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**Sex-based harassment and silencing in academia:  
How people are led to reluctant acquiescence**

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3<sup>rd</sup> revision submitted for publication consideration to:

***Human Relations***

July 2018

**Acknowledgements**

We are most grateful to the 31 early- and mid-career women academics who willingly shared their stories of sex-based harassment with us. While many of the stories were replete with pain, trauma and frustration, we can only hope that they are pleased with the outcome of the study in the form of this article. We also thank Associate Editor, Matthew Sheep, and three anonymous reviewers whose thoughtful comments prompted us to think deeper about the implications of our study and which, ultimately, strengthened many of the ideas found in this article.

# **Sex-based harassment and silencing in academia: How people are led to reluctant acquiescence**

## **Abstract**

*The #MeToo and the 'Time's Up' movements have raised the issue of harassment encountered by women to the level of public consciousness. Together, these movements have captured not only the ubiquity of harassment in the everyday functioning of workplace settings, but they have also, concomitantly, demonstrated how victims are all too often silenced about their experiences with the phenomenon. Inspired by the political and the social currents emerging from these movements, and theoretically informed by the concepts of discursive hegemony, rhetorical persuasion and affective practice, this article draws on a qualitative study of early and mid-career women academics working in UK business schools to explore the question: How are victims who start to voice their experiences of sex-based harassment silenced within the workplace? Based on our findings, we conceptualise organisational silence as the product of the collective efforts of various third party actors, who actively mobilise myriad discourses in their daily interactions to persuade employees to not voice their discontent, thereby maintaining the status quo in the organisation. In doing so, we argue that sex-based harassment is accomplished by the complicity of various third party actors rather than the corollary of the isolated behaviours of unscrupulous victimizers. In highlighting features of academic work that facilitate complicity, we heed to calls to better contextualise sex-based harassment specifically and other forms of workplace mistreatment more broadly.*

**Keywords:** sex-based harassment, silence, discourse, hegemony, third party actors, academia

## **Introduction**

Originally conceived by social activist, Tarana Burke, the phrase ‘me too’ was coined over a decade earlier with the intention to support racialized women and girls who were victims of sexual violence. In the aftermath of the sexual assault scandal of film executive Harvey Weinstein, on 15 October 2017 actress Alyssa Milano tweeted, ‘If you’ve been sexually harassed or assaulted write “me too” as a reply to this tweet.’ Within hours, the two-word hashtag was trending number one on Twitter, and Milano’s original tweet had received over 53,000 replies from all over the world. A social movement was born (Langone, 2018).

The #MeToo movement raised the issue of harassment experienced by women to the level of public consciousness. In doing so, it illuminated two outcomes. First, the movement captured the ubiquity of harassment in the everyday functioning of workplace settings. Indeed, it revealed how harassment in organisations not only transcends cultures and geographies, but it is also present across myriad work environments—whether she might be an undocumented labourer cleaning toilets or a famous actress appearing in Hollywood blockbusters.<sup>1</sup> The #MeToo campaign vividly illustrated that even seemingly empowered women working in professional settings are not immune from experiencing harassment; on the contrary, they are habitually its targeted victims. Second, though almost equally as disturbing, the revelations that emerged from the #MeToo movement, disclose the poignant reality that victims are all too often silenced about their experiences with harassment (Batty et al., 2017; McDonald, 2012; Collinson and Collinson, 1996; Watts, 2010).

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<sup>1</sup> We recognize the fact men are not immune from being victims of sex-based harassment. While acknowledging this point, the specific purpose of our study is to understand how women victims account for being silenced in the workplace by third-party actors. As such, in this article, we will use feminine pronouns to refer to victims. While making this acknowledgement, it should be underscored that women are potentially more vulnerable to sex-based harassment as they occupy less powerful organisational positions (O’Connell and Korabik, 2000).

The #MeToo movement has generated several implications for scholarly inquiry. At the very minimum, it has highlighted the need to conceptualise the antecedents of silencing experienced by victims of harassment. In this article, we seek to advance knowledge on the specific phenomenon of sex-based harassment. Theoretically informed by the concepts of discursive hegemony (Fairclough, 2010), rhetorical persuasion (Symon, 2005) and affective practice (Wetherall, 2012), this article draws on a qualitative study of early and mid-career women academics working in UK business schools to explore the question: *How are victims who start to voice their experiences of sex-based harassment silenced within the workplace?*

Before proceeding, it is important to offer a caveat concerning the term that is at the crux of this article: *sex-based harassment*. Following Berdahl (2007: 641), we define the term to capture ‘behaviour that derogates, demeans, or humiliates an individual based on that individual’s sex.’ Berdahl argues that those who engage in such behaviour ‘are motivated and able to do so by a social context that pervasively and fundamentally stratifies social status by sex.’ While Berdahl uses the term ‘sex,’ scholars have recognised that individuals can also be derogated, demeaned and humiliated on the basis of their gender. As such, we follow Leskinen et al.’s (2011: 26) contention that sex-based harassment not only captures elements of sexual harassment (Collinson and Collinson, 1996; McDonald, 2012; Uggen and Blackstone, 2004; Wilson and Thompson, 2001) such as unwanted sexual attention and sexual coercion (Lim and Cortina, 2005), but also encompasses gender-based harassment, which ‘communicates [verbally and nonverbally] hostility that is devoid of sexual interest.’ By invoking the term sex-based harassment in this article, we are relatively well positioned to conceptualize a diverse set of behaviours that are intended to stratify social status based on sex and/or gender than would be permissive if we remained within the restrictive definitional parameters of sexual harassment.

Based on our findings, we make two notable and interrelated contributions. First, we broaden existing understandings of silencing (Donaghey et al. 2011; Manley et al. 2016; Brown and Coupland, 2005), by explaining how discontent employees who start to voice are led to reluctant acquiescence through the enactment of discursive hegemony by others in the organisation (Fairclough, 2010). Second, we highlight how various third party actors (e.g., human resources officers, professional colleagues, and line managers [Quick and McFadyen, 2017]) are complicit in the silencing of victims. Based on our findings, we argue that sex-based harassment is accomplished, in part, by the complicity of various third-party actors within the organization, rather than the corollary of the isolated behaviours of unscrupulous victimizers. Taking these contributions together, we heed calls to better contextualise sex-based harassment specifically (Leskinen et al., 2011; Berdahl 2007), and other forms of workplace mistreatment broadly (McCord et al., 2018).

In what follows, we first review the literature on organisational silence focusing on how individuals are silenced in their work settings and highlighting gaps in prior explanations. We then introduce the ideas of discursive hegemony, rhetorical persuasion and affective practice which theoretically frame our study. We subsequently describe our research context and methodological approach. Thereafter, we present our findings, which provide insights into three key discourses used to silence victims of sex-based harassment. We show how these discourses are mobilised within the workplace by third party actors and how they are experienced by victims leading to their reluctant acquiescence. We close this article by discussing the contributions and the implications of our study.

## **Silencing in organisations**

At the broadest level, silence in work settings refers to employees' disinclination to speak out. It is antithetical to voice (Donaghey et al., 2011), which involves having 'a say' over matters that affect one's working life (Dundon and Rollinson, 2011). Since the term was initially conceived by Albert Hirschman in 1970, silence has been interpreted as both a symptom and a response to workers' dissatisfaction or perceived mistreatment (Dean and Greene, 2017). Silence is mediated by power, contextually defined in terms of the position of individuals or groups within the particular organisational hierarchy (Behtoui et al., 2017; Wang and Hsieh, 2013). If an employee believes that she lacks power in relation to others at work, she is likely to be silent (Morrison et al., 2015).

