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Sex-based harassment and organizational silencing: How women are led to reluctant acquiescence in academia

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Abstract

The #MeToo and the Time's Up movements have raised the issue of sexual harassment encountered by women to the level of public consciousness. Together, these movements have captured not only the ubiquity of sexual harassment in the everyday functioning of the workplace, but they have also demonstrated how women are silenced about their experiences of it. Inspired by the political and the social currents emerging from these movements, and theoretically informed by ideas of discursive hegemony, rhetorical persuasion and affective practice, this article draws on a qualitative study of early- and mid-career female academics in business schools to answer the following question: *How are victims who start to voice their experiences of sex-based harassment silenced within the workplace?* Our findings reveal that organizational silence is the product of various third-party actors (e.g. line managers, HR, colleagues) who mobilize myriad discourses to persuade victims not to voice their discontent. We develop the concept of 'reluctant acquiescence' to explain the victims' response to organizational silencing. In terms of its contributions to the extant literature, this article: (i) moves away from explanations of sex-based harassment that focus solely (or predominately) on the actions of individual perpetrators; and (ii) shows how reluctant acquiescence leads to maintaining the status quo in the organization. In highlighting features of academic work that facilitate reluctant

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acquiescence, we call for more contextualization of the dynamics of sex-based harassment specifically, and other forms of workplace mistreatment broadly.

Keywords
academia, discourse, hegemony, #MeToo, reluctant acquiscence, sexual harassment, silencing

Introduction

Originally conceived by social activist, Tarana Burke, the phrase 'me too' was coined over a decade ago, in 2006, with the intention to support women and girls of colour who were victims of sexual violence. In the aftermath of the sexual assault scandal of film executive Harvey Weinstein, on 15 October 2017 actress Alyssa Milano tweeted, 'If you've been sexually harassed or assaulted write 'me too' as a reply to this tweet.' Within hours, the two-word hashtag was trending number one on Twitter, and Milano's original tweet had received over 53,000 replies from all over the world. A social movement was born (Langone, 2018).

The #MeToo movement raised the issue of sexual harassment experienced by women to the level of public consciousness. In doing so, it illuminated two things. First, the movement captured the ubiquity of sexual harassment in the everyday functioning of the workplace. Indeed, it revealed how sexual harassment in organizations not only transcends cultures and geographies, but it is also present across myriad work environments – whether she might be an undocumented labourer cleaning toilets or a famous actress appearing in Hollywood blockbusters.[1] The #MeToo campaign vividly illustrated that even seemingly empowered women working in professional settings are not immune from experiencing sexual harassment; on the contrary, they are habitually its targeted victims. Second, though almost equally as disturbing, the revelations that emerged from the #MeToo movement disclose the poignant reality that victims are all too often silenced about their experiences with sexual harassment (Batty et al., 2017; Collinson and Collinson, 1996; McDonald, 2012; Watts, 2010).

The #MeToo movement has generated several implications for scholarly inquiry. At the most basic level, it has highlighted the need to conceptualize the antecedents of silencing experienced by victims of sexual harassment. In this article, we contribute to this debate by advancing knowledge on the broader phenomenon of sex-based harassment. Theoretically informed by the concepts of discursive hegemony (Fairclough, 2010), rhetorical persuasion (Symon, 2005) and affective practice (Wetherell, 2012), this article draws on a qualitative study of early- and mid-career female academics working in UK business schools to answer the question: *How are victims who start to voice their experiences of sex-based harassment silenced within the workplace?*

Before proceeding, it is important to offer a caveat concerning the term central to this article: sex-based harassment. Following Berdahl, we define the term to capture 'behaviour that derogates, demeans, or humiliates an individual based on that individual's sex'. Berdahl argues that those who engage in such behaviour 'are motivated and able to do so by a social context that pervasively and fundamentally stratifies social status by sex'

(Berdahl, 2007: 641). Whereas Berdahl uses the term 'sex', scholars have recognized that individuals can also be derogated, demeaned and humiliated on the basis of their gender. As such, we concur with Leskinen et al.'s (2011: 26) position that sex-based harassment not only captures elements of sexual harassment (Collinson and Collinson, 1996; McDonald, 2012; Wilson and Thompson, 2001) such as unwanted sexual attention and sexual coercion (Lim and Cortina, 2005), but also encompasses gender-based harassment, which 'communicates [verbally and nonverbally] hostility that is devoid of sexual interest'. By invoking the term sex-based harassment in this article, we are relatively well positioned to conceptualize a diverse set of behaviours that are intended to stratify social status based on sex (and/or gender) than would otherwise be permissive if we remained within the relatively narrow definitional parameters of sexual harassment.

Based on our findings, we offer multiple contributions. First, we broaden extant understanding of silencing (Brown and Coupland, 2005; Donaghey et al., 2011; Manley et al., 2016), by explaining how discontented employees who start to voice are led to (what we term) *reluctant acquiescence*. Second, we highlight how various third-party actors (e.g. human resources officers, professional colleagues and line managers [Quick and McFadyen, 2017]) are complicit in yielding reluctant acquiescence of victims. Based on our findings, we argue that sex-based harassment is accomplished, in part, with the complicity of various third-party actors within the organization rather than being solely the result of actions committed by individual perpetrators. Taking these contributions together, we heed and echo calls to better contextualize sex-based harassment specifically (Berdahl, 2007; Leskinen et al., 2011), and other forms of workplace mistreatment broadly (McCord et al., 2018).

In what follows, we first review the literature on organizational silence, focusing on how individuals are silenced in their work settings and highlighting gaps in prior explanations. We then introduce the ideas of discursive hegemony, rhetorical persuasion and affective practice, which theoretically frame our study. We subsequently describe our research context and methodological approach. Thereafter, we present our findings, which provide insights into three key discourses used to silence victims of sex-based harassment. We show how these discourses are mobilized within the workplace by third-party actors, and how they are experienced by victims, leading to their reluctant acquiescence. We close this article by discussing the contributions and the implications of our study.

Silencing in organizations

At the broadest level, silence in work settings refers to employees' disinclination to speak out. It is antithetical to voice (Donaghey et al., 2011), which involves having 'a say' over matters that affect one's working life (Dundon and Rollinson, 2011). Ever since the term was initially operationalized empirically in 1970 by Albert Hirschman (1970), silence has been interpreted as both a symptom and a response to workers' dissatisfaction or perceived mistreatment (Dean and Greene, 2017). Silence is mediated by power, which is contextually defined in terms of the position of individuals or groups within the particular organizational hierarchy (Behtoui et al., 2017; Wang and Hsieh, 2013). If an employee believes that she lacks power in relation to others at work, she is likely to be silent (Morrison et al., 2015).

Extant studies have provided insights about the contextual factors that foster silence within work settings (Morrison and Milliken, 2000; Simpson and Lewis, 2005). For example, research has examined how organizational cultures pivotally shape silence, highlighting how individualistic, competitive (Manley et al., 2016) and high-power-distance organizational cultures (Morrison and Rothman, 2009) are sites at which silence is fostered. Silence is also often the result of employees having few avenues of recourse to pursue issues that are of concern to them. This might be owing to the failure of existing organizational mechanisms to enable voice or, otherwise, the absence of such mechanisms altogether (Donaghey et al., 2011). Alternatively, speaking up about problems in the organization may not be perceived as effort-worthy (Morrison and Milliken, 2000) because of repeated organizational failures to respond to employees' complaints about injustice (Harlos, 2001). This phenomenon has been dubbed by some scholars as the 'deaf ear' syndrome (Goldberg et al., 2011; Harlos, 2001).

