

When Capital Conceal Harassment: Explaining Sexual Harassment in American Colleges and Universities Through the Lens of Cultural Capital Theory

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Abstract

This paper examines the issue of sexual harassment in U.S. colleges and universities through the framework of cultural capital theory. It argues that professors' cultural capital — comprising academic prestige, research accomplishments, and social networks — empowers them to commit sexual harassment with minimal repercussions. The hierarchical relationship between professors and students, particularly at the graduate level, creates an environment where students depend on professors for academic and career advancement, making them vulnerable to harassment and less likely to report it. The paper highlights the role of gender inequality and the academic power structure in normalizing harassment and silencing victims. Through case studies at institutions like Caltech and Dartmouth College, the paper illustrates how professors' cultural capital allowed them to evade accountability, while students were pressured into silence. By applying Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital, the paper concludes that the unequal distribution of cultural capital in higher education contributes significantly to the concealment of sexual harassment and suggests that reforming university monitoring systems may offer a potential solution to address these issues.

Keywords: sexual harassment, cultural capital, academic power, gender inequality, higher education

1. Introduction

In the U.S. and around the world, higher education institutions have a long history of frequent incidents of sexual harassment and assault by professors. The Western media and social organizations have formed scale of resistance in some degrees (e.g., collective marches and other activities) and required universities to openly tackle the assaults of professors and to make their management systems visible, but more important questions are: What dares aggressors to act and allows

them to escape punishment, and what prevents victims from reporting. Data show that only 7% of a sample of female students in U.S. colleges and universities who responded to sexual harassment chose to report it to the institution (Hill & Silva, 2005). A significant contributing reason for students not being proactive in publicizing their encounters are students' lack of trust in the institution and the feeling that they will not receive effective feedback and supports for their requests for help (Cantor et al., 2015).

Sexual harassment is a type of behavior that

obscures personal boundary, which intent to be violent and controlling, and is viewed as potentially emotionally charged such as humiliating, scaring and intimidating to an individual (United Nations, 2008). In general, sexual harassment should be legally sanctioned or morally condemned by the person. However, in the special public space of colleges and universities, because of the interests and unequal power relations between students and professors, and because of the impact that their behavior can have on the social prestige and status of educational institutions, a portion of voices that choose to report sexual harassment to the public are silenced by power. In addition, many more victims choose to keep quiet voluntarily due to the strong personal networks and power of professors.

The important reason behind this phenomenon — the ability of extensive and profound cultural capital to empower or translate into the power of professors to commit assaults against students without suffering reputation losses, and to use it as a means of controlling public opinion in institutions and evading due punishment, and the students being compelled to compromise because of their need for their own cultural capital, this is the viewpoint which be highlighted and analyzed in this paper.

2. Statement of the Problem

In U.S. institutions of higher education, the professor-student relationship involves strong links of benefits: a student's academic resources, relationships and social networks, and career growth are connected with his or her supervising professor. This leads to a hierarchy and a specific academic social structure that guides an unequal allocation of power, thereby creating a risk environment supportive of harassment and victimization, and may have contributed to a cultural environment in which sexual harassment is normalized (Zara et al., 2024). Students who are victimized often feel embarrassed and emotionally uncomfortable. Researches has proved that the adverse consequences of sexual harassment include academic setbacks or failures, reduced trust in relationships, lowered self-confidence, and physical and mental illnesses (Li, 2014). Yet symbolic pressure or coercion from professors makes it difficult for students to protect their rights and interests due to fear of revenge and blame; furthermore, gender inequality brought about by societal role expectations increases the

risk of stigmatization for victimized female students, and also makes it easier to distort their victim status or rumor violence. This makes it harder for a significant proportion of female students in higher education to open up about their experiences, especially in male-dominated academic areas (Estrich, 1986).

3. Propose of Study

The purpose of this paper is to validate that social and personal cultural capital has a positive impact on the power of professors and the validation of sexual harassment in the context of American higher education, focusing on clarifying the following three points: a) what is cultural capital; b) the expression of cultural capital in the American society and its impact on the higher education environment; and c) the translation of cultural capital to the power of professors, as well as the tolerance and the conceal of their aggression by universities. This paper will also introduce the concrete case based on this social issue and continue to discuss:

Are graduate students more likely to be victimized than undergraduates?