A plethora of studies have provided insights into important contextual factors that foster silence within work settings (Morrison and Millikenan 2000; Simpson and Lewis 2005). For example, research has examined how organisational cultures pivotally shape silence, highlighting how individualistic, competitive (Manley et al. 2016) and high power distance organisational cultures (Huang, Van de Vliert and Van Der Vegt, 2005; Morrison and Rothman, 2009) serve as sites where silence flourishes. Silence is also often the result of employees having few avenues of recourse to pursue issues that are of concern to them. This might be due to the failure of existing organisational mechanisms to enable voice or, otherwise, the absence of them altogether (Donaghey et al., 2011). Alternatively, speaking up about problems in the organisation may not be perceived as effort worthy (Morrison and Milliken, 2000) because of repeated organisational failures to respond to employees' complaints about injustice (Harlos, 2001). This phenomenon has been dubbed, by some scholars, as the 'deaf ear' syndrome (Goldberg, Clark and Henley, 2011; Harlos, 2001).

One of the most conspicuous ways by which silence in organisations is maintained involves the role of management. According to Donaghey and colleagues (2011), management has a great degree of choice in creating spaces for voice and, concomitantly, establishing cultures of silence within the workplace. For instance, organisations can deliberately silence employees through agenda-setting and the arrangement of institutional structures (Auster and Prasad, 2016) that organises them out of the voice process. Pinder and Harlos (2001) argue that employees will be silent if management acts in ways that discourage communication from below or constructs speaking up as being futile or detrimental to one's career. In other words, managers can negate the efficacy of existing avenues of formal recourse that aim to safeguard workers' interests by either explicitly or tacitly discouraging employees from their utilisation. The literature also addresses lateral influences on silence. Scholars argue that discontent employees often withdraw their opinions because they fear isolation from the workgroup, particularly when the individual believes that their position is representative of a minority viewpoint (Bowen and Blackmon, 2003; Milliken et al., 2003). However, the literature on workplace bullying indicates, conversely, that third party actors (including colleagues, superiors and onlookers) (Priesemuth, 2013; Mitchell et al. 2015), often experience lower levels of satisfaction (Sims and Sun, 2012), little identification with the organisation's core values (Hannah et al., 2013) and depression (Emdad et al. 2012) as they witness others' discontent.

A body of research positions silence as a normative feature of organisational life (Morrison and Milliken 2000). Brown and Coupland (2005) have offered insights into how organisational discourse silences employees by articulating normative pressures to conform. They show how orally transmitted norms of conduct encourage employees to act in a predictable and, this often means, a 'silent' manner. They further demonstrate how the research participants of their study



reproduced the discursive practices that rendered them silent as they drew on prevailing discourses to author preferred versions of self. It merits note that, Brown and Coupland also underscore that their participants were not mere subjects of organisational control. Rather they were complicit ‘without necessarily internalising their senior managers’ values’ (Willmott as cited in Brown and Coupland, 2005: 1061). In a study of professional football players, Manley et al. (2016) draw on Foucault’s (1977) concept of disciplinary regimes to show how organisational discourse influence individuals to embrace and reproduce specific values and norms and display a particular notion of self—leading to their conscious adoption and, ultimately, their shared acceptance of silence. The scholars argue that ‘silence’ in this case signifies empowerment and promotes a sense of belonging to the organisation. Collectively, these studies illuminate how individuals are silenced in organisations through non-coercive, discursive means and how under certain conditions employees willingly consent to being silenced and feel empowered by doing so.

The above literature on the various shapers of silencing leads to an important distinction between quiescence and acquiescence. Quiescence is defined as the active, deliberate withholding of voice due to factors such as fear and anger (Pinder and Harlos, 2001). In contrast, acquiescence is defined as a less conscious, passive and resigned state of silence due to accepting the worldview of others and giving up hope of improvement (Harlos, 2016; Henik, 2008). Recent work on the topic, however, indicates that acquiescence may also be associated with emotions such as shame and fear, although not to the same degree as more deliberate forms of silence (Kirrane et al. 2017).

Taken altogether, this stream of research illustrates the myriad ways through which employees are silenced in work settings. What remains lacking in extant scholarship is insights into how people who start to voice their discontent are silenced. In other words, what are the types of

discourses used to silence discontent employees who start to voice, how are they mobilised in organisations and how is the process experienced by discontent employees? In what follows, we will explicate the theoretical framing of our study.

### **Theoretical framework**

To develop the theoretical framework of our study, we integrate ideas of discursive hegemony, rhetorical persuasion and affective practice.

#### ***Discursive hegemony***

Discursive hegemony (Fairclough, 2010) is a theoretical concept that combines ideas of discourse and hegemony. Discourse refers to ‘a set of meanings, metaphors, representations, images, stories, statements and so on that in some way together produces a particular version of events’ (Burr, 1995: 48). It is a ‘system of representation’ (Hall, 2001: 72) that regulates all social interactions. While certain material conditions may exist independent of discourse, it is discourse that ultimately allows for such things to become intelligible by attributing meaning onto them within social relations (Foucault, 1971). Discourse is seen as central in building knowledge and power. Knowledge claims codified within and through discourse are invoked to exercise power over certain classes of people using myriad forms of social control (Prasad, 2009)—a process that Foucault (1971) refers to as governmentality. It bears underscoring that discourse is never neutral; much to the contrary, it performs in advancing certain narratives while relegating others (van Dijk, 1988; McGregor, 2003).

Discourses can become culturally dominant or hegemonic (Edley, 2001). For example, women are often seen as being natural caregivers. This discourse has become so culturally ingrained in many societies that it is often understood as taken-for-granted common sense (Reynolds and

Wetherell, 2003). Fairclough (1989) argues that certain discourses achieve the status of ‘common sense’ and become accepted as ‘cultural truths’ in the process of individuals ‘rationalising’ certain phenomena as being natural. Individuals ‘accounts are seen as important ‘epistemological sites’ (Sunderland, 2004) to examine processes of ‘naturalization’ and the construction of ‘common sense.’ The ability of dominant groups to maintain hegemony over others is directly tied to their ability to influence the scope and the flow of discourse. Thus, according to Fairclough, ‘hegemony and hegemonic struggles are constituted to a significant degree in the discursive practices of institutions and organizations’ (126).

Broad hegemonic discourses reflect in, and are reproduced and challenged by, localised micro discursive practices (Zanoni and Janssens, 2003). Individuals continuously engage in micro discursive interactions which influence and configure broader macro frameworks of meaning (Potter, 1996; Potter and Wetherall, 1987). These micro discursive practices help us understand how macro discourses are created and shape the ways in which people operate.

### ***Rhetorical persuasion***

Rhetoric refers to discourse targeted at influencing a particular audience through argument and persuasion (Bonet and Sauquet, 2010; Gill and Whedbee, 1997). Rhetoric can be considered to be dialogical (Billig, 1996) where arguments are produced in a context with potential counter-arguments. Argumentation can construct certain versions of reality as legitimate, while undermining other versions (Phillips and Hardy, 2002). Rhetoric helps us to gain a better understanding of how hegemonic power operates by focusing on speakers’ use of persuasive arguments (Zanoni and Janssens, 2003) to maintain and challenge the existing social order.

Rhetoric focuses on the persuasive function of micro discursive activity. Potter (2007) identifies two rhetorical strategies to make arguments persuasive. 'Reifying' seeks to convince others that accounts are facts, while 'ironizing' seeks to expose those 'facts' as a social construction (Potter, 1996: 107). To make their arguments persuasive (Warnick and Kline, 1992), individuals will often draw on well-known discourses (Burr, 2003). Topic avoidance is also a pertinent rhetorical strategy (Silence, 2000). One can change topics of conversation, thereby effectively removing certain issues from the agenda altogether (Billig, 1996). Significantly, it is important to recognise that persuasion is also influenced by the perceived authority, credibility (Giles and Coupland, 1991), exposure and expertise (Fernando, 2017) of speakers.

