

Breaking the silence around academic harassment

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Academic harassment is a serious, yet unresolved, issue that not only affects targets (e.g. students, postdocs and faculties of various ranks [1]) but also the people around them and even the scientific community as a whole. There is often staunch defence and protection of harassers, mainly because of the federal grant, industry and foundation funding that is usually drawn in by the harassers. The common narrative is that the harasser is advancing science, mentoring future scientists and is simply too good to lose. Ultimately, in the eyes of the institution, the financial interests obtained through the harassers outweigh the harm endured by their targets. This virtually always results in the academic institutions stakeholders defending the bully and not addressing the rights of their targets. The unwillingness of the involved stakeholders to address academic harassment results in the lack of successful, fair and effective responses of the scientific community (and specifically institutions) to academic harassment: many recent reports suggest that sweeping the incidences of academic harassment under the carpet has been the common practice of many institutions to protect their interests [2]. These interests revolve primarily around reputation and money, thereby facilitating the protection of well-funded perpetrators and the resources they bring to universities. By contrast, the interests of targets – recognition, justice, safe and inclusive working environments and compensation – are hardly taken into account. Here, we summarize the main current issues in handling academic harassment, and the potential strategies that can effectively address this issue in academic organizations and ensure safe workplaces. Addressing and correcting academic harassment is long overdue!

Workplace harassment: a general overview

The harassment (and specifically bullying) process in various settings (including industry and academia) is generally divided into two major phases [3]: (i) the subjugation and control phase, where the target is

subjected to continuous and relentless attack on their personality via many methods (e.g. constant criticism, exclusion, aggressive and disrespectful communications, surveillance at work and beyond the workplace, lower performance markings and other systematic negative social acts), and (ii) the destruction phase where the orchestration of the demise of the individual takes place. In the destruction phase, unsubstantiated, vague complaints are being fabricated with the intention of attacking the integrity of the researcher/employee and to bully them out of the job via disciplinary sanctions, suspension and dismissal [3–5]. Most of the targets of academic and workplace bullying experience some of the predetermined manifestations of the bullying process.

As this phase evolves, paperwork and deliberate repetition of the malicious and baseless complaints (e.g. by managers and human resources departments) [6] result in concealing the truth and the power imbalance, and in oppressing, silencing and underscoring the grievance of the innocent, and very often female, employee. The intensity and regularity of the mistreatment, leading to psychological and health-related repercussions, makes employees numb; they have difficulties in defending themselves and protecting their mental health. Yet, the goal of the perpetrator is to eliminate targets through various unethical actions including dismissal, ill-health retirement, enforced early retirement, redundancy and obligatory resignation [3].

Issues in addressing academic harassment

The literature is rich in investigating the nature and root causes of various types of workplace harassment, including bullying [4,7]. However, recent systematic reviews on anti-harassment and non-discrimination policies in academia conclude that these policies have had no discernible effect [8–10]. In fact, scholarly articles about harassment in academia still issue the same recommendations as most did three decades ago, suggesting little progress has been made towards



sustainable solutions [8–10]. Available guidelines and reporting systems for sexual harassment and bullying are largely ineffective mainly due to a pervasive gap between policy and practice [11], which contributes to institutions protecting the perpetrators, while silencing and retaliating against reporters. As a consequence, high-profile academic harassers thrive in our science backyards as a rule rather than an exception, accompanied by the inevitable institutional betrayal [12] and (re)-traumatization of those who report bullying [13,14]. Ultimately, effective institutional change is prevented and, hence, harassment is enabled and facilitated by different stakeholders through the reluctant acquiescence of silenced targets. This leads to a fear culture among bystanders. On this point, it has been noted that those who are bullied face not only their immediate perpetrators but also a chain of enablers beginning with their immediate colleagues, and that bullying by superiors has a close link to bullying by colleagues [15].

When considering what feeds into the policy–practice gap in academic bullying, a number of factors have been reported [16]. First, targets of academic bullying and harassment are usually in dependent positions on their perpetrators: they often occupy lower hierarchical positions, are often precariously employed, have care responsibilities for others and/or have work visas contingent on their current position.

