

MESSAGES ABOUT SEX IN THE WORKPLACE: A CONTENT ANALYSIS OF PRIMETIME TELEVISION

Claudia Lampman, Brenda Rolfe-Maloney, Eric John David,
Mandy Yan, Nick McDermott, Stefanie Winters, Jennifer Davis,
and Rebecca Lathrop

*Department of Psychology, University of Alaska, Anchorage, AK
99508*

(afcbl@uaa.alaska.edu)

Because television has the potential to shape cultural beliefs about both sexual norms and appropriate workplace behavior, it seems important to examine TV's portrayal of "sexual etiquette" in the workplace. In a content analysis of two episodes of every primetime comedy aired on all broadcast and cable networks during fall 2000, we coded every sexual remark and behavior made in a workplace scene. Across all networks, 85 percent of programs and one in four workplace interactions contained some type of sexual content. Overall, a viewer is likely to hear eleven sexual remarks and see two to three sexual behaviors in a workplace setting per hour; this jumps to twenty-three remarks and nine behaviors on cable networks. Sexual remarks were mostly explicit, made in an office setting, by White men, and were rarely (1.4%) about sexual harassment or discrimination. Although sexual content in the workplace was generally less common on broadcast than cable networks, a broadcast network (Fox) actually had the highest overall rate, with sexual content in 38 percent of workplace scenes. Given that research suggests that TV teaches youth about sexuality and cultivates sexual attitudes and beliefs consistent with televised portrayals, it is alarming that youth may learn from television that sex in the workplace is not only commonplace, but also to be tolerated and enjoyed.

American television is growing up. In fact, it seems to have reached puberty, sexually speaking. In the past few years, both the amount and explicitness of sexual content on television appear to have risen dramatically. This sexual growth spurt, due in part to

4 Sexuality & Culture / Fall 2002

broader availability of cable programming not subject to the same sexual regulations as broadcast television, has been documented by recent research. The most current and comprehensive data available have been compiled by Dale Kunkel and his colleagues in a series of reports for the Kaiser Family Foundation (Kunkel, Cope, Farinola, Biely, Rollin & Donnerstein, 1999; Kunkel, Cope-Farrar, Biely, Farinola & Donnerstein, 2001). They drew random samples of daily and primetime programming aired on broadcast and cable stations during the 1997-1998 and 1999-2000 seasons, and assessed the number of shows and scenes per hour that included “any depiction of sexual activity, sexually suggestive behavior, or talk about sexuality or sexual activity” (p. 7).

Key findings from their studies document a recent surge in sex on American television. In particular, they found that the number of shows with sexual content increased significantly over the two-year period (from 56% to 68%), and the number of scenes containing sexual content also rose from 3.2 to 4.1 per hour. Sexual content was most common during primetime, where 75 percent of all shows and 5.8 scenes per hour contained sexual material in 1999-2000. They also found that during the 1999-2000 season, 65 percent of shows and 3.8 scenes per hour contained talk about sex, 27 percent of shows and 1.8 scenes per hour depicted some type of sexual behavior, and 10 percent of shows and one scene per hour depicted sexual intercourse, all significant increases over the 1997-1998 season. Finally, they found that depictions of intercourse were not only more common, but also more explicit.

Kunkel et al. (2001) stated that their research is “...grounded in the assumption that media content holds the potential to influence the audience, and in particular young viewers who are just developing their views about sex” (p. 1). What research evidence is there to support this assumption? In a recent review of this literature, Greenberg and Hofschire (2000) discuss four kinds of influence that sexual content has on adolescent TV viewers:

