

Is there a culture of denial around sexual misconduct in academia?

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I write this from my office in a department of philosophy somewhere in the northern hemisphere. Beside my computer, the unshorn mug of Harvey Weinstein stares out from the cover of the 23 October edition of *Time* magazine. Beside his unpleasant mien are three words: Producer, Predator, Pariah.

Academia is no Hollywood, but it is also infected by a hidden epidemic of sexual misconduct. There is at least one sexual predator in every department I've studied in, or taught in, over 30 years. This is increasingly being acknowledged, but responses typically focus on teaching students about consent. This is hopelessly naive and dangerous.

Sexual abusers come in all ages, colours and classes. It's not necessarily the creepy old prof we need to look out for: sometimes it is the mild-mannered junior faculty who has a wife and young children and self-identifies as a "feminist". When I was 18, I was date-raped by a guy home from university for the summer. He went on to become a geography professor.

Inside this world, there is an ancient route by which sexual misconduct thrives. It is through faculty sleeping with, and then marrying, their students. Sexual harassment is commonly seen as being on a totally different planet from consensual sexual-romantic relations between academics and students, framed in terms of the understandable need for human connection, and requiring discretion and minimal intervention.

But it is not that simple. There is a zone of overlap between these poles that I have personally experienced and watched happen around me. Academics can sexualise the learning space to "prime" the ego-satisfying possibility of

being seen as sexual by their students. They can talk in seminars about personal sexual exploits. They can use case studies with a palpable sexual dimension, make sexually charged remarks in lectures, or openly share facts about their sex lives around the department.

None of this would even be on the radar of “sexual violence”, but it opens the door to low-level sexual harassment. This is because colleagues and students tend to respond, consciously or unconsciously, with amped-up sexualised conduct, thus normalising the sexualisation of shared learning spaces.

Then come the direct propositions. These usually go along with casual, did-he-really-do-that? touches of those students the professor finds attractive. When I was an undergraduate, I was propositioned by at least three male faculty members. On one occasion, I was on a crowded bus going to campus. I had to stand close to an elderly man, who was seated. He spent the entire ride speaking under his breath about my ass and thighs. I tried to move away but was jammed in like a sardine. Fast-forward to grad school and he turns out to be a distinguished professor – thankfully not in my area. Another female grad student told me he had offered her money for sex (something that also once happened to me, with a different academic, during his office hours). At his funeral, which we were all expected to attend, many off-colour jokes were made about how he loved women and how he had a collection of photos of them that he would show other male faculty if they were lucky. I wondered whether there was a picture of my ass and thighs in there. And was it labelled?

During my 10 years of graduate study, I was propositioned by five of the 16 academics in my department (90 per cent of whom were male), and was constantly sexually harassed. There was Professor X, who was married and had a son my age. He would stare at my breasts when we crossed paths. I would hug the opposite wall in the corridor, keep my eyes on the ground and hold my purse or binder in front of me. I never took a class with him.

Then there was Professor Y, who got drunk at the last seminar of the year, held at his house. When everyone was at the door preparing to leave, he made a speech about how all the students had been great and everyone had passed – except me, who would be required to stay behind and “do some extra work”. Everyone laughed. I tried to avoid him subsequently, although twice found myself on an advisory committee with him.

I could recount another 100 incidents, and every one of my female colleagues has similar stories to tell. I did not invite, or enjoy, any of this, and I stayed away from the department as a consequence. It reduced the number of faculty members I could even conceive of studying with – not merely because I didn’t want to be subject to their verbal or actual gropings, but also because I just didn’t respect them as human beings and didn’t want their name beside mine on a thesis. I had to change my area of research away from my interests and previous specialisations. My right to fair and equal education was, in effect, violated. When I spoke with the dean about it, she agreed but said (very regrettably) that nothing could be done.

My treatment also prevented me from spending much of my free time around the department. It is very stressful knowing that you should be making an effort to network – to kiss ass for professional reasons – but not feeling able to do so. At the end of my graduate work, I felt like I was alone rather than in a community – and that feeling has lingered to this day.

Yet some professorial propositions ultimately end up in a successful “coupling”: a falling in love. Indeed, marrying students was not at all unusual in my graduate department: at least six other male faculty members’ wives were former students.

When a student turns up as Mrs X or Mrs Y at the next departmental Christmas party, all the unwanted, even assaultive behaviour of the recent past is eclipsed and silenced. Calling the professor out on his prior behaviour is, at that point, perceived as an attack on a family man’s character, his wife’s judgement and their mutual, consensual love. Besides, everyone in Judeo-Christian cultures loves a redemptive arc. Complainants (there are always more than one) are framed as “colluding liars” and “bitches” (being involved in regular rape or harassment cases) and also

as “sore losers” and “just jealous”.

