitive to the issue having "lived through what it's like."

I was wrong. The women already knew, and the men who did not identify with me in my role tuned out. The "Aha!" moment did not come until three years ago.

I was part of a panel on harassment at Consumers Energy. I was going to demonstrate my role-play technique and suggest it might be something they adopt to give their training a more "lived-in" feel. But this time, for whatever reason, I did not ask for a female volunteer. Instead, I simply pointed to one of the men and asked him to participate with me, play out the scenario I presented the way he thought he would "in real life," in front of the group. And then I "sexually harassed" him, pretty relentlessly and intensely with as much sincerity in this role-play as I could muster. It was in a safe and controlled setting, but I'm not sure he necessarily felt that way at the time. And it had the desired effect. The feedback we got from him, and many of the men who were in attendance was, "sheesh, is that what it feels like?" It began a conversation with their female peers most of them said they had never had.

This method involves intense emotional responses as well as cognitive ones, as in real time the subject does his best to feel and respond as authentically as possible. After the role-play is played out, a debrief of what was said and what was felt is held, the ultimate goal being that something about "what it feels like" was in fact learned, not through a disembodied test, but through direct experience.

With Nguyen's help as she researched the methods and effectiveness of "affective role-playing," I honed this approach over time and in different settings. Months later, I used this harassment role play with a class of undergraduates and again chose a man to be my subject. Again there was an intensity to my approach, and all around the room, students frowned. One woman shook her head, another looked away in discomfort. Other men fidgeted in their seats, and the student himself visibly tensed as the role-play escalated and "the advances" become more and more unwelcome. His fists balled at his sides and his knuckles turned white from the tension, despite the fact that this was all "make-believe." When I finally backed off and began a class debrief, an observation about changed behavior through empathy came forward that further cemented for us that it is men who should be the focus of these role-plays.

In the literature on how people change, developing "cognitive empathy" is preferred over "emotional empathy." Cognitive empathy refers to the ability to put yourself in another's shoes, to take her point of view. It is to know something about "what it's like to…" and respond appropriately. Emotional empathy, which refers to actually feeling the other's emotions as part of being with that person, is eschewed for a variety of reasons, not the least because it can lead to burnout, i.e., one simply can't go around feeling what others are feeling without suffering emotionally oneself. We—Nguyen and I—don't disagree with that under most circumstances, but as it pertains to sexual harassment and its persistence in businesses and institutions here in West Michigan and elsewhere, we are willing to argue there should be an exception made – the emotional and financial costs are too great not to. People can and do change, but until more men really do feel, through emotional empathy, what women who are subject to harassment are feeling, there may be little incentive to change. Harassment as a phenomenon is unlikely to decline until men insist it does, just as much as women do. Until men finally feel why it should. ■

i Canter, David, et. al. "Report on the AAU Campus Climate Survey on Sexual Assault and Misconduct." Westat. October 15, 2019. Print.
ii "2018 Study on Sexual Harassment and Assault." Stop Street Harassment, February 21, 2018, http://www.stopstreetharassment.org/our-work/nationalstudy/2018-national-sexual-abuse-report/.
iii "2018 Study on Sexual Harassment and Assault." Stop Street Harassment, February 21, 2018, http://www.stopstreetharassment.org/our-work/nationalstudy/2018-national-sexual-abuse-report/.