Studies have drawn on theoretical ideas of rhetoric to offer explanations into how ordinary employees undermine and invalidate normative organisational discourses (Nentwich and Hoyer, 2012; Symon, 2005). Research in this area has also show how individuals challenge the assumptions underpinning normative discourses and rework them in an effort to create new organizational realities (Fernando, 2017). In a study of the Financial Accounting Standards Board (FASB), Young (2003) shows how rhetorical persuasion is used to, at the same time, maintain dominant accounting practices and silence alternatives and criticisms. She argues that, 'highlighting the impracticalities of alternatives' (2003; 637) is a rhetorically effective argument as it stresses the inevitability of the current situation and reproduces the status quo (Wetherell et al., 1987).

As individuals engage with one another rhetorically, they position the location of others within social relations, and they are, in turn, positioned by others (Davies and Harre, 1990). Extant

research has demonstrated how discursive positioning through rhetoric is imperative for the creation of individual subjectivities, which fundamentally inform the ways in which subjects understand themselves (Hollway et al. 1998).

### ***Affective practice***

The notion of ‘affective practice’ pivots on the idea that the affective and the discursive intertwine (Wetherall, 2012). Social interactions and practices in which people engage, can give rise to certain emotional experiences. Emotions emerge as people feel implicated in discourse by their own and by others' utterances and actions (Goodwin, 2006). From this perspective, emotions are not automatic, involuntary and non-representational; rather there is a seamless interplay between accounts, interpretations and the state of bodies (Ahmed, 2004).

Emotional responses are influenced by interpretations conveyed in practices of social interaction, encapsulating those practices that occur within the workplace (Serfert, 2012; Sointu, 2016). Emotions can, thus, be read as being relational. As an illustrative example of affective practice in action, Loveday (2016) shows how working class individuals experience shame through micro discursive practices (Wetherell, 2012). She shows how negative emotions are evoked as individuals recollect discourses that positioned their working class socio-economic status in pejorative terms. Namely, their subjectivities are cast as being ‘valueless’ by the ideologically constructed discourses of others. Value-laden judgements conveyed through discursive positioning can thus be ‘internalised by subjects and negate their sense of self’ (Sayer, 2005: 153).

### ***Theoretical integration***

We find ideas of discursive hegemony, rhetorical persuasion and affective practice conducive for understanding women’s accounts of silencing in the workplace. Hegemony as discourse

(Fairclough, 2010) provides us with a means to conceptualise the dominant discourses that protect the organisation's status quo. Likewise, from such a theoretical location, we ascertain the notion that dominant discourses are maintained through individuals' micro-level discursive practices (van Dijk, 2001; Zanoni and Janssens, 2003). The concepts of rhetorical persuasion and affective practice are especially well versed to understand how these discursive practices operate and are experienced by individuals. Indeed, rhetorical persuasion and affective practice illuminate how certain discursive elements contribute towards maintaining hegemonic discourses (Wetherell, 2012; Young, 2003).

Finally, it ought to be clarified that hegemony should not be considered as being fixed or permanent. On the contrary, hegemony is achieved by being discursively performed and re-performed (Fairclough, 2010). Within such a conceptual purview, resistance to hegemony through the enactment and mobilisation of alternative discourses is possible, although (agents of) the dominant group and maybe even those individuals who are most marginalised by dominant discourses may endeavour to silence (Strinati, 1995) such alternative discourses in an effort to preserve existing systems of hegemony.

## **Research design**

In this section, we explicate the research design of the study. We first describe its context, before turning to present its data and methods.

### ***Context***

The research context of our study is UK business schools. In the last decade, scholars have expended much effort in conceptualising the myriad institutional dynamics of UK-based business schools (Fernando, 2018). Extant studies on the topic have yielded numerous

important insights pertaining to the ‘lived experiences’ of academics within such an institutional context. One line of scholarly inquiry that has been pursued with earnest is the questionable role of managerialism on the narrowing parameters of the types of research that constitute as institutionally valuable—and, thus, is either explicitly or tacitly encouraged in business schools (Butler and Spoelstra, 2016; Mingers and Willmott, 2013; Willmott, 2011). A related stream of work has explored how various forms of managerialism has problematically impugned the identities and the experiences of business school academics (Clarke and Knights, 2015; Clarke et al., 2015; De Vita and Case, 2016). For instance, studies highlight how certain early career academics desperately seek senior collaboration (Prasad, 2013) to fulfil publication requirements. Likewise individuals who struggle to meet performance demands woefully attempt to justify their approach to work and secure their professional legitimacy (Fernando, 2018).

One poignant finding that has emerged from the corpus of this literature is that marginalized subjectivities are especially vulnerable within business school settings—and academia more broadly. Indeed, recent conceptual and empirical research on racialised and ethnic minorities (Johansson and Sliwa, 2014), lesbians and gays (Ozturk and Rumens, 2014), the disabled (Williams and Mavin, 2015) early-career scholars (Bristow et al., 2017), and women (Fotaki, 2011; 2013) has demonstrated how certain disenfranchised groups continue to be, in one way or another, relegated in UK business schools. In terms of the latter category, researcher have shown how women academics (and the knowledge they produce) are routinely subordinated in the business school’s (hyper)masculinist culture (Fotaki, 2011; 2013). It is the normalisation of such a culture that renders business schools as institutional sites at which various forms of harassment and bullying are propagated, and allowed to flourish. We build on such studies by

examining the experiences of early- and mid-career women academics with sex-based harassment.

### *Data and methods*

This article is based on cases of sex-based harassment collected through one-to-one interviews with 31 early- and mid-career academics employed at business schools at nine different research-intensive universities in the UK. Fifteen respondents worked at the lecturer level, while the remaining sixteen held senior lecturer positions. All of our respondents were employed at relatively large business schools, which enjoyed an international reputation for research excellence. Our study focused on exploring women academics' perceptions of career opportunity and career constraint. Sex-based harassment was a meaningful theme that we explored as it was a salient factor in understanding constraints to women's careers in this sector.

Our sampling strategy adopted the snowball method. We started with eight academics known to us, and they put us in touch with other research participants who might be interested in speaking about the topics that we were interested in exploring. In following this strategy, our sample grew. Contrary to our expectations, it was not too difficult to gather a sample through snowballing. Indeed, many respondents we interviewed readily introduced us to other research participants. Before commencing the interviews, our research participants were given participant information sheets, which provided full details about the study, the topics we intended to explore and how we planned to store and report the data to protect the participants' confidentiality.

In the course of the semi-structured interviews, which lasted between one and two hours, we asked research participants to share stories about their careers, focusing on their experiences at



work, career paths and challenges. With regards to sex-based harassment, we asked research participants to comment on whether they, or others known to them, have experienced insulting, hostile and degrading attitudes that made them feel bullied and/or excluded due to their gender category. Furthermore, we also asked them to comment on women's experiences of unwanted sexual attention and sexual coercion in academia. Research participants described their own and/or others' experiences in academic settings by providing insights into sexist remarks, harassment during pregnancy and post birth, gender-based bullying and sexually motivated advances. To understand whether they believed their experiences with harassment were based on sex and/or gender, we asked them whether they thought, all else being equal, if men would have experienced it. In each case, we focused on understanding the research participants' choice of voice and silence, asking them to explain how they decided on what to do, who influenced them and what exactly happened when they voiced their discontent. We encouraged them to detail events as vividly as possible and invited them to reflect about how they, or those whom they were describing, felt at each moment.

