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Published online: 04 May 2023.

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Making Sense of Sexual Harassment Over Time: Young Women's and Nonbinary People's Accounts in 2000 and 2021

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ABSTRACT

The #metoo movement and various other social media campaigns have made sexual harassment increasingly visible in recent years. Such collective practices of naming and thereby resisting sexual harassment have been made possible by feminist discourses that have enabled the linking of personal experiences to gendered social structures. In this paper, we examine temporal shifts in young people's accounts of sexual harassment based on two datasets generated by 15–16-year-old girls and nonbinary people which were collected 20 years apart (2000 and 2021) in Finland. We draw on poststructuralist discourse theory, intersectionality and Sara Ahmed's writings on complaints in analysing the participants' positions in relation to sexual harassment. Notably, in the 2000 dataset, the participants emphasized individual agency and responsibility, whereas in the 2021 dataset, they acknowledged gendered and intersectional patterns in victimization and actively resisted victim-blaming and silencing. We conclude that the positions the participants held in the two datasets differ specifically in the extent to which they are informed by feminist discourses and the extent to which sexual harassment is seen as warranting and legitimating complaint.

Introduction

There has been much debate about what constitutes sexual harassment, and understandings of it have shifted over time (Eyre, 2000). However, with second-wave feminism's consciousness-raising movement in the 1960s and 1970s, it came to be understood as unwanted sexual attention and behaviours that plays an important role in the reproduction of gendered power relations (McKinnon, 2016). This conceptualization linked previously unspeakable, invisible and private experiences to gendered structures that can be changed (Thomas & Kitzinger, 1997), thereby challenging the hegemonic discourses and practices which work to maintain the invisibility of sexual harassment (Gavey, 2019). From 2017 onwards, feminist understandings of sexual harassment gained particular traction with the #metoo movement, which exposed how commonplace it is and struggled for legal redress against men who sexually harass (Lazard, 2020).

We trace continuities and discontinuities in sense-making about sexual harassment that have been enabled by discursive shifts over the first two decades of the twenty-first century. We do this

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by analysing young women's and nonbinary people's accounts of sexual harassment from datasets produced in Finland in 2000 and 2021. Over that period, the burgeoning of social media has given young people new ways of disclosing sexual harassment and criticizing the inequalities of hetero-sexist power relations (e.g. Clark-Parsons, 2021; Mendes et al., 2018). Recent studies on young people's digital feminist activism against sexual harassment, violence and rape culture have high-lighted the youths' increased capacity to label and speak against these phenomena (Jackson, 2018; Sills et al., 2016).

However, the increasing visibility of sexual harassment on social media does not necessarily translate into widespread awareness of how it expresses itself in young people's everyday lives. Rather, sexual harassment is much more likely to be recognized for middle-class white women than it is for other people (Mendes et al., 2018). This is exemplified by the systemic forgetting of the fact that it was the Black feminist activist Tarana Burke who first used the phrase "me too" in 2006 in an effort to highlight the experiences of Black women and girls who had survived sexual violence—a decade before the #metoo movement became an international viral phenomenon (Burke, 2017). #Metoo focuses on the experiences of privileged women (Davis & Zarkov, 2017). It is thus important to take an intersectional perspective in analysing how one makes sense of sexual harassment, as those making sense of it are positioned by race, class, ethnicity, gender identity, migration status and generational difference.

Our analyses are therefore intersectional, recognizing that everyone is always simultaneously positioned in various social categories (Collins & Bilge, 2020). We use this perspective to nuance our primary, poststructuralist theoretical lens (e.g. Foucault, 1980; Weedon, 1987). Poststructuralism highlights the interlinkages of knowledge, power and discourses in the unfolding of sense-making in its socio-historical contexts. Our starting point is Foucault's (1977) notion of "conditions of possibility", which emphasizes the socio-historical contingency of both sense-making and the reality within which it is situated. Based on this idea, we view each of the studied historical time periods (2000 and 2021) as characterized by the availability and dominance of particular kinds of discourses. Discourses, in the Foucauldian sense, are systems of meaning-making that construct their objects in particular ways and encourage certain kinds of knowing and acting that are inextricably linked with power relations. In poststructuralist thought, powerful discourses attain the status of truth because they are upheld by institutionalised—and thereby normalised—practices. However, the power attached to certain discourses is always met with resistance in the form of non-hegemonic discourses and the alternative understandings they make available (Hall, 2001). This means that a plurality of discourses that shape understandings and practices can be found in any historical period, even though a particular discourse may momentarily hold a hegemonic position and thus exert more power than others (Weedon, 1987). The discourses that are available in a particular socio-historical context both enable and limit sense-making of phenomena such as sexual harassment and violence (Gavey, 2019); thus, their impacts and the power relations between them are traceable through the ways in which these phenomena are given meaning in accounts such as the ones we analyse.