Why do aggressor professors choose sexual harassment and aggression among the many means (e.g., money, delayed graduation, verbal violence) by which they can pressure and control students?

What are some of the sociocultural factors that can influence these choices?

4. Theoretical Framework

In this paper, we use the framework of cultural capital theory to analyze the issues raised above based on the context of higher education in the US.

Cultural capital theory (Bourdieu, 1986) defines cultural capital as a social resource that can be acquired through academic education, interpersonal socialization, and social customs and norms. This social resource, through social media or public relations, impacts the social reputation of an organization or individual and therefore determines their opportunities and options. Based on this theory, cultural capital is sort of three main forms:

1) Specific cultural capital, which refers to the reserves of knowledge, talents, and skills that an individual absorbs and internalizes during the process of acquired skills training and socialization.

In the group of professors in colleges and universities, it shows up as rich research experience, subject knowledge, results published in academic journals, and receiving honors, etc. (Bourdieu, 1986), which accumulates personal connections and reputations for them, but actually expands invisible power as well.

2) Objective cultural capital, which refers to items reflected in concrete with objective value, such as money, luxury goods, etc., which can serve to show the subject's wealth and power.

In the college environment, according to the psychology of showing off, people tend to pay more respect and obey professors' power because of the material things they show.

3) Internalized cultural capital, which refers to the social norms, cultural customs and general values that individuals develop through education. Research in the context of sexual harassment is most typical of the "male-dominated society" in the US and medias that are prejudiced and hostile to women. More than the former two, they are not the capital directly held by the aggressor, but by influencing and shaping the thinking, behavioral patterns and perceptions of the general public, they lead them to indulge in the aggressor's expansion and abuse of power, which makes it easier for the aggressor to commit wrongful acts and go unpunished.

In summary, with the support of cultural capital theory perspective, the following points can roughly explain the problem of sexual harassment in American higher education:

- 1) The cultural capital possessed by professors is beneficial to the external reputation of educational institutions and the development of academic cooperation, thus prompting institutions to embrace their behavior;
- 2) The personal prestige and power transformed by cultural capital suppresses student resistance;
- 3) Capital holders who conform to the prevailing social ideology of the day are able to use their symbolic power or material benefits (e.g., money, etc.) to maneuver public view in the social media, thereby removing accusations or condemnations.

5. Methodology & Cases Statement

The research method used in this paper is the documentary survey method combined with cases study. In this research, this paper selects 2 real cases from American education

organizations:

1) The sexual harassment of a professor at the California Institute of Technology that occurred in 2015. In this case, Prof. Ott, as a famous astrophysics lecturer in this university, was suspended because he was accused of "sexual harassment" by two female students. He had fallen in love with a female postgraduate student and verbally harassed her on a number of occasions over the course of his teaching career, but dismissed the student out of fear that she would take unfair advantage of his affections and not take her work seriously, while at the same time he maintained an affair with another female student and professed his love for her over a period of 21 months. The two intolerant students chose to report the incident to the university, but all Caltech did was suspend Prof. Ott's salary for nine months and require him to receive "reinstatement training" when he returned to campus. They did not even take away his research rights. According to the investigation, Prof. Ott is a senior member of the Caltech faculty, with independent research rights, and was granted his tenure at the age of 38. The students were dissatisfied with the sanction because it meant that Prof. Ott would continue to work with students.

2) In 2018, seven female students at Dartmouth College jointly reported three professors for sexual harassment. The three professors sent indecent photos to students without their permission, as well as inviting them for drinks and subsequently sexually assaulting them. However, these behaviors were ignored and concealed by Dartmouth College. Back between 2002 and 2017, at least 27 students had already given feedback to officials about the professor's improper behavior. In addition, many more victims have been forced to accept the victimization and choose to remain silent due to the professor's control over a large amount of academic resource and his ability to intervene in social opinion about them. In response to public pressure, the university eventually removed or retired the three professors.

