Interdisciplinary Research in Gender

SEXUAL MISCONDUCT IN ACADEMIA

INFORMING AN ETHICS OF CARE IN THE UNIVERSITY

Edited by
Erin Pritchard and Delyth Edwards

ROUTLEDGE

Sexual Misconduct in Academia

This book is about experiences of sexual misconduct in the everyday spaces of academia and what and how we can learn from these experiences to inform an ethics of care in the university.

By bringing a wide range of lived experiences of students, staff and researchers out of their current marginalised positions within academic discussions, the book offers a deeper understanding of sexual misconduct in the academy for both students and staff. Each of the chapters offers not only opportunities for conversation and reflection, but addresses and suggests what responses to academic sexual misconduct could and should involve. By presenting collective accounts of experiencing, witnessing, researching and writing about sexual misconduct in academic spaces, *Sexual Misconduct in Academia* examines how to develop ethical pedagogical practices, if an ethics of care is to be truly implemented or transformed.

This book is suitable for students and scholars in Gender Studies, Education and Sociology.

Erin Pritchard is a senior lecturer in Disability Studies at Liverpool Hope University and a core member of the Centre for Culture and Disability Studies. She has published a monograph for the Routledge Disability Studies Interdisciplinary Series, entitled *Dwarfism, Spatialities and Disabling Experiences*. She has previously published an article entitled 'Female researcher safety: the difficulties of recruiting participants at conventions for people with dwarfism' published in the *International Journal of Social Research Methods*. She is also a guest writer for the National Sexual Violence Resource Center.

Delyth Edwards is a lecturer in Inclusion, Childhood and Youth in the School of Education, University of Leeds, and was previously a lecturer in the Sociology of Childhood and Youth at Liverpool Hope University. As well as contributing a chapter to this edited book, Delyth is currently revising an article exploring her own experience of sexual harassment in ethnographic research.

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12 The walls spoke when no one else would

Autoethnographic notes on sexual-power gatekeeping within avant-garde academia

Lieselotte Viaene, Catarina Laranjeiro and Miye Nadya Tom

Introduction

The #MeToo movement entered the public sphere with its hashtag buzzed throughout international news and social media. In the years since, several articles focussed on prestigious academic institutions and professors. What you are currently reading was drafted by three researchers[1] who recognized themselves in the many situations that women have bravely described. Even while finishing the final draft of "writing-out" our experiences, another high-level scandal about Harvard "Star Professor" John Comaroff, a well-known expert on African Studies and postcolonial Anthropology, reached the established newspapers in the US. Just as we will analyse in our chapter, this scandal reveals – once more – how academia often works: institutional cover ups to protect "Star Professors" who favour abuses of power towards young women researchers who depend on the academic approval of these individuals to build their careers. Instead of our names, we will use our institutional positions at that time – The Former National Ph.D. Student, the Former Post-Doctoral Researcher, and the Former International Ph.D. Student – to better underline the asymmetrical power relations we faced. Two of us – the Former National Ph.D. Student and the Former Post-Doctoral Researcher – met for the first time in a bar close to the train station of the city where our research centre was based. A few months before, a common Ph.D. colleague introduced us via email because she thought that we should talk to each other. This encounter was transformative for each of us. After months of internal self-blame, our suspicions and doubts were confirmed, giving our narratives a different angle. We realized that our experiences were neither isolated nor exceptional. Rather, we faced our institution's violation of professional ethics, especially its inexistent safeguards for young women striving to build their graduate or post-doctoral academic careers working in a precarious labour environment. We realized that our experiences of

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institutional abandonment happened for the sake of preserving the prestigious reputation of the research centre and its "Star Professor."[2]

After our first meeting, we continued to exchange media articles. We understood that we would have to cope with concepts such as "grooming," "gaslighting," "academic incest," "Star Professors and their institutional backing," and "whisper network" to analyse and understand better our individual and collective narratives. While each of us has a unique story, there are also many connecting dots shared among each of our experiences. For instance, the Former International Ph.D. student came at 23 years old to develop her doctoral research in one of the newly created Ph.D. programmes. The Former Post-Doctoral Researcher came through an international mobility research programme funded by the European Commission. Both were new in the country, did not master the language, and knew no one upon their arrival. The Former National Ph.D. Student arrived at this research centre where she was integrated into a program with other colleagues. Additionally, she was in her own country. All three went to this international recognized research centre to learn about (de)colonization, emancipatory, and transformative social sciences.

When we shared our stories with non-academic friends, it was common to face questions on why we did not scream from the rooftops or write open letters to denounce the institutional harassment and the silently accepted practice that sexual access to young researchers and intellectual extractivism is part of the "compensation package" (Theidon 2022) to be part of the club of the Star Professor. As with many victims, few understand their reluctance to speak out. In the case of academia, few understand how institutions and their internal dynamics might constrain young female academic researchers from standing up and talking out publicly. This chapter will examine and unfold different layers of the complexities and ambiguities to find possible answers.

