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# Sexualisation

## Abstract

One person treats another as a sexual being by responding to their actual or perceived sexual properties. I develop an account of *sexualisation* to examine this phenomenon, especially as it relates to wrongful treatment such as sexual harassment. On the account proposed here, one person sexualises another when they foreground that person's sexual properties. Some property of a person is foregrounded when it is introduced to the score of the encounter, following David Lewis's conception of a *conversational score*. Having developed a concept of sexualisation, I argue that unwanted sexualisation is wrong because it contradicts a person's self-presentation. Unwanted sexualisation is a particularly serious instance of this due to cultural norms surrounding sex and the practice of unwanted sexualisation.

Key words: ethics, feminism, foregrounding, self-presentation, sex, sexual harassment

## Section 1 – Introduction

Sexualisation occurs when one person treats another as a sexual entity (a sexual being or a sexual object) by responding to their actual or perceived sexual properties. While I develop a morally neutral concept of sexualisation, my focus is on instances of *unwanted* sexualisation such as the following.

> **Business Meeting**. Ashley is attending a business meeting shortly after accepting a job at a new organisation. The small team that she works with, most of whom are men, are also in attendance. The meeting is led by their manager, Bill. After welcoming her, Bill turns to Ashley and says: "You're very pretty, aren't you? I know the guys are very happy to have you working here. I'm sure you'll have a good time with them".[1]

> **Street Harassment.** "It is a fine spring day, and with an utter lack of self-consciousness, I am bouncing down the street. Suddenly I hear men's voices. Catcalls and whistles fill the air…These noises are clearly sexual in intent and they are meant for me; they come from across the street. The body which only a moment before I inhabited with such ease now floods my consciousness. I have been made into an object" (Bartky 2008, 55).

In these cases, the complainant is wronged in part because the perpetrator treats them as a sexual being or a sexual object against their will. In Business Meeting, Bill communicates that Ashley is sexually attractive, that her colleagues are sexually attracted to her, and that she will enjoy engaging in sexual activity with these colleagues. He casts Ashley in a sexual light, commenting on (his view of) her sexual capacities and sexual desires, and sexualises her male colleagues by implying that they would enjoy engaging in sexual acts with her. In Street Harassment, the perpetrators direct explicitly sexual utterances towards the victim.

[1] This is an entirely fictional case, and it is worth considering it alongside Press Briefing in Section 3.

My discussion of this phenomenon proceeds as follows. In Section 2, I develop a concept of sexualisation as foregrounding some (actual or perceived) sexual property of a person. In Sections 3 and 4, I argue that unwanted sexualisation wrongs the person sexualised because it contradicts their self-presentation. In Section 5, I examine unwanted sexualisation as a discriminatory practice.

## Section 2 – An Account of Sexualisation

I propose that a person is sexualised if and only if some actual or perceived sexual property of theirs is *foregrounded*. Following Erving Goffman (1959), Amy Olberding (2014, 293–94) claims that:

> "Self-presentation involves foregrounding certain features of ourselves, those features we sanction as how we want ourselves in the situation we inhabit to be understood, and backgrounding other features, those we consider inconsistent with our situation or deem irrelevant, less salient, or simply more intimate than what we would sanction for notice in a given situation."

In any context, we present certain properties of ourselves to others and we intend that our interlocutors respond to these properties. These are properties that we *foreground*.[2] Equally, there are some properties of ourselves that we want others to overlook or ignore, which we *background*. Self-presentation consists in foregrounding and backgrounding certain properties of ourselves. Successful self-presentation requires the cooperation of others; if other people comment on or otherwise respond to those properties one backgrounds, or ignores those properties one foregrounds, then they undermine one's self-presentation (Olberding 2014, 292–96). I describe this as *contradicting* a person's self-presentation; Person A contradicts Person B's self-presentation when A foregrounds some property of B that B prefers to background or backgrounds some property of B that B prefers to foreground.[3]

Olberding applies this phenomenon to sexist micro-aggressions reported in the blog *What is it Like to be a Woman in Philosophy?* One contributor reports the following incident:

> **Conference.** "When pregnant for the first time, and at a stage where this was showing, I attended a small-scale conference I'd organised…I was not able to steer a single conversation away from the pregnancy. Even explicit attempts on my side to talk about the topics of the conference or the content of the talks were quickly rebuffed by a comment or enquiry about my pregnancy" (Anonymous 2011; Olberding 2014, 293).

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[2] We might also think of foregrounding some property as raising this property to salience. I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for this framing.

[3] Many properties of a person are backgrounded simply because they do not come up in the conversation. For example, suppose that I am discussing work with a colleague. In this conversation, my family relationships are backgrounded by default because neither party raises these to salience by commenting on them. If my colleague did ask me about my family, they would not contradict my self-presentation because I do not have a preference to background my family relationships.

Olberding (2014, 293–94) argues that the philosopher's colleagues undermine her self-presentation. She foregrounds her role as philosopher and backgrounds her pregnancy, but her interlocutors focus on her pregnancy while ignoring her philosophical contributions.

