

From me too to what now: advancing scholarship on sex harassment issue 1: a persistent problem

As a social problem, sex harassment is pervasive and persistent. Throughout the world and over millennia, powerful people – usually adult men – have imposed their will, their sexual will, on less powerful people – most often women and girls. No matter what the blend of forces impelling the perpetrators, the effects on victims can be devastating. And, of course, what we today see as a social problem was not so labeled in the past.

If you consider how long the problem has plagued societies, you might marvel at how rapidly the narrative has changed. It was only in 1965 that sex discrimination became illegal in the USA (Civil Rights Act of 1964). By the mid-1970s, the term “sexual harassment” was used by women at Cornell University at a speak-out against sexual exploitation in the work place (see Baker, 2007) and then by legal scholar, Catherine McKinnon (1979). More importantly, before the end of the 1970s, case law established that sexual harassment was a form of sex discrimination and therefore illegal and punishable by law (*Meritor Savings Bank v. Vinson*, 1986). A subsequent shift in labels from “sexual harassment” to “sex harassment” and “sex-based harassment” has called attention to the fact that the domination of women and the policing of masculinity rather than sexual desire are the primary drivers of harassment (Berdahl, 2007). Scholars and activists have combined forces to help society move down the path of social change.

Along the bumpy road of change came Anita Hill. Reluctantly the shy law professor from the University of Oklahoma described to the watching world how she had been sexually harassed by Clarence Thomas, then nominee to the Supreme Court. The American nation exploded into debate. Thomas was handily confirmed. The year was 1991. In total, 15 years after the Thomas hearings, Tarana Burke coined the term “Me Too.” As part of her recovery from different incidents of sexual abuse, Burke wanted to let other victims know that they were not alone. Solidarity was key.

Then on October 15, 2017, activist and star of film and television, Alyssa Milano tweeted: “If you’ve been sexually harassed or assaulted, write ‘me too’ as a reply to this tweet.” The volcano was live. Lava beds of tweets began to flow with violent and sporadic periodic eruptions ever since.

In countries outside the USA, change has also occurred (Bell *et al.*, 2002; Park, 2017). A term that sounds just like “sexual harassment” was imported into the Japanese language right after the Thomas-Hill hearings and soon became part of the lexicon. By the 1990s, even the French, fabled for their obsession with romance, determined that sexual harassment was not romantic, and their Parliament made sexual harassment illegal.

While the attention of the general public has waxed and waned as issues burst into the media spotlight and then dimmed out, the attention of scholars to sex-based harassment has been more or less constant since the 1980s. Over 6,000 scholarly articles and books show the words “sexual harassment” or “sex harassment” in the title (Google Scholar searches, 2018). Edited volumes are in no short supply. Nor are authored books.

Our edited volume contributes to the scholarship. In this first of two issues, we present a blend theoretical, historical and meta-narratives as well as empirical research that build on the understanding the dynamics of sexual harassment. Some of our contributors have helped to shape the very field of scholarship in the social sciences while others come newly to the area. Two of the pieces involve experimental manipulations. Two mine field data for insights; two others call our attention to what the Me Too movements have potentially



changed for the better or left unexamined. The final essay gives a clarion call for new generations to add their voice to these struggles.

Several pieces in our volume present basic social scientific studies on the topic of sexual harassment. Louise Fitzgerald (2020) reviews the literature that exists on three categories of employed women (agricultural workers, domestic workers, and wait-staff) and one category of women that spans occupations: tenants in low-income housing. She shows the dynamics of vulnerability and also suggests how collective action can empower the vulnerable.

Quite a different methodology is seen in the second article, by Margaret Stockdale *et al.* (2020), who distinguish between self-focused power and other-focused power, with the latter being akin to social responsibility. To their surprise, they find that in an experimental situation, both types of power increase the declared likelihood of harassment. The links travel along (i.e. are mediated by) expected paths and are moderated by some personality variables.

Whereas Stockdale *et al.* (2020) ponder factors that contribute to the prevalence of sexual harassment, Alexis Adams-Clark *et al.* (2020) look at the consequences of harassment and document in particular a cluster of negative consequences of harassment for its victims concerning dissociation. Victims may have used dissociation to cope with harassment; but they then are plagued by its continuation long afterwards.

The fourth and fifth contributions to the present volume turn more directly to the present. The fourth article by Stephanie Brown and Jericka Battle (2020) centers on the concept ostracism. Ostracism serves to isolate victims, often intentionally and sometimes unintentionally. By connecting victims, note Brown and Battle (2020), the #MeToo Movement necessarily serves to combat the effects of ostracism. Even those victims who continue to be isolated in their own organizations can find comradeship and support via social media.

In the fifth piece, Brittney Amber *et al.* (2020) conduct an experiment, again using a sample of Amazon's MTurk workers, to address an important question arising from the #Me Too Movement. Social commentators have wondered whether the current apparent explosive increase in the number of cases of sexual harassment arises from media attention. Amber *et al.* (2020) find that participants who are exposed to news stories about sexual misconduct admit that the stories serve reminders of their own experiences; but, importantly, participants exposed to other stories are just as likely as the first set of participants to report having been sexually harassed. Amber *et al.* (2020) conclude that the #MeToo Movement has made it acceptable to admit past harassment but has not somehow elevated reporting above its real prevalence.

The next piece turns to data collected from those participating in the #MeToo Movement. Kimberly Schneider and Nathan Carpenter (2020) accessed the tweets that were posted in the first 24 hours after Alyssa Milano made her post. They selected ten thousand tweets for analysis, sorting the messages into those that described an incident and those that reacted to a discloser. Among the many interesting findings of Schneider and Carpenter's (2020) work is a very reassuring note that less than 3 percent of the tweets gave evidence of backlash.

At the conclusion of our issue is a reflective piece by Sarah Heck (2020). Heck's thought-provoking analysis can be seen as a sort of meta-story. It allows us to see how the narrative about sexual harassment has changed and is changing due not only to social events but also to the academics who provide analyses of the events. As Heck (2020) so poignantly reminds us, activism and scholarship go hand in hand.

As a companion to this special issue, we will gather additional research in a second issue on sex harassment. The question at the center of the second issue is "given what we now know: What now?" Where might we go from here?

Consistent with our contributors, we editors distinguish between neutrality and objectivity, two concepts that are too often confounded in the academy (Crosby and Bearman, 2006).

The Me Too and related social movements have broken the silence and demanded action. We hope these issues respond effectively to that call and contribute to the elimination – or at least the great diminishment – of sex harassment. We hope that our conceptualizations and our objective data will help us understand more about equality, diversity and inclusion. But we eschew the illusion of neutrality. Rather we hope that our science will help create worlds that are more equal, diverse and inclusive.

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