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Enough is Enough

By Bernard Wood

April 21, 2015

“The greater the power, the more dangerous the abuse”

(Edmund Burke speaking in the House of Commons on the 7th February, 1771)



Power differentials among individuals¹ are inevitable and they certainly exist in academia, where power comes from the perception that an individual is more influential and has greater access to resources than the majority of their peer group. This influence then leads to invitations to give talks and seminars, to serve on panels and editorial boards, and to mentor graduate students.

All of these activities feed back to further increase a person's influence in, and on, our field. Inevitably anyone taught, advised or mentored by a particular individual is beholden in one way or another. Undergraduate and graduate students depend on that individual for their grades and letters of support. Graduate students, post-docs and junior faculty are beholden because they rely on their advisor for formal and informal support, especially when they apply for jobs.

But this power and influence comes with the unwritten obligation that it should be used for good and not for ill. I use my² power when I write reference letters, referee manuscripts and grant applications, and I am using it by writing this

essay. I like to think that overall I have used my power responsibly, but unfortunately I can think of several examples when my actions could have been more responsible. But I have not consciously used that power for ill.

What is unconscionable is for an individual to exercise their academic power to solicit sexual favors. Such abuses occur between males, between females, and between females and males, but recent research has confirmed that most abuses occur when more senior men exert their power on more junior women³.

Although I have been aware of the problem for many years, it is only recently that I have appreciated just how pervasive and insidious these behaviors are. Yet on several occasions in the past few weeks senior researchers in our field have expressed to me that it is flying in the face of human nature to try to stop such interactions. Maybe both parties were worse the wear for alcohol. Or the more junior “partner” was a willing participant in the interaction. So, in one argument recently put to me, because there is “fault” on both sides, then no harm has been done.

This is simply wrong, wrong, and wrong.

Inappropriate interactions that abuse the academic power dynamic should never have been allowed to occur.

First, if researchers had an appropriate ethical compass it could and should have prevented them from indulging in such behavior.

Second, because these behaviors often occur in a social context - in a bar, by a camp fire, or at a happy hour - others might have stepped in to prevent the behaviors, take the offender to task and remove them from the professional milieu they are exploiting. But this is much easier said than done precisely because the same power imbalances that are exploited, knowingly or unknowingly, by the offender also deter people from intervening.

Third, if a student or junior colleague was minded to report an incident, it is not always clear how they should do so without running the risk of retaliation.

So what can be done to help rid our discipline of this unacceptable and destructive behavior?

First, it must be made absolutely and transparently clear that there are no “gray areas” here.

Any “affair”, long or short, between a faculty member and a student is wrong, and if such an affair occurs it is the faculty member’s responsibility.

Any exploitation of academic seniority to solicit sexual favors is unacceptable. Offenders who fail to recognize this have no place in academia.

Second, when we see it, we should call it. The nature of these interactions is such that they are seldom reported to any effective authority. I will not dwell on the obvious reasons for this, but it should not take a rocket scientist to understand that the power imbalance that makes the behavior unacceptable in the first place effectively silences the abused party.

Third, we need to be strong allies and generate an atmosphere in our discipline that weaves layer upon layer of support for the individuals who are subjected to these abuses. We need several effective safety nets so that if one, or two, or three, fail, then colleagues in our community will still feel protected. Equal academic opportunity does not exist as long as individuals have to adjust their careers to make sure they are not exposed to sexual predation. Countless women have quietly left our field because they do not feel safe from the effects of sexual misconduct or adequately supported when they have been abused³.

Fourth, do not wait for “proof” of sexual harassment before considering that it might be occurring in your community. Be vigilant. Organize occasional conversations in your journal clubs and lab groups that raise these issues. Remove some of the informal social barriers that may discourage junior colleagues from talking about unwanted attention.

But what is *my* particular responsibility?

The untenured are brave to speak up out about this⁴, but change will be more likely if condemnation of these behaviors comes from within the “club” that has tacitly protected offenders in the past.

So what, as a member of the academic alpha male club, can my fellow members and I do?

First and foremost we must make it crystal clear that sexual predators have no place in academic life. Our silence is tantamount to acquiescence.

Second, we must explicitly reject the argument that just because others have “got away with it” it is somehow unfair to draw attention to the problem now. It

is precisely that “head in the sand” attitude that has facilitated behaviors that should have been outlawed long ago.

The exploitation of power inequality to procure sexual favors is a particularly egregious abuse of academic power. It is an abuse that has gone unchecked for too long. It should, and must, be stopped.

Enough is enough.

1 <http://www.abc.es/fotonoticias/fotos-archivo/20141214/giganton-boxeador-primo-carnera-1614179562729.html>

2 <http://scholar.google.com/citations?user=RVHmQvIAAAAJ&hl=en&oi=ao>

3 [Clancy KBH, Nelson RG, Rutherford JN, Hinde K \(2014\) Survey of Academic Field Experiences \(SAFE\): Trainees Report Harassment and Assault. PLoS ONE 9\(7\): e102172. doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0102172](#)

4 <http://evostudies.org/2015/04/the-endemicity-pervasiveness-of-sexual-harassment/>

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