



# ELEPHANT

IN THE LAB

OPINION

## Sexual harassment in Academia: A Matter of Power (Imbalance)

<b>Short title</b>	Sexual harassment in Academia
<b>Long title</b>	Sexual harassment in Academia: A Matter of Power (Imbalance)
<b>Authors</b>	Kelsey Medeiros <sup>1</sup>
<b>Author affiliation</b>	<sup>1</sup> The University of Nebraska Omaha
<b>Author bios</b>	Kelsey Medeiros is an Assistant Professor of Management at the University of Nebraska at Omaha where she researches workplace troublemakers. She is also the co-founder of <a href="#">Whisper Coalition</a> , a research group focused on sexual harassment, and <a href="#">Ethics Advantage</a> , a consulting firm working on improving workplace ethics.
<b>Author social links</b>	Kelsey Medeiros: <a href="#">Twitter</a> – <a href="#">LinkedIn</a> – <a href="#">Website</a>
<b>Date published</b>	16 March 2021
<b>DOI</b>	<a href="https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.4606740">10.5281/zenodo.4606740</a>
<b>Cite as (APA)</b>	Mederios, K. (2021). Sexual harassment in Academia: A Matter of Power (Imbalance). <i>Elephant in the Lab</i> . DOI: <a href="https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.4606740">10.5281/zenodo.4606740</a>

*Today is the day Julia has been dreaming about since the first day of her PhD program – it's interview day at the American Economics Association (AEA) Annual Conference. As her phone plays her familiar morning alarm, Julia jumps out of bed, bright-eyed and hopeful for the 10 interviews she has scheduled for the day. She irons her power skirt and navy blouse carefully, ensuring she leaves no creases uncreased. She reviews her notes on each school, each committee member, and each job requirement, preparing her responses just enough to sound polished but not too much as to sound over rehearsed. She slips on her special interview heels that give her that extra boost of confidence and height she likes and walks out of her hotel room – shutting the door behind her and with it, imagining the start of her future as an assistant professor of economics.*

*Julia walks straight to her first interview which she finds a few doors down from her own hotel room. After a brief knock, a man opens the door to a hotel room identical to hers. He greets her and she feels the butterflies of meeting a scholar whose research she cites regularly and who is considered a giant in the field of economics. She has admired his work since early in her PhD training and has dreamed about the chance to discuss it with him.*

*As she enters, she scans the room and notices 1 chair which has been turned from the hotel desk to face the edge of the bed. The committee member takes his seat and gestures toward the bed. Julia had read about women who had been asked to sit on the hotel bed, and some even asked to lie down, during their job interviews. She also read that some had been verbally and physically propositioned during their interviews! The stories were legendary whispers in her women in economics networking groups. But that was the “old days” she had told herself. She hadn’t expected to find herself in this compromising position in 2018. #Metoo had been making headlines for some time now and university faculty would have surely been paying attention.*

*She took her seat on the bed. She instantly felt uncomfortable as she sat there, the man staring at her from his chair. Her thoughts became scrambled as she thought about the stories she had read about and whether or not the same might happen to her – What will I do? How can I get out? I can’t make a bad impression on this guy – this is my career. Breathe Julia.*

*She misses the interviewer’s question. “I’m sorry, could you repeat that?” she asks.*

*Looking slightly annoyed, the committee member repeats his question, but Julia still struggles to focus. She responds to the question, but fails to make her point clearly, jumbling her words and forgetting key details. The mental notes she knew so well just minutes ago in her own hotel room, now seem buried under anxieties and fear for her own wellbeing.*

\*\*\*

Some may read Julia’s story and think she should have just rolled with the punches – a bed is just a big, squishy chair with pillows. If anything, she should feel thankful that she was given such a throne for her interview.

For others, the power dynamics in Julia’s story are palpable. Many will see that what some may construe as a harmless situation, could quickly turn harmful. Indeed, stories and research on power dynamics in academia reveal that situations like Julia’s can and do turn precarious, at times resulting in sexual harassment and even assault.

Sexual harassment on its own is problematic and worth addressing. However, the issue compounds when one considers who the typical target of sexual harassment is. Research tells us that individuals who are lower in a status hierarchy and those that are unrepresented are more likely to be the targets of harassment behavior (e.g., Harned et al., 2002). In the academy, this means that women in, or in contention for, junior faculty positions are disproportionately

targeted when it comes to sexual harassment. From an intersectional lens, BIPOC and LGBTQIA+ individuals in the academy may be particularly at risk of sexual harassment.

