

## **Organizational norms of sexual harassment and gender discrimination in Danish academia**

From recognizing through contesting to queering pervasive rhetorical legitimation strategies

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## ORIGINAL ARTICLE

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Sexism in Business Schools: Structural Inequalities, Systemic Failures and Individual Experiences of Sexism

# Organizational norms of sexual harassment and gender discrimination in Danish academia: From recognizing through contesting to queering pervasive rhetorical legitimation strategies

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## Abstract

Studies of sexual harassment in professional contexts, including academia, provide detailed explanations of the predominance and pervasiveness of sexist organizational norms that enable harassing behavior—and offer a thorough critique of the structures and practices that support and reproduce these norms. When sexist organizational norms are linked to acts of sexual harassment, it becomes clear that harassment is systemic, and that organizations tend to justify and excuse the very norms and behaviors that propagate harassment. Focusing on the context of Danish universities, we do not ask whether sexism exists in Danish society generally and in academia specifically, but rather, why issues of systemic sexism and normalized sexual harassment have been ignored for so long and how sexist organizational norms have been maintained. Based on an investigation of prevalent rhetorical strategies for legitimating sexual harassment and gendered discrimination, we discuss how recognizing these strategies may translate into concerted action against them. Introducing queer organization studies as a lever for such translation, we suggest that a norm-critical approach may, first, explain how currently dominant norms offer sexist excuses for continued harassment and, consequently,

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delegitimize and change these unjust norms and the untenable practices they support.

#### KEYWORDS

academia, legitimation strategies, norm critique, queer organization studies, rhetorical analysis, sexism, sexual harassment

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

In the late summer of 2020, Sofie Linde, a highly profiled Danish media personality, used her platform as host of a national comedy award show to narrate incidents of sexism and sexual harassment that she had experienced throughout her career in the media industry. The speech set off a “second wave” of #MeToo activism in Denmark, which spread from industry to industry as media professionals, politicians, musicians, and medical staff came forward to talk about individual experiences and/or sign collective testimonies regarding sexism in their professional fields. Academia was no exception, and a collective of researchers gathered more than nine hundred testimonies and almost seven hundred signatures in only 4 days. The collected testimonies were subsequently published in a report that also included resources and tools that can assist university management and others in battling sexism in academia (Einersen et al., 2021). The initiative and the voices of the collective are furthermore documented at <https://sexismedu.dk>.

Whereas the “first wave” of #MeToo was largely ignored and/or ridiculed in Danish media coverage (Askanius & Hartley, 2019) and was deemed to have gone “too far” by members of the general public as well as university employees (Christensen, 2018; Skewes et al., 2021), the debate that followed Sofie Linde’s speech and the subsequent initiatives resonated more deeply. The reasons for the relative success of this “second wave” are multifaceted and difficult to discern, but Linde’s rhetorical prowess was one central source of inspiration and gave new impetus to the movement (Danske Taler, 2020). As a result, key decision makers and senior managers across the involved industries now appear to recognize the problematic existence of sexist organizational cultures that sustain gender inequalities and enable sexual harassment. The question then is not whether sexism exists in Danish society generally and at Danish universities specifically, but *why issues of systemic sexism and normalized sexual harassment have been ignored for so long, how norms of sexist organization have been maintained, and what it might take to change them*. Taking our cue from the power of Linde’s rhetorical performance, we suggest that rhetoric can be a force of change, but hasten to recognize that it can also be used to support the status quo (Harmon et al., 2015). Persuasive and performative speech acts, we contend, are centrally involved in legitimating sexual harassment and gendered discrimination—and in delegitimizing and changing organizational and societal norms.

Situating this study in the context of Danish academia, we offer an analysis of prevalent rhetorical strategies for legitimating harassment as articulated across interviews with academic staff, administrative personnel, and university managers. We find that everyone, including people who have experienced and even spoken out against harassment, uses legitimation strategies to “explain away” the problem during the interviews and/or indicate how such strategies have been used to silence them in their organizational contexts. Here, rhetorical utterances reproduce prevalent norms and articulated legitimation strategies become barriers to translating recognition of the problem into concerted action. Therefore, fighting sexism and harassments must involve the recognition of rhetorical legitimation strategies as well as the organizational norms that these strategies draw on; if we can recognize and explain the rhetoric that legitimizes sexism, we also become better at calling it out and offering alternatives. In this light, the identification of a total of 10 recurrent rhetorical strategies is the first contribution of this paper, as it enables us to call out the legitimation of harassment when we see it. Further, considering these strategies in the context of the dominant organizational norms of academia offers explanations as to why the legitimation of harassment is so

prevalent. Such recognition and understanding of rhetorical strategies and organizational norms are necessary steps toward their contestation and dismantling.

The legitimization of hurtful norms and practices is by no means unique to the professional field of academia in the national context of Denmark at the present time. To the contrary, existing research amply documents the insidious and pervasive character of sexist organizational norms as they relate to sexual harassment (Bell et al., 2019; Fernando & Prasad, 2019; Hlavka, 2014; Phipps & Young, 2015). Although most studies on organizational sexism and sexual harassment document and denounce the prevalence of these phenomena, the identified problems have also proved to be extremely entrenched in organizational realities. Given this entrenchment, we suggest that queer organization studies may provide a means of prying organizational norms open and troubling dominant strategies for their reproduction (Just et al., 2017; Parker, 2002, 2016; Pullen et al., 2016; Rumens, 2017). As such, queer theory is our entry-point to norm critique, as we premise our second contribution on the introduction of queer organizational perspectives, which support the move from recognizing and explaining systemic sexism and normalized harassment to contesting and altering ingrained normativities.

We contribute to the reform of organizational norms by detailing how current norms are upheld through the rhetorical entanglements of academia and sexism—and by suggesting queer means for their disentanglement. To do so, we conduct a three-step investigation of 37 interviews with employees at Danish universities who were invited to share their understandings of and opinions on gendered harassment and discrimination. In the first analytical step, we establish the context for harassment at Danish universities, based on the interviewees' descriptions of their work environment, cultural norms, professional standards, etc. In the second step, we identify rhetorical strategies for legitimating harassment and discrimination. In combination, these two rounds of analysis detail why and how sexist norms and harassing behaviors are reproduced in Danish academia. As such, the analysis identifies, categorizes, and explains the legitimization strategies used by the informants, applying tools for the rhetorical analysis of “image repair” (Benoit, 1997) to the interviewees' explanations of their organizational experiences. In the third step, we introduce the queer perspective to contest dominant norms and activate the performativity of alternatives (Gibson-Graham, 1996), which facilitates the move from the identification of prevalent legitimization strategies to support for counterstrategies of de-legitimation. To do so, we combine two modes of listening to our data that enable us to identify the legitimization of norms and to question the norms' legitimacy: rhetorical (Ratcliffe, 2005) and queer (Landreau, 2012). Listening to the informants' predominant justifications of the status quo not only lets us understand their rhetorical strategies but also points to the very rhetoricity of societal norms (Villadsen, 2020), opening up space to suggest how such norms might also be challenged *and* changed rhetorically (Sowards & Renegar, 2006). Applying rhetorical and queer listening, then, enables us to move from explaining rhetorical legitimization strategies through contesting sexual harassment to queerly interrogating sexist norms as a lever for organizational reform.

In what follows, we first review the extant literature on sexual harassment and gender discrimination in (work) organizations and then discuss how this literature may be brought into dialog with queer organization studies, suggesting how such dialog could move studies of sexist organizations in a more norm-critical direction. We then present our data collection methods and detail the analytical strategy of explanation and contestation. On this basis, we suggest how understanding the entrenchment of sexist norms in societies and organizations may support the critical work of changing such norms, one rhetorical encounter at a time.