We employ the concept of *subject position* to link intersectionality and the poststructuralist perspective. This concept refers to the fact that different discourses open up different positions in relation to the world and others, from which positions the discourses make sense (Davies & Harré, 1990). In occupying a particular subject position, one is identified, either by oneself or by others, as *a particular kind* of person, and thereby adopts or is ascribed a socially recognizable identity made available by the prevailing discourses (Hall, 2001). In this paper, we draw upon the idea that different discourses open up different possibilities for adopting positions in relation to sexual harassment and making sense of it from those positions. We view the positions from which young people make sense of sexual harassment as shaped by available discourses and intersectional power relations as well as by the ways any person is located in these matrixes of power.

Our analyses' third theoretical underpinning is Sara Ahmed's (2021) theorization of complaint. This was fuelled by her resignation from her UK university post because her attempts to have

student complaints about sexual harassment from male lecturers addressed were repeatedly ignored. The present paper draws on her analysis of the role of complaints about sexual harassment in breaking the normative silence that surrounds it and fostering resistance to silencing. Ahmed suggests that complaining can be a fight for justice and change, particularly when it is collective and opens space for others to complain, despite the difficulties and sometimes negative ramifications of speaking up. She makes a convincing case that the intersectional, collaborative, feminist labour of complaint is crucial to dismantling the racist and sexist structures that oppress those making the complaints.

In sum, our inquiry draws on three theoretical perspectives: a poststructuralist understanding of the socio-historical specificity of discourses and related subject positions; an intersectional lens; and Ahmed's (2021) views on complaint as collective resistance. From these perspectives, we analyze how young people's efforts to make sense of sexual harassment—and the positions from which they do so—are informed by different discourses, intersectional distinctions and power relations, and what kinds of possibilities for enacting collective resistance these sense-making efforts and posi-tionings are linked to. The next section discusses the Finnish discursive context for sexual harass-ment and feminist resistance. This is followed by a description of the two analysed datasets, after which their analyses are presented and then brought into dialogue with the theoretical perspectives outlined above in the paper's final section.

Sexual Harassment and the Finnish Context

This paper draws on studies that were conducted in Finland. Similar to other Nordic countries, Finland's national image is that of a progressive, "woman-friendly" welfare nation with high levels of gender equality in many areas of life (Elomäki et al., 2021). Since their establishment in the 1970s and 1980s, the state gender equality bodies have worked in partnership with women's movements to raise concerns about gender inequality. The welfare-state feminism and gender equality discourses have produced such idealized figures as the "strong Nordic woman" or the "Nordic girl" who is strong, smart and free (Oinas, 2017). From the 1990s onwards, these discourses were complemen-ted with the transnational and mediated "girl power" discourse, which was associated with a take-charge dynamism and individual empowerment (Aapola et al., 2005). While the Finnish feminist movement has feared becoming "co-opted by state discourses and practices", new forms of feminist activism that aimed to diversify gender, racial and sexual politics and to invite mobilization through social media emerged in the 2010s (Elomäki et al., 2021, p. 56). This echoes a broader shift in hegemonic feminist narratives in the Nordic region towards a stronger emphasis on antiracist, postcolonial, indigenous and queer perspectives (Stoltz et al., 2021).

The Finnish welfare-state feminism is well exemplified in public discussion of sexual harassment, which was initiated in the early 1990s when the concept was translated from English and launched by the Council of Equality Affairs. This was followed by reports on the prevalence of harassment as well as changes in legislation to address it. The focus of both the state's and academic research was first on adult women and workplace harassment, but in the 2000s research interest expanded to adolescents and young adults. A question on experiences of sexual harassment was added as a fixed question to the nationally representative School Health Promotion Study in 2010, thus allowing the monitoring of trends in the phenomenon.

In the 2019 School Health Promotion Study (Ikonen & Helakorpi, 2019), 32% of girls and 8% of boys in the 8th or 9th grade (15–16-year-olds) reported having experienced sexual harassment over the previous year. The numbers were even higher among sexual and gender minority youth, of whom approximately 40% had experienced sexual harassment. Other minorities, such as people with immigration background or with disabilities, have also been associated with increased vulner-ability to sexual harassment. In 2021, the number of girls reporting experiences of sexual harass-ment had increased to approximately 50%, with boys continuing to report at 8% (Helakorpi & Kivimäki, 2021). Results such as these have gained vast attention in the media and on social media,

where parallel concerns—especially over digital harassment of and violence towards young women —have been frequently expressed in recent years. In Finland, given the global #metoo movement, sexual harassment has continued to arouse attention and debate on social media; such attention and debates were revitalized in summer 2021 with new, more local social media campaigns.