The research on sexual harassment and career trajectory is clear – when someone is harassed, they are more likely to leave an organization and with some leaving the field altogether (McLaughlin et al, 2017; Medeiros & Griffith, 2019). By failing to address sexual harassment among faculty in our institutions, we are systematically pushing these groups out of our institutions. We are pushing bright minds, new ideas, and critical perspectives out of our classrooms and out of our labs. In a time when universities are increasingly committing to creating inclusive spaces, they are undermining their efforts by not addressing the systemic issues within academia that perpetuate harassment.

## Is Sexual Harassment in the Academy a Problem?

Yes. Research on sexual harassment in the academy suggests that it remains a prevalent problem. In a 2003 study examining incidences of sexual harassment in the workplace across private, public, academic, and military industries, Ilies et al (2003) found academia to have the second highest rates of harassment, second only to the military. More recently, [a report by the The National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine](#) (NASEM) summarized the persistent problem of sexual harassment in academia with regard to faculty-student harassment, as well as faculty-faculty harassment. To find more evidence of this issue, one can also turn to Twitter - as [Times Higher Education highlighted in their 2019 blog](#).

There are several systemic reasons why sexual harassment may be particularly prevalent in academia. As recognized by the NASEM's 2018 report on sexual harassment in the academy, these include academia's gender imbalance and its hierarchical power structure. Research suggests that sexual harassment is more likely to occur in male-dominated organizations (e.g., Hegewisch & O'Farrell, 2015; Medeiros & Griffith, 2019). Although academia has made advances with regard to increasing the number of women in faculty positions, it largely remains a male-dominated industry, especially in more senior faculty positions (Bacchi, 1993; Diamond et al., 2016; O'Connor, 2020; Zhuge et al., 2011 ). Additionally, the hierarchical nature of academia, as well as its over emphasis on “star researchers” creates an environment in which sexual harassment by those in power may perpetuate.

Along these lines, safe reporting mechanisms must be put in place to encourage junior faculty members to bring forward issues that challenge the extant hierarchy. This requires clear policies and the communication of these policies. Research from business, however, also teaches us that comprehensive protections must be in place for those who do report. For example, in an experimental study, Hart (2019) found that women who self reported sexual harassment were less likely to be recommended for promotion compared to women with identical qualifications. The failure to set up systems that protect those that report sexual harassment and challenge academia's hierarchy, enables a self-perpetuating cycle of power to flourish. Is it really such a

surprise then that researchers such as Kirkner, Lorenz, and Mazar (2020) found that sexual harassment largely goes unreported?

## What Constitutes Sexual Harassment?

Definitions of sexual harassment are similar across borders generally including both verbal and physical manifestations. See below for examples of how it is defined around the world:

The [US Equal Employment Opportunity Commission \(EEOC\)](#) defines sexual harassment as follows:

*“unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, and other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature.”*

The [UK government](#) defines sexual harassment as:

*“any unwanted conduct of sexual nature that makes you feel intimidated, degraded, humiliated, or offended.”*

In [Japan](#), harassment is defined more broadly as “power harassment” or “pawa hara,” which includes:

*“physical abuse, emotional abuse deliberately isolating an employee, overworking an employee, consistently assigning work below an employee’s skill level, and infringing on an employee’s privacy.*

The [South African government](#) lists the following as their definition of sexual harassment:

*“(1) Sexual harassment is unwanted conduct of a sexual nature. The unwanted nature of sexual harassment distinguishes it from behaviour that is welcome and mutual. (2) Sexual attention becomes sexual harassment if: (a) The behaviour is persisted in, although a single incident of harassment can constitute sexual harassment; and/or(b) The recipient has made it clear that the behaviour is considered offensive; and/or(c) The perpetrator should have known that the behaviour is regarded as unacceptable”*

Cross culturally, it appears we can agree - sexual harassment involves unwanted verbal and physical abuse.

## Why Power Matters for Sexual Harassment

The role of power in perpetuating sexual harassment can be viewed through two perspectives. The dominant theory of power in sexual harassment is that of the vulnerable-victim, which argues that workers in more vulnerable positions or with less? power are more likely to be the targets of sexual harassment behavior (e.g., Wilson & Thompson, 2001)

Emerging from this line of thought, a common solution touted to reduce sexual harassment is then to increase the number of women in power. However, one must also consider theories of power threat, which have received considerable support (e.g., De Coster, Estes, & Mueller, 1999). The power-threat model suggests that sexual harassment may be a reaction to an individual challenging their status position. For instance, there is evidence to suggest that women in leadership positions experience more sexual harassment compared to women in non-authoritative positions (McLaughlin Uggen, & Blackstone, 2012). This may be due, in part, to a greater understanding of what constitutes sexual harassment. However, as argued by McLaughlin et al (2012), sexual harassment may also “serve as an equalizer against women in power, motivated more by control and domination than sexual desire.” This was also an effect Dr. Jennifer Griffith and I observed in our analysis of women in surgery and their experiences with sexual harassment (Medeiros & Griffith, 2019).