Contrary to what we expected, and what the literature suggests about collecting qualitative interview data on sensitive topics (Dundon and Ryan, 2009; Adler and Adler, 2002), our research participants were willing to share their views and experiences freely. This may be partly due to the closely knit network through which they were recruited, which assured them confidentiality. Furthermore, they expressed appreciation for our research agenda. Notwithstanding this point, during the course of the interviews, we were empathetic about our research participants' fears concerning such sensitive matter and, accordingly, we continued to reassure them confidentiality (Dundon and Ryan, 2009). Several respondents spoke about the experiences of 'close others' who they were careful to not name. However, they provided full accounts about the events that they talked about, indicating that they had complete information

about the cases they described and were very closely connected to the targets. There were no significant differences between the themes that emerged in their own cases versus the cases of close others.

The interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed into verbatim text. The main data analysis technique used was thematic analysis, which involves organising and analysing textual data according to themes. Nvivo was used to organise data. Following King's (2004) approach, we first developed a list of descriptive codes representing the key themes that research participants introduced such as 'it's no big deal' and 'it happens all the time.' Once the initial codes were defined, we allocated sections of data notes to the appropriate themes. As part of the process, we also used Nvivo software to analyse our data for high frequency words. We found that people frequently evoked words which signify negative emotions. We then coded our data for emotions such as fear and shame which formed part of our descriptive codes. Next we moved from first order descriptive codes to second order conceptual codes. For instance, 'it's no big deal' and 'it happens all the time' were amalgamated to form 'invalidating claims of sex-based harassment.' Finally, we developed third order aggregate themes, after carefully considering the second order conceptual codes. For example, 'archiving claims of harassment' and 'avoiding talk about harassment' formed the aggregate theme 'people should trust the system to accord justice.' The third order themes coalesce into the key discourses through which hegemony was maintained in the higher education sector. Figure 1 provides an overview of the coding template.

--- Insert Figure 1 about here ---

We also examined all data that were not associated with a particular theme in an effort to identify contrasting and minority views to ensure that our analysis is based on all of the research

participants' voices. We re-read the contents of each theme to develop our understanding of the individual themes and relationships between them. When we spotted relationships between codes, we further explored them across all the transcripts to fully understand the story that our respondents were seeking to convey.

### **Findings: Silencing women academics in the higher education sector**

Our research participants spoke about sex-based harassment in their work settings highlighting the significant discontent experienced by targets. However, when women started to voice, they were silenced by third party actors such as female and male colleagues, managers and HR representatives. Our research participants' accounts of silencing coalesced into three key themes: (a) one can challenge the system only if their issue is uncommon and significant, (b) one should trust the system to accord justice, and, (c) negative consequences follow those who challenge the system. In what follows we explore how these discourses manifested in third party actors' micro discursive interactions with victims, leading to the latter's reluctant acquiescence.

#### ***One can challenge the system only if their issue is uncommon and significant***

This discourse implied that people can pursue formal complaints and challenge the system *only* if their issue is uncommon and significant. This discourse was maintained by two argumentation strategies: *invalidation* and *reifying an alternative version of reality*. In the case of the former, when people started to voice their discontent, third party actors (line managers, senior managers and HR representatives) attempted to *invalidate* individuals' complaints (Nentwich and Hoyer, 2012) by casting their experiences as trivial and common and, thus, having no grounds for a formal complaint against the system.

Paula explains how a young female representative from HR responded to her complaint about a senior colleague's unwanted advances:

*I told them about how he insisted that we discuss papers during afterhours all the time and about everything he has said and that woman told me that she does not see sexual harassment. She said that if she did, she would have supported me. She said that she has handled many cases of sexual harassment throughout her career. In their view, insisting on discussing a paper over wine is hardly a crime—I suppose they need evidence of something like rape or assault. However, they said that they will have a talk with him to settle matters. But after everything she said to me, I just didn't want to talk about it anymore—it is deeply humiliating. Because she is in HR, she technically should know about what she is talking about and she is an external party so she cannot be biased. She didn't get it I guess. It seems silly to get into this kind of a situation in the first place. To this date, I feel embarrassed when I think about the whole scenario.*

The HR officer *ironized* Paula's complaint (Potter, 1996) by making the point that the evidence she presented does not amount to harassment, thus counter arguing that she has no case to challenge the system. The officer drew on her expertise (French and Raven, 1959) and years of experience to make her argument persuasive (Warnick and Kline 1992). Furthermore, she also rather 'patronisingly' offered to speak to the accused on Paula's behalf to clear any possible misunderstanding and make the environment more pleasant for her in the future. By virtue of their position as impartial conveyors knowledgeable about sexual harassment in the workplace, HR officers were able to legitimise their verdict and exercise hegemony by tacitly advancing the narrative (Fairclough, 2010) that one has to have a very strong case to lodge a formal complaint and, thereby, to challenge the status quo of the system.

In the course of this interaction, Paula felt positioned (Burr, 2003) as an individual who had misinterpreted her circumstances and felt deeply embarrassed due to this perceived misunderstanding (Edwards, 1999; Kirrane et al., 2017). However, while Paula started to doubt herself, she did not totally yield to the perspective of the HR representative. Instead she felt torn between the HR representative's invalidating interpretation of the situation and her own beliefs of the situation. The conflicting reading of the situation led, ultimately, to Paula's reluctant acquiescence (Pinder and Harlos, 2001). It should be underscored that embarrassment was part and parcel of Paula's silence. Paula continued to feel embarrassed as she recalls her experience, highlighting how the process of recollection itself works as a type of affective practice (Wetherell, 2012) to maintain silence as shame (Loveday, 2016) is brought into fore.

The second argumentation strategy evoked by third parties was reifying an alternative version of reality (Potter, 1996; Symon, 2005). This involved attempting to persuade victims that they might be partially responsible for their own fate; thus, playing down the significance of their complaint and indicating to them that they have little ground to challenge the system. Andrea explains how HR officers suggested that she may have *unthinkingly* encouraged her harasser to repeatedly invite her out:

*Her view was that I never refused to attend the first few occasions which was clearly outside professional interests. So he would have thought that I am interested in a non-professional relationship. I told her that I just got into academia, I was vulnerable, I didn't want to displease him although I had no interest in him. I really needed someone to write with. I never thought that he would take it this far. But she (HR officer) clearly felt that he never forced himself on me—I had a responsibility to indicate to him if I was not interested. I*

*mean she was nice and everything. She said that she understood that this is my first job and I don't know how things work still. HR is there to mediate and help people. She said that she takes her duty of care very seriously and she cares about my welfare. But it seems like I may have indicated that I am interested in him when I kept on meeting him at various places—even though we met for work. I didn't know this—this is my first job. And he is old enough to be my father. I felt that he was exploiting his authority but then they clearly didn't think so. I have not worked anywhere else before so I suppose I was naïve. Maybe. I don't know. This was probably the most humiliating meeting in my life.*

Andrea is a junior academic and she was in her very first academic appointment. As she complained about being harassed by a senior academic, the HR officer counter-argued by suggesting that Andrea did not clearly indicate to him that she is uninterested in a non-professional relationship. In doing so, the HR officer attempted to offer an alternative interpretation of her situation (Symon, 2005) and turn the responsibility onto the victim. Because Andrea's career progression heavily depended on publications and she was desperate for senior collaboration as an early career scholar (Prasad, 2013), she felt compelled to tolerate her collaborator's tendencies to transgress professional boundaries until things went completely out of hand. However, the HR officer did not consider the fact that the nature of academic work made young women like Andrea especially vulnerable to harassment.

The particular HR officer drew on discourses of 'duty of care' (Jingree, 2015) to position herself as having the victim's best interest at heart. Furthermore she invoked 'newcomers lack of know how' (Cooper-Thomas et al. 2014) to convince Andrea that HR is better placed to judge the situation than is she. In the way, she enacted hegemony by weakening the significance of Andrea's complaint.

