

Book Review for 7/12/04 by Paul Jacques

Title: "What is Sexual Harassment? From Capital Hill to the Sorbonne"

Author: Abigail C. Saguy

Publisher: University of California Press

Copyright: 2003

Price: \$50.00 (hard cover), \$19.95 (paperback)

ISBN: 0520237404 (hard cover), 0520237412 (paperback)

Length: 235 pages

Reading time: 10-15 hours

Reading rating: 5 (1 = very difficult; 10 = very easy)

Overall rating: 3 (1 = average; 4 = outstanding)

Subject areas: Management; human resources; culture and work; sexual harassment

The topic of sexual harassment is very much an issue in both the U.S. as well as in France. Numerous studies have shown that females are likely to be a victim of harassing behaviors in the workplace at some point in their careers. This book represents a most interesting view at differing forces were brought to bear regarding how both nations conceptualize and deal with this issue. Saguy's book gives much to think about whether the reader labors on the shop floor or manages employees in a multinational company.

Saguy traces the difference in the evolution of the concept of sexual harassment to contrasts between embedded social structures, relationships between institutions (such as news media), and cultural/political elements that distinguish France from America. Saguy asserts that the concept of sexual harassment is a function of cultural attitudes which, in turn, are shaped by contextual factors.

Sexual harassment laws in the U.S. stem from a national tradition embodying principles of antidiscrimination. U.S. law condemning sexual harassment originates from Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Title VII is designed to achieve equal treatment of both sexes within the workplace. Sexual harassment violates those principles because members of one sex are targeted for abusive behavior solely because of their sex. Unfortunately, behavior at work that doesn't appear anti-discriminatory is missed by Title VII as is harassing behavior occurring outside the workplace. In contrast, French law focuses on power relationships wherever they might occur (supervisor/subordinate, landlord/tenant, etc.). French law pertaining to sexual harassment centers on the idea that sexual harassment constitutes an abuse of authority.

The second leg of contrast between the two countries relates to the media's role in defining sexual harassment in the respective countries. For example, Saguy offers evidence that American reporting of sexual harassment has largely produced articles detailing scandals involving high-profile political figures which are largely devoid of in-depth legal analysis. Saguy argues that this is a natural outcome of the pressures faced by the for-profit U.S. media industry that minimizes investigative journalism and to focus instead on the sensational. In contrast, Saguy suggests that the French culture has a comparatively less puritanical attitude towards sex and that this attitude diminishes the

salience of non-violent incidents of a sexual nature. It would follow that there'd be comparatively fewer articles produced by the French media pertaining to such events. Moreover, French reporters are more constrained by broader libel laws and are less driven by advertising revenues and concern with profit. Saguy concludes that the media practices in each country have differentially shaped the populace's perception of sexual harassment law in each country and that perception differs from provisions in the actual statutes.

The third leg of differences between how sexual harassment is viewed in these countries centers on employers. In the U.S., managers use a business frame in which sexually-tinged behavior at work is considered undesirable because it impacts productivity or isn't "professional." Furthermore, there is a distinction between the acceptability of these behaviors in social settings versus at work. Managers can and should discipline perpetrators of sexual harassment occurring in the workplace under penalty of law. In contrast, French employers are not held liable for sexual harassment in the workplace and in fact may be penalized for disciplining an alleged harasser given less than compelling evidence of guilt.

In conclusion, this book is an interesting read for those who seek to expand their knowledge of the concept of sexual harassment in particular, or for those who wish to broaden their knowledge of cross-cultural differences in general.

Dr. Paul H. Jacques is an Assistant Professor of Management and International Business in the College of Business at Western Carolina University. For previously reviewed books, visit our Website at [www.wcu.edu/cob/bookreviews](http://www.wcu.edu/cob/bookreviews).