- Learning
- Appreciation
- Disinhibition
- Cultivation

Learning, or the idea that sexually-oriented television can serve as a sex educator for young viewers, is the first influence. For example, Greenberg, Linsangan, and Soderman (1993) found that youth who were randomly assigned to watch TV clips about prostitution, homosexuality, and married intercourse showed significantly better understanding of sexual terms used in those scenes (e.g., solicitation, shooting blanks, getting in a family way, gay) than teens in control conditions. The second effect, appreciation, regards adolescents' desire to watch television programs containing certain types of sexual content. For example, the teens studied by Greenberg et al. (1993) reported that they most enjoyed viewing scenes about prostitution, followed by scenes showing sex between unmarried individuals, homosexuality, and intercourse between married partners. Disinhibition, a third effect of exposure to sexual content on television, occurs when there is a positive association between television viewing and more accepting or liberal sexual attitudes. Bryant and Rockwell (1994), for instance, found that adolescents who watched segments of TV depicting intercourse among unmarried adults were more accepting of sexual improprieties than those exposed to clips of similar length but free from sexual content. Finally, a number of studies have found cultivation effects, where heavy TV viewers see televised depictions of sexuality as realistic, and tend to overestimate the prevalence of sexual behaviors and consequences frequently shown on television (see Gerbner, Gross, Morgan & Signorelli, 1994). Carveth and Alexander (1985), for example, found that college students who were heavy soap opera viewers made larger predictions about the number of individuals in society who have had illegitimate children or been divorced than lighter viewers. More recently, however, Ward and Rivadeneyra (1999) found that viewer involvement (i.e., level of identification with specific TV characters) was more strongly related to beliefs about levels of sexual activity among peers than was simple amount of television exposure.

Taken together, the studies described above suggest that sexual talk and imagery are becoming increasingly common on American television, and likely influence our beliefs about sexuality in society. Moreover, television has a lot to tell us about who is doing

what with whom, and where they are “doing it.” One important “where” is the workplace. Primetime television is replete with popular workplace series, such as *Ally McBeal*, *NYPD Blue*, *ER*, *Spin City*, and *Just Shoot Me*. Because television has the potential to shape cultural beliefs about both sexual norms and appropriate workplace behavior, it seems important to examine TV’s portrayal of “sexual etiquette” in the workplace.

Recent research suggests that sexual harassment continues to be a widespread and significant problem in the American workplace. In a review of the literature, Charney and Russell (1994) reported that the most reliable data available on the prevalence of sexual harassment in the U.S. is a survey of federal government employees conducted by the United States Merit Systems Protection Board (USMSPB) in 1981. This survey, sent to a random sample of 24,000 U.S. government employees with a return rate of 85 percent, closely followed the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission’s definitions of sexual harassment, and was updated in 1988. The USMSPB found that 42 percent of the women and 15 percent of the men responding to the survey had been sexually harassed in the previous two years, and 62 percent of these individuals were the targets of severe forms of sexual harassment. Such harassment exacts high costs from both victims and their employers. While sexual harassment can obviously create a hostile work environment and damage victims’ chances for advancement, they may also suffer emotional and physical consequences including anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, weight loss, sleep and stomach problems (Dansky & Kilpatrick, 1997), and anger, guilt and fear (Thacker & Gohmann, 1996). In addition, organizations must cope with job turnover, missed work days, problems with productivity, medical insurance claims, and legal suits (Thacker & Gohmann, 1996; USMSPB as cited in O’Hare & O’Donohue, 1998).

Although research documents that sexual harassment is common and has serious consequences, research also suggests that most incidents go unreported (Goleman, 1991; Gruber & Smith, 1995). How do individuals (both perpetrators and victims) determine what types and amount of sexual remarks or behaviors are acceptable in

their own workplaces? Although the causes of sexual harassment are clearly multidimensional, one contributing factor may be the messages we receive from television about the acceptability of sexual remarks and behaviors in the workplace. To date, however, very little research has examined how sex in the workplace is depicted on television. The notable exception is a study by Grauerholz and King (1997) who identified incidents of sexual harassment in a sample of forty-eight hours of primetime programs aired on ABC, CBS, and NBC during the Fall 1991 season. They coded all instances of: (1) quid pro quo harassment, where an individual's current employment or future promotion is contingent upon tolerating sexual comments or actions, (2) hostile environment harassment, where the sexual conduct of one employee "unreasonably interferes with a person's work or creates a hostile, intimidating and offensive work environment" (p. 133), and (3) sexually offensive incidents, defined as "...any unwanted behaviors that are sexist (derogatory toward one sex) or sexual" (p. 133). Coders were instructed, however, to record *all* interactions that were non-mutual and sexual or sexist, including those occurring outside the workplace.

Grauerholz and King (1997) found that sexual harassment was very "visible" or prevalent on primetime television in 1991. They found a total of 231 incidents of sexual harassment in their sample of eighty-one programs, an average of 3.4 incidents per thirty-minute episode. Most of these incidents involved sexist or sexual comments (65%) and physical sexual advances or body language (21%). More overt acts, including sexual propositions, bribery, harassing/obscene phone calling, stalking, kidnaping or undue attention were less common (13%). About three-fourths of the offenders were male adults, most of whom were White (84%), and more than 80 percent of the victims were White women. The majority of these offenses (two-thirds), however, occurred *outside* of the workplace. Although Grauerholz and King found that sexual harassment was quite "visible" on primetime, they also discussed its "invisibility"—the fact that the incidents are rarely acknowledged as problematic. More than 70 percent of the instances of sexual harassment occurred in situation com-

edies that included a laugh track, and in nearly half of the cases (47%), the victims either did not react, ignored the incident, complied with the request, or responded positively with humor or sexual interest.

