

How to combat workplace bullying in academia: insights from previous initiatives and ideas to move forward

**Simone M. Pieber, Anouk Beniest, Anita Di Chiara, Derya Guerer,
Mengze Li, Andrea Popp and Elenora van Rijsingen**

Paper headlines

A Lawsuit Accuses Harvard of Ignoring Sexual Harassment by a Professor

The controversy surrounding John Comaroff, an anthropologist, has divided the faculty, with scholars like Jill Lepore and Henry Louis Gates Jr. supporting their colleague.

SCIENCEINSIDER | EUROPE

ETH Zurich starts process to dismiss professor accused of bullying students

Swiss university shut down astronomy institute last year where accused professor worked

31 OCT 2018 • BY [GRETCHEN VOGEL](#)

Science

In the science lab, some bullies can thrive unchecked for decades

Bullying claims suggest a scientist's life is at odds with the profession's noble ideals

● **[Bosses at leading UK science institute accused of bullying staff](#)**

ASIAN AMERICA

Black, Asian law students call for professor to be suspended over racist remarks

Penn's Amy Wax said on Tucker Carlson's show that Black and Asian people are resentful toward "Western peoples' outsized achievements."

Former MIT professor accused of sexual harassment withdraws from NYU hiring consideration

Dr. David Sabatini resigned from MIT last month.

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EXCLUSIVE

News | Investigation

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Al Jazeera investigation reveals how some of Britain's top universities fail to protect students from sexual misconduct.

CAREERS

Academic bullying is too often ignored. Here are some targets' stories

25 MAY 2021 • BY [KATIE LANGIN](#)

Scientific studies

RESEARCH PAPER | VOLUME 40, 101121, OCTOBER 01, 2021

STEM the bullying: An empirical investigation of abusive supervision in academic science

Sherry E. Moss ¹ ✉ • Morteza Mahmoudi ¹ ✉ • [Show footnotes](#)

[Open Access](#) • Published: September 07, 2021 • DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.eclim.2021.101121>

Articles

Early work-environmental indicators of bullying in an academic setting: a longitudinal study of staff in a medical university

Christina Björklund ✉ , Marjan Vaez & Irene Jensen 

Pages 2556-2567 | Published online: 29 Feb 2020

Cuts and Bruises Caused by Arrows, Sticks, and Stones in Academia: Theorizing Three Types of Racist and Homophobic Bullying in Adult and Higher Education

Mitsunori Misawa, PhD

First Published November 20, 2014 | Research Article |  Check for updates

<https://doi.org/10.1177/1045159514558413>

[Article information](#) ▾

Published: 18 March 2008

Workplace Bullying In Academia: A Canadian Study

Ruth McKay ✉, Diane Huberman Arnold, Jae Fratzl & Roland Thomas

Employee Responsibilities and Rights Journal 20, 77–100 (2008) | [Cite this article](#)

4011 Accesses | 101 Citations | 43 Altmetric | [Metrics](#)

Published: 14 March 2012

Workplace Bullying in Academia Creates a Negative Work Environment. An Italian Study

Gabriele Giorgi ✉

Employee Responsibilities and Rights Journal 24, 261–275 (2012) | [Cite this article](#)

1785 Accesses | 52 Citations | [Metrics](#)

Original Article | Published: 07 November 2008

Contrapower Harassment in Academia: A Survey of Faculty Experience with Student Incivility, Bullying, and Sexual Attention

Claudia Lampman ✉, Alissa Phelps, Samantha Bancroft & Melissa Beneke

Sex Roles 60, 331–346 (2009) | [Cite this article](#)

3119 Accesses | 42 Citations | 23 Altmetric | [Metrics](#)

What is workplace bullying?

Bullying is any form of:

Harassment

Abusive, insulting, offensive language use and/or unwanted (physical) attention, etc.

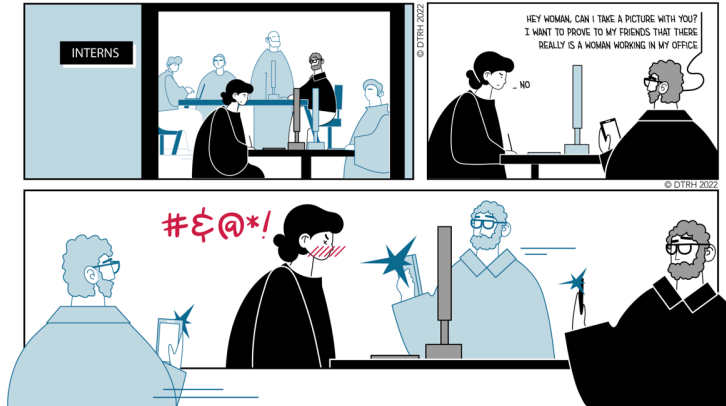
Ostracism (social rejection)

Deliberate exclusion from social events, isolation, jeopardising work-relationships, etc.