But the icky truth is that I know of no happy outcome that was not preceded by at least three “attempts” by the professor that the students in question experienced as sexual harassment. For example, after rejecting the advances of a professor at a graduate seminar, I had to spend a lot of time managing his fragile ego and staying away from him – which was hard because I had a class with him. Then he married one of my office mates, who quit and had an adorable kid.

Even in matrimony, the professor’s innocence is rarely more than superficial. I know of at least 10 cases in which professors marry two smart, sexy students in a row – separated of course by a few children and different institutions. Then there was Professor Z in my graduate school. He was married to a student: an office mate of mine. But that didn’t stop him, every year, from inviting the female teaching assistant he found most attractive – usually a new grad student who didn’t know enough to decline – to his house to “do various tasks” – always when he wife was out. One of those tasks was to sort his books. While the TA was doing this, he would sit watching her. On one occasion, he stretched out on the floor underneath her.

I bear no ill will to female colleagues that married my (our) mentors, or to colleagues that are currently bedding my (our) graduate students. But there are subterranean patterns of sexual misconduct, and great chunks of ongoing harm that take place by virtue of the damaged or deformed ego needs of mostly male faculty.

If we keep failing to look hard enough, and in all the right places, the epidemic of sexual harassment on campus will never subside. Because it has the best possible hiding spot: right in front of us.

The author is a female senior professor of philosophy.



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Well-intentioned efforts to stop sexual misconduct and harassment have created a legal apparatus that shares troubling parallels with the Inquisition

Citing the egregious case of Harvey -Weinstein as a “tipping point”, law-makers in the US House of Representatives and the Senate are crafting new rules on handling workplace discrimination that would change the culture in Congress. Mandatory anti-harassment training, enhanced anti-retaliation protections for staffers, and prohibitions on mediation are some of the policy changes being considered.

The question is, when does the effort to end sexual harassment do more harm than good? A sober look at how these policies have worked on college campuses reveals a disturbing trend. Well-intentioned efforts to stop sexual misconduct and harassment have created a legal apparatus that shares troubling parallels with the Inquisition.

The tipping point for college investigations occurred in 2011, when the US Department of Education began issuing a set of new guidelines for investigating cases of gender discrimination under Title IX legislation. As with the current push in Congress, the guidelines emphasised a zero-tolerance attitude through streamlined proceedings, enhanced anti-retaliation provisions and suspicion of mediation. To ensure maximum effect, all college employees became mandatory reporters: teachers were obliged to report on ambiguous evidence in freshman essays, and financial aid staff were required to pass on any private information that might pertain to a perceived sexual impropriety.

Not surprisingly, that zero-tolerance attitude has come at an enormous cost to the free exchange of ideas and feelings. With every employee acting as an arm of the Title IX apparatus, conversations with students must be punctuated with frequent reminders about the obligations of mandatory reporters. As if that weren't enough, the apparatus itself legitimises a culture of sexual paranoia. The only explanation for why each employee must stand on patrol is that men must be incapable of restraining their predatory instincts and women must be incapable of coping with unwanted advances.

But unlike other zero-tolerance policing efforts, such as preventing illegal drug use, there is no room for dissent. When Laura Kipnis, a cultural theorist at [Northwestern University](#), questioned the benefits of the Title IX policies in 2015 in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, students at Northwestern protested and called for her dismissal. She then found herself facing Title IX allegations. A reference that she had made to a specific case – one that had been written up in the press and was eventually dropped – resulted in her being accused of engaging in retaliation.

Kipnis delineates each step of the process in her 2017 book *Unwanted Advances: Sexual Paranoia Comes to Campus*. Unable to know who brought the charge against her, unclear about the exact nature of the charge and forbidden to bring a lawyer with her to the meeting with the investigating team, she discovered at first hand how basic principles of due process are easily abandoned when feelings run high.

After questioning her about the sources for her ideas, her “Midwestern Torquemadas” concluded that her essay had had a “chilling effect” on “survivors”. Pondering when “survivor” had replaced “accuser”, Kipnis describes the chilling effect on academic freedom. After the *Chronicle* essay was published, she was deluged with emails from professors “too frightened to say such things publicly themselves”. Academics, she discovered, routinely avoided controversial topics in class that had anything to do with sex, including abortion, rape law, incest and homosexuality, for fear of risking a Title IX investigation.