One the most conspicuous ways by which silence in organizations is maintained involves the role of management. According to Donaghey et al. (2011), management has a great degree of choice in creating spaces for voice and, concomitantly, establishing cultures of silence within the workplace. For instance, organizations can deliberately silence employees through agenda-setting and the arrangement of institutional structures (Auster and Prasad, 2016) that organize them out of the voice process. Pinder and Harlos (2001) argue that employees will be silent if management acts in ways that discourage communication from below or constructs speaking up as being futile or detrimental to one's career. In other words, managers can negate the efficacy of existing avenues of formal recourse that aim to safeguard workers' interests by either explicitly or tacitly discouraging employees from their utilization.

The literature also addresses lateral influences on silence. Scholars argue that discontented employees often withdraw their opinions because they fear isolation from the workgroup. This is especially the case when the individual believes that their position is representative of a minority viewpoint (Bowen and Blackmon, 2003; Milliken et al., 2003).

A body of research posits silence as a normative feature of organizational life (Morrison and Milliken, 2000). Brown and Coupland (2005) have explained how organizational discourses silence employees by casting normative pressures upon them to conform. They show how orally transmitted norms of conduct encourage employees to act in a predictable – and this often means a 'silent' – manner. They further demonstrate how victims reproduced the discursive practices that rendered them silent as they drew on prevailing discourses to author preferred versions of self. In a study of professional football players, Manley et al. (2016) draw on Foucault's concept of disciplinary regimes to show how organizational discourses influence individuals to embrace and reproduce specific values and norms and display a particular notion of self, leading to their conscious adoption – and ultimately their shared acceptance – of silence. They argue that 'silence', in this case, signifies empowerment and promotes a sense of belonging to the organization. Collectively, these studies illuminate how individuals are silenced in organizations through non-coercive, discursive means, and how under certain conditions employees willingly consent to being silenced and may feel empowered by doing so.

Any understanding of organizational silencing should be prefaced by a distinction between quiescence and acquiescence. Quiescence is the active, deliberate withholding

of voice owing to factors such as fear and anger (Pinder and Harlos, 2001). In contrast, acquiescence is a less conscious, passive and resigned state of silence owing to accepting the worldview of others and giving up on hope for improvement (Harlos, 2016).

The extant literature illustrates the myriad ways through which employees are silenced in work settings. What remains lacking in the existing scholarship is explanation into how people who start to voice their discontent are silenced. In other words, what are the types of discourses used to silence discontented employees who start to voice, how are these discourses mobilized in organizations, and how is the process experienced by such employees? We answer these questions in the present study.

Theoretical framework

To develop the theoretical framework of our study, we integrate ideas of discursive hegemony, rhetorical persuasion and affective practice.

Discursive hegemony

Discursive hegemony (Fairclough, 2010) is a theoretical concept that combines ideas of discourse and hegemony. Discourse refers to 'a set of meanings, metaphors, representations, images, stories, statements and so on that in some way together produces a particular version of events' (Burr, 1995: 48). It is a 'system of representation' that regulates all social interactions (Hall, 2001: 72). Although certain material conditions may exist independent of discourse, it is discourse that ultimately allows for such things to become culturally intelligible by attributing meaning onto them (Foucault, 1971). Discourse is seen as central in building knowledge and power. Knowledge claims codified within and through discourse are invoked to exercise power over certain classes of people using myriad forms of social control (Prasad, 2009) – a process that Foucault (1971) refers to as governmentality. It bears underscoring that discourse is never neutral; on the contrary, it performs in advancing certain narratives while relegating others (McGregor, 2003).

Discourses can become culturally dominant or hegemonic (Edley, 2001). For example, discourse portrays women as being natural caregivers. This discourse has become so culturally ingrained in many societies that it is a taken-for-granted, foregone assumption (Reynolds and Wetherell, 2003). Fairclough (1989) argues that some discourses achieve the status of 'common sense' and become accepted as 'cultural truths' in the process of individuals 'rationalizing' certain phenomena as natural. The ability of dominant groups to maintain hegemony over others is directly tied to their ability to influence the scope and the flow of discourse (Gramsci, 1971). Thus, according to Fairclough, 'hegemony and hegemonic struggles are constituted to a significant degree in the discursive practices of institutions and organizations' (Fairclough, 1989: 126).

Broad hegemonic discourses reflect in, and are reproduced and challenged by, localized micro-discursive practices (Zanoni and Janssens, 2003). Individuals continuously engage in micro-discursive interactions that influence and configure broader macro-frameworks of meaning (Potter, 1996; Wetherell and Potter, 1988). These micro-discursive practices help us understand how macro-discourses are created, and govern the ways in which people operate.

Rhetorical persuasion

Rhetoric refers to discourse targeted at influencing a particular audience through argument and persuasion (Gill and Whedbee, 1997). Rhetoric can be considered to be dialogical (Billig, 1996) where arguments are produced in a context with potential counter-arguments. Argumentation can construct certain versions of reality as legitimate, while undermining other versions (Phillips and Hardy, 2002). Rhetoric helps us to gain a better understanding of how hegemonic power operates by focusing on speakers' use of persuasive arguments (Zanoni and Janssens, 2003) to maintain and challenge the existing social order.

Rhetoric focuses on the persuasive function of micro-discursive activity. Potter (2007) identifies two rhetorical strategies to make arguments persuasive: 'reifying' seeks to convince others that accounts are facts; and 'ironizing' seeks to expose those 'facts' as a social construction (Potter, 1996: 107). To make their arguments persuasive (Warnick and Kline, 1992), individuals will often draw on well-known discourses (Burr, 2003). Topic avoidance is also a pertinent rhetorical strategy (Silience, 2000). One can change topics of conversation, thereby effectively removing certain issues from the agenda altogether (Billig, 1996). It is important to recognize that persuasion is also influenced by the perceived authority, credibility (Giles and Coupland, 1991), exposure and expertise (Fernando, 2017) of speakers.

Studies have drawn on theoretical ideas of rhetoric to offer explanations into how ordinary employees undermine and invalidate normative organizational discourses (Nentwich and Hoyer, 2012; Symon, 2005). Research in this area has also shown how individuals challenge the assumptions underpinning normative discourses, and rework them in an effort to create new organizational realities (Fernando, 2017). In a study of the Financial Accounting Standards Board (FASB), Young (2003) demonstrates how rhetorical persuasion is used to both maintain dominant accounting practices and silence alternatives to, and criticisms of, those practices. She argues that, 'highlighting the impracticalities of alternatives' (Young, 2003: 637) is a rhetorically effective argument insofar as it stresses the inevitability of the current situation, thereby reproducing the status quo (Wetherell and Potter, 1988).

Affective practice

Affective practice is the idea that the affective and the discursive intertwine (Wetherell, 2012). Social interactions and practices in which people engage can give rise to certain emotional experiences and inform how they encounter and see the world (Segarra and Prasad, in press). Emotions emerge as people feel implicated in discourse by their own, and by others', utterances and actions (Goodwin, 2006). From this perspective, emotions are not automatic, involuntary and non-representational; rather, they are engendered by the interplay between accounts, interpretations and the state of bodies (Ahmed, 2004).

Emotional responses are influenced by interpretations conveyed in practices of social interaction, encapsulating those practices that occur within the workplace (Seyfert, 2012; Sointu, 2016). Emotions can, thus, be read as being relational. As an illustrative example of affective practice in action, Loveday (2016) shows how working-class individuals

experience shame through micro-discursive practices (Wetherell, 2012).[2] She identifies how negative emotions are evoked as individuals recollect discourses that positioned their working-class socioeconomic status in pejorative terms. Namely, their subjectivities are cast as being 'valueless' by the ideologically constructed discourses of others. Value-laden judgements conveyed through discursive positioning can, thus, be 'internalised by subjects and negate their sense of self' (Sayer, 2005: 153).