Grauerholz and King (1997) have clearly begun an important line of investigation about sexual harassment on television: however, it seems important to explore further the association between work and sex on television for several reasons. First, Grauerholz and King analyzed programs from 1991, aired on only three of the major broadcast networks. Given the recent increase in sexual content on television documented by Kunkel and colleagues, and greater access to cable programming not subject to the same restrictions as network broadcasts, it seems important to examine a more representative sample of today's television fare. Second, Grauerholz and King focused on instances of bona fide sexual harassment that occurred both within and outside the workplace. In order to understand the messages television conveys about what levels of sexual activity are acceptable in the workplace, however, it seems important to examine all instances of sexual content in the workplace, not just those meeting the criteria for sexual harassment. Therefore, the goal of the present study was to assess the amount and types of sexual content in television scenes depicting a workplace. We decided to focus on primetime comedy series for the following reasons. First, the best and most recent data available from the Kunkel et al. (2001) report suggest that sexual content is more common during primetime programming than any other time of day. Second, situation comedies contain more sex and have shown the most significant increase in sexual content in the past several years than any other genre of programming (Kunkel et al., 2001). Third, more than 70 percent of the instances of sexual harassment found by Grauerholz and King (1997) occurred in situation comedies. Finally, sitcoms have the potential to trivialize and normalize sex in the workplace because they present sexual remarks and behaviors as humorous and lacking serious consequences (Grauerholz & King, 1997). In addition, we wanted to be able to compare programs aired on cable versus broadcast networks, and describe the race and sex of characters involved in sexual activity in the workplace.

Method

Sample

The sampling frame for this study was a list of all half-hour comedies shown during primetime in Anchorage, Alaska, on all broadcast or cable networks in October and November 2000. The research team recorded and coded two randomly selected episodes of each program in the sampling frame. Only current shows were recorded (i.e., shows in syndication were excluded). A total of thirty-seven different programs appearing on ABC, CBS, Fox, NBC, UPN, HBO, and COM (the Comedy channel) met these criteria (see Table 1 for a complete listing of programs reviewed). The final sample consisted of seventy-two half-hour episodes; one program was canceled during the taping period before a second episode was recorded, and one program aired only one episode during the taping period.

Table 1

Description of the Sample (Two Episodes of Each Program Aired in October-November, 2000)				
Broadcast Networks				
ABC	CBS	Fox	NBC	UPN
Dharma & Greg	Becker	Malcolm in the Middle	Cursed	Girlfriends
Drew Carey	Bette	Normal, Ohio	Daddio*	Moesha
Geena Davis Show	Everybody Loves Raymond	That 70s Show*	DAG	The Hughleys
Norm		Titus	Frasier	The Parkers*
Madigan Men	King of Queens		Friends	
Spin City	New York NY		Just Shoot Me	
Trouble with Normal	Yes Dear		Michael Richards***	
Two Guys and a Girl			Third Rock	
			Tucker*	
			Will & Grace	
Cable Networks				
COM			HBO	
Strangers with Candy			Arli\$\$**	
Strip Mall			Curb Your Enthusiasm	
			Sex and the City	

* program contained no workplace scenes
 ** only one episode of program aired during taping period
 *** only one episode recorded because show was canceled during taping period

Coding Scheme

The goal of the study was to code every workplace scene for the presence of sexual remarks and sexual behaviors. Consistent with recent content analyses in this area, a scene was defined as an interaction between a single set of people in a single location at one point in time (e.g., Kunkel et al., 2001, Kunkel et al., 1999, and Ward, 1995). A workplace scene was defined as one in which a major character in the show was working. A character was defined as major if he or she had a recurring role in the show from week to week, or played a central role in the episode. For example, a restaurant or bar would be considered a workplace for a major character who worked there (e.g., a waiter, manager, or bartender) or who came to the restaurant as part of their job (e.g., a police officer or detective investigating a case there). A restaurant would not be considered a workplace for two co-workers from a store having lunch together, even if they were discussing work.