With this in mind, women face a double-bind with regard to power and sexual harassment. They are at risk of harassment given their typically underrepresented nature in academia, but as more women enter the academy, their very presence challenges the hierarchy, which again, puts them at risk of sexual harassment.

## How Academia Responds to Power Matters

How leaders in the academic community respond to power abuses / sexual harassment sends a signal to others as to what the culture will and will not tolerate. It is then logical that to reduce sexual harassment in the academy, we must call on our leaders to take action against this behavior. The National Science Report (2018) noted the importance of these actions in creating a culture that others perceive to be intolerant of sexual harassment and thereby reducing the behavior.

While likely an obvious solution to many readers, the reality is that leaders often fail to take action against perpetrators of sexual harassment in the workplace and specifically, the academy. One reason we often see these behaviors go unpunished is due to a perpetrator’s accumulated idiosyncrasy credits (Griffith & Medeiros, 2020). Hollander (1958) coined the term idiosyncrasy credits to refer to allowances made for deviating from the norm. Specifically, credits are accumulated through good performance and high status and spent by engaging in idiosyncratic behavior. When someone with little to no credit behaves idiosyncratically, the behavior will likely be viewed as unacceptable and are likely to face consequences. In contrast, when someone who has built up a substantial amount of credit behaves idiosyncratically, they are often given a “pass.”

When it comes to sexual harassment, the use of idiosyncratic credits has been widely cited, albeit through different terms. For instance, when Susan Fowler left Uber, she noted that her claims of sexual harassment were dismissed because the harasser was a “high performer” (Scheiber & Creswell, 2017). When considering the role of power in sexual harassment, it would be remiss of us to not consider the power of the perpetrator themselves. In academia, this power most likely

comes from their “star” power as researchers or teachers. Theories of idiosyncrasy credits would suggest that when these academic stars sexually harass others, the academy is likely to dismiss accusations, “let them slide,” or respond with minimal punishments.

The trio of the vulnerable-victim model, the power threat model, and idiosyncrasy credits then suggests a cyclical pattern in which women are more likely to be targeted both for their lack of, and for their possession of power, while their perpetrator may go unpunished for the very same possession of power. Academia’s hierarchical nature and gender imbalance is systematically increasing women’s likelihood of being harassed and ultimately, leaving the academy altogether.

## What We Can Do

It’s always a soul crushing exercise to lay out just how systemic this issue is in our community. But there is certainly hope if we are willing to see the complexity of the issue and to address it head on. But this will take work and is certainly not something that will be solved by an annual 1-hour sexual harassment training. The system requires a complete overhaul.

It’s also worth noting that this is not something that can be fixed by teaching women, POC, and LGBTQIA+ to avoid harassment or by “empowering” to fight back. Sure, defending and protecting yourself is great - but what if we created a space where groups of people didn’t have to protect themselves from harassment on a regular basis? What if we created a space where we could all use our cognitive resources to contribute to scientific innovation and student development instead of how to avoid being harassed?

I don’t know about you, but I prefer the latter.

So how do we do it? What can we do?

The National Academy of Sciences report notes 15 important recommendations for enacting change in our institutions. Although each are equally important and I encourage readers to review the report in full themselves, I want to raise 3 recommendations relevant to the preceding discussion on power.

### **1. Change the culture**

An organization’s culture includes both tangible and intangible artifacts. With hierarchy in mind, the National Academy of Science recommends diffusing the traditional hierarchical cultural structures by creating mentoring networks and committee-based advising. Further, shifting reward structures away from those singularly focused on publications or grants may encourage a more holistic view of faculty that spreads rewards throughout as opposed to making the academic rich richer. With regard to the tangible, it is also important for academia to examine how practices, policies, and procedures hold up the hierarchy and promote sexual harassment. When it comes to Julia’s story, for instance, the practice of conducting interviews in hotel rooms created a

space in which sexual harassment could more easily occur. Along these lines, recent work by Drs. Jennifer Hirsch and Shanus Khan (*Sexual Citizens*, 2020) on the role physical spaces play in establishing power dynamics and perpetuating sexual assault should be considered.

**2. Actually listen to women**

It is not enough to promote women. We must also listen to their viewpoints. Too often we see women placed in roles as tokens, or who are placed in roles and asked to conform to the existing norms. Women should be placed in these roles to challenge the status quo and to raise important issues that we may otherwise go unnoticed. With regard to Julia's example, for instance, men in higher status positions may fail to recognize the compromising experience of women interviewing in a hotel room. In fact, it was due to the actions of two women, Kathryn Holston and Anna Stansbury, that in 2019, the ASSA banned the use of hotel rooms for these meetings.