Second, the intersectional nature of vulnerability and dependency, as well as the extreme power differentials, between harassers and targets, are rarely accounted for in policies and reporting systems [17]. Finally, the interests of the institutions in which bullying, harassment and power abuse take place, typically align more closely with the interests of the perpetrators than with the interests of the targets [2,16].

Academic harassment is common even at the highest-ranking universities [16]. Take Harvard University, for example: for decades, some male professors at the university sexually harassed and intimidated students and staff [2]. The university only recently took action against the professors, one of whom is reported to have said to a female professor, ‘this would be a nice place for a rape’. This is not just an American phenomenon either. Lund University failed to act properly following multiple reports of bullying over the years against two powerful professors with influential positions across Europe [18]. As another example, in one infamous case at the University of Toronto, accountability for a bully remained elusive – related to the defence of his ‘unmatched’ publication output – even after professional misconduct was followed by research misconduct [19].

Whether the institution is ‘prominent’, ‘highly ranked’ or not, bullying is very common. For example, a recent large survey-based Swedish study (with 38 918 participants) on academic bullying revealed that 1 in 15 people have experienced academic bullying over the past years [20].

Such stories make the news far too often – limited actions against perpetrators, a lack of support for targets, zero accountability for the people who conduct the internal investigations, the latter simply another name for damage control and coverup. We have not heard examples of robust undertakings, including financial redress, aimed at healing the mental and physical damage that affects not only the targets of bullying but also their families.

In many cases, the people who harass and demean receive minor consequences, such as having to take corrective online courses, for example, on anti-bullying, anger management and/or anti-discrimination. They retain their positions, their status and their power. By contrast, their victims find themselves with few options to pursue their cases after reporting abuse internally because their institutions gave little or biased consideration to their cases [21]. In many instances, targets face retaliatory action such as negative, unsubstantiated or biased testimony regarding their own actions, with the aim to damage their reputation and justify the perpetrators’ actions [6,22]. One well-known process, for example, that undermines the empowerment of targets is gaslighting, in which perpetrators and human resource advisors, but also higher management, suggest that the behaviour does not constitute bullying, that the target is overly sensitive, or worse, needs to improve their communication skills.

External legal aid is rarely feasible for targets. Universities have the funds that targets do not have to pay for lawyers to defend them, and perpetrators are supported by public resources [23]. Circulating adverse publicity through the use of organized public relations departments is a process wide open to most hospitals and/or universities [24]. Targets, by contrast, are often forced to comply with the code of silence through non-disclosure agreements.

All of the above denies justice to targets of academic bullying and harassment who must cope with substantial damage to their careers and finances, as well as physical and mental health [16,25]. In addition, society as a whole is deprived of potentially useful scientific discoveries that are not being made because often innovative scholars from minority backgrounds are disproportionately targeted by harassment and bullying [26].

As a consequence, academia long suffered from the lack of information on the severity of academic



harassment. This lack of information, at least in large part, relates to the confidentiality of the harassment reports at institutional levels. Fortunately, scholars speak out and organize more and more, giving much-needed insights into how to move forward [5]. Because only a very narrowly defined group enjoys intersectional privilege in academia – mostly white, heterosexual men with few care responsibilities relative to those of female academics, who are well-embedded in powerful local networks [11] – it stands to reason that many people will be confronted with harassment over the course of their academic careers. The estimates are also unreliable because many people are pushed out of academia without getting a chance of reporting – this is the case, for instance, for many academics on fixed-time contracts who are working under precarious conditions. Similarly, scholars who are vulnerable to deportation, for instance, because they are on work visas, are unlikely to report bullying and harassment. Overall, for the scholars most vulnerable to bullying (e.g. PhD students and women) [16,20], exploitation and harassment, reporting will often be unfeasible. In stark contrast to the most vulnerable scholars, heterosexual, white men without disabilities ‘enjoy a raft of unearned benefits’ in academia that cannot be accounted for by differences in education, experience, hours worked, family responsibilities and other confounding factors [27,28]. Note that bullying appears to be related to power differentials more than to gender, meaning that the reason why perpetrators are overwhelmingly male is because men disproportionately occupy powerful academic positions. Obviously, women in powerful positions can be bullies, too [29,30]. To date, however, white men are also the ones most likely to reach the powerful positions in academia that are typically occupied by harassers and bullies because they are granted more career opportunities and feel more respected at work. Indeed, the study finds that this group experiences less harassment than people in every other intersecting demographic group studied. Accordingly, they will be less likely to have to report harassment and bullying, are less likely to face the emotional, psychological and financial violence associated with reporting and so are less likely to leave science.

