

Prevent upwards bullying and abuse of reporting systems



Recent efforts to shine a light on bullying and harassment in academia have laid the foundation for collaborative action against this age-old issue, with the promise of systemic change. However, this change must also prevent less-common cases of upward bullying and abuse of reporting systems.

To date, critical actions against bullying and harassment in academia include funding agencies withdrawing funding from perpetrators¹; science academies ejecting harassers²; institutions and universities improving their reporting systems³; journal editors increasing awareness⁴; recruiters changing practices to stop rehiring harassers⁵; and members of the scientific community refusing to remain neutral about bullying and harassment issues^{6,7}.

However, to create confidence in these efforts and accelerate their success, we must also prevent abuse of reporting systems and resources. These systems and resources are aimed at empowering targets and disciplining perpetrators, but some individuals pretend to be targets to unethically benefit from the system.

The majority of cases of workplace bullying – including industry and academic bullying and harassment – follow the direction of the power differential. That is, individuals with greater power bully and harass those with less power. However, in a few cases the direction is reversed. In other words, it would be naive to believe that only people in lower-power positions are targets. This is an important, but often hidden, aspect of academic bullying and harassment. The concept of upward bullying was first discussed in gender harassment in 1997 (ref. ⁸), followed by several studies on workplace bullying since 2002 (refs. ^{9,10}). In the case of academia, laboratory members might bully and harass their supervisors in various ways. This may include making false allegations in an attempt to abuse the reporting system and available resources. It may also include cyberbullying¹¹ or using tactics (for example, behavioural tactics such as tardiness, gossip and rumours)¹² to gang up against the target. Studies suggest that the side effects



of upwards and top-down bullying on targets are the same¹³.

I recently analysed complaints and reports that have been submitted to the [Academic Parity Movement](#) in the three years of its existence to estimate the percentage of complaints made by supervisors towards their subordinates. Of 1,836 reports, 12 (less than 1%) were from supervisors who had been bullied and harassed by their laboratory members. Examples of academic bullying or harassment ‘from below’ may include unfounded allegations of bullying and harassment against supervisors (9 out of the 12 reports). According to content analysis of the reports submitted to the Academic Parity Movement, these cases of upward bullying are often considered an attempt to justify the perpetrator’s low performance and/or to retaliate based on their disappointment. This disappointment may originate from a lack of realistic expectations.

Studies on workplace bullying in general suggest that upward bullying behaviours may be experienced by 11% of the workforce¹². Abuse of the reporting system is one of many upward bullying actions. However, although the incidence of upwards bullying is relatively low – and bullying via abuse of the reporting system may be even lower – its negative effects are marked. It may

diminish confidence in reporting systems and resources, and thus undermine stakeholders’ efforts and successes in addressing academic bullying and harassment.

Several practical actions could be taken in academia to prevent upwards bullying and the abuse of reporting systems and resources. First, we need to educate members of the scientific community as to the differences between academic bullying and harassment, and academic performance and freedom. Increasing understanding of both upward and top-down bullying and harassment can prevent erroneous justification of inappropriate behaviours. Second, laboratories and research groups should set out realistic expectations by both parties in power and their subordinates. This can enable laboratory members to develop a clear understanding of realistic expectations that are specific to their discipline and group. These may include publication criteria and timelines, authorship requirements, laboratory works and ethics, and the regulation of good laboratory practices.

Another important step in preventing the abuse of resources and reporting systems¹⁴ could be taken by supervisors, hiring departments and institutional policy makers. To ensure that supervisors and laboratory members share realistic and legitimate expectations, supervisors and human resources staff should consider including a probation period in offer or contract letters. This would give all parties the chance to evaluate their initial expectations in the new environment without any liabilities.

Another action that can be made by institutional policy makers is to create and/or improve institutional policy around upward bullying in general, and the abuse of reporting systems in particular. In an early case study of upwards bullying¹⁴, a manager was systematically bullied by a subordinate, and the organization failed to support the target owing to a lack of guiding policy and understanding of the individual case¹³. To prevent this, institutional policies should consider the individual nature of each case during the investigation process.

Stakeholders should also nurture a culture of seeking help for targets of malicious or vexatious allegations, as they may be reluctant¹⁵ or feel ashamed¹⁶ to seek support – at least in part owing to their own and others' expectations of their position.

Finally, we should consider how to discipline individuals who misuse the available reporting system by making malicious false allegations. I argue that such individuals should be subject to disciplinary strategies similar to those being developed and designed for top-down perpetrators of academic bullying and harassment. After all, in both cases, targets can face serious mental and physical symptoms after experiencing these unethical behaviours^{13,17}. For example, a confirmed case of abusing the reporting system should be mentioned in abuser's record so they cannot target others by changing their workplace but not their behaviour. This would be similar to institutional efforts to stop passing on validated harassers or bullies to other institutions⁵. It is important to emphasize that the targets of both top-down and upward academic bullying experience a wide range of bullying patterns over a period of time, and often have witnesses or documentation, or seek help to validate what they experience as bullying (for example, through consultation with trusted offices, including the

ombudsperson). This is less likely to be the case for abusers of the system.

Upwards bullying is not common, but it is a hidden problem in academia. It may manifest as the abuse of reporting systems and resources, and this can undermine confidence in efforts to counter bullying and harassment in academia. By clarifying these issues, we hope to motivate change in academic settings and empower targets across academia. Our workplaces should be safe environments in which we can do our best scientific work and improve science evolution⁷.

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Competing interests

M.M. discloses that (1) he is a co-founder and director of the Academic Parity Movement (www.paritymovement.org), a non-profit organization dedicated to addressing academic discrimination, violence and incivility; (2) he is an advisor for and shareholder in Partners in Global Wound Care (PGWC), and a co-founder of and shareholder in NanoServ Corp. and Targets' Tip Corp.; and (3) he receives royalties/honoraria for his published books, plenary lectures and licensed patents.

Additional information

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