In this context, Alexandro Portelli's (2013) work on oral history writing resonates with the authors. Twenty years ago, he wrote that the history of harassment has never emerged due to its private domain. Therefore, it was seen as having no historical significance; that which has not been spoken of will not be found in official historical accounts. So, it would be an ungrateful task to look for traces of sexual misconduct through the usual historical sources, such as archival or court documents. In the last couple of years, however, stories of harassment breached the floodgates of silence and even reached the international spotlight. To understand how this tradition of abuse has survived from *jus primae noctis* times until the present day is a too complex endeavour for this chapter. However, a critical analysis of our experience may advance some clues about why the academic world is such a fertile context for this kind of continuous abusive behaviour. Specifically, we attempt to unpack the different layers of power entanglements within an institution that promotes itself – and is internationally recognized – as progressive, transformative, anti-patriarchal, and de-colonial.

We draw upon autoethnography, "a form of inquiry, writing, and/or performance that puts questions and 'issues of being' into circulation and dialogue" (Bochner 2013, p. 54), as the main research method for analysing our individual and collective experiences in this chapter. Granted that memory is the primary source of our analysis, it is essential to highlight that the truth of any autoethnography is not stable since memory is active, dynamic, and ever-changing (Bochner 2013 and Giorgio 2013). Additionally, we reflect on situations of institutional abuse, which tend to happen in private settings with no witnesses. They might become known through survivors' voices,[3] naturally subjective, emotional, or even resentful. We are writing from these voices. Reflecting on a traumatic event brings with it the repetition of its violence, making it difficult to describe coherently. Therefore, we argue that demanding objectivity to a survivor's description is also an act of violence. It is also important to recognize that these situations are incredibly nerve-wracking, generating memory errors or deformations. Commonly, survivors cannot remember apparent details of the abuse or can even mix up two cases of abuse in the same. Nevertheless, these errors can be psychologically true and that truth can be more revealing than any factual record. They are essential for understanding abusers' patterns precisely because instead of describing facts, they strive to make sense of them (Portelli 2013).

We did not interview any institutional actors. We inquire into their behaviours and attitudes based on our perceptions and lived experiences. If abusive situations can include multiple realities – whose credibility should not be considered exclusively on their agreement with the facts – it is better to assume that we do not share the same reality with abusers and their enablers. We interweave these three types of observations in the analysis that follows: first, our personal experiences and memories; second, personal experiences in relation to others who supported us or even shared with us the same burden; third, our collective observations to make sense of the abusers' behaviours. As Tomaselli, Dyll-Myklebust, and van Grootheest (2013, p. 576) observe, autoethnography is a "political/personal intervention." Moreover, as Ahmed (2021, p. 32) has pointed out regarding sexual misconduct in academia, "Telling the story of a complaint can feel like telling a life story." As such, the main goal of this chapter is to contribute to opening a much-needed debate in academia about institutional responsibilities by reflecting on analytical concepts such as "whisper network," "sexual-power gatekeepers," "academic incest," and "intellectual and sexual extractivism." Although our academic careers went ahead, we are aware that for many colleagues, the same obstacles lead to dropping out and the end of their academic careers.

Surrendering to the Star Professor: Some reflections about power structures and cult-like dynamics

The Star Professor at the centre of our chapter established an academic school of thought, which appeals to Ph.D. students and junior researchers

from all around the world. The institution is based in a country where little public funding is attributed to scientific research but, thanks to his international profile, it was able to attract a lot of national and international research funding, which made it grow very fast (see also Molesworth, Nixon, and Scullion 2009 and Brown with Carasso 2013). He held the main power and academic position at the institution, which in practice means a personal identification between both. There are few Ph.D. fellowships, even fewer post-doc positions, and a permanent job contract can be considered a mirage. So, many researchers worked in very precarious conditions, which made them vulnerable to institutional abuses of power, as will be described in the next section.

Besides the Star Professor, there were two crucial figures to understand its power dynamics: the Apprentice and the Watchwomen. The Apprentice was considered by many as the Star Professor's intellectual right hand and his successor. He was quickly rising in the Star Professor's shadow by having prominent roles in national and international research projects, in Ph.D. programmes, and in key power governance bodies. The Apprentice usually welcomed foreign Ph.D. students and other young post-doctoral researchers who came as part of international mobility programs. For those who just had arrived, he first appeared as an intelligent, successful, caring, and extremely helpful senior researcher. The Watchwoman had many academic and key institutional responsibilities: co-coordinator of a Ph.D. programme, part of power governance bodies, principal investigator of research projects, and supervisor of Ph.D. students, among others. The ones who arrived to work with the group of the Star Professor were welcomed by the Apprentice and the Watchwoman, who played the role of gatekeepers, "individuals who smooth access to the group … key people who let us in, give us permission, or grant access" (O'Reilly 2009, p. 123) for new researchers who wanted to be involved in the several research activities of the group around the Star Professor – seminars, summer schools, publications, among others.[4] The academic activities of research groups were in the hands of these two crucial figures since the Star Professor spent half of the academic year at a prestigious university in another continent. Two other crucial figures at the institutional level were men in key positions of the crucial power governance bodies, both long-term intimate friends of the Star Professor.

