



Contemporary Issues

Contra-power harassment of nursing academics[☆]

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1. Introduction

Demand and consumer driven higher education has seen an increase in aggressive and sometimes violent behaviour by university students against academic staff. Considered by some to be a form of workplace bullying or workplace harassment, this is now being perceived as a different form of unacceptable workplace behaviour perpetrated by university students, including undergraduate nursing students. There has been little research exploring this phenomenon with the majority of work focusing on horizontal violence – academic versus academic. However, despite the differences in the perpetrators of this behaviour, students or academics, the net effect is to wilfully hurt another person, emotionally, physically or sexually. Early definitions of bullying exemplify an intentionality to consciously hurt another and put them under stress, or longstanding violence, physical or psychological conduct by an individual or a group that is directed against another individual. A more recent definition suggests that bullying is:

Repeated unwanted behaviour and actions toward a victim, which cause offense and distress and may have a negative effect on their job performance or dignity in the workplace (Rockett et al., 2017; 13)

However, the difficulty here is deciding whether unacceptable student behaviour can be considered bullying, given that the experiences of academics might involve a single encounter. Undoubtedly there are occasions when persistent poor behaviour can be easily identified as bullying; for example, within lectures or tutorials, and therefore it is possible that bullying-type behaviours perpetrated by nursing students could be seen as context driven. For this reason, it might be more appropriate to identify nursing student incivility towards academics as being harassing in its intent. Using the definition developed by White (2010; 24), harassment is:

“...any behaviour, be it physical, visual, verbal, personal, sexual, that makes an individual feel uncomfortable, frightened, embarrassed, degraded, hurt and, or, any act which diminishes a person's confidence or oppresses another by abuse of power”.

2. The Extent of the Problem

Coined ‘contra-power harassment’ to mean harassment of people who are in formal positions of power by people who are not, there has been a significant change in the power imbalance between academics and students. Lee's (2006) seminal work “university students behaving badly”, highlighted the difficulties experienced by academics, especially the perceptions of contra-power harassment enacted by students. Shouting, swearing, physical violence, stalking and character assassination on social media are some of the more defining experiences academics may encounter from students. However, other studies have highlighted that additional unwarranted behaviour does occur - behaviours such as sexist comments, inappropriate eye contact, physical advances of a sexual nature, sexual bribery, sexual assault and obscene phone calls or emails. In one example, Lee (2005) recounts the story of where a female academic was ‘mobbed’ by a group of male students who were clearly disenfranchised with the unit content (it was a first year gender and media studies unit). Harangued, intimidated and ignored during class exemplifies the types of behaviours that academics can face from students. Clearly this is a good example of sexism, but some students can go as far as fabricating evidence so as to cast doubt and call in to question the academic's teaching ability. More recent work highlights the issue of fabrication, especially where course progression and grades figured highly. In White's (2010) study, for example one academic commented that “student expectations are high and too often unachievable...and to up their mark they do whatever they wish”. However, this can also be extended to quite serious personal attacks on academics by students with far reaching consequences that the student is neither concerned with nor cares about: “there were rumours going around the university about me, like my partner was a prostitute and a drug dealer and that I condone her lifestyle...lived off her...that I didn't have a PhD...of course it was a pack of lies”. But feeling powerless to act or more often

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Table 1
Examples of some types of undesirable behaviours perpetrated by students towards academics (White, 2010).

Contra-power harassment behaviours	Examples of behaviours
Verbal	Screaming, shouting, swearing, labelling, name calling, heckling
Personal	Sexual comments, inappropriate eye contact, public humiliation, defacing personal property, malicious rumours, belittling comments, writing poor unit and/or teaching evaluations, sexual bribery, sexual assault, stalking
Isolation	Using mobile phones in tutorials or lectures, talking during lessons
Task	Contacting academics outside of normal work hours such as the evenings or weekends, complaining about lack of prompt reply to messages such as emails, complaints of inappropriate marking

the case, not being believed by university management creates an environment of stress and anxiety (MacLennan, 2000). For those who experience student harassment, it is likely they will not pursue the perpetrator for fear of repercussions if they took action, such as those who are on sessional teaching contracts who are apprehensive that their contract may not be renewed. There may also be concerns by some full-time academics that pursuing the perpetrator may have an unfavourable effect on a future promotion application. The net effect as Grauerholz (1989) points out is an undermining of authority and confidence, interference with academic work and professional growth, and damaging if not distrustful relationships with students.