For each workplace scene, we recorded the total number of remarks sexual in nature and the total number of sexual behaviors. The method for coding sexual remarks was based on Ward's (1995) description of a "conversational turn," where one person is speaking without a major interruption. Minor interruptions, such as 'uh-huh,' 'yeah,' or 'I see' would not be counted as a conversational turn. A sexual remark would be counted toward the total if it was different from others made by the same person within a conversational turn, or was separated within a conversation by a major interruption.

The coding scheme for this study¹ was developed during a pilot study conducted by the first author. A review of workplace scenes in a sample of shows from the 1998-99 season revealed that remarks of a sexual nature in the workplace tended to fall into eleven categories:

1. Comments of a sexual nature about a person's body or appearance
2. Sexual innuendo
3. Comments about sexual arousal
4. Lust or fantasy remarks
5. References to intercourse or sexual history

6. Comments about homosexual activity or sexual orientation
7. Statements about sexually transmitted diseases
8. References to pornography or prostitution
9. Statements about contraception and abortion
10. Talk about sexual harassment, coercion or assault
11. The use of sexual slurs or name-calling.

Coders were provided with detailed descriptions of each category, along with examples of remarks that would and would not be considered sexual. For example, when examining a comment about a person's body or appearance, coders were instructed to record only statements of a sexual nature (e.g., "She has the most amazing ass"), not general comments about appearance (e.g., "That's a beautiful dress"). After determining that a remark qualified as sexual, it was recorded verbatim on the code sheet, along with the sex and race of the person making the statement, and a description of the workplace setting (e.g., office, hospital, school).

Sexual behaviors were recorded in a similar fashion. The pilot study revealed that most sexual behaviors in the television workplace tended to fall into five major categories: (1) leering, ogling, or staring, (2) sexual touching, caressing, or fondling, (3) passionate kissing, (4) sexual gesturing (e.g., licking one's lips or grinding hips in a suggestive manner), and (5) sexual aggression. For each workplace scene, the total number of sexual behaviors was recorded, including a detailed description of each behavior, the sex and race of each person involved, and a description of the workplace setting. After all data collection were complete, the sexual remarks and behaviors were categorized.

Interrater Reliability

A team of researchers (a psychology professor, one graduate student in clinical psychology, and six undergraduate students) served as coders in this study. The coders each received twelve hours of training on use of the coding scheme. To test interrater reliability, all eight researchers coded the total number of sexual remarks and sexual behaviors in three half-hour sitcom episodes, containing a total of sixty-three scenes. The average reliability coefficient

(Pearson's r) between pairs of raters was .91 for sexual behaviors (range from .75 to .98), and .87 for sexual remarks (range from .77 to .95). For the main study, every episode was coded by at least two raters, and any disagreements were discussed until consensus could be reached.

Categorization of Sexual Remarks and Behaviors

After all of the coding was complete, each sexual remark and behavior was recorded on a note card along with the sex and race of the individual(s) involved. As a group, the entire research team then sorted the remarks and behaviors into distinct categories. In some cases, a remark or behavior would be placed into more than one category. For example, the remark "Jeffrey is the key and I know all about his keyhole," which was made by a man, was coded as both sexual innuendo and a comment regarding homosexual activity.

Results

Nearly 90 percent of the programs we reviewed (33 of 37) contained workplace scenes (see Table 1). In total, we coded 751 workplace scenes among these thirty-three programs for the presence of sexual remarks and sexual behavior. Table 2 presents percentages and mean numbers of sexual remarks and behaviors in these workplace interactions. Overall, 84.8 percent of the programs contained at least one instance of sex in the workplace. We found a total of 346 sexual remarks and eighty-two sexual behaviors in the 751 workplace scenes. One in four workplace interactions contained some form of sex, most of it verbal. On average, a viewer of primetime comedies is likely to hear a sexual remark in every other workplace scene, more than five times per episode, and nearly eleven times per hour. That same viewer is also likely to see two to three instances of sexual activity in the workplace per hour of viewing, or approximately one sexual behavior in every ten workplace scenes.

