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## Coming Out of the Sexual Harassment Closet: One Woman's Story of Politics and Change in Higher Education

SUSAN K. GARDNER

*In this essay, a university professor tells the story of her sexual harassment by her graduate school adviser in order to explain the institutional cultures and structures that exist to perpetuate this type of behavior in higher education as well as to communicate the steps she took to create change and accept the events that occurred. Characterizing the documentation as a "coming out process," she describes the events that occurred from 2002–2006, using a semi-autoethnographical approach augmented with document and literature analyses. The essay goes beyond a mere re-telling of the events to an analysis of the cultural constructs that foster sexual harassment at institutions of higher education.*

**Keywords:** sexual harassment / university / culture / power

*"Each woman who brings charges has a story to tell, and it is this collective voice that may, ultimately, have an impact on society."*

—(Muir and Mangus 1994, 104)

As my adviser placed his hand on my hip and his tongue in my ear, he whispered, "Can't I go home with you tonight?" As distasteful as I found this and as uncomfortable as it made me, it got worse. I went home that evening in tears, unbelieving and incredulous. This was a man who I admired, who I trusted, and whom I aspired to be like one day. The cognitive dissonance I experienced that evening and the next day were so great that in order to maintain some semblance of sanity I chose to pretend it never happened. It wasn't until he called my home and left me a message the next day that I could no longer choose to ignore it; it happened. My adviser sexually harassed me.

I have struggled with how to pose my story, with the details to be shared and those to be hidden, but mostly I have struggled with the decision whether to tell my story at all. It has taken me some time to come to this point, but storytelling, according to Muir and Mangus (1994), is particularly helpful in dealing with the trauma of sexual harassment. They point out, "Through listening to the stories that individuals are willing to tell, others can learn about the nature of sexual harassment, perhaps recognize its occurrence in their own lives, and pass the story on to someone else" (104). This paper, then, in many ways, is my "coming out of the sexual harassment closet" exercise.

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Why would I consider telling my sexual harassment story as an act of “coming out of the closet”? D’Augelli (1994) describes the coming out process as one that “is nearly always one of difficult *personal* discovery, of slowly and painfully appreciating a personal consistency that cannot be explored through routine socialization mechanisms” (320; emphasis in original). In this way, my sexual harassment experience is one that has most certainly become part of who I am now, both as a woman and as a member of the professoriate; and, much like D’Augelli’s view of coming out, my process toward understanding and internalizing the sexual harassment experience has certainly been slow and painful.

Much like other issues of sex and sexuality in our society, sexual harassment is kept in silence. Indeed, scholars have suggested that in many ways, women are socialized to accept and be silent about sexual harassment inasmuch as men are socialized to act out sexually harassing behaviors as part of the “boys being boys” mentality (for example, Grauerholz 1994; Gutek and Koss 1996). And, much like coming out, regarding sexual orientation, historically, victims of sexual harassment have been viewed as abnormal and wrong for speaking out about their experiences (Wood 1994). In this way, my conceptualization of coming out regarding my sexual harassment experience is very similar to that of bell hooks’ (1989) concept of “coming to voice,” in that telling my story is breaking the silence, speaking the unspoken, and naming the unnamed. Indeed, the silence that surrounds incidents of sexual harassment is so pervasive that it renders it almost invisible to the rest of society (Kreps 1994). Victims who do speak out are often subjected to trivialization of their accounts or straightforward dismissal of their experiences, as witnessed, for example, in the case of Anita Hill and her harassment by Clarence Thomas (Clair 1994). Furthermore, many victims experience fear of repercussions, guilt, shame, and extreme isolation in feeling that they are alone in their experience (Dziech and Weiner 1990; Hill and Silva 2005). Other costs of coming out of the sexual harassment closet may include hostility from others, time lost in productivity, financial hardships resulting from this loss of productivity as well as from legal and medical bills associated with the reporting process (Dziech and Weiner 1990; Hill and Silva 2005).

When speaking from the perspective of academia, the power differential that exists between students and faculty members further exacerbates the issues associated with coming out about the incident when one considers the stakes of maintaining a fellowship or assistantship or even remaining in the degree program (Dziech and Weiner 1990; Krener 1996). To be sure, manifestations of power are what often define sexual violence and sexual harassment and hierarchical structures exacerbate these power differentials (Saguy 2000). Institutions of higher education, particularly large research institutions, perpetuate hierarchical and bureaucratic structures (Birnbaum 1988) that may feed easily into the existing power differentials

and create cultures that by definition feed into sexual harassment behaviors. In addition, the inherent power structure existing between graduate student and faculty adviser can be particularly problematic when the student relies so much upon the adviser for guidance, acceptance, and future success in the professional world (Aguinis et al. 1996; Bargar and Mayo-Chamberlain 1983; Clark and Corcoran 1986; Clements 2005; Hartnett 1981; Heinrich 1995; Schroeder and Mynatt 1993). When coupled with the fact that men still dominate the highest positions of power in academic institutions (Wilson 2004), the inherent power differential takes upon a gendered perspective as well (Schultz 1998; Crouch 2001).

Why, then, speak out, come out, or come to voice? First of all, I find that I am certainly not alone in my experience. Hill and Silva (2005), on behalf of the American Association of University Women's Educational Foundation, report that nearly two-thirds of all college students have been sexually harassed, but less than 10 percent of these students ever tell anyone, and even fewer ever report it to college or university administrators. While they only report undergraduate experiences, we can assume that similar, if not higher, statistics exist at the graduate level (Conrad and Taylor 1994). Secondly, knowing the prevalence of sexual harassment, one must speak out to create change. Muir and Mangus (1994) state, "In essence, we are learning to tell our stories, and as each story is told, it is added to the collective voice which, in turn, will ultimately have an impact on public discourse and policy actions" (91). To create change regarding sexual harassment, survivors must step forward to tell their stories.

