

Mobilization in Response to Workplace Harassment: Lessons from One University Setting


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Cover Page Footnote

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Introduction

Responses to workplace harassment are shaped by a multitude of factors including who committed the harassment and how, in what context it occurred, and what history and support workers bring to their harassment experiences. Indeed, responses vary widely – some workers respond formally, reporting harassment to attorneys or government authorities while others respond informally, perhaps receiving support from coworkers or friends and family outside of work. Building from prior research on mobilization in response to workplace harassment, we consider how the mobilization responses of faculty in one university setting map onto a recent typology of mobilization (Blackstone, Uggen, and McLaughlin 2009) where responses range from ignoring harassment to reporting it to an attorney or government agency. We also ask what might be learned from this group’s responses to harassment.

Defining and Responding to Harassment

Prior to addressing the question of how individuals respond to harassment, we must first define what we mean by workplace harassment. Indeed, conceptualizations of the term vary depending upon whether we are describing legal definitions, workplace understandings, or individual people’s perceptions.

While legal definitions exist for some forms of harassment (e.g., the sex discrimination portion of Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act was later amended to include sexual harassment) not all forms of workplace harassment are

currently included in the law. Workplace bullying, for example, is identified in many organizations' workplace harassment policies but, at present, there is no comprehensive federal law that specifically addresses workplace bullying. The U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission recognizes harassment as a form of discrimination and lists "discrimination by type" on its website (<http://www.eeoc.gov/laws/types/>). Types of discrimination recognized by the EEOC include age, disability, equal pay/compensation, genetic information, national origin, pregnancy, race/color, religion, retaliation, sex, and sexual harassment. Within each discrimination type, harassment in the form of intimidation or sexual advances may be considered.

Though employees are not explicitly protected from workplace bullying by law, many employers maintain harassment policies that forbid bullying and other unwelcome behaviors. Indeed, workplace harassment may take various forms (Fendrich, Woodward, and Richman 2002; Krieger, et al. 2006; Rospenda and Richman 2004;). Building from their own and others' work, Rospenda and Richman (2004) developed a typology of generalized workplace harassment, which includes covert hostility, verbal hostility, manipulation, and physical hostility. Others suggest two main forms of workplace abuse exist: bullying and mobbing (Koonin and Green 2004). What these concepts have in common is that they refer to unwanted behaviors directed at an employee in such a way as to interfere with that employee's performance at work.

Legal and workplace definitions aside, individual perceptions of harassment also matter. Research by sociologists and others finds that what one may consider harassment varies by social context, age, work experience, gender, and other factors (Bellas and Gossett 2001; Blakely et al. 1995; Giuffre and Williams 1994; Lerum 2004; Lopez, Hodson, and Roscigno 2009; Magley and Shupe 2005; Mueller, DeCoster, and Estes 2001; Navarro et al. 2009; Quinn 2002; Vaux 1993; Welsh et al. 2006; Williams 1997). For example, we know that men are less likely than women to perceive potentially harassing behaviors as harassment (e.g., Uggen and Blackstone 2004; Padavic and Orcutt 1997; Sears et al. 2011). This makes sense, of course, as the social context of gender inequality shapes the meaning of unwanted advances or bullying behaviors differently for women and men. In fact, Quinn (2002) found that men actually changed their assessments of their own “girl watching” behaviors in the workplace after being asked to consider their behaviors from their targets’ perspectives.

We also know that race and citizenship status may influence perceptions of harassing behaviors. Welsh et al. (2006) found that white women with full citizenship are more likely than non-citizens and women of color to label certain workplace experiences sexual harassment. Giuffre and Williams (1994) found that understandings of the same behavior varied depending upon whether the perpetrator’s race or sexual orientation differed from that of the target. What this

work tells us is that the same behavior may have very different meanings depending upon when, where, how, to whom, and by whom it occurs.