Table 2 also compares workplace sex between programs aired on cable channels and the major broadcast networks (ABC, CBS, Fox, and NBC). All of the comedies on the cable channels con-

Table 2

Percentages and Mean Numbers of Sexual Remarks and Behaviors in Workplace Comedies			
	All Networks	Major Broadcast Networks*	Cable Networks
Percent of workplace programs containing:			
any sex	84.8%	84.0%	100.0%
sexual remarks	81.8%	80.0%	100.0%
sexual behaviors	51.5%	48.0%	80.0%
Percent of workplace scenes containing:			
any sex	24.8%	22.6%	34.1%
sexual remarks	23.3%	21.2%	31.8%
sexual behaviors	6.4%	4.7%	12.7%
Total N of:			
scenes	751	548	173
episodes	64	49	9
hours	32	24.5	4.5
sexual remarks	346	239	104
sexual behaviors	82	40	42
Mean number of sexual remarks per:			
scene	0.46	0.44 ^a	0.60 ^a
episode	5.41	4.88	11.56
hour	10.81	9.76	23.11
Mean number of sexual behaviors per:			
scene	0.11	0.07 ^b	0.24 ^c
episode	1.28	0.82	4.66
hour	2.56	1.63	9.33

* ABC, CBS, Fox, NBC

^{abc} Pairs of means in a row with different superscripts differed significantly ($p < .001$)

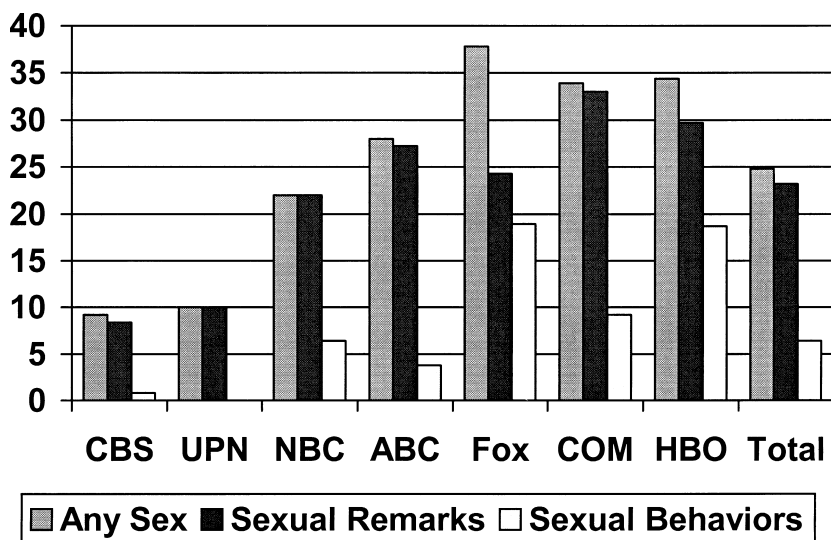
tained workplace scenes with sexual content, and more than one in three of these scenes included some sexual activity or reference. When compared to the major broadcast networks, the cable programs averaged more than twice as many sexual remarks and nearly six times as many sexual behaviors per hour. However, while the mean number of sexual behaviors per workplace scene was significantly higher on cable (.24) than on the four main broadcast channels (.07), the difference in sexual remarks only approached statistical significance (.60 on cable vs. .44 on broadcast).

There was also significant variability across networks in the amount of workplace sex (see Figure 1). Although the average amount of sexual content per scene and hour was much higher on the cable channels, a broadcast network (Fox) actually had the greatest percentage of workplace scenes with sexual content. Nearly 38 percent of the workplace scenes on Fox contained some type of sex, followed by HBO (33.9%), COM (34.4%), and ABC (28%). Approximately one in five workplace scenes on NBC and one in ten on CBS and UPN included either sexual remarks or behavior.

Verbal sexual references were most common on the two cable networks (HBO and COM), where roughly one in three workplace scenes included talk of a sexual nature. About one quarter of workplace scenes on ABC, Fox, and NBC included comments about sex, and one in ten on CBS and UPN. Sexual behavior in the workplace, however, was most frequent on Fox and HBO, where nearly one in five scenes at work involved sexual activity. About one in ten of the workplace interactions on COM included sexual behavior, followed by NBC (6.4%) and ABC (3.8%). There were

Figure 1

Percent of Workplace Scenes Containing Sexual Content by Network



very few instances of sexual behavior in the workplace on CBS, and none on UPN.