## The Design of a Story

In order to best tell my story, I begin with how my story is to be told. What I explain here are the overarching research traditions or frameworks that guide my storytelling process. My purpose in sharing these frameworks is to elucidate the reasoning behind the structure of my story, from which perspective I choose to articulate it, and the lens through which I experienced it.

I chose autoethnography as the guiding framework for this paper. Autoethnography allows for cohesion of personal experiences with particular cultural contexts, and in my case, within the unique cultural context of higher education. Ellis and Bochner (2000) define autoethnography as an "autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural" (739). In this paper, I connect my personal experiences of sexual harassment to the cultural aspects inherent in higher education. I make these connections through my own personal accounts witnessed through a journal I kept from the initial incident of sexual harassment in the fall of 2002

through the culmination of the reporting experience in the summer of 2004, as well as through notes and reflections I have maintained through the present day as the coming-out process has unfolded. As I reviewed my transcribed journals and notes, I looked for particular themes that emerged consistently and compared these with the overriding themes in literature about sexual harassment.

I augment my story with document analysis of relevant reports, newspaper articles, and e-mail messages. Considered a rich source of data (Bogdan and Biklen 2003), the documents used in this paper were those available both from the public domain as well as those that were directed personally to me. Personal documents include university correspondence regarding my sexual harassment case as well as personal e-mails sent to me by those in the community during the incidents described. All authors of personal documents and individuals involved in the case have been assigned pseudonyms in order to maintain the confidentiality of those involved. Public documents include those produced by the university as the investigation and follow-up events occurred, including mass e-mails sent to the university community by the administration. Much like the analysis described for the autoethnographical portion of the data included in this paper, document analysis occurred through identification of themes that emerged as well as those that corresponded to the predominant literature on sexual harassment.

## Culture

As described earlier by Ellis and Bochner (2000), autoethnographical methods include perspectives from both the personal and cultural dimensions of an event or occurrence. It is therefore fitting that the conceptual framework for this paper is based on theories of organizational culture. Specifically, the culture discussed in this paper is the culture within the institution of higher education in the United States. Kuh and Whitt (1988) describe culture in higher education in the following way:

Culture in higher education is defined as the collective, mutually shaping patterns of norms, values, practices, beliefs, and assumptions that guide the behavior of individuals and groups in an institute of higher education and provide a frame of reference within which to interpret the meaning of events and actions on and off campus. (12)

Within this paper, I use the culture of higher education to describe the setting and influence for the sexual harassment incidents as well as the subsequent actions taken by the university to address the harassment, which thereby illustrate the university's overriding beliefs and attitudes about the incidents and sexual harassment in general.

The events surrounding my sexual harassment by my adviser as well as the institutional responses to it and sexual harassment in general, therefore, cannot be generalized to other institutions. While similar organizations generally share traits (Kuh 2001), and by extension, universities generally share many cultural traits, certainly the events that occurred between my adviser and me as well as the institutional response were unique to that particular culture and university. However, while the points I make in my accounting of the events surrounding my sexual harassment are certainly unique to my incident, there are nevertheless many lessons to be learned about culture and change for all of higher education. It is here, then, that the personal and political converge, when the "I" of the individual becomes the "we" of the culture.

The cultures examined in this paper are those occurring at both the micro- and macro- levels. In my experience, these cultures included the micro cultures of a college of education and the institutional culture of a large research institution where I matriculated. The college of education promotes a generally cohesive environment, wherein the two separate departments of the college often interact and collaborate. This type of environment promulgates a sense of cohesion among its students, particularly at the graduate level. Typically, the department or discipline is the micro-culture, particularly at the graduate level where the department is at the center of the student's experience and her socialization (Turner, Miller, and Mitchell-Kernan 2002). My experience transcended the boundaries of my department, due to the cohesive nature of the college, as well as due to a leadership role I played in the college's graduate student government.

Micro-cultures are embedded within the larger cultures of graduate education and academia in the United States. The larger culture of academia is one built upon tradition and hierarchy (Becher and Trowler 2001). Hierarchy, particularly in large institutions such as my alma mater, is indicative of a larger bureaucratic culture that permeates the institution (Birnbaum 1988). This hierarchy is by extension a demonstration of power (Saguy 2000). Those higher on the institutional organizational chart are granted more power, and those lower on the chart are granted less. Within the realm of graduate education, this power differential is even more acute (Aguinis et al. 1996; Altbach 1970), as students must submit to the socialization process, and often to their advisers, in order to become a successful member of the profession (Weidman, Twale, and Stein 2001). Moreover, as women in academia still do not have equity among the highest reaches of power, such as through presidential appointments or promotion to full professor (Wilson 2004), the power differential becomes even more problematic. Indeed, particularly for women doctoral students, the relationships they form with advisers can ultimately lead to a case of accumulated disadvantage (Clark and Corcoran 1986). Therefore, the

relationship between graduate student and adviser becomes paramount to a student's success while in graduate school as well as in the profession (Bargar and Mayo-Chamberlain 1983).

This paper examines my sexual harassment experience from my perspective as an individual through the lens of the culture that exists in higher education, how my actions were influenced by that culture, and how that culture perpetuates sexual harassment. The information included in my story reflects my recollection of the incidents that occurred as they related to culturally situated sexual harassment at the university. Inasmuch as the coming out process entails a development of the individual's identity (D'Augelli 1994), my experience lent itself to a personal development of myself as woman, feminist, and professional. Specifically, D'Augelli posits that a person's identity is socially constructed over time and that the coming out process was one that is greatly influenced by cultural norms in the larger society. Moreover, unlike other theorists, D'Augelli believes that individuals extend a great amount of influence upon their own identity development. In this way, the coming-out experience in relation to my sexual harassment was one that not only influenced my identity development but also one that I used to make change in my own life.

## Awareness

The first time happened a few weeks after I met him. I was a brand new doctoral student in the program and I had just begun his class a few weeks earlier. He had invited the class over to his home for his birthday party. I went with two other classmates and, upon arriving, was greeted by him with a hug. It was clear from the drink in his hand as well as his demeanor that he had been drinking; of course it was, after all, his birthday party. I felt the embrace to be a bit odd, but was made much more uncomfortable by his comment to me as he hugged me: "Wow, Susan looks hot tonight." I recall thinking the whole thing odd enough that I mentioned it to my friend at my side. But, as I would do again in the future, I dismissed this uncomfortable interaction.

