

# Harassment, a field study

Science, including the fields of ecology and evolution, must advocate a zero-tolerance policy towards harassment and bullying. This means promoting safe workspaces in all contexts, and letting go of the idea that fieldwork entails special circumstances.

Revelations of harassment at the highest levels of Hollywood and the UK government in the past month have led to increased personal and professional reflection across all industries. Social media users have flocked to post #MeToo stories on Facebook and Twitter, revealing the gamut of acts of harassment they have experienced in their lives. Science is no exception to this, and scrutiny reveals particular problems in the fields of ecology and evolution.

The past few years have seen numerous news stories about senior figures in these disciplines who have been accused by some of their colleagues and students of multiple forms of intimidation, bullying and sexual harassment. At the same time, there has been an increased awareness and understanding of how colleagues and students may be exposed to vulnerable contexts through lack of oversight. A recurring theme in this coverage is the challenges of fieldwork.

Social media initiatives such as [#PregnantInTheField](#) and science educator Emily Graslie's [call for public discussion of the taboos and challenges surrounding menstruation](#) have raised awareness of the particular trials fieldwork can pose to women. But many challenges imposed by constraints of the field, such as limited privacy, geographic isolation and a dependence on others, can affect everyone. Yet ecology and evolution fields seem to prize these 'macho' challenges almost as a badge of honour. Conferences echo with anecdotes of the extremes researchers have gone to in order to retrieve the season's data: the stressful make-or-break deadlines; the isolation posed by remote field sites; the topsy-turvy situation where work colleagues become living companions for weeks or even months on end; the challenges of temporary field accommodation to maintenance of personal hygiene. But during assertion of these bragging rights, there may be limited awareness of the fact that these constraints all contribute to creating contexts of increased personal vulnerability. Complaints alleged against prominent Antarctic geologist David Marchant by two of his former students, which Marchant denies, illustrate such a context.

And, of course, the field is not the only context of manufactured vulnerability: the

'field mentality' easily filters through to the department, the lab, or the conference (which shares many similarities with the challenges of the field) as still more reports reveal. Journalist Michael Balter has repeatedly investigated parallel claims of sexual harassment leading from institution to conference and back again, notably in the case of Brian Richmond, ex-curator of human origins at the American Museum of Natural History, who is alleged to have sexually assaulted a junior colleague in a hotel room while both were attending the European Society for the Study of Human Evolution (ESHE)'s annual meeting in 2014; allegations that Richmond denies. In reporting other claims, Balter has suggested that new iterations of sexual harassment on the part of junior colleagues may derive from exposure to a culture of such behaviour exhibited by senior colleagues.

There is evidence that the issue of harassment in ecology and evolution extends far beyond these specific cases: a 2014 study of 666 field scientists<sup>1</sup> found that 64% of survey participants had experienced sexual harassment (defined as inappropriate or sexual remarks), and 20% experienced sexual assault (defined as sexual contact that was unwanted, unconsenting, or where it was unsafe not to consent). Of those who experienced sexual assault, only 23% reported it, and only 19% of those who reported it were satisfied with the outcome of their report. When these acts occurred, the victims were more likely to be women, and either junior colleagues or students. The impact of these attacks may be long-lasting: Kathryn Clancy and co-authors posited that the strain and stress of experiencing harassment and assault may contribute to the 'leaky pipeline' phenomenon<sup>1</sup>, that is, the gradual loss of women from science, technology, engineering and mathematics fields; their 2017 follow-up study<sup>2</sup> confirmed this perception among victims of historic harassment.

The 2017 study highlights the difficulty of establishing acceptable behavioural norms in the absence of explicit and enforced policy, as well as the overwhelming importance of such policies in fieldwork contexts: where codes of

conduct and expectations were not clearly established, understood and enforced, there was a correlation with higher rates of sexual harassment<sup>2</sup>. It seems probable, although not tested in that particular study, that a correlation would exist with other forms of bullying and abuse as well. Appropriate information flow emerges as a key criterion in creating safe workspaces—both senior staff and junior participants need to understand and abide by regulations for them to be effective. In order to combat contexts of vulnerability in which harassment and bullying can arise, this information flow should extend from what is acceptable interpersonal behaviour, to what are reasonable expectations for junior and senior fieldworkers alike in constrained circumstances: provision of a rota for meal preparation; discussion of appropriate noise levels at night; and access to sufficient food, water and breaks during strenuous or restrictive activity, for example.

The good news is that codes of conduct for acceptable behaviour, and provision of reporting structures to facilitate resolution of complaints, are on the rise in scientific contexts, although admittedly more so at conferences than for fieldwork. Following calls from researchers, for example ref.<sup>3</sup>, many conferences and societies now issue codes of conduct for meetings (see the [Ecological Society of America's policy](#), for instance). [ESHE now provisions ombudspersons](#) to whom incidents (both harassment and other forms of inappropriate behaviour) can be reported. By constituting an independent body outside a university department or conference organizational committee, ombudspersons help to combat the recognized challenge that a victim may be wary to report an incident perpetrated by a senior colleague. It's to be hoped too that growing awareness of not only historic incidents but also formerly taboo subjects, such as the personal challenges of fieldwork, may empower victims to speak up. The ecology and evolution communities must continue speak out about these issues and these incidents, calling out colleagues when we witness bullying or harassment.

As for combatting the structures that have facilitated harassment and bullying, as Clancy et al. suggest, it's time to let go

of the idea that the field or the meeting entail special circumstances that mitigate inappropriate behaviour<sup>1</sup>. While it's true that there are challenges specific to both, this is all the more reason to push for regulation and oversight to preserve safe workspaces

for all, regardless of whether this workspace is halfway up a mountain, in a conference centre, or a lab. □

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#### References

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