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Joining the #MeToo Chorus: Reporting Harassment During Psychology Graduate Training

Keely Kolmes

The first time I experienced sexual harassment at a job was when I was doing legal temp work in New York, and I did not address it. The second time was also through a temp agency, providing tech support to a medical imaging software company in California. At that job, I endured months of sexual and gender-based harassment. I spent hours crying in the bathroom at work. Despite being a night owl, I had started working the east coast 6am – 2pm shift to avoid my male coworkers who had taken to betting money on the amount of time it took me to resolve a technical problem. I only reported what happened to the temp company after I completed six months at the assignment and I was asked to return to the job. Of course, they didn't send me back. They found me another placement.

The third time was in 1997. I didn't identify it as sexual harassment for a long time. This time, the abuse had more far-reaching effects, because it was enacted by my first clinical supervisor in my first practicum. In some ways, you could say that this time I wasn't being paid to be harassed — I was actually paying for it.

I was in my second year of graduate school, and from August through February, my supervisor had been making extremely aggressive personal comments in individual supervision.

He also directed graphic sexual comments towards me in both group and individual supervision. I often left individual supervision in tears. But it was hard to make sense of because I didn't have any idea what clinical supervision was supposed to look like. He believed that supervision should look a lot like therapy. Even though I experienced many of his questions and comments as antagonistic and personally invasive, I was led to believe that avoiding them was "resistance," and might result in a poor evaluation or



my not learning how to be a skilled clinician. I lacked the experience to understand that his aggressive probing was out of place. One day, six months into the placement, things went to another uncomfortable place regarding his feelings of attraction towards me, and I left his office shaking. It took me awhile to feel able to drive. Instead of going home, I drove from the agency right back to school where I ran into a close friend and cried to her. When I told her what had happened to me that day, her eyes opened wide. She said the words: "That's clearly sexual harassment."

The next day I went separately to two trusted professors and told them each what had been happening. With my female professor, I expressed guilt. Did I make this happen? Was it my fault because I talked about being bisexual? Did I make it happen because I told him I was doing a dissertation about BDSM? She told me, "It doesn't matter what you said. It is his job to be professional and hold the boundary. Even if you *were* unprofessional -- and nothing you have told me indicates that you were -- it would not excuse this behavior from him." With my male professor, my first worry was: "Does my telling you this mean you have to do something about it? What if I'm not sure whether I want to report it?" Thankfully, this professor said, "Yes, I am supposed to do something about it. But I'd like to give you the space to figure out what to do and I will not take any action right now. Please take some time to think about this." I am so grateful to him for giving me the control over what I wanted to do, because I think it would have been even more disempowering to have that opportunity taken from me. Several days later, I knew that I needed to report this.

After I came forward and filed a complaint with the school and the agency, nine other women from my year and previous years came forward with similar stories. It wasn't all sexual harassment. Some told stories about how he had insisted they should seek personal therapy from him because "nobody else can understand and help you like I can." There were multiple tales of boundary and power violations. (He was eventually fired and I believe he later temporarily

lost his license, for an infraction that occurred years after I left the agency.)

And yet, despite the stories, despite the fact that this supervisor actually agreed that my description of the things he had said was accurate, the senior female staff liaison my school had assigned to help me transition to another supervisor told me: "We will give you a different individual supervisor, but we want you to continue in group supervision with him, because in *my* experience, these things only happen in private."

So unlike the previous two episodes, this time I fought for myself. I was adamant that I would not return to any kind of supervision with him. But it took my male professor's support to point out that group supervision was where the reply to my question about getting 7th grade boys to engage in therapy was, "You're an attractive woman, they're too worried about their dicks getting hard to engage in therapy." Asking me to make myself vulnerable again with someone I'd reported for harassment revealed a lack of understanding about the dynamics of either clinical supervision or harassment. I had to fiercely advocate for myself about things that seemed painfully obvious to me. The agency, and the replacement female individual supervisor continuously pressured me for the remaining three months to have a healing and processing session with them and the supervisor which I repeatedly declined and never engaged in. It was fascinating to both observe and experience a culture of disregard and an enabling system that wanted *me* to be the healer, the one to make it all okay. It frustrated me to see that my explicit statements about what I needed to feel protected were not going to be respected. The supervision may have ended, but I had to remain vigilant.

And even then, when I had stood up for myself, and even after they assigned me another group supervisor, I continued to suffer in multiple ways. I continued to hear stories from the women who remained in our old group. They would tell me that this supervisor used their group supervision as a kind of personal therapy to talk about his feelings about what happened

with me. It made them uncomfortable. Others now considered me a safe person to complain to about his other actions with them. Well, this all made me pretty uncomfortable too. I had to finally ask people to please just not tell me anything. I was just trying to survive my second year of graduate school and continuing to hear more stories about him was triggering.