The three authors had unique academic mentoring relationships with each of these Star Professor's gatekeepers. The Former International Ph.D. Student was the first Indigenous doctoral researcher to come through the programme under the mentorship of the Watchwoman. The Former National Ph.D. Student was the Apprentice's first mentee who was enrolled in one of the doctoral programmes created by the Star Professor and co-coordinated by the Watchwoman. While the Star Professor was the Former Post-doc Researcher's official grant supervisor, he appointed the Apprentice as one of the two members of her Advisory Board, together with the Watchwoman. When she arrived at the research centre, the Former Post-doc Researcher was

made aware by someone from the Project Office about the long-standing intimate relationship between the Star Professor and the Watchwoman.

As time went by, we became more aware of how these personal relationships shaped institutional dynamics, including the production and reproduction of academic incest. In these dynamics, the role of the Apprentice and the Watchwoman is not limited to the more traditional reading of the concept of gatekeepers (a well-known concept among ethnographers). Here, the gatekeepers to the institution's power structures rely upon the nonexistence of ethic safeguards regarding academic mentoring. Such dynamics have enabled these two people to play the role of sexual-power gatekeeper where in many situations a clear line between coercion and consent is difficult to draw. Moreover, the institution has cultivated both cult-like dynamics and friendship dynamics of loyalty, as will be described below. The concept of "loyalty" is crucial and widely used by the Star Professor in institutional meetings, while "school" and "community" are also often used.

From academic incest to intellectual and sexual extractivism

Academic incest, as described by Basak (2013), occurs when someone is hired because of participating in clientelism dynamics at the university, involving asymmetric power relationships. The Star Professor and the Watchwoman might see in his Ph.D. students an opportunity for vocational reproduction, namely spreaders and defenders of his conceptual avant-garde decolonial framework (Corey 2018). Numerous are the stories about how the Star Professor obliged his students to quote him extensively, using his conceptual and analytical framework as the main academic reference in their work. At the same time, when threatened by other investigators' work, he might make his assistants and students the perfect victims to vent his frustrations. These kinds of academic relations generate tensions of exclusivity, elitism, and consequently jealousy and competition among early career researchers. Academic incest has even darker sides: despite the well-known discourse about the importance of collaborative and participatory action research with research participants as a way to transform the academia, the Star Professor could be seen as an expert in intellectual extractivism. Stories of research assistants whose work and knowledge were used in his books and being poorly paid are numerous. Assisting the Star Professor might be regarded as an informal in-between job while waiting (and hoping) for a research grant, fellowship, or job contract. As far as we know, he had three assistants from a Latin-American country, where the Star Professor's work has a vast social and political impact. They became privileged academic and political bridges for his ongoing research. However, being based in a foreign country, where they do not know labour legislation, his assistants find themselves in very vulnerable social and labour positions. Some of them even got fired without receiving due pay for all of their work. Their names might only appear in the acknowledgements or in the footnotes, not being recognized

for their intellectual authorship. This misconduct explains how this kind of Star Professors could write dozens of single-authored articles and book chapters per year while giving conferences and masterclasses across the globe. None of these young scholars dare to publicly denounce this misconduct and abuse of power for two main reasons. The first is being discredited by their peers, becoming isolated, and consequently in a difficult situation to restart their careers. Second is perceiving their positions as prestigious and promise to bring career advantages in the future no matter how distressing the present is.

At this institution, these kinds of imbalanced power relationships were frequently cloaked by social events part of the institutional culture, such as dinners in restaurants and private houses, where closer personal relationships between researchers from different hierarchical positions were encouraged. After Star Professor's yearly series of masterclasses, it is an unwritten rule that all researchers gather in a specific restaurant. In fact, in a personal meeting with the Star Professor, he instructed the Former Post-doc Researcher that she should go to these dinners to integrate herself better into her new research institution. The Former National Ph.D. Student received the same recommendation from both coordinators of her doctoral program.[5]

The restaurant was emblematic because of its homages to the Star Professor from students of different generations. It was a ritual to take group and individual photos with the Star Professor during these dinners and recite his poems. It involved a lot of drinking and dinners typically finished at dawn with everybody dancing or singing. During one of these dinners, the Former National Ph.D. Student and another female colleague were hugged by the Star Professor. This gesture, apparently innocuous, took too long, inviting closer familiarity. A male Ph.D. colleague realized what was happening and alerted them that this kind of inappropriate behaviour was usual. Moreover, he warned his female colleagues that they should remain careful. However, these inappropriate behaviours towards students are usually underestimated through humour or denial. Once, the Apprentice invited his students to party at his place. Laughing about it, they said that he was probably planning "an orgy party." This joke unfolds an ambivalence: his students felt empowered to be invited to his place in the sense that they belonged to the inner circle. Some were even aware of its dangers, which they then denied through humour. In his informal talks, he even questioned closed and monogamous relationships, creating grey zones about how to handle professional boundaries when there were implicit "friends/colleague/student with benefits" expectations to the researchers that he mentors. Inviting students and young researchers to spaces outside of the research centre made them more vulnerable.