The Content of Sexual Remarks and Behaviors

The content of the sexual remarks is summarized in Table 3. Although innuendo was one of the most frequent types of sexual talk in the workplace (e.g., “Why don’t you meet me in the supply shack?”), the vast majority of sexual remarks (76.6%) were quite overt. Nearly one in four of the sexual comments was about intercourse or some other sexual behavior (e.g., “I’m pretty sure we had sex in the back of my cab”), almost one in five concerned sexual arousal, desire or fantasy, (e.g., “It got me a little hot”), and one in six was a remark about a sexual body part or nudity (e.g., “Big tits and big hits”). More than one in ten of the remarks was a reference to a person’s sexual history, including infidelity (e.g., “I’ve had more lovers than you’ve had trips to the boys department at Sears”), and a similar number of the comments were about pornography, prostitution or stripping (e.g., “It’s your husband’s latest porno ‘Poke-me-mon,’ I bought it by mistake for my kid”). Roughly one in thirteen comments was about sexual orientation or homosexual behavior (e.g., “OK Sophie, you’re here, you’re queer”), sexually transmit-

Table 3

Content of Sexual Remarks (total N=346)		
Topic of Remark	Frequency	Percent
Sexual innuendo	81	23.4%
Intercourse or other sexual behavior	81	23.4%
Sexual desire, arousal, appeal, or fantasy	64	18.5%
Body parts or nudity	57	16.5%
Sexual history or infidelity	38	11.0%
Sex industry (pornography, prostitution, strippers)	36	10.4%
Contraception or sexually transmitted diseases	26	7.5%
Sexual orientation or same-sex sexual activity	26	7.5%
Sexist remarks or sexual slurs	24	6.9%
Atypical sex or sex toys	15	4.3%
Sexual harassment or sexual violence	5	1.4%

Note: Percentages do not add up to 100 because some sexual remarks were placed into more than one category.

ted diseases or contraception (e.g., “Historically, syphilis is right up there with the Germans”), or involved a sexist remark or sexual slur (e.g., “You arrogant prick”). Comments about atypical sex (e.g., “Drew’s brother has a certain peccadillo, he likes to be restrained while we make love”) were infrequent (4.3%), and only five comments total (1.4%) concerned sexual harassment, discrimination, or violence (e.g., “You are discriminating against lesbians”). The majority of sexual remarks were made in an office (42.8%) or medical (19.9%) setting. Approximately one in ten remarks was made in a school (11.5%), sex industry (9.1%), or nontraditional (outside the office) setting (10.4%). Talk about sex was much less common among employees in restaurants or bars (2.0%), studios (3.1%), or retail settings (1.3%).

The types of sexual behaviors found in the TV workplace appear in Table 4. More than 40 percent of the sexual behaviors seen in the TV workplace involved a sexual gesture of some sort (e.g., pelvic thrusts, shaking breasts, flicking tongue). Approximately one in four of the behaviors involved leering, ogling, or staring in a sexual manner, or whistling/cat-calling. Passionate kissing and displays of nudity each made up about 15 percent of the sexual behaviors. About one in ten of the workplace sexual behaviors involved sexual grabbing or touching between a man and woman, and one in sixteen involved sexual grabbing or touching between two women. We found no instances of sexual behavior between two

Table 4

Content of Sexual Behaviors (total N=82)		
Type of Sexual Activity	Frequency	Percent
Sexual gesture	36	43.9%
Leering, ogling, staring, catcalling	19	23.2%
Display of nudity	13	15.6%
Passionate kissing	12	14.6%
Sexual touching, caressing, fondling (heterosexual)	9	11.0%
Streetwalking/prostitution	6	7.3%
Sexual touching, caressing, fondling (homosexual)	5	6.1%
Sexual aggression	3	3.7%

Note: Percentages do not add up to 100 because some sexual behaviors were placed into more than one category.

men in a workplace setting. About 7 percent of the behaviors involved soliciting sex for money, and only 3.7 percent were displays of sexual aggression. Sexual behavior was most frequent in an office setting (28.2%), or when a character was working in a venue outside of the office (19.4%) or at home (13.6%). Sexual behavior was rarely seen in a medical setting (3.9%) or restaurant or bar (1.0%).

Race and Sex

Table 5 describes the race and sex of the characters who engaged in sexual activity or talk in the workplace. Chi square tests found no association between race (White, African American, or Asian American) and sex of characters on sexual remarks ($\chi^2 (2) = 4.28, p = .12$). As Table 5 indicates, most of the sexual remarks in the workplace were made by White (85.4%) and male (63.4%) characters. Sexual behaviors, however, were equally likely among male and female characters. There was also significant variability in sexual activity by race. African American characters made one in ten of the sexual remarks in the workplace, but engaged in one in five of the sexual behaviors. There was a modest association between race and sex on sexual behaviors ($\chi^2 (2) = 5.85, p = .05$); sexual behavior was more frequent than expected by African American males and Asian American females.

