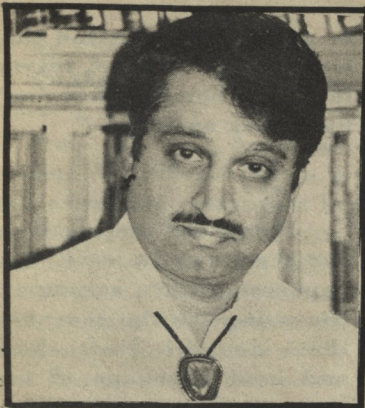


# Harassment by experts: sex under surveillance



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WE LIVE IN an age of experts who specialize in information gathering – including information on controversial human-moral issues. Once gathered, such information becomes the basis of the perceived power of the behavioral experts to provide compassionate guidance to the rest of bungling humanity.

Uncritical submission to any kind of information gathering has become so common-

To begin with, it was not clear why an anonymous survey needed to provide a guarantee of confidentiality – unless such a guarantee in the covering letter was meant as a hint/invitation/encouragement to provide names and other specific details. Those who may have got taken in by such guarantees may want to remind themselves in future that such information (whether on paper or transferred to electronic storage) in the offices of the psychology basement or elsewhere, is no safer than were the confidential tapes in the oval office of a US President some years ago. Yet, US Presidents and psychologists still continue to believe that there is one born every minute, forgetting that any leaks could be legally hazardous for all parties.

A similar double-bind message was repeated in the supplementary section of the questionnaire – with almost comical overtones. Respondents were requested to report their “most



**“We may ask whether this survey may also be regarded as a social-scientific form of voyeurism”**

place on the part of the general public and the students that we seem to stand in need of a warning similar to that which is given to the consumer: buyer beware!

Each one of us must give some independent thought to the overall cost-benefit question of any information gathering venture – without being awed by the scientific appearances of the instruments used in gathering such information. We must always ask the simple question: information for what purpose and at what human-social cost?

The Sexual Harassment Survey conducted recently by a team of psychologists at this University is one such information gathering project about which we must raise some questions – besides its cost in dollars. For instance, we may ask whether this survey may also be regarded as a social-scientific form of voyeurism which, in the long run, may turn out to be an even more psychologically invasive form of harassment than its social counterpart. In other words, can such a survey be like the cure that turns out to be as bad as the disease – if not worse?

memorable” experience of sexual harassment. Such a memorable experience is more likely to be about a sexual escapade; while sexual harassment would be a rather distressing experience – not worthy of being remembered, but recalled only with a heavy heart. Whether or not this is a Freudian slip, it does reinforce the point that such surveys always carry the potential for becoming social-scientific forms of voyeurism. We may grant that this is simply a poor choice of words – like the poor choice of many of the questions in the rest of the questionnaire.

Even a cursory examination of the nature of most questions shows that many simple and ordinary human relation situations, by the very fact of being questioned, stand at risk of becoming suspect in any future interactions – not only by the parties concerned but also by those who thrive on the warmth of gossip during the cold Island winters. One need not wonder then that, given the leading and loaded questions, some percentage of people are bound to see themselves on the receiving end of amorous glances or advances.

There is no use pretending that we are just discovering the frequency of courtship and mating rituals in the hallowed halls and smoke-filled pits of higher learning. Long before Dean Martin was ‘watching all the girls go by’, ogling was a universally favorite campus pastime among both sexes – and it does not seem as if it is about to go out of fashion soon.

For instance, we all know of productive relationships on campus within and between all groups (faculty, students and staff) – some of which, over time, have consummated into reproductive relationships issuing in healthy offspring. While there is not a shred of evidence that any of these in-

**“Now that touching is suspect, we may look forward to psychologists selling us brand new non-sexual touching therapies.”**

involved a sexual harassment component, it is impossible to rule out what the questionnaire vaguely calls “unwanted pressure” (for coffee, tea, or sympathy) in the initial courtship stages of such eventually reproductive relationships. Given the present trend, many potentially productive relationships, which slip between the cup and the lip (i.e. remain unconsummated), may well end up as cases of sexual harassment in which the aggrieved party wants even. Such surveys and policies, therefore, have a real manipulative potential of distorting social perceptions and eroding human relationships.

None of this criticism is meant to downplay either the reality or the seriousness of the problem of sexual harassment on or off campus, in one or more cases. What must be questioned, however, is the necessity for the quantification of a human-moral problem. In other words, if the larger purpose is to create a widespread awareness/consciousness of the problem of sexual harassment, it is also important to remember the double-edged nature of such awareness/sensitization/behavior control techniques; in the hands of zealous social scientists, such instruments have the real potential of cutting the wrong way into human rela-

research antics which have a potential for causing further distancing in human relationships.

All such noble pretensions to democratize the definition and meanings of sexual harassment can only lead to further confusion. What is needed is some semantic clarification – not a pseudo-scientific survey based on averaged perceptions, percentage opinions and quantified gossip. For instance, it is indecent to use offensive language, (despite its popularity on or off the Confederation Center stage), when the audience shows no appreciation/taste for it. Likewise, it is plain bad manners to stare at someone – suggestively or otherwise. However, many such unwanted behaviours are cases for which one solution may be to distribute such literature as Ms. Manners’ Etiquette book.

Harassment of any kind begins only when there are elements of relentless pressure and coercion which carry a threat or evidence of actual exploitation or deprivation of a person’s benefits and rightful earnings (in cash or credits). Anything short of this remains a matter of poor taste and bad manners, not harassment. But all this can be established by commonsense and clear thinking – without the benefit of costly surveys.

Cases of real harassment can always be covered under a broad human rights policy. Otherwise the creation of policies for every specific form of

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