Theoretical integration

We find ideas of discursive hegemony, rhetorical persuasion and affective practice conducive for understanding women's accounts of silencing in the workplace. Hegemony as discourse (Fairclough, 2010) provides us with a means to conceptualize the dominant discourses that maintain and protect the organization's status quo. Likewise, from such a theoretical location, we ascertain the notion that dominant discourses are reified through individuals' micro-level discursive practices (van Dijk, 2001; Zanoni and Janssens, 2003). The concepts of rhetorical persuasion and affective practice are well versed in identifying how these discursive practices operate and are experienced by individuals. Indeed, rhetorical persuasion and affective practice illuminate how certain discursive elements inform hegemonic discourses (Wetherell, 2012; Young, 2003).

Research design

In this section, we explicate the research design of the study. We first describe its context, before turning to present its data and methods.

Context

The research context of our study is UK business schools. In the last decade, scholars have expended much effort in unravelling the myriad institutional dynamics of UK-based business schools (Fernando, 2018; Fotaki, 2011). Extant studies on the topic have yielded numerous important insights pertaining to the lived experiences of academics within such an institutional context. One line of scholarly inquiry that has been pursued with earnest is the questionable role of managerialism on the narrowing of parameters of the types of research that constitute as institutionally valuable (Butler and Spoelstra, 2016; Willmott, 2011). A related stream of work has explored how various forms of managerialism have problematically impugned the identities and the experiences of business school academics (Clarke and Knights, 2015; Clarke et al., 2012; De Vita and Case, 2016). For instance, studies highlight how certain early career academics desperately seek senior collaboration to fulfil publication requirements. Likewise, individuals who struggle to meet performance demands woefully attempt to justify their approach to work and secure their professional legitimacy (Bristow et al., 2017; Fernando, 2018).

One poignant finding that has emerged from the corpus of this literature is that marginalized subjectivities are especially vulnerable within business school settings, and academia more broadly. Indeed, recent conceptual and empirical research on racialized and ethnic minorities (Johansson and Sliwa, 2014), lesbians and gays (Ozturk and Rumens,

2014), the disabled (Williams and Mavin, 2015), early-career scholars (Bristow et al., 2017) and women (Fotaki, 2011) have demonstrated how certain disenfranchised groups continue to be, in one way or another, relegated in UK business schools. In terms of the latter category, researchers have shown how female academics (and the knowledge they produce) are routinely subordinated in the business school's (hyper)masculinist culture (Fotaki, 2011). It is the normalization of such an androcentric culture that renders business schools as institutional sites at which various forms of harassment and bullying are propagated – and, at times, allowed to flourish. We build on existing studies by examining the experiences of early- and mid-career female academics with sex-based harassment.

Data and methods

This article is based on cases of sex-based harassment collected through one-to-one interviews with 31 early- and mid-career female academics employed at business schools at nine different research-intensive universities in the UK. Fifteen research participants worked at the lecturer level, and the remaining 16 held senior lecturer positions. All of our research participants were employed at relatively large business schools that enjoyed an international reputation for research excellence. Our study focused on exploring female academics' perceptions of career opportunity and career constraint. Sex-based harassment was a meaningful theme that we explored as it represented a salient constraint to women's careers in this sector.

Our sampling strategy adopted the snowball method. We started with eight academics known to us, and they put us in touch with other research participants who might be interested in speaking about the topics that we were interested in exploring. In following this strategy, our sample grew. Contrary to our expectations, it was not too difficult to gather a sample through snowballing. Indeed, many of the research participants we interviewed readily introduced us to others. Before commencing the interviews, our research participants were given participant information sheets, which provided full details about the study, the topics we intended to explore, and how we planned to store and report the data to protect participant anonymity.

In the course of the semi-structured interviews, which lasted between 1 and 2 hours, we asked research participants to share stories about their careers, focusing on their experiences at work, career paths, and challenges (Pizzorno et al., 2015). With regard to sex-based harassment, we asked research participants to comment on whether they, or others known to them, have experienced insulting, hostile and degrading attitudes that made them feel bullied and/or excluded because of their gender category. Furthermore, we also asked them to comment on women's experiences of unwanted sexual attention and sexual coercion in academia. Research participants described their own and/or others' experiences in academic settings by describing incidents involving sexist remarks, harassment during pregnancy and post birth, gender-based bullying and sexually motivated advances. To understand whether they believed the experiences identified were based on sex and/or gender, we asked them whether they thought, all else being equal, if men would have had similar experiences. In each case, we focused on understanding the research participants' decision to voice or to be silent, asking them to explain how they

decided on what to do, who influenced them and what exactly happened when they elected to voice their discontent. We encouraged them to detail events as vividly as possible, and invited them to reflect on how they, or those whom they were describing, felt at each moment.

Contrary to what we expected, and what the literature suggests about collecting qualitative interview data on sensitive topics (Adler and Adler, 2002; Dundon and Ryan, 2009), our research participants were willing to share their views and experiences freely. This may be partly owing to the close-knit network through which they were recruited. Furthermore, they expressed appreciation for our research agenda. Notwithstanding this point, during the course of the interviews, we were empathetic about our research participants' fears concerning such sensitive matters and, accordingly, we continued to reassure them anonymity (Dundon and Ryan, 2009). Several respondents spoke about the experiences of 'close others' whom they were careful not to name. However, they offered detailed accounts of the events, indicating that they had substantial information about the incidents they described and were very closely connected to the targets. There were no significant differences between the themes that emerged in their own cases versus the cases of close others.

The interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed into verbatim text. The main data analysis technique used was thematic analysis, which involves organizing and analysing textual data according to themes. NVivo was used to organize data. Following King's (2004) approach, we first developed a list of descriptive codes representing the key themes that research participants introduced, such as 'it's no big deal' and 'it happens all the time'. Once the initial codes were defined, we allocated sections of data notes to the appropriate themes. As part of the process, we also used NVivo software to analyse our data for high-frequency words. We found that the research participants often evoked words that signify negative emotions. We then coded our data for emotions such as 'fear' and 'shame', which formed part of our descriptive codes. Next, we moved from first-order descriptive codes to second-order conceptual codes. For instance, 'it's no big deal' and 'it happens all the time' were amalgamated to form 'invalidating claims of sex-based harassment'. Finally, we developed third-order aggregate themes after carefully considering the second-order conceptual codes. For example, 'archiving claims of harassment' and 'avoiding talk about harassment' formed the aggregate theme, 'people should trust the system to accord justice'. The third-order themes coalesce into the key discourses through which, we conclude, hegemony was maintained in the work setting. Figure 1 provides an overview of the coding template.

We also examined all data that were not associated with a particular theme in an effort to identify contrasting and minority views to ensure that our analysis is based on all of the research participants' voices. We re-read the contents of each theme to develop our understanding of the individual themes and relationships between them. When we spotted relationships between codes, we further explored them across all of the transcripts to fully understand the story that our research participants were seeking to convey. In the next section, we present our data in the form of vignettes of sex-based harassment. We have used pseudonyms and avoided naming our interviewees' departments or positions in order to protect their identities.