These findings fit with those from other countries. For example, a study by the UK Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted, 2021) involving 32 schools and 900 schoolchildren found that 90% of girls and 50% boys had been sent unwanted sexually explicit pictures, and that 92% of girls reported that sexist name-calling was common. In 2020, a young British woman, Soma Sara, set up a website called "Everyone's Invited" following publicity about the widespread nature of sexual harassment in schools. The website aimed to give children who had been sexually harassed at school the opportunity to document their experiences. Volunteers were no longer able to manage uploading submissions to the website after having received 50,046 of them. What was painfully clear was that girls from all social groups had experienced sexual harassment, and that many hundreds of schools were involved.

The Studies

This paper aims to analyse young women's and nonbinary people's accounts of sexual harassment and to situate those accounts in time by drawing on two studies, produced 21 years apart, in 2000 (by Aaltonen) and 2021 (by Venäläinen). Both datasets consist of written materials produced by participants from the same age group (15–16-year-olds), and were collected in order to map experiences and meanings of harassment in the lives of young people.

The datasets have been extracted from broader corpora including young men's accounts. However, the present analysis focuses on young women and nonbinary people's sense-making because, as the Finnish School Health promotion survey results indicate (Helakorpi & Kivimäki, 2021), these groups are at heightened risk of sexual harassment. This is not to assume that young women's and nonbinary people's experiences and views can be equated, but to enable analyses that can illuminate commonalities and differences among those who most commonly experience sexual harassment.

The 2000 dataset was produced for research that was interested in how young people perceive and experience sexual harassment (see, e.g. Aaltonen, 2017, 2018). The data production process included collecting writings from 15–16-year-old students in the final year of a Helsinki-based comprehensive school (Year 9). The students were invited to write an essay on the basis of a short text that introduced them to different notions of sexual harassment and asked them to "discuss what, in your view, differentiates pleasant from unpleasant attention in relations between the sexes in particular". As was the convention for writing essays at school at the time, the essays were written using paper and pen. The participants were also given a short form on which to provide background information on their gender identity (on the basis of a girl/boy binary). Here, we draw upon the essays written by girls only (N = 53). The essays ranged in length from 58 to 627 words, with an average length of 244 words.

The 2021 dataset was also produced for a broader research project focused on meanings and experiences of sexual harassment among young people, with more specific interest in their situatedness in the #metoo era as well as in intersecting differences among young people. This dataset was generated with the help of an online form, the link to which was circulated by collaborating youth workers in municipal youth services, the services' social media channels, and those of various NGOs, between February 2021 and January 2022. The form consisted of questions designed to guide the participants' writing about the topic (focused both on their views of sexual harassment and its occurrence among young people and on their own experiences of it). The participants were also given the opportunity to write freely about the topic in their own words. The form included open questions about gender identity, age and minority group belonging, which the participants were free not to answer. The present analysis includes the responses of young women and nonbinary people aged 15–16 years (N = 47). Thirty-seven of these participants identified as

a woman/girl (both terms were used), and ten as nonbinary or as questioning. Altogether, 18 participants identified as LGBTQIA+, one belonged to an ethnic minority and one to a religious minority. The responses ranged in length from nine to 360 words, with an average length of 92 words.

Compared to the 2000 dataset, which encouraged participants to discuss the boundaries between wanted/pleasurable and unwanted/harassing attention or sexual behaviour, the questions used to collect the 2021 dataset guided the participants to express their views on incidents and experiences that have already been defined as harassment. They thus largely excluded, for instance, discussions of incidents/experiences that might be seen as falling into a grey zone or towards which the participants' may have been ambivalent. The instructions for the 2021 participants thus pre-defined sexual harassment as a problem, whereas instructions used for collecting the 2000 dataset were more open. However, the instructions that generated the datasets also had common features: In both sets, the instructions included examples, or a definition of, gender-based or sexual harass-ment. Some of the questions used as stimuli were also similar, asking, for instance, about the prevalence of sexual harassment among young people and solutions to it. However, the 2021 dataset also included a question about social media, which was not relevant in 2000. Furthermore, the 2000 sample participated in the study as a school activity, whereas the 2021 sample chose to participate online in their free time. It must, then, be kept in mind that the datasets were generated under different conditions.

Our analysis was guided by the following question: how do young women and nonbinary people make sense of sexual harassment in the two datasets, and how do they position themselves in relation to it in their written responses? First, each dataset was analysed separately with the help of these questions. For the second author, revisiting the 2000 dataset as the original primary analyst meant that it was read through a temporal lens which, itself, subjects the dataset to comparison to the present. Second, all the authors collaborated in bringing the datasets into conversation to identify differences and similarities across them, trace dimensions of change and continuity and note silences (e.g. Irwin et al., 2012).

