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Contrapower Harassment and the Professorial Archetype: Gender, Race, and Authority in the Classroom

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NiCole Buchanan's Personal Reflections

I began teaching as a second-year graduate student. Twenty-two years old and naïve about the difficulties I would face, I expected challenges to my authority due to my age. I even suspected students might sense my insecurity as a new instructor. Although I knew I would make errors while learning the process of teaching, I expected students would be generous in allowing me to work through the process and perhaps even embrace my naïveté. For the most part, this was true. Students were kind, willing to learn what I had to offer, and forgiving of my mistakes. What I did not anticipate were the reactions of a small but significant group of students who found my presence offensive, my authority comical, and my capacity to disperse knowledge non-existent. For this group of students, I will never be seen as knowledgeable or worthy of their respect because I do not embody the two factors they believe are key to being a professor: being white and being male.

Now that I am a professor, this segment of the student population continues to exist. When I enter the classroom, I can usually spot such a student immediately: as he realizes I am the professor, he leans back in his chair, crosses his arms, and puts his feet on the chair in front of him. This student will often give me "the look," the smirk or contemptuous stare that says, "This woman, this black woman, cannot possibly know anything. What gives her the right to evaluate me?"

Whenever such a student appears in my class, I know that I can count on a difficult semester. I will likely face continual challenges to my authority. Even the simplest of assertions will be met with demands that I produce proof that what I say is not my mere opinion but is substantiated by legitimate sources of knowledge. His demeanor in class will often reflect defiance and condescension, which has the potential to infect the entire class. Such behaviors are designed to "put me in my place," remind me that I am merely a woman--and a black woman at that. His goal is to reinforce the long-held social hierarchy that places men, particularly white men, above all women, regardless of age, experience, or education.

Harassment and the Law

Such incidents occur despite the fact that policies designed to protect against discrimination and harassment have existed for over three decades. The first such law was Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which was a general provision prohibiting discrimination based on sex, race, color, religion, or national origin in the workplace. This was followed by Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, the first statute specific to educational programs. It enjoined educational institutions against discrimination or exclusion from any educational program on the basis of sex. With this statute, educational institutions were now accountable to the same non-discrimination standards established by Title VII for employment settings. However, it was not until 1980 that the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) established a legal definition of sexual harassment that outlined specific behaviors that constitute sexual harassment.

Sexual Harassment: An Occupational Hazard

Even with these laws in place, sexual harassment is the most common occupational hazard for working women, with half of all women being sexually harassed over the course of their working lives. Sexually harassing

behaviors are broadly defined and can include examples as wide-ranging as sex discrimination, unwanted sexual attention, sexual coercion, and even sexual assault. Furthermore, although sexual harassment is often only recognized if a boss harasses an employee, such behaviors can and do occur across all levels, including peer-to-peer harassment among co-workers and employee-to-boss harassment.

Theories examining why sexual harassment occurs have focused on power differentials between individuals both within organizations and in society. Many theorists have pointed to the influence of patriarchy and the role of male dominance in society as contributing factors. This is supported by findings that sexual harassment occurs most frequently when men have positions of social and/or structural power over women, when women enter occupations traditionally dominated by men, or when women challenge definitions of masculinity and femininity.

Unlike the typical assumptions about workplace harassment--that it is often sexual and that it is perpetrated by those in power and directed toward subordinates--women with formal organizational power often face harassment by those they instruct, guide, and evaluate. Katherine Benson (1984) defined this form of harassment as contrapower harassment, which refers to the harassment of those with more organizational power by those with less. This definition has often been furthered by discussions of "formal" versus "informal" power in a particular context, which is influenced by societal norms. For example, while a female professor may have more formal power than a male student, because society still conveys more power and authority to men, the male student has more informal power due to his gender. Parallel situations can occur when discussing differences in race/ethnicity, age, sexual orientation, and social class.

Contrapower Harassment in the Academy

Eros DeSouza and A. Gigi Fansler have estimated that 10-53% of all female university faculty have experienced an assortment of behaviors defined as contrapower harassment. Although contrapower harassment can also happen to male workers, the targets of contrapower, as with all forms of sexual harassment, are disproportionately female. Moreover, Buchanan's research has found that women who are members of racial or ethnic minority groups are often doubly discriminated against, which has been substantiated by Caroline Turner's research with women faculty of color. This reality is problematic given that today's universities are becoming increasingly diverse among both the student body and faculty. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics, as of 1999 women comprised 37.2% of all full-time professors in degree granting and 14.4% of all faculty are now people of color. Nevertheless, the professorial archetype is still that of a white heterosexual man. As people of color and women enter academia, they challenge student perceptions of what a professor should be. As a result, professors may find themselves the target of harassment from both peers and subordinates.

