

#MeToo and the ASA Working Group on Harassment

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“Until you are somebody, you need to wear a name tag.” That’s how I remember his first words to me at the 2006 conference, one year after I was awarded my PhD and started my tenure-track job. He proceeded to tell me that he didn’t need a name tag because everyone knew who he was. He turned his back to the crowded room, stepped in closer, and then discreetly fingered my chest and said something to the effect, “Just in case you didn’t know, the name tag goes here.” This occurred before I had even spoken a single word. Shocked by his supercilious behavior, I momentarily froze before stepping back and telling him that this conversation was over and that, in fact, I did not know him. I walked away before he could respond.

Later that day I attended a section reception. He was there talking to some colleagues that called me over. We were cordial and he eventually apologized for his earlier conduct. I accepted his apology and continued to socialize.

We ran into each other again at an informal gathering of gay and bisexual men at a nearby bar. As the music played and the drinks flowed, he sexually propositioned me. I declined and let him know that I was in a relationship. He laughed, showed me the ring on his finger, and told me that he’d be worth the infidelity; not because of his sexual prowess but because he had important connections. Relationships, he insisted, were key to publishing in top journals, securing recommendations from prominent scholars, and ensures tenure. After saying no (again) I prepared to leave. He then leaned in to whisper a veiled threat: If I wanted to be a success in my new profession I should join him in his hotel room. When I declined (yet again) he told me that I would regret it.

The next day he tracked me down and apologized profusely for his behavior the night before. He had done some intel and discovered that my partner was a prominent, senior scholar at one of the top universities in another academic discipline. He said he wouldn’t have propositioned me so aggressively if he knew with whom I was romantically linked. So, although the apology was addressed to me it was my notable partner that he felt he disrespected.

Our paths would continue to cross for years due to our mutual research interests. These encounters went largely without incident until he discovered that my relationship had ended. He confronted me at another academic social and yelled at me for not telling him that my partner and I had been broken up for over a year. Some harsh words were exchanged as I reminded him that I was under no obligation to keep him abreast of my personal life. At some point he followed me into the bathroom, grabbed me, and attempted to kiss me. I pushed him away. He told me that my upcoming tenure case was now in jeopardy because he or some of his friends would likely be called upon to review my file. I’d be lying if I said his threat did not worry me, especially since I stopped being invited to social gatherings and I would hear through the grapevine his disparaging remarks towards me.

As a researcher who studies sexual assault and as a member of the new ASA Working Group on Harassment, I know that the offenses committed against me were neither unusual nor particularly

outrageous. Like many others, a senior colleague targeted me for sexual advances at our Annual Meeting, and when those advances were not reciprocated the advances became increasingly hostile and resulted in professional isolation. And similar to others I did not feel comfortable sharing these experiences with either the ASA or colleagues in my home department. Despite the rhetoric of inclusion and diversity, professional organizations often create cultural environments that make disrupting the status quo risky—especially for young professionals attempting to establish themselves in a competitive academic market. Further, when leaders in your field are the ones doing the harassing, the harassed can feel acutely immobilized.

Understandably, most discussion of sexual harassment focuses on the more common experiences of women being targeted by more powerful men; and White women have been centered in the #MeToo movement currently taking Hollywood by storm. As a queer Black man, nevertheless, my experience highlights the need for a comprehensive understanding of the issues if we are truly committed to changing a harassment culture. Men are less likely to report harassment out of fear of not being believed and/or that their harassment will be trivialized. Also, if the survivor is a member of the LGBT community and is not comfortable disclosing their sexual or gender identity, he/she/they may feel especially powerless if reporting necessitates self-disclosure. Further, my own research consistently demonstrates that when the victim and the perpetrator are both members of a marginalized group the survivor is less likely to report the abuse out of fear of perpetuating negative stereotypes about their community. This can put racial, gender, and sexual minorities at increased risk for continued abuse.

Therefore, it is incumbent upon ASA leadership and departments to actively prevent harassment. I am motivated to work with the ASA Harassment Working Group to help establish policies and norms that will challenge and transform a professional culture that has long ignored or even tolerated harassment and the group is hard at work. For instance, we hope to model the proactive strategies of other organizations to empower bystanders to speak out, and encourage training for ASA section chairs and staff on how to report and handle harassment claims. We also call on conference organizers to rethink the goals and formats of social events, as preliminary assessments suggest that these events may inadvertently produce environments that increase the likelihood of various types of harassment. Also, we should consider improving mechanisms for reporting and ensure that meaningful sanctions, including revoking membership to offenders of our ethical norms, are deployed. In short, it is important that we don't force survivors to shoulder the responsibility of changing a culture of harassment. Individual responses alone will not solve the issue. This is an ethical obligation of our shared association to examine the ways in which power dynamics shape interactions within our membership in order to create a community where everyone feels welcome and free from harassment in all its damaging forms.

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