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## In Sociologists' #MeToo Moment, Does Their Response Heed the Lessons of Social Science?

By Marc Parry SEPTEMBER 10, 2018

PHILADELPHIA

A protest march in Los Angeles this year is part of the #MeToo movement against sexual violence.

The field of sociology faces a #MeToo moment, triggered in part by accusations that a star scholar sexually harassed former students. But as sociologists struggle with how to respond to sexual misconduct in their midst, how well are they heeding the lessons of their own social-science research?

The controversy surrounding Michael Kimmel, a scholar of masculinity at Stony Brook University, permeated hallways and social media as more than 5,500 sociologists gathered here recently for their annual conference. It's a notable case because of the gap between Kimmel's stated beliefs — once described in *The Guardian* as "perhaps the world's most prominent male feminist," he had been slated to get an award for contributions to gender equality — and his alleged behavior.

Some sociologists are demanding tough consequences for people who have engaged in sexual misconduct. Suggestions include barring those people from meetings of the American Sociological Association, perhaps indefinitely. "Here's an idea for sexual-harassment training," Philip N. Cohen, a sociologist at the University of Maryland at College Park, tweeted to his 15,000 followers. "Make a rule against sexual harassment. Make sure everybody knows what the rule is. Then fire people who break the rule. Watch and learn."

For its part, the association took pains to ensure that all conferencegoers had read its anti-harassment policy. At the meeting, the group offered training in bystander-intervention strategies to prevent sexual assault.

All of this might seem sensible. But one prominent sexual-assault researcher finds the field's response problematic, because he doesn't see it as being based on clear, evidence-based policies.

"Even an organization which is purportedly a social-scientific organization has a really hard time drawing upon social research to actually institute policy and solutions," said Shamus Khan, chair of the sociology department at Columbia University.

For the past few years, Khan has immersed himself in figuring out solutions to the problem of sexual violence. He helps to run a large-scale research project focused on the social and sex lives of undergraduates at Columbia and Barnard College. The study fielded a team of ethnographers who observed students at bars and parties and interviewed them about their sexual experiences. Khan has kept largely quiet about that research, which is the subject of a forthcoming book. But in a pair of interviews with *The Chronicle*, he opened up about some of its implications for sociology's reckoning with sexual misconduct.

Social-science research, he argued, finds scant evidence that either anti-harassment policies or bystander-intervention programs are effective solutions to the problem of sexual misconduct. He also maintained that academics' punitive response to that problem could very likely have an unintended consequence: to inhibit some victims from coming forward to report incidents of abuse.

Most victims do not report their assaults. One common reason: Victims care about the person who harmed them, as Khan and his colleagues show in a new paper on the Columbia project. Victims, he said, may worry about the fallout for that person if they were to report.

It isn't that Khan disagrees with the activists trying to bring attention to sexual misconduct in higher education. The furor is necessary, he said, because the problem has been ignored for so long.

From his perspective, what's striking is the gulf between two big conversations within sociology and among left-wing academics more generally. One is the response to sexual misconduct in academe, with its zeal for punishment. The other is the push for criminal-justice reform, with its criticism of extremely punitive responses to crime.

The question, as Khan sees it, is whether those discussions can be merged. Among scholars studying sexual violence, he noted, research is increasingly focused on a different way of responding to such misconduct — a victim-validating approach that de-emphasizes punishment and focuses on acknowledging and redressing harm.

#### Assessing Bystander Programs

Some of Khan's arguments are controversial, particularly those that question the effectiveness of bystander-intervention programs.

These programs, used by colleges nationwide, train members of a community to recognize situations in which someone is at risk of assault. They teach skills to help get people out of those situations.

For example, during the bystander workshop offered at the recent American Sociological Association conference, participants discussed scenarios like the following. A graduate student, presenting research, is approached by a senior professor after the session, who invites the student to have a drink or visit the professor's room for pointers on the study. A bystander might help the student get out of this predicament by also expressing interest in the research and suggesting that all three of them discuss it over coffee in the lobby.

Sharyn Potter, executive director of research at a sexual-violence-prevention center based at the University of New Hampshire, ran the workshop. In an interview, Potter said that when she went to college, in the late 1980s, men were essentially told not to be rapists, and women were given whistles and told not to get raped. Potter promotes bystander-intervention programs — her center has developed one — because they shift that victim-perpetrator paradigm, stressing the role of a whole community.