## 2 | QUEERING SEXIST ORGANIZATIONAL NORMS AND NORMALIZED HARASSMENT

Feminist organization scholars have thoroughly documented how gendered organizational structures, norms, and workplace cultures enable and support the occurrence of sexual harassment (e.g., Bell et al., 2019; Brewis, 2001; Foley et al., 2020; Gómez-González et al., 2022; Guschke & Sløk-Andersen, 2021; Harding et al., 2013; Hennekam & Bennett, 2017; Ortlieb & Sieben, 2019; Pullen et al., 2017; Thomas & Davies, 2005). It follows that incidents of gendered discrimination and sexualized misconduct are not isolated or exceptional phenomena within an (otherwise

well-functioning) organization but are embedded in social norms, or as Hearn and Parkin (2001) argue, violation is inherent to organizing. When viewing acts of sexual harassment in the context of sexist organizational norms, it becomes clear that harassment is an exercise of power (Wilson & Thompson, 2001): what turns a physical or verbal act into a case of harassment is not just that it is unwanted, but also that rejecting such unwanted attention incurs the threat of retaliation. Further, organizational knowledge of sexual harassment risks reproducing rather than changing sexist norms, as acts of defining and regulating harassment privilege certain experiences and accounts over others, thus tending to normalize and even exonerate behaviors that might, given different gender norms and power dynamics, be classified as unacceptable acts of harassment (Brewis, 2001).

Gendered organizational norms are performative; they are produced in and productive of the contexts of their exercise and articulation (Allen, 1998). Scholars have identified a number of ways in which the performativity of sexist norms facilitates and sustains harassment and discrimination. For instance, Hlavka (2014) investigates gendered harassment and violence against adolescent women and shows that the reproduction of such behavior is based on the normalization of sexism and sexualized violence. Similarly, Hennekam and Bennett's (2017) study of the creative industries reveals a relation between sexist norms and the occurrence of sexual harassment, particularly as couched within workplace structures, processes, and cultures.

Phipps and Young (2015) develop the link between persistent harassment and encultured organizational practices in the context of higher education, connecting students' socialization into "lad cultures" with occurrences of sexism, sexual harassment, and sexual assault. These authors identify a culture of misogynist masculinity that builds upon ideas of "reclaiming territory in the context of [...] increased competition between the sexes" (461). Fernando and Prasad (2019) focus on the workplace culture of academia to reveal how a culture of reluctance to change that goes hand-in-hand with the silencing of victims allows sexual harassment to remain part of the status quo. Similarly, Savigny (2014, 2017) documents the pervasive ordinariness of "cultural sexism" in British academia, and Bourabain (2021) relates such everyday sexism to racialized experiences of discrimination at Belgian universities.

As shown here, the extant literature offers detailed explanations of the existence and pervasiveness of sexist organizational norms that enable harassing behavior through heteronormative assumptions of compulsory sexuality (Epstein, 1996)—and levels severe criticism at the structures that support these norms as well as the practices of their enactment. In other words, it is clear that sexist norms are performative, but it is less obvious *how* they can remain normative. In organizational contexts that explicitly disavow sexism and harassment, how do underlying gendered and sexist norms continue to legitimize otherwise inexcusable behavior? Understanding such legitimation of the status quo will not only help explain its persistence but can also facilitate change, as we may become more adept at contesting dominant norms and their legitimation.

To build this aptitude, let us return to the basic tenet of performativity; norms are performative in the dual sense of requiring and depending on repetition, which means they may induce their own preservation but can also be challenged and changed (Allen, 1998). The performativity of organizational norms points to their rhetoricity; norms are performative only as long as they are persuasive (Butler, 1997; Rand, 2008). Thus, norms can always be contested, and change happens when the contestant position becomes more persuasive than the normative one (Harmon et al., 2015). Here, a rhetorical exploration of legitimation strategies may be coupled with a norm-critical agenda of challenging the dominant norms from within, turning the urge toward justification into a willingness to recognize the hurtfulness of domination and to reform normative positions accordingly (Christensen et al., 2021; Guschke & Christensen, 2021).

Exploration of the norm-critical potential for change through "repetitions with a difference" that push against current normativities is at the heart of queer organization studies. Such endeavors not only reveal the contingency of existing norms but also work actively to destabilize them (Gibson-Graham, 1996; Wiegman & Wilson, 2015). Although first developed in the context of lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, intersex, and asexual activism, we understand queer as a theoretical as well as an empirical "orientation" toward difference (Just et al., 2017). In organizational terms, queer research (and activism) implies a shift away from the inclusion of minoritized subjects, which may be the aim of much critical scholarship, toward a critique of all normalization, including the normalization of difference. As an

emerging subfield, queer organization studies seek to “trouble” that which appears “normal” (Butler, 1990), exploring alternative, “wonky,” or “weird” ways of organizing (Burchiellaro, 2020, 2021; Christensen, 2021).

Accordingly, queer organization studies offer an agenda of critically engaged scholarship that dynamically and continuously contests dominant norms (Parker, 2016), questions normativities, including one's own, and destabilizes the power relations they produce (Rumens et al., 2019). Inspired by this program, we seek to contribute to the study of sexual harassment and gender discrimination by identifying and contesting the ways in which discriminatory norms and harassing behaviors are legitimized within organizational contexts. Thus, we not only offer a critique of such legitimation but also point to the transformative potential of queering organizational norms—beginning with the rhetorical strategies that support them.

### 3 | METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

In a study conducted in the European Union (EU) in 2014 that included 42,000 women from all member states, 83% of Danish respondents reported that they had experienced sexual harassment at least once since the age of 15, and 80% said they had experienced it within the previous 12 months (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2014). While this places Denmark among the three countries with the highest occurrence, it has been argued that sexual harassment might be reported more frequently by Danish participants due to the gender equality standards in the country. Expecting equal treatment might lead Danish women to recognize and label experiences more clearly as sexual harassment than would be the case for women in less gender-equal countries (Latcheva, 2017). Regardless, the result speaks to the entrenchment of harassing behavior in the Danish context and makes it an interesting case for examining the legitimation of such behavior: how can a country that is widely acknowledged for having high standards of gender equality tolerate the prevalence of sexual harassment?

#### 3.1 | Exploring understandings of harassment and discrimination at Danish universities

The empirical material for this investigation consists of 37 interviews with employees at Danish universities. Part of a larger study, the interviewees were recruited through a survey that was sent out widely to people in research, administrative, and leadership positions at all Danish universities and was completed by almost four hundred individuals (see Appendix Table A2 for an overview of the survey participants). Among the 37 interviewees are representatives from most universities, covering all academic job categories, and at various stages of their careers. Moreover, the group of participants is about equally made up of cis women and cis men as well as Danish and non-Danish employees, which means non-Danish employees are somewhat overrepresented relative to the entire population of university employees in Denmark (see Appendix Table A1 for an overview of the interviewees).

The first author conducted individual, in-depth, semi-structured interviews with the aim of exploring the interviewees' understandings of harassment and discrimination. It was emphasized that interviewees need not have personal experiences with harassment to participate, nor did they need to share these experiences if they had them. However, interviewees were asked about occurrences of harassment and discrimination in their workplaces, and many chose to share incidents in which they had been involved as victims, survivors, and/or bystanders, just as some suggested involvement as perpetrators.

All interviewees signed a consent form before the interview in which they agreed to the recording of the interview and its use for the research project. All transcripts were anonymized, processed, and stored in accordance with the EU's General Data Protection Regulation, but ensuring anonymity is not only a matter of regulatory compliance. More importantly, it is a consequence of the ethical responsibility we feel toward the interviewees who trusted us with their opinions and experiences. To more fully establish the interview as a safe space, all interviewees were also informed that they could revoke their consent (in full or concerning parts of the interview) if they changed their minds

after the interview. This did not happen, but a number of interviewees asked to be informed before publication if insights from their interviews were to be used. Accordingly, the first author has been in contact with some of the quoted interviewees to ensure that they feel safe with their representation in this article.