Drawing on Olberding's concept of self-presentation, I propose that a person is sexualised whenever some actual or perceived sexual property of them is foregrounded. This raises two questions. First, how are properties of a person foregrounded? Second, which properties are *sexual* properties?

As Olberding presents the idea, commenting on or otherwise responding to some property of a person foregrounds this in the context of an interaction between persons. In what follows, I argue that it does so by adding the relevant property to the *score* of the encounter.

David Lewis (1979) draws an analogy between conversations and baseball games. A baseball game has a score, where this encompasses not only the familiar meaning of *score* as the number of points won by each team, but also the preceding events in the game and the state of play at that moment (Lewis 1979, 342–45). Understood in this way, the score of a baseball game includes all facts about the state of play that bear on the proper progression of the game. Crucially, the score determines which future moves in the game are permitted (Lewis 1979, 343; McGowan 2019, 28). For instance, Mary Kate McGowan (2004, 97) notes that the rules of baseball prohibit a player moving directly from first base to third base (they must first run past second base). If a player is on first base (which is part of the score of this game at that time), then it is not permissible for them to run immediately to third base.

Lewis (1979, 344–45) claims analogously that conversations have a *conversational score*, which includes prior contributions to the conversation and the state of the conversation at the relevant moment in time (McGowan 2019, 32). Like the baseball score, the score of a conversation includes "*everything* that is relevant to its proper development" (McGowan 2019, 28). Anything that a person has already contributed to the conversation therefore forms part of the conversational score. Also like the baseball case, the score of a conversation, in conjunction with conversational norms, determines whether subsequent contributions to the conversation are permissible or acceptable (Lewis 1979, 344–45; McGowan 2019, 32–34).[4] Whether it is conversationally permissible to make some contribution to an ongoing conversation depends on the conversational score. Following McGowan (2019, 27), I use the term "permissibility facts" to refer to facts about which conversational contributions are (conversationally) permissible and impermissible. I am primarily interested in two mechanisms by which the conversational score determines the permissibility facts for subsequent contributions: presuppositions and relevance.

One way in which the conversational score determines whether subsequent contributions to the conversation are permissible is the inclusion of presuppositions into the conversation. Lewis (1979, 339–40) claims that contributions to a conversation introduce presuppositions to the conversational score and this determines whether certain subsequent contributions are permissible. In particular, once a presupposition is part of the conversational score, it is

[4] Lewis (1979, 345) uses the term "acceptability" while McGowan (2019) uses the term "permissibility". They have in mind a notion of what is conversationally appropriate, rather than an ethical notion of permissibility (McGowan 2019, 111).

typically impermissible to contradict this presupposition without acknowledging that this is what one is doing (Lewis 1979, 339–40; McGowan 2019, 36–37). Suppose that, while entertaining guests in my home, I exclaim “there is another bottle of wine in the fridge”. Assuming that my contribution is not challenged, this introduces into the conversational score the claim that there is wine available for my guests to drink. This renders certain subsequent contributions such as “it’s a shame we’ve run out of wine” conversationally inappropriate because they contradict the established claim, which is now included in the conversational score.

Relevance is another mechanism by which the conversational score determines permissibility facts because it is typically jarring for a party to a conversation to offer a contribution that is irrelevant to the subject of the conversation (McGowan 2019, 31–32). By saying something about subject S, a participant in a conversation makes subsequent contributions about S relevant to the contribution, so contributions about S are no longer impermissible on the grounds of being irrelevant (McGowan 2019, 32). Consider two people having a conversation about the metaphysics of gender. One of them contributes “sorry to change the subject, but I tasted an excellent sauvignon the other day.” In doing so, they add a statement about wine to the conversational score in a way that changes the subject of the conversation. This makes it the case that wine is a relevant topic of conversation and makes it appropriate to comment on wine as the conversation proceeds, because such contributions are now relevant. The conversational score determines which contributions to a conversation are relevant, and therefore which contributions are impermissible because irrelevant.

In both cases, a person’s contribution to the conversation affects the conversational score by introducing a presupposition or changing the subject of the conversation respectively and, in turn, affects the permissibility facts for subsequent contributions. Hence, these initial contributions change the permissibility of subsequent contributions. McGowan (2019, 34) coins the term *conversational exercitive* for any “conversational contribution” that changes the permissibility of subsequent contributions to the conversation. In the above examples, the speakers’ initial claims about wine are both conversational exercitives; they change which future contributions are conversationally permissible by affecting the conversational score. McGowan (2019, 38) argues that most (perhaps all) conversational contributions are conversational exercitives because any contribution to a conversation will affect the conversational score.

I propose that some property of a person is foregrounded when it is introduced into the score of a conversation (or encounter). When one person responds to some property of an interlocutor, they thereby introduce this property to the conversational score. This property of a person is then a part of the conversation. Responding to some property of a person, introducing it to the conversational score, makes it the case that this property is relevant to the interaction, raising it to salience in this context. I suggest that this captures the phenomenon of foregrounding as developed by Olberding while explaining how particular properties of a person come to be foregrounded in conversations and other interactions.