Moreover, young researchers were sometimes very isolated, which was the case of the Former International Ph.D. Student and the Former Post-doc Researcher who became aware of the Apprentice's habitual grooming and sexual extractivism behaviour too late (Hanson and Richards 2019). As a

result, those who afterwards claimed non-consensual or intimidating sexual approaches would be questioned. They might hear back: "You went [to his house] because you wanted it!" Overall, this behaviour raises key questions about to what extent consent and coercion could easily have been separated towards the outer world when a power-structured mentor relationship flows towards a close friendship but turns out to be a manipulative move towards sexual extractivism.

An unbalanced swing: Anonymous graffiti and the whisper network

In midst of the international #MeToo movement, the walls at this institution began to speak. Graffiti shouted what no one dared to denounce. The Former Post-doc Researcher first saw the graffiti at the entrance of the institution's building saying "*Beat it or go away [name of Star Professor]. We [females] all know it.*" She was shocked and confused, but the whole conflict situation at her host institution started to make sense. While she felt as though she stood completely alone, she realized that other colleagues were bearing the same burden. The graffiti encouraged her to speak about her serious conflict with another female Ph.D. colleague. The Former Post-doc Researcher explained that a few weeks before, she was obliged to leave the Latin-American country where she was conducting fieldwork and return immediately to the institution. One of the key institutional governance bodies pressured her to change the research progress report she had to submit to her funding agency, in which she described inadequate supervision and institutional support to implement her research. She refused to do so because she was not able to meet the core objectives of her grant without this institutional support, which was part of the grant agreement. She had the gut feeling that she was not receiving this necessary support because she did not enter the "being friends/colleagues with benefits" scheme that the Apprentice had insinuated a year ago. She felt that he literally shut the doors: she was never invited to any meeting with the Star Professor's research group she was supposed to collaborate with, and an invited book chapter for the Star Professor's book on her field of expertise was no longer needed, no research contacts nor networks were shared, the training opportunities established in the grant were not created. Now she was being threatened with a disciplinary process of dismissal. This female Ph.D. colleague shared that the graffiti the Former Post-doc Researcher saw on the walls was not the first, the graffiti kept reappearing. She suggested the Former Post-doc Researcher talk with the Former National Ph.D. Student, who was having issues with the Apprentice – a supervisor they both shared. This colleague also shared that she had heard that the Apprentice frequently pestered female students, flirting with them anytime they casually met at parties, bars, or other informal situations.

The whisper network started to take shape and we (the authors) became aware of another incident: another international Ph.D. student who decided to conclude her doctoral research in her country-of-origin instead at this institution. She only told another female colleague the valid reason for this change: her supervisor, the Star Professor, had touched on her knee, inviting her to "deepen their relationship" as a "payback" for his academic support. The Star Professor was already in his late seventies. This female colleague kept that secret for a while, but after knowing that the Former National Ph.D. Student felt harassed, she told her about this incident. The Former National Ph.D. Student, who knew this latter student, sent her a photo of the front door of their centre, where someone graffitied: "[name of Star Professor] had raped a student." Someone erased these graffitis, but in the months that followed, similar ones appeared: on the facade of the research institution, on the walls in front and at the entrance of this institute, and on a wall of a neighbouring faculty building, among others.

The Former National Ph.D. Student learned about the graffiti through a colleague, who supported her initially when she decided to advance an institutional complaint about her Ph.D. supervisor's misconduct without knowing to whom or much less how. Yet, she later advised the Former National Ph.D. Student to back down. In her opinion, the Apprentice was raising problems about her thesis as a form of retaliation because he had not succeeded in sexualizing their relationship. The Former National Ph.D. Student had never realized her supervisor had any sexual intentions towards her, but she had previously noticed sexual intentions towards other female colleagues. In the first year of her Ph.D., for instance, a good friend of hers was sexually involved with him. The Former National Ph.D. Student had never understood what had happened that night, but her colleague was anxious for the rest of the semester. Concerning the Former National Ph.D. Student, he just attacked her academic work. First, he over-criticized her fieldwork, arguing that she had not found empirical evidence to corroborate her dissertation's hypothesis. Later, he stated she did not hold "dissertation thinking," forcing her to revise, again and again, her dissertation's structure. Naturally, this situation set in motion a cycle of low self-esteem, late work, and less polished writing, which might prove that it was the Former National Ph.D. Student and not her supervisor, who was the crux of the problem.[6]

