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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Accepting, distancing, rationalising: strategies used by female South African academics to negotiate contrapower harassment

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ABSTRACT

Sexual harassment is a pernicious problem globally. Under-researched is the phenomenon that Katherine Benson (1984) coined "contrapower" harassment. Using Michel Foucault's conceptualisation of power as being productive as a theoretical lens, this narrative study was interested in how contrapower harassment produces effects in the subjectivity of female South African academic women. Participants report effects such as hypervigilance and fear forcing them to adopt self-protective measures. However, they also narrated how these experiences generate enabling effects. Participants developed coping mechanisms such as strategic acceptance, distancing, rationalization, and 'choosing their battles' to reclaim their authority. The study demonstrates that far from being passive victims, these women actively navigate and contest power, using the knowledge produced by their harassment to develop strategies for survival and resilience in a work environment experienced at times as hostile and unsafe.

Key words: contrapower harassment; coping mechanisms; female academics; Foucault, higher education; institutional cultures; sexual harassment; power; resistance; South Africa

INTRODUCTION

Sexual harassment has been cited as a major problem in institutions of higher education world-wide and findings from literature indicate that women are the main victims (Wood et al, 2021). It takes various forms which exist on a continuum, ranging from the most violent acts such as rape and beating, to gestures, comments or remarks (Dalmiya, 1999, p. 47). To date, the bulk of research on sexual harassment in higher education has been conducted in universities in the global north and focuses mainly on the experiences of students (Klein & Martin, 2021). In the South African context, research on sexual harassment in educational settings has mainly focused on high schools (see Human Rights Watch, 2001; Prinsloo, 2006; Smit & Du Plessis, 2011). Research on sexual harassment in higher education contexts in South Africa has focused mainly on the sexual harassment of students by people in a position of power (Mayekiso & Bhana, 1997; Bennett, 2005; Adams et al., 2013; Quirk & Dugard, 2024).

In this paper, we tell the (reconstructed) stories of female academics' experiences of contrapower harassment. Katherine Benson uses the term "contrapower harassment" to refer to harassment which occurs when a person with less formal power harasses someone with greater formal power. In a higher education setting, for example, this would refer to individuals with formal authority such as female lecturers being sexually harassed by someone who is formally in a less powerful position such as a student. In this paper we describe the experiences of contrapower harassment that were related to us by women who are academics at South African universities.

We find that their experiences of contrapower harassment give rise to resistance which they display in various ways. Thus, the productive effects of power are never only "repressive". Power also produces enablement, forms of resistance and useful knowledge that the participants use to devise measures to minimise harm to themselves, to reconstitute their subjectivity as powerful and to find ways of being that are possible in the context of the new knowledges and truths that their experiences bring about.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMING

Foucault conceived power as dispersed, ubiquitous and ever-present in social relations (Foucault, 1975, 1978, 1986). What Foucault describes as "capillary power" is power that stretches into the extremities of the everyday mundane activities of life. Power produces certain kinds of subjects so that, as Heyes (2011, p. 159) argues, for Foucault, the term "the subject" is not just a synonym for "person" but denotes possibilities of being a certain kind of person. What Foucault focuses on in his work is how power subjugates and makes individuals subject to it (Foucault, 1982, p. 781).

Importantly, for Foucault though, power is never a purely repressive or subjugating force but is also productive and can yield positive effects (Foucault, 1975, p.194; 1978, p. 36).

Oppressive experiences, even at their most constraining, give rise to new forms of behaviour as opposed to simply closing down or censoring certain forms of behaviour (Mills, 2003, p. 33). For Foucault, power is not so much about limits on our liberty, as it is about making us into certain kinds of people as it trains our bodies to be preoccupied with particular kinds of surveillances causing us to think of ourselves in certain kinds of ways (May, 2011, p. 76). We are disciplined by power's subtle forms of management to self-monitor in accordance with the lessons it teaches us.

