

Violence and Mentoring: Race, Gender, and Sexual Harassment

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Members of marginalized groups—including, but not only, women and people of color—find themselves in a difficult position, where they require mentoring relationships to navigate and overcome their marginalization and isolation in political science, and yet they are less likely to receive mentorship than their counterparts in the profession (Jordan-Zachery 2004; Lavariaga Monforti 2012). In response, in 2002, the American Political Science Association (APSA) Council established the Task Force on Mentoring, which built a mentorship program centered around the experience of women and people of color, with the ultimate goal of diversifying political science through increased recruitment, retention, and integration (APSA Mentoring Program; Monroe 2003, 94; Jordan-Zachery 2004, 875; Alex-Assenoh et al. 2005, 283). Unfortunately, using mentorship as a tool to diversify the profession has not proven wholly successful. Mentorship is often assumed to be entirely *good* and therefore *more* mentorship is called for. What is often overlooked in discussions regarding mentorship and diversity are the ways that mentorship itself can perpetuate the very hierarchies it is ostensibly designed to remedy. What is often ignored are the ways that mentorship itself can be oppressive especially for graduate students whose substantive scholarship questions dominant epistemological and methodological standards in political science and whose embodied presence routinely challenges prevailing gendered and racialized norms in the discipline.

Political science has yet to significantly increase diversity in its faculty ranks (Alexander-Floyd 2015; Mershon and Walsh 2015; Sinclair-Chapman 2015). The APSA Task Force on Political Science in the Twenty-First Century (2011) finds that despite efforts to diversify, including mentoring, women and people of color are extremely underrepresented, and the situation is particularly stark for women faculty of color in the discipline.¹ In response, I ask: What role does sexual harassment² play in the underrepresentation of women and women of color in political science?

What happens when mentors sexually harass women students? How do race and gender intersect with epistemological and methodological differences between students and faculty to make some students more vulnerable to sexual harassment in the mentor/mentee relationship, especially when their mentors are themselves members of a marginalized group? I apply existing research to analyze my personal experience of sexual harassment as a graduate student to provide insight about the difficulty of diversifying political science.

Specifically, I critically reflect on my/other mentorship relationships to show how difficult it is to build trust and solidarity in a hierarchical power structure also divided across racial, gender, and epistemic differences.

The narrative I offer reveals the pain I experienced as a graduate student in political science. I share this encounter as emblematic of a larger problem where particular gendered and raced bodies are marginalized in the mentor/mentee relationship—a relationship designed to empower and uplift.

MENTORSHIP AND SEXUAL HARASSMENT

Recent studies have made clear that sexual harassment is a common experience for women, and the academy is no exception (Brown 2019; Hasunuma and Shin 2019; Monroe 2019). As a young woman of color at a top political science doctoral program in the United States, I was the target of sexist comments, sexist humor, and sexual harassment throughout my six years in the program. Faculty members and fellow graduate students sexually harassed me, and I remained silent; I did not report this to the department or university.

One such incident happened when I was three years into my graduate program when I was sexually harassed by a mentor, which was previously chronicled in Behl (2017), and I declined to report it.³ I decided not to file a formal complaint—part of me convinced myself it wasn't *that bad*, and the other part of me justified it because I needed the mentor's support—to pass my qualifying papers, pass the dissertation, complete my PhD, and secure an academic job. I felt this need because, in a discipline and profession that is so often hostile to women and people of color, I saw this mentor as an ally—a fellow person of color, in a highly competitive and hostile academic environment who valued my research; he supported my decision to study minority Sikh women in India using interpretive methodologies deemed unscientific and invalid by others in the department.⁴ I believed that he understood what it meant to not belong, to be rendered illegitimate, and to be defined as suspect as a researcher and a human being. Yet this support and validation were laced with sexist comments, sexist humor, and sexual harassment.

Why do I feel ashamed about my decision? I *know* that as a woman student of color I had limited power. And yet I *feel* ashamed. I ask myself: why did I fail to report? There are multiple, complicated answers, which position me, at times, as a victim of and, at other times, as complicit in gendered violence. One answer to the question is that there is *no*

appropriate response to sexual harassment. I was scared that naming the sexual harassment for what it was would mean losing this mentor's support. But there was nothing I could do or say to make the harassment stop. I was voiceless. I was powerless. I was defenseless...or was I?