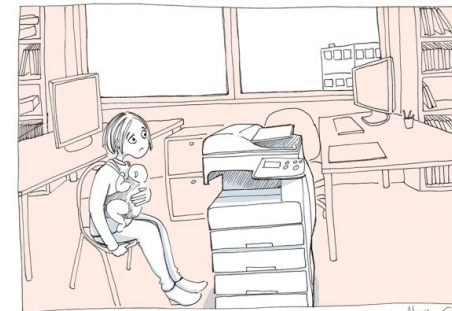
Intimidation

verbal, physical, psychological intimidation, etc.

www.didthisreallyhappen.net



Mobbing:
more than one
aggressor!



www.didthisreallyhappen.net

Scan/click for more detailed explanations:



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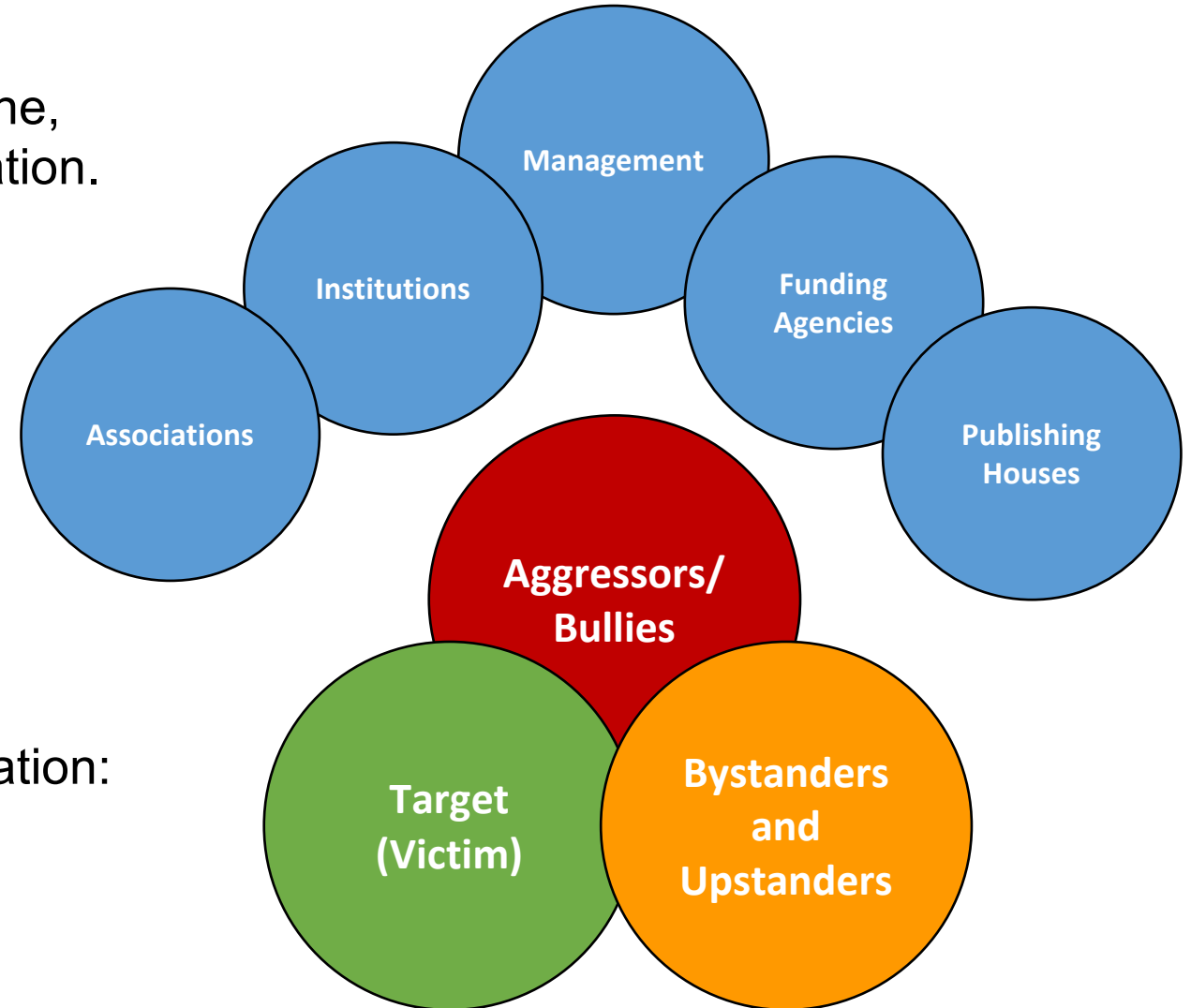
Dynamics