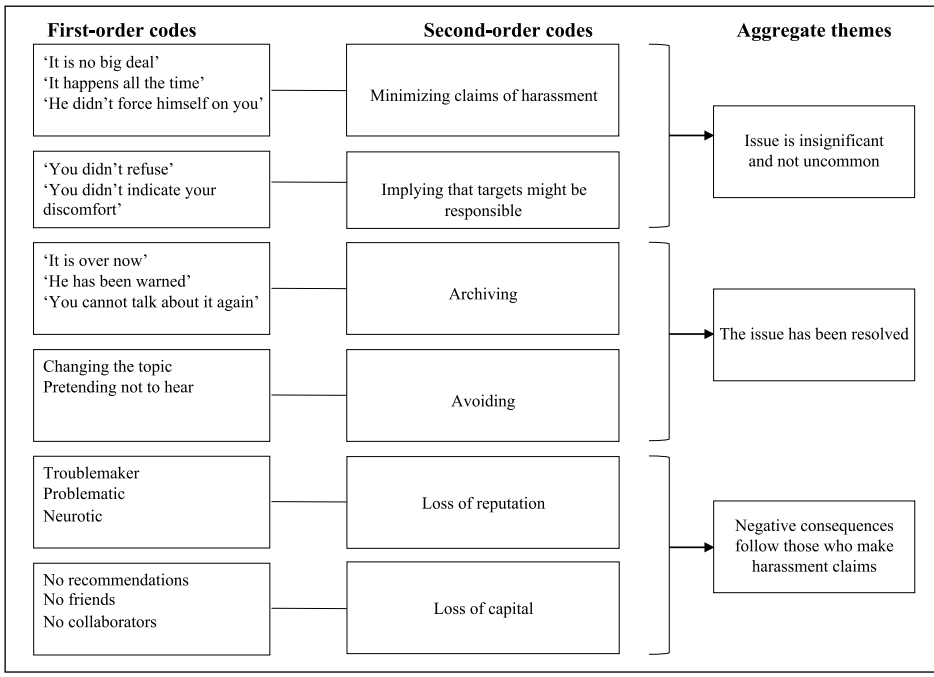

Figure 1. Coding overview.

Findings: Silencing female academics in the higher-education sector

Our research participants identified how sex-based harassment in work settings led to victims experiencing significant discontent. However, when women started to voice, they were silenced by third-party actors such as colleagues, managers and HR representatives. Our research participants' accounts of silencing coalesced into three key themes: (a) people can challenge the system only if their issue is uncommon and significant; (b) one should trust the system to accord justice; and (c) negative consequences follow those who challenge the system. In what follows, we explore how each discourse manifested in third-party actors' micro-discursive interactions with victims, leading to the latter's reluctant acquiescence.

People can challenge the system only if their issue is uncommon and significant

This discourse implied that people can pursue formal complaints and challenge the system *only* if their issue is uncommon and significant. This discourse was maintained by two argumentation strategies: *invalidation* and *reifying an alternative version of reality*. In the case of the former, when people started to voice their discontent, third-party actors (line

managers, senior managers and HR representatives) attempted to *invalidate* individuals' concerns (Nentwich and Hoyer, 2012) by casting their experiences as trivial and common, and thus having no legitimate ground for a formal complaint against the system.

Paula explains how a young female representative from HR responded to her complaint about a senior colleague's unwanted advances:

> I told them about how he insisted that we discuss papers during afterhours all the time and about everything he has said, and that woman told me that she does not see sexual harassment. She said that if she did, she would have supported me. She said that she has handled many cases of sexual harassment throughout her career. In their view, insisting on discussing a paper over wine is hardly a crime – I suppose they need evidence of something like rape or assault. However, they said that they will have a talk with him to settle matters. But after everything she said to me, I just didn't want to talk about it anymore – it is deeply humiliating. Because she is in HR, she technically should know about what she is talking about and she is an external party so she cannot be biased. She didn't get it I guess. It seems silly to get into this kind of a situation in the first place. To this date, I feel embarrassed when I think about the whole scenario.

The HR officer *ironized* the complaint (Potter, 1996) by suggesting that the evidence Paula presented did not amount to harassment, thus counter-arguing that she has no case to challenge the system. The officer drew on her expertise (French and Raven, 1959) and years of experience to make her argument persuasive (Warnick and Kline, 1992). Furthermore, she also rather 'patronisingly' offered to speak to the accused on Paula's behalf to clear any possible misunderstanding and make the environment more pleasant for her in the future. By virtue of their position as impartial conveyors knowledgeable about sexual harassment in the workplace, HR officers are able to legitimize their verdict and exercise hegemony by tacitly advancing the narrative (Fairclough, 2010) that one has to have a very strong case to lodge a formal complaint and thereby to challenge the status quo of the system.

In the course of this interaction, Paula felt positioned (Burr, 2003) as an individual who had misinterpreted her circumstances and felt deeply embarrassed owing to this perceived misunderstanding (Edwards, 1999; Kirrane et al., 2017). However, although Paula started to doubt herself, she did not totally yield to the perspective of the HR representative. Instead she felt torn between the HR representative's invalidating interpretation of the situation and her own beliefs of the situation. The conflicting reading of the situation led, ultimately, to Paula's reluctant acquiescence. It should be underscored that embarrassment was part and parcel of Paula's silence. Paula continued to feel embarrassed as she recalled her experience, highlighting how the process of recollection itself works as a type of affective practice (Wetherell, 2012) to maintain silence, as shame (Loveday, 2016) is foregrounded in the incident.

The second argumentation strategy evoked by third parties was reifying an alternative version of reality (Potter, 1996; Symon, 2005). This involved attempting to persuade victims that they might be partially responsible for their own fate, thus playing down the significance of their complaint and indicating to them that they do not have justification to challenge the system. Andrea explains how HR officers suggested that she may have 'unthinkingly' encouraged her harasser to repeatedly invite her out:

> Her view was that I never refused to attend the first few occasions, which was clearly outside professional interests. So he would have thought that I am interested in a non-professional relationship. I told her that I just got into academia, I was vulnerable, I didn't want to displease him, although I had no interest in him. I really needed someone to write with. I never thought that he would take it this far. But she [HR officer] clearly felt that he never forced himself on me – I had a responsibility to indicate to him if I was not interested. I mean she was nice and everything. She said that she understood that this is my first job and I don't know how things work still. HR is there to mediate and help people. She said that she takes her duty of care very seriously and she cares about my welfare. But it seems like I may have indicated that I am interested in him when I kept on meeting him at various places – even though we met for work. I didn't know this – this is my first job. And he is old enough to be my father. I felt that he was exploiting his authority, but then they clearly didn't think so. I have not worked anywhere else before so I suppose I was naïve. Maybe. I don't know. This was probably the most humiliating meeting in my life.

Andrea is a junior academic and she was in her very first academic appointment. As she complained about being harassed by a senior academic, the HR officer counter-argued by suggesting that Andrea did not clearly indicate to him that she was uninterested in a non-professional relationship. In doing so, the HR officer attempted to offer an alternative interpretation of her situation (Symon, 2005) and turn the responsibility onto the victim. Because Andrea's career progression heavily depended on publications and she was desperate for senior collaboration as an early career scholar (Prasad, 2013), she felt compelled to tolerate her collaborator's tendencies to transgress professional boundaries until things went completely out of hand. However, the HR officer did not consider the fact that the nature of academic work made young women like Andrea especially vulnerable to harassment.

The particular HR officer drew on discourses of 'duty of care' (Jingree, 2015) to position herself as having the victim's best interest at heart. Furthermore, she invoked 'newcomers' lack of know-how' (Cooper-Thomas et al., 2014) to convince Andrea that HR is better placed to judge the situation than is she. In the process, she enacted hegemony by weakening the significance of Andrea's complaint.

In the course of this interaction, Andrea was positioned as a naïve, inexperienced individual incapable of managing the boundaries of a professional relationship (Goodwin, 2006), and she felt humiliated because of such a reading of her situation (Kirrane et al., 2017). Although the HR officer's persuasive arguments led Andrea to wonder if she was herself responsible for her fate, she was unwilling to completely accept this position. However, in the state of confusion, Andrea reluctantly acquiesced to being silent, therein conforming to the hegemonic status quo by yielding to the authority of the system.

