

SETH KATZ



We are all complicit in harassment and abuse

To combat bad behaviour, researchers must collectively create ways to take responsibility, says Virginia Valian.

In August, a prominent professor issued a public apology to Jeffrey Epstein's victims. He said he had not known about the nature of Epstein's crimes when he accepted donations from the financial tycoon and serial abuser of underage girls, but he acknowledged responsibility for helping to burnish the criminal's reputation: information was there for the learning, had he thought to look for it.

The vast majority of scholars will never have crossed paths with Epstein, but many of us — myself included — are guilty of lapses, of instances when we failed to recognize or take steps to prevent abuse. It is past time for us to create effective ways to intervene.

Funding agencies have moved to curtail abuse, but they also helped to create a system that abets it. Research institutions tend to have money and power concentrated in too few hands. They tend to ignore reports of misconduct to 'protect' the school.

Faculty members can be surprisingly unaware. Those at the University of Rochester in New York who blew the whistle on a colleague after learning about instances of sexually and personally inappropriate behaviour towards graduate students were shocked that such behaviour had been going on for years. A psychology professor at my own Hunter College at the City University of New York (CUNY) resigned in July amid reports that he had committed sexual harassment, misused funds and created a hostile work environment. An independent investigation found multiple violations of CUNY policy. He has not, to my knowledge, responded publicly to the allegations. Although he was in my department, I knew nothing about the behaviour of which he is accused.

I would like to give myself a pass. But I cannot.

I did not see that I should help set the appropriate social norms, create the right environment and look out for warning signs. As a senior faculty member, as someone who works on gender equity and diversity, as a teacher, as a supervisor of graduate students, I have an implicit duty to promote good behaviour and prevent bad behaviour.

Here's one incident that I still think about. Almost a decade ago, that former colleague said he was "disgusted" to learn I had referred a student to student services after she told me that she felt a man in the class was stalking her. He thought it was a 'he said, she said' situation and that I should not have involved the authorities. I replied that the student was visibly uncomfortable, that harassment rarely has witnesses, and that we needed to respect everyone's rights. (Student services did intervene, in a helpful and respectful manner that resolved the situation.) What I didn't say was that his response was one-sided, inappropriate and insensitive. I didn't want to rock the boat, or to think through the implications of his reaction for other students.

My complicity sickens me.

What can I do now? I can start by apologizing to the students and

staff who had no protectors or protections within the university, even though words are cold comfort to those who were harmed. Next, I can work with my colleagues to improve our environment.

People are getting better at recognizing bad behaviour. What we need are ways to respond when we see it: whether it's an individual staring at someone's body inappropriately, or a person speaking to someone dismissively. We need strategies to keep our responses collegial and respectful. We should assume good intentions whenever we can. We don't want to trade a climate in which everyone is silent for one in which everyone is shouting.

Some of our failures result from a lack of good tools. If we don't know how to act, we don't act. Several universities are implementing intervention strategies for faculty and students who witness questionable behaviour. Florida International University in Miami, for example, describes potential interventions along two dimensions, timing and level of involvement, with tailored recommendations, such as interrupting for clarification, seeking a private discussion, or advocating policy change. The international project 'Did This Really Happen' creates comic strips to spur discussion.

Last year, my colleague Abigail Stewart and I described how a university department launched a successful programme to shift norms. (It's described in our 2018 book *An Inclusive Academy*.) The programme began with a survey of graduate students and faculty

members that revealed areas of dissatisfaction that faculty members had been unaware of. The department then created student-faculty committees to recommend changes and, as a department, agreed on a set of them — for instance, ensuring that questions at seminars are challenging, but not combative or belittling. A survey several years later showed improved satisfaction; even initial sceptics were persuaded of the benefits.

To move forward, we must agree broadly on the right norms and how to set them. But we might not be sure where the line is, or how to respond when we think that someone has crossed it. Working that out will take time, good will and a willingness to learn from our peers. Most importantly, we need to include trainees and staff in our discussions, and to make sure that they do not fear retaliation for asking about or reporting questionable behaviour.

We would all like to think that our own departments are safe and healthy. But we have ample evidence that we cannot just assume all is well. Unless we proactively put appropriate norms and checks in place, we must expect that abuse will occur. The time to act is now. ■

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