Multiple indirect parties have the power to intervene, solve, support or prevent a bullying/mobbing situation.

More regarding dynamics is available in our Mind Your Head blog post from 2021!

Direct parties involved in a bullying/mobbing situation:

- the aggressor(s)/bully(ies)
- the target/victim
- the bystanders/upstanders



Actions Fields

Top Down Action

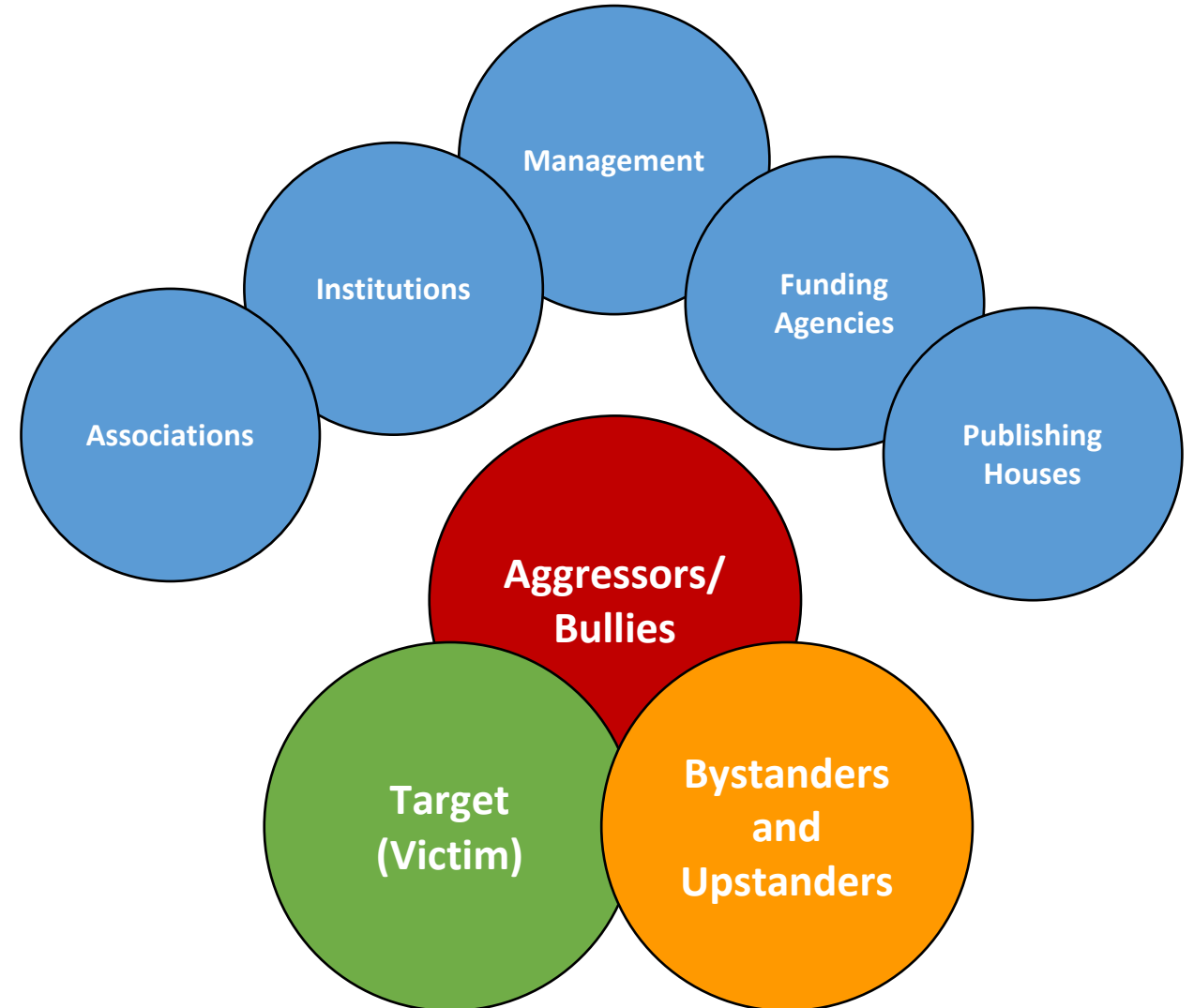
- Consequences/sanctions
- Code of conduct