Trust the system to resolve issues and accord justice

This discourse involved emphasizing that employees should trust the system to resolve their issues and accord justice. In line with this discourse, as victims attempted to voice their experiences of sex-based harassment, ordinary colleagues vehemently counter-argued (Billig, 1996) that they should not do so because their issue has been resolved or would be resolved if they trusted the system. In other words, the argumentative strategy

involved challenging the fundamental assumption underpinning the victim's argument (Fernando, 2017; Nentwich and Hoyer, 2012), making the point that they do not have an issue that needs further redress.

Helen explained how her colleagues tried to convince her to stop complaining about a senior professor who repeatedly pressured her to 'up' her publication game during the last REF cycle (the UK's system for assessing the quality of research in UK higher-education institutions), disregarding the fact that she had been on maternity leave twice (Leskinen et al., 2011). When she appealed to HR, she was told that the harasser had been warned. What she found particularly revealing is the fact that her colleagues sought to convince her to stop talking about the issue any further because, as they interpreted it, the matter had concluded:

> I was at the point of a nervous breakdown and all they, who were women themselves, by the way, could say was 'it won't happen to you again. I am sure they sorted it out'. Nobody wants to go against the organization, although they barely know this man. I suppose it is about conformity. I really wanted to tell the world that he is so instrumentalist that he lives for 4 star publications, and if you are not producing that for him, you are not worth living. Maternity leave, in his view, is not a good enough excuse for not writing. But others forced me to just shut up and let it go because it's over. One of my friends said to me, 'you are being so stubborn and difficult, just let it go, no one else will act like you, it's over – just get it into your head. You do not keep on knocking on a door after it has been opened, do you? It doesn't make any sense'. When this happens, you really feel that maybe everyone is right; maybe it has been solved. These people are some of the smartest people in the world, after all. But then another voice in you also says 'no', and you continue to feel low.

Although pressure to publish does not necessarily constitute sex-based harassment in and of itself, the issue becomes a case of sex-based harassment because Helen's maternity leave was not respected by her head of department (Berdahl, 2007). Helen's colleagues insisted that she should stop pursuing the issue any further because the matter was now closed. They presented her promotion as 'factual evidence' of there being no issue upon which to take further action (Zanoni and Janssens, 2003). Moreover, drawing on the metaphorical example of 'knocking on an open door', they attempted to strengthen their argument by appealing to rationality and logic (Nentwich and Hoyer, 2012).

It is particularly revealing that Helen was positioned as a 'difficult character' who operated very differently from others in her profession in this interaction (Burr, 2003). In line with this deviant positioning, Helen felt confused, and started to question her approach. Her colleagues made the point that conformance is normative in the academic profession whereas voice is deviant. The collective efforts of her well-meaning female colleagues made it difficult for Helen to continue to exercise voice. She felt unsupported (Bowen and Blackmon, 2003; Milliken et al., 2003) and confused, and ultimately she reluctantly acquiesced by resigning herself to drop the case. However, she continued to feel low (Kirrane et al., 2017) as she felt denied the right to justice.

Avoidance was used as a rhetorical strategy (Silience, 2000) to negate the assumptions of the victim's argument. Anne explains how her colleagues started to avoid her when she continued to speak out about a senior colleague who harassed her on the basis of her gender and sabotaged her probation. Because Anne was now promoted, her

colleagues clearly felt that the issue was over, and they avoided her whenever she attempted to speak about an issue that, in their minds, did not exist any longer:

> I could have talked to a wall instead to get a better response; they just changed the direction of conversation whenever I talked about promotions. In their view, I am now promoted so it does not matter if my line manager made sexist remarks throughout my probation – telling me as a woman I should not be too careerist and that I write like a woman – beating around the bush without making a bloody point. I felt traumatized and almost came to the point that I doubted my own capabilities and thought that I will never get tenure. But in their view, it is over now, I don't have to work with him anymore, and I have been promoted, so nobody wants to hear about that old story. When people start to avoid you, you feel like a fool. Nobody wants to be known as a fool. So I guess there is nothing more to it. Of course, I am not happy.

In this interaction, Anne was positioned as foolish for continuing to talk about an issue that had been resolved by the system. The 'affective practice' (Wetherell, 2012) of judgement appeared to be a real source of anxiety for her, and she feared the negative valuation associated with being positioned as a foolish person (Loveday, 2016). Although Anne did not feel that she received justice for the trauma she went through, her colleagues' complicity confused her and, in the end, she felt compelled to reluctantly acquiesce. It is significant to note that Anne continued to feel unhappy about her experience.

Negative consequences follow those who challenge the system

This discourse highlighted the personal costs associated with challenging the system. In line with this discourse, when victims started to voice, third-party actors counterargued by emphasizing the impracticalities of taking their argument forward (Young, 2003).

Marsha explains how she was advised by well-meaning colleagues to not complain about unwanted sexual attention because she would be known as a troublemaker:

> So my close colleague's view was that, if this gets out, I would be the girl who accuses men of coming on to her. My colleague [name], who is a genuinely nice person and is known by everyone as a fair and good person, firmly believed that it is in my best interest to stop it. She told me that she is only saying this to me because she has my best interests at heart and I believe her. But it is difficult to forget what happened. The costs are great if I open my mouth and he just covers it up or if people cover for him. To be really honest, I am scared of being that person who people are wary of dealing with – so I don't know what to do. But I also feel that someone should speak up.

Marsha's colleague not only highlighted the negative repercussions of criticizing the system (Young, 2003), but also drew on the discourse of 'best interests' (Smeyers, 2010) as a rhetorical device (Warnick and Kline, 1992) to make her argument persuasive and convince Marsha to be silent. This excerpt illuminates how discursive hegemony in an organization is enacted by ordinary individuals who are most likely to be disadvantaged

by it (Strinati, 1995). In this interaction, Marsha realized that she might be positioned as 'the troublemaker'. This positioning instilled a sense of anticipatory fear within her (Edwards, 1999; Kirrane et al., 2017). Given that academia is a small and tight-knit community, where social capital is critical for career advancement (Angervall et al., 2018), having a negative reputation can lead to significant career disadvantages. However, at the same time, Marsha also felt that someone should speak up and voice the injustice she encountered, though, in the end, she reluctantly acquiesced.

Judy explains her colleague's counter-argument when she complained about her line manager:

> I was treated very differently to the guys. I was paid much less than two guys who were much junior to me, and on top of that I was always shoved to the corner. I finally thought that I can't take it anymore. I owe it to myself to say something, to do something about my plight. But my close friends at work were adamant that I should not say anything. My friend [name] told me about this girl who just couldn't find anyone to collaborate with her after she had accused a collaborator of stealing her data. People were scared to have anything to do with her. Anyone who makes a fuss is known as a problematic person. Everyone knows that. And they think that I will inevitably be a problem for the organization if I go ahead with this. I don't know if my situation is similar to the girl that [name] knows, but they are right about gossip traveling across the country in academia. It is such a small world and people know about everything. I honestly couldn't find one friend who would support me in this. They were all like 'this is the way the real world works' and 'you have to handle it in a more tactful way'. I don't know if I am immature for wanting to be treated equally. But when they talk about the dangers of challenging the system, I lose my confidence and start to rethink about everything. I don't want anyone to be afraid of engaging with me. I am still thinking. At the moment I am not doing or saying anything because I don't know what to say or do. It is not an easy position to be in. I feel bad all the time.