The Former National Ph.D. Student felt that he badmouthed her to other senior researchers, diminishing the possibility for her to collaborate with projects related to her research topic. A senior colleague even once joked about hearing that she would not finish her Ph.D. For two years, they had established a fruitful collaborative professional relationship but suddenly this senior researcher stopped inviting her to participate in seminars, conferences, or workshops related to her topic. The Former National Ph.D. Student assumed that his behaviour was a sign that the institution would not protect

her. Believing that she would lose any complaint against the Apprentice, she decided to remain silent. Confronted with these microaggressions and hostility, slipping out was a matter of mental health. Like the Former Post-doc Researcher, she felt that the institution tried to isolate and silence her. The graffiti broke that isolation and silence.

To date, the authors do not know who was behind the graffiti.[7] While anyone has yet to claim responsibility, the writing on the walls enabled female researchers to start whispering and talking in confidence to share their suffering and struggles. As Carrie Rentschler (2018) described, a whisper network among female researchers creates a mutual aid linkage, enabling them to talk in confidence and meet others suffering similar circumstances. It made sense of a safe invisible container where women can connect and share. At the same time, this network breaks the mental and emotional isolation in which many women find themselves facing institutional abandonment. Isolation, lack of peer support, institution's accusations about "a rumour mill" or "witch hunts," gaslighting, and misinformation are some of the faces of institutional harassment. Suppose sexual misconduct might be a single assault. In that case, institutional harassment is the fertile ground that legitimizes this sexual misconduct, makes it grow, and enables it.

Whisper networks boast a sense of justice. Even if whispers might not always be entirely true, the people who spread them search for truth. The truth can take different shapes, and whispers belong to what can be labelled as hidden transcripts (Scott 2008). For instance, the Former National Ph.D. Student heard that other two post-doctoral female researchers made an institutional complaint against her supervisor. Yet she never found who these researchers were and if the accounts she was told actually happened. When she first realized about a sexual assault involving the Apprentice, she shared it with a colleague. This colleague told her that she already knew about it, adding some details. Later, both realized they have been talking about two different cases believing that they were the same one. So, if half-truths combine to generate multiple truths, the absence of a single and exclusive truth is the primary institutional argument to discredit the voices of women who were targets of harassment and sexual abuse/violence. Because of that, whisper networks may trap those who see them as a gateway for righteousness; they may work for and against victims of sexual misconduct, harassment, and even sexual violence.

Another practice that we observed is the existence of ambiguous drawbridges between the whisper networks and institutional sexual-power gatekeepers. We consider a drawbridge as a person who hears and supports victims but who also withdraws from acting against the institution in order to maintain his/her institutional position to continue to belong there. For instance, as soon as one senior researcher realized that a former Ph.D. student had publicly denounced the Star Professor for sexual abuse, she contacted her, expressing her support. She had done the same with some

other Ph.D. students who faced similar situations. Nevertheless, this senior researcher did not confront her colleagues or supervisors on the student's behalf. Indeed, a bolder stance might imply facing her peer's hostility. Under a competitive work environment, very few will risk losing their position, even if that means disregarding unethical misconduct. Inside the institution, the drawbridge can additionally use the information without the victim's control. Then, who benefits from drawbridges in this type of situation? Those who substructure them and, consequently, control them. Even though the anonymous graffiti (we counted eight) did not provoke a public (inter) national scandal, it enhanced the aforementioned whisper network, which allowed us to connect, share, and co-write this chapter.

Self-proclaimed radical feminists: Drawbridges where one expects support

As described earlier, the Star Professor's extractivism is not limited to the intellectual level. His sexual extractivism was well-known among his female feminist researchers and reproduced by the Apprentice without a problem. In fact, in certain circles, the rumours of the Star Professor's affairs around the world seem to be tolerated as part of the prestigious status of a Star Professor. Some female researchers even saw these sexual interactions as a stepping stone for upward mobility in the academic hierarchy. So, this is another example of "a more familiar story of deeply fucked up institutions where star professors hold too much power to determine the future of their protégés" (Wang 2018).

Critical feminist studies are an important research field within the institution, which also hosts a renowned Ph.D. programme on the subject. Over the years, this programme has created a group of feminist researchers who conduct remarkable work and publications with and about sex workers, transgendered immigrants, and Indigenous and Afro-Descendant women. One of their research topics is harassment, including in the workplace. Some of these feminist researchers even belong to the institution's scientific and ethics governance bodies. However, these positions are assigned to people trusted by key power people of these institutional bodies. We witnessed that, instead of protecting female researchers and students who were targets of harassment and sexual abuse, these governing bodies might become instruments of repression. For instance, some ethics commission officers – at the time of our tenure – were influential public voices on L.G.B.T.Q.I.A.+ rights. However, their background did not encourage us to denounce any abuse that had happened while they were presiding over the ethics governance body because they were a long-term friend of the Apprentice. On the contrary, we felt that they could use their position to discredit us. Given these circumstances, the absence of complaints did not signify the lack of abuse in this institution. During our tenure, this committee did not even have a protocol about sexual and labour harassment.[8]