Consider Conference. On my account, the philosopher’s pregnancy is foregrounded when it is introduced to the score of her conversations with her colleagues. When her colleagues ask her about her pregnancy, they introduce this to the score of their conversation. These utterances make it the case, according to the conversational score, that the conversation is

now *about* the philosopher's pregnancy. The philosopher's interlocutors make her pregnancy conversationally salient by introducing it to the conversational score, thus foregrounding this aspect of her. This changes the conversational permissibility of subsequent contributions about the philosopher's pregnancy. Such contributions are now relevant to the ongoing conversation because the score includes that the philosopher's pregnancy is the current subject of this conversation. Comments on the philosopher's pregnancy therefore serve as conversational exercitives; they affect the score by changing the subject of the conversation, such that subsequent contributions on the philosopher's pregnancy are relevant. At the same time, these comments maintain the philosopher's pregnancy as the topic of conversation, blocking her attempts to foreground her role as professional philosopher. Generalising this, referring to some property of a person makes this property salient to the ongoing encounter, which captures the intuitive idea behind foregrounding.

This applies to sexualisation cases. In Business Meeting, Bill's comments changed the conversation to be about the prospect of sexual activity involving Ashley and her colleagues. His comments constitute a conversational exercitive that introduces a sexual property of Ashley to the score of their conversation and thereby makes this relevant to their conversation. In adding this to the conversational score, he makes the conversation about the sexual properties that he attributes to Ashley. As a result, Bill foregrounds a (perceived) sexual property of his interlocutor, sexualising her.

Street Harassment raises complexities for my account in two ways. First, it is not well described as a conversation because there is no mutual exchange; the assailants hurl abuse at a person and she does not respond to them. Nevertheless, my account accommodates this as a case of sexualisation. There is a set of facts about the assailant's behaviour, which determines that certain subsequent responses are 'conversationally' permissible and impermissible. This is analogous to Lewis's account of a conversational score, and I will refer to this as the score of the *encounter*. The utterances performed by the assailants determine that this encounter is an instance of street-based sexual harassment and introduce to the score the assailants' sexual perception of a particular person and that they have aggressively shouted something sexual at this person. We can see that they have thereby changed the score of the encounter because their comments change the 'conversational' permissibility of subsequent actions. It is conversationally permissible (although practically dangerous) for the person targeted to respond in anger, or indeed for a third party to intervene, where this would not be conversationally permissible if the assailants had not perpetrated the harassment. The assailants' actions make it the case that the person's anger or a third party's intervention are relevant, warranted, and intelligible responses. This reveals that the assailants' harassment affects the 'conversational' permissibility of subsequent contributions to the encounter, and therefore that there is a *score* for this encounter even when it consists in the assailants hurling abuse without a response from anyone else.

Second, it is not clear that the assailants foreground a particular property. Bartky (2008, 58) observes that the perpetrators' "Catcalls and whistles" in Street Harassment "are sexual in intent". Even when such utterances do not amount to intelligible statements (as in the case of whistling and other noises), they nevertheless introduce the perpetrator's perception of the victim into the score of this encounter by uttering noises that are widely understood to convey something sexual, albeit non-specific, about the person targeted, and so foreground something sexual about them.

In Street Harassment, then, the assailants direct sexually explicit utterances at the victim and in doing so make actual or perceived sexual properties of the victim the subject of the encounter. This is not a conversation, but the perpetrators introduce the idea that the victim is a sexual being or sexual object to the score of their verbal assault. The perpetrators thereby foreground some sexual property of the victim by introducing this to the score of the encounter and do so against the victim's will.

Indeed, Bartky (2008, 55) reflects that "I must be made to see myself as they see me", where this contradicts how she sees herself and wishes to be seen by others. Also discussing street-based sexual harassment, Cynthia Bowman (1993, 537–38) claims that "The comments and conduct of the harasser…force this perception [of the target as a sexual object] upon his target." The account of sexualisation I have developed goes some way towards accommodating these observations. Bartky and Bowman both describe instances of harassment in which the assailants impose their own perception onto the victim. On my account, they do so by foregrounding some (perceived) aspect of the victim against their will, making the perpetrator's sexual perception of the victim relevant to the encounter.

The second aspect of my account concerns which properties of a person constitute sexual properties in the relevant sense, and so which properties must be foregrounded for a person to be sexualised. For the purposes of this account, sexual properties include a person's actual or perceived sexual desires and a person's actual or perceived role in the sexual desires of others. So, a person is sexualised when some individual foregrounds that person's (actual or perceived) sexual desires or implicates them in the sexual desires of others.

Foregrounding other properties of a person may sexualise them if these properties are generally recognised as playing a central role in sexual desire. In particular, certain body parts (genitals, breasts, etc.) and certain acts (penile-vaginal intercourse, oral sex, etc.) are associated with sexual desires to the extent that drawing attention to these body parts or acts can be sufficient to foreground a person's sexual desires or to imply that this person has a role in the sexual desires of others. I propose that certain body parts and certain acts are so widely assumed to be directly implicated in sexual desire, that foregrounding the 'sexual' body parts of a person or the 'sexual' acts in which they might be involved foregrounds a sexual property of that person.[5]

Sexualisation does not require that a sexual property is foregrounded in a way that presents this as desirable. For example, if one person says of another "they're so awkward; I'd never sleep with them" or "I hear they've slept with a lot of people at work", they thereby sexualise this person by foregrounding their sexual (un)attractiveness or sexual history. The first comment foregrounds a person's awkwardness by linking it to sexual desire, even though it does so in a way that presents the property as undesirable.