Judy's colleague attempted to establish a connection between socially accepted judgements (people who challenge the system are known as problematic) and the proposition that she wanted to promote (one should not make an official complaint about her line manager's unequal treatment) (Warnick, 2000). By doing this, she highlighted the impracticalities of challenging the system (Young, 2003). The fact that academia is an extremely 'small world' was used to support the point that so many people will get to know about Judy's 'problematic' behaviour and, as a result, hesitate to engage with her.

Judy's colleagues also drew on 'tact' (Agedbite and Odebumni, 2006) and the 'nature of the real world' as rhetorical devices to persuade her not to challenge the system, but rather to learn to cope within it. In the interaction, Judy felt positioned as an immature individual for trying to voice, and felt afraid of the prospect of people hesitating to work with her in the future (Kirrane et al., 2007). On one hand, she really wanted to voice against the injustice she encountered, although, on the other hand, she was afraid of the consequences that the exercise of such voice would engender on her career. She reluctantly acquiesced herself to silence (Pinder and Harlos, 2001) and continued to feel bad about her plight.

Table 1 offers additional representative quotes, categorized by second-order codes, which emerged from the study.

Table 1. Additional data.

Second-order codes	Data excerpts
Invalidating complaints	When I joined, this professor from [name] assumed the unofficial role of a mentor. He published in [name] area and he came to me actually, because my PhD was related to his work. He advised me, introduced me to people. One day we went for coffee after data collection and he started talking about how he liked to have sex and it was all wrong. And I was listening, trying to act like nothing was wrong with it. He didn't touch me but he was talking and I suppose I was listening – I had two papers with him. Two years of work. Eventually I thought this is wrong and I raised the issue with my mentor. He said that some odd guys talk like that – it is nothing new in this world we live in. So his advice was to keep away. But don't complain because it is not a massive issue – and I was like 'oh okay, sorry that I thought of it as a massive issue, stupid me'. Because that is exactly what he implied. I debated about this in my head again and just thought, 'I am going to let it go because I just can't face another person telling me that "it is not a massive issue, you are dumb to think so".' (Chiara) They just ordered me around, told me to pick up little things, do the admin work that nobody else wants to do, and excluded me when it comes to joint grants or anything important like that. And when I start to complain or hint, they would raise their voices to intimidate me as if I were a small child although we were all the same age. Several times they have made remarks like, 'Are you on your period? You seem to be in a mood.' Our manager never said anything because he doesn't care and he didn't want to get involved. I eventually went to a colleague responsible for staff development and told him everything. While I told my story, he looked at me as if I had a mental issue. He was very polite but he told me that he doesn't understand why I am so upset, hinting that I might be finding it difficult to adjust to work because this is my first job. In his view, there are all sorts of people in a workplace and the dynamics are never smooth. People say things and you say things back and it happens all the time – so I have no case whatsoever. He also said that nobody has made a complaint like this before for his 10 years in post – which was disturbing. In my interest, he advised me to not talk about this to anybody. Every word he said made me feel really foolish. I honestly believed that there is a significant gender issue in this research group – there are not many women and they are not used to women. But if no one else has ever complained about something like this then – I don't know. (Diejente)

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued)

Second-order codes	Data excerpts
Shifting the responsibility to targets	A very senior academic member and a representative of HR spoke to me and kindly tried to explain that my interactions with him were consensual – it was not harassment. So I suppose that a senior professor can misuse professional opportunities to get close to junior colleagues with insincere motives and it is not misconduct if the unfortunate victim ends up falling for it. Anyway, what was really disheartening was HR telling me not to talk about this to anybody and to not belittle him! He is still around the school trying to make himself as visible as possible to me as if to say that he won. So I eventually have ended up making myself invisible because, as they said to me, I am the one who did the mistake of letting him get too close to me and that is appalling place to be in. (Fiona) When I heard that he had spoken about me to other colleagues in a sexualized way, I complained. I mean, he was a married man, I always knew he was all wrong. But now I finally had proof. But they (the organization) just dismissed it. They tried to frame it as a personal issue – for which I may be partially responsible. They hinted very subtly that I need to learn to deal with various people at work. And I was wondering what are they saying, did I just imagine this all – am I losing it or what? God, I cover my face when I think about this episode. (Gracia)
Archiving issues to indicate that there is no issue anymore	It's wrong when someone forces you to come to a conference which is really not relevant for you. And you really need the support so maybe on one hand you are thinking should I just ignore this and try to get some guidance. It is not justifiable. But people don't want to talk about it. For even the most ethical and supportive colleagues, the issue is now over, he probably got a warning so now let's not talk about controversial things. And when people do this, you wonder if it is really *is* over. Maybe it is but I don't feel a sense of closure – but no one understands my point. So I am lost at the moment. (Lolita) She had two kids and it was snowing heavily that day but he insisted that she come to work. She practically begged him to let her stay because she might not be able to do the pick up on time. But he was insistent that she should play by the same rules as everyone else. This is nothing new to him. He has done things like this to me too – but this was really bad. Anyway [name] made it to work but she got stuck on the way back – had a breakdown and complained about him the week afterwards. She cited examples from all of us. I don't know what happened but he became quite mellow suddenly. But she was clearly told to not talk about this to anyone because it is over. For her it was not over, but for everybody else it was. In that kind of a setting, I suppose, you have to be daft if you don't just drop it. It is a hard call to make though. (Tasha)

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued)

Second-order codes	Data excerpts
Avoiding to indicate that nobody is interested to hear about an issue that has been resolved	He verbally abused me continuously – he actually said that I am struggling to get a boyfriend because I am so uptight. I work very hard and I am meticulous. He couldn't stand the fact that I don't conform to the dominant mould, the sweet female RA who is not too ambitious and who is ready to do secretarial work. Around the same time, I came to know that he had done this to someone else too in another university. Then I felt that I had a strong enough case to destroy him. I was told that he will not bother me again and that he would not have to work with me again. He kept a low profile for some time – he had major grants so he never really had to come. But ultimately he was seen around again and it seemed like nothing really happened and I didn't feel that I got any justice. But that was it. I was told to not talk about it to anybody. Nobody knew what I went through – it didn't seem as if he paid a price for what he did. People didn't want to talk about it anymore because it is over. They avoided me whenever I brought it up. One of my friends told me that I am a stubborn brat who just can't let go. So I don't know. It sucks but there doesn't seem to be anything else to do. (Melanie)
	He was junior to me and he was nothing – he had nothing to say for himself. But he couldn't stand the fact that a girl was unofficially overseeing him. I was more senior, better published, so I lead the team. The principal investigator was too busy for anything. He made my life a living hell, and once he actually walked into a bathroom when I was using it just to humiliate me. Too many things like this happened. I told the principal investigator, who told me that he would sort it out. But 'please don't let any of this out because we all have to cooperate for this project'. He became docile overnight. But that's not enough. But nobody wants to talk about it. When I bring it up with my team members, they change the topic, as if I am talking about something which should not be spoken about. It is patronizing and I go home thinking to myself that I'll never bring it up again. But I want to. Every day I want to bring this up but I don't feel able to. (Ioana)
Negative repercussions of voice	He made my life miserable during maternity leave, hinting that I strategically chose to have children during the grant. But my team members were like 'even if you leave the organization, the nature of the industry means that getting the wrong person on your bad side can effectively ruin your career, especially if it's someone in your area. So just keep quiet. You don't want to be known as a parasite'. No I don't want to be known as a parasite. No one wants to be known as a parasite. My team members are not foolish people, they know about the world. So I am scared to open my mouth to be honest although I really want to. (Abbey)

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued)

Second-order codes	Data excerpts
	He made a move on me and it wasn't the right thing to do. But my closest friends at work were adamant that I should not do anything or say anything. Because I am a probationer, it is particularly risky. More importantly, people who complain are the troublemakers that everyone avoids, and everyone agreed I am going to get myself into that position if I open my mouth. You become cautious when everybody you know and trust starts saying this. And there are other male academics who date young girls – it is an increasingly common practice. One senior person here was dating a PhD student who was much younger than him. Once she completed the PhD she had a career made for her. So in an environment like this, there might be people who are ever willing to excuse him. (Husna)

Note: Pseudonyms have been used to protect the privacy of participants.