In the course of this interaction, Andrea was positioned as a naïve, inexperienced individual incapable of managing the boundaries of a professional relationship (Goodwin, 2006) and she felt humiliated due to such a reading of her situation (Kirrane et al. 2017). While the HR officer's persuasive arguments led to Andrea wondering if she was herself responsible for her fate, she was unwilling to completely accept this position. However, in the state of confusion, Andrea reluctantly acquiesce to being silent, therein conforming to the hegemonic status quo by not continuing to challenge the system.

### ***Trust the system to resolve issues and accord justice***

This discourse involved emphasising that employees should trust the system to resolve their issues and accord justice. In line with this discourse, as victims attempted to voice their experiences of sex-based harassment, ordinary colleagues vehemently counter-argued (Billig, 1996) that they should not do this because their issue has been resolved or would be resolved if they trust the system. In other words, the argumentative strategy involved challenging the fundamental assumption underpinning victims' argument (Nentwich and Hoyer, 2012; Fernando, 2017), making the point that they *do not* have an issue anymore.

Helen explained how her colleagues tried to convince her to stop complaining about a senior professor who repeatedly pressurised her to 'up' her publication game during the last REF cycle (the UK's system for assessing the quality of research in UK higher education institutions), disregarding the fact that she had been on maternity leave twice (Leskinen et al., 2011). When she appealed to HR, she was told that the harasser has been warned. What she found particularly revealing is the fact that her colleagues sought to convince her to stop talking about the issue any further because it is over:

*I was at the point of a nervous breakdown and all they (who were women themselves by the way) could say was 'it won't happen to you again.' I am sure they sorted it out. Nobody wants to go against the organisation, although they barely know this man. I suppose it is about conformity. I really wanted to tell the world that he is so instrumentalist that he lives for 4 star publications, and if you are not producing that for him, you are not worth living. Maternity leave, in his view, is not a good enough excuse for not writing. But others forced me to just shut up and let it go because it's over. One of my friends said to me 'you are being so stubborn and difficult, just let it go, no one else will act like you, it's over—just get it into your head.' 'You do not keep on knocking on a door after it has been opened do you? It doesn't make any sense' When this happens, you really feel that maybe everyone is right maybe it has been solved. These people are some of the smartest people in the world after all. But then another voice in you also says 'no' and you continue to feel low.*

While pressure to publish does not necessarily constitute sex-based harassment in and of itself, the issue becomes a case of sex-based harassment because Helen's maternity leave was not respected by her head of department (Berdhal, 2007). Helen's colleagues insisted that she should stop pursuing the issue any further because her turmoil is now over. They presented her promotion as a 'factual evidence' of there being no issue to take forward anymore (Zanoni and Janssens, 2003). Furthermore, drawing on the metaphorical example of 'knocking on an open door' they attempted to strengthen their argument by appealing to rationality and logic (Nentwich and Hoyer, 2012).



It is particularly revealing that Helen was positioned as a ‘difficult character’ who operated very differently to others in her profession in this interaction (Burr, 2003). In line with this deviant positioning, Helen felt confused and started to question her approach. Her colleagues made the point that conformance is normative in the academic profession, while voice is deviant. The collective efforts of her well-meaning women colleagues made it difficult for Helen to voice any further. She felt unsupported (Bowen and Blackmon, 2003; Milliken et al., 2003), confused and, ultimately, she reluctantly resigned herself to drop the case. However she continued to feel low (Kirrane et al. 2017) as she felt denied the right to justice.

Avoidance was used as a rhetorical strategy (Silience, 2000) to supplement challenging the underpinning assumptions of victims’ arguments. Anne explains how her colleagues started to avoid her when she continued to speak out about a senior colleague who harassed her on the basis of her gender and sabotaged her probation. Because Anne was now promoted, her colleagues clearly felt that the issue is over and they avoided her when she attempted to speak about an issue which, in their minds, does not exist any longer:

*I could have talked to a wall instead to get better response; they just changed the direction of conversation whenever I talked about promotions. In their view, I am now promoted so it does not matter if my line manager made sexist remarks throughout my probation—telling me as a woman I should not be too careerist and that I write like a woman—beating around the bush without making a bloody point. I felt traumatised and almost came to the point that I doubted my own capabilities and thought that I will never get tenure. But in their view, it is over now, I don’t have to work with him anymore, and I have been promoted so nobody wants to hear about that old story. When*

*people start to avoid you, you feel like a fool. Nobody wants to be known as a fool. So I guess there is nothing more to it. Of course I am not happy.*

In this interaction, Anne was positioned as foolish for continuing to talk about an issue which has been resolved by the system. The ‘affective practice’ (Wetherell, 2012) of judgement appeared to be a real source of anxiety for her and she feared the negative valuation associated with being positioned as a foolish person (Loveday, 2016). While Anne did not feel that she received justice for the trauma she went through, her colleagues’ complicity confused her and, therefore, she felt compelled to reluctantly acquiesce in the course of being torn between competing beliefs. It is significant to note that Anne continued to feel unhappy about her experience.

#### ***Negative consequences follow those who challenge the system***

This discourse highlighted the personal costs of challenging the system. In line with this discourse, when victims started to voice, third party actors counter-argued by emphasizing the impracticalities of taking their argument forward (Young, 2003).

Marsha explains how she was advised by well-meaning colleagues to not complain about unwanted sexual attention because she will be known as a trouble maker:

*So my close colleague’s view was that, if this gets out, I would be the girl who accuses men of coming on to her. My colleague [name], who is a genuinely nice person and is known by everyone as a fair and good person, firmly believed that it is in my best interest to stop it. She told me that she is only saying this to me because she has my best interests at heart and I believe her. But it is difficult to forget what happened. The costs*

*are great if I open my mouth and he just covers it up or if people cover for him. To be really honest, I am scared of being that person who people are wary of dealing with—so I don't know what to do. But I also feel that someone should speak up.*

Marsha's colleague not only highlighted the negative repercussions of criticising the system (Young, 2003), but also drew on the discourse of 'best interests' (Smeyers, 2010) as a rhetorical device (Warnick and Kline, 1992) to make her argument persuasive and convince Marsha to be silent. This excerpt illuminates how discursive hegemony in an organisation is enacted by ordinary individuals who are most likely to be disadvantaged by it (Strinati, 1995). In this interaction, Marsha realised that she might be positioned as 'the troublemaker.' This positioning instilled a sense of anticipatory fear within her (Edwards, 1999; Kirrane et al. 2017). Given that academia is a small and tightly knit community, where social capital is extremely important to develop a career (Angervall et al., 2018), having a negative reputation can lead to significant career disadvantages. However, at the same time, Marsha also felt that someone should speak up and voice the injustice she encountered, though, in the end, she reluctantly acquiesced.

Judy explains her colleague's counter-argument to her attempt to complain about her line manager:

*I was treated very differently to the guys. I was paid much less than two guys who were much junior to me and on top of that I was always shoved to the corner. I finally thought that I can't take it anymore, I owe it to myself to say something, to do something about my plight. But my close friends at work were adamant that I should not say anything. My friend [name] told me about this girl who just couldn't find anyone to collaborate*

*with her after she had accused a collaborator of stealing her data. People were scared to have anything to do with her. Anyone who makes a fuss is known as a problematic person. Everyone knows that. And they think that I will inevitably be a problem for the organisation if I go ahead with this. I don't know if my situation is similar to the girl that [name] knows, but they are right about gossip traveling across the country in academia. It is such a small world and people know about everything. I honestly couldn't find one friend who would support me in this. They were all like 'this is the way the real world works' and 'you have to handle it in a more tactful way.' I don't know if I am immature for wanting to be treated equally. But when they talk about the dangers of challenging the system, I lose my confidence and start to rethink about everything. I don't want anyone to be afraid of engaging with me. I am still thinking. At the moment I am not doing or saying anything because I don't know what to say or do. It is not an easy position to be in. I feel bad all the time.*

Judy's colleague attempted to establish a connection between socially accepted judgements (people who challenge the system are known as problematic) and the proposition that she wanted to promote (one should not make an official complaint about her line manager's unequal treatment) (Warnick, 2000). By doing this she attempted to highlight the impracticalities of challenging the system (Young, 2003). The fact that academia is an extremely 'small world' was used to support the point that so many people will get to know about her 'problematic' behaviour and, thus, hesitate to engage with her.