I also feel ashamed about my decision to never ask other women students of color about their experiences, and I find this feeling puzzling as well. I *know* that they too had limited power. But, I wonder what did they experience in the mentorship, recruitment, and retention processes? From my vantage

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point, it is entirely possible that mentorship, recruitment, and retention experiences consisted of offers of funding packages and best fucks; campus tours and rankings of top tits; formal meetings and booze-filled evenings. Had others received a formal education in graduate school policies and procedures and an informal one in sexual harassment and perhaps much more? *I never asked about any of this.* Instead, I put my head down and focused on my goal—the PhD.

In order to publish this article, I have again been complicit in gendered violence. I was asked to remove all details of my experience of sexual harassment because they are considered potentially libelous. I *complied*. What does it mean that as a graduate student, I found it so difficult to speak of my experience and now as an associate professor I continue to find myself silenced? Why is it so difficult to speak of sexual harassment? Why do academic institutions, from departments and universities to journals and professional societies, silence those who try to speak out?

How do we foster diversity and advancement in the discipline when some of its members are being harassed, objectified, and marginalized by the very people who are supposed to support and empower them?

My response to my own experience raises a larger question: How do we foster diversity and advancement in the discipline when some of its members are being harassed, objectified, and marginalized by the very people who are supposed to support and empower them? How do women students create solidarity and trust with one another in an environment where sexual harassment is used to harm, humiliate, divide, discipline, and disempower? How do women students of color create solidarity and trust with mentors across racial, gender, and epistemological differences? My experience demonstrates that race and gender intersect in complicated and painful ways making it difficult to retain and integrate marginalized individuals through mentorship relationships. My experience also demonstrates that academic institutions, from universities to journals and professional societies, actively silence those who have been subjected to gendered violence.

VIOLENCE AND MENTORING

I open with my experience of sexual harassment and connect it with a continuum of gendered violence all designed to marginalize, objectify, and isolate women and women of color in academia. This continuum extends from emotional violence to physical assault. At one end of the spectrum there are sexual jokes, rumors, and gossip—all of which are so often compounded by race. At the other end of the spectrum there is rape, sexual assault, stalking, and molestation. Unfortunately, my experience with these forms of harassment is not unique

but rather, sadly, the norm for many women and women of color in academia (Marshall, Dalyot, and Galloway 2014; Managan 2017). Many scholars have demonstrated how academic institutions create an inhospitable climate for women faculty of color by maintaining dominant, intersecting ideologies, such as white supremacy, patriarchy, heteronormativity, classism, ethnocentrism, and rationality (Allen 2012, 18; see also, Narayan 1997; Agathangelou and Ling 2002; Gutierrez y Muhs et al. 2012), while others have shown how political science is experienced as a particularly hostile environment for women of color (Anonymous and Anonymous 1999; Sampaio 2006; Brown 2007; Behl 2017; 2019).

I, like other marginalized individuals, experienced intersecting forms of oppression: not only was I marginalized based on my race, ethnicity, and gender in political science, I was also othered by my epistemological and methodological choices. In a predominantly positivist political science department, my use of critical, interpretive, and feminist methodologies for

studying minority women, who were connected to my identity, rendered me as an “outsider” or “not a serious scholar” in the eyes of many faculty members and peers. Faculty members were reluctant to mentor me because of my methodological choices. The department was hesitant to fund my scholarship and to provide access to key resources and professional networks because of my epistemological and methodological choices. My marginality in terms of my embodied presence and substantive scholarship made me more vulnerable to sexual harassment. My mentorship experience forced me to calculate the tradeoffs between epistemological and methodological freedom and sexual harassment. The mentor/mentee relationship also forced me to effect a compromise between racial solidarity and gendered violence.

A growing body of research explains why women and women of color experience sexual harassment/assault in the

academy and why they often remain silent. According to Karen Kelsky (2017), “The entrenched hierarchies of the academic world, the small size of most scholarly fields, the male dominance of virtually every field...and junior scholars’ desperate dependency on good references for career advancement, make for conditions in which sexual abuse...can flourish with impunity.”⁵ Similarly, A.K. Amienne (2017) argues that in a highly competitive system in which “a single person has the power to make or break someone else’s career...you will have abuse. Not only rape and overt sexual aggression, but also the many complicated and twisted forms of abuse that can sink a woman’s chances of succeeding in an already biased business.”