Sexual harassment is a sensitive research topic and therefore requires astute ethical reflexivity. In keeping with feminist poststructuralism, we recognize that our own ways of producing knowledge as researchers are tied to our historical era, socio-cultural contexts and individual positionalities, although there is no room in this paper for a detailed exploration of these positionalities. Our positioning as feminist researchers has shaped our encounters with the datasets and motivated our interest in and reading of young people's understandings of sexual harassment in relation to feminist discourses. We belong to different generations from the participants in both studies, and we have tried to remain cognizant of this by attending closely to young people's sense-making and by reflecting critically on our ways of interpreting it through the theoretical frames outlined above. We followed ethical guidelines for data collection by acquiring informed consent from all partici-pants. The 2021 study was ethically approved by the ethical board of the university where the study was conducted (statement 32/2020), whereas the 2000 study did not require an approval, since acquiring one was not required by the ethical guidelines of the time. We have carefully ensured that participants cannot be identified from the extracts included in this paper. We use pseudonyms (chosen by us) to reflect the participants' gender identities, and we do not provide any further information about the participants, as this could jeopardize their anonymity. The extracts in the analyses have been translated from Finnish by the authors. The next two analysis sections focus on each dataset in turn. This is then followed by a discussion wherein we compare the analyses with the help of the theoretical perspectives outlined in the introduction.

Defining the Boundaries of Harassment in 2000

The introductory text used in the data production conducted in 2000 served as a broad starting point for the participants to think about the boundaries of harassment and differences between

pleasant and unpleasant, acceptable and unacceptable attention. An important feature of the essays was the participants' reluctance to use the label of "sexual harassment" even for sexual attention that was described as clearly one-sided, unwanted, unpleasant or "gross". The participants only used labels of "real" or "proper" harassment to refer to serious incidents involving violence, coercion and/or a deviant perpetrator. The young women discussed the spectrum of harassment and the grey area between harassment and non-harassment, distinguishing between unwanted attention that one "should not stand for at all" and attention that is perhaps unpleasant but "does not matter":

> There are many types of harassment and while some types are harmless, the others are not. (Sara)

The essays included both personal accounts of harassment and general opinions about what harassment is and what explains it. Personal accounts often entailed descriptions of how a participant acted when responding to an unwanted advance, or how she anticipated she would act if harassed. On a general level, harassment was often viewed as a distant and relatively rare phenomenon, and was made sense of from a position that we call *pragmatic*. From this position, sexual harassment was seen as an unavoidable part of everyday life. While some suggested that the problem could be tackled through educating young men, many considered it impossible to prevent or eliminate the problem or control the way other people behave. Boys' and men's harassing behaviour was made sense of in alignment with the male sexual drive discourse (Hollway, 2001), with references to "male instincts", men's naturally strong sex drives, and the "humming hormones" of boys of a certain age. Additionally, the young women constructed boys as immature compared to girls of the same age. This immaturity was taken as a mitigating factor in assessing boys' behaviour. The participants also made sense of harassment in racialized and ethnicised terms by referring to "foreigners" as likely harassers. They therefore constructed harassment as a non-Finnish activity by drawing both on discourses of Finnish gender equality and racialized discourses on gendered violence as originating in "cultural difference" (Aaltonen, 2018; Venäläinen & Menard, 2022; see, also, Stoltz et al., 2021 on the related concept "Nordic exceptionalism"). Finally, the participants drew on a pervasive Finnish discourse of harassment and violence as fuelled by alcohol (2006). The latter discourse was utilized both to excuse the everyday bad behaviour of peers and to make sense of more unusual incidents wherein participants had been subject to advances from middle-aged men:

> I think almost everyone has had an experience of feeling harassed. It's not a big problem in Finland. And you can always see how alcohol plays a big part in harassment. (Heidi)

In line with the patterns of normalization identified in previous research (Gavey, 2019), these discourses serve to excuse and justify harassment and position boys and men as not responsible for their actions. Consequently, they position young women as bearing the burden and the individual responsibility of recognizing, avoiding and devising ways to deal with harassment.