Nevertheless, we are not merely or wholly docile in our subjection to power. Foucault (1978) acknowledges that where there is power there is resistance. Resistance results in power relations being altered, weakened, reversed or reaffirmed. Thus resistance itself must be understood as an expression of power (Feder, 2011, p. 63). In this paper we are interested in how the participants challenge and contest attempts to undermine their authority. The participants emerge not as docile and passive objects of dominant discourses and techniques of power concerning the female body but as embodying and wielding the possibilities of resistance against such discourses and techniques but within the social and institutional constraints within which they operate (Oksala, 2011, p. 93).

METHODOLOGY

We conducted 13 in-depth narrative interviews with female academics working at South African higher education institutions about their experiences of contrapower harassment. Social researchers working in narrative traditions interpret stories (Riessman, 2005, p. 474). In narrative research, the unique voice of each individual is given prominence, especially voices that have not much been heard in research. Chase (2005, p. 656) notes that in narrative work, the speakers or narrators construct events through narrative rather than simply referring to events. Webster and Mertova (2007, p. 2) argue that narrative allows researchers to present experience holistically in all its complexity and richness. Stories are a window into attempts of a self to find identity in terms outside itself (Frank, 2002, p. 115). When people story their identities, they offer the researcher insight into how they perceive and experience the world, how meaning is made from experiences, and how identities are constructed in the social and cultural setting within which those experiences arise (Taylor, 2007, p. 3).

The study sample consisted of female South African academics. Women who had at any point in their teaching careers experienced contrapower harassment and were willing to share such experiences were purposefully selected for inclusion in the study. Participants were drawn from different South African universities, including both historically black and historically white universities. They worked in various disciplines including the human sciences, natural sciences, arts and commerce – in an attempt to ensure diversity in the study sample. The racial composition of the sample included nine white and four black female academics.

Informed consent to participate in the study was solicited from all the participants. Participants were guaranteed in writing the right to withdraw their consent to participate in the study at any point.

We used Braun and Clarke's method of thematic analysis (2023; see also Byrne, 2022) to analyse the narrative interview transcripts. An overall theme that emerged across the data set was the way in which experiences of harassment lead to a lasting sense of needing to be hypervigilant and on guard in order to feel protected. This is the first finding. Our interest however was in going beyond this to understand the strategies that participants were able to employ to deal with the impact that the experience had on them. To this end, we constructed three themes which capture the ways in which the participants negotiate contrapower harassment. These were accepting, distancing and rationalising and are described in greater detail below.

FINDINGS

> *I often used to work very late in the evenings in that office but …lately I'm always thinking, "I must go home now because I don't feel like it's safe [anymore]". In the evenings that I have to be there late when my students are writing a test, I go home and fetch my dog then come back to campus because truth of the matter is that it's my safety that matters. And if I pop in over the weekend I try and do the same as well. Sometimes my husband will just come with me so that I'm not there by myself (Elena).*

Elena's experience of contrapower harassment transforms her into a certain kind of (fearful, watchful) subject who develops a constant awareness of her surroundings and adopts various measures to protect herself from potential attacks. Maya similarly described being transformed into someone who is constantly concerned about and assessing her safety while at work. While her preferred mode would be to be open and welcoming, she now has the impression that her students could "really harm" her.

> *So, if I have to do some work in the evening, I won't come alone. I will try and not have my classes scheduled late because I don't want to be leaving here after dark. I have to be careful about how and when I schedule one-on-one consultations. If you are scheduling consultations with students during holiday times for example when there is no one in the building, you don't want to be alone with someone you have invited into your space. It's your job to be open and welcoming to that person but they could really harm you. You have to second guess everything about how safe you are in a space where you know ideally you should feel safe (Maya).*

Electronic media serve as a convenient platform for bullying - a phenomenon known as cyber-bullying (Blizard, 2016). While contrapower cyber-bullying may seem less threatening than being harassed in the physical presence of another person, as Aria's story makes clear, it can be just as invasive and violating as any other form of harassment.