As the semester unfolded, I got to know him much better. In our small program, he was the instructor for the majority of the classes I would ultimately take in my program of study. He was one of the most charismatic individuals I have ever met. Sharing personal stories with his students, he often made students feel a closeness to and understanding of the person beyond the professor. And, on top of this, he expressed an interest in the topic that I was most passionate about myself: social justice. I was awed by him. He was my first encounter with a professor in my graduate program and, in many ways, a mentor, a father-figure, and a role model. I wanted to



be like him. As my first semester in the program ended, I felt certain that someone who respected my potential and intelligence, as well as someone whom I deeply admired, would be the right choice for my dissertation chair. I approached him and we agreed: He would become my adviser.

Time passed and I began formulating a research topic and often consulted with him on this and other matters related to my program of study. Due to what I considered to be his sensitivity, I was not surprised that he would often ask about my love life. I rarely had much to report, but I appreciated his holistic concern for his students. Even when I would see him throughout town, he would greet me with an embrace and a kind word, but as the months passed and our acquaintance grew, the embrace was often paired with a glance. It was this glance that began to make me nervous; a glance that felt inappropriate and made me uncomfortable. I was not entirely sure of what I was interpreting, but I began to feel it keenly enough that I commented to my friends about a gnawing awareness of his interest in me beyond the classroom. And as these incidents continued to occur, my growing foreboding made me comment to these same friends that I was afraid something was going to happen.

## Encounter

The end of another semester approached. In the meantime, he and another faculty member in the college had approached the dean for funding to attend a conference along with three other students. He asked if I would like to attend this conference, feeling it would be an excellent professional development opportunity for me. I had just recently decided that I wanted to become a faculty member, like him, and was going to transition to full-time status in the summer. He assisted me not only with this conference, but wrote recommendation letters for scholarships and helped me in locating an assistantship in the fall.

It was shortly after that a few of my friends and I decided an end of the semester celebration was in order. We went out on the town for a girls' night of dinner and dancing. It was now after the semester had ended, and both the town and the dance club were deserted by undergraduates. We had a lot of fun enjoying the empty dance floor, but when my friend Andrea pointed out his arrival, my spirits sank. My foreboding thoughts had come to realization. I muttered an expletive, knowing that all of the glances and moments of discomfort would be borne out in this evening. When everyone else mentioned they were going over to greet him, I had to be pulled along. I do not know why I knew, but somehow I suspected something was going to happen that night. I described the events in my journal the next day:



When I went over and said hello with everyone else, he said, “Holy shit! You look absolutely gorgeous! If I weren’t your professor right now . . .” and he laughed. So, I knew it was going to be difficult: Here I am completely in awe of this man and I know that not only is he attracted to me physically, but that he gets me, he appreciates me, he understands what I’m about and I love that.

The night progressed with much dancing and shot buying from him. He was constantly around me, trying to dance with me, and after Andrea told him that she and Kirsten might be staying at my house, he got it in his head that he wanted to come to this “slumber party,” and proceeded to ask me all night if he could come over. I never said anything—I felt strange and knew this was quickly becoming dangerous. Every time he came over to dance with me, he grabbed my hand or my hip—then he started putting his face on my neck—I don’t think I ever touched him back, but I did dance with him. At one point he said, “You know we’re going to Denver soon.” I said, “And what do you think is going to happen there?” He said, “We’re going to spend a lot of time together.” I knew what he meant. This whole thing just suddenly started getting creepy. When he wasn’t by me, he was talking nonstop to Andrea and Kirsten about me—suddenly something that I was secretly flattered by became weird and uncomfortable. Between all of this and the nonstop questions about coming home with me, I got freaked out and walked away. Kirsten came over to talk to me about it and while she was, Andrea came up with a freaked out look on her face. I asked her, “What happened?” She said he had asked her if he could go home with me. When she said she didn’t think so, he said, “You mean I can’t bury my face between her thighs tonight?”

Yes, he actually said that.

Well, hearing this made me start to cry and we secretly collected our things and snuck out to leave.

I was pretty upset—I guess it was one thing to be flattered by his attention, but I never would have acted on it. It is completely unethical for him to be doing this—and most certainly for him to be saying things like that to other students of his about me.

I was upset. I remember that I cried the whole way home. My friends tried to console me while they expressed their own disdain for his behavior. I think we were all dumbstruck by what had happened and tried to make sense of it in our own ways.

My own words in my journal express what was initially flattery that then turned into panic and disgust regarding his actions. I remember later feeling frightened about these feelings of flattery and admiration, that I had somehow brought on his attention, that I had “asked for it” in my mannerisms or my clothing. While we can certainly see parallels between sexual harassment victims and victims of sexual assault, I was not yet at the point where I could distinguish and characterize my own feelings about the incident. Dziech and Weiner (1990) echo this point: “[A student] may also feel guilty because [she is] flattered by the professor’s interest in [her] . . . she may have a certain amount of gratitude for the interest he has in her” (83–84).

My reactions the next day, then, were perhaps not surprising. I called my mother the next morning to tell her the story. In my journal from that day I comment, "When I told my mom, I obviously couldn't tell her exactly what he said—you know it's not good when you can't tell your mom." Her instantaneous reaction was, "Well, you're not going to that conference with him, that's for sure!" I told her that I had to, that I had no choice. It was already paid for and my name was on the program. I felt that if I didn't go it would reflect badly on me and my future career prospects. I told her that I was instead going to pretend it didn't happen. He certainly had too much to drink and that clearly explained his behavior. In my journal, I say:

So I spent a lot of the day thinking about it and getting pretty upset about it and at him in general. I really was hoping that he'd sober up and realize how inappropriate he had acted and would want to apologize—however my biggest fear was also that he would want to apologize—I didn't want to talk about it with him. I felt like the minute we would talk about it, it would be "out there" and make life really difficult for the next two years of my life. I had just hoped to ignore it and we could mutually realize (privately) that it was wrong and never go there again.