Regarding their personal accounts of experiencing harassment, the participants took up an individualist *street-smart* position that constructed them as knowledgeable and capable of coping with harassment, and thereby of individually or collectively resisting victimization. While breaking the silence around harassment was perceived as difficult to do alone (Aaltonen, 2017), being in a group was portrayed as allowing the young women to complain about harassing situations out loud in public places (Ahmed, 2021):

> I can chat and dance [with boys] but I don't want anybody to touch me against my will. At least I have been able to stop the gropers. [...] Once we were coming home by bus at night and two drunken men in their thirties entered the bus and started shouting at us and tried to grope. We told them off and luckily got off the bus at the next stop. (Anna)

The street-smart position was built with descriptions of managing unpleasant incidents without compromising the heterosexual desire to socialize with young men. This positioning aligns with popular feminist discourses from the 1990s that emphasized girl power and portrayed young

women as smart and able to mount strategies for dealing with harassment (e.g. Aapola & Kangas, 1996). In doing so, it effectively constructs these capacities as obligations for young women.

The essays included some vivid descriptions of incidents that left the young women angry and frustrated because they were repeatedly forced to negotiate what constituted acceptable and unacceptable sexual suggestions. The extract below is an example of an account where the quest for a potentially enjoyable interaction turns into an instance of warding off persistent harassment. The situation is described as frightening and risky, and getting out of it as requiring toughness and luck (see Odenbring & Johansson, 2019, on tough-girl feminism).

> We walked a while and then two foreigners came to us and started making propositions. I said no to everything and continued walking but my friend had been eyeing the other one so she started talking with him [...] One was touching me up and I said don't touch me which helped for some time but I had to keep shouting at the others so that they would leave me alone [...] I couldn't stand them so I left but my friend stayed for a while. I was a bit worried for her but she got home alright [...] If you are not tough they get what they want so you have to be tough. (Laura)

Both Anna and Laura positioned themselves as street-smart by specifying the age and ethnicity of perpetrators if it differed from their own. Their positioning therefore relied on intersectional distinctions in alignment with the discourse of strong Nordic girlhood and Nordic exceptionalism. While propositions from older men were usually met with disgust and disbelief, the young white women were more ambivalent about approaches from the men labelled as "foreigners" (see Aaltonen, 2018). Other examples of street-smart positioning included descriptions of mundane and recurring experiences that were considered irritating, even disgusting, but manageable features of life. The participants' capacity to see examples of harassment as commonplace required them to interpret such incidents as trivial, and tolerating them was considered proof of being strong. In these examples, recognizing and labelling harassment was presented as deciding whether or not the young woman felt she could tolerate the unwanted attention, and that it was not dangerous:

> I have not experienced harassment unless one takes into account the numerous flashers that have crossed my path. (Maria)

A pronounced version of the street-smart position was made explicit in comments stated from a position that can be characterized as *can-do*. This depoliticized orientation to harassment emphasizes girls' self-reliance and sense of agency, in line with post-feminist discourses and their tendency to responsibilise individuals (Baker, 2010; Gill, 2016). The can-do position was well exemplified in an outspoken essay that presented young women as active agents who could harass boys if they wanted to, and who should be able to manage and avoid harassment through making the "right" choices. This participant suggested that young people want to invest in their attractiveness and invite heterosexual interest, but sometimes the attention is lewd and unwanted. In her account, young women should be aware that they provoke the attention they receive by their clothing choices or their reputations. This was framed as distinctively middle-class social competence (see Aaltonen, 2006; Odenbring & Johansson, 2019; Skeggs, 1997). Speaking from this position, the appropriate strategies for coping with such situations were ignoring the advances, clearly communicating that they were unwanted, or choosing to tolerate "jokes that not everyone always finds funny". In other words, young people's complaints about harassment were invalidated by being attributed to misinterpretation or to the target's characteristics, such as over-sensitivity.

> If you say briskly 'I don't want to' it works but if you giggle and say 'maybe not' it does not sound plausible even to yourself. [...] It's just nice to be noticed. But if you have a certain kind of reputation you invite more attention. That's something you can affect yourself. (Sofia)

Finally, deviating markedly from the previous positions while corresponding to common positionings in the 2021 dataset, some young women took a position that can be characterized as *feminist*, whereby they made analytical and critical remarks about the unfairness of double standards or victim-blaming:

> I find it stupid if the target of harassment is accused, for example for wearing revealing clothes. People should be able to wear any kinds of clothes without any problems. (Paula)

This positioning is a combination of acknowledging the unfairness of sexual harassment and imagining a fairer world in which the treatment of young women is not dictated by normative notions of femininity, and in which young women are not held responsible for being mistreated. With this critique, Paula calls for change in dominant discourses that sustain victim-blaming, thereby aligning herself with feminist discourses on sexual harassment (Gavey, 2019).