> *The very first time I received the email from my stalker I felt very angry. I could feel my heart beating very fast because I felt that this person is invading my personal space and violating me as a person because I now have to think of myself as this sexual object and not a lecturer who is trying to do my job. I felt very violated because to me it's quite scary to think that one of my students who is sitting in my class is actually thinking about me in that way* (Aria).

As a result of these experiences, Aria adopts new ways of thinking about herself; she enters a subject position of heightened self-awareness and internalisation of how she perceives she comes across to her students. How she teaches and interacts with students in the classroom is affected as a result.

Becoming preoccupied and concerned with safety all the time is a common lasting effect of what might on the face of it seem like an isolated or singular event - what Elena called the "ripple effects" of contrapower harassment. The different measures Maya takes such as being cautious about when to schedule, and the location of, one-on-one consultations with her students reveals how she has become subjugated by her experiences of contrapower harassment so much that what could be taken for granted as straight forward consultation sessions with one's students become a very complicated and technical process riddled with a lot of planning and considerations to ensure her safety. The different measures participants describe in their stories demonstrates how their experiences transformed them into individuals who need to have their guard up at all times.

They begin to view their workplaces as suffused with the potential for danger and violation. In response, since they seem to have no sense of being able to find institutionalised support or solutions, they develop a range of personal strategies to protect themselves which we refer to here as "accepting", "distancing" and "rationalising".

Accepting

Gail spoke of coming to accept the conditions that she has to work in as a strategy for coping with circumstances which she feels are institutionally and socially condoned rather than challenged.

> *It is something you kind of get used to, because students don't see you as people … which I have just accepted. It's going to happen and that's part of the job but also, I suppose in the way in which it's not necessarily vocally dealt with. New students in the university should be taught about respecting other people and taking responsibility for their actions…. We don't really do that. Our expectations on students are very low in some ways maybe because they are customers and maybe because of the way our society views people of their age group. It's kind of quietly condoned though not being challenged* (Gail).

As Samantha pointed out, resistance comes with a price and is not always an option. This does not mean that she is passive or lacks agency but rather that she "chooses her battles" and "absorbs" as a survival strategy instead of the self-defeating and exhausting possibility of fighting every instance of micro-aggression encountered.

> *In that moment, I suppose I was reacting in the same ways women who are generally placed in lower positions of authority do. In the kind of "rather than resist, absorb" way because resisting comes with a price… Well, I mean in daily life where there are these micro-aggressions that are so deeply entrenched in our everyday interactions, it's difficult to name it so instead of naming it, instead of having to do that kind of ongoing resistance which then turns you into the sort of screeching maniac you tend to choose your battles you know… you tend to absorb these things. It's almost like a survival strategy in a world that is patriarchal and sometimes it's just simpler to absorb… I think we make decisions on a daily basis as to whether we are going to confront these subtle forms of interaction that are going to position me in a particular way… You learn to live with it in a sad kind of way because calling people out is extremely difficult you know (Samantha).*

Kgomotso also described the common strategy of minimising or "brushing off" the harm of being objectified or denigrated.

> *My experiences have made me realise that there is still a long way to go in terms of getting men to think differently about women … I've also realised that maybe we need to be harsher in the way that we react to these things because now that they have done it to me and all I do is brush it off and continue with class or just walk away or change my clothes, I've realised that I'm the one doing all the work to make the situation better for me but there is no responsibility on the person who is actually doing the deed. … I'm doing the dealing with the problem but I think if we were to be harsher, they would take some responsibility. They would know, we don't say this to lecturers, we don't comment on the lecturer's body. We don't do all that. So, there would be some responsibility from them as well. So, after having experienced it I really think that whenever we are able to tackle this problem we must because I think had I reacted differently – like called out the person – or had I spoken separately with the boys and let them know the consequences, or reported them or warned them that I was going to report them and that this was not acceptable, I think it wouldn't have gone on, well not in front of me at least or directly in my face. I think it wouldn't have gone on had I reacted differently (Kgomotso).*

Kgomotso's reflections point painfully to the fact that participants find themselves searching for a reason in their own behaviour for why things like this "go on" and wondering if they should have or could have handled things differently even while realising that the blame is not theirs to carry. This grappling with a sense of one's own responsibility coupled with the realisation that the problem is institutional and social rather than personal ran through the narratives regardless of the particular strategy of resistance that was chosen.