Finally, a person is sexualised when some sexual property of theirs is made relevant, even when the person in question does not have this property. For example, the utterance "they've slept with a lot of people at work" sexualises the person even if they have not done so. In cases of unwanted sexualisation, the perpetrator often projects their own sexual

[5] For one view of how these body parts and acts come to be considered sexual *by default*, see Robert Morgan (2021, 523–28).

perception onto the person they target, regardless of whether this corresponds to anything true about that person.

To summarise, sexualisation is the treatment of a person as a sexual entity. It occurs when some actual or perceived sexual property of a person is foregrounded, where the relevant properties concern a person's (actual or perceived) capacity for sexual desire and/or a person's (actual or perceived) role in the sexual desires of others. A property is foregrounded when a person comments on or otherwise responds to this property and thereby introduces it to the score of the encounter.

## Section 3 – The Ethics of Contradicting Self-Presentation

In this section, I argue that contradicting a person's self-presentation is typically *prima facie* wrong because it undermines their autonomy and instrumentalises them. In Section 4, I examine cases in which contradicting a person's self-presentation is not seriously wrong and argue that unwanted sexualisation is relevantly distinct from these cases.

I propose two reasons that contradicting a person's self-presentation often *prima facie* wrongs them; it reduces their autonomy over their interactions with others and it treats them as though they have value only insofar as they are useful to others.[6]

First, contradicting a person's self-presentation reduces their autonomy over an important aspect of their life. Cooperating with a person's self-presentation is important because they are then free to determine which aspects of themselves that they present to and withhold from others. A person whose self-presentation is contradicted will encounter a disconcerting lack of autonomy. They will find that they are not able to determine which aspects of their life are discussed or determine the capacity in which they interact with others. This is because successfully foregrounding and backgrounding aspects of oneself relies on the cooperation of others; if a person's interlocutors foreground and background aspects of that person in such a way that contradicts that person's own self-presentation, then the person' self-presentation simply will not guide or form the basis of their encounter (Olberding 2014, 290–91, 295–96).[7] When a person's self-presentation is contradicted, they are prevented from determining the role that they take in their interactions with others and from withholding aspects of themselves that they consider private or otherwise inappropriate for discussion. This infringement of a person's autonomy is often psychologically and emotionally draining. The person whose self-presentation is not

[6] I discuss sexualisation as a concept distinct from sexual objectification. However, my discussion here shows that there are significant similarities between unwanted sexualisation and sexual objectification; denial of autonomy and instrumentalisation also form part of Martha Nussbaum's (1995) concept of objectification as developed by Rae Langton (2009). I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer on this point.

[7] Discussing Jennifer Hornsby's (1995, 134–36) concept of "reciprocity", Kristie Dotson (2011, 237–38) argues that "Speakers require audiences to "meet" their effort "halfway" in a linguistic exchange" and that "the success of a speaker's attempt to communicate ultimately *depends* upon audiences". Following Hornsby and Dotson, I argue here that successful self-presentation relies on the cooperation of others, requiring minimally that others do not foreground that which one seeks to background. I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer on this point.

respected must either perform a role that has been imposed on them or engage in a draining campaign of asserting her own self-presentation against resistant interlocutors (Olberding 2014, 291–92, 295).

When a person's self-presentation is contradicted, they not only find themselves unable to withhold that which they wish to background, it also hinders them in instantiating any role or property that they wish to foreground (Darwall 1977, 38, 2021, 566; Olberding 2014, 294–95).[8] As a result, they are hindered in pursuing their goals in the relevant context, where pursuing these goals depends on them instantiating a particular role and having this respected by others. In Conference, the philosopher is denied the benefits of attending the conference *as a philosopher*, namely engaging in philosophical and professional conversation, because her colleagues refuse to cooperate with her foregrounding of this role (Olberding 2014, 295). Consider also the following case.

> **Press Briefing**. "Sen. Peter Lucido, R-Shelby Township, made the comments outside the Senate chamber Tuesday to a reporter from the Michigan Advance, while surrounded by a group of male high school students from De La Salle Collegiate in Warren. "You've heard of De La Salle, right?" the Michigan Advance quoted Lucido as asking reporter Allison Donahue, who is 22. When Donahue said she had not, Lucido said: "It's an all-boys school," adding: "You should hang around — you could have a lot of fun with these boys, or they could have a lot of fun with you."" (Egan and Gray 2020a).[9]

Donahue was not only compelled to expend a great deal of emotional energy challenging these comments and asserting her self-presentation as a journalist, but she reports that "it stopped me from doing…the job I wanted to do, and that was significant to me" (Sacks 2020).

Contradicting a person's self-presentation imposes significant limits on their autonomy over the aspects of themselves that they present to the world and therefore over their interactions with others. Limiting a person's autonomy in this way entails that their own preferences do not determine which aspects of themselves guide their interactions with others. Hence, contradicting a person's self-presentation without justification fails to give appropriate regard to this person's interests and preferences. It is sufficiently detrimental to their autonomy that there is a *prima facie* moral constraint against doing so.