Consequently, the institution's approach to bullying, manipulation, coercion, and control is worsened by the fact that its theoretical principles about a decolonial, inclusive, and reflexive academia convince others that they face injustices and abuses if they ever run across them in real life (Amienne 2016). This huge theory-practice gap enhances abusive relationships, through which one can control others. As already exhibited in other research in this context (Ahmed 2021), men who are publicly feminist and privately abusive are increasingly common. They usually keep close relations with women and non-binary people, who would protect their reputation if accused of sexual misconduct. The gesture of one of the most well-known feminists in this institution may illustrate this situation: she covered one of the above-mentioned pieces of graffiti with her jacket while waiting for someone to clean it.[9] One could ask why these self-proclaimed radical feminists are not openly supporting victims and demanding institutional change. The fact is that abusers become experts in creating strategic enablers through manipulation, such as playing with their labour vulnerabilities.

From whispers to quelling voices: The institutional witch hunt

The graffiti triggered more reactions: months after they appeared and several years after being sexually assaulted by the Apprentice, the Former International Ph.D. Student, living on another continent, decided to denounce him in her social network, explicitly calling him out as a "sexual predator." She also warned in the same post that the Apprentice was "not the voice of anti-racism or social justice."

The social media post was picked up by people linked to the institution and started to circulate quickly. The Former International Ph.D. Student received emails from the Apprentice's lawyer, one of the research institute's lawyers, requesting she delete that post from her social media. If she would not delete it, the lawyer threatened that the Apprentice would criminally charge her for defamation. Under this pressure, she removed that post. Despite this fact, the Apprentice made a criminal complaint against her.

As analysed in other cases of academic power abuse and sexual misconduct, the "hierarchical power structure offers rewards and protection to those at the top and enacts a steep price on those with little institutional clout" was also prevalent in this research institution (Wang 2018).

Even if our individual stories are unique, a connecting dot is how the institutional machinery sought to set in motion and gain full speed to oppress and silence people who publicly denounce abuse through social media (here, the Former International Ph.D. Student) or to their funding agencies (such as in the case of the Former Post-doc Researcher). The previously mentioned two key power figures of governing bodies were crucial in institutional oppression. The main focus was clearly protecting the good name and the institution's international fame at all costs, including the Star Professor and his Apprentice.

This same threatening pressure technique was used towards the Former Post-doc Researcher when the institution, through one of these key power figures, requested that she abort her fieldwork to return to the research institution within seven days. If not, she would face a disciplinary procedure for immediate dismissal with just cause. The Former Post-doc Researcher complied with the request, which meant cancelling her research activities and flew back to the country and complied with the obligation to go to the office every day. Nevertheless, a few weeks later, the research centre started a disciplinary procedure despite the fact her two-year labour contract was three months short of ending with a Disciplinary Charge Sheet for Dismissal of 59 pages long. Notably, it was the first time in the almost 40 year's existence of the institution that the Labour Code was used against a researcher.

Another similar pattern is that the institution deliberately used the fact that both women were foreigners and do not know domestic law nor master the national language in their favour. In the case of the Former International Ph.D. Student, it took her a couple of months to find someone who could give her the necessary legal advice about what criminal complaint entailed for her. In the Former Post-doc Researcher's case, she learned from the union's lawyer, hired upon returning to the country, that such a disciplinary process usually takes a couple of months and that an immediate termination was legally not possible.

A third pattern is how these key power institutional actors mobilized everything in their power to pressure, threaten, and exhaust emotionally not only these two women but also the Former National Ph.D. Student. At the time of the Former Ph.D. International Student's public post, the Former National Ph.D. Student was contacted to talk about her admission to the next stage of public defence, which had been delayed for several months. During that meeting, she was asked if she felt like a victim of harassment by the Apprentice. Unable to confirm, she used this unexpected opportunity to describe the abuses she had been subjected to during the past few years. During this conversation, she did not perceive that this institutional key power figure was trying to clarify what happened; but that he could use her vulnerability to protect the Apprentice. In fact, a couple of days later, her Ph.D. defence was suddenly postponed without any justification.

The Former International Ph.D. Student was invited by a senior researcher to teach in a summer school. Once this program was known, one of these key institutional figures, called this senior researcher explaining that this Former International Ph.D. Student was under criminal investigation by the police and that she would be detained for interrogation once arriving in the country. This key power institutional figure publicly stated that it was a private issue between the Apprentice and the Former International Ph.D. Student. At that moment, we – the three authors – were already in contact through the whisper network. We knew that this key power institutional figure's research area is the national justice system and judicial operators, therefore he has very close contact with the judicial system. Moreover, he

was a member of a research group working on the country's justice system which implied regular meetings with local judges, attorneys, and so on. The Former International Ph.D. Student was fed up with this blank threat and cancelled her participation.