Distancing

> *I've now learnt a lesson: that the closer that I get to students and the more that I open up the more I am bound to be harassed. But as I'm saying this I'm suddenly realising that I'm now putting the blame on myself and my behaviour and that I'm actually saying that it's because of me and my openness that this has happened and this is actually like an epiphany to me because it's typical of a victim to think that the fault lays with them. That it's something that you did whereas in fact it is the perpetrator who should be blamed. I'm thinking now as I am saying this to you that it's something that I'm becoming aware of now. That it's not something that I am doing wrong but that that person is doing wrong you know. It's not the way that I interact with my students that's caused this. This is something that I hadn't even thought about before and maybe it will change my behaviour in the future because I guess that I shouldn't change just because this person has violated me and that I should be true to myself* (Ayanda).

The "withdrawal" from her students that Ayanda describes is a tactic she employs to attempt to minimise incidents of contrapower harassment. Aria also uses "distancing" as a strategy to cope with the harassment she experiences:

> *I started to distance myself. I wasn't as friendly or as open as I used to be in the past. Especially when I spoke with male students, I thought to myself, maybe it's this guy who is doing it. So, I started to protect myself by acting in those ways. It got to the extent that I started to think of getting weapons to protect myself. I got pepper spray to take to campus with me to protect myself* (Aria).

Megan similarly spoke of needing to be "firmer" and needing to delineate "boundaries":

> *Maybe I need to be firmer in terms of how I set up those boundaries. Maybe I should insist on being called Ms. Wilson. I should insist that they don't knock on my door outside of my consultation hours, to command respect, but I don't think that's good for the learning environment because I do want students to be able to feel comfortable enough to ask questions ….*(Megan).

For Cathy, meeting students in public or having an open-door policy can be seen as shields that help discourage harassing behaviours from students.

> *I can't even get my own colleagues to leave their doors open when they meet with students or to avoid having after hours meetings alone with them. There is a lot of thinking that this doesn't actually happen but it is fairly widespread you know* (Cathy).

Rationalising

Another coping strategy is rationalising experiences of contrapower harassment. Rationalising is a defence mechanism that

involves the justification of an unacceptable behaviour, thought or feeling in a logical manner which is used when trying to avoid the true reason for the action (see also Nugent, 2013). This strategy is often called "making excuses" (Pedersen, 2016).

> *I quite easily dismiss it, but I can see that if I was a different person with different personality traits I would be hugely affected by those little things. I often wonder if it's not just a certain level of immaturity where they just think that this person is here, I'm going to make a lot of assumptions about them that can lead to treating people in a way that you aren't really thinking about how you are treating them. Because to them, it doesn't matter because we are not humans and lecturers aren't feeling beings. (Gail).*

> *I guess I became comfortable in my own skin that I know what I'm talking about and that I'm good at what I do and it doesn't matter what a student says because people are complicated. Maybe they had a bad day or they really just don't like me personally and that impacts what they say. … Sometimes it can be annoying but I just rationalise them as teenage boys just joking around to be honest (Sarah).*

Gail rationalises her experiences of contrapower harassment as displays of immaturity, a rationalisation for the unpleasant behaviour of her students. Similarly, Sarah can be seen to be attempting to "make sense" of the reasons why some of her students display harassing behaviours towards her. Rationalising is a strategy to lighten their experiences as something that results from "immaturity" or as something that emanates from someone having a "bad day". These forms of rationalisation, remove responsibility both from the perpetrator and the institution, treating contrapower harassment as normal and expected behaviour from immature people but also operating to protect the victim who can make light of the experience.