According to the research, in a study on the correlation between the academic level of medical students and the probability of suffering sexual harassment, 52% of medical students, 31% of hospitalists, and 25% of faculty members in the total sample had been sexually harassed in 2018 (Hsiao et al., 2021). Additionally, another study showed public

information about faculty members committing sexual attack, 8% of the perpetrators were assistant professors, 13% were associate professors, and 51% were professors (Espinoza et al., 2020). This suggests that an increase in academic hierarchy promotes sexual harassment by giving individuals more invisible power; similarly, individuals with higher academic status or more resources are less likely to be sexually assaulted.

6. Discussion & Limitations

The cases above all illustrated that the academic hierarchy and accumulation of knowledge owned by an individual translates into cultural capital, and is internalized as an advantage that facilitates avoidance of punishment for sexual assault, victimization, or control of the victim's actions. In the social context of the US, where education has become a core social sector, individuals with mature academic resume and educational backgrounds often have more opportunities for higher-paying jobs (DiMaggio, 1982). Consequently, this has led to the fact that in American higher education, academic resources have become a condition to control students.

In the case of Professor Ott, it can be seen that because he was a celebrity professor at the college with independent research rights, he was able to obtain significant social influence and prestige for the institution, becoming an authoritative symbol of the educational institution and maintaining the school's internalized capital, which led the school to choose to continue to employ him; and in the case of Dartmouth College, the school's attitude of harboring the aggressor and the professor's academic. In the case of Dartmouth College, the school's attitude of hiding the aggressor and the professor's academic oppression combined to prevent the victims from resisting, but the support of society and public opinions could create a positive awareness and help them to defend their rights.

Combined with the cases and literature analysis, it is not difficult to find that most of the sexual harassment by professors in America occurs at the graduate level. A survey shows that graduate students are more likely to be sexually harassed than undergraduate students (Zara et al., 2024). At the undergraduate level, the power of professors over students is confined to course grades, organization of activities outside the

classroom, etc., and the number of students they face makes it hard for them to have isolated social activities with specific students; however, at the graduate level, there is a clear dependence between students and their professors, and not only is the development of their careers related to their professors' opinions, but also they need to inherit their professors' academic networks and study resources (Li, 2014). Students who are subject to "Apprenticeship" have to accept harassment in order to gain their own cultural capital.

The fact that the aggressor professor chose sexual harassment among the many means of applying unequal power can be attributed to the vague legal system of the US and the inequality of the traditional social concepts of gender from the perspective of cultural capital. Issues such as monetary coercion and physical harm have clear legal boundaries, and students' cries for help will not be obscured by the social culture; while the existing legal system lacks a clear definition of sexual harassment and punishment rules, which makes the evaluation of the harm blurred; meanwhile, a study found that sexual harassment in academia is also the result of the concept of "gender roles overflow" in the social and cultural capital, i.e., irrelevant to academics and inappropriate gender role expectations, which lead professors to treat students in a female role rather than a mentor-apprentice relationship (Li, 2014).

Up to now, the research in this paper still has some limitations: since many students remain silent about the issue of sexual harassment, the cases found in the reported literature are based on what has been reported in the media, and their description and analysis are inevitably subjective; in addition, the concepts of cultural capital and academic resources are inherently obscure and abstract, and are affected by factors such as personal wealth, academic subjects, positions, etc., which make them difficult to be defined in concrete terms.

7. Conclusion

This paper focuses on the issue of sexual harassment of students by professors in US and analyzes it using Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital. It argues that, under this perspective, the problem of sexual harassment where the perpetrators dare to act, and the victims are afraid to report can be attributed to the fact that "cultural capital has become the power of

professors and the necessity of students". The cultural capital possessed by professors is not only effective in controlling the actions of students, but also in shifting university administration and public opinion in their favorable direction. In addition, patriarchal and male dominated notions of academic organization, gender and power inequalities, and the still imperfect nature of the relevant systems make it challenging for students to gain widespread support in the college environment. Due to the fact that cultural capital is necessary for the functioning of society and an important factor of social perceptions, it is difficult for us to essentially remedy this situation. In the future, adjustments to the monitoring system of universities and the graduate school system may become feasible ways forward.

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