Lateral Action

- By-/Upstanders speaking out
- Diffusing the situation
- (Legal) support for target/victim

Bottom Up Action

- Educating people
- Creating awareness



Recent and Upcoming Activities

- ✓ Mind your Head Blog Post Series 2018+
- ✓ 10 Step Practical Guide 2020
- ✓ EGU Blog Post 2021
- ✓ Short Course EGU GA 2021
- ✓ Great Debate EGU GA 2021

➤ EGU Blog Post 2022 (out now!)

➤ Survey (coming soon) – “...to document adverse experiences in the geosciences and gain insights for initiatives that help to improve workplace culture.”

Mind Your Head #1: Let's talk about mental health in academia

Elenora van Rijsingen · May 30, 2018

Mind your head #3: A healthy relationship with your advisor

Elenora van Rijsingen · July 11, 2018

How to Combat Bullying and Discrimination in the Geosciences

Here are 10 practical steps that scientists can take to counteract the detrimental effects of abusive academic work environments.

By A. L. Popp, C. A. Hall, and Y. A. Yilmaz · 24 November 2020



Mind your Head: An introduction to Workplace Bullying in Academia

Simone Pleber, Elenora van Rijsingen, Derya Güler and Anouk Beniest · March 24, 2021 · Mind Your Head · No Comments



Reading Material

Popp, Pieber, Raji, Li, Guerer, Di Chiara, Beniést(2022) – **our latest blog post!**
<https://blogs.egu.eu/geolog/2022/05/11/how-to-egu22-help-us-ensure-a-safe-and-inclusive-egu22/>

Pieber, van Rijsingen, Gürer, Beniést (2021) <https://blogs.egu.eu/divisions/ts/2021/03/24/mind-your-head-an-introduction-to-workplace-bullying-in-academia/>

Popp, Hall, Yilmaz (2020) <https://doi.org/10.1029/2020EO151914>

More Reading Material:

Duffy, M. and Sperry, L. (2014) Overcoming Mobbing: A Recovery Guide for Workplace Aggression and Bullying. [Oxford University Press](#) (Ed); Illustrated Edition (10. Januar 2014), 256 p. ISBN-10: 9780199929559.

Hemstra, J. (2019) Being bullied? Here's what to do, c&en mag, 97 (44).
<https://cen.acs.org/careers/graduate-school/Being-bullied-s/97/i44> Published on 5 November 2019.

Keashly L., in Special Topics and Particular Occupations, Professions and Sectors, P. D'Cruz, E. Noronha, L. Keashly, S. Tye-Williams (eds.), Handbooks of Workplace Bullying, Emotional Abuse and Harassment, vol. 4 (Springer, Singapore, 2019), pp. 1–77, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-10-5154-8_13-1

Mahmoudi, M. (2020). A survivor's guide to academic bullying, Nature Human Behaviour 4, 1091 (2020). <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41562-020-00937-1>

Poole, R. (pseudonym) (2016) Bullied out of research. Science, 354 (6311), pp. 514. DOI: 10.1126/science.354.6311.514; <https://science.sciencemag.org/content/354/6311/514.full>

Seek help, attend workshops, provide data:

- **Royal Society of Chemistry (RSC)**
RSC Helpline, +44 1223 624606 (International)
<https://www.rsc.org/new-perspectives/talent/bullying-and-harassment-support>
RSC Web Contact Form
<https://www.rsc.org/new-perspectives/talent/bullying-and-harassment-support/#emailus>
- **American Geophysical Union (AGU)**
Ethics and Equity center offers Free Legal Advice
<https://ethicsandequitycenter.org/legal-consultation/>
- **Academic Parity Movement:**
Report incidents, seek psychological/legal help, or attend workshops: <https://paritymovement.org/about/>



Credit: Dustin Belt. Distributed via [Unsplash](#).

Bystander intervention

DIRECT:

- Direct Confrontation
- Distraction

INDIRECT:

- Delay
- Delegate
- Document

2D

DIRECT INTERVENTION

DIRECT CONFRONTATION:

If you feel safe and comfortable to **confront the aggressor directly**, you can call out their behaviour or question the intent (e.g., "I understood xyz, did you mean it like that?").