I was also struggling to make meaning of this experience in the midst of a formative year of training for me. My supervisor, remarkably, did not accuse me of misrepresenting anything he had said. In our one exchange with the clinic director, the week after our last supervision session, I presented a long document describing the multiple interactions that had caused me such distress over the past year. My supervisor agreed that everything in my document was accurate. These were his words. However, he claimed that the meaning I made of his words was wrong – that I had misunderstood his intent. It was painfully ironic to be in a setting in which I was being trained to trust my feelings and perceptions, while simultaneously being told my feelings and perceptions of ongoing harassment were not “accurate.”

This was also an astounding display of male privilege: your experience is overruled. I am the decider of what these words mean. I was being told that my experience didn't count, and it seemed rather dismissive of the person being harmed. But I was strong enough to insist that I get to be the co-decider, the arbiter, of the meanings of those words and interactions. It made me wonder what would have happened if he had not frequently been so explicit, had his words not caused such an extreme reaction in everyone else who read that document? Would my experience have been discounted if it was all subtext, looks, prolonged gaze? It also made me understand my confusion and why I had to wait six months until finally what was said was so unmistakable, despite feeling nauseous every day I had to go to supervision.

I also had to consider what, if anything, I might say during interviews for my next practicum placement. Would I disclose what happened to me and have to endure more questions about

it? Should I gloss over it? My advisor encouraged me to focus my responses on my second replacement supervisor and to not bring up this experience during my interviews. But I felt more anxious than usual in my interviews. Thankfully, I was placed at a training site I loved. I felt safe and supported there, and I returned for a second year part-time internship. During my first year, within my group supervision, I did disclose what had occurred, and I eventually told my two individual supervisors, as well. It felt very affirming to do this within a context of trust and safety. It also was satisfying to finally learn what supervision with appropriate boundaries felt like. I am still in touch with one of these supervisors from two decades ago.

A few years later, I participated in an interview for a dissertation that a classmate was doing on graduate students who had experienced harassment at their training and internship sites. Most participants had experienced harassment from staff or clients. I was the only person out of nearly 20 who had experienced it from a supervisor. I was also the only person who reported it. In looking at the harmful effects of the experience, it seemed I was faring better than the others. I do think it was empowering to report it. On the other hand, I continued to suffer consequences.

I believe that one of the reasons it took me seven years to graduate is that being sexually harassed in my second year of graduate school left me feeling that I needed more training to “make up for” the lost year. Although that supervisor did teach me some valuable things during our time together, I was left with a deep insecurity about that year of training. I kept taking on extra training to try to make up for his deficits, some of which I carried as my own. Those extra years cost me money and prevented me from getting a head start on repaying my loans. It would have been nice to have been compensated for the time and money that this awful experience took from me. But of course, pursuing that would have set me back even more in time and energy.

It is costly to be harassed and it is also costly

to report it. Don't blame people who don't have the time and stamina to halt their careers to deal with this. It is so easy to say people should report these things. But it is also a sacrifice that you cannot understand if you don't live through it, even if empowerment is part of the package. Fighting can be exhausting. Don't be surprised when people you think of as strong or powerful let these things slide. Most of us are too busy working and too tired to address each and every incident of harassment we experience in our lifetimes. We have classes to teach and books to write and dreams to chase. We have to choose our battles.

I do not know a single person who has lived in a female body who doesn't have a backlog of harassment stories to share. We get tired of letting things roll off our backs but the alternative can be expensive when we consider all the other things we want to get done. Laughing off unwanted attention as if it is not violent, threatening, or offensive can seem more expedient. We become accustomed to "making nice" with colleagues who have crossed our boundaries because we are wary of having it framed as our problem or our over-sensitivity. It was extremely time-consuming to report my harassment, but even on the small scale, many of us don't have the time or energy when leaving a party or walking down the street to tell you that your comment about how our clothing fits our bodies is not welcome. It is often faster, simpler to laugh or shrug off, even as it irritates. We don't have the extra time to stop and explain this to you. This should not have to be the bad bargain we get when we are born into a female body.

Don't remind us that all men aren't like this. We are well aware. We do not need a reminder that there are good men in the world. Many good men supported me during this period, particularly my male professor who is now a friend and colleague. And more than one female colleague failed me, like the female faculty liaison who tried to encourage me to go back to group supervision because "in my experience" harassment doesn't happen in a group setting. Or the female supervisor who kept pestering me to do the processing session with the harassing supervisor.

If you have a friend, classmate, or colleague who is experiencing harassment, the best thing you can do is to be a supportive listener to this person. Understand that people make all sorts of choices about if and when to report such incidents including whether doing so will involve more time and effort than they feel they have. As a supportive listener, you can help empower a person to make the best decision for themselves moving forward, even if for that individual, that means moving on without reporting it.

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