Retrospectively, I realize that this reaction was completely normal. Dziech and Weiner (1990) underscore, "Many students attempt to ignore incidents in the hope that they will not recur" (84). What they say next is something, however, I wish I would have known: "Their optimism usually proves false, since most harassers are encouraged by a student's failure to resist" (84).

Later that day, I went over to my friend Nichole's house to discuss the previous evening's events. She had been there earlier in the evening, but had left before the worst occurred. As someone finishing up her PhD in Counseling Psychology, she was particularly helpful in discussing my feelings about the incident. I felt better about what had happened and resolved further to forget it happened and move on. However when I arrived home, what greeted me let me know that this was something I could not do. My journal states:

I got home and there was a message from him—first teasing and saying, "Hope the slumber party went well," and then asking me to call him on his cell phone. This call was made at approximately 6 PM—so not drunk—light of day—and certainly not remorseful. None of his students have his cell phone number. The only way he has my phone number is from class. So, yes, I realize that I need to talk to him—I just need to formulate it and figure out how I'm going to deal with the fallout afterward. This is really difficult for me, but I'll also admit that my awe of him has diminished drastically in the past 24 hours—how do I know that this is so blatantly wrong when he obviously has no clue?

## Disintegration

My friends who witnessed the event that night invited me to lunch a few days later. Under the guise of a girls' lunch, they confronted me with a typed list of the items they were going to present to him about his behavior and what they perceived to be a lack of professionalism; they told me that if I wasn't going to act upon what had happened, then they were. I expressed my appreciation and consideration of their willingness to deal with the incident, but told them that I needed to be the person who confronted him. My belief was that he would take it less confrontationally if it came from me and would respect it more since we did, of course, have such a good working relationship. I was admittedly concerned about *him* at this point and wondering if he was feeling as conflicted about the whole incident as me, a sentiment common to those who have experienced sexual harassment (Lenhart 1996). My friends pressed me to verify that I would indeed speak to him. They had seen how the incident had begun to take a toll on me. I was frequently in tears and often distracted. I told them that I was certainly serious about my intentions to talk to him. I was beginning a summer course with him in a few days and decided that I would talk to him the first day classes began.

While I most certainly knew his behavior was inappropriate and unprofessional, it did not gel with the image I had conceived in my mind about him. For several weeks, the cognitive dissonance I experienced was so difficult to endure that I would often have to remind myself what had happened and that it indeed had occurred. I was not, at this point, ever really mad at him. I took a large amount of the responsibility for what had occurred upon myself, as is common (Lenhart 1996; Gutek and Koss 1996), and self-incriminating thoughts went round and round in my head. For those intervening weeks, these thoughts were all that I could concentrate upon. Several of my friends told me that I should report the incident, but that was something that I could not conceive of. He was my adviser and my mentor. It was all just a big misunderstanding; I was sure of it.

When I approached him in his office that morning, he launched immediately into our preparations for the conference. When he finished, I told him I needed to speak to him about something. I asked if I could close the door, and with a very shaky voice, told him what I had spent many hours and multiple drafts preparing to say. I asked him not to speak until I was done, as what I had to say was extremely difficult for me. As I had rehearsed, I told him that what had happened between us that night made me extremely uncomfortable. I told him that it could never happen again. I told him that the only relationship we could ever have would be one in which he was my professor and I was the student. I told him that I hoped it wouldn't affect our working relationship and, as I began to cry, I asked if he understood.

He listened and when I finished, he straightened up and in a very dignified, but soothing, tone told me: "Don't worry about it. Put your tears back in your eyes and don't worry about it. I would never do anything to jeopardize our relationship." I'll admit that while this is not the response I was expecting or hoping for, I accepted it nevertheless as validation of what I had just told him. While he did not take responsibility or offer remorse, his words indicated acceptance in some shape or another. He began discussing the conference again and we headed to class.

I was admittedly concerned about how our relationship would now function. Would he treat me differently? Would he be standoffish and avoid me? Would he disdain me or feel hurt? I was extremely worried about this, especially since I had a class with him. I was certainly relieved, then, to see no change in his behavior toward me in class, and our subsequent planning for the upcoming conference proceeded.

I told my friends and my mother about what had occurred. While they were to a great degree nonplussed by his reaction, they also felt similarly mollified by it. Nevertheless, I was wary, so much so that I approached the other faculty member that was attending the conference. Dr. Albert was a newer addition to the faculty in the program and I had gotten to know her better as I was also taking a course from her that summer. She was close to my age and she and my adviser were friends. I felt that someone who was close to him might be better able to assist me with the dilemma, and again, my concern for his feelings and his well-being were factors in my decision to speak to her. When I shared the story with Dr. Albert, I felt validated by her acknowledgment of the incident; she listened intently, she handed me a tissue when I cried, and she offered me a hug when I finished. She assured me that she would not allow any behavior of that sort to occur while we were at the conference. She told me she would never leave me alone with him and would, in her words, "kick his ass" if he acted like that again. She even offered to speak to him about the incident, but I assured her this was not necessary.

We spent a week at the conference, meeting often to discuss what we were learning and experiencing. All was progressing well, and in the evenings during the regular social hour, he would leave the group to spend time with his son who was with him or to meet with other friends. I felt calmed and relaxed, seeing that nothing had occurred and feeling that my worries were unnecessary. I had two other students with me and Dr. Albert to keep me company and to ward off any alone time with him. It was our last evening there that everything changed.