Table 5

Racial and Gender Breakdown of Sexual Remarks and Behaviors

	Percent of Characters Involved In:	
	Sexual Remarks (n=346)	Sexual Behaviors (n=82)
Race		
White	85.4%	66.0%
African American	10.2%	19.4%
Asian American	3.8%	4.9%
Other/not determined	0.6%	9.7%
Sex		
Male	63.4%	48.5%
Female	36.6%	51.5%

Discussion

Our findings suggest that a regular viewer of primetime comedies receives a potent set of messages about sex in the workplace. In the sitcom workplace, talk about sex is extremely common, mostly explicit, socially acceptable, and rarely about anything unpleasant. It occurs in all workplace settings, but most especially “at the office,” and usually concerns overt aspects of human sexuality such as intercourse or sexual desire, arousal or fantasy. Sexual innuendo, once the only acceptable type of sexual remark on primetime, seems to merely be an opportunity for humor now, not a need to veil sexual content. Although sexual behavior is less common in primetime comedies, more than half of all workplace programs and 80 percent of the cable shows depicted sexual activity while major characters were working, most of it in the form of sexual gestures, leering, and nudity. Although talk about intercourse was extremely common, we did not find any depiction of intercourse in a work setting in these programs.

It is interesting to compare our findings with the Kunkel et al. (2001) analysis of primetime comedies on the major broadcast networks. We found that in one hour of viewing primetime sitcoms on these networks, one is likely to hear almost ten sexual remarks and see one to two sexual behaviors in a workplace setting. Kunkel et al. (2001) found a similar number of verbal sexual references per hour across all types of scenes, but two to three times more sexual behavior. In other words, in broadcast comedy series during primetime, people talk about sex at work as often as they do in any other type of setting (and on cable channels they talk about sex at work twice as often). Such portrayals may suggest to viewers that it is as common and acceptable to speak explicitly about sex at work as it is anywhere else. Although viewers will see less sexual behavior in work settings than in other settings on the major broadcast outlets, they are still likely to see a couple of instances of sexual behavior in the workplace in an hour of primetime comedy viewing, and nearly ten per hour on the cable networks.

The primetime comedy viewer will also find that most of the sexual remarks are made by White men, and almost never concern

issues of sexual harassment or discrimination. In fact, the only comment specifically about sexual harassment in the seventy-two episodes analyzed for the present study concerned the possible sexual harassment of a dog. These findings are consistent with those of Grauerholz and King (1997) who found that the vast majority of incidents of sexual harassment in a sample of primetime television from 1991 were committed by White men, were accompanied by a laugh track, and were often responded to with humor or sexual interest. Our results may both reflect and reinforce a sexual stereotype of an active male and passive female, and suggest that it is acceptable to speak explicitly about sex at work for fun (especially if you are a White man), but not about finding such sexual activity offensive. This may contribute to a workplace climate that sees women who report sexual harassment as “troublemakers” who need to “lighten up,” and suggest that someone who is bothered by sexual activity in the workplace is not a victim, but a prude.

Although we found that cable programs generally contained more sexual content—especially sexual behavior—than shows on the major broadcast channels, the Fox network was actually found to have the highest overall rate of sexual content in the workplace. This is disconcerting given that the Fox network is such a favorite among teenagers (Fox television enjoys, 2001). In addition, of the four major broadcast networks, Fox was the only one with more viewers during the 2000-2001 season than the season before (Fox television enjoys, 2001). Parents, moreover, may believe that shielding their children from cable programs will keep them from viewing programs heavy on sexual content. Our results, however, suggest that workplace sex is also quite common on at least three of the major broadcast networks (Fox, ABC, and NBC).

Obviously, societal attitudes about the acceptability of sexual talk or activity in the workplace are shaped by multiple forces. If television is one of these forces, however, the present findings suggest cause for concern. When bombarded by such images, we may come to accept the inevitability of such behavior, and view our own or others negative reactions to such activity as abnormal. Sex in the workplace is clearly not always unappreciated or inappropriate, and some work settings may be more accepting of sexual re-

marks and behaviors than others. However, given that the potential consequences of sexual harassment are so severe, and most likely to impact young single women insecure in their employment, it is frustrating to see that this genre of television programming clearly sends the message that sexual remarks and activity are always welcomed and a common and enjoyable part of the workplace environment.