DISCUSSION

Puwar (2004) has described how "bodies out of place" must constantly perform competence to counter the suspicion of illegitimacy. Women in academic institutions, and black women in particular, operate from a place of disadvantage where they must work harder to establish themselves as credible sources of knowledge. Alongside the general demands of academic life, there is the additional burden of contending with entrenched patriarchal cultures that continue to shape the university as a masculinised and racialised space. In the South African academy, this experience is intensified by intersecting histories of race, colonialism, and patriarchy that continue to inform institutional cultures.

South African scholars such as Amanda Gouws (2016) and Pumla Dineo Gqola (2015) have long drawn attention to how universities mirror the broader patriarchal society in which they are embedded. Gouws argues that the persistence of gender-based violence and sexual harassment in universities reveals how

institutional cultures reproduce social hierarchies rather than dismantle them. Gqola (2015), in her analysis of rape culture in South Africa, describes how silence, denial, and impunity maintain gendered domination through both spectacular and everyday forms of violence. These insights illuminate that contrapower harassment experiences are not isolated incidents but symptoms of wider institutional cultures that normalise the devaluation of women's authority.

Desiree Lewis (2001; 2017) similarly critiques how South African universities have historically privileged Eurocentric and masculinist modes of knowledge production that exclude and marginalise women's experiences. In this light, contrapower harassment can be understood as a disciplinary mechanism that polices women's intellectual and bodily presence within academic spaces. The harassment experienced by female academics is not simply personal or interpersonal; it is a reproduction of patriarchal epistemologies that render women's authority precarious. Lewis's call to centre feminist epistemologies that disrupt patriarchal power is echoed in the participants' own narrative strategies, where they produce counter-knowledges—refusing to be positioned solely as victims and instead articulating tactics of survival, boundary-setting, and resistance.

Gouws (2018) points to the ways in which neoliberal managerialism in South African universities reinforces hierarchies that disproportionately disadvantage women, particularly black women, by depoliticising gender-based violence and framing it as individual misconduct rather than systemic failure. This insight is visible in how participants describe internalising responsibility for societal and institutional shortcomings.

Thus, contrapower harassment must be understood not merely as personal deviance but as a manifestation of institutional and epistemic power. It is a form of gendered governance that disciplines women's bodies and professional identities while simultaneously eliciting acts of subtle resistance. These resistances—expressed here as "accepting," "distancing," or "rationalising"—should not be dismissed as compliance, but read, following Lewis (2002) and Gqola (2015), as forms of situated feminist agency enacted under conditions of constraint. As Gouws (2021) argues, feminist transformation in higher education requires not only policy reform but also a dismantling of the deep cultural logics that sustain gendered power.

CONCLUSION

This paper has explored how female academics in South African universities negotiate and respond to experiences of contrapower harassment. By foregrounding their narratives, it contributes to breaking the culture of silence surrounding this under-researched phenomenon, revealing how women who occupy positions of authority nonetheless find themselves vulnerable to gendered forms of subordination.

Drawing on Foucault's conceptualisation of power as both repressive and productive, the findings illustrate how contrapower harassment simultaneously disciplines and enables. Participants' strategies of accepting,

distancing, and rationalising, represent the subtle negotiations of power that allow them to maintain their professional identity and personal integrity while being aware of their own vulnerability.

Importantly, this study calls attention to the institutional and cultural conditions that make contrapower harassment possible. The persistence of gendered assumptions about authority, the privileging of the "somatic norm" (Puwar, 2004), and the customer-service logic of the neoliberal university combine to sustain environments in which female academics' credibility can be undermined. Institutional transformation requires more than policy—it requires critical engagement with these embedded hierarchies of power and the everyday practices that normalise harassment.

Universities should therefore move beyond reactive mechanisms of reporting towards cultivating cultures of accountability and solidarity. This includes redesigning student evaluation systems that facilitate harassment, creating confidential and accessible reporting pathways, and developing peer-support and mentorship structures that validate women's experiences rather than pathologise them. Recognising contrapower harassment as a form of institutionalised gender violence is a necessary step toward transforming higher education into a genuinely safe and equitable space of knowledge production.

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