

It's time to recognize how men's careers benefit from sexually harassing women in academia

Becky Mansfield, Ohio State University, Columbus, OH, mansfield.32@osu.edu Becky Mansfield is a Professor in the Department of Geography at Ohio State University.

Rebecca Lave, Indiana University, Bloomington, IN, rlave@indiana.edu Rebecca Lave is an Associate Professor in the Department of Geography at Indiana University.

Kendra McSweeney, Ohio State University, Columbus, OH, mcsweeney.14@osu.edu Kendra McSweeney is a Professor in the Department of Geography at Ohio State University.

Anne Bonds, University of Wisconsin – Milwaukee, Milwaukee, WI, bondsa@uwm.edu Anne Bonds is an Associate Professor of Geography at the University of Wisconsin – Milwaukee.

Jaelyn Cockburn, University of Guelph, Guelph, ON, jaelyn.cockburn@uoguelph.ca Jaelyn Cockburn is an Associate Professor in the Department of Geography, Environment and Geomatics at University of Guelph.

Mona Domosh, Dartmouth College, Hanover, NH, domosh@dartmouth.edu Mona Domosh is a Professor of Geography at Dartmouth College.

Trina Hamilton, State University of New York at Buffalo, Buffalo, NY, trinaham@buffalo.edu Trina Hamilton is an Associate Professor of Geography and Co-Director of the Center for Trade, Environment and Development (CTED) at the State University of New York at Buffalo.

Roberta Hawkins, University of Guelph, Guelph, ON, rhawkins@uoguelph.ca Roberta Hawkins is an Associate Professor in the Department of Geography, Environment and Geomatics at the University of Guelph.

Amy Hessel, West Virginia University, Morgantown, WV, Amy.Hessel@mail.wvu.edu, Amy Hessel is a Professor of Geography in the Department of Geology and Geography at West Virginia University.

Darla Munroe, Ohio State University, Columbus, OH, munroe.9@osu.edu Darla Munroe is a Professor in the Department of Geography at Ohio State University.

Diana Ojeda, Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, Bogotá, Colombia, diana.ojeda@javeriana.edu.co Diana Ojeda is an Associate Professor in the Instituto Pensar of the Pontificia Universidad Javeriana.

Claudia Radel, Utah State University, Logan, UT, claudia.radel@usu.edu Claudia Radel is an Associate Professor of Human Geography in the Quinney College of Natural Resources at Utah State University.

The wave of accusations about sexual harassment and predation in media and art has shown that it is impossible to separate the art from the artist, sparking much needed discussion about “how the myth of artistic genius excuses the abuse of women” (Hess 2017). We have a similar myth in academia: that the contributions of a harassing scholar can be separated from his bad behavior. It is time to debunk that myth once and for all.

The Me Too and Time's Up movements that started in 2017 released waves of high-profile accusations about sexual harassment. Bursting the bubble of denial and doubt, the steady drumbeat of testimonials generated widespread awareness about how common harassment is in work and educational settings of all sorts, including academia (e.g. North 2017, Gluckman 2017). Drawing on this welcome energy and visibility, and against the predictable backlash (e.g. Garber

2018), it is time for Geography to confront the fact of harassment (Alderman and Dowler 2018, Lawhon 2018). As a discipline, we must address head-on both ongoing harassment and the cumulative legacy of past harassment.

Yes, harassment is extensive and it is harmful.

There is abundant evidence that quotidian and persistent sexual harassment is prevalent and has devastating professional and personal effects for the targeted person. A 2018 National Academy of Sciences report draws on scholarly research to document the painful experiences and myriad effects of sexual coercion, unwanted sexual attention, and gender harassment (i.e. not all sexual harassment is about sex acts). The report also emphasizes that women of color and gender non-conforming women face multiple, intersecting forms of harassment. These personal stories makes clear the rawness and range of women's experiences.

Such revelations also provide evidence of longstanding problems in Geography. Responding to the immediacy of *Me Too*, Karen Kelsky, of *The Professor Is In*, started a crowdsourced survey for people to submit personal stories about harassment in academia, and many of these stories are explicitly about Geography (Kelsky 2017). Well before *Me Too*, in a President's Column in the AAG newsletter, Mona Domosh (2015) collected quotes from geographers reporting their experiences of sexism, racism, harassment, and heterosexism. Geographers have published accounts of sexual and racial harassment in our field (e.g. Joshi et al. 2015, Mahtani 2006, Tolia-Kelly 2017), including personal accounts of their own experiences (e.g. de Mello Freitas et al. 2017, Liu 2006, Pulido 2002). Two decades ago, Gillian Valentine told in blistering detail her story of intense, invasive, sustained sexual harassment (1998).