Second, contradicting a person's self-presentation ordinarily treats them as instrumental to another person's ends, or *instrumentalises* them. The perpetrator treats the victim as though aspects of the victim's life and personality may be foregrounded for the purposes of the perpetrator and/or bystanders regardless of the victim's preferences. They thereby

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[8] See also Hanna Gunn (2018, 11–16) on "programmatic social-epistemic agency", which she defines as "our ability to be self-authoring in the roles that we can occupy within the social-epistemic domain of our lives…and the degree to which we can be effective in these roles", and which depends on the "cooperation" of others.

[9] Lucido responded that he was "not talking about anything sexual" and was instead "geeked up about the boys coming there" (Egan and Gray 2020a). He later claimed that his comments were taken out of context and then that he was misquoted (Egan and Gray 2020b). This case was also covered in national and international press (BBC News 2020; CBS News 2020), and by Donahue (2020) herself.

ordinarily fail to respect the victim as a person with non-instrumental value, whose preferences and interests are important independently of any use the victim may have to the perpetrator.[10]

By cooperating with a person's self-presentation, their interlocutor engages with this person *on their own terms*, respecting the person's preferences about which aspects of themselves are brought to the attention of others and made salient to their interactions. Cooperating with a person's self-presentation is consistent with recognising that they have their own preferences and goals, reflected in their self-presentation, and taking this into account in decisions about how to act towards them. When a person's self-presentation is contradicted, in contrast, they are not treated as someone whose preferences and interests are important independently of how far these may serve others. Instead, their interlocutor imposes onto them some role, which serves the interlocutor's ends, while disregarding and undermining the ends of the person whose self-presentation is contradicted. Contradicting a person's self-presentation thereby fails to respect them as an individual with their own independently important preferences and interests. It treats the person as valuable merely in terms of the role or function that they may perform for others. When a person's self-presentation is contradicted without good reason, they experience their interactions with others as being for the benefit of their interlocutors rather than for themselves. We might expect that a person whose self-presentation is consistently contradicted to develop a conception of themselves as existing *for others*.

Imagine that I am having a conversation with somebody and I am intrigued by some aspect of their private life, but I know that they would be embarrassed if I mentioned it. By omitting to comment on this, I treat them as though their own preferences matter. I respect them by considering their interests and preferences as generating a constraint on my own actions. If instead I comment on their private life and contradict their self-presentation, I treat them as though my own curiosity is more important than their preferences over which parts of themselves guide our interaction. We might say that I *use* them as an instrument; I act to relieve my own curiosity without properly considering their preference to background these details of their private life, and treat them as though they are important only inasmuch as they can satisfy my own preferences without due regard for their own ends. In so doing, I fail to give due consideration to the fact that they are a person with their own goals, preferences, and interests.

In summary, unwanted sexualisation foregrounds some sexual property of a person against their will and so contradicts their self-presentation. Contradicting a person's self-presentation is ordinarily *prima facie* wrong because it limits their autonomy and instrumentalises them.

[10] An anonymous editor raises an exception. Suppose that a person's self-presentation consists so completely in serving others that she would balk at the idea that she has value for her own sake. Her interlocutor responds by arguing that she is valuable in her own right and thereby contradicts her self-presentation. In this very unusual case, contradicting a person's self-presentation does not instrumentalise them, so I must propose that contradicting a person's self-presentation without good reason *ordinarily* instrumentalises them, although it does not *necessarily* do so.

Section 4 – Is Sexualisation Distinct?

Unwanted sexualisation wrongs the victim because it contradicts their self-presentation. However, this alone does not explain the severity of the wrong often perpetrated in these cases. Consider the following examples.

> **Jerk**. A group of friends are on a night out. One of them becomes increasingly intoxicated, issuing hurtful remarks to others. The following day, the group confronts their friend, the 'jerk'. The jerk is visibly embarrassed and states that he does not want to talk about it. Nevertheless, the group continues to talk about his behaviour and to request an apology.
>
> **Waiter**. A waiter seeks to take a patron's order, but the patron instead talks at length about their own life, relationship woes, and historical regrets.

The jerk prefers to background his obnoxious behaviour, but his friends insist on discussing it with him.[11] The waiter seeks to foreground their role as a waiter, but the patron refuses to respect this self-presentation. In both cases, someone's self-presentation is contradicted. Yet, these cases do not involve the serious wrong often perpetrated in unwanted sexualisation. Hence, I must distinguish unwanted sexualisation from these less wrongful cases.

In Jerk, the group does not wrong the jerk. The jerk wrongs his friends, and his friends therefore have a good reason for confronting him. The jerk's friends can respect him, appropriately considering his preferences and interests, while nevertheless contradicting his self-presentation by confronting him. When one person wrongs another, it would be unreasonable of them to expect those affected to overlook their wrongdoing because the perpetrator would prefer to background it. Hence, contradicting the jerk's self-presentation does not wrong him in this case. This could alternatively be described in the language of *claims*. Ordinarily, persons have a moral claim against having their self-presentation contradicted, but this is outweighed or does not obtain at all in Jerk, given the jerk's bad behaviour.