For these reasons, it is not surprising that we still have serious harassment and bullying issues in our science backyard. To address this issue in a timely and effective manner, more coordinated actions are essential by powerful stakeholders, including (i) governments, and possibly (ii) strategic litigations, because they provide public resources to fund the academic system that offers survival benefits for mean and

mediocre people [31–33]. The importance of funds to support targets in defences against vexatious and unfounded legal action cannot be overstated. In sum, effective recommendations addressing academic harassment require integrated and collaborative action from multiple stakeholders in addressing academic harassment [5].

The reported high-profile harassers are hardly alone

The resignation of Eric Lander, the former director of the Office of Science and Technology Policy and White House science advisor, has resurfaced an age-old issue regarding bullying in the academic workplace. Lander is not alone. Many high-profile scientists have bullied people who work for them [2].

Might lessons be learned from examples of high-profile harassers? One may be that ‘second chances’ – reprimands, tiny fines – only enable more bullying. Another: even if a bully is evicted, many enjoy a soft landing [34], so it is realistic to ask not whether, but where, Lander will find safe harbour. Finally, after bullies depart, their enablers usually remain in power. For many such ‘bullies-by-proxy’ – including Deans and University Presidents – bullying represents a smooth path to a successful academic career [31]. After all, the colleagues who are bullied out of academia are disproportionately often those facing intersecting disadvantages, the great potential of innovative thinking and scientific progress coming from harassment targets is stifled. Institutions’ protection of harassers and bullies and their betrayal of those targeted by such behaviours, as well as the complete lack of accountability of universities for safeguarding academic integrity, send a strong signal to scholars, resulting in disillusionment, cultures of fear and hopelessness [29] – and, ultimately, to scholars leaving the sector [35].

What might seem a winning strategy, and one that is often attempted by targets, would be to shift the focus from an *economic* framework: that is the one applied by almost everyone in power within the system, to an *ethical* one: that is to apply a moral or ethical compass to the actions of the bully and to the suffering of the targets. Where can those who are harassed seek refuge? The issue is *where* the targets of harassment (specifically, of bullying) may find an entity that applies a moral compass, identifies the injustices and ethical transgression, and provides those who are bullied with both moral and practical support. Many bullied academics have attempted to search for such individuals in two areas. The first are organizations dedicated to academic freedom: university faculty



associations and national organizations for professors. Some of those who have been harassed and side-lined have been greatly supported by such national organizations [36]. However, examples of such robust support are rare [37].

A second refuge might be, one would expect, within departments of academical ethics (in hospitals or universities). Ethicists in these departments, ostensibly, are hired to question and challenge violations of ethical principles which arise within the institutions. However, clinical ethicists lack formal power within these institutions and hence, are vulnerable to retaliation; probably more importantly, as Elliott notes 'many ethicists have become such institutional insiders that the very problems they should be addressing are invisible to them' [38]. Hence, in practice, the hospital ethicists are, usually, passive witnesses to the destruction of targets of bullying.

Fighting academic bullying

Targets of academic harassment can arm themselves with some strategies including proper documentation of each incidence and seeking help from trusted and independent resources such as Ombuds offices and external organizations working in the field of academic harassment. Some key lessons that targets of academic harassment can employ to protect themselves and fight back are provided in reference [6].

Ombuds offices

One of the most trustable resources that institutions can provide for targets to share their concerns in a confidential manner is Ombuds offices [39]. Although Ombuds offices provide visitors with a highly confidential, independent and informal forum on their concerns and options, many institutions are not equipped with these offices. In addition, Ombuds offices have their own limitations in supporting targets, which are discussed elsewhere [39].