When sexual harassment and other forms of gendered violence persist in academia, the effects are multifold. For one, this undermines attempts to diversify the profession. When the very professors, mentors, and advisers who are teaching, guiding, recruiting, and retaining are also, simultaneously, harassing, abusing, and objectifying women and women of color, gendered violence persists and limits women’s access and advancement in the profession. According to the APSA Committee on the Status of Women in the

which results in individual loss for those who are victimized and a collective loss in scholarship, research, and knowledge production for academia.

CONCLUSION

Why are women of color so severely underrepresented in political science, despite significant efforts to diversify the profession? Why do women and women of color continue to experience political science as a hostile environment, despite the discipline’s decades long commitment to advancing diversity?

To begin answering these questions, I share my experience of sexual harassment to give voice to a problem that is pervasive yet often dismissed in academia. I call on all political scientists to identify and expose how gendered violence within mentorship relationships contributes to the underrepresentation of women and women of color in political science, and how this underrepresentation leads to compromised and partial knowledge. I also call on political science to acknowledge that mentor/mentee relationships are themselves tangled up in power relations, and therefore, mentorship programs alone are unlikely to diversify the discipline,

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Profession (2018), “The experience of harassment, particularly by a trusted teacher, mentor, or senior colleague, can reduce a woman’s productivity, deny her recognition, undermine her confidence, and limit her access to professional networks.”

At the individual level, pervasive gendered violence in academia causes physical harm, mental-health damage, and economic loss for those who are subjected to this violence (Jackson 2019; Lay 2019; Strach 2019). Gendered violence has a long-term physical impact, commonly reported symptoms include headaches, fatigue, nausea, insomnia, respiratory infections, weight loss, and gastrointestinal problems (Thakur and Paul 2017, 35). After the physical harm is done, victimized individuals also suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, depression, anger, fear, helplessness and enhanced feelings of imposter syndrome, isolation, and failure (Kokobobo 2017; Thakur and Paul 2017; Sulfaro and Gill 2019).

Those subjected to gendered violence also experience professional and economic loss as some change mentors, departments, and institutions while others exit academia entirely. Such changes can lead to loss of funding, resources, key professional relationships, and productivity. Sexual harassment functions to push women out of academia—some women leave “voluntarily” to avoid their predators, while others are forced out by their predators who systematically attack their victim’s research and scholarship (Kokobobo 2017). Repeated and continued experience of gendered violence pushes women and women of color out of academia,

and may function to maintain the very marginalization and isolation they are designed to overcome. Lastly, I write for those who find themselves at the margins of this profession to remind them that they are not alone in their experience of harassment and humiliation, marginalization and shame, assault and pain, objectification and isolation. And I call for an alternative imagining of mentorship and inclusion in political science—one free of racialized, gendered, and epistemic violence. ■

NOTES

1. In 2010, 86.6% of female political science faculty were Caucasian, 6.1% were African-American, 4.4% Asian Pacific Islander, and 3.0% Latina (APSA Task Force 2011).
2. Meghna Basu Thakur and Priscilla Paul (2017, 34) define sexual harassment as “gender harassment, unwanted sexual attention...and sexual coercion.”
3. For a detailed discussion, see Behl (2017, 2019).
4. Rebecca Gill states “if imposter syndrome is the unrealistically low assessment of one’s own talents, adding sexual harassment to the mix provides specific, tangible confirmatory evidence that the low assessment isn’t unrealistic after all—that the stereotypes are true. That you don’t belong” (Flaherty 2018).
5. Karen Kelsky’s (2017) crowdsourced survey of sexual harassment in academia demonstrates how “mentoring relationships—intended to guide and empower—have resulted in the objectification and sexualization of students” (Kokobobo 2017; see also Gluckman 2017; Wadman 2017; Gupta 2018; Korn 2018). Kelsky (2017) finds that sexual harassment is “rampant” and is used to “hound” women out of academia. It should be noted that Kelsky’s survey methodology is flawed, but the sheer volume of reported cases of sexual harassment should give pause.

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