Judy's colleagues also drew on 'tact' (Agedbite and Odebumni, 2006) and the 'nature of the real world' as rhetorical devices to persuade her to not challenge the system, but rather to learn to cope within it. In the interaction, Judy felt positioned as an immature individual for trying

to voice, and felt afraid of the prospect of people hesitating to work with her in the future (Kirrane et al. 2007). One on hand she really wanted to voice against the injustice, though, on the other hand, she was afraid of the consequences that the exercise of such voice would engender on her career. She reluctantly resigned herself to silence (Pinder and Harlos, 2001) and continued to feel bad about her plight.

Table 2 offers additional representative quotes, categorised by second-order codes, which emerged from the study.

--- Insert Table 2 about here ---

## **Contributions**

Based on our findings we make two substantive contributions. First, we extend existing understandings of silencing in the workplace (Donaghey et al. 2011; Brown and Coupland, 2005; Manley et al. 2016) by explaining how discontent employees who start to voice are led to reluctant acquiescence (Pinder and Harlos, 2001) through the collective efforts of third party actors. Through an in-depth study of women academics' accounts of silencing, we unravelled three thematic discourses (Fairclough, 2010) used to silence discontent employees and, thereby, maintain the hegemonic status quo. We showed how these discourses are operationalised in the daily micro discursive activities of third party actors (Zanoni and Janssens, 2003). Specifically we provided insights into how managers, HR personnel and ordinary employees discourage individuals from voicing their discontent through persuasive counter-argumentation strategies (Billig, 1996), which consolidate and reproduce hegemonic discourses. Table 1 maps the overall phenomenon we describe.

--- Insert Table 1 about here ---

In line with the discourse that ‘one can challenge the system only if the issue is uncommon and significant,’ managers and HR personnel invalidated incumbents’ complaints (Nentwich and Hoyer, 2012) by playing down their experiences or otherwise attempted to reify an alternative version of reality (Potter, 1996; Symon, 2005) by emphasising that victims might be partially responsible for their own plight. They often drew on their expertise (French and Raven, 1992) and experience so as to make their arguments persuasive (Warnick and Kline, 1992). Likewise, in line with the discourse ‘employees should trust the system to resolve their issues,’ ordinary colleagues challenged the fundamental assumption underpinning the victims’ narratives (Nentwich and Hoyer, 2012), making the point that their issue has been resolved and there remains no further ground to voice. In other instances, colleagues actively avoided victims who started to voice (Silence, 2000). Finally, in line with the discourse ‘negative repercussions follow those who challenge the system,’ ordinary employees emphasised the impracticalities of taking a complaint forward (Young, 2003) often drawing on discourses such as ‘best interests’ (Smeyers, 2010) to explain why people should learn to cope with the system than to challenge it. Thus, third party actors discursively reinforced hegemony as soon as people started to voice their discontent, leading to their reluctant acquiescence (Pinder and Harlos, 2001).

Individuals’ reluctant acquiescence can be explained in several ways. Drawing on the idea of affective practice (Wetherall, 2012), we can understand silence as a by-product of individuals’ emotional experience of being ‘unfavourably positioned’ (Burr, 2003; Goodwin, 2006; Ahmed, 2004) in discursive interactions. As victims were positioned as ‘troublemakers’ and ‘foolish misinterpreters,’ they experienced shame (Loveday, 2016) and/or anticipatory fear: affects that are associated with silence (Kirrane et al. 2017; Edwards et al. 2009). We might, thus, understand reluctant acquiescence as part and parcel of individuals’ affective experience. On

the other hand, applying ideas of cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957) and induced compliance (Harmon-Jones and Mills, 1999), we might understand silence as an attempt to address the conflicted state of mind that victims experience as they are persuaded by legitimate and trustworthy third parties to adopt an alternative view to their own view of things. When a reasonably convincing structure of thought challenges an existing belief or mind-set, individuals experience a sense of psychological tension or cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957). According to the induced compliance paradigm, if there is significant incentive to avoid negative repercussions, there is more reason to adopt the new thought and justify the dissonance (Burns, 2006). From this perspective, because there is a strong case for an academic to avoid negative career repercussions associated with challenging the system, we might expect victims to feel persuaded to consider the counter-arguments raised by third party actors and to experience a sense of conflict in the process. Within this context, silence is read as an attempt to reduce dissonance by reluctantly acquiescing to the idea that there might be no point of voicing further.

In the literature on silencing in organisations, Donaghey and colleagues (2011) offers a reading of silence which brings the role of management into focus, illuminating specifically how management perpetuates a climate of silence (Morrisson and Milliken, 2003) through the design of particular institutional arrangements that leave employees out of the voice process. We extend and develop this work by conceptualising organisational silence as the product of the collective efforts of various third party actors, who actively mobilise myriad discourses (Fairclough, 2010) in their daily micro interactions and persuade (Symon, 2005) employees to not voice their discontent and, in doing so, maintain the discursive hegemony of the organisation. Within this purview, hegemonic discourses did not automatically articulate normative pressures to conform (Manley et al. 2016; Brown and Coupland, 2005). Rather such

discourses were catalysed in micro discursive interactions; namely, individuals had to be reminded of them and persuaded to yield to them.

It is crucial to note that third party actors often work in tandem to reinforce discursive hegemony. For instance, managers and HR personnel's efforts to invalidate victims' account of sex-based harassment through the discourse that 'one cannot easily challenge the system unless their issue is uncommon and significant' was meaningfully reinforced by ordinary employees colluding to insist that 'people should trust the system to accord justice' and underscoring the costs of challenging the system. By examining how people continuously engage in micro discursive interactions which influence and configure broader macro frameworks of meaning (Potter, 1996; Potter and Wetherall, 1987), we were able to illuminate how individuals who start to voice are silenced by third party actors and how hegemonic discourses are consolidated and reproduced in the process.

Our second contribution involves conceptualising sex-based harassment as accomplished by the complicity of various third party actors (Quick and McFadyen, 2017) within the organization. Prevailing understandings conceptualise sex-based harassment as a personalised interaction between a harasser and a victim. We challenge this view by illuminating how third party actors collude to create a context in which sex-based harassment is not identified and redressed and, tacitly, encourages more people to engage in such thwarting behaviour. Indeed, the findings from this study offers an opposing view to the extant literature, which suggests that third party actors are ever ready to help victims (Priesemuth, 2013; Mitchell et al. 2015; Sims and Sun, 2012), often dis-identify with the organisation's core values (Hannah et al., 2013) and experience depression themselves (Emdad et al. 2012) as they witness the plight of victimised others. In our study, third party actors' complicity made victims feel confused,



ashamed and fearful (Kirrane et al. 2017) and ultimately, compelled them to reluctantly acquiesce to the status quo (Pinder and Harlos, 2001). As importantly, the discourses invoked by third party actors provided an organisational culture in which perpetrators could operate with impunity. Indeed, many respondents spoke about how harassers who received warnings for their behaviour continued to work for the organisation. They were formally protected by non-disclosure agreements and informally protected through the complicity of people who were unwilling to criticise them and jeopardise their own and their organisation's reputation in the process.