As a group, we decided to go out to the evening's social together and then out to dinner to celebrate our hard work that week. At some point, however, the conversation shifted as Dr. Albert began a discussion about sex. I remember looking at her with pleading eyes, trying to convey that this was not wanted or at all appropriate, but I think too much celebrating

had made her forget her promise to protect me. We were sitting in a booth in the middle of the restaurant and I remember trying to make myself disappear while they talked, sinking lower into the corner of the booth and remaining silent. When he turned to me, laughing, and asked, "So, Susan, do you swallow?" my reaction was one of dismay. I said to him, and to the rest of the table, "You know you shouldn't be asking me that. You know that that is inappropriate." He laughed and silence fell at the table. Eventually, the topic changed. We later left the restaurant as a group and I returned to my room to retire for the evening.

When the phone rang later, I knew who it would be. His question to me: "What are you doing?" My response: "I'm going to bed." His request: "Do you want some company?" I sighed and told him good night, that I would see him in the morning. I think at this point I felt that our roles had changed; I was no longer the student and he the professor, he with the power and knowledge and I without. I felt like he was any other straight man I had encountered who was trying to push the envelope far enough to see if I would submit. My exasperation at this sort of scenario was nothing new and like those other incidents, I more or less ignored it and decided to let it go.

I think that my attitude of dismissal was easy to maintain during this time. When we returned from the conference, I did not see him again until the fall semester began. Much like the adage, "Out of sight, out of mind," I was able to escape thoughts of him because I did not see him or have to interact with him. But as fall semester and my full-time status in the college began, I could no longer avoid him or the truth of what had occurred.

## Reintegration

The first few days of the semester were admittedly awkward. Since I no longer had any courses with him, it was easy to evade interaction with him most of the time; however, there were still occasional awkward moments on the elevator or in the hallway. I knew after the conference that things needed to change, but I put it off until the semester began, considering my options in a small program of few graduate faculty. Of course, he could no longer be my adviser.

As classes began, I approached a new faculty member in the program. I had done a bit of work for her in the summer and felt a burgeoning connection and interest in her work. She had arrived untenured but planned to present herself for tenure and promotion that year. I set up a time to talk to her and tried to convey my need for a new adviser, feeling that I could talk to her about what had happened and would thereby garner her support. While she agreed to serve as my new adviser and chair, she seemed reluctant to hear much about the incidents or to express much

emotion about the events. I covertly handed in the signed documents to the department conferring her status as my new adviser, hoping no one would question or ask why the change was needed.

It was around this time that I decided to report the incident. I had met with Paul, a friend of mine, and I told him what had happened. His shock and disgust at my former adviser's behavior were not surprising to me; everyone who knew of the events had that same reaction. What was different, however, were Paul's questions. He asked, "Are you pressing charges?" I told him I was not. He responded, "Why not?" I replied that I didn't want to. He further prompted, "What happens if he does it to someone else?" And this time, I had no response. Suddenly everything shifted in my mind. I could not conceive of anyone else having to go through what I experienced. As I pondered my own beliefs and values about feminism and social justice, I realized that I felt compelled to do something.

My journal entry on October 20, 2003 continues the story:

So, I started the research into the process of sexual harassment complaints. I went first to see a therapist at the counseling center who was very forceful in expressing her disgust and disdain over the situation and very much influenced me to report it. I told her I needed some time to think it all over. On Friday, I filed my seven page complaint.

A lot of conflicting issues and concerns have plagued me over the past month:

- 1) Talking to my new chair—I haven't felt utter and complete support from her ever on this subject—not that it's bad and understandable when I see that she's up for a tenure vote in the next month or so—she's worried. I just don't get it and feel pretty disappointed in not only her in a way, but in the profession that creates an environment of silence where one is afraid to stand up for what is right because it might piss someone off so you can't get tenure. What is that?!?!?
- 2) Who am I doing this for? If I'm doing it for him—to "teach him a lesson" or whatever, that's not right. I can't control what he does or doesn't do—I can only control what I want or will get out of this. I am doing it for someone else, though—the six or seven other people I've heard he's now done this to. Some of them have made their peace, but some are going to tell their own story.
- 3) Is this academic or even professional suicide? What could happen to me? I'm not necessarily afraid he'll "do anything," but I'm afraid of being alienated, ostracized, or having my reputation tarnished. I know the system—I just don't want to suffer any more than I feel I have already.

The administrator at the office on campus handling the complaints met with me and Kirsten, my friend who had witnessed the original incident. After turning in my typed account of the incidents, the administrator informed me that my former adviser would receive a copy of the complaint and would have a week to respond. At that point, the investigation would begin and would include interviews of witnesses. She assured me that the entire process would take no more than thirty days and that I would be protected throughout the process from harassment or retaliation from

him. Before I left, she asked me what consequences I would like to see for his behavior, should they find that my report was substantiated in the investigation. The final report says this:

Complainant stated her purpose in filing a complaint was to get Respondent to listen and hear he has consistently violated faculty-student professional boundaries and for him to get some professional help in dealing with his behavior.

I believe that when I initially filed the complaint, this *is* all that I wanted. In many ways, I felt emotions similar to those that Dziech and Weiner (1990) found in students they studied who were sexually harassed by their faculty: "Another repeated reaction of women victims is their ambivalence about and sometimes sympathy for the harasser. Women students, especially if they are considering making a formal complaint, worry about the professor's career, marriage, and future. Over and over they comment, 'I don't want anything bad to happen to him'" (83). Nevertheless, as my journal entries from that time reveal, I began to experience a shift in my positionality regarding the incident—as I began to see and feel it was no longer necessarily just about me, but about him, his behaviors, and about the institutional culture that perpetuated these behaviors. In essence, I began to shift from the individual to the cultural understanding of what was occurring.

When it finally arrived sixty days later, his rebuttal consisted of blaming me for what had happened, stating in his written response, "For a person to be so uncomfortable with me for over an eight month period of time, I find it ironic that from my perspective, she has used me for her own professional gain (e.g., letters of recommendation for scholarships, supporting here [sic] in ascertaining [sic] an assistantship position, and attending a national conference). It seems to me, that if one is so uncomfortable with someone, they would eliminate their interaction with that person." He also points out, in his defense, "Each scenario of perceived sexual harassment was not in a professional setting." Never once in his statement does he deny that the events occurred.