Every story is different; put together they demonstrate a dangerous gauntlet so many of us run. Some men (and occasionally women) seem to see female (and occasionally male) students as a pool of sexual availability for themselves and for colleagues. At our conferences, departmental happy hours, and

other necessary networking events, serial gropers and stealth abusers ogle, touch, and otherwise harass women (Domosh 2015, Joshi et al. 2015). Some sleep with students and encourage other faculty to do the same. Others 'merely' comment -- casually and often -- about women's bodies (and especially younger, junior women's bodies) and their personal lives. Some take advantage of isolated fieldwork situations to proposition and harass female students. Some have used "office hour" meetings to share porn with male grad students, or to "innocently" show explicit imagery to female graduate students. Some make disparaging remarks about female students in faculty meetings. Some, acting as "mentors," actively discourage and belittle students and junior colleagues. Some -- as Valentine's story demonstrates -- send anonymous hate mail.

Yes, harassers benefit.

The people who harass may be few, yet they have an outsized impact because some of the most influential men in our field are known to be serial harassers. Yet the relationship between academic success — even "brilliance" — and sexual harassment is one that we as a field have been studiously avoiding. You'd never know from the published interviews, the festschrift volumes, and the hagiographic obituaries that some of our most lauded intellectuals are perpetrators. When we evaluate the contributions and careers of abusive scholars, we somehow gloss over their disturbing behavior. Surely -- we tell ourselves -- their actions towards women are irrelevant to our practice of nominating them for awards, inviting them to give talks, citing their work, or assigning it in seminars. Surely the trail of destruction they leave behind them is a character flaw, a lamentable quirk unrelated to the value of their scholarly contributions. Perhaps, even, their track record of sexual harassment marks some personal insecurity that makes their intellectual achievements all the more admirable.

No way. Abuse of power is not incidental to these men's "greatness"; it is central to it. The relationship between these serial harassers and scholarly influence is no coincidence: prestige and ability to advance is at least partly predicated on the damage they have done

to women and others with feminized bodies and non-heteronormative identities. Abuse of power contributes to their professional success in multiple ways.

For one, sexual harassment benefits men by systematically undermining women, even those not directly targeted. Harassment tells women “you do not belong here” (NAS 2018) and contributes to the presumption of incompetence (Gutierrez y Muhs et al. 2012). Lecherous professors harass bright female graduate students right out of academia, derailing their lives and impoverishing our field. Women who successfully run the gauntlet enter their professional lives with an extra burden of defensiveness and battered intellectual confidence. For many of us, speaking up about sexual violence and gender harassment in academic spaces has translated into diverse and highly consequential forms of mistreatment and intimidation from our colleagues and institutions, including being denied raises and stripped of resources such as teaching assistants. These abuses of power create extra work that stays with us throughout our careers as we maneuver around harassers, counter bad behavior, and mop up the mess when colleagues and students suffer abusive encounters (Mauer 2018). Just writing this essay is an example of the sort of defensive work that drains time and effort from women’s scholarship. While these lecherous men heap work on the rest of us, they write unhindered. Even being punished for harassment can benefit the harasser, for example as their workload decreases when female advisees are steered elsewhere (Spahr and Young 2018).

Further, these “brilliant” harassers are often gatekeepers. Women are evaluated throughout their careers by the very men who abuse and belittle them. This forces women scholars and their allies to make painful daily choices about whether to nurture professional relationships with these powerful men (Wang 2017). Even citing their work or including it in our syllabi burnishes their reputations (Usher 2018). But if we opt out by ignoring them, we risk losing access to the resources, opportunities for advancement, and intellectual foment accessed only through complicity. If we report a supervisor’s harassment during fieldwork, we can be blocked from access to the field data we helped to collect. Junior

faculty hesitate to call out bad behavior, knowing these “great” men have control over promotion and tenure. Reporting harassment is emotionally and intellectually exhausting, and can inspire harsh retaliation, such as the questioning of a student’s “worthiness” for continued graduate funding. Even tenure doesn’t remove us from these guys’ reach. There are ugly examples of outspoken female scholars whose well-deserved promotions were systematically delayed by the harassers with whom they failed to play along. Even the success of some women and people of color, despite pervasive harassment, has proven insufficient to level the playing field for others. These power dynamics also affect men who repudiate predatory behavior: play nice with the lecherous colleague or be marginalized or expelled.