It is the main goal of the data generation and analysis to be open to the understandings and experiences of the participants without being uncritical of their opinions and behaviors. Thus, our aim is not to take the informants' accounts apart but to reveal the labor that went into maintaining consistent narratives and normative subjectivities (Riach et al., 2016). That is, we explore the conditions, expectations, and ideals of organizational subjectivities that underlie articulated perceptions and understandings of harassment and discrimination.

To this end, we draw on the dual approaches of "rhetorical" and "queer" listening. Here, rhetorical listening involves paying attention to the informants' articulated persuasive strategies, the argumentative patterns they employ, and the discursive regularities they reproduce (Ratcliffe, 2005). By uncovering the legitimation strategies used by the informants, we have become aware of how ingrained these strategies are, and we have subsequently observed our own use of them in various everyday encounters.

Realizing how these strategies for legitimating otherwise unjustifiable behavior permeate our own rhetorical practices, even as we seek to (re-)position ourselves as queer scholars, marked an important step toward articulating the persuasive and norm-critical aim of revealing and dismantling current strategies for legitimating harassment and normalizing discrimination. To support this process, we seek to queer our rhetorical listening. This move "allows things to remain askew, strange, unhoused, and unfamiliar" as we gain "the ability to listen with new ears to familiar voices" (Landreau, 2012, p. 156). Thus, queer listening enables us to move from acknowledging the pervasiveness of the rhetorical legitimation of sexual harassment to also scrutinizing and contesting the normative basis upon which these strategies of legitimation are built—marking the transition from the analysis to our discussion, as we explain below.

### 3.2 | The rhetorical legitimation of harassment

We conducted the analysis in two rounds. First, we listened inductively for cues about the contextual enablers of harassment. This inductive and open-ended coding informs the first round of analysis, which provides an overview of the norms that the informants associate with academia. Second, we turned to the specific issue of how the interviewees speak about harassment. As we listened rhetorically to these utterances, we were reminded of the classical situation of the courtroom. Knowingly or not, all our informants defended themselves, their organizations, and/or academia from the charge of being sexist perpetrators of harassment—and/or recounted instances of such defense as they had experienced them in their organization. In so doing, the interviewees applied and reproduced rhetorical strategies for legitimating predominant norms and practices, thus defending the status quo against accusations that, if conceded, would necessitate personal, organizational, and cultural change. Whereas we had expected criticism of and resistance to sexism and harassment, the informants overwhelmingly justified the organizational norms of academia, even when describing hurtful experiences and/or criticizing specific behaviors and events.

This surprising observation became the starting point for the second round of analysis, which details the rhetorical legitimation strategies that the informants recount and/or apply. Strategies of rhetorical defense are developed not only in classical texts on the genre of legal speech (Hoppmann, 2014) but also in a number of modern socio-political contexts (Just & Mouton, 2014; Ware & Linkugel, 1973), including an increasing interest in organizational crisis communication (Coombs et al., 2010). In this latter context, Benoit (1997, 2015) adopted classical rhetorical concepts to develop five general categories for countering an attack and restoring organizational image: denial, evasion of responsibility, reduction of offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification.

Applying Benoit's framework to the interviewees' statements, we immediately recognized several of the general strategies but also found that their articulations were particular to the work of legitimating harassment in Danish academia. Thus, we worked abductively with the conceptual categories and the empirical articulations, gradually

identifying 10 specific strategies and grouping them in accordance with four of Benoit's five categories (see Table 1). Interestingly, there is no evidence of mortification in our data, just as corrective action becomes an occasion to suggest that enough has already been done, leading right back to denial.

Beginning from this initial observation, the second round of analysis details different strategies for legitimating harassment, normalizing harassing behavior, and privileging subjectivities that accept and propagate such norms and behaviors. Subsequently, this reading of the strategies as used and retold by our informants leads to our contestation of sexist organizational norms in the context of Danish universities. In the discussion, we consider how, having listened to the prevalent rhetorical strategies, we can begin to queer the norms they reproduce. To this end, we re-articulate and enhance the de-legitimation of harassing behavior in sexist cultures, suggesting how such renewed strategies may become more persuasive and thus, performative in the context of (Danish) academia.

## 4 | LISTENING FOR RHETORICAL LEGITIMATION OF SEXUAL HARASSMENT IN DANISH ACADEMIA

As mentioned, the analysis is conducted in two rounds. First, we uncover the main traits of the context for harassment at Danish universities as described by the informants. Second, we detail the rhetorical strategies used to defend harassment, presenting the various arguments used to legitimize the current situation and reject the need for change. Although these strategies are sometimes hard to listen to, we believe that the detailed understanding of how they work is a necessary first step toward their dismantling; the more satisfactory and joyful, but also troubling and arduous work to which we turn in the discussion.

### 4.1 | Context for harassment at Danish universities

The overriding trait of the context is one of formality–informality, as careers in academia are highly hierarchized and very fluid, with various encounters between people at all steps in their careers and in different job categories taking place in everyday situations, in supervisory relationships, at seminars, conferences, etc. A number of specific contextual factors coalesce to enable harassment; these factors are neither causal, nor is harassment inevitable. However, the combination of these factors not only makes harassment possible but also facilitates its normalization within Danish academia. The most notable factors, as identified in the interviews, are normalization of conflict, blurring of personal and professional relationships, dynamic power relations, increasing precarity, sustained belief in meritocracy, and the licentious behavior of stars, which are all exasperated by one final factor, referred to by many informants as “the Danish way.”

#### 4.1.1 | Normalization of conflict

Scholarly disagreement is idealized as a key feature of good academic conduct. One head of department simply said, “Academic discussions can be very tough” (A27). As the quote indicates, it is assumed that the quality of the

TABLE 1 Strategies for legitimating harassment

Image repair strategy	Denial	Evasion of responsibility	Reducing offensiveness	Corrective action	Mortification
Strategies for legitimating harassment	Simple denial, passivity, ignorance	Avoidance, derailing, individualizing	Dismissing, ridiculing, hierarchization of experiences	Non-performative diversity	[Not found]



discussion can be measured by the harshness of the conflict, where hard equals good. Another head of department similarly asserted, "It's quite important that you have these negotiations. And these discussions can get quite heated and violent as well" (A10).

Seen from this perspective, calling out harassment may be dismissed as blocking academic freedom and preventing frank academic debate, which is an essential part of academia's scholarly ethos. The first head of department elaborated the position as follows:

I think that at least my colleagues here would agree that protecting academic freedom is our most important task as leaders. For me, it's part of academia that you learn that a harsh discussion with strong argument is not a personal thing. Academic discussions can be very tough, but it is not about identities. It's not about you. It's about ideas. [...] Identity politics is a no go in academic settings.

A27

Here, "identity politics" is perceived as making the professional personal, which violates the norm of academic conflict.

#### 4.1.2 | Blurring of personal–professional relations

Although the informants agree that conflict is essential to the academic profession and should not be taken personally, they simultaneously describe a strong personal attachment to their work. Thus, personal and professional relationships often overlap in academia, and many indicate that their closest personal relations are formed within professional networks, just as they speak of their professional community as a close-knit group of friends or even an "academic family." Yet academia does not offer a very tangible work environment, and many express detachment from their physical workplace. Oftentimes, researchers do not collaborate closely with their workplace colleagues; they are connected to their professional networks but not (necessarily) to the person in the neighboring office.

