

Academia as an Incubator of Oppression and Violence: A Closer Look at Academic Mobbing and Bullying Offline and Online

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Abstract

Academic mobbing, bullying, and cyberbullying are pervasive and interconnected harms in academe with scarce conversation and intervention devoted to them. The author discusses what these phenomena are and asserts academia and its institutions are incubators of oppression and violence as well as protectors of these abuses. The text illustrates some of the destructive consequences for targets of these attacks, refuting other conceptualizations that downplay the severity of academic mobbing and bullying. The author also contends that understanding of academic mobbing and bullying must be multimodal and extend to cyberspace. The text concludes with how both gross negligence and the illusion of the academy as a just exemplar sustains these harms.

Keywords: academia, institutional culture, academic mobbing, academic bullying, organizational culture, abuse, aggression, harassment, humiliation, smear campaign, cyberbullying, toxicity, social murder, harm, suicide, violence, health risk

1. Introduction

On the 12th of April in the year 1994, Justine Sergent was found dead in her garage from carbon monoxide poisoning (Cran, 2018). Sergent, a professor and cognitive neuroscientist at McGill University, endured over two years of intense scrutiny, humiliation, and degradation of her work and personhood that stemmed from research allegations within her institution (Ratelle, 1994; Seguin, 2016). In advance of her death, Sergent detailed in a letter “the “nightmare” and “harassment” she believed had “no end in sight” (Westhues, 2005, p.25).” Justine’s battle concluded with a suicide many have attributed to academic mobbing. While there are numerous brutal activities in the ecosystem that is academia, among the most enduring, deadly, and destructive are academic mobbing and bullying. The purpose of this text is to offer a nuanced and critical perspective of academic mobbing and bullying. In doing so, I both extend and challenge extant conversations by suggesting that academic mobbing and bullying are violent, incubated through academia’s culture, and permeates to the internet.

2. Academic Mobbing and Bullying

To be sure, while understudied and typically unaddressed, academic mobbing has already amassed multiple definitions. As Metzger, Petit, and Sieber (2015, p.139) report, “the Chronicle of Higher Education defined academic mobbing as bullying where members of a department gang up to isolate or humiliate a colleague.” Similarly, Khoo (2010, p. 61) discusses it as ““non-violent” attacks where “one or a few academicians threatened by a target launch a desperate campaign, infecting person after person with the desire to eliminate,” harass, harm, humiliate, and tear down that target. While those definitions are useful in outlining some behaviors in academic mobbing, they either position this behavior as non-violent or are limiting in conveying its devastation (Iloh, 2021c). Seguin’s definition (2016) is particularly instructive as it states that academic mobbing is “strategic,” “led by a group of instigators/recruiters,” and often involves “fabrications, anonymous accusations, hateful messages, rumors, intimidation, public humiliation, withholding information, tampering with work, downplaying accomplishments, defamation, secret convenings to discuss target, and police-like surveillance and scrutiny” that makes target out to be a problem. Ultimately, Seguin (2016) sees academic mobbing as a “social murder a person can’t survive.” In addition, targets likely experience threats, “rhetoric that borders on hysteria in its exaggerations and fabrications,” as well as outright violations and unfairness within the target’s “adjudication and evaluation processes (Friedenberg, 20018).” Academic bullying, while in some ways similar to academic mobbing, should not be conflated with academic mobbing. Academic bullying is a form of attack usually carried out by one person, particularly with positional or social power such that this perpetrator faces no consequences for inflicting harm on

a specific target (Keashly, 2019; Westhues, 2005). Thoughtful exploration of mobbing and bullying separately could warrant specific forms of intervention and action.

Targets of academic mobbing and bullying are especially likely to be racially minoritized, younger, and women (Lampman, 2012; 2016; Prevost & Hunt, 2018). These targets also typically have less power, allies, and resources than their aggressors. Perpetrators and initiators of academic mobbing and bullying often possess multiple sociopathic characteristics (Khoo, 2010; Westhues, 2005) and are also more likely to be men (Hoenigman Meyer, 2021). Accordingly, academic mobbing and bullying are enabled in academia through multiple forms of abuse as well as power, resource, and information asymmetries in higher education (Iloh, 2019; 2020; 2021b). Those impacted by academic mobbing and bullying can find themselves struggling to navigate, let alone survive, the spiritual, professional, emotional, and psychological assaults they are experiencing within their workplace and beyond (Iloh, 2021a; 2021c; 2021d; Williams, 1991). Additionally, due to the complicity of others in the academic setting, a target may find any attempts to address such behavior exhausting and futile. Perpetrators are likely to even recruit harassers and saboteurs from other spaces and institutions to magnify harm to a target. Initial perpetrators might also continue attacks against their target even after the target exits the environment. Thus, the aggression and relentlessness of academic mobbing and bullying pushes targets to adopt the belief that they will have no relief and a spectrum of suffering, torture, and loss is imminent.

3. Academic Mobbing, Bullying, and the Internet

Given all that has been detailed about academic mobbing and bullying, it is no surprise that they can extend to the world wide web. With the prevalence of social media accounts, websites, and blogs dedicated to the stalking, trolling, harassing, defamation, and bullying of certain academics; mobbers and bullies have help in spreading the reach of their harm. Moreover, academics can seek the help of such harmful and biased platforms to aid them in targeting their colleagues. For example, enlisting a blog/website to surveil, troll, and harass a scholar is a way to amplify mobbers and bullies' attempts to defame, publicly humiliate, demoralize, and terrorize their target. Not only can the academic mobber or bully continue to covertly harass their target with anonymous comments of vitriol; the readership or followership of that platform can join the mobbers/bully in doing so as well. These attempts to direct hatred, animosity, and discrediting to a target can also lead to heightened visibility of the target such that they also receive threats of harm and violence from strangers.

