

Academic cyberbullying

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Academic harassment is a violation of human rights in the academic setting.¹ This dangerous practice has evolved a fast-track cyberbullying facet, manifested by the use of online tactics to increase the level of fear, intimidation, isolation and thus the physical and mental injuries inflicted on targets.²⁻⁴ These tactics are focused on psychological attacks meant to destabilise, undermine and essentially break the personality of the targets, leading them to feel powerless and helpless to take any action and even to become mentally ill.

These tactics can include, but are not limited to:

- Emails: i) illicit surveillance of email communications, which might often include direct interference by the aggressor, deleting emails, file attachments, threads of communications, automatic replies or even blocking colleagues without the target's knowledge/consent; ii) the daily receipt of multiple spam, phishing or malware-containing emails to disrupt work activities and to destabilise the target; iii) the receipt of cumulative uncooperative and even rude emails from managers and administrative staff within a short period of time to affect the performance of crucial obligations, such as the delivery of lectures and/or grant proposals; iv) the receipt of threatening/intimidating emails early in the morning and/or after business hours placing the target in an anxious state all day, causing insomnia or affecting the weekend's rest; and v) Sexually explicit email communications and/or relation-seeking spam emails that arrive in the target's work email to demean, offend and undermine them.
- Persistent interference with an academic's digital profile by eliminating information from their staff webpages without their knowledge and/or adding ghost co-authors of their work and/or deleting information about their publications.
- Multiple and persistent nuisance calls at unsocial hours from callers informing the targets that their accounts have been hacked (e.g., false hospital

appointments in academic medicine) designed to create a constant state of poor mood, fear and shock.

- Ordering goods or services with malicious intent on behalf of the target.
- Illicit surveillance of private email accounts and mobile communications, texts and images designed to elicit information which could be used to entrap, sabotage or undermine the target.
- The receipt of coded spam messages containing threats, inferior job offers or the editorship of non-existent journals to intimidate, confuse and belittle a target.

The distinct advantages of the above-mentioned concerted bullying behaviours are that they are not location- or time-specific and, more importantly, have no witnesses. The target is at the mercy of the aggressor seeking to disrupt their life and profession and to catch them out on every possible occasion. The main objective is for the targets to know that they are unacceptable/unwelcome people and are being monitored. By applying cyberbullying tactics, over time, the target's sense of agency and self-confidence becomes diminished, and a previously energetic, bustling person can become reduced to a numbed and anxious version of themselves.

The effects of cyberbullying are devastating. Physical symptoms include insomnia, nausea, migraines/severe headaches, palpitations, stomach pains, incontinence, loss of appetite, weight loss and lethargy.^{5,6} Psychological symptoms include distress, high levels of anxiety, feeling isolated, loss of confidence, panic attacks, anger and mood swings, lack of motivation, depression and suicidal thoughts.⁷ In fact psychological harm is not confined to targets (who may suffer for decades⁸) but also extends to members of their family and to associates.

The use of digital technologies in the conditioning, controlling and finally removing the targeted employee from their workplace is not only inhumane, unethical and unprofessional but also unlawful. It breaches individuals' human rights to respect for private and family life and the right to data protection as well as their rights to human dignity, health and safety at work. These rights are protected by international human rights law and national human rights or constitutional laws (e.g., in the European Union, Articles 1, 7, 8, 13, 21, 30, 31, and 47 of the EU Charter of Fundamental

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Fig. 1: The anatomy of bullying and cyberbullying: enablers and psychological tactics to remove targets from their working place.

rights are relevant⁹). It is difficult to argue that harassment (digital or otherwise) happens because of negligence—instead it is a purpose-driven process of unwarranted interference with one’s life, career, reputation, and professional relations that may be tolerated and even concealed by institutions.

Institutions must display zero tolerance for academic bullying and harassment not only because they corrode organisational cultures, but also because such behaviours are both distracting and destructive; they deprive the organisation of talented individuals and institutionalise disrespect for human rights and the sanctity of individual personality. Researchers cannot contribute their best when they are under fear of harassment, bullying or abuse. They have the rightful expectation to be treated with dignity, respect, courtesy, consideration, and professionalism.

Regulators must ensure that institutions comply with their legal obligations and that individuals receive real and effective protection of their human and labour

rights. Institutions could be required to produce annual statements about complaints, staff grievances and bullying and harassment incidents as well as about the measures they took to address them and reduce them. Naming and prosecuting the abusers of human rights is also an effective strategy. Ultimately, academic bullying and harassment are made possible only by unethical and unlawful actions (Fig. 1) which, under public or media scrutiny, all organisations would wish to disassociate themselves from. Exposing those actions and raising awareness about their psychological effects and human rights implications would help create more respectful, safe and healthy academic environments.

Contributors

All authors conceived and wrote the manuscript.

Declaration of interests

Morteza Mahmoudi discloses that 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 harassment. Dora Kostakopoulou discloses that she is an advisor to the Academic Parity Movement.

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