Sexual Harassment in Academia and Beyond: Causes, Consequences, and Change

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The #MeToo movement has brought a new wave of attention to the problem of sexual harassment in academia and other workplaces. Policymakers and organizational leaders are asking what causes sexual harassment, what its consequences are, and how it can be stopped. Knowledge from decades of sociological research helps us understand—and change—the reality of sexual harassment in academic workplaces and beyond.

Sexual harassment is a gendered expression of power, shaped by the ideals and demands of heteronormative masculinity (Uggen and Blackstone 2004). Harassers, more often men than women, appear to target those who challenge gendered power dynamics—including men who do not adhere to hypermasculine norms, women, and others (McLaughlin, Uggen, and Blackstone 2012; Roscigno 2019; see also Harassment at Its Intersections [www.asanet.org/news-events/footnotes/apr-may-2019/features/sexual-harassment-its-intersections]).

Organizational characteristics also play a role in shaping patterns of harassment. Harassment rates are higher in organizations and occupations dominated by men, and climates that create a perception of tolerance of gender and other forms of harassment (NAS 2018).

Workplace sexual harassment comes with severe costs to targets, other colleagues, and organizations. Targets of harassment may experience increased anxiety and depression, physical symptoms such as trouble sleeping, ostracism at work and career stagnation, and financial stress (NAS 2018).

Harassment harms employers and universities as well. Organizations where harassment occurs see reduced employee job satisfaction, lower organizational commitment among employees, increased absenteeism, and deteriorating relationships among employees. Harassment also undermines and is a violation of educational, scholarly, and research integrity in departments and organizations, damaging reputations and tearing apart friends and colleagues with “known” perpetrators in their midst (NAS 2018).

Organizations, administrators, and employees including chairs, faculty, instructors, and staff all have roles to play in changing this reality.

In a previous issue of Footnotes (vol 47, number 3), Sharyn Potter described the role of bystander intervention in addressing sexual harassment and assault (see Potter’s video www.facebook.com/watch/?v=221465858780186). By emphasizing bystander intervention, organizations promote the idea that we share responsibility for creating safe workplaces where all employees can thrive. Too often it is left to targets alone to speak out about toxic workplace cultures. But having supportive friends at work appears to serve as a protective buffer against harassment (Blackstone, Uggen, and McLaughlin 2009; Roscigno 2019).
Though targets should not be expected to speak out alone, academics do appear more likely to speak up when targeted than are those in other workplace settings. One small study at a single campus found that nearly 98 percent of faculty who reported experiencing harassment told someone—be it a family member, friend, colleague, or campus official—about their harassment experience (Blackstone and Gardner 2018).

College and university administrators should be aware of and heed academics’ propensity to speak up. Understanding that targets are likely to tell someone, albeit perhaps not an administrator, about their harassment experience means that at least some harassment programming should be directed toward those who support harassment targets.

Men and others who identify as allies in the fight against workplace sexual harassment and other forms of sexism have an important role to play. Programs focused on advocates and allies who work in consultation with women and other gender minorities can be found at institutions across the country. Advocates and allies commit to meeting regularly, completing education and training focused on issues of gender equity, and offering training and opportunities for reflection to others (see, for example, North Dakota State University Advocates and Allies Program www.ndsu.edu/forward/advocates_and_allies/).

The role of department chairs and directors in promoting a healthy and productive culture—for faculty, staff, and students—is also crucial, as departments represent the larger institution. Further, department climate plays a key role in faculty decisions about whether to stay or leave an institution, particularly for women (August and Waltman 2004). Department chairs can be proactive in creating an inclusive culture in which harassment and abuses of power are not tolerated (see the ASA working group’s handout for chairs www.asanet.org/sites/default/files/stopping_harassment_in_your_department.pdf).

Organizations can do more as well. Policies alone do not work; they must be clear and shared widely and regularly. Conventional forms of training are more likely to backfire than to stop harassment (see Tinkler 2018 www.asanet.org/promisesandpitfalls). Targets and bystanders who report harassment have to be protected against retaliation and job loss (see Dobbin and Kalev 2018 www.asanet.org/antiharassmentprograms). In addition, we know that harassment is more prevalent in organizations where more men than women are employed. More should be done, therefore, to encourage institutions and departments to recruit and retain gender minority faculty.

An institution’s administration shares responsibility for preventing workplace sexual harassment and responding when it occurs. Sexual harassment will not go away without large-scale organizational and cultural change, but there are actions that individuals, administrators, and institutions can take to move the needle toward such change.

Further information and an overview of sociological research on harassment: ASA Anti-Harassment Resources www.asanet.org/asa-anti-harassment-resources
References


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