It is important to consider the contextual factors which shaped third party actors' complicity in silencing victims. First, the fact that career structures in academia are significantly influenced by powerful sponsorship, the goodwill of key players in the field and senior collaboration (Prasad, 2009) makes it very unlikely that people support others who challenge the system (Fotaki, 2011). Indeed, as our research participants explained, 'getting the wrong person on your bad side' can effectively be career suicide in the academic world. Second, because academia is a highly specialised profession with only few vacancies in the job market and the notion of 'fit' plays a significant role in acquiring positions (Lachapelle and Burnett, 2018); concomitantly, exit becomes a difficult option as compared to most other professions. From this perspective, we might again expect individuals' propensity to challenge the system and/or advice others to do so to be limited, because there are little options for exit. Third, as in many professional settings, being affiliated with deviance is highly problematic because the system implicitly demands loyalty and conformance (Coupland, 2001; Reid, 2015; Prasad et al., in 2018).

As third party actors attempted to convince victims to not voice their discontent, they discursively evoked values such as tact (Agedbite and Odebumni, 2006) and acceptance of the status quo, suggesting that these values are dominant in the culture of their organisations—values which are altogether antithetical to voice. Considering how features of the occupational context facilitate complicity and provide a safe haven for perpetrators and repeat offenders in the process, we draw on our findings to contextualise sex based harassment (Leskinen et al., 2011; Berdahl 2007), and other forms of workplace mistreatment broadly (McCord et al., 2018).

We acknowledge the limitations of our findings. Our study is based on the accounts of 31 women and we recognise that we cannot claim that sex based harassment is pervasive in British higher education institutions. Having said that, the purpose of our study is not to make generalised statements about the state of affairs, but rather, to provide rich insights in how victims who start to voice are silenced.

## **Implications**

We now turn to consider the implications of our study for research and practice, which we summarise in five points. First, it is important to legitimise complaints about sex-based harassment – taking the necessary steps to redress the discourses that one can challenge the system only if their issue is uncommon and significant, one should trust the system to accord justice, and negative consequences follow those who challenge the system. This can be done through opening up more channels for people to voice their discontent, introducing policies that safeguard employees who challenge the system and running campaigns to inform employees that they *can* criticise the system and that criticism is seen as constructive and conducive for the ultimate betterment of the organisation. Leaders should be at the forefront of

such cultural change taking a significant role in implementing new policies. In this vein, those organisational values that may be perceived as being antithetical to voice should be attenuated—namely, conformance and loyalty. This can be achieved through intra-organisational efforts to legitimate the value of whistle blowers (Kenny, 2018) who disclose cases of sex-based harassment.

Second, employers should take a pro-active approach to considering how work is organised, managed and rewarded, and how organisational structures potentially facilitate sex-based harassment. Our findings provide insights into how academic careers, which are heavily dependent on senior collaboration, made young women scholars feel somewhat compelled to turn a blind eye to the first warning signs committed by perpetrators. Likewise, victims of sex-based harassment were often left unsupported because nobody wanted to make powerful enemies in the tightly knit academic context where social capital plays a significant role in career advancement. Employers can deal with these issues by constantly reminding senior colleagues about the responsibilities associated with collaboration and by closely monitoring junior colleagues in potentially precarious positions to ensure that they do not feel unable to voice.

Third, it is necessary to have well defined policy documents in place to deal with sex-based harassment—documents that clearly define what constitutes sex-based harassment, the procedure by which to deal with reported cases and the mechanisms to support people through the grievance process and afterwards. All line managers and HR personnel should be briefed on such policies and procedures. Relatedly, it is important to ensure that victims feel that justice has been accorded. They should be assured that culprits have been adequately punished and steps have been taken to prevent such cases from being repeated against other employees. If

people believe that injustice is ‘covered up’ by the organisation, this can negatively affect their commitment and motivation and, in the more extreme cases, dissatisfied victims may elect to exit the organisation. Accordingly, proper grievance management processes should be a central aspect of high commitment retention based HR systems. It is also important to reconsider the use of non-disclosure policies. It is critical to ask whether in the course of protecting employees’ privacy, do these policies engender the unintended consequence of protecting wrongdoers and lead to victims believing that justice has not been served. This is an important point to consider if the interests of potentially vulnerable employees, such as would-be victims of sex-based harassment, are to be protected.

Fourth, HR practitioners should be careful to not consolidate hegemonic discourses in an effort to protect the interests of the organisation. HR practitioners are undoubtedly in a difficult position being expected to prioritise the interests of both ordinary employees and the organisation. Thus, it is essential for personnel affiliated with HR to be reflexive about potential conflict of interests, namely when claims of sex-based harassment are made, they should be mindful of their status as ‘impartial conveyers’ and the responsibility associated with this role. In the event of a grievance, victimised individuals should be encouraged to seek further advice outside the organisation—perhaps, where available, from the union—rather than be silenced.

Fifth, ordinary employees should be reflexive about the repercussions of their actions and discourses. In colluding to isolate people who do not conform to the dominant mould, individuals are effectively aiding and abetting harassment and harassers, and ultimately their actions reproduce exploitative cultures in the organisation.

### **Concluding remarks**

On 27 February 2018, as we were in the midst of finalising our revision of this article, The Chronicle of Higher Education published an expose on a multi-decade long case of sex-based harassment at Harvard University (Bartlett and Gluckman, 2018). Dating back to 1981, the case revolved around Terry Karl, who was at the time, a recently hired assistant professor of government, and her senior and prominent colleague, Jorge Dominguez. Karl had accused Dominguez of engaging in a course of action that was tantamount to sex-based harassment, including unwanted touching, inappropriate comments and veiled threats. Karl first appealed to Dominguez to suspend his behaviours that were causing her ‘distress’ and, when that appeal failed to achieve its intended purpose, she sought protection from various third party actors within Harvard—including her dean and the university president—and, eventually, she lodged a complaint with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. Karl’s appeals for recourse were negated by the third party actors from whom she sought redress, and little was done in terms of either meaningfully protecting Karl or disciplining Dominguez. As the situation with Dominguez became increasingly untenable, Karl resigned her position at Harvard in the mid-1980s and moved to a university elsewhere. It would be revealed, eventually, that over the course of the next three decades, multiple women faculty and postgraduate students would accuse Dominguez of committing behaviours that were constitutive of sex-based harassment (Bartlett and Gluckman, 2018).

What is, perhaps, most alarming are the parallels between Karl’s case and the sentiments described by the research participants of our study. Indeed, much akin to what transpired with Karl over three decades ago, the research participants of our study described how third party actors negated their concerns of sex-based harassment. Together, these cases poignantly capture the fact that sex-based harassment in academe, and beyond, is not a new or an anomalous phenomenon. As a growing number of individuals have recognized the

pervasiveness of the phenomenon, the #MeToo movement—which we described at the introduction of this article—has catalysed the ‘Time’s Up’ campaign. The ‘Time’s Up’ campaign is a move in the right direction insofar as it offers tangible support for women who have encountered sex-based harassment in the workplace (e.g., providing pro bono legal support) (Langone 2018). However, given the ubiquity of the phenomenon, more research on the topic is merited. With this in mind, we have offered an empirical study on how sex-based harassment manifests in the higher education sector today.