Discussion

Based on our findings, we make two substantive contributions. First, we extend existing understandings of silencing in the workplace (Brown and Coupland, 2005; Donaghey et al., 2011; Manley et al., 2016) by explaining how discontented employees who start to voice are led to reluctant acquiescence (Pinder and Harlos, 2001) through the collective efforts of third-party actors. Through an in-depth study of female academics' accounts of silencing, we unravel three thematic discourses (Fairclough, 2010) used to silence discontented employees and, thereby, maintain the organization's hegemonic status quo. We show how these discourses are operationalized in the daily micro-discursive activities of third-party actors (Zanoni and Janssens, 2003). Specifically, we offer insights into how managers, HR personnel and ordinary employees (colleagues) discourage individuals from voicing their discontent through persuasive counter-argumentation strategies (Billig, 1996), which effectively consolidate and reproduce hegemonic discourses. Table 2 maps the described phenomenon.

In line with the discourse that 'one can challenge the system only if the issue is uncommon and significant', managers and HR personnel invalidated incumbents' complaints (Nentwich and Hoyer, 2012) by playing down their experiences or, otherwise, attempted to reify an alternative version of reality (Potter, 1996; Symon, 2005) by emphasizing that victims might be partially responsible for their own plight. They often drew on their expertise (French and Raven, 1959) and experience so as to make their arguments persuasive (Warnick and Kline, 1992). Likewise, in line with the discourse 'employees should trust the system to resolve their issues', ordinary colleagues challenged the fundamental assumption underpinning the victims' narratives (Nentwich and Hoyer, 2012), making the point that their issue had been resolved and there remained no further ground to voice. In other instances, colleagues actively avoided victims who started to voice (Silience, 2000). Finally, in line with the discourse, 'negative repercussions follow those who challenge the system', ordinary employees

Table 2. Visual overview.

Hegemonic discourse	Underpinning micro-strategies	Positioning	Outcomes	Actors
One can only challenge the system if the issue is uncommon and significant	Invalidating complaints	Foolish misinterpreters	Confusion Shame	Line managers Senior managers HR officers
	Reifying an alternative version of reality	Unable to manage professional boundaries		
One should trust the system to accord justice	Challenging the fundamental assumption underpinning victims' arguments	Difficult and/or immature	Confusion Low spirits	Colleagues
	Avoidance	Foolish	Confusion Low spirits	Colleagues
Negative consequences follow those who challenge the system	Highlighting impracticalities related to reputation	Troublemaker	Fear Low spirits	Colleagues
	Highlighting impracticalities related to loss of material factors	Immature		

emphasized the impracticalities of taking a complaint forward (Young, 2003), often drawing on discourses such as 'best interests' (Smeyers, 2010) to explain why people should learn to cope with the system than to challenge it. In sum, third-party actors reinforced hegemony through various discursive mechanisms as soon as people started to voice their discontent, leading to what we term 'reluctant acquiescence' (Pinder and Harlos, 2001).

Our research participants' reluctant acquiescence can be explained in several ways. Drawing on the idea of affective practice (Wetherell, 2012), we can understand silence as a by-product of individuals' emotional experience of being 'unfavourably positioned' (Ahmed, 2004; Burr, 2003; Goodwin, 2006) in discursive interactions. As victims were positioned as 'troublemakers' and 'foolish misinterpreters', they experienced shame (Loveday, 2016) and/or anticipatory fear: affects that are associated with silence (Kirrane et al., 2017). We might, therefore, understand reluctant acquiescence as part and parcel of individuals' affective experience. On the other hand, applying ideas of cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957) and induced compliance (Harmon-Jones and Mills, 1999), we might understand silence as an attempt to address the conflicted state of mind that victims experience as they are persuaded by legitimate and trustworthy third parties to adopt an alternative view to their own reading of things. When a reasonably convincing structure of thought challenges an existing belief or mindset, individuals experience a sense of psychological tension or cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957). According to the induced compliance paradigm, if there is significant incentive to avoid negative repercussions, there is more reason to adopt the new thought and justify the dissonance (Burns, 2006). From this perspective, because there is a strong case for an academic to avoid

negative career repercussions associated with challenging the system, we might expect victims to feel persuaded to consider the counter-arguments raised by third-party actors and to experience a sense of conflict in the process. Within this context, silence is read as an attempt to reduce dissonance by reluctantly acquiescing to the idea that there might be no further need to voice.

In the literature on silencing in organizations, Donaghey et al. (2011) offers a reading of silence that brings the role of management into focus, illuminating specifically how management perpetuates a climate of silence (Morrison and Milliken, 2000) through the design of particular institutional arrangements that leave employees out of the voice process. We develop this work by conceptualizing organizational silence as the product of the collective efforts of various third-party actors, who actively mobilize myriad discourses (Fairclough, 2010) in their daily micro-interactions, and persuade (Symon, 2005) employees not to voice their discontent. This process, ultimately, maintains the status quo of the organization. Within this purview, hegemonic discourses do not automatically articulate normative pressures to conform (Brown and Coupland, 2005; Manley et al., 2016). Rather, such discourses are catalysed in micro-discursive interactions; that is to say, individuals had to be reminded of, and persuaded to yield to, them.

It merits note that third-party actors often work in tandem with one another, either purposefully or not, to reinforce discursive hegemony. For instance, managers' and HR personnel's efforts to invalidate victims' accounts of sex-based harassment through the discourse that 'one cannot easily challenge the system unless the issue is uncommon and significant' was reinforced by ordinary employees colluding to insist that 'people should trust the system to accord justice' and by underscoring the costs of challenging the system. By examining how people continuously engage in micro-discursive interactions that influence and configure broader macro-frameworks of meaning (Potter, 1996; Potter and Wetherell, 1987), we were able to illuminate how individuals who start to voice are silenced by third-party actors and how hegemonic discourses are consolidated and reproduced in the process.

Our second contribution involves conceptualizing sex-based harassment as accomplished by the complicity of various third-party actors (Quick and McFadyen, 2017) within the organization. Prevailing understandings conceptualize sex-based harassment as a personalized interaction between a perpetrator and a victim. We challenge this view by illuminating how third-party actors collude to create a context in which sex-based harassment is neither properly identified nor redressed. Consequently, others are tacitly encouraged to engage in such thwarting behaviour. Indeed, the findings from this study offer an opposing view to the extant literature, which suggests that third-party actors, upon seeing the plight of victims, are ever ready to help them (Priesemuth, 2013; Sims and Sun, 2012); often dis-identify with the organization's core values (Hannah et al., 2013), and; experience depression themselves (Emdad et al., 2012). In our study, third-party actors' complicity made victims feel confused, ashamed and fearful (Kirrane et al., 2017) and, in the end, compelled them to reluctantly acquiesce to the status quo (Pinder and Harlos, 2001). As importantly, the discourses invoked by third-party actors provided an organizational culture in which perpetrators could operate with impunity. Indeed, many respondents spoke about how harassers who received warnings for their behaviour continued to work in the organization. They were formally protected by non-disclosure

agreements and informally protected through the complicity of people who were unwilling to criticize them and jeopardize their own and their organization's reputation in the process.