This situation of de-/attachment enables harassing behavior in several respects. Detachment means that many academics do not feel a strong responsibility toward upholding a well-functioning work environment within their institutions, as "a lot of people in universities [...] view the workplace culture as something that's very tertiary to producing research and teaching" (A24). The office is seen as a place to work. When sitting behind the closed door of one's office, harassment that takes place in the hallways—or behind other closed doors—remains invisible.

Attachment, on the other hand, the depth and breadth of personal relations within academia, brings its own difficulties. Some talk about a general lack of trust between colleagues, as it is never completely clear "on whose side" one stands. One interviewee, a non-Danish assistant professor, reflecting on the aftermath of her own harassment experience, articulated this concern:

It's so dangerous for me now [to speak about the harassment experience] because he's talking to the men around, and he offers them stuff, makes them feel important, and makes their relationship feel important and shows them that they are special to him.

A17

She then argues that these relations might make colleagues believe "his side" of the story rather than hers, which makes it very difficult to speak up about harassment.

### 4.1.3 | Dynamic power relations

The informants continuously bring up the complex organization and seeming invisibility of hierarchies in Danish academia, where formal managerial responsibility and informal leadership roles are often decoupled from one another. For example, PhD researchers at Danish universities are both employees and students. This means that supervisors do not hold formal managerial responsibilities vis-à-vis their students but might still act as their leaders, creating strong informal dependency. A Danish PhD researcher explained:

[Informally] your boss is also your examiner and your supervisor. You're not just being led by the people above you; they're also constantly the ones who have to evaluate the quality of what you do and report it to other places.

A12

The entanglement of formal and informal hierarchies is also present in the relationship between middle managers, most notably heads of departments, and researchers. Although management has become somewhat professionalized, middle managers are usually researchers themselves. While in their leadership function, they have managerial power over and responsibility for the other researchers in their group but also remain members of a research field and, thus, are dependent on other scholars in that field. Assessing the possibility of reporting a harassment case involving two professors as perpetrators, the same interviewee stated:

So, it's all very much interwoven. The interests are all like this [knotting her fingers]. And, for example, the guy who was head of section and is in principle above those two other professors, in reality, is just their colleague, right?

A12

Given their close connections, leaders are not always willing or able to stand up against senior researchers accused of harassment.

### 4.1.4 | Increasing precarity

When asked to describe the academic work setting, many interviewees referred to conditions of extreme competition, constant performance pressure, and precarity, the interconnections of which create an environment conducive to harassment. Researchers in temporary positions know that getting tenure is a privilege of the few, rather than a general career path. This leads to strong competition among colleagues, which, in turn, implicates constant pressure to prove oneself more worthy of a tenured position than everyone else. A non-Danish PhD student shared her experience that academia is not set up for collective support but for promoting self-interest, meaning, "we're not necessarily always gonna be happy for each other because we're in our own individual paths" (A16). Competition, performance pressure, and precarity enable harassment in a number of specific ways, which, if anything, are increasing in magnitude in the current environment.

First, performance pressure leads to a constant sense of not having enough time to complete all the different tasks and requirements. One department head, a non-Danish male professor, said, "There is more and more pressure to do more and more things so that those kind of conflicts [...] might occur because there's kind of just not enough time to engage with all of them" (A10). Dealing with harassment, especially if it is perceived as one workplace problem out of many, becomes "priority 16" on your list, as another interviewed professor (A28) phrased it.

Second, extreme competition leads people to think of their careers as a prize they need to fight for, even if this means compromising their values and ideals. One PhD researcher, a Danish woman, said:

I think people are very afraid of losing their jobs, perhaps being kicked out of academia. I mean because a lot of it is so network based, it might not only be your job, it can also be your reputation [that you risk losing], if you get the wrong enemies [...] get into a struggle with the wrong people.

A11

Speaking up against harassment becomes a hazard to one's career, and overlooking it is a means of smoothening career progress.

Importantly, these conditions are known to the people working in academia, which leads to further problems: "The pressure is just basically addressed as something people should deal with. [...] Most people feel it's part of the job. You either like it or leave it," a female associate professor (A23) stated. The idea of "having to struggle to make it" is so ingrained that having to struggle with harassment, and its mental and bodily implications, falls within the same frame—becoming a problem the individual must learn to cope with in order to succeed.

#### 4.1.5 | Sustained belief in meritocracy

The competitive environment is accompanied by a strong belief in academia as a meritocratic system, meaning "the winners" (the ones who get tenure, external funding, etc.) are considered to have proven themselves "worthy." Thus, meritocracy overshadows injustice and discrimination, as inequalities can be explained away with reference to individual merit. Further, meritocracy establishes a reward and incentive system that privileges "hard measures" such as the number of publications, publication rankings, amount of funding grants, etc., while "soft indicators," such as engagement with the work environment and workplace behavior, play a lesser role. In the words of one interviewee, a Danish male PhD student:

People who are researchers are probably less diplomatic, or less sort of people-persons in general, because it is a meritocracy—or should be a meritocracy, it's not always true. So, in most cases, you can get away with being not very co-operative in organizational settings. And in other places that would be a huge problem, but at a university, people can be odd and stay odd for a very long time without anything happening because they are measured on different levels.

A5

Conversely, speaking up against harassment in an effort to improve the workplace culture will not increase one's worth in the meritocracy game.

#### 4.1.6 | Licentious behavior of stars

Relatedly, top researchers are granted special status, with attendant privileges. As a female assistant professor pointed out, "The thing that we have in academia is that we have stars. We have, like, celebrities, if you will, and they're quite powerful, maybe not structurally but they have a certain appeal" (A17). These stars not only have special positions but are even expected to be a bit "odd," meaning the room for tolerable behaviors widens. The stars are "beyond the law, no matter what social rules we decide on that apply to everyone, it doesn't apply to [them] now because [they are] so powerful" (A17).

Detrimentially, even if a “star” gets punished for their harassing behavior and perhaps even loses some status within the academic system, the victim is left feeling responsible for the institution's loss of a significant source of reputation and funding. Several victims reported feeling that they have to compensate for the institution choosing them over a highly ranked professor: “He [the harasser] had to go because of me. Now, I have to prove that I'm worth that. [...] I have to work to claim that space and to make sure that everybody knows that I belong here” (A17). What should be a decision for or against letting harassment at the workplace go unnoticed and unpunished becomes a question of choosing which person is more valuable to the organization and worthy of belonging to academia.

#### 4.1.7 | “The Danish way”

All of these issues are attributed to academia as such, but they come in a particular Danish variety. Or rather, the mechanisms that enable harassment are all reinforced by being practiced in “the Danish way.” Although it is difficult to determine whether this environmental conditioning is, in fact, particularly “Danish” in the sense of being linked to Danish culture (and not other national contexts), it is interesting that many interviewees seem to assume as much, referring to various aspects as “something Danish” and summing them up as “the Danish way.”

“The Danish way” is positioned as an ideal to live up to, particularly by those who are not Danish (or not perceived as Danish enough). One non-Danish female PhD student described herself as “not the ideal foreigner” and explained that “if you're a foreigner you have to be even more Danish than the Danes, otherwise everything you do is not good enough” (A36). What is more, the ideal must not be questioned: “As a foreigner, to critique the Danish way is really risky. [...] Because if you're labeled a difficult person then you're—because the jobs are so competitive anyway—that you're really digging your own grave” (A23).