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**Table 1: Visual overview**

<b>Hegemonic discourse</b>	<b>Underpinning micro strategies</b>	<b>Positioning</b>	<b>Outcomes</b>	<b>Actors</b>
One can only challenge the system if the issue is uncommon and significant	Invalidating complaints	Foolish misinterpreters	Confusion Shame	Line managers Senior managers HR officers
	Reifying an alternative version of reality	Unable to manage professional boundaries		
One should trust the system to accord justice.	Challenging the fundamental assumption underpinning victims' arguments	Difficult and/or immature	Confusion Low spirits	Colleagues
	Avoidance	Foolish	Confusion Low spirits	Colleagues
Negative consequences	Highlighting the impracticalities	Troublemaker	Fear	Colleagues

follow those who challenge the system	related to reputation		Low spirits	
	Highlighting impracticalities related to loss of material factors	Immature		

**Table 2: Additional data**

Second-order codes	Data Excerpts
Invalidating complaints	<p><i>When I joined, this professor from [NAME] assumed the unofficial role of a mentor. He published in [NAME] area and he came to me actually, because my PhD was related to his work. He advised me, introduced me to people. One day we went for coffee after data collection and he started talking about how he liked to have sex and it was all wrong. And I was listening, trying to act like nothing was wrong with it. He didn't touch me but he was talking and I suppose I was listening—I had two papers with him. Two years of work. Eventually I thought this is wrong and I raised the issue with my mentor. He said that some odd guys talk like that—it is nothing new in this world we live in. So his advice was to keep away. But don't complain because it is not a massive issue – and I was like 'oh okay, sorry that I thought of it as a massive issue, stupid me.' Because that is exactly what he implied. I debated about this in my head again and just thought 'I am going to let it go because I just can't face another person telling me that 'it is not a massive issue, you are dumb to think so.' (Chiara)</i></p> <p><i>They just ordered me around, told me to pick up little things, do the admin work that nobody else wants to do, and excluded me when it comes to joint grants or anything important like that. And when I start to complain or hint, they would raise</i></p>

	<p><i>their voices to intimidate me as if I were a small child although we were all the same age. Several times they have made remarks like, ‘Are you on your period? You seem to be in a mood.’ Our manager never said anything because he doesn’t care and he didn’t want to get involved. I eventually went to a colleague responsible for staff development and told him everything. While I told my story, he looked at me as if I had a mental issue. He was very polite but he told me that he doesn’t understand why I am so upset, hinting that I might be finding it difficult to adjust to work because this is my first job. In his view, there are all sorts of people in a workplace and the dynamics are never smooth. People say things and you say things back and it happens all the time—so I have no case whatsoever. He also said that nobody has made a complaint like this before for his 10 years in post—which was disturbing. In my interest, he advised me to not talk about this to anybody. Every word he said made me feel really foolish. I honestly believed that there is a significant gender issue in this research group—there are not many women and they are not used to women. But if no one else has ever complained about something like this then—I don’t know (Diejente)</i></p>
<p>Shifting the responsibility to targets</p>	<p><i>A very senior academic member and a representative of HR spoke to me and kindly tried to explain that my interactions with him were consensual—it was not harassment. So I suppose that a senior professor can misuse professional opportunities to get close to junior colleagues with insincere motives and it is not misconduct if the unfortunate victim ends up falling for it. Anyway, what was really disheartening was HR telling me to not talk about this to anybody and to not belittle him! He is still around the school trying to make himself as visible as possible to me as if to say that he won. So I</i></p>

	<p><i>eventually have ended up making myself invisible because, as they said to me, I am the one who did the mistake of letting him get too close to me and that is appalling place to be in. (Fiona)</i></p> <p><i>When I heard that he had spoken about me to other colleagues in a sexualised way, I complained. I mean, he was a married man, I always knew he was all wrong. But now I finally had proof. But they (the organisation) just dismissed it. They tried to frame it as a personal issue—for which I may be partially responsible. They hinted very subtly that I need to learn to deal with various people at work. And I was wondering what are they saying, did I just imagine this all—am I losing it or it or what? God I cover my face when I think about this episode (Gracia)</i></p>
<p>Archiving issues to indicate that there is no issue anymore</p>	<p><i>It's wrong when someone forces you to come to a conference which is really not relevant for you. And you really need the support so maybe on one hand you are thinking should I just ignore this and try to get some guidance. It is not justifiable. But people don't want to talk about it. For even the most ethical and supportive colleagues, the issue is now over, he probably got a warning so now let's not talk about controversial things. And when people do this, you wonder if it is really is over. Maybe it is but I don't feel a sense of closure—but no one understands my point. So I am lost at the moment (Lolita)</i></p> <p><i>She had two kids and it was snowing heavily that day but he insisted that she come to work. She practically begged him to let her stay because she might not be able to do the pick up on time. But he was insistent that she should play by the same</i></p>

	<p><i>rules as everyone else. This is nothing new to him. He has done things like this to me too—but this was really bad. Anyway [NAME] made it to work but she got stuck on the way back—had a breakdown and complained about him the week afterwards. She cited examples from all of us. I don't know what happened but he became quite mellow suddenly. But she was clearly told to not talk about this to anyone because it is over. For her it was not over, but for everybody else it was. In that kind of a setting, I suppose, you have to be daft if you don't just drop it. It is a hard call to make though. (Tasha)</i></p>
<p>Avoiding to indicate that nobody is interested to hear from about an issue which has been resolved</p>	<p><i>He verbally abused me continuously—he actually said that I am struggling to get a boyfriend because I am so uptight. I work very hard and I am meticulous. He couldn't stand the fact that I don't conform to the dominant mould, the sweet female RA who is not too ambitious and who is ready to do secretarial work. Around the same time, I came to know that he had done this to someone else too in another university. Then I felt that I had a strong enough case to destroy him. I was told that he will not bother me again and that he would not have to work with me again. He kept a low profile for some time—he had major grants so he never really had to come. But ultimately he was seen around again and it seemed like nothing really happened and I didn't feel that I got any justice. But that was it. I was told to not talk about it to anybody with Nobody knew what I went through—it didn't seem as if he paid a price for what he did. People didn't want to talk about it anymore because it is over. They avoided me whenever I brought it up. One of my friends told me that I am a stubborn brat who just can't let go. So I don't know. It sucks but there doesn't seem to be anything else to do. (Melanie)</i></p>

	<p><i>He was junior to me and he was nothing—he had nothing to say for himself. But he couldn't stand the fact that a girl was unofficially overseeing him. I was more senior, better published so I lead the team. The Principle investigator was too busy for anything. He made my life a living hell, and once he actually walked into a bathroom when I was using it just to humiliate me. Too many things like this happened. I told the principle investigator who told me that he will sort it out. But 'please don't let any of this out because we all have to cooperate for this project.' He became docile overnight. But that's not enough. But nobody wants to talk about it. When I bring it up with my team members, they change the topic, as if I am talking about something which should not be spoken about. It is patronising and I go home thinking to myself that I'll never bring it up again. But I want to. Every day I want to bring this up but I don't feel able to. (Ioana)</i></p>
<p>Negative repercussions of voice</p>	<p><i>He made my life miserable during maternity leave, hinting that I strategically chose to have children during the grant. But my team members were like 'even if you leave the organisation, the nature of the industry means that getting the wrong person on your bad side can effectively ruin your career, especially if it's someone in your area. So just keep quiet. You don't want to be known as a parasite.' No I don't want to be known as a parasite. No one wants to be known as a parasite. My team members are not foolish people, they know about the world. So I am scared to open my mouth to be honest although I really want to. (Abbey)</i></p>

*He made a move on me and it wasn't the right thing to do. But my closest friends at work were adamant that I should not do anything or say anything. Because I am a probationer, it is particularly risky. More importantly, people who complain are the trouble makers that everyone avoids and everyone agreed I am going to get myself into that position if I open my mouth. You become cautious when everybody you know and trust starts saying this. And there are other male academics who date young girls—it is an increasingly common practice. One senior person here was dating a PhD student who was much younger to him. Once she completed the PhD she had a career made for her. So in an environment like this, there might be people who are ever willing to excuse him. (Husna)*



**Figure 1: Coding overview**