Just as perceptions of the same behavior may vary, so too will responses to the same behavior. Sociolegal scholars note that there are a number of factors at play in determining how and whether an individual will respond to a perceived wrong (Bumiller 1988; Ewick & Silbey 1998; Felstiner et al. 1980-81; Gallagher 2006; Kritzer et al. 1991). Certainly, an individual's own sense of efficacy plays a role (Baker et al. 1990; Felstiner et al. 1980-81; Terpstra & Baker 1986) as does a person's emotional response to the experience (Cormier 2007). Feminist and other scholars note that social forces such as a person's relative position of power also play a role in shaping responses to workplace harassment (Nielsen 2000; Quinn 2000; Welsh et al. 2006). For example, employees with relative prestige in an organization may feel more empowered to speak up than those who have less workplace power or prestige (Barr 1993). Friendships in the workplace and organizational culture also shape responses to harassment at work (Chamberlain et al. 2008; DeCoster et al. 1999). In short, a multitude of factors play into responses to harassment.

In 2009, Blackstone, Uggen, and McLaughlin proposed the following preliminary typology of mobilization in response to harassment:

Mobilization Continuum:

Ignore→*Avoid*→*Self-help*→*Tell friends/family*→*Tell equals*→*Tell superiors*→*Tell attorney/agency*

While most employees do not report harassment to an attorney or government agency (Blackstone, Uggen, and McLaughlin 2009), this level of reporting certainly is not the only way of mobilizing in response to harassment. Employees may feel that their experience has been satisfactorily resolved by engaging in some form of self-help such as confronting harassers directly. They may go further by telling supportive others outside of work about the harassment or telling coworkers or managers. The most formal type of mobilization on the continuum, reporting harassment to an authority such as a human resources official or an attorney, is both the least frequently employed by individuals who experience harassment and also the most commonly considered by scholars and activists interested in responses to harassment (Blackstone, Uggen, and McLaughlin 2009).

While formal reporting of harassment may be perceived to be the most effective strategy for reducing workplace harassment, employers could benefit from understanding the additional forms of mobilization employees take in response to harassment. It is possible that employers could build more effective

educational and preventive programming by better understanding the more common mobilization strategies of their employees.

Harassment in Academia

In academic settings, mobbing, or “ganging up on someone using rumor, innuendo, discrediting, humiliation, isolation, and intimidation in a concentrated and direct manner,” (Koonin and Green 2004:73), is a common form of workplace harassment. Twale and DeLuca (2008) find that as much as 15 percent of the working population in the United States has experienced mobbing. Sexual harassment is also reported in academic settings. Studies show that rates of workplace sexual harassment may be as high as 70 percent among women and 15 percent among men (e.g., Fitzgerald and Shullman 1993; Fitzgerald et al. 1988; Gruber 1992; Kalof et al. 2001; Thacker 1996; Uggen and Blackstone 2004; USMSPB 1988).

Davenport, Schwartz, and Elliott (1999) argue that academia’s unique culture may inadvertently support mobbing, as academic cultures are typically based upon isolation, ambiguity, and a high-stress work environment (Twale and DeLuca 2008). Indeed, cultures in academia are built upon tradition and hierarchy (Becher and Trowler 2001). Mobbing in academia may be particularly prevalent given the power dynamics at work within the faculty hierarchy (Twale and DeLuca 2008). Hierarchy is representative of a larger bureaucratic structure and cultures that permeate the institution (Birnbaum 1988) and, by extension,

demonstrate power (Saguy 2000). That is, individuals in higher positions within the organization wield more power than those below them. This power differential is especially problematic in academia where women are not equally represented among the highest ranks, such as through presidential appointments or promotion to full professor (Valian 1998). Research universities, “striving institutions” – institutions that seek to gain prestige relative to other institutions in the academic hierarchy – and those with scarce resources or a changing professoriate may be especially prone to harassing cultures (Twale and DeLuca 2008).

In what follows, we examine the extent to which harassment occurs in one striving academic setting and how individuals respond to said harassment.

