

Submission 405

This is a story of control and power, which manifested itself in the bullying and harassment over many years by one particular person- my PhD supervisor.

I worked in research where the competition is crippling and destructive- there are far more PhDs than jobs, very few full-time roles, and very low success rates for grants and fellowships. Along with this career insecurity, there are very few women in senior roles; enormous pressures to work only on commercialisable research; increased casualisation of the workforce (affecting maternity leave entitlement); and a culture of protecting those in leadership positions- at any and all costs. All of these were critical in my decision to leave research, not to mention the sexual harassment as detailed below.

In my first year as a PhD student I was referred to him at a work dinner as 'one of [his] bitches', he'd threaten that if I took a particular route with my work that he'd 'wipe his arse' with me, and publically rallied against anything that threatened his position.

I hoped that becoming pregnant would absolve me of these public and private sexual, social and intellectual putdowns, but that wasn't to be. In fact, upon returning from maternity leave after my second child, I was in a meeting and he said he was stressed and suggested 'imagine if we just had sex on this desk'. I couldn't help the look and sounds of disgust and at our next meeting he sat and barely said anything, just gloated about the important people who had been calling and emailing him, inferring that I'd missed my chance.

The worst thing about all of this is that I knew I wasn't the only one, and that I wasn't the target of the worst harassment. But I kept those conversations confined to the whispers at the cafe, or the crying and breakdowns in the toilet, or the cathartic, pouring out conversations with former colleagues after they were so relieved to have moved on from that work. Those in leadership instead looked at grant monies won, publications published, awards given. But surely they were surprised at the high turnover of female staff and their patterns of abrupt desertion- why did they not act..?

There was always something to pity him for, and I was naive in thinking I could ignore it. After all, he'd assured me that I would be able to get a post-doc with him, without having to go through the grant-writing rigamarole. And he could offer that because he had ample research funding- a scarcity- and a plum new role at another University. I couldn't rock the boat too much as I would be scurrying away a significant opportunity at a career in research.

I left that institution [REDACTED] and was very fortunate to be offered another role elsewhere. However, the same sexual harassment, bullying and misconduct was also occurring there, [REDACTED]. This time I made an anonymous complaint and once the Head of Dept finally got back to me after their 'investigation' I was told I had misunderstood the situation. A year and a half later I learnt that they had promised to support the academic, no matter what had occurred. At the same time, I heard about other sexual misconduct allegations from a senior academic that had resulted in pretty severe restrictions to their ability to supervise students. When I queried what had been done to support the victims' welfare I was told I was being disrespectful. This academic is still in their position of leadership.

At this stage I had just finished writing up my PhD, but I couldn't bear to email my supervisor to organise submission. I would've had to apologise and grovel to get their approval to hand it in, and as I knew how awful and manipulative he was, it would have only lent more credence to my supervisor and their ways. After all this effort, my heart and head had been broken on the rocks of the continuous, unfettered manipulation, bullying and harassment of junior academics: an unjust system in an increasingly tenuous industry. It was also an incredibly isolating lesson to learn that those who did try to complain are immediately ignored or discredited.

I hate this system of power and privilege- how it is so toxic, despite the veneer of academic respectability. A lot of academic knowledge and expertise is derived from older, white, hetero, racist men who rarely want to concede that their knowledge is lacking, much less wrong, and certainly not by a young woman with a dissenting view- we are always deemed their inferior, by experience and by position. But those in leadership positions (up to the Dean level) knew all about these claims, they were complacent in their duty of care, and therefore are complicit in this culture of harassment and bullying.