Independent organizations

In the absence of strong institutional support and integrated functioning among stakeholders, several organizations have been created to support targets of academic harassment. We, for example, established the Academic Parity Movement (<https://paritymovement.org/>), a non-profit organization dedicated to addressing academic discrimination, violence and incivility at their roots to ensure all bright minds can excel and progress. In the situation that countless harassment

targets' voices remain unheard, the Academic Parity Movement has a simple message: the same human rights that apply outside the lab, apply inside of it. The short-term goal of the Academic Parity Movement has been to increase awareness about academic harassment among involved stakeholders and establishing a platform where stakeholders and decision-makers can collaborate in better addressing academic bullying. For example, it is important to educate targets about what constitutes bullying and also about gaslighting, manipulation and the process described as DARVO (Deny–Attack–Reverse Victim and Offender) [40] – all mechanisms employed by perpetrators and people around them to lead targets of bullying into 'reluctant acquiescence' [41]. Scholars refer to 'network silence' around harassment. We increasingly understand that harassment and bullying are utilized by academics to eliminate unwanted competition and gain access to powerful positions [31,32].

The mid-term goal is focused on empowering targets to protect themselves and fight back against perpetrators and their supporters by (i) providing a platform for targets to share their experiences and receive support from one another and expert advisors, and (ii) providing legal support to selected targets in order to signal to bullies that they remain accountable for their actions. The long-term goal is to create a 'framework of integrated response, in which stakeholders, as responsible and response-able parties, could proactively collaborate and coordinate to reduce the incidence and consequences of academic bullying, while at the same time building constructive academic cultures' [5] (Fig. 1).

The Academic Parity Movement team consists of experts from a variety of scientific and professional backgrounds and locations, which is useful in understanding the many manifestations of academic bullying. When targets contact the organization and seek help, they are directed to one of the advisors who has knowledge/understanding of target's institutional culture and scientific discipline. The advisor sets a meeting with a target to clarify their concerns, identifies their goals and considers all of their options in managing or resolving their concerns to enable them to weigh their options and reach the decision that works best for their situation. The Academic Parity Movement team has also provided informal advice to over 700 targets in various disciplines. To date, we have focused on increasing awareness about academic bullying through journal publications with diverse readership. We also completed a global survey on academic bullying to better understand the root causes of the bullying issues [16]. Very recently, the organization started a





Fig. 1. Academic Parity's vision timeline.

target story series, where we share anonymized target narratives that can be useful for many other targets to protect themselves and the people of the circle of their influence.

Legal protection

Although the bullying behaviours are not ethical, they are rarely protected by strong and clear law enforcement globally. In the meantime, perpetrators are being protected by many resources (e.g. public) as their interest is intertwined with their departments and/or organizations [23,42]. However, there are some exceptions in pioneering countries that are making anti-bullying/harassment laws to better protect targets of workplace bullying. For example, in the European Union, Sweden was the first country to outlaw bullying at work in 1993. It defined bullying as 'recurrent reprehensible or distinctly negative actions which are directed against individual employees in an offensive manner and can result in those employees being placed outside the workplace community'. The Swedish legislation also created a duty for employers to swiftly investigate, mediate and counter any instances of bullying as well as to take preventive organizational measures. Sweden's legislative template was then followed by other EU countries which adopted legislation prohibiting bullying at work. The European Union contributed to the enhanced protection of employees via the adoption of the European Social Charter, the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights and the EU Health and Safety and anti-discrimination directives.

In the lack of direct law protection related to the workplace, bullying targets may seek protection by connecting the bullying they experienced with the following laws: (i) anti-discrimination law, (ii) human rights international and national (constitutional) laws, (iii) data protection law and (iv) domestic criminal law outlawing malicious communications designed to cause distress or anxiety to a person. It is noteworthy that

these laws and their protection level are country specific.

The protected characteristics of the anti-discrimination law (e.g. – s. 27 of the Equality Act 2010 in the United Kingdom) are sex, race, disability, gender reassignment, religion or belief, sexual orientation, pregnancy and maternity and marriage or civil partnership.