3. The Nature of the Offending

Typically the behaviours associated with this type of harassment, including those mentioned above can be classified into four types of 'attack' – verbal, personal, isolationist and task (Table 1).

The use of inappropriate language appears to have become common place in the classroom where swear words such as the "F" word are common place and used without a second thought (White, 2010). Moreover, the type of language used can often be perceived as verbally aggressive and the unpredictability of the incident can cause a great deal of stress for the academic on the receiving end even more so when students personalise the attack. Name calling, malicious teasing or using undermining comments and the use of sexually explicit language and innuendo unfortunately have the biggest emotional impact on the academic. Grauerholz (1989) surveyed 208 female professors to ascertain levels of exposure to sexual harassment by students. More than 58% of respondents had experienced more than one form of sexual harassment, the majority of which were sexual comments made towards or about them and unwanted physical contact – all of the perpetrators were male students. More recently, Lampman et al. (2009, 2016) found that 14–25% (n = 349) of female academics still reported unwanted sexual attention from students. Some respondents in White's (2010) study were exposed to what can be best described as sexual bribery:

On two occasions I've had students who slyly ask me out by email, one emailed me two or three times in order to try and get me to meet her and of course I didn't. (Male Academic)

Interestingly, White (2010) found that female academics viewed sexual comments as amounting to sexual harassment whereas the male academics perceived them as a joke. Other forms of harassment, such as isolation attacks could at times take on a more sinister and troublesome form. White (2010; 82) provides a good example of isolation attack where students unhappy with the quality of a handout then:

They [first year students] go and put a formal complaint through the student union against me to the management of the school. It just says 'a number of students' and I don't even know who they are, they never showed themselves so I am trying to address a non-entity. The Head of Department should have insisted that the students show themselves, they are cowards hiding behind someone else and they should have been made to account for it.

It transpired that a third-year student was the root cause for the

anguish experienced, and when the academic in question realised who the culprit was they were not surprised as this student was well known for their confrontational and aggressive behaviour. In another example, MacLennan (2000) recounts an episode of both isolation and task behaviours where a female student, not happy with her final grade, made fabricated allegations against a female academic with regard to irregularities and inconsistencies in her marking, that the academic verbally abused students inside and outside of the classroom, and that the academic failed to maintain office hours – all of which were completely unfounded. The attack on the academic intensified to include allegations that the academic falsified grades. The appeal was rejected, but perhaps what was distressing was the student's response to the appeals committee in which she stated – "I didn't really care about changing the grade; I just wanted to make the bitch suffer." The truly vexatious nature of this student's behaviour is saddening. However, these are not isolated incidents as one might imagine. With the advent of social media and electronic forms of communication such as email, students are becoming ever more brash and aggressive in what they communicate to academics, often contrary to university and professional policies discouraging this type of behaviour. Written communication, especially in emails, take an overly familiar tone, as if to suggest that the academic and student are 'buddies' which, causes a great deal of stress for academics attempting to maintain professional relationships. Indeed, many students may lack awareness of the importance for academics to retain a professional rather than friendly tone, or to even understand the difference between these two approaches. On the other extreme, emails can be rude, disrespectful and thoughtless:

I got an email from this student saying that I was a bad person and I should never be allowed to work with students again or supervise them and people should be protected from me and it went on like this. (White, 2010; 86)

Even more stressful are student subject evaluations where they feel comfortable to say whatever they like under the protection of anonymity. Of course for the academic there is no recourse, and academics may be left reeling at the allegations made by the student, in some cases, such undesirable comments may be unsubstantiated or even fabricated.