Once his rebuttal was given, the investigation was allowed to begin. So what began with a promise for a thirty-day turnaround was now entering three months. As the office investigating the complaint tried to contact him for a more specific response to the actual events that occurred, he evaded their phone calls repeatedly until at last he hired an attorney to respond. This final response occurred only at the prompting by the department chair and the college's dean, who had both been contacted by the investigator. Finally, with no further response from my former adviser, the investigator chose to conclude the investigation. The final report was given to me on May 17, 2004—almost exactly seven months to the date after I filed the initial complaint.



## Emersion

The rest of my story is what occurred after that final report was submitted. As per university policy, I was given a copy, he was given a copy, and copies went to the department chair, the college dean, and to the provost. The investigating office on campus found him to be responsible for the sexual harassment. What did this mean? While the office that investigates comes to a conclusion on the incidents, they do not recommend specific action, but leave this up to the college in which the faculty member is housed. I therefore met with the dean and the department chair separately after receiving the final report and was summarily informed that while they expressed their deepest regret for the actions of my former adviser, they could not tell me what actions would come of it as it was a confidential personnel issue. I was told, however, that he would most certainly not be dismissed but would be reprimanded and admonished so that no further behavior of this sort would be repeated.

As alluded to earlier, the culture of a particular institution—in this case, that of an institution of higher education—can have a powerful influence upon individuals. As Conrad and Taylor (1994) point out, “The incidence of harassment is related to a number of organizational factors, and the outcomes of harassment complaints are influenced by a group of organizational processes we will label the ‘organizational conspiracy of silence.’ Individual and institutional responses to harassment claims reproduce the contextual factors that facilitate harassment and the responses that help perpetuate it” (45). When seen through power structures like the tenure process or the graduate student-faculty member relationship in a higher education organization and its culture, these incidents of sexual harassment are perhaps not surprising.

Consequently, after seven months of waiting for the final report, I was more or less made aware that, in my mind, the process was ineffective. Not only did I feel that nothing really changed, but I also found in the course of my experience that other students had also been harassed by him. While some came forward during the course of my investigation to tell their stories to university officials, others told me they felt too frightened to speak up and chose rather to pretend it didn’t happen and move on with their lives. One student told me she had also confronted him about his behavior and was told “it would never happen again.” She expressed no other problems had occurred and felt that they had a good relationship that she did not want to compromise.

In many ways, I tried to let it all go. The summer of 2004 was now approaching and I was getting ready for my PhD examinations and for my dissertation research. I was told explicitly by my new adviser that I had more important things to worry about—and she was right. As angry as I

was and as anticlimactic as the reporting process had felt to me, I believed the best way for me to deal with all of it was to prove that it had not fazed nor hurt me. Yet, I resented his lasting effect on me.

I nevertheless did my best to avoid him in the hallways, going the long way through the building just to evade his office area and getting to meetings first so I would not be forced to sit anywhere near him. If I was invited to departmental events, I did not go if he was going to be there. I left to conduct my dissertation research and worked diligently to complete it. I began the academic job search and immersed myself in that task. I think I lived in this sort of unsettling state for quite a few months, still darting from room to room in the building, but remaining busy enough to keep my anger from overwhelming me. However, when I was contacted a few months later by a student asking to talk to me about a private matter, everything changed.

While she wasn't harassed by him, she was sexually harassed by a new professor in the building. My final year of graduate school I served as the president of the graduate student organization in the college and had made it a point to talk to the incoming graduate students about sexual harassment policy and complaints on the campus, a policy, up to that point, that was never distributed to graduate students. She remembered me sharing the information at orientation that summer and contacted me looking for advice and guidance. As she finished her emotional account, I described her options and told her that I would be supportive of whatever she decided. She was impressed with my knowledge about the process and asked me, "How do you know all of this?" She was surprised when I told her, quietly, "It happened to me, too." She then asked the question I knew she would ask: "Did you file a complaint?" I told her I did, but when she asked me if I felt like it was worth it, I hesitated.

My initial thought was to tell her the truth: Absolutely not, it was not at all worth it and the decision to go forward often made the whole situation feel worse. I wanted to tell her that the process had made me feel victimized all over again, but this time by the university. Instead, I told her that I was sure my case was not representative of what usually happens and that it really was up to her to decide what was best for her. She left me and told me she would get back to me with her decision. I left feeling deflated, anxious, and above all else, enraged.

Something about hearing that it was happening all over again to someone else made my blood boil. Worse, it was a brand new professor, a "superstar" who had been courted by the university. So not only was it happening to another student, but by another professor who promulgated a social-activist research agenda. When, shortly after, she informed me of her decision to not only report it to the university, but to sue him in civil court as well, I applauded her efforts and gave her my whole-hearted support. While her investigation by the university only took the

institutionally mandated thirty days, its findings in her favor nevertheless reflected a similar outcome. Upon seeing no action by the institution, she decided to extend her lawsuit to the university and subsequently decided to take her case to a higher power: The press.

## Acceptance

In the midst of all this, I also was able to defend a dissertation, conduct a job search, and move to a different state where I accepted my first academic position. In more ways than one, it was a relief for me to be away from the place where it all happened. I was able to gain not only physical distance from it, but mental and emotional distance as well. I reveled in the freedom of not having to see him, of not accidentally running into him in the elevator, of not having to skulk around town in the off-chance he might be at the grocery store, the pharmacy, or the restaurant where I dined. Realizing this freedom and accepting this distance also allowed me the emotional space to come to terms with what had happened to me: I was sexually harassed. I felt that with my newly gained emotional and physical distance, as well as my new academic position, I was free to admit what had happened to me and to no longer be “in the closet.”

Before I left my university a few months before, I had made my perspectives clear to the administrators in the college. I had been hearing rumors about other incidents of sexual harassment involving my former adviser as well as gossip about other faculty members in the building. I made it clear to the college administrators that I was willing to go to the press if for no other reason than to see changes happen in the college. Both the dean and the department chair assured me that all formal complaints would be taken seriously, but only if they became formal complaints. They told me that could not act on rumors alone, and that if people did not step forward to file complaints, there was nothing that they could do. While understandable, these types of comments nevertheless infuriated me. I would typically retort, “But how can people step up and file complaints if they are afraid? And, furthermore, why should people file complaints if they see nothing will be done about it?”