Although “the Danish way” is a problematic mechanism of inclusion and exclusion in its own right, it is particularly damning in the context of sexism, where a range of sexist jokes and misogynist comments are legitimized as just “Danish humor.” Several interviewees stated that they perceive the Danish boundaries of acceptable joking to be loose, tending toward nonexistent. Interestingly, this tolerance for sexist joking goes hand-in-hand with claims of having achieved gender equality. Furthermore, experiences of harassment are often claimed to be mere misunderstandings (or miscommunication), especially when reported by non-Danish employees. These, and a host of other strategies, serve to legitimize the current state of affairs and effectively defend Danish academia against accusations in specific harassment cases and against general charges of harboring a sexist culture. In the next round of analysis, we detail these legitimization strategies.

## 4.2 | Legitimation strategies

As explained in the methods section, we identified 10 recurrent rhetorical strategies for legitimating harassing behavior and categorized them according to four of Benoit's five image repair strategies, beginning with variations of denial. Although all the interviewees employed legitimation strategies, they did not necessarily aim to legitimize harassment. Many, in fact, articulated the opposite aim, and some were even aware of the strategies, distancing themselves from them when recounting their use. Thus, we identify the legitimation strategies in and through articulated rhetorical patterns, not through recourse to speakers' intentions. In the discussion, we connect the rhetorical strategies with the contextual factors to criticize their material effects and suggest counter-strategies of de-legitimation.

### 4.2.1 | Denial

The first strategy, denial, takes three specific forms: simple denial, passivity, and ignorance. As the label indicates, the first subcategory, *simple denial*, is the strategy of simply refusing to accept charges of harassment. As a Nordic

country, Denmark is positioned as a frontrunner in gender equality legislation and a champion of egalitarian practices, which are perceived to be incommensurable with harassment. Thus, harassment must be a thing of the past, something that happened to women when they entered the labor market in the 1950s. If harassment happens today, it is not in Denmark or even Europe. One Danish PhD student, for instance, said that he was dismissed with the suggestion to “go abroad, and it's even worse” (A24) when he tried to talk about problems of harassment and discrimination for PhD students in his department. Some may insert the qualifier that “there is a little bit of an issue” (A30) here and now, as a Danish male head of department conceded, but the argument that it was a lot worse in the past and that it is still worse elsewhere nevertheless serves to legitimize current practices in Danish academia. When the existence of the problem is denied, the reproduction of workplace harassment can continue uninterrupted and undisturbed.

The second subcategory of denial, *passivity*, works through a different logic but is based on similar assumptions. In this case, harassment is acknowledged as a problem in contemporary Denmark, but it is still contrasted with the past to indicate that things used to be a lot worse. What is being denied here is the need for active intervention; as things have been improving over time, we should just let more time pass to see further improvement. A non-Danish male associate professor stated:

It's also a generation thing. Things that were acceptable to the people who were young 30 years ago had a different norm. I'm in a fraternity where we have white men in the ages of 60 and 70, and they don't understand why it's not okay to use the N-word because in their generation it was a thing you could say without offending anyone. And they don't understand why the meaning of the word has changed. So, it seems that there are these conservative forces within a generation where they don't get why it's not okay.

A8

The argument, then, is premised on the misperception that perpetrators are only old men, meaning the problem will be solved with the passing of time: “It's traditionally like that [...] If there are more and more successful stories [of women in academia], then more and more people would accept it. So, we just need time” (A2), another interviewee, a non-Danish female PhD student, claimed. This positions harassment as an individual problem and overlooks its structural anchoring, which means the structures that invite harassing behavior can be freely reproduced, and new generations continue to be socialized into such behavior. Further, the logic of automatic progress disregards feminist efforts, past and present, to call out overt forms of harassment as well as sexist workplace cultures—these efforts, arguably, being the real reason that anything has changed.

The third subcategory of denial, *ignorance*, relies on the logic of experience: “If I've never encountered something, then it doesn't exist.” The “trick” here is to make sure one is in such a position as to never come across any harassment cases in the first place. This strategy seems to be particularly popular with heads of departments and other individuals in positions of responsibility. A male associate professor who coordinated the work environment evaluation in his department referred to it for substantiation of his claim:

Harassment at work [...] that's something I've never even thought about before the [work environment] questionnaire. [...] I think we actually stand really well in that chapter. Because we have these evaluations every four years, and there is completely zero tolerance [of harassment]. We have a complete evaluation section on bullying and workplace harassment. And we scored 100% on that. So, nobody experienced anything.

A8

This strategy not only ignores harassment but also the many circumstances that prevent people from speaking up about their experiences. Protecting themselves under a veil of ignorance, organizational members are able to deny the existence of harassment cases in their immediate workplace environment despite public attention being drawn to the issue. At worst, it becomes an active strategy of silencing and suppression rather than “merely” a case of not knowing.

## 4.2.2 | Evading responsibility

We also identified three sub-strategies for evading responsibility: avoiding, derailing, and individualizing. The first, *avoiding*, directly seeks to free the individual and organization from responsibility for harassment. We term this strategy *avoiding* not only because reactions are closed off but also because non-reaction derives from an urge to not be involved with harassment in any way. Describing how he would react if he witnessed harassment, a non-Danish male interviewee summarized the strategy quite neatly:

I would probably be much too reticent to directly confront the guy or to cause any sort of direct remonstrance there, which maybe is wrong but maybe isn't because I guess it's not clear what the victim in that circumstance would necessarily want. [...] But that probably wouldn't be why I wouldn't do it. It would probably just be... it's a weird thing. [...] You're part of a sort of a group setting. It's kind of like there's a sort of implicit social community [in academia] that's being created that you're sort of enjoying, or that sort of is important in lots of ways. And I would be worried about disrupting that.

A33

What is particularly remarkable here is that the interviewee reflects upon the ways in which avoidance may be problematic but nevertheless justifies the practice. Thus, he upholds the strategy as a way of shifting the issue away from himself and evading any responsibility he might have—if not for engaging in harassing behavior, then for maintaining an environment in which such behavior goes unpunished, even “unseen.”

*Derailing* is a strategy that evades responsibility by placing it with the individuals involved, rather than at the organizational and structural levels. The argument used is that each harassment case is unique, depending on the context, situational conditions, people involved, etc. Therefore, each case needs to be considered in isolation—freeing the individual and organization from the responsibility to address harassment as a general problem. A Danish male PhD student stated:

I guess the problem with defining or even just trying to delineate what harassment might look like is that I guess it all depends on the recipient of behavior or unwanted looks. Because, you know, people are clearly very different. And I'm not saying this to hide or gloss over historical developments and power relations. It's just that it's still very much the case that two people in here, say two women, would take very differently to a specific kind of behavior or talk. So that's why it's really tricky to get to the essence of harassment.

A4

We should note that those who fight harassment also recognize the importance of considering each case and listening to individual experiences. However, when used as an argument against acknowledging harassment as a general problem, the strategy derails any investigation into its structural reproduction.

Derailing might be seen as one particular and particularly powerful way of *individualizing*, which is also done in several other ways. A common strategy is to individualize the problem by claiming it is an issue of “a few bad apples” who do not “play by the rules.” Furthermore, this strategy even legitimizes the behavior of some harassers, as it is deemed an unfortunate but acceptable personality trait. A typical example of this strategy was articulated by a female PhD student as the preface to an account of a harassment incident:

So, we have a full professor here in the department. And he is known to be a little bit of a difficult person. He has a specific personality. He's a little bit older. He has certain ideas of how the world is or should be and shouldn't be. And we've always got along well.

A31

One interviewee, a male head of the department, even excused his own behavior in this way, stating:

For sure, people have felt attacked by me. [...] I'm really sorry I'm not a better person than that. And you know, it's unforgivable. And many things that I've done are unforgivable. But then, I mean, I've said, "Well, look I'm sorry. I got angry. I have a temper. And you pressed some buttons."

A10

When harassing behavior is ascribed to a few individuals and legitimized as unfortunate but tolerable outlier behavior, everyone else is freed from the duty to interfere.