4. The Contributing Factors

There are many factors which may have contributed to this phenomenon. While the most obvious one is concerned with gender (Grauerholz, 1989), the changing climate of paid for and demand-driven higher education is creating an environment in which a sense of entitlement based on consumerism is a driving force. As most if not all aspects of accessing higher education are now seen as pay as you go, students and families are seeing a university education as an economic investment. As a result, university students are demanding an account of their investment where they feel the university has not met its obligation under their student contract – the adage that paying fees confers the right to a degree. However, the reality is that poor marks, failing assessment items and non-attendance in class constitutes a threat to that investment and as such students voice their displeasure at academics and the university for not having their needs met (Lee, 2006).

Such is the sense of entitlement that students as consumers have adopted a role which has changed the balance of power in their favour, so much so that some students have become self-absorbed and self-centred – in essence they “[blame] others rather than look at themselves” (White, 2010; 90).

Consumerism aside, flexibility in today's technological world has seen students attempting to ‘fit’ their university education around their personal lives and paid employment. The stress that this incurs and the resulting conflict in juggling competing demands has seen a change in the student body. Online subject material now means that students no longer need to be physically present at the university. However, what this means is that the academic-student relationship has changed, and some would suggest negatively, to the point that some academics now feel they are education service providers as opposed to knowledgeable experts (White, 2010). For example, Rolfe's (2002) study found that students demand and expect all subject material prior to lessons, which students rely heavily upon as the sole source of information they require to pass the assessment items instead of material they obtain themselves. As a law lecturer stated:

There is a growing expectation that we will provide all materials. I have had a few students this year saying ‘you are giving us handouts but you are then expecting us to read legal cases and you haven't photocopied those for us’.

It is generally accepted that students have to support themselves financially to support living and university costs; the impact is poor attendance, late arrival, early leaving and late assessment submission. This then affects the students' health. Tiredness, increased anxiety, general illness and depression have been seen to have a significant effect on student engagement and completion (Spadaro and Hunker, 2016). While universities are attempting to promote a more flexible approach to learning, the same might not be said of students who are less flexible about the timing of classes:

Students are constantly asking to change their tutorial groups because it does not fit in with their work commitments...it never used be as bad as it now. (Rolfe, 2002; 177).

Further examples from academics when dealing with appeals for late assessment submission have been that students expect their work and personal life to be taken into consideration. The increased expectations of students who demand flexibility in course delivery has resulted in academics bearing the brunt of student incivility, frustration and stress as students try to deal with issues outside of the university.

5. Conclusion

There are some studies that have looked at student harassment of academics, in most cases from a sexual harassment perspective (Grauerholz, 1989; Lee, 2005, Lampman, 2009, 2016). Those studies that focus on the student harassment of academics are predominantly qualitative in nature, and as such the true extent of the problem is relatively unknown because the participant numbers are small. The quantitative studies use survey designs to assess specific aspects of student harassment, which in most cases is sexual harassment. To date, there appears to be a lack of research into this concerning issue for nursing academics, and accordingly there is no validated quantitative measure of contra-power harassment in the literature that has been developed specifically to investigate this. This may in part be due to the

sensitive nature of this issue. Anecdotally, there may be a reluctance to pursue the problem, perhaps for fear of what the results might reveal in terms of the repercussions and personal consequences experienced by nursing academics. One nursing colleague sums it up passionately:

This topic is the "elephant in the room" of our overly politically correct society. Academics feel like criminals these days. When we report something unethical (such as cheating on exams or plagiarism on papers) or assign the grade earned by a student, we are dragged through the mud in appeals, committee hearings, even lawsuits...I predict an even greater shortage of nursing faculty in the future than we already have. Once the word gets out how universities do not support their academics but rather throw them under the bus, even fewer nurses are going to leave the well-paying jobs they have in practice or administration to go into a poorly-paying academic job just to get their good reputation destroyed.

Moreover, if the current trend continues, it would not be surprising to see that student harassment of academics becomes a workplace health and safety issue.

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