And the approach has shown results. A recent systematic analysis concluded that these programs "can effectively change college students' attitudes, beliefs, and behavior," although the effects were small and shrank with time. Participants "are much more likely to identify a bad situation," said Potter, a sociologist who has studied bystander intervention for about 15 years. "And they're much more likely to either feel comfortable intervening, or report that they've intervened."

The fact that research on bystander training hinges on what people self-report is what makes Khan question how much we really know about the effectiveness of such interventions.

A bias exists in situations like this, he said. When people are made aware of socially desirable behavior, they're likely to espouse actions and attitudes consistent with it. What people actually do, he said, doesn't necessarily match what they tell survey researchers.

The objective yardstick here, he argued, is an organization's level of sexual assault. "No research has shown — at least within the school context — that places that have systematically implemented bystander intervention have lower rates of assault," he said.

With anti-harassment policies, the story is more straightforward. There is no evidence that such policies reduce harassment, said Frank Dobbin, a sociologist of organizations at Harvard University.

What's more, the grievance procedures attached to such policies seem to backfire, according to an analysis by Dobbin and Alexandra Kalev, of Tel Aviv University. People who file formal complaints often face retaliation, such as being demoted, fired, or further harassed. Most complaints don't lead to a finding of guilt, because the two parties' contrasting accounts of a situation can be difficult to adjudicate. People accused of harassment rarely lose their jobs.

Dobbin serves on a task force that was set up last year to advise the American Sociological Association on how to revise its approach to harassment. One reason that work has yet to be completed, he said, is that the group is wrestling with the relevant research.

"The ASA is trying to come to grips with the fact that it looks like the main policy-procedure format has adverse, not positive, effects," Dobbin said, referring to formal grievance procedures in cases of harassment.

"The research doesn't show a very clear solution here," he said. "So we're at a point where we need organizations to try more things. And we need more research."

### The Problem of Power

As Khan sees it, the conversation that sociology needs is tougher than any consideration of bystander training or anti-harassment policies. It's a conversation that begins with the structure of the academy itself.

One fundamental lesson of the scholarship on sexual misconduct, he said, is that power is an important dimension of the abuse. People in powerful positions deploy harassment as a tool to maintain their dominance.

Most academics profess a belief in equality. Yet the system of higher education they have built, Khan said, is "one of the most feudal organizations you could imagine." Consider the status gradations of the professoriate, each step up the ladder a further accrual of power: from nontenured to tenured, from associate professor to full professor to endowed chair.

Challenging such hierarchies — by rethinking tenure, say, or empowering graduate students within professional organizations like ASA — would help address sexual misconduct, Khan argued.

If uprooting such an entrenched system doesn't seem likely to happen anytime soon, he points to another potential solution, a strategy known as restorative justice.

The idea is an alternative to traditional, adversarial systems that weigh evidence to determine whether a policy was violated, and which apply standardized punishments.

Restorative justice is an umbrella term for a variety of techniques. In one general approach, the victim describes the harm done. The person who hurt the victim accepts responsibility. The parties come up with an individualized plan to repair the harm and prevent it from happening again. The redress plan includes indirect victims, too, such as friends, parents, and community members.

Restorative justice has been rare in cases of sexual assault on American campuses, in part because of concerns about its compliance with federal policy. Skeptics also question whether the strategy holds the people who have caused harm — and the institutions that employ them — sufficiently accountable.

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But it has demonstrated success outside higher education. Mary P. Koss, a veteran sexual-assault researcher, ran a restorative-justice program for sex offenders referred by prosecutors in the county surrounding Tucson, where she works as professor of public health at the University of Arizona. Her program required offenders to do things like go to counseling, comply with stay-away orders, and check in regularly with a case manager.

"Restorative justice is not soft justice — it's just a different justice measure," Koss said. She added, "More victims might report if we offered them more options for how they could achieve their justice needs."

In Khan's view, it's easy to look at sexual misconduct through the lens of dramatic examples — the serially offending sociopath who must be stamped out. But sexual harassment in academe is probably common, perpetrated by "normal women and normal men," not just sociopaths, he said. It may not be effective to impose harsh punishments on so many people. It may be possible to reform those people.

Restorative justice, he said, shifts the emphasis to something that victims want. In contrast to sociologists' conversations about ratcheting up punishment, he said, that something is often acknowledgment.

"The more you punish, the less likely it is that someone is willing to admit that they did something, because the consequences are that much higher for them," Khan said. "And this would be a conversation we would be willing to have, if it weren't something so close to us."

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