So, as American television continues in its sexual growth spurt, social scientists should continue to explore the potential ramifications of this development. Future research in this area should explore whether heavy viewing of TV programs laden with sex in the workplace affects perceptions about the degree to which such behavior occurs and is acceptable in “real life.” Do we see television’s content as a mirror reflecting real world behavior or simply as light hearted fun or escape? Although the present study was limited to primetime comedies, viewers may actually see dramatic programming as more true-to-life, and research suggests that media effects are likely to be greatest when adolescents consider them realistic (Huston, Wartella & Donerstein 1998 as cited in Greenberg & Hofschire 2000). It would be very interesting to see whether young viewers would evaluate the acceptability of various scenarios depicting sex in the workplace differently if they thought it was real versus just a television program. Given that research suggests that sexual content on television does teach youth about sexuality, entice them to view programs depicting sexual activity, and cultivate attitudes and beliefs more similar to the TV world than the real world, it seems reasonable to be concerned that they may learn from television that sex in the workplace is not only common and acceptable, but also to be tolerated and even enjoyed.

Notes

1. The coding scheme is available from the first author upon request at afcb1@uaa.alaska.edu.

References

- Brown, J. D. & S. F. Newcomer. (1991). Television and Adolescents’ Sexual Behavior. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 21: 77-91.

- Bryant, J. & S. C. Rockwell. (1994). Effects of Massive Exposure to Sexually-oriented Primetime Television Programming on Adolescents' Moral Judgment. In D. Zillman, J. Bryant and A. C. Huston (Eds.), *Media, Children and the Family: Social Scientific, Psychodynamic, and Clinical Perspectives* (pp. 183-195). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Canadian Press*. (9 April 2001). Fox Television Enjoys Ratings Revival as Viewers are attracted by Fresh Programs.
- Carveth, R. & A. Alexander. (1985). Soap Opera Viewing Motivations and the Cultivation Process. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 29(3): 259-273.
- Charney, D.A. & R. C. Russell. (1994). An Overview of Sexual Harassment. *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 151(1): 10-17.
- Dansky, B. S. & D. G. Kilpatrick. (1997). Effects of Sexual Harassment. In W. T. O'Donohue (Ed.), *Sexual Harassment: Theory, Research and Treatment* (pp. 152-174). Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon.
- Gerbner, G., L. Gross, M. Morgan & N. Signorelli. (1994). Growing Up with Television: The Cultivation Perspective. In D. Zillman and J. Bryant (Eds.), *Media Effects: Advances in Theory and Research* (pp. 17-41). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Grauerholz, E. & A. King. (1997). Primetime Sexual Harassment. *Violence Against Women*, 3(2): 129-146.
- Goleman, D. (22 October 1991). Sexual Harassment: It's about Power, not Lust. *New York Times*, C1, C12.
- Greenberg, B. S. & L. Hofschire. (2000). Sex on Entertainment Television. In D. Zillman and P. Vorderer (Eds.), *Media Entertainment: The Psychology of its Appeal* (pp. 93-111). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Greenberg, B. S., R. Linsangan & A. Soderman. (1993). Adolescents' Reaction to Television Sex. In B. S. Greenberg, J. D. Brown and N. L. Buerkel-Rothfuss (Eds.), *Media, Sex and the Adolescent* (pp. 196-224). Creskill, NJ: Hampton Press.
- Gruber, J. E. & Smith. (1995). Women's Responses to Sexual Harassment: A Multivariate Approach. *Basic and Applied Social Psychology*, 17: 543-562.
- Kunkel, D., K. M. Cope & E. Biely. (1999). Sexual Messages on Television: Comparing Findings from Three Studies. *The Journal of Sex Research*, 26(3): 230-236.
- Kunkel, D., K. Cope-Farrar, E. Biely, W. J. M. Farinola & E. Donnerstein, E. (2001). *Sex on TV 2*. Washington DC: The Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation.
- O'Hare, E.A. & W. O'Donohue. (1998). Sexual Harassment: Identifying Risk Factors. *Archives of Sexual Behaviors*, 27(6): 561-580.
- Thacker, R. A. & S. F. Gohmann. (1996). Emotional and Psychological Consequences of Sexual Harassment: A Deceptive Study. *The Journal of Psychology*, 130(4): 429-446.
- Ward, M. & R. Rivadeneyra. (1999). Contributions of Entertainment Television to Adolescents' Sexual Attitudes and Experiences: The Role of Viewing Amount versus Viewer Involvement. *The Journal of Sex Research*, 36(3): 237-249.