Data and Method

Data come from a 2011 survey of faculty at Land Grant University, a mid-sized public institution located in the United States. The purpose of the survey was to assess workplace climate at LGU. LGU is a predominately White institution (7% faculty of color) with an uneven gender balance in the associate and full professor ranks (41% women and 20% women, respectively). There is more gender balance at the assistant professor rank, where 48% of LGU faculty are women. The survey was sent to all faculty (N = 573) in tenure-stream and non-tenure-stream positions. A total of 338 faculty responded to the survey, for a response rate of 59%. Because a very small proportion of part-time faculty

responded to the survey, our results may more accurately represent the experiences of full-time faculty.

The 2011 LGU climate survey contained five questions dealing with workplace harassment; four questions were closed-ended and one was open-ended. The purpose of the first question was to assess the faculty's awareness of LGU's policy on workplace harassment. The remaining harassment items in the survey were designed to better understand individual harassment experiences, responses to those experiences, and perceptions of those experiences.

Descriptive statistics for each of the four closed-ended questions are presented followed by results from qualitative analysis of the open-ended item: "Please include any additional details you are comfortable sharing about your harassment experience." Responses to the open-ended item were analyzed by closely reading all responses multiple times, identifying common themes across responses and coding like categories of data together. Like-passages of data, referred to as "meaning units" (Weiss 2004), were labeled with a code intended to succinctly portray the themes present in the passages. Respondents shared details regarding the type of harassment experienced, from whom harassing behaviors originated, and the extent to which harassment was ongoing or isolated. We describe these findings as well as their implications.

Findings

Responses to the first question, designed to assess awareness of harassment policy at LGU, reveal that the vast majority of respondents reported being aware of LGU’s harassment policy. Respondents were asked, “Were you aware that LGU has the following policy on harassment in the workplace?: *It is the policy of [LGU] that acts of harassment and violence in the workplace will not be tolerated.... Harassment is unwelcome behavior that is severe, persistent, and/or pervasive and has the intent or effect of interfering with a person’s educational or work performance or creates an intimidating, or offensive educational, work, or living environment.*” Ninety-four percent of survey participants answered “yes” in response to this question.

In our second harassment question, participants were asked: “Using the above definition, have you been harassed while employed at [LGU]?” A total of 309 people responded to question. Of those, 45 individuals (14.6%) responded “yes.” This rate, around 1 in 7 people, is similar to that found in other research on workplace harassment. Comparing women’s responses to those of men reveals an unsurprising gender difference: 23% of women reported experiencing harassment at LGU compared with 9% of men. These results are presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Percent Reporting Harassment at LGU

Who reported experiencing harassment while employed at LGU?	Percent
Women	23%

Men	9%
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Next, respondents were asked about their responses to harassment. Our third question asked: “If you have been harassed while in your position at [LGU], did you speak with anyone (e.g., friends, family members, colleagues, etc.) about your experience?” A total of 97.8% of participants reporting harassment on their survey said “yes” in response to this question. It is important to note that in other studies and workplace contexts, well under half of workers speak with someone about their harassment experience (Blackstone 2012; Blackstone, Uggen, and McLaughlin 2009).

Question four asked respondents: “With whom did you speak about your harassment experience?” Results, represented below in Table 2, show that faculty at LGU use informal support systems far more often than formal reporting mechanisms. Specifically, family members, friends, and colleagues were the most common sources faculty told about their harassment experiences. On the other end of the continuum, institutional entities including human resources, public safety, and union representatives were least likely to be utilized as sources of reporting.

Table 2: To Whom Respondents Reported Harassment

With whom did you speak about your harassment experience?	Percent of Respondents Who Told Someone
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Family member	81.8%
Friend	77.3%
Colleague	68.2%
Supervisor	52.3%
Equal Opportunity	27.3%
EAP	6.8%
Human Resources	4.6%
Public Safety	2.3%
Union representative	2.3%

Finally, the fifth harassment question in our survey asked respondents to, “Please include any additional details you are comfortable sharing about your harassment experience.” Sixty percent (N = 27) of those reporting harassments in response to question two provided details in response to this open-ended question. Respondents’ comments addressed such details as type of harassment experienced, harasser identity, and the extent to which harassment was isolated or on-going. These results are represented in Tables 3, 4, and 5 below.