Similarly, individualization of the victim's experience and feelings leads to general evasion of responsibility. Many interviewees pointed to individuals who "let themselves be provoked easily" (A7), thus ascribing the problem to the individual (over-)reaction of the victim rather than to actual harassment. Consequently, resolving the situation or leaving the job becomes the responsibility of the victim. Interestingly, there are nuanced variations in this individualization strategy. Although some simply claim that victims' feelings are illegitimate, casting them as overly sensitive, overreacting, or "making a scene," another strategy involves acknowledging the legitimacy of the victims but rejecting the harassing behavior as the cause of or trigger for their emotional reactions. The following description by a head of department provides a fitting example:

I would say if someone feels harassed, well, then there is a problem. But I would not say that just because someone feels harassed, then this person is by definition harassed. With this, I do not really agree. I mean people can be extremely sensitive, you know, and people may also overreact, for sure. [...] And, of course, if that happens in my department, then there is a problem. This is a problem that I cannot ignore. But I'm saying that maybe the problem may be with the person who feels offended instead of the person who has done this so-called offending behavior.

A10

Several interviewees stressed that one should not question another person's feelings, therefore potentially aligning themselves with feminist positions against harassment, but then argued that although the person might feel this way, it does not prove the experience is harassment. This places the "burden of proof" with victims and undermines recognition of their experiences while paying lip service to them.

### 4.2.3 | Reducing offensiveness

We also found three sub-strategies for reducing offensiveness: dismissing, ridiculing, and hierarchizing experiences. *Dismissing* cases as "just a misunderstanding" is a prominent strategy in Danish academia, which very directly reduces the offensiveness of the events. Reflecting on the potential occurrence of harassment in his organization, a male department head explained:

If someone is harassed, if we call it that, then of course it has some importance. However, it could be a misunderstanding. There are many possibilities. [...] It should be taken seriously, that's clear. But also, when there are human beings around, then there can be misunderstandings.

A30

Thus, the problem is acknowledged but redefined. We are not (necessarily) dealing with harassment but (more likely) with a communication difficulty, cultural differences, or just a general misunderstanding, which should be

treated, addressed, and solved as such. Another interviewee, a non-Danish female PhD student, described her experience of wanting to report harassing behavior:

This was accumulating. And I didn't know what to do. Then, I talked to the section leader. And he would tell me that I misinterpreted her [the harasser's] way and she's not bad, and she's from a different culture. Maybe it is because of that. And she's also new. And I had to maybe give her some time to feel more comfortable in the [work] environment.

A26

Another PhD student, a Danish woman, similarly stated that an appropriate reaction to harassment would be to first and foremost consider it a misunderstanding, “[If I felt harassed], I would try and engage with the people that were actually behaving this way to figure out if there was some sort of misunderstanding. I would assume that it was a misunderstanding” (A19).

A related strategy for reducing offensiveness consists of *hierarchizing harassment experiences*. In most interviews, harassment cases were differentiated into “bad cases” and “not-so-bad cases,” with the former being labeled real, actual, hard, heavy, substantial, extreme, violent, dangerous, dramatic, and so on, while the latter are described as minor, “other instances,” or “a little bit of this and that,” indicating that they might belong to the category of misunderstandings, as detailed above, or in other respects should be seen as less offensive than “real” harassment. These descriptions belittle events that are placed in the second category, but they establish this category as the broader and more common one, with only the very severe cases singled out as “actual” harassment. These cases, the argument goes, are deeply problematic, but they are also rare, almost nonexistent in comparison to the more common and less important cases. A Danish male interviewee stated, “Of course, there are certain kinds of behavior that would almost inevitably sort of qualify as harassment, I guess. I mean, groping or touching. But as far as I know, this really doesn't happen” (A4). When juxtaposed with the “real but rare” cases, the numerous instances of what we might term everyday sexism become positioned as mere trifles: their offensiveness is reduced, and so is the need to deal with them.

*Ridiculing* is the third subcategory for reducing offensiveness, which also works by delegitimizing claims of harassment. Although ridicule might initially be an almost instinctive reaction to hearing something that seems either implausible or threatening, it can also be used more deliberately to negate and reject accusations of harassment. Whether used intentionally or not, ridiculing is a powerful strategy for reducing the offensiveness of harassing behavior and questioning anyone who speaks out against harassment. One interviewee, a non-Danish male associate professor, described how his manager used this strategy when speaking about workplace harassment at a department meeting:

We have very big monthly meetings. And then for some reason, without anyone asking him, the head of department decides to talk about offensive behavior. And sort of starts saying, “We don't have an issue with it. If anyone says this is an issue, he is hysterical. We're not America.” Blah blah blah. And basically, he was just undermining me [...] He was ridiculing me. Not mentioning my name but ridiculing the hurt that I felt [because of my harassment experience] by diminishing [it and] making it [seem like] this is just silly. This is just nonsense. It's no problem. [...] And the people who knew me and knew the case were like: “What is happening here?” And the rest of them were just laughing and making jokes about it.

A15

Ridiculing another person's claims can serve several related purposes. One of its functions is to make one's own view seem the only reasonable one. It also positions the speaker in a powerful position as the one who is laughing, while the ridiculed person is silenced. A female PhD student shared, “I think you are always scared that people will



just laugh and think you're ridiculous and lightweight or foolish in some sense" (A19). Thus, the offensiveness of harassing behavior is not only reduced, but also people who speak out against harassment are effectively silenced.

#### 4.2.4 | Corrective action

Finally, we identified one strategy of corrective action. Or rather, a strategy of claiming that appropriate action has already been taken and, hence, no more work needs to be done, thus making a full circle from correction and back to denial. Inspired by Ahmed (2016), we term this strategy *non-performative diversity*. Ahmed uses the concept of non-performativity to explain why certain types of diversity work are inherently problematic, impeding rather than realizing their stipulated goals. Ahmed (2012) uses the example of writing diversity policies, showing how the writing of a policy, which outlines the problems an organization faces regarding diversity, becomes seen as proof that diversity work is being done and thus turns into an argument for not doing anything else.

In the interviews, there is general agreement that workplace diversity is a positive goal that Danish universities ought to strive for. This leads to two lines of argument. One points to the existence of "diversity subjects," those who are perceived as bringing diversity to the workplace, as proof of organizational diversity. A Danish head of department, for instance, proudly claimed:

We are a very internationalized department. I mean, maybe the Danes are still the biggest group, but it's surely challenged by the Germans and the Italians. [...] Now we have hired two Portuguese speaking. That means that we are in total four Portuguese. So, we have sort of a host of nationalities. And I think a lot of also the Danes—the majority of the Danes—sort of like this sort of international atmosphere at the department.

A30

Another argumentative line is to simply point out diversity as a perceived fact. Another Danish head of department explained, "They [the members of the department] think of themselves as very diverse. [...] They consider diversity and room for diversity important values" (A27).

Either way, being diverse becomes a value and a self-image or self-conception rather than a practiced reality, and might, in fact, be completely separate from the bodies that inhabit a workplace. Still, it can be assumed to be the current reality: "Today, it is a given fact that universities are diverse" (A27). Linking this back to Ahmed's concept of the non-performativity of diversity work, we suggest that corrective action is non-performative at Danish universities. Given that discrimination and harassment are seen as the opposite of diversity, the assumption of the existence of (good) diversity means that these (bad) practices must have been eradicated.

The mere existence of diversity, as a fact or aspiration, inhibits further anti-discrimination and anti-harassment diversity work. Further, it provides a basis for other strategies, such as dismissing (claiming incidents are just (cultural) misunderstandings, an unavoidable issue in diverse workplaces) and denial (arguing that with diversity being a reality, things must be better here and now than they are/were elsewhere and earlier).