To me, the problem was clearly an issue of institutional culture and precedence that investigated reports at one level, but allowed individual administrators at the college or department level to decide upon recourse. There were frequent rumors that spoke to many incidents of sexual harassment, in both my previous college and in others on the campus, being flagrantly ignored by the administration. When this was pointed out to both administrators (who were women), they replied, “But those are just rumors.” My response was, “But doesn’t it say something that the rumors even exist? What kinds of messages do rumors like these send to people

who might be thinking about reporting it? And, moreover, what kinds of messages do these types of rumors send to those who harass?"

When I left the college in the summer of 2005 with the threat of further action lingering on my lips, I knew something else: One other woman reported that my former adviser had sexually assaulted her. While she was no longer his student, the fact that he did something so appalling and so morally and ethically repugnant enraged me. After speaking with her directly and hearing about the specific details of what occurred, I was even more incensed. She told me that the day he assaulted her she had finally confronted him about the incident with me and the rumors she had heard. His reaction to her was, "Oh, you know, it's just another story of a woman trying to keep a man down." That night, according to her, he entered her home uninvited and assaulted her.

She pressed charges, at both the university and local levels. While no longer a student, she did now work at the institution and had to go through a similar reporting process. After the investigation concluded, the university found him not responsible. I personally do not know why the incident was not found credible, but I do know that hearing even the inkling that he had crossed the line of professionalism one more time and again with no repercussions was enough to make up my mind. I decided to go to the press.

## Disclosure

Just as my decision to report what had occurred to me to the university was a monumental decision and one rife with stress and indecision, so was my decision to go to the press about my story. I had to decide my reasoning behind "coming out" and what I hoped the outcomes would be. In the end, I realized that the only way to make change at the institution was through leveraging some power of my own. I felt that by advocating for students in my position as the president of the graduate student organization, through my talks with administrators, and certainly through the formal reporting process of the harassment, I had pursued all of the bureaucratic paths available to me, all of which were clearly unsuccessful in making change. From my work as an administrator and now as a scholar of higher education, I knew that two things really influence change in a large bureaucratic organization: money and bad press (see, Kezar and Eckel 2002). Real change in academia is often fueled by either a lack of money or an infusion of it wherein new structures or ways of thinking about an issue are influenced. Since I lacked the fiscal power, I invoked the political.

After much consternation and many sleepless nights, I made my decision to come forward and "to come out." Ultimately, what I decided was not to tell this story—the story of what he did to me, but the story of

what happens when it occurs. I wanted to emphasize the institutional and bureaucratic barriers that stand in the way of changing a culture that does not actively seek to discourage this sort of behavior, or to effectively respond when it does occur. I wanted people to know that until changes were made to both the institutional and bureaucratic cultures, sexual harassment would continue. I never once mentioned his name or the circumstances around which the harassment occurred; I never felt doing so was necessary to get my point across.

After the story was printed, one can imagine the fall out: Two incidents of sexual harassment in one college? With rumors of possibly more, not just in the college of education, but all across the campus, the student reporters had endless fodder for editorials, in-depth reports, and now, connections to the larger mainstream media. I was suddenly barraged with e-mails and phone calls by supporters, not only from those whom I knew, but also from others whom I had never met. One such woman told me, "While I have had a great graduate experience here, I was assaulted by a faculty member in the college when I was an undergrad eight years ago. Like you, I never heard anything in response to the complaints I made." Another woman shared her story with me: "As a master's student, my adviser sexually harassed me. I was young and naïve and never said anything to him or anyone else. Years later, I still have a pit in my stomach when I think about him and things that he said and did. I have always regretted not being more assertive and confident because I'm sure that he continued with his pattern of abuse after my departure."

While my e-mail and voicemail box continued to fill, within the college a large display of outrage on the part of many faculty members and graduate students resulted in several "town hall" meetings to discuss the issue. I heard many stories about these meetings, none good. Most of the stories entailed more graduate students tearfully sharing their stories—that they too had been sexually harassed. Shortly after, on November 15, 2005, a mass e-mail was sent to the university community by the provost, stating that "sexual harassment of a student by a professor severely damages that relationship and demeans our highest academic values. Sexual harassment destroys a trusting environment, putting in its place fear and anxiety." In the message, he called the community to action, asking "victims" to speak out and report incidents and for administrators and faculty to report any incidents about which they are told. He also asked the community to join him in reevaluating the existing policy and in educating others about its existence.

The provost, per institutional policy, is always copied on any sexual harassment report involving faculty members; therefore, he and the provosts before him knew of every single reported incident of sexual harassment on that campus. I responded personally to the provost, letting him know that I appreciated the movement forward, while also

making him aware that many of the policies he discussed in his memo (trainings, results of harassment investigations, response to victim) were never enacted with me and were in actuality what caused much of my frustration with the process. He never responded to the e-mail.

However, as many told me, things were finally beginning to happen. Several meetings were called, both in the college as well as across the university. A new task force was implemented to evaluate and work toward creating a new policy, and many more women were stepping forward to tell their stories. I heard about all of it—through e-mails, through calls, and through the student newspaper. I know it was not an easy time for those in the college. One faculty member related to me, “To be honest it has been a nightmare. It is just too much. Faculty are overwhelmed, the administration is overwhelmed, the environment is strange; more people are not coming into work because of this. It’s just reached the maximum point, I think.” Another faculty member e-mailed me to tell me, “Obviously, there is much work to be done here. Without you both coming forward, we might have continued to operate in a climate of silence. Trust that some of us will keep pushing on this so that real change might occur.”