On the other hand, the Former Post-doc Researcher once back at the institution, she entered into a burnout and had to take a sick leave prescribed by a psychiatrist. In midst of this burnout, the disciplinary procedure she had to face became an emotional exhausting and nerve-wracking legal calvaria mountain: among others, she had to present written English testimonies to support her case, her sick leave was inspected by the Verification Commission of the Social Security Institution upon request of the institution. According to her lawyer, this procedure was completely unnecessary and even illegal.

A final pattern in all cases is that, contrary to the Star Professor's research discourse of social and restorative justice, there was a complete absence of positive and constructive ways to deal with the voiced discontent and complaints of all young female researchers. Before her refusal to change and lie in her report to the funding agency, the Former Post-doc Researcher had voiced on several occasions her grievances; though, the institute did not undertake the necessary steps and initiatives to restore the situation and avoid a complete rupture. Reflecting upon this exaggerated institutional witch hunt, the Former Post-doc Researcher realized that the institution probably did not want to run the risk that she would amplify her original complaint, also considering the graffiti sprayed upon the institution's walls in midst of the international #MeToo movement.

In the case of the Former National Ph.D. Student, her grievances were ignored and were never taken seriously. Several years prior, the Former International Ph.D. student had informed the Watchwoman about her concerns, expressing her weak emotional state and fears after the sexual abuse by the Apprentice, who continued to contact and sexually harass her despite her requests to be left alone. The Watchwoman did not respond. In light of this, removing the Apprentice from the National Ph.D. Student's supervision, coordination, and teaching positions was never proposed as an institutional solution.

While in the cases of Former National Ph.D. Student and Former Post-doc Researcher, the Apprentice completely disappeared from the scene once the institutional machinery took over, in the case of the Former International Ph.D. Student, the Apprentice did the necessary public and private manoeuvres to de-legitimize her complaint to regain his face and reputation. A few days before her public post, police forces attacked people in a neighbourhood on the country's capital's outskirts. Afro-descendant citizens, frequent victims of political abuse and institutional racism, are the majority of this neighbourhood's inhabitants. Reacting to this attack, a demonstration to denounce and protest police violence took place in one of the capital's main avenues. This pacific demonstration was also violently repressed by the police forces. Identifying himself as Afro descendant, the

Apprentice wrote a long and eloquent text in his social network, which allowed him to position himself as a victim, escaping the place of oppressor where he had been placed by the Former International Ph.D. Student's public denunciation, who is an Indigenous woman. Hundreds of people shared his text, expressing their appreciation for him. Additionally, he also contacted several colleagues to counter-explain his version of this reported assault, arguing that physical assault was warranted and that the sexual assault was consensual. By positioning himself as a victim of defamation and racism while racializing the Former International Ph.D. Student as white, he won the support of many, including some colleagues who months before were involved in the whisper network. For those abused by him, this was a moment to step back: all drawbridges stood up at the same time.

Final reflections

The anonymous graffiti did not provoke the scandal those who had risked painting the walls had expected to. Nevertheless, without them, we would not have connected the dots, much less have co-written this chapter. The Former National Ph.D. Student and the Post-doc Researcher would not have met at the bar at the train station. The Former International Ph.D. Student would not have denounced the Apprentice on social media. Both the National Ph.D. Student and the Former International Ph.D. Student were living abroad when the graffiti appeared. Both of them received photos of most of them no matter how quickly the graffiti was erased once it was discovered since employees of the institution kept erasing the writing on the walls. One day, we received a photo of graffiti, and the next day, we received a photo of a white square covering it. The day after, a photo of another graffiti was painted on the white square. The photos were circulated to us and others. Unlike the walls, it is impossible to erase the images from all of the devices they were sent to.

The graffiti was (and still is) an epicentre of resistance. The underlying message in each graffiti was: you are not alone. We felt empowered each time we received a photo of the graffiti. This empowerment, in turn, helped us to pursue our careers, arriving at a point where we can write about it in hopes of contributing to transforming a professional field that is very dear to us.

Despite the empowerment the graffiti and the whisper network offered each of us, the personal and professional ramifications must not be underestimated. It is beyond the scope of this chapter – all women have been dealing with combinations and different degrees of burnout, depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder reaching out to professional support which marks us up to date. This gives us an even more bitter taste because, as mentioned above, the Star Professor's research agenda seeks social justice and deep social transformation. However, practice contributes to the degradation of female young researchers' mental health.