## 5 | CONCLUDING DISCUSSION: CONTESTING AND QUEERING PERVASIVE RHETORICAL LEGITIMATION STRATEGIES

Having identified recurrent rhetorical strategies for legitimating harassment, we now go on to consider how understanding of these strategies may support contestation of the organizational norms and normative subjectivities that they reinforce. To do so, we first bring the two rounds of analysis together in a norm-critical account of how the context of Danish academia and the rhetorical legitimization strategies interrelate to normalize harassment and main-

tain a culture of everyday sexism. Second, we turn to the task of dismantling existing norms, which takes the two interrelated forms of rhetorical contestation and queering organizations.

## 5.1 | A norm-critical account of the strategies of legitimation

Listening to the informants' accounts of their experiences and explanations of their behaviors, we were particularly struck by the extent to which everyone participated in the legitimation of harassment and normalization of sexism. During the interviews, even people who had experienced harassment and/or objected to it in their own organizational contexts would suggest that certain behaviors might be somehow more acceptable because, for instance, a key academic practice is to combine "harsh discussions" and "personal relations." Furthermore, the combination of hierarchical structure and meritocratic ideology led people in precarious positions to accept a certain level of exploitation as a tolerable price to pay in the pursuit of their careers. And even when speaking up about incidents of outright harassment and abuse, these individuals worried that they themselves might not be "worth" as much as those who had hurt them. In the Danish context, moreover, there is a particularly strong belief that egalitarianism generally and gender equality specifically have been achieved, and that being able to "joke" and talk "freely" is a sign that everyone is "equal." This belief makes it difficult to recognize harassment for what it is and easy to disregard even severe instances as "misunderstandings."

These conditions not only produce an environment that enables harassing behavior in academia (as also documented in other studies, e.g., Bourabain, 2021; Guschke & Sløk-Andersen, 2021); they are, as we have shown, themselves reinforced by prevalent rhetorical strategies for legitimating such behavior. When incidents of harassment can be denied, redefined, and/or justified, harassment can continue unnoticed and unnoted. Let us unfold these dynamics: first, the strategies of denial and corrective action work together to suggest that harassment no longer exists because appropriate measures have already been taken. Thus, any behavior that might be perceived as harassment is, the argument goes, actually something else. Second, the strategies of evasion of responsibility and reduction of offensiveness set in to redefine the behavior in question and shift the burden of proof and/or action away from organizational actors and the institutional field of academia to individual academics. In combination, these strategies produce vicious cycles of invisible proliferation and silencing (Fernando & Prasad, 2019; Hershovic et al., 2021) that hide and protect sexist norms and harassing behavior under a veil of equality.

The result is that within academia, the normative subject position is one that does not see harassment even when it slaps them in the face (Thomas & Kitzinger, 1994; Whitley & Page, 2015). Even victims become involuntarily involved in reproducing the culture of everyday sexism, as speaking out against it is equal to speaking out against academia. Arriving at this conclusion, we were faced with the chilling realization that we—as self-identified queer academics, but academics nonetheless—are just as implicated in the maintenance and legitimation of sexist norms as are our informants. Thus, the strategies of rhetorical legitimation are also on the tips of our tongues. For instance, when discussing an incident one of us had recently heard of, we caught ourselves "assuming that it was a misunderstanding" and had to bite down hard not to express the view that "it couldn't be that bad."

What we learn here is, first, that norms will be difficult to change, and that the process of rearticulation must be as much about self-scrutiny as about pointing the finger at others. Second, we find that understanding how norms are reproduced is the first step toward being able to challenge and change currently dominant normativities. As we turn our attention to the norms that members of academia are conditioned to reproduce to become recognized as good academics and, thus, "constituted as socially viable beings" (Butler, 2004, p. 2), we are also laying the ground for repetitions with a difference (Allen, 1998). By dissecting the rhetorical strategies that uphold sexist organizational norms, we become able to put them to "queer use" (Ahmed, 2019)—to do otherwise than normatively intended, required, or demanded; to invent subversive strategies, to find means of reinterpreting the norms creatively, to call them out directly, and in numerous other ways, do the legwork of rhetorical dissent that may lead to societal dislocation (Ivie, 2005).

## 5.2 | Queer listening for strategies of contestation

Detailing the prevalent dynamics indicates why they are so difficult to unravel but also provides entry points for such unraveling. Knowing the norms and underlying assumptions of rhetorical legitimation strategies may help us counter them more effectively, reiterating the accusations against harassment with renewed strength. To do so, we first need to insist that the defended actions are, indeed, illegitimate. Today, it is generally accepted that harassment is wrong and should be abolished (NIKK, 2020), and the assumption that it *has* been abolished forms, as we have seen, the basis for denying its existence. Sadly, however, wishing something away does not make it disappear (Ahmed, 2007).

Thus, the second step is to show that harassment persists despite its general denouncement. This takes us to the issues of definition and justification. If it is assumed that harassment has been abolished, then, the argument goes, specific experiences and behaviors must be something other than harassment—a compliment, a joke, a misunderstanding, a misstep, an isolated instance (a “bad apple,” an “overly sensitive” individual). Whatever the specific turn of phrase, academic organizations are absolved, and any remaining responsibility is placed with the individuals involved. Often, individuals who have experienced harassment are left with the options of coming to terms with those experiences or leaving academia (see also Fernando & Prasad, 2019; Whitley & Page, 2015).

This is where rhetorical interventions aimed at delegitimizing the current situation can most persuasively set in. There is plenty of evidence of the entrenchment of sexist norms and harassing behavior, yet one of the consequences of this entrenchment is to ignore the problem; how, then, can we resolve this double bind? Specifically, the task is to enforce the notion that the person experiencing harassment is entitled to define that experience, as is established in EU law (Directive, 2006/54/EU, see also Latcheva, 2017; NIKK, 2020) but is far from the common understanding in (Danish) academia (Borchorst & Agustin, 2017; Guschke et al., 2019; see also Hlavka, 2014). Also, we must counter the strategies of evading responsibility and make harassment recognizable as a systemic problem that must be addressed at the organizational and institutional levels (Bourabain, 2021; Whitley & Page, 2015). What we need are rhetorical resources for “staying with the trouble” (Haraway, 2016) rather than continuing to smooth it over.

The question is, where do we find such resources? Progress is a rhetorical possibility: it is inherent in the rhetoric of norms that they can be changed if contested persuasively. However, getting there is a slow, arduous, and ongoing process, and “waiting for change” will get us nowhere. Acknowledging the toll and toil of continuous engagement with oppositional views, Villadsen (2020, p. 328) admonishes us to carry on:

At this moment (when despair and “tuning out” can be tempting reactions to a hyper-polarized political climate and to alarming developments in areas such as international relations, social inequality, minority protection, etc.), rhetorical practice remains a hope for collective ethical improvement and civic commitment.

To maintain such hope and to carry on practicing it, we turn to queer listening for dissonances, jarring notes, and discant voices, finding strength in the alternatives that exist within dominant strategies, in the cracks and crevices of their repetition. Returning to the example of our own recent experience, let us contemplate the possibilities it offers for going against normative repetition toward norm-critical practices. Realizing our own urge to reproduce current legitimation strategies, the incident led us to consider how we might, first, dwell with the unsettling experience of our own reproduction of normative positions and, second, use the resulting agitation as an impetus for expressing perplexity concerning harassment cases in nonjudgmental ways. That is, accusations of sexual harassment are usually unanticipated, shocking even, and rightly so, but we can express shock in ways that do not resemble disbelief, belittle the experience, or place blame on those who report it. To facilitate such inclusive language, we can think about ways of engaging with our normative frameworks of understanding that open up, rather than close off, alternatives to predominant interpretations.