Predatory men may even champion a select few female scholars. This is not only a great smokescreen for their otherwise bad treatment of academic women; it allows the male scholar to demand payback. Does the esteemed man require a nomination for a prestigious award? Who better to write it than a woman that he promoted. The hypocrisy is astounding, and it is compounded by the fact that some of the most predatory “big name” scholars in our field built their reputations on progressive, even radical, political positions (see also Joshi et al. 2015, Liu 2006, Mott and Cockayne 2017, Sanders 1990). Yet they have been staggeringly cavalier about how they themselves dominate and disenfranchise women and people of color.

These are some of the many ways in which the bad behavior of harassers is harnessed for academic prestige and success. They get rid of competitors, or burden them with extra work. They get to feed off adulation and sexual energy; after using sexual innuendo to sideline and silence a female graduate student at that happy hour — for example — they get to go home, unburdened and unafraid, to take that woman’s idea and write about it as their own. They get extra attention that burnishes their reputation because they are harassers: be nice or face retaliation. They use these spoils of ideas, energy, time, and attention to spin the web of “brilliance” for which they exclusively will be credited. This is how sexual and gender harassment of

women is fundamentally about abuse of power and sets up the “brilliant” men who — seemingly on their own merit — rise to the top.

Does this mean that it’s impossible to be a great scholar without being a harasser? Of course not. Kudos to our many male colleagues who have built impressive, influential careers while treating female colleagues and students with consummate respect. But that doesn’t mean you’re off the hook, or that you don’t benefit. As one commentator put it, “men benefit professionally from sexual harassment. Even those who don’t harass” (Connley 2017). If you knew about your colleague’s “disturbing” behavior but did nothing, this is on you, too. If you still went out for beers with him at the annual conference, recommended students to his program, accepted his invitations to give talks or to co-author or co-edit with him, you own this. If you benefited from the old (lecherous) boy network through mentoring or career promotion, some piece of this is on your head (Connley 2017). Because in any of these cases, you acquiesced to building a career within a hierarchy of knowledge production built on sexual harassment of women. And if you had no idea that harassment and abuse were widespread in the discipline, now you do, and now you can make it your business to do something about it.

None of us can claim immunity from this mess. We all must contend with the fact that the intellectual fabric of our discipline has been woven, to some degree, by the routine abuse and diminishment of women, people of color, and less senior scholars by some highly influential men (and, yes, sometimes women). Feminist and anti-racist geographers long have argued for the locatedness of geographical knowledge and the inseparability of the knower from the knowledge (e.g. Joshi et al. 2015, Kobayashi and Peake 1994, Rodó-de-Zarate and Baylina 2018). Yet we maintain the myth of the exceptional individual (white man): why are we so willing to separate the harassment from the harasser’s “brilliant” insights? Doing so not only exacerbates the power structure that damages women and people of color directly through harassment (an equity argument), but is also a structural barrier to

addressing problematic knowledge production: it is an issue for academia not just because of lost productivity and under-deployed talent (an economic argument), but because these power dynamics are part and parcel of geographical knowledge (an epistemological argument).

It is not only women and people of color whose knowledge production is embodied, embedded, emplaced, and shaped by personal biography; academic “success” needs to be so situated as well (Hawkins et al. 2014). The question is not whether sexual predators can produce good scholarship (Rothfeld 2017). The question is how they produce that scholarship and who should get credit for it. Harassment supports the myth of individual brilliance, and this myth is in turn used to excuse harassment. We need to break this toxic cycle.

We have work to do.

We must make destructive power visible and refuse to celebrate abusive individuals. For example, we can insist on discussing their behavior when we teach their work, and we can actively work to change the canon (Keighren et al. 2012, Maddrell 2015). We can refuse to honor them with nominations and invitations, and we can institute new review requirements for disciplinary honors and other forms of institutional recognition. Perhaps we can require evidence of how a nominee for research honors fosters inclusivity, just as many job applications now require a diversity statement (Golash-Boza 2016).

We can also double down on our efforts to celebrate and promote the excellent work of those whom abusers have silenced and sidelined. For example we can develop more careful and inclusive practices of citation, peer review, syllabus development, and so on (e.g. Athena Co-Learning Collective 2018, Berg 2011, Joshi et al. 2015, Mott and Cockayne 2017). We can and should refuse to put yet more energy into propping up abusers and mopping up the messes they create. Instead, let’s channel this uncomfortable reckoning into recasting our field along more equitable, respectful lines and re-claiming academia as a place of critical inquiry and transformation.

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