Under the US Constitution, legislators are granted immunity from prosecution for what they say; the framers of that document determined that opinions and ideas needed to be aired in order to create better laws. Given the experience on college campuses, that immunity might be challenged. Nobody wants to be associated with the likes of Weinstein. Few are willing to invoke the presumption of innocence. The tipping point may indeed have been

reached.

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Abusers make their victims feel powerless, but often it is a wider culture that downplays the impact of sexual violence that really silences women

I recently got one of those “who to follow” emails from Twitter, which uses clever algorithms based on your internet usage to suggest people you might be interested in. The first name on the list was a male academic who had sexually harassed my friend, a university lecturer.

This man is relatively well known in progressive academic circles; his professional and feminist credentials made my friend trust him. His harassment of her was a series of micro-aggressions: difficult to prove, but slowly corrosive of her confidence. She has found it impossible to take action against him, not least because – as my friend puts it – he is a “golden boy that everyone loves in academia and on social media”. She fears a backlash if she calls him out, because he will be supported not only institutionally but also within their mutual social network.

In my research, I have written about the way that silence was perceived as a female virtue in the Middle Ages, and how women were expected to silently bear sexual and domestic violence rather than risk shaming themselves and their families. Despite the span of centuries between my sources and the present day, I repeatedly hear troubling

echoes of that medieval past in the way women talk about their experiences of sexual violence. Recently, I have heard from several women who have felt unable to speak out about sexual assault at the hands of male academics. Many of their stories share a common thread of feeling belittled and marginalised by the men in question; one example is the student who was told by a male professor that she was “too pretty and feisty” to be studying law – before he groped her.

Abusers are good at making their victims feel powerless, but often it is a wider culture that downplays the impact of sexual violence that really silences women. The law student reported her assault to her personal tutor, who merely suggested that she avoid the teacher in question. Unsurprisingly, she did not feel confident about taking the matter further. In another case, a young woman was harassed by a fellow PhD student, who would barge into her bedroom uninvited to talk about his recent sexual conquests. The only advice that she received after reporting it to university authorities was to make sure that she locked her door. Another woman who contacted me said that her head of department had implied that she was “melodramatic” and discouraged her from pursuing a formal complaints process. In these instances, women were not silent by choice – they tried to speak, but were gagged by systemic failures within their institutions.

Even if a woman thought that reporting her experience might not be disregarded or dismissed out of hand, the same culture that emboldens some men to become abusers and permits institutions to brush wrongdoing under the carpet might make her feel that her suffering was not serious enough to warrant action. One woman disclosed to me that despite being raped by a male academic, she did not feel that he deserved to lose his career over what he did to her.

In academia, individual intellectual achievement can seem more important than anything: than teaching, collegiality, kindness. It can mean that “golden boys” are rewarded for their outputs while victims of their violence are called “over-sensitive” and see their own careers suffer, either as a result of stress or because their departments sideline them. For many female academics, staying silent is not a choice: it is a survival technique.

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The problem is framed as one of individuals rather than culture. The sector needs to acknowledge that it has been wilfully negligent

Academia in the UK has a serious problem with staff sexual misconduct. The 1752 Group was formed in 2016 as a research and lobby organisation to put staff-to-student sexual misconduct on the national agenda after we recognised that nowhere in the UK were higher education institutions developing effective responses to this issue. We are partnering with sector-wide organisations, including Universities UK, and working to develop national guidelines that will help institutions to prevent staff sexual misconduct and to respond effectively when it does occur.

We use the term “sexual misconduct” to describe forms of power enacted by staff (employed or contracted in different capacities) in their relations with students (and other staff, who are often in more junior roles). As well as sexual harassment, assault, grooming and sexual coercion, sexual misconduct might also include consensual sexual relations where the power imbalance between staff and students means that these relations can still have a negative impact on students’ well-being and academic engagement.

Data in this area are sparse. The Association of American Universities (AAU) in 2015 found that one in six female postgraduate students had experienced staff sexual misconduct, and we anticipate a similar prevalence in the UK because here too doctoral students are placed in long-term, proximal and dependent relations with individual staff members, in which misconduct can occur. The AAU reported that a high percentage of trans and non-binary students experienced staff sexual misconduct. Crucially, few data are available on the impact on students of colour.

We are partnering with the National Union of Students to carry out the first national study of staff sexual misconduct in the UK, and we will publish our findings next year.

Our work points to the serious consequences of staff sexual misconduct for students' equal access to education. Students can experience mental health issues, feel unsafe on campus, relinquish teaching work, alter or interrupt their studies, or drop out of education altogether. Yet existing structures and processes mean that the problem and its impact remain hidden. If a student makes a complaint to their institution, there is currently no requirement for the institution to inform them of the outcome, and universities routinely ask both students and staff to sign non-disclosure agreements that prevent any discussion of disciplinary proceedings brought against staff. These contracts create a culture of silence that protects perpetrators, even while the contract is often couched in terms of protecting the student.

