How bullying becomes a career tool

Täuber, Susanne; Mahmoudi, Morteza

Published in:
Nature Human Behaviour

DOI:
10.1038/s41562-022-01311-z

Publication date:
2022

How bullying becomes a career tool

To the Editor — Amongst recent high-profile bullying and (sexual) harassment scandals in academia, many have involved perpetrators who are 'star academics', yet had records of bullying and multiple complaints over many years[1]. People often believe that these scientists are bullies despite being star academics. Their misbehaviours are attributed to an unfortunate decoupling between being a good scientist and being a decent person. However, academics who have experienced bullying often describe patterns that suggest a different explanation entirely: bullying is a means for mediocre scientists to rise to the top. Some star academics reached their position because they are bullies, not in spite of it.

There are multiple, interrelated ways in which bullying can be a way to further one's career and interests in academia. Bullying behaviours — including abuse of power, mobbing and devaluing the achievements of others — sabotage the careers of their targets, effectively removing competition from the academic environment. Once they rise to the top, academics can use the same strategies to promote their 'chosen ones', and become untouchable.

What makes bullying an unethical, yet effective, means to rise through the ranks? An emerging body of research suggests that mediocre academics in particular resort to bullying, to remove their competition[2,3]. Experimental research has shown that when male hierarchies are disrupted by women, this incites hostile behaviour specifically from poorly performing men, because they stand to lose the most[4].

Members of underrepresented groups report they are the targets of bullying with the intent to sabotage their careers. Some anecdotes suggest that bullies spring into action when their targets become too successful for their liking — and thus viable competition. For instance, one international female scholar working in the Netherlands noted that she was treated quite well until she scored a multi-million grant[3]. After that, she became the target of harassment, including physical attacks. By sabotaging others' careers, bullies effectively remove competition. When other academics in the department perform objectively better, sabotaging or ostracizing is chosen as an alternative path to the top[2,3].

What are the structures that support bullies? Although highly competitive selection processes are abundant in academic environments, the evaluation criteria are often obscure. This allows perpetrators and their allies, who according to a global study are likely to be men and from the highest-ranked institutions[5], to use ever-changing performance criteria to justify denying their targets tenure, promotions and professorships. The concept of bullies having allies, or building networks across the ranks, also transpires in some reports: targets of bullying talk of department chairs who may want to promote their own home-grown 'crown princes and princesses', even if they are performing at a lower level than their peers. One female international researcher working in the Netherlands reported that when she won a major grant, people started to doubt the capabilities of one of the department's crown princes who was supposed to be promoted — which then was blamed on her[3]. She has been bullied out of the university as a result, and the "male colleague is associate professor now, even though his performance is not more than average." The issue has been conveyed poignantly elsewhere, written with a focus on men sexually harassing women in academia[6]: "Abuse of power is not incidental to these men's "greatness"; it is central to it."

It is not only obscure criteria and favouritism that generate fertile ground for bullying: the hypercompetitive academic environment offers a 'survival benefit' for people with personality traits such as boldness, dominance, meanness and disinhibition[7]. These personality traits have been clearly associated with bullying behaviours[8]. This may play out as routinely overstating one's own achievements but belittling those of colleagues, planting false stories to harm the reputation of colleagues, or publicly ridiculing, insulting or tarnishing the achievements of colleagues[9]. Thus, our current academic culture — with its hypercompetition, precarious employment and steep hierarchy — appears to incentivize bullies by providing the conditions that allow them to thrive[9,10].

Academia urgently needs a paradigm change to remove the conditions that allow bullies to reign. It is time to effectively address issues that past leadership (both departmental and institutional) has too often neglected or exploited for their own benefit: the bullying, mobbing and abuse of those who are underrepresented and marginalized in the academy for various reasons.

We need to make sure that academic leaders are culturally sensitive team players who are aware of the dynamics of power and privilege, and who will not incentivize bullying but rather stimulate community spirit. Achieving this goal will require the proactive contributions of all stakeholders in an interdependent and collaborative manner. We need attention and collaborative action by all members of the scientific workforce from the local to the global scale, to stand in solidarity and empower scholars to bring about long-overdue systemic change in academia. ❐

Susanne Täuber [1]✉ and Morteza Mahmoudi [2]✉

[1]*Department of Human Resource Management & Organizational Behavior, University of Groningen, Groningen, the Netherlands.* [2]*Department of Radiology and Precision Health Program, Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI, USA.*
✉*e-mail: s.tauber@rug.nl; mahmou22@msu.edu*

Published online: 07 February 2022
https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-022-01311-z

References

1. Goulet, T. L. *Science* **373**, 170–171 (2021).
2. Naezer, M. M., van den Brink, M. C. L. & Benschop, Y. W. M. *Harassment in Dutch Academia: Manifestations, Facilitating Factors, Effects and Solutions* (LNVH, 2019).
3. Young Academy Groningen. *Report on Harassment at the University of Groningen* (2021).
4. Kasumovic, M. M. & Kuznekoff, J. H. *PLoS ONE* **10**, e0131613 (2015).
5. Moss, S. E. & Mahmoudi, M. *EClinMed* **40**, 101121 (2021).
6. Mansfield, B. et al. *Human. Geogr.* **12**, 82–87 (2019).
7. Tijdink, J. K. et al. *PLoS ONE* **11**, e0163251 (2016).
8. Namie, G. *Results of the 2017 WBI Workplace Bullying Survey* (WBI, 2017).
9. Forster, N. & Lund, D. W. *Glob. Bus. Organ. Excell.* **38**, 22–31 (2018).
10. Moss, S. *Nature* **560**, 529 (2018).

Competing interests

S.T. is a member of advisory board at the Academic Parity Movement (www.paritymovement.org), a nonprofit organization dedicated to addressing academic discrimination, violence and incivility. M.M. is a cofounder and director of the Academic Parity Movement, and receives royalties/honoraria for his published books, plenary lectures and licensed patents.