This is indicative of a more general account of when it is permissible to contradict a person's self-presentation,[12] although a proper development of this is outside the scope of this paper. There are two ways to model the permissibility of contradicting a person's self-presentation. On the first, it is *prima facie* wrong to contradict a person's self-presentation for the reasons developed above, but this is often outweighed or justified by countervailing reasons, as when foregrounding some property of a person is necessary for holding them

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[11] I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for revealing a complexity in this case. When the jerk performs the bad behaviour, he introduces this to the score of his encounter(s) with others and so foregrounds it, making it a part of his self-presentation. It does not therefore seem to contradict his self-presentation when his friends bring this up. In response, I suggest that his performing this bad behaviour on the night out introduces it to the score of his encounter(s) at that time, but does not thereby add it to the score of his later encounter with his friends the following morning. Hence, we can make sense of the claim that the jerk's friends contradict his self-presentation by foregrounding his bad behaviour, even though he foregrounded it himself on the previous night.

[12] I am grateful to Jamie Dow and an anonymous reviewer for raising this point.

accountable. On the second model, persons typically have a moral claim against others contradicting their self-presentation, but this claim can be nullified when the person in question behaves wrongfully. I have in mind something like Christopher Wellman's (2012) rights forfeiture theory of punishment. According to this account, persons have certain rights against infringements of their liberty and property, so criminal punishment can only be justified if the offender forfeits these rights by committing an impermissible transgression. By analogy, we might say that persons ordinarily have a claim against others contradicting their self-presentation, which they can forfeit by behaving unethically. I remain neutral here on how we should understand the permissibility of contradicting a person's self-presentation.

While I have not advanced a particular explanation of how the jerk's behaviour justifies the contradiction of his self-presentation by his friends, his bad behaviour enables us to make a principled distinction between cases in which it is wrong to contradict a person's self-presentation, as in most cases of unwanted sexualisation, and cases like Jerk. In cases of unwanted sexualisation, there is typically no good reason to subject a person to unwanted sexualisation that would outweigh the concerns from autonomy and instrumentalisation raised earlier. This does, however, reveal some cases in which unwanted sexualisation is not wrongful; namely when the person sexualised is held accountable for their own wrongful behaviour. For instance, suppose person A discovers that their romantic partner, person B, has cheated on them. B would much prefer not to talk about this. By insisting on talking about B's cheating, A foregrounds a sexual property of B, his sexual activity with a third party. A therefore sexualises B against B's will, but this is justified along the same lines as the jerk's friends contradicting his self-presentation.

Waiter presents a different problem to Jerk. There are many cases in which contradicting a person's self-presentation is only a minor wrong, best understood as a kind of rudeness. While it can be frustrating and harmful, the experience of having one's intended self-presentation overlooked typically does not involve the feelings of powerlessness, humiliation, and vulnerability often provoked by unwanted sexualisation. I propose that unwanted sexualisation is typically more seriously wrong than many other cases in which a person's self-presentation is contradicted due to cultural norms surrounding sex and sexualisation.

First, cultural norms treat sex as especially private (McGregor 1994, 235). In almost all known cultures, sexual genital contact occurs in private (Westin 1984, 62–63). In many parts of the world, there are strong social prohibitions and laws against (certain kinds of) sexual contact and the exposure of sexual body parts in public. Hence, unwanted sexualisation foregrounds some (actual or perceived) property of a person that, according to widespread cultural norms, is appropriately exercised only in private. I have proposed that contradicting a person's self-presentation reduces their autonomy and instrumentalises them. Unwanted sexualisation is especially disrespectful because it does so in relation to something deeply private.

The perpetrator of unwanted sexualisation reduces the victim's autonomy over how they present themselves and over their interactions with others even to the extent that they are not able to withhold something as private as their (actual or perceived) sexual properties. The perpetrator of unwanted sexualisation prevents the victim from maintaining a distinction between public aspects of themselves that they present to many others and

private aspects of themselves that they present to a select few. The perpetrator not only refuses to cooperate with the victim's self-presentation, but also prevents them from obscuring intensely private aspects of themselves and their life. This goes some way to explaining why unwanted sexualisation can make a person feel vulnerable and humiliated; it prevents them from keeping obscured an aspect of themselves that is, according to cultural norms, deeply private.

Contradicting a person's self-presentation also instrumentalises the victim, using them for the perpetrator's own ends without giving due consideration to the victim's ends. This admits of degrees. In Waiter, the patron instrumentalises the waiter by fulfilling their own preference to complain about their life without due regard to the waiter's preference to fulfil the role of *waiter*. Nevertheless, this instrumentalisation is limited. The patron does not act as though they are entitled to discuss the waiter's private life, but instead imposes one appropriately public-facing role (of listening to the grievances of others) onto the waiter in place of the one that they would prefer to carry out. Hence, many cases in which a person's self-presentation is contradicted are nevertheless consistent with granting significant consideration to their preferences and interests; they enable a person to keep private aspects of their life private even while failing to grant adequate consideration to the public role that they seek to occupy. In contrast, the perpetrator of unwanted sexualisation instrumentalises the victim more extensively. In these cases, the perpetrator treats the victim as though any aspect of the victim or their life, even something as private and intimate as sex, may be foregrounded for the perpetrator's own benefit. This demonstrates a more extreme failure to respect the victim. Hence, unwanted sexualisation is more seriously wrongful than other cases in which a person's self-presentation is contradicted, because it concerns aspects of a person that are culturally recognised as distinctively private, and so the undermining of autonomy and instrumentalisation are more severe.