Uniting Against Victimisation in 2021

In contrast to the 2000 study, most of the participants in the 2021 study perceived sexual harassment as violent actions that have severe consequences for their victims. Indeed, rather than "target", the participants generally used the term "victim" to refer to someone subjected to harassment, thus highlighting the unequal power dynamics at play. The sense of powerlessness commonly associated with victimhood was also evident in the participants' descriptions of instances of sexual harassment that they perceived as common or had, themselves, encountered. For example, Emily pointed out that sexual comments disguised as jokes are very common among young people, and that they do not stop even if one tries to speak out; one risks being labelled "overly sensitive". Gabrielle, in turn, remarked that it is impossible to escape sexual harassment because harassers are everywhere, thereby highlighting a lack of safe spaces.

Furthermore, the participants frequently provided exhaustive lists of different types of sexual harassment they had encountered or which they saw as common among young people. In doing so, they highlighted the vastness of the problem and showed their ability to distinguish sexual harassment from non-harassing behaviour. Several participants also listed various harmful consequences of sexual harassment, thereby making visible the injury it causes. This emphasis on powerlessness indicates a *vulnerable* position, which was present in the majority of the dataset's accounts, written both by young women and nonbinary people. The positioning is in line with feminist discourses' emphasis on victim identity, which however has gained varied nuances in different decades (Lazard, 2020). Whereas victim identity tends to be divorced from agency in public imagination, Lazard (2020) has shown that in 2010's the splitting of victimhood and agency has been less pronounced. These contemporary nuances are echoed in the dataset, where the participants emphasized vulnerability specifically in their descriptions of the occurrence of sexual harassment and their risk of being subjected to it, but adopted a much more agentic position regarding its aftermath. This is evident in Koda's remark, written from the position of a nonbinary person:

> HARASSMENT MAKES YOU FEEL ASHAMED [capital letters in the original], even though you haven't done anything wrong yourself. Harassment makes you feel subjugated, powerless, weak and worthless. Even a small touch can lead to big burst of emotion. (Koda)

Koda highlights the harm inherent in sexual harassment by emphasizing how it makes a person feel ashamed despite not having done anything wrong. By highlighting the illegitimacy of shame, Koda refuses to accept victim-blaming (in contradistinction to many of the 2000 accounts). Similar resistance to positions of responsibility was evident in several participants' accounts. Such resistance is enacted from a position we have labelled a *survivor* position. The labelling follows the adoption of the same term in feminist discourses on sexual harassment and violence based on an attempt to refute the passivity commonly associated with victimhood (Lazard, 2020). In the 2021 dataset, the survivor position is specifically based on resistance to secondary victimization such as being blamed or silenced. According to Lazard (2020; also e.g. Banet-Weiser, 2021), such resistance is a key feature of contemporary discourses on sexual harassment. This pattern of resistance can be interpreted as an example of discursively enacted complaints which challenge hegemonic practices of silencing, even though, as Ahmed (2021) illustrates, they are frequently met with further efforts to silence and subdue (p. 18–24; 107–108).

The silencing that follows from speaking out is made visible and problematized, for instance, by Kaitlin, who describes being treated with contempt if she tries to raise the issue:

> Sexual harassment is a truly horrible thing to do to another person. If you harass another person sexually, the other will always remember it and it will leave a mark. I don't think there's enough talk about sexual harassment and when I personally talk about sexual harassment, I'm just viewed with contempt. It is also downplayed that 'there is no more sexual harassment' or that 'don't bother to complain about such small things, there are bigger problems in the world'. I don't know anyone in my circle who hasn't experienced sexual harassment, which is really sad. It also bothers me that this thing is normalised and when one feels uncomfortable with someone and when another person is doing things you don't like and that makes you feel uncomfortable, it is said that 'boys are boys'.[...] I am really glad that these things are finally talked about [on social media]. (Kaitlin)

In addition to patterns of silencing, Kaitlin criticizes patterns of normalization, a term she explicitly uses in the extract. This term and the criticism it enables connect her sense-making to the vocabulary of feminist critiques of a heterosexist culture that sustains and legitimizes sexual harassment and violence (e.g. Gavey, 2019). Kaitlin's critique of normalization, and especially her rejection of the phrase "boys are boys" as an example of this, is quite different from the pattern of accounts in the 2000 dataset, which were more likely to excuse boys' harassing behaviour by drawing on the male sexual drive discourse (Hollway, 2001). What also distinguishes Kaitlin's account from, for instance, Heidi's account in the 2000 dataset (cited above) is the way in which the prevalence of sexual harassment is problematized. In Heidi's account, the ubiquity of sexual harassment was interpreted as meaning that, in practice, one should not allow oneself to be bothered by it. By contrast, Kaitlin describes it as causing upset (or even trauma), and stresses the importance of making sexual harassment more visible and resisting its normalization.