The most obvious examples of contrapower harassment are suggestive looks, body language, physical harassment, or verbal remarks directed towards a professor by a student. Covert behaviors can include a wide range of actions including anonymous, inappropriate phone calls or letters and negative verbal or written comments about a professor expressed to others, including her peers, superiors, staff, or other students. While the overt behaviors have been shown to be the most upsetting to victims in the short-term, the insidious nature of covert behaviors also have long-term negative emotional and professional effects.

One of the most common and potentially damaging areas where contrapower harassment occurs is via anonymous teaching evaluations of instructors. Students' evaluations of women faculty are sometimes suspiciously low. Susan Basow's research has found consistent gender differences in student ratings of professors, particularly when male students rate female professors. Additionally, Caroline Turner has found that female faculty of color are frequently challenged by and negatively evaluated by students, regardless of teaching ability. These discrepancies make it appear that women are less capable instructors, the effects of which can persist beyond a single semester. For example, teaching evaluations are often the initial screening tool used to determine which faculty will be nominated for teaching awards. Professors with an established history of high average ratings are more likely to receive such awards, which provide the foundation for future career awards such as Distinguished Professor. Therefore, the systemic bias in teaching evaluations can dramatically reduce the number of women eligible for prestigious career awards in the future.

In addition to averaged rankings, written comments on evaluations often reveal active misogyny and harassment. To demonstrate this point, several students in a Multicultural Psychology course at a Midwestern university examined the content of anonymous student comments on a Web site accessible only to other students within the institution. The purpose of the site is to provide more detailed information on specific courses and instructors to inform students as they select courses. The results were profoundly disturbing. Female professors were criticized as being "ugly," "dorky," or "frumpy" in their dress and appearance. Other comments were often filled with sexual images, fantasies, and explicit comments regarding sexual acts students wanted female professors to perform. In hostile student commentaries, the words "bitch," "whore," and other derogatory names were commonplace. In some cases, students wrote detailed fantasies of how they would like to hurt or kill their female professor. The students found no similar examples of comments wishing harm or violence against male faculty. In fact, while men were occasionally described as "jerks" or "assholes," the vast majority of explicit sexual comments and derogatory names were directed toward female faculty.

Specific to teaching evaluations, Michael Messner found that while men are evaluated for their skills and abilities as instructors, women are first evaluated by their gender performance and then by their teaching performance. He analyzes this phenomenon by examining comments about female professors' clothing and found that women are caught in a catch-22 whether they dress more or less formally. For example, if a woman tries to assert her authority in the classroom by wearing more formal attire, she may be seen as being less feminine and, therefore, not performing her appropriate gender role. As a result, students are critical because she is not conforming to their stereotypes of women as feminine, not authoritative. However, if she dresses informally, it contributes to the image of women as unworthy of the same respect and status afforded to male faculty, no matter what their attire.

Regardless of why and how it occurs, contrapower harassment has a severe impact on the psychological and professional lives of women faculty. Many faculty who experience contrapower harassment report heightened levels of depression and anxiety, and severe cases of harassment can lead to traumatic stress symptoms. There are also negative job consequences. Some women's interest in teaching decreased as a way to avoid harassment. For those who remain, negative class ratings and skewed peer or supervisor perceptions can influence tenure and promotion decisions for female faculty, resulting in fewer women achieving positions of power within academic institutions.

Addressing Contrapower Harassment

Given the high cost of contrapower harassment and the vast number of women affected, it is important to reduce its impact. Having a syllabus that includes highly structured guidelines and grading criteria and adhering strictly to those standards can offer some protection from claims of subjectivity, capriciousness, and disorganization. Women can also assert their authority by not allowing students to use the professor's first name, dressing more formally, and keeping the physical space of the classroom orderly.

Another suggestion for combating student bias in teaching evaluations is to get independent evaluations of professors' teaching effectiveness. For example, many institutions have instruction consultants who will not only help faculty with their teaching but also will observe them in the classroom and provide written feedback. This feedback can be used to improve teaching, regardless of one's current abilities. Perhaps more importantly, such evaluations can provide independent verification of a professor's teaching skills, which then can be used in conjunction with student evaluations for tenure and promotion decisions.

Michele Paludi and colleagues suggest that the best method for combating the negative career impact of contrapower harassment is implementing policies and training to educate people, especially other professors and university officials about its prevalence and consequences. Many successful anti-harassment and anti-discrimination programs already exist that can be used to create training and educational programs specifically addressing contrapower harassment. It is important to include those who make tenure and promotion decisions in such workshops.

Because of the complicated nature of contrapower harassment and the entrenched social hierarchy and power

that cause it, easy and quick solutions do not exist. We remain hopeful, however, that actively addressing contrapower harassment with policy and training initiatives will decrease its prevalence and its consequences on the career trajectories of women in the academy.

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