Second, unwanted sexualisation is threatening. When a perpetrator sexualises a person against their will, the perpetrator demonstrates that they are willing to undermine the victim's autonomy and to instrumentalise the victim in a sexual manner, contradicting their self-presentation in a way that presents them as a sexual entity. The victim may therefore reasonably believe that the perpetrator will escalate their behaviour to further harassment and physical violence. Indeed, there is evidence that victims of sexual harassment, especially women, interpret unwanted sexualisation in this way (Avina and O'Donohue 2002, 72–73; Bowman 1993, 535, 539–40; Thompson 1994, 320–21).[13]

Third, unwanted sexualisation is often an awful experience for the person sexualised. They may feel distressed, afraid, panicked, self-conscious, humiliated, powerless, dirty, and disgusted (Bartky 2008, 55; Bowman 1993, 525, 537–38; Thompson 1994, 320). Discussing Press Briefing, for example, Donahue (2020) reports that "The situation made me feel embarrassed, it made me feel small", while Bartky (2008, 55) reports that the incident depicted in Street Harassment is "humiliating". In the long term, victims may suffer

[13] The extent to which unwanted sexualisation threatens is likely to depend on contextual features of each case. As an anonymous reviewer notes, street-based sexual harassment targeting a lone individual is perhaps more likely to be threatening than a careless comment made by a friend, even though the latter case involves additional wrongs such as a breach of trust. This also applies to the features that I consider below; the extent of subjective suffering and discriminatory wrongs will differ between cases. Unwanted sexualisation includes a diverse range of cases, and my account aims to accommodate this complexity.

depression, anxiety, stress, loss of motivation, guilt, post-traumatic stress disorder (Bowman 1993, 538), lack of confidence, and an undermined sense of self (Thompson 1994, 324–25). Unwanted sexualisation at work can be detrimental to the victim's career and inflict significant financial loss (Avina and O'Donohue 2002, 73). On the street, it compels people, especially women, to avoid public areas in which they have been targeted or feel unsafe, hindering their freedom to traverse public space (Bowman 1993, 539–40; Thompson 1994, 322). In many cases, unwanted sexualisation is distinct from other refusals to cooperate with a person's self-presentation because the person sexualised *experiences* it as far more harmful. Moreover, it is reasonable and proportionate for people to experience unwanted sexualisation in this way, given that the perpetrator wrongs the victim by undermining their autonomy and instrumentalising them with regard to something very private, threatens the victim, and, as I argue in the following section, often discriminates.

## Section 5 – Unwanted Sexualisation and Discrimination

There is a fourth reason that unwanted sexualisation is distinct from many other cases in which a person's self-presentation is contradicted. Unwanted sexualisation is highly gendered. Perpetrators of unwanted sexualisation are disproportionately men and victims are disproportionately women (Adams et al. 2020, 37–38, 74–75; Kearl 2018, 14–20, 31; MacKinnon 2007, 225–27). Hence, unwanted sexualisation targeting women is often sexist discrimination; the woman's self-presentation is rejected in part because she is a woman.

This impacts the dynamics of unwanted sexualisation itself. Unwanted sexualisation draws attention to and makes salient something very private about a person that they seek to background. I have argued that this undermines their autonomy and instrumentalises them. Where unwanted sexualisation targets someone because they are a woman, for example, it denies them the capacity to determine which aspects of themselves form the basis of their interactions with others because they are a woman. Equally, it treats them as though their own preferences are important only insofar as these serve the interests of their interlocutors because they are a woman.

Moreover, Olberding (2014, 296) argues that a person whose self-presentation is contradicted might reasonably infer that their interlocutors think that they are not suitable to occupy the property or role that they seek to foreground. After all, if one presents oneself in a particular role, and one's interlocutors instead draw attention to other parts of oneself, one is likely to think that they do not really believe that one is capable of successfully inhabiting that role. In Conference, the philosopher might infer that her colleagues do not judge her to be a competent philosopher, given that they refuse to engage with her *as a philosopher*. Olberding (2014, 294–300) also argues that women are more likely than men to have their self-presentation as philosophers contradicted because "the social identity of the philosopher is associated with male identity". Therefore, when a woman's self-presentation as *philosopher* is rejected, this might convey the message that she is a sub-par philosopher *because she is a woman*. This reinforces sexist biases and gendered exclusion.