4. Outcomes of Academic Mobbing and Bullying

Academic mobbing and bullying, whether online or offline, can lead to a plethora of personal, professional, and life consequences for targets. As it relates to potential professional outcomes, mobbing and bullying can be a catalyst for a variety of forms of withdrawal or departure from the organization or profession as a whole. This can include, "resignation, denial of tenure, taking permanent or recurring sick leave, job dismissal, or having all their responsibilities withdrawn (Seguin, 2016)." Additionally, targets may find it hard to persist in their profession, as attacks on their work and ability to work impact their productivity. Academic mobbing and bullying can leave targets struggling psychologically, emotionally, spiritually, and physically. Specifically, academic mobbing and bullying can prompt high levels of anxiety, stress, feelings of distress, depression, self-harm, suicidal ideation, outside threats of harm from others, and even suicide (Cassell, 2011). According to Seguin (2016), over 12 percent of academically mobbed professors die of suicide. The aggregate of prolonged stress from academic mobbing and bullying can also lead to health challenges and illnesses that result in premature death. As such, framing academic mobbing and bullying as non-violent is not only irresponsible, it minimizes severe consequences and fatalities.

5. Academia as an Incubator and Sustainer of Oppression and Violence

One might ask why these forms of violence are so prevalent within academe. Academia is a breeding ground and facilitator of mobbing and bullying (Barratt-Pugh & Krestelica, 2019). Specifically, it is an ecosystem that establishes and sustains an oppressive and hegemonic culture with power asymmetries that embolden perpetrators. Moreover, it is also an incubator and protector of abuse, aggression, whiteness, professional jealousy, epistemic violence, cruelty, nepotism, retaliation, competition, hazing, and harassment that multiple members of its ecosystem uphold, from students to senior leaders. For example, a young Black early career professor could be a target of mobbing and bullying that involves coordinated harassment and discrediting from students, faculty, and leaders whose identities are privileged and weaponized. Poisonous forms of leadership, colluding, anti-intersectional understandings of maltreatment, toxic positivity, and groupthink also support and elevate the harms of mobbing especially. "If professors aim to put a colleague down, one strategy could be to wear the target down by shunning, [humiliation], bureaucratic hassles, [discrediting and sabotaging work], and withholding of deserved rewards (Khoo, 2010, p. 61)." Through academic mobbing and bullying, any vitriol for a target that perpetrators possess can be transformed into material damage in the target's life.

The unwillingness of academia to take action against academic mobbing and bullying takes many forms, including ignorance and unbelief (Cassell, 2011). Through her dialogue with senior scholars, Erika Marin-Spiotta finds, “many view harassment as an injustice that happens somewhere else, not in their field or institution (2018).” Because of refusal and denial; targets of academic bullying and mobbing are left vulnerable to even more harm, gaslighting, retaliation, or silencing if/when they do consider addressing these conditions.

Academia, or those most protective of its culture, might be intentionally slow or unwilling to address academic mobbing and bullying. Ignorance and negligence of academic bullying and mobbing means institutions can avoid accountability for their harmful rituals and conditions. Those who raise concerns about an institution, problem, department, or leadership may be bullied or mobbed, which then quiets and/or invalidates voices advocating for change. Moreover, institutions addressing these forms of misconduct would mean an interrogation of their own abuses of power, whiteness, anti-Blackness, racism, discrimination, ageism, sexism, misogynoir, xenophobia, punitiveness, and systems of oppression. Additionally, through academic mobbing and bullying, a target who could pursue legal options for institutional wrongdoing may be too exhausted, maligned, ill, or fearful to do so after extensive attacks.

6. Conclusion

My premise here is that we must situate academic mobbing and bullying as more than just footnotes in the understanding of academic organizational culture, but as the violent, destructive, and multi-modal phenomena that they are. Moreover, in framing these aggressions as health threats, it is my hope that society can elevate concerns about the egregious ways those in academia harm others. In reviewing the legacy of Justine Sergent, there exists only a paucity of articles that name the brutality Sergent experienced. Additionally, countless minoritized scholars who too have suffered irreparable harm harbor stories unknown. Refusing to identify, confront, and eliminate academic mobbing and bullying not only disguises what lies within academic spaces, it sustains a culture that jeopardizes lives.

Short Biography of the Author

Constance Iloh is a social scientist committed to identifying the abuses and inequities embedded within the culture of social institutions such as higher education. Dr. Iloh works at Azusa Pacific University where she is an Associate Professor in the Department of Higher Education within the School of Behavioral and Applied Sciences. As a multidisciplinary scholar, Iloh finds possibility in working from the lenses of anthropology and business especially. Some of Professor Iloh’s recent work includes “Do it for the Culture: The Case for Memes in Qualitative Research” which appears in the *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* and “The Broken Yellow Brick Road: A Narrative Exploration of the College-Going Decisions and Trajectory of a Low-Income Single Mother of Color” published in *Education Sciences*. Dr. Constance Iloh received the honor of being listed as a *Forbes* 30 under 30 as well as having her work featured by *NBC Universal*, *NPR*, *Diverse Issues in Higher Education*, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, *Politico*, and others. Constance’s website is www.constanceiloh.com.

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