Be firm, respectful and concise. This strategy can be powerful, yet, be aware, that it is also risky as it can lead to repercussions for you and the person being targeted.

DISTRACTION:

De-escalate the situation by **defusing or redirecting the focus in a subtle way**.

You can do so by, for instance, interrupting the situation by asking a question or making a comment unrelated to the previous topic. You can also ask the person who is targeted if they want to join you in going to another event (e.g., a workshop or seminar) that is about to start.

3D

INDIRECT INTERVENTION

DELAY: If you are unable to act in the moment, **offer support to the targeted person after the incident** by acknowledging that they experienced inappropriate behaviour. Ask them if they are okay and/or need help (e.g., to report the incident or to leave the venue / find a safe space). Respect if they deny help.

DELEGATE: If you are unable to intervene directly, **find someone else who can assist to resolve the situation**, ideally someone in a power position.

DOCUMENT: **Make a record of the incident containing all details** (who, where, when?), which can become very helpful if the person who was being harassed decides to report the incident. Do not share your documentation with anyone without the consent of the person who experienced the harassment.

What is workplace bullying?

Box 1

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Examples of means of workplace bullying and workplace mobbing in academia

Harassment, ostracism and intimidation are typical means of workplace bullying and workplace mobbing.

- **Harassment**, such as using abusive, insulting or offensive language or any other form of unwanted (physical) behaviour towards a target
- **Ostracism** (social rejection), such as through deliberately excluding the target from work meetings, team activities, and isolation through jeopardizing the target's (work-related) relationships
- **Intimidation**, including verbal, physical and psychological intimidation, such as threatening with contract termination, vandalising target's laboratory equipment, or staring at the target



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Behaviours and actions may have a broader range with blurry boundaries and increasing severity over time, e.g.:

- **Setting the target up to fail**, through, for instance,
 - withholding information vital to workplace performance,
 - setting unreasonable deadlines or constantly changing them,
 - setting tasks that are far beyond the target's skill level.
- **Humiliating the target**, through, for instance,
 - setting tasks that are unreasonably low,
 - ridiculing or belittling in front of colleagues, collaborators, etc.,
 - spreading rumours to make the target look like trouble/enemy.
- **Limiting the target's freedom**, through, for instance,
 - making up rules/standards that apply only to the target,
 - falsely accusing of wrongdoing ("blaming the victim"),
 - denying chances to communicate (e.g. interrupting).
- **Hindering professional development**, through, for instance,
 - denying access to resources or opportunities,
 - denying credit for scientific ideas and results (authorships),
 - discrediting the target in front of (future) collaborators/employers.

<https://blogs.egu.eu/>

Towards creating a healthy and safe working environment

Box 2

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Towards creating a healthy and safe working environment

Message for bullies

Workplace aggression thrives when management is negligent or promotes a toxic culture in the first place – yet, we all are responsible to reflect on our own character traits and behaviours. If you recognize workplace aggressions in your own behaviour (or within your team), please keep on educating yourself around this matter. Note that an apology can help the target in processing the experience and in recovering even years after the incidents.

Message for targets

If you sense or recognize that you are a target of workplace aggression, please know that you are not alone - we feel with you. You deserve to be respected and, certainly, plenty of professionals will be happy to collaborate with you based on upright integrity. You may be a target, but you do not need to be a victim! The guide "How to combat bullying and discrimination in the geosciences" provides 10 strategies to empower you.

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Message for bystanders

A target/victim might have difficulties engaging with you by themselves and can be uncertain on whether they can trust you. However, their suffering might be much worse than what you perceive. If you think you are a spectator to a bullying or mobbing situation, please know that as small as your supportive action may be, any clear sign of solidarity with the target matters. You may also contribute to a systemic change by educating yourself around the matter and challenging your colleagues, superiors and/or human resources on which systems they have in place to create a healthy and safe environment.

Message for management

You are responsible to set a safe framework and to train those in responsibility positions to recognize and effectively counteract abusive situations in academia, while keeping in mind the vulnerability of the target. When confronted with a situation, you need to hold yourself accountable, step away from primarily protecting the institution's reputation, and focus on effectively protecting your employees' and students' long-term health and safety. Today, a target/victim often needs to be their own biggest advocate on top of the strains from the initial situation - this is unacceptable, change it!

<https://blogs.egu.eu/>