Queer listening can open up possibilities for staying with the tolerable discomfort of recognizing harassment experiences rather than being confined to the intolerable comfort of suppressing such experiences under the weight of rhetorical legitimation. Every time we counter and keep countering specific arguments that defend harassment (even in the very moment when we counter our own initial reactions of disbelief and belittlement and instead recognize harassment experiences as shocking but true), we contribute to the broader struggle against sexism as it currently manifests in academia. Thus, we must continue contesting existing norms and queering their rhetorical legitimation wherever we find it, beginning with our own reproductions of the normative subjectivities we otherwise seek to escape. Establishing alternative normative positions begins with the more fundamental contestation of our own norms and normativities. Change begins with the recognition of our own uncomfortable truths.

### 5.3 | Queering organizational norms

However, the process does not end there. We can move from recognition of current norms to their contestation and queering by supplementing the critique of social practices and rhetorical strategies with an offer of alternative experiences of recognition (Burchiellaro, 2021; Christensen, 2021; Just et al., 2017). Drawing upon the notion of queering as “troubling” that which appears “normal” (Butler, 1990), this offer of alternatives begins with questioning and testing the limits of the norms that structure social and organizational relations, standards, and expectations. It proceeds through a double movement of uncovering the performative power of norms' perceived naturalness, thus showing how there is nothing natural about them, while insisting that norms could always be performed differently—and therefore, changed. Proposing *how* they could be different might begin with the suggestion that individual academics and academic institutions alike would prosper from alternative norms of caring, companionship, solidarity, and support (rather than existing norms of conflict, constant competition, and individualized meritocracy), which, when realized, will create an environment that is prohibitive (rather than facilitative) of harassing behavior.

Returning to our informants' accounts of sexual harassment in academia with these considerations in mind, it is important to note that some do express regret at the state of affairs, others even despair. Along the way, there are glimmers of hope, as people have spoken up—and been able to continue their careers. Nevertheless, the rhetorical legitimation of sexist organizing is overwhelming. That is where we are at; this is where the process of queering must begin. However, the interviews were conducted before the “second wave” of #MeToo in Denmark, which we mentioned in the introduction, and the informants do not anticipate that their individual actions might gain organizational momentum. Now, it seems that individual voices, each retelling their personal experiences as well as listening to each other's accounts, are joining forces to *collectively* testify about the entrenched sexism of academic and other societal institutions, creating the conditions of possibility for rhetorical, organizational, and societal change. Importantly, the new kinds of collectivity that are emerging in and through this process provide impetus for transforming organizational norms; in making it impossible for complaints about harassment at universities to be ignored and disregarded, they pave the way for institutional change (see also Ahmed, 2021).

However, when taking such steps, queer theory reminds us to be careful, suggesting that no alternative is viable outside the norms of recognition, but immediately admonishing us to consider how our own demands might “lead to new and invidious forms of social hierarchy” (Butler, 2004, p. 115). With this warning in mind, it is paramount to stay open to the continued contestation of new normative foundations, as queering organizational norms must involve all norms, even those that promise us (whoever we might be) inclusion (Burchiellaro, 2021). Queer performativity rests on this continued process of “repetition with a difference” (Allen, 1998). No matter what the currently available difference might be, one must start with the recognizable and begin the unraveling from there.

As we and many others continue to contribute to this process, it will thus be pivotal for the #MeToo movement to not only call out those forms of sexism that fit normative frames (namely, sexual harassment against white, straight, cis women) but also to insist on troubling the very norms on which much of the current #MeToo movement in Denmark is based. Staying attentive to the ways in which alternative norms are not only produced but also continuously unraveled *within* the movement will enable specific efforts to bleed into broader norm-critical processes that make it possible to queer organizational and societal norms. Only if and when we organize the difficult process of refusing the comfort of legitimation and, instead, collectively and continuously trouble organizational norms can we begin to make a difference. Lasting change only happens when challenges to sexist norms become even more persistent and persuasive than their repetition.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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## APPENDICES

TABLE A1 Overview of interview participants ( $n = 37$ )

Interviewee #	Gender (cis male/cis female)	Nationality (Danish/non-Danish)	Position
A1	Cis male	Danish	Associate Prof
A2	Cis female	Non-Danish	PhD Fellow
A3	Cis female	Danish	PhD Fellow
A4	Cis male	Danish	PhD Fellow
A5	Cis male	Danish	PhD Fellow
A6	Cis female	Danish	PhD Fellow
A7	Cis male	Danish	Administrative Coordinator
A8	Cis male	Non-Danish	Associate Prof
A9	Cis male	Danish	Professor
A10	Cis male	Non-Danish	Head of Dept./Institute/Faculty
A11	Cis female	Danish	PostDoc
A12	Cis female	Danish	PostDoc
A13	Cis female	Non-Danish	PhD Fellow
A14	Cis male	Danish	Associate Prof
A15	Cis male	Non-Danish	Associate Prof
A16	Cis female	Non-Danish	PhD Fellow
A17	Cis female	Non-Danish	Assistant Prof
A18	Cis female	Danish	PhD Fellow
A19	Cis female	Danish	PhD Fellow
A20	Cis female	Danish	Research Assistant
A21	Cis male	Non-Danish	PhD Fellow
A22	Cis female	Non-Danish	PhD Fellow
A23	Cis female	Non-Danish	Associate Prof
A24	Cis male	Danish	Research Assistant
A25	Cis male	Non-Danish	PhD Fellow
A26	Cis female	Non-Danish	PhD Fellow
A27	Cis female	Danish	Head of Dept./Institute/Faculty
A28	Cis male	Danish	Professor
A29	Cis female	Danish	Teaching Assistant
A30	Cis male	Danish	Head of Dept./Institute
A31	Cis female	Non-Danish	PhD Fellow
A32	Cis male	Danish	Research Assistant
A33	Cis male	Non-Danish	PhD Fellow
A34	Cis female	Danish	Special Consultant
A35	Cis female	Non-Danish	Administrative Coordinator
A36	Cis female	Non-Danish	PhD Fellow
A37	Cis female	Danish	Administrative Coordinator

TABLE A2 Overview of survey participants ( $n = 399$ )

Gender	Female: 52%
	Male: 44%
	Non-binary: 1%
	Prefer not to say: 3%
Nationality	Danish: 63%
	Non-Danish: 33%
	Prefer not to say: 4%
Age	18–25: 5%
	26–30: 27%
	31–35: 17%
	36–40: 11%
	41–45: 10%
	46–50: 9%
	51–55: 7%
	56–60: 5%
	61+: 6%
	Prefer not to say: 3%
Sexual orientation	Asexual: 1%
	Bisexual: 4%
	Heterosexual: 84%
	Homosexual: 4%
	Other: 2%
	Prefer not to say: 5%
Position	Administrative Officer: 3%
	Associate Professor: 18%
	Assistant Professor/Postdoc: 10%
	Chief/Special Consultant: 1%
	External lecturer: 1%
	Managerial Position (e.g., Head of Faculty, Head of Department): 8%
	PhD Fellow: 39%
	Professor/MSO: 6%
	Research Assistant: 3%
	Other: 4%
	Prefer not to say: 6%
University	AAU: 13%
	AU: 7%
	CBS: 17%
	DTU: 30%
	ITU: 5%
	KU: 14%
	RUC: 3%
	SDU: 3%
	Prefer not to say: 6%

(Continues)

TABLE A2 (Continued)

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Years worked at the University	0–1: 21%
	2–5: 40%
	6–10: 15%
	11–15: 10%
	16+: 12%
	Prefer not to say: 2%

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