At the same time, the institutional witch hunt came with high reputational costs, the gaslighting strategy of marking young female researchers as "difficult," "aggressive," and "unrespectful" is something we take with us while building further up our academic career in other places, even in distant countries. Those gaslighting labels "got under our skin" (Ahmed 2021, p. 27), and we experience challenges in building up new, healthy and trusting professional relationships due to the feeling of constantly walking on a tightrope: in a simple stumble to keep balance, everything can eventually be used against you. Disagreements and tensions are part of every labour environment, but once a researcher has this kind of public label, every new conflict is easily framed by the other parts to scapegoat, reproducing this gaslighting strategy.

Revisiting our central question on what might inhibit young female academic researchers from taking a stand and openly speaking out against sexual misconduct and sexual abuse (or even sexual violence), there are several complex layers and factors at play. Perhaps the biggest factor is what one researcher in the underground solidarity network commented:

> The research centre IS the Star Professor, so if the Star Professor falls … the whole institution falls with him. Therefore, there is no critical mass inside towards this kind of misconduct and abuse. Nobody wants to fall and be branded as someone of that fallen centre [which is nationally and internationally renowned].

Another factor is that depression or burnout might result from not denouncing these matters in order to avoid legal, public, or professional repercussions. This was evident in the case of the Former National Ph.D. Student, who followed the advice of her psychotherapist: "Not denouncing is not about cowardice, but about mental health."

As this chapter shows, figures like the Apprentice were invested not only in carrying the name and work of a Star Professor, but his legacies of abuse. Each was sheltered by figures such as the Watchwoman and the self-proclaimed feminists who also see their work and names invested in a globally renowned institution. As recently analysed "Abuse of power is not incidental to these men's 'greatness'; it is central to it" (Täuber and Mahmoudi 2022). Under a competitive and precarious work environment bullying becomes a career tool for Star Professors. And this competition and precarity turn peers into their enablers.

The method of autoethnography has given us a valuable analytical tool to critically unpack the different interconnected layers of power and how cult-like and family/community dynamics around a Star Professor have enabled a research culture where its reputation should be untouchable. Many researchers at the centre surrender to that power logic. Having the opportunity to co-write this book chapter has been a very healing process at

the individual and collective level for the three of us. At the same time, it has triggered many emotional scars and fear. Despite those triggers, we join the growing critical call from within academia for an urgent paradigm shift in this professional field and strive towards a more collaborative, transformative, and interdependent community.

Notes

1 We would like to recognize the invaluable support of many colleagues and friends (women and men). Unfortunately, we cannot name as the current academic settings we work in do not offer enough emotional and physical safeguards in order to continue our research harassment-free.

2 We borrow the concept of "Star Professor" from Esther Wang who critically analysed the sexual harassment scandal around Avital Ronnell, New York University Professor, and considered a Super Star Professor in academic field: feminist literary theorist. See Wang, E., 2018, *What are we to make of the case of scholar Avital Ronell?,* Jezebel. Available at: https://jezebel.com/what-are-we-to-make-of-the-case-of-scholar-avital-ronel-1828366966?utm_medium=sharefromsite&utm_source=Jezebel_facebook&fbclid=IwAR38HZjsvxYcbm_02N-BxkqKM47nvSd8f1faFr1Tso-35QDcF6kcCVf3uBQ. Since this article of 2018, the coined term of "Star Professor" has become widely used in academic reflections about #MeToo in academia. See Susanne Täuber and Morteza Mahmoudi, 2022, "How bullying becomes a career tool," *Nature Human Behaviour* https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-022-01311-z.

3 Instead of using the term "victim" in this context, we prefer to use the term "survivor" to stress the active role of those persons who have faced similar situations to deal and overcome them; the term "victim" may have a too passive connotation.

4 Sarah Ahmed in her recent book "Complaint!" uses the term "door holders" to refer to the same institutional power this kind of people have (Duke University Press, 2021).

5 The Former International Ph.D. Student did not partake in these dinners due to her age and disconnect with older members of her cohort; however, she was later invited to a gathering organized by the Apprentice, at which point she was physically and sexually assaulted.

6 Many people who suffer from gaslighting do not realize that they mistake their confusion for legitimate feelings against themselves, leading to lowered self-worth and possible situations that make it more challenging to deal with gaslighting. Often, gaslighting occurs between two individuals who trust each other, with one subtly manipulating the other. Because it often occurs within intimate interpersonal relationships, manipulation can be complicated to spot.

7 When the graffiti appeared, there were feminist assemblies in that town. Some researchers who attended these meetings were easy targets of the "witch-hunt" accusations. Meanwhile, these feminist meetings weakened and became residual. However, probably, at that time, those who painted the graffiti felt sheltered by them. One senior female researcher also reduced this institutional oppression's weight a bit less thanks to her underground solidarity and unconditional support.

Things did not change as much as we expected, but there is now an ombudsman position at this institution. And we have learned some pathways to forward.

8 The centre has now a Code of Conduct, but it is very unlikely this will be activated for this kind of issues as people in the centre are aware of the institutional culture which does not favour a systematic change.

9 This information was obtained through the whisper network.

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