Because of the sector's lack of adequate policies and procedures regarding the sexual misconduct of staff, encouraging the quiet resignation of perpetrators has become institutions' default response to misconduct. The problem is framed as that of individual perpetrators, rather than that of an entrenched culture of denial. The sector needs to acknowledge that it has been wilfully negligent in its responsibilities for safeguarding students and ensuring equal access to education for all.

Solutions to this problem are necessarily multifaceted. Recent research analysing 300 faculty sexual harassment cases in the US found that 53 per cent involved serial perpetrators, which suggests that a cross-university strategy is required. Fundamentally, responses must confront issues of power imbalances, and the procedures involved must be transparent and all actions taken must be made public. Based on our continuing research projects and casework, we offer a number of recommendations.

First, institutions should have a clear, enforceable and visible professional code of conduct. Second, policies in this area should not be subsumed within generic "conflict of interest" or "bullying and harassment" policies. It is essential to draft bespoke staff-student relationship policies that apply to all staff and not only to those with direct teaching or supervision responsibilities. Also needed are policies on staff-staff relationships that recognise the existence of power operating in reporting and line-management relationships as well as in more junior roles. Specific reporting and complaints processes for sexual misconduct are also necessary, feeding into the data reporting that should be required annually from each institution.

Third, non-disclosure agreements should never be used in cases of staff sexual misconduct. Fourth, anonymous and third-party reporting should have the power to lead to investigations, rather than serving solely as data collection. Fifth, students need support throughout the reporting process and beyond, ideally from an independent trained specialist.

Finally, institutions need to recognise and address how their organisational cultures support and condone sexual misconduct, even when there are preventive policies and training in place. There is work to be done in understanding the multiple cultures that can exist within an institution that can lead to very different experiences for students and staff across different departments and disciplines. Without this knowledge informing long-term cultural change programmes linked to policy and practices, sexual misconduct will continue to occur.

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I have reflected on the times that I have been sexually harassed in the academic world. But would I name names? Certainly not

First it was men in Hollywood and showbiz in general, then men in the UK Parliament – who will be next in the exposure of sexual harassment? Not many male MPs turned up to debate the matter in the Commons, and I imagine that not many would turn up if there were to be special meetings convened in universities, either. Sexual harassment is endemic in just about every profession, including the academic, because where there is an imbalance of power, there will be exploitation of the weakest.

Back in the 1970s, Malcolm Bradbury's novel *The History Man* depicted a womanising, left-wing sociology lecturer called Howard Kirk, and there was a lot of speculation about who was the model for that character. We all knew men like Howard Kirk, but we also all knew women who idolised them or, less frequently, tried to exploit them in turn, so as to ensure decent essay grades.

I have reflected in the past week or so on the various times that I have been sexually harassed in the literary and academic world. I came up with a string of names that includes some very senior men, including a handful of vice-chancellors, professors and well-known writers, as well as others lower down the food chain. I have been pinned to walls, groped at parties, had my bottom pinched, breasts fondled, skirt lifted – sometimes with joviality, other times with the intensity of lust, fuelled by alcohol. One man was so infamous for his behaviour that when he crossed the room at drinks receptions, I, like the other women present, would strategically hold a plate and a handbag so as to

employ jutting elbows as a defence.

But would I name names? Certainly not, and for two reasons. First, because I am a child of the generation that took this kind of behaviour as par for the course and so learned how to deal with it. I have used cutting remarks, the odd slap and the technique of grinding sharp nails across an offending hand. I have also on occasion bluntly told sex pests to “fuck off”.

Second, although such events were distasteful, I never felt in any danger. I remember being very frightened when I was 12 years old, going home from school and being groped by a stranger who pursued me the length of the tram, right up to where the driver sat. I got off before my stop and ran all the way home. I never had that same fear as an adult because there is a difference between being 12 and being 21, and there is a difference between serious sexual assault and gross behaviour. Also, I learned not to put myself at risk if it could be avoided, so going to someone’s bedroom or agreeing to work late in private was definitely out.

I suppose I thought that things had improved for younger women, and that the millennium generation of men were less crudely sexist than their elders: that the Howard Kirks of today were less inclined to grope and proposition their students

and colleagues. But I am told that while this might appear to be true, there are other forms of bullying and harassment that reflect the unequal power balance in academia. So while I applaud the women who are outing sex pests, I view with cynicism the suggestion that naming a few names is going to end what is, unfortunately, universally bad behaviour.

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