I was, admittedly, overwhelmed by the response—in more ways than one. It would have been an interesting venture to calculate the amount of hours that were dedicated to responding to e-mails, discussing the situation with colleagues, and hearing about the meetings and latest happenings back at the university. I could almost hear my adviser’s words from years before echoing in my head, “You don’t have time to focus on this now.” It is perhaps, then, not surprising that when I received a phone call from a television reporter asking to hear my story, I declined. Nothing could ever undo what he did to me and nothing I did could ever make him feel how he made me feel. Retaliation through public humiliation would not solve anything, nor would it make me feel any better. I felt I did as much as I could: I put some pressure on the university to make some changes and look at things in a new way.

## Identity Cohesion and Role Commitment

That brings me full circle in my story; but where does it leave the issue? The television reporter who contacted me for an interview asked me one question that summarizes my story, the problem, and the larger issue at hand; a question that has haunted me each day as it has haunted me throughout my writing of this account. He asked, “In your opinion, what can be done to stop sexual harassment?”

What can be done? How can it be changed? Can sexual harassment be stopped? I think the simple answer is, “No, it can’t,” as long as we

continue to have the strict hierarchies and accompanying power differentials that exist in higher education. And, as has been often said, higher education is a microcosm of society—can we change something like sexual harassment in higher education without also changing it in society? I often feel overwhelmed and daunted by the idea of stopping it—and not just sexual harassment, but all forms of discrimination and bias. In my mind, they are all very similar and work within the same structures of oppression and power. Indeed, even feminists do not agree about the causes and consequences of sexual harassment (Crouch 2001). Whether we base sexual harassment on the gendered power structures that exist in our culture or look at it as a problem of individual misbehavior, we must nevertheless address it.

From a cultural perspective, therefore, higher education institutions must work to break down the hierarchies and power differentials that exist. In my case, one could see change occurring from the top-down, through the provost's actions and e-mail, as well as change evolving from the bottom-up, through individual students stepping forward to make change. From the former perspective, the culture of the institution acknowledged the provost's powerful position as a male and as the chief ranking academic officer of the institution. From the latter, we may be able to see the change that can be created when those without power assume positions that are indeed powerful, whether as a collective group or by using resources to gain power within the existing cultural paradigm. I believe that both of these perspectives are, to an extent, valid. As the prevailing culture in academia is one that rests firmly upon a foundation of hegemony and patriarchy, we will need men in these positions of power to acknowledge the existing power structures and to make change. Moreover, all must see that it is often women and people of color who recognize these power imbalances and work to create change due to their own oppressed positions. If men are able to see past their privileged status and acknowledge these deficiencies perhaps change can occur. At the same time, we will need everyone, regardless of positionality, to step forward to demand change and end the silence.

Certainly, as we begin to see more feminist forms of leadership and governance in business and in higher education (Kezar, Carducci, and Contreras-McGavin 2006)—those that promote collective decision-making and a reduction of hierarchies (Bess and Dee 2008)—perhaps we can also in time come to see these changes as more the norm rather than the exception. In this way, involving all constituencies in decision-making processes on a campus is imperative to breaking down the power differentials that exist. Likewise, involving graduate students in these decision-making processes will assist them not only regarding their socialization to the profession but also regarding the understanding of their future roles as faculty members in these cultures.



Furthermore, policies should be made explicit regarding these power differentials as they currently exist. Faculty members, due to their inherent positions of power over students, have no business dating or romantically pursuing students. While there may certainly be actual cases of love between a faculty member and a student, if it is indeed love, the relationship can wait until the individual is no longer a student. I am aware of too many cases of faculty members and their faculty senates that refuse to allow strict language such as this into their agreements and contracts; indeed, one administrator at my alma mater told me that during a sexual harassment training she once was asked by a faculty member, "Well, if we can't date our students, who is there left for us to date?" Certainly, faculty members must be made aware of their power and the scope of this power over their students. Again, through doing this, students may also be made explicitly aware of their future power through the socialization process.

Inherent in these academic cultures, therefore, is also the hierarchy and precedent of the tenure system for faculty. Submitting to the power hierarchy is often expected of tenure-track faculty in order to be fully accepted and gain promotion and tenure at the institution (Tierney and Bensimon 1996). Once again, women and other underrepresented groups are often disadvantaged in this process due to their lack of power in the prevailing system and culture (Tierney and Rhoads 1994). Graduate students receive their anticipatory socialization for these faculty roles while in graduate school (Austin 2002) and providing them with the knowledge and power to make change in their current and future roles is an important part of making current and future change. Educating graduate students and early career faculty for the potential of their power within the existing culture is vital to creating change within these cultures. This might be created through changing the reward structure that currently exists for faculty members (Tierney and Bensimon 1996; Boyer 1990) or through changing the existing structure and challenging the prevailing paradigms and hegemony that reinforce the power differential (Tierney and Bensimon 1996).

On an individual level, we certainly know that we have much work to do. I know that if I do what I can do to make my corner of the world a little better place, I can hopefully influence others to do the same. I have an amazing honor and opportunity to work with current and aspiring higher education administrators and faculty each day. If I can model for them professional standards and ethics, include these standards in my curriculum, and speak out against acts of oppression and bias in my workplace and in my world, I am doing my part. And, because of this, I have come to accept what happened to me—to come out of the closet—and accept this as a part of my identity. In this way, the coming out process regarding sexual harassment allows an individual not only to seek community among others with this experience but also to forge this part of

her identity with other aspects and to bring about social change through this knowledge (Downing and Roush 1985).

I began writing this paper hoping to punctuate my experience with sexual harassment and to finally be able to put it to rest (that is, silence it again, but within myself), but what I have realized in the midst of this is what happened to me isn't something I can leave behind or forget about—it is part of who I am. My experience with sexual harassment has very much formed the person I am today and most certainly the professional I will always be. I have also decided to begin sharing my story with my students; I do this not to make a spectacle of "him versus me," but to let my students know that speaking out can often incite change, and I do it in the hope that someone else will feel permission to tell his or her story. If we can all come out of the sexual harassment closet, maybe we can all begin to look at it no longer as a silent issue to be handled alone, but one that we must all change together.

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