Likewise, unwanted sexualisation can convey misogynist messages, given the historical tendency for women's sexuality to be emphasised above other aspects of their lives. Where workplace sexualisation consists in a refusal to cooperate with a woman's foregrounding of

her own professional role, it conveys that the individual woman is unsuited to this role, perhaps because she is a woman. For instance, Bill's remarks to Ashley not only draw attention to a perceived sexual property, but also convey the message that she should not have her self-presentation as a businessperson respected. In combination with the facts that women suffer unwanted sexualisation disproportionately and that many sexist stereotypes emphasise women's sexuality over their professional aptitude, Bill's comments may be interpreted as implying that Ashley is unsuited to her job *because she is a woman*.

In Street Harassment, the assailants refuse to cooperate with the victim's self-presentation as a person freely traversing a public space. They thereby communicate that she is deficient in this property that she foregrounds. In a broader systemic context in which street harassment is overwhelmingly imposed by men onto women, the message communicated is that the person targeted is not entitled to access and enjoy public space *because she is a woman* (Bartky 2008, 106; Bowman 1993, 526; Thompson 1994, 322–25).

Moreover, people of colour, LGBT people, and disabled people[14] suffer disproportionately from unwanted sexualisation (Adams et al. 2020, 40–46; Bowman 1993, 531–32; Kearl 2018, 18–19). When it is directed against members of these groups, unwanted sexualisation may be an instance of discrimination against a marginalised group and may convey oppressive messages about them. When a Black woman is sexually harassed at work, this might be an instance of sexist and racist discrimination (if she would not have been targeted if she was not a Black woman), it might convey the view that she is unsuited to her job role (her attempt to foreground this role is contradicted), and it might convey the message that she is unsuited for this role *because she is a Black woman* (the perpetrator refuses to cooperate with her self-presentation in this role on this basis).

Insofar as unwanted sexualisation is discriminatory, marginalised persons are also unable to achieve with their conversational contributions that which non-marginalised individuals often reliably achieve. For clarity, I focus on the case of a woman who faces unwanted sexualisation because she is a woman. Following Lewis, Lynne Tirrell (2018, 3–4) claims that language involves a set of games and speech constitutes a move in these games. However, these rules often operate differently for women; social norms dictate that women have different "game-assigned powers" to men, limiting what they are able to do in conversations (Tirrell 2018, 6–10). In particular, Tirrell (2018, 10–15, 22, 27–28) argues that women often find themselves unable to enact permissibility facts as effectively as men and that their contributions are more likely to be treated as conversationally inappropriate. For instance, a woman might find her idea overlooked entirely in a business meeting, as if her contribution made no difference to the conversational score. Alternatively, her colleagues might respond with surprise or disdain, as if it is not appropriate for her to make this suggestion, especially if she works in a male-dominated field (Tirrell 2018, 26). On Tirrell's account, the conversational norms that apply in light of the score are not gender-neutral;

[14] Many disabled people also suffer the reverse, of being overlooked as sexual beings and desexualised against their will (Lintott and Irvin 2016, 300; Santos and Santos 2018). I leave a discussion of unwanted *de*sexualisation for future work, but my account is well equipped to say something about this phenomenon. When individuals are disproportionately desexualised against their will, their self-presentation is contradicted; they seek to foreground some sexual aspect of themselves, or to have sexual aspects of themselves foregrounded to the same extent as a person without a disability, but find that others background this.

women often find that their contributions do not add to the score in the same way as men's contributions and that women are judged more often than men to have transgressed some conversational norm for the very same contribution. Women therefore typically have less "discursive authority" than men; they are less able to perform particular speech acts and to have these recognised by others (Tirrell 2018, 14).

On my account, unwanted sexualisation against women is an instance of this. By self-presenting in a certain way, a person performs a conversational exercitive, enacting or attempting to enact permissibility facts for their interactions with others. Specifically, they attempt to make the properties they foreground relevant to their interactions with others, and the properties they background irrelevant. Insofar as women are more likely to be subjected to unwanted sexualisation than men, the conversational permissibility facts that they enact by making their sexual nature irrelevant to their encounter with others are less authoritative; they are less likely to secure adherence by interlocutors. When a person backgrounds their sexual properties, they make a move in the relevant encounter with the intention of withholding their sexual properties from salience. Given the prevalence of unwanted sexualisation against women in particular, women are disproportionally likely to find that this move is blocked or disregarded. As a result, women are less able to reliably perform the relevant moves required to determine the basis of their encounters with others and the properties that others will treat them as instantiating. Drawing as it does on Lewis's conversational score, my account of unwanted sexualisation suggests that unwanted sexualisation against women is an instance of this phenomenon identified by Tirrell (2018, 14); women's discursive authority is disproportionately undermined.

## Conclusion

I have proposed an account of sexualisation, treating someone as a sexual being. On my account, sexualisation concerns the way in which a person navigates and presents themselves to the (social) world and the ways in which others may affirm or disrupt this. A person is sexualised when their sexual properties, or sexual properties that are attributed to them, are foregrounded and so raised to salience in the operative context. Contradicting a person's self-presentation is typically *prima facie* wrong because it undermines their autonomy and instrumentalises them. Unwanted sexualisation is a morally special case of contradicting a person's self-presentation because sex is distinctively private and unwanted sexualisation is threatening, often discriminatory, and experienced as especially harmful.

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