Kaitlin's remark that the phrase "boys will be boys" serves as a tool for normalizing sexual harassment was echoed in several other accounts, where the participants directly criticized gendered double standards in the ways sexual harassment continues to be publicly downplayed. With these criticisms of an unfair gendered patterning, many of the 2021 participants aligned with the *feminist* position, which was espoused by a minority in the 2000 dataset. The feminist position is understood, here, as making gender visible as a system that reproduces inequalities. It is therefore an even more explicitly critical position than the vulnerable and survivor positions.

> Sexual harassment is very, very common in my experience, although it should not be. Every single friend of mine (girlfriend) has experienced sexual harassment at some point in their lives. It's super wrong how girls should be careful not to wear revealing clothes and carry a knife, but boys aren't taught that kind of behaviour isn't ok? (Charlotte)

Charlotte highlights the commonality of sexual harassment among her girlfriends whilst pointing out that this is unacceptable. Seeing sexual harassment as a collective experience was a key prerequisite for collective feminist mobilization against it when the term was coined in the 1970s. This mobilization was fuelled by anger and an active desire to enact change in these gendered patterns of abuse, emotions also evident in much of the mobilization around #metoo (Lazard, 2020). Hints of such anger are, indeed, evident in Charlotte's and many others' accounts, where the injustice of responsibilising girls (Gavey, 2019) while not holding boys accountable is highlighted.

Similar ways of pointing out the injustice in the prevailing state of affairs is also evident in the following nonbinary participant's account:

> In my view it's appalling how many young people experience sexual and gender-based harassment, and that it's not intervened in or the punishments are very mild. (Sage)

Sage's account includes a broader critical commentary on the discrepancy between the widespread nature of harassment and the large number of its victims, on one hand, and the lack of societal response, on the other. Such expressions of frustration and disbelief abounded in most of the accounts, making them readable as politically oriented complaints (Ahmed, 2021) against societal wrongs.

In some accounts, criticism against the gender system was expanded with references to inter-sectional categories besides gender, such as the systems of privilege and oppression (Collins & Bilge, 2020) associated with hetero- and cis-normativity as well as racialization, though the latter was only touched upon occasionally and in passing. Mia, for instance, expressed the view that rather than young women being taught to be wary of men, white, cis-gendered, heterosexual men should be taught to behave properly. Katie highlighted intersectionality in patterns of victimization by stating that "the victims are usually those who do not fit into western, gendered beauty and fashion ideals". She also noted that her own belonging to a sexual minority specifically exposes her to harassment. Dale, in turn, when expressing their view on how sexual harassment could be prevented, called for taking boys' and nonbinary youths' experiences into account: "By creating a more neutral atmo-sphere around it, because I think it centres around girls too much. It is not taken into account that boys and other genders can experience it as well". Dale's comment bears traces of multiple discourses. On the one hand, calling for "neutrality" and attending to men's victimization resonates with gender-neutral understandings of violence. These understandings have been prevalent in Finland for several decades, and, especially in online contexts, are frequently mobilized for the purpose of disseminating anti-feminist views (Venäläinen, 2020). However, Dale's comment high-lights nonbinary young people's experiences, and is not accompanied by anti-feminist argumenta-tion. Spoken from the position of a nonbinary youth, the comment can be interpreted as an attempt to make sense of sexual harassment from the perspective of a nonbinary understanding of gender. As such, the comment resonates with increased efforts to rethink gender and sexual politics from queer perspectives in the Nordic region in the 2010s (Elomäki et al., 2021; Stoltz et al., 2021).

Shifting Patterns in Sense-Making and Collective Resistance Around Sexual Harassment

Our analyses illustrated the ways in which young women made sense of sexual harassment in 2000 and, along with nonbinary people, in 2021. We approached the participants' accounts from a poststructuralist perspective, linking them to the idea that different discourses and the associated subject positions (Davies & Harré, 1990) are potentially continuous in time but can also vary in their availability at different time periods. The young women in 2000 made sense of sexual harassment from pragmatic, street-smart, can-do and feminist positions. By contrast, the young women and nonbinary people in 2021 adopted vulnerable, survivor and feminist positions. The predominant differences in the positions between datasets align with the discursive transitions illuminated by previous research, and can be linked with the burgeoning of social media and the digital feminist activism impelled by #metoo.