**3. Hold people accountable**

In any culture change initiative, it is imperative that leaders reward the desired behavior and punish the undesirable. In this instance, leaders must not fall prey to idiosyncrasy credits, and stand up against those who engage in sexual harassment – regardless of their performance. Of course, due process and appropriate investigative procedures should be followed. Once a conclusion has been reached, however, leaders must act and signal to the community that sexual harassment will not be tolerated in the academy.

If we want to truly make academia a physically safe space for all, we need to address the root problem: power. What will you do?

## References

- Bacchi, C. (1993). The brick wall: Why so few women become senior academics. *Australian Universities' Review*, 36(1), 36 - 41.
- De Coster, S., Estes, S. B., & Mueller, C. W. (1999). Routine activities and sexual harassment in the workplace. *Work and Occupations*, 26(1), 21 - 49. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0730888499026001003>
- Diamond, S. J., Thomas, C. R., Desai, S., Holliday, E. B., Jagsi, R., Schmitt, C., & Enestvedt, B. K. (2016). Gender differences in publication productivity, academic rank, and career duration among US academic gastroenterology faculty. *Academic Medicine*, 91(8), 1158 - 1163. <https://doi.org/10.1097/ACM.0000000000001219>
- Griffith, J. A., & Medeiros, K. E. (2020). Expanding the footprint of sexual harassment prevention training: A power, credit, and leadership perspective. *Industrial and Organizational Psychology*, 13(2), 137 - 141. <https://doi.org/10.1017/iop.2020.26>
- Harned, M. S., Ormerod, A. J., Palmieri, P. A., Collinsworth, L. L., & Reed, M. (2002). Sexual assault and other types of sexual harassment by workplace personnel: A comparison of antecedents and consequences. *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*, 7(2), 174 - 188 doi:10.1037//1076-8998.7.2.174.
- Hart, C. G. (2019). The penalties of self-reporting sexual harassment. *Gender & Society*, 33(4), 534 - 559. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243219842147>
- Hegewisch, A., & O'Farrell, B. (2015). Women in the construction trades. Institute for Women's Policy Research. <https://iwpr.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/C428-Women-in-Construction-Trades.pdf>
- Hollander, E. P. (1958). Conformity, status, and idiosyncrasy credit. *Psychological Review*, 65(2), 117 - 127. <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0042501>
- Ilies, R., Hauserman, N., Schwochou, S., & Stibal, J. (2003). Reported incidence rates of work-related sexual harassment in the United States: Using meta-analysis to explain reported rate disparities. *Personnel Psychology*, 56(3), 607 - 631. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1744-6570.2003.tb00752.x>
- Kirkner, A.C., Lorenz, K., & Mazar, L. (2020). Faculty and staff reporting and disclosure of sexual harassment in higher education. *Gender and Education*, 1-17. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2020.1763923>
- McLaughlin, H., Uggen, C., & Blackstone, A. (2012). Sexual harassment, workplace authority and the paradox of power. *American Sociological Review*, 77(4), 625 - 647. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0003122412451728>
- McLaughlin, H., Uggen, C., & Blackstone, A. (2017). The economic and career effects fo sexual harassment on working women. *Gender & Society*, 31(3), 333 - 358. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243217704631>
- Medeiros, K. E., & Griffith, J. A. (2019). Double-edged scalpels: The trials and triumphs of women surgeons. *Narrative Inquiry in Bioethics*, 9(3), 221 - 227. [10.1353/nib.2019.0057](https://doi.org/10.1353/nib.2019.0057)
- National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (2018). Sexual harassment in academic science, engineering, and medicine. <https://www.nationalacademies.org/our-work/sexual-harassment-in-academia>
- O'Connor, P. (2020). Why is it so difficult to reduce gender inequality in male-dominated higher educational organizations? A feminist institutional perspective. *Interdisciplinary Science Reviews*, 45(2), 207 - 228. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03080188.2020.1737903>
- Scheiber, N., & Creswell, J. (2017). Sexual harassment cases show the ineffectiveness of going to HR. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/12/business/sexual-harassment-human-resources.html>
- Hirsch, J. S. & Khan, S. R. (2020). Sexual citizens: A landmark study of sex, power, and assault on campus.
- Wilson, F., & Thompson, P. (2001). Sexual harassment as an exercise of power. *Gender, Work, & Organization*, 8(1), 61 - 83. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-0432.00122>
- Zhuge, Y., Kaufman, J., Simeone, D. M., Chen, H., & Velazquez, O. C. (2011). Is there still a glass ceiling for women in academic surgery? *Annals of Surgery*, 253(4), 637 - 643. [10.1097/SLA.0b013e3182111120](https://doi.org/10.1097/SLA.0b013e3182111120)