It is important to account for the contextual factors that shape third-party actors' complicity in silencing victims. First, the fact that career structures in academia are significantly influenced by powerful sponsorship, the goodwill of key players in the field and senior collaboration makes it very unlikely that people support others who challenge the system (Fotaki, 2011). Indeed, as our research participants explained, 'getting the wrong person on your bad side' can effectively be career suicide in the academic world. Second, because academia is a highly specialized profession with few vacancies in the job market, the notion of 'fit' plays a significant role in acquiring positions (Lachapelle and Burnett, 2018); concomitantly, exit becomes a difficult option as compared to most other professions. From this perspective, we might again expect individuals' propensity to challenge the system and/or advise others to do so to be limited, because there are few options for exit. Third, as in many professional settings, being affiliated with deviance is highly problematic because the system implicitly demands loyalty and conformance (Coupland, 2001; Prasad et al., in press; Reid, 2015).

As third-party actors attempted to convince victims not to voice their discontent, they discursively evoked values such as tact (Agedbite and Odebumni, 2006) and acceptance of the status quo, suggesting that these values are dominant in the culture of their organizations – values that are wholly antithetical to voice. Considering how features of the occupational context facilitate complicity and provide a safe haven for perpetrators and repeat offenders in the process, we draw on our findings to contextualize sex-based harassment (Berdahl, 2007; Leskinen et al., 2011) and other forms of workplace mistreatment more broadly (McCord et al., 2018).

We acknowledge the limitations of our findings. Our study is based on the accounts of 31 women. Having said that, the purpose of our study is not to make generalized statements about the state of affairs, but rather to provide rich insights in how victims who start to voice are silenced.

Implications

We now turn to consider the implications of our study for research and practice, which we summarize in five points. First, it is important to legitimize complaints about sex-based harassment. This translates into taking the necessary steps to redress the discourses identified in this article – that people can challenge the system only if their issue is uncommon and significant, one should trust the system to accord justice and negative consequences follow those who challenge the system. This can be done through opening up more channels for people to voice their discontent, introducing policies that safeguard employees who challenge the system, and running campaigns to inform employees that they *can* criticize the system and that criticism is seen as constructive and conducive for the ultimate betterment of the organization. Leaders should be at the forefront of establishing such a culture by implementing policies intended to yield the desired outcome. In this vein, those organizational values that may be antithetical to voice should be monitored and, when necessary, attenuated – values such as conformance and loyalty. This

can be achieved through intra-organizational efforts to legitimate the value of whistleblowers (Kenny, 2018) who disclose cases of sex-based harassment.

Second, employers should take a proactive approach in considering how work is organized, managed and rewarded, and how organizational structures potentially facilitate sex-based harassment. Our findings provide insights into how academic careers, which are heavily dependent on senior collaboration, rendered early career women scholars feeling somewhat compelled to turn a blind eye to the first warning signs committed by perpetrators. Likewise, victims of sex-based harassment were often left unsupported because nobody wanted to make powerful enemies in the tight-knit academic context where social capital plays a significant role in career advancement. Employers can deal with these issues by constantly reminding senior colleagues about the responsibilities associated with collaboration and by underscoring to junior colleagues who may occupy potentially precarious positions that they should not feel inhibited to voice.

Third, it is necessary to have well defined policy documents in place to deal with sex-based harassment – documents that clearly define what constitutes sex-based harassment, the procedure by which to deal with reported cases and the mechanisms to support victims through the grievance process and in the cases' aftermath. All line managers and HR personnel should be briefed on such policies and procedures. Relatedly, it is important to ensure that victims feel that justice has been accorded. They should be assured that culprits have been adequately punished and that steps have been taken to prevent such cases from being repeated against other employees. If people believe that injustice is 'covered up' by the organization, this can negatively affect their commitment and motivation and, in the more extreme cases, dissatisfied victims may elect to exit the organization. Accordingly, proper grievance management processes should be a central aspect of high-commitment retention-based HR systems. It is equally important to reconsider the use of non-disclosure policies. It is critical to ask whether, in the course of protecting employees' privacy, these policies engender the unintended consequence of protecting wrongdoers, and lead to victims believing that justice has not been served. This is an important point to consider if the interests of potentially vulnerable employees, such as would-be victims of sex-based harassment, are to be protected.

Fourth, HR practitioners should be careful to not consolidate hegemonic discourses in an effort to protect the interests of the organization. HR practitioners are undoubtedly in a difficult position, being expected to prioritize the interests of both ordinary employees and the organization. Thus, it is essential for personnel affiliated with HR to be reflexive about potential conflict of interests; namely, when claims of sex-based harassment are made, they should be mindful of their status as 'impartial conveyers' and the responsibility associated with this role. In the event of a grievance, victims should be encouraged to seek further advice outside the organization – perhaps, where available, from the union or industry ombudsman (Auster and Prasad, 2016) – rather than be silenced.

Fifth, ordinary employees should be reflexive about the repercussions of their actions and discourses. In colluding, often inadvertently, to isolate people who do not conform to the dominant mould, individuals are effectively aiding and abetting harassment and harassers. Ultimately, such actions amount to the reproduction of exploitative cultures in the organization.

Concluding remarks

On 27 February 2018, as we were in the midst of finalizing our revision of this article, *The Chronicle of Higher Education* published an expose on a multi-decade-long case of sex-based harassment at Harvard University (Bartlett and Gluckman, 2018). Dating back to 1981, the case revolved around Terry Karl, who was, at the time, a recently hired assistant professor of government, and her senior and prominent colleague, Jorge Dominguez. Karl had accused Dominguez of engaging in a course of action that was tantamount to sex-based harassment, including unwanted touching, inappropriate comments and veiled threats. Karl first appealed to Dominguez to suspend his behaviours that were causing her 'distress' and, when that appeal failed to achieve its intended purpose, she sought protection from various third-party actors within Harvard, including her Dean and the university President. She would eventually lodge a complaint with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. Karl's appeals for recourse were negated by the third-party actors from whom she sought redress, and little was done in terms of either meaningfully protecting Karl or disciplining Dominguez. As the situation with Dominguez became increasingly untenable, Karl resigned her position at Harvard in the mid-1980s and moved to a university elsewhere. It would be revealed, eventually, that over the course of the next three decades, multiple female faculty and postgraduate students would accuse Dominguez of committing behaviours that were constitutive of sex-based harassment (Bartlett and Gluckman, 2018).

What is, perhaps, most alarming are the parallels between Karl's case and the sentiments described by the research participants of our study. Indeed, much akin to what transpired with Karl over three decades ago, the research participants of our study described how third-party actors negated their concerns of sex-based harassment. Together, these cases poignantly capture the fact that sex-based harassment in academe, and beyond, is neither a new nor an anomalistic phenomenon. As a growing number of individuals have recognized the pervasiveness of the phenomenon, the #MeToo movement – which we described at the introduction of this article – has catalysed the 'Time's Up' campaign. The 'Time's Up' campaign is a move in the right direction insofar as it offers tangible support for women who have encountered sex-based harassment in the workplace (e.g. providing pro bono legal support) (Langone, 2018). However, given the ubiquity of sex-based harassment, more research on the topic is needed. With this in mind, we have offered an empirical study on how sex-based harassment manifests in the higher-education sector today.

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Notes

1 We recognize the fact that men are also not immune from being victims of sex-based harassment, but the specific purpose of our study is to understand how female victims account for being silenced in the workplace by third-party actors. As such, in this article, we use feminine pronouns to refer to victims. It should equally be underscored that women are potentially more vulnerable to sex-based harassment as, overall, they occupy less powerful organizational positions (O'Connell and Korabik, 2000).

2 This point was beautifully captured by Nancy Harding (2018) in her plenary address for the Critical Management Studies division at the Academy of Management.

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