From a poststructuralist perspective, the differences in the positions adopted by the young women writing in 2000 and the young people writing in 2021 illustrate temporal shifts in the "conditions of possibility" (Foucault, 1977) for making sense of sexual harassment. One of the key differences regards vulnerability: whereas the 2021 participants often highlighted vulnerability, the 2000 participants tended to repudiate it by adopting agentic positions, such as street-smart and can-do positions. This difference echoes shifts in the centrality of victim identity and its relation to agency in feminist discourses on sexual harassment that have taken place over the same time span. According to Lazard (2020), the 1990s and early 2000s were characterized by a reluctance to highlight victimhood, in line with postfeminist and neoliberal discourses (Gill, 2016), whereas the 2010s saw a renewed emphasis on it as the basis for collective mobilization. In line with these shifts, the 2021 participants' emphasis on vulnerability was frequently coupled with adopting agentic positions in their efforts to speak against practises of victim-blaming and silencing. Therefore, the differences between the datasets are specifically in the contexts and modes of agency the partici-pants express: Whereas the 2000 participants highlighted their capacity to fend off harassment in their daily encounters, the 2021 participants highlighted their capacity to critique secondary victimization in line with the efforts of contemporary social media activism.

Another key difference is in the participants' use of discourses that normalize sexual harassment: Whereas in the 2000 dataset, discourses such as that normalizing the male sexual drive (Hollway, 2001) played a central role, these were virtually absent from the 2021 dataset, replaced largely by explicit efforts to hold potential perpetrators accountable. Given these differences, it is plausible that #metoo and the discussions that it has entailed at least partly account for the greater clarity that the 2021 sample has about the illegitimacy of being subjected to sexual harassment. The spread of feminist discourses can also explain the virtual absence of normalizing discourses in the 2021 dataset, since much of feminist work has been focused on countering the latter alongside refuting the related dynamics of victim-blaming (Gavey, 2019).

The second theoretical perspective that informed our inquiry was intersectionality. The importance of an intersectional lens has been highlighted, for instance, by previous research showing that claiming the position of a woman victim is associated with white middle-class privilege and thus is not equally available to all women (Lazard, 2020). Intersectional distinctions were only occasionally explicit in our datasets, which limits our possibilities for engaging with them. However, they were evident, for instance, in the ways in which potential perpetrators of sexual harassment were discussed. In the 2000 dataset, sexual harassment was construed as more reprehensible with the intersection of age and gender, older men being seen as more menacing perpetrators than younger ones. Furthermore, the young women's obligation to fend off harassment was construed in alignment with middle-class ideals, and, most significantly, with the "foreigners" label, potential perpetrators were made sense of as more suspect by mobilizing intersections of racialization, migration status and gender identities. The 2021 dataset did not include similar intersectional patterns; rather, the responsibility was occasionally placed on "white cis hetero men", and intersectional patterns in vulnerability were occasionally recognized. This indicates an awareness of intersectional privilege attached to normative positions, much in line with contemporary feminist digital activism and the broadened Nordic feminist narratives of 2010s (Elomäki et al., 2021; Stoltz et al., 2021). Furthermore, some of the comments in the 2021 dataset moved towards a nonbinary view of gender identities, even though the binary gender categorizations remained in place for the most part. Such views were often presented by nonbinary youth, even though their views and the young women's generally aligned. Nonbinary young people's experiences and views of sexual harassment present an understudied area, which, regrettably, we do not have room to engage with further in this paper, but hope to see in future research.

Our analyses' third theoretical underpinning relates to Ahmed's (2021) theorization of complaint as a form of collective political action. This notion enables further identification of differences between our datasets. In 2000, collective action meant relying on girlfriends to help in avoiding or dealing with harassing incidents, while in 2021, it referred to making harassment visible on social media. Overall, in the 2021 dataset, the participants' accounts could be read as direct complaints about sexual harassment that included expressions of frustration and anger at a perceived discrepancy between the continuing prevalence of sexual harassment and increased disapproval of it. As previously mentioned, these critiques echo current social media activism around the issue (e.g. Clark-Parsons, 2021), and several participants did, indeed, mention having participated in such activities. In Ahmed's (2021) view, whilst making complaints is also currently restricted by constant practices of silencing by the powerful, sharing stories on social media, such as in the case of #metoo, facilitates telling more stories and interpreting one's experiences of harassment through the stories told (p. 280). Thus, collective feminist action has the power to turn individual stories into collective complaints. This turn towards collective critique is visible in the 2021 dataset, where there was a clear emphasis on the importance of a cultural change and on joining in shared efforts to challenge sexual harassment. This aligns with Ahmed's (2021) argument that complaint is central to dismantling racist and sexist oppressive structures.

In sum, the shifts in sense-making of sexual harassment and the positions adopted in relation to it that our analyses illuminate suggest that feminist discourses and collective resistance might indeed have become more readily available to young people within the last 20 years. However,

this does not mean that the positions made available by feminist discourses are equally accessible to all young people. There is a continued need to raise intersectional awareness of sexual harassment and to facilitate collective resistance to it.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

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