

Review

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Killing a Virus with Stones? Research on the Implementation of Policies Against Sexual Harassment in Southern African Higher Education. Jane Bennett ed. African Gender Institute, University of Cape Town, 2005.



I was sent this book to review as an unexpected *quid pro quo* for a request on my part for a response to a collection of women's writing. The rationale from the editor of the journal was that I "would have read it anyway". Well, no, I wouldn't have.

As a so-called "survivor" of sexual harassment, after a brief joyless spurt of reading and perusing research in an attempt to put some kind of epistemological structure around the incoherence and conflict of the experience (and in a less scholarly effort to find some practical "how-to's"), I have tended to live more comfortably in a space of denial and repression, avoiding all writing and discussion on the topic. In one sense this has been profound emotional cowardice; in another, I feared above all that I would find myself becoming a raving feminist virago, obsessed – like Ahab and the white whale – with a single topic, fixed in a monocular vision that would have me end my days in bitter, mutilated vigilante-ism, and (worse!) as a terminal bore at dinner parties.

So I approached the task of reading and reviewing this text with more than a little apprehension and reluctance, and a fair degree of skepticism about the value and relevance of "Policies Against Sexual Harassment" in having any real meaning for anyone other than university administrators.

Jane Bennett's thoughtful and scholarly introduction addresses this issue head-on. In reflecting on the metaphor in the title ("killing a virus with stones") she notes that "[t]he image exposes the crudity of the assumption that formal regulation of social behaviour can simultaneously transform it" (4) and later persuasively argues that "where behaviour experienced as impossibly destructive by survivors is discursively protected ... the work of voicing resistance and planning redress and change needs long-term, intricately strategised theorisation" (5). In her conclusion she comments that engagement with the arenas of sexual harassment (dealing with complainants or "perpetrators",

sitting on committees, drafting policy, developing training initiatives, conducting research) “presents a set of theoretical challenges whose questions on justice, citizenship, credibility and trauma perplex, test the intelligence and demand sophisticated levels of discipline, moral fibre, and acuity” (212).

The book is an important contribution to this kind of theorisation, and meets the challenges Bennett outlines with audacious and rigorous reflective scrutiny. Bennett has framed the three case studies (of the Universities of Stellenbosch, the Western Cape, and Botswana) with a thorough theoretical background, an exposition of the research methodology and process (including a useful and painfully honest explication of the ethical dilemmas surrounding this kind of research), and a concluding chapter which both summarises and weaves together the very complex variety of themes and issues arising out of the case studies.



In the discussion on research methodology, and reflecting on the institutional anxieties surrounding research into policy and practice on sexual harassment, Bennett offers the insight that “in this position of anxiety, the university itself becomes ‘feminised’, fearful of stigma and ‘lost honour’” (44), in a discomfiting parallel to the common and debilitating syndrome of spoiled identity or damaged reputation experienced by sexual harassment survivors. Given the ego-penetrative impact of issues of sexuality and sexual violence, the honesty and courage of the research, and of the three participating institutions needs to be acknowledged.

The three case studies make for fascinating reading. Each is slightly different in focus and approach, but all tackle the highly complex research issue of testing the implementation of policy in the Byzantine ecology of the academe (in what at least one researcher describes as a “schizoid university” (187) – which one could argue is tautologous – it applies to most universities of our experience). All arrive at recommendations as to immediate interventions and steps towards solutions to some of the challenges identified. (Not quite the easy “how to’s” that I yearn for, but gratifyingly specific and actionable, nevertheless.) I would perhaps have wanted sight of the actual policy and procedure documents of the various institutions, not necessarily as that dreaded business shibboleth – “best practice” – but as a reserve that my institution, and others, could perhaps draw from. Such a consolidated resource may well exist on a website somewhere, but a pointer to this would be useful.

Bennett refers to policy as “a would-be syntax” (199) and notes that this research project does not yet constitute a concentrated exploration, but rather a “translation”. And I was struck by how issues of language abound throughout the case studies. There is the concern as to what “official” language the sexual

harassment policy documents are written in (English? Afrikaans? isi-Xhosa? Setswana? Maintenance workers at the University of Botswana, for instance, feel that the policy does not concern them, because it is written in English).

Some policies are critiqued for the inaccessibility and impenetrability (!) of the documentation and language. Definitions are alternately contested or celebrated. Survivors battle to “language” their experiences. Students grapple with labelling what is and isn’t sexually harassing behaviour. “Perpetrators” find words for their behaviour which “normalize” it, placing them firmly on the OK end of the spectrum. There is a common thread of institutional or individual silence, which narrows the range of what people are prepared to commit to words (either spoken or written). Issues of “naming” are tackled – what does one do with anonymous complaints? Whose identities need protecting, and how? (And I noted the power of my own name, which still jolts me when put out there, albeit in a footnote, as a case in point.) What is the force of putting into public text the plot and outcomes (for unnamed protagonists) of sexual harassment cases, as UWC does? Does a written policy document have a voice if it is not talked about in forums and meetings?



Let it be said. It is important to speak out into the silence and to put a vocabulary and a grammar into the mouths of our students and staff and our institutions (that epiphenomenon, that ghost in the machine that is somehow both more – and less – than the sum of its constituent parts). It is easy to feel overwhelmed by the force and intransigence of the cultural virus that is sexual harassment. It is tempting to lapse into fretful railing about the futile flimsiness of paper (whether a policy document or a research report) against such a powerful form of violence. Gouws, Kritzinger and Wenhold, writing about their research at the University of Stellenbosch, conclude that “the long years spent in ratifying this policy were not wasted; they simply constitute phase one of an on-going, rigorous, epistemological and political struggle to bring the full meaning of gender into campus life” (112). Bennett says that “policy remains just that: an opportunity” (212). I would argue that the same is true for this book. It is phase one; an opportunity. Let us hope that the readers – some of whom, we hope, have the power and will to change institutions, and to be changed themselves – use this opportunity well.

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