Table 3: Type of Harassment Reported by Respondents

Type of harassment	Percent
Bullying	33.3%
Sexual	18.5%
Not stated	48.2%

Table 4: Person by Whom Respondent Harassed

Harassment coming from...	Percent
Colleague	51.9%
Superior	25.9%
Student	7.4%
Unstated	14.8%

Table 5: Harassment Isolated Event or Ongoing

Harassment isolated or ongoing?	Percent
Isolated event	11.1%
Ongoing and current	33.3%
Ongoing but now ended	22.2%
Ongoing; unclear if current	11.1%
Unclear	22.2%

The open-ended comments on the survey help shed light on why respondents may have been reluctant to report harassment to their superiors or to formal entities on campus. In one-quarter of cases where respondents provided details about their experience, harassment came from the respondent's superior, making reporting up the "chain of command" unlikely. As one respondent put it:

"My [higher up] can be a bully. As well, he often jokingly brings up gender issues. The problem is that to survive I go along with it and joke

back, which probably only encourages the behavior. I have not told him to stop. I see how he bullies other faculty and want to stay on his good side.”

Another respondent wrote:

“Bullying behavior by some in the administration is quite common. Some people are singled out for special treatment and/or are held to different standards.”

Finally, one person shared:

“Harassment in form of verbal bullying - attempting to change my mind in order to support the other's position. Person was dept chair at the time.”

In these and similar cases it is unsurprising that friends, family members, or colleagues might be the most likely sources to whom the person being harassed would report harassment.

Those who did attempt to report up the chain were often disappointed by the response received by institutional authorities. One respondent explained:

“The Equal Opportunity officer at the time told me, ‘You can’t make people be nice you’ (after showing rude notes, and explaining a recent threatening phone message left on my home phone). The Dean suggested I get counseling, to which I said, ‘I don't need counseling, I need a dean with a backbone.’”

Another respondent shared:

“I was told that since the individual involved has tenure and refuses to participate in mediation, nothing could be done. This has gone on for over 12 years.”

One respondent stated:

“[The Equal Opportunity office] was not interested. When a similar issue came up with another colleague, mysteriously my and others' files no longer existed.”

Finally, a respondent summed up potential problems with formal reporting mechanisms by sharing:

“The university did not and does not show concern.”

Discussion and Conclusion

A usually high number of faculty at LGU reported being aware of harassment policies and reported telling someone about their own harassment experiences. Policy awareness and speaking up to anyone at all are two necessary and important steps needed in order to raise awareness about workplace harassment and put an end to it. Yet despite the fact that faculty at LGU seem to understand that the policy exists and are willing to speak to someone when it happens, very few faculty report utilizing formal campus resources or reporting mechanisms when they experience harassment. Instead, faculty are most likely report their experiences to friends, family, and colleagues. Open-ended responses

suggest that when faculty do utilize formal campus mechanisms of reporting, their experiences are often unsatisfactory.

These findings suggest several possible courses of action. First, it is clear that campus institutions such as human resources and equal opportunity offices could more effectively respond to faculty complaints of harassment when they are reported to these offices. It is perhaps unsurprising that faculty do not report harassment to these offices given the experiences reported by the faculty at LGU. Institutions might consider requiring relevant campus officers to obtain further education and training offered by knowledgeable outsiders such as victims' advocates, government authorities, and legal experts. Having knowledgeable and supportive campus officers will ultimately help to raise awareness about and reduce harassment on campus.

These findings also point to a possibly untapped source of support for workers and for reducing harassment in the workplace. More than two-thirds of respondents reporting harassment said that they told a co-worker about the harassment. We know from research on bullying in schools that peers play a crucial role in helping their classmates cope with and confront such instances (Hawkins, Pepler, and Craig 2001; Salmivalli 1999). Our findings suggest that institutions should consider targeting supportive others for training, prevention, and awareness-raising. In particular, campuses such as LGU should consider offering programming in bystander intervention for employees. Such intervention

training could also include education about formal mechanisms of reporting on campus and the importance of reporting harassment to formal entities.

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