Human rights law protects the dignity of human beings, their personality rights, their physical and mental integrity, their freedoms of expression and association and the safety and health of workers. Both the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the EU Charter of Human Rights have specific dignity clauses, namely, Articles 12 and 1, respectively. In the Member States of the European Union, citizens and residents can invoke those rights directly before national courts.

Data protection law gives the targeted employee the right to challenge any unlawful processing of their personal data and thus any false claim made against them on the grounds that it is neither fair, nor accurate, nor adequate and relevant nor based on their consent (these are breaches of the data protection principles which are legally binding and enforceable). The employee has the right to object to any further processing of unfair and inaccurate information and to request its rectification or erasure. If the employer, as the data controller, fails to respect the rights of the data subject, then a complaint to the Information Commissioner (i.e. the national data regulator), and/or a judicial remedy, including a claim for compensation (e.g. distress alone could be a ground for compensation in accordance with UK case law), can be made.

Finally, targets can seek law protection through complaints such as malicious communications. This type and extent of protection through this law is highly dependent on the country. For example, in the UK, section 1 of the Malicious Communications Act 1998 (as well as section 127 of the Communications Act 2003) makes it an offense to send a letter or



electronic communication or an article of any description that conveys a message which is indecent or grossly offensive, or a threat or information which is false and known or believed to be false by the sender, with the intention to cause distress or anxiety to the recipient. Bullying through false and vexatious workplace complaints, therefore, targets may argue that they fall within the remit of this criminal offense.

The need to expose the names of validated academic harassers

As scholars of academic harassment, we suggest that revealing the names of validated harassers (e.g. through confirmation by institutional investigation committees) could help to (i) minimize harassment, (ii) prevent the formation of serial harassers and/or (iii) stop passing the harassers to new institutions.

In the past few years, the scientific community has witnessed reports of allegations of various types of harassments, including sexual and bullying, across the spectrum of scientific disciplines [43]. As mentioned earlier, almost all cases that reached the media were from strong (high-profile) perpetrators who were serial harassers for many years (and even decades) [43–46]. This is extremely disappointing for the scientific community, as the reports revealed the lack of proper institutional (and other stakeholders) actions to stop the harassers earlier. One of the main reasons for the formation of serial harassers in academia is the confidentiality of the harassment investigations, which is in favour of perpetrators. While targets have to deal with severe consequences of reporting the incidences of harassment, ranging from leaving the institution to tolerating the retaliation and/or mobbing issues [16,21,47], the perpetrators enjoy the luxury of the confidentiality of the harassment investigation outcomes and get additional chances to continue their positions/work with minor consequences (e.g. passing courses to fix the behaviour in question). At least from the recent scandals of academic harassment that reached the media [43–46], it is clear that such approaches failed to change the harassers as they subsequently focused on other targets [48].

Based on the above reasons, it is high time for the scientific community to demand institutions and funding agencies to reveal the names of the validated harassers. The US National Institute of Health, for example, has withdrawn funding from more than 70 harassers [49], but failed to reveal their names and affiliations to the scientific community. There are requests from many members of the scientific community to consider academic harassment as scientific

misconduct [50]. If researchers with a history of scientific misconduct are being reported by journals and other resources [51,52], academic harassers should not be treated differently.

Albert Einstein once said: 'The world will not be destroyed by those who do evil, but by those who watch them without doing anything'. This is why we need to take academic harassment seriously, working together [53] to ensure targets are heard, believed and supported. Similarly, bystanders and witnesses need to be more proactive regarding academic harassment incidences. People involved in mobbing (ganging up against targets) need to be held accountable for their actions. Finally, we need to address the relocation of repeat offenders, many of whom may go on to destroy more promising careers, and private/family lives.

Conflict of Interest

Morteza Mahmoudi discloses that he is a co-founder and director of the Academic Parity Movement (www.paritymovement.org), a non-profit organization dedicated to addressing academic discrimination, violence, and incivility. Dora Kostakopoulou discloses that she is an advisor at the Academic Parity Movement. Susanne Täuber discloses that she is an advisory board member at the i) Academic Parity Movement and ii) the Network against Abuse of Power in Science.

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