

Lab policy on sexual (and other) harassment

Considering the recent stream of news on sexual harassment and assault cases, I've decided it is time to have a sexual harassment policy that goes beyond the university's, and that it is a good idea for everyone in the lab to think carefully about these issues, both for your time in the lab and for your future careers. While some issues are clear-cut, others are grey, and reflection is critical.

Power

Most cases of harassment arise in situations where someone in power abuses, or is perceived to abuse, that power. In our lab, there are two kinds of power, hard power and soft power. Hard power is the ability to cause a concrete outcome that can affect someone's career: the ability to hire, fire, change a salary, give a grade, approve a thesis, write a crucial letter of recommendation for MSc, Ph.D, and post-doc students, etc. Generally speaking, I am the only one in the lab that has hard power. However, it is not impossible that someone else could have a hard-power relationship, so I think it is worth spelling out the distinction.

Soft power is more nebulous: it is perceived authority in the absence of hard power. A Ph.D student might have soft power over a BSc intern, or a post-doc over a Ph.D student. One of my goals for the lab is to minimize soft power, to put all members on as equal an intellectual footing as possible. But it would be naïve to think that there are no differences in how a statement from me is perceived, relative to that of an intern. And soft power is tricky because it need not always align with academic status – it might also be related to length of time in the lab, perceived academic competence, charisma, etc. And this means that the soft power dynamic between two people might not always be clear, or even that two people might have very different perceptions of their soft-power dynamic.

The potential for miscommunication

Intersecting with power dynamics is the potential for miscommunication. I hope/believe we will never have a sexual predator in the lab, so I think miscommunication is the biggest potential problem for lab members. As an example, I'll share an experience from during my Ph.D. I was the student representative on the department's admission committee, which meant I had some power over who was admitted to the Ph.D program. A research assistant in my lab had applied, and I felt awkward having power over someone in my social circles, so I decided to bring it up openly, and I told her that I would treat her application fairly. This was not a wise choice, and I hadn't thought thoroughly about how the conversation would go. She ended up feeling I was trying to threaten her or hold my power over her in some way, and told many of our mutual friends without telling me she felt that way. It took months to sort things out with my friends, and she and I never recovered our friendship. We were both at fault – me for having not thought carefully through the power dynamic, and her for jumping to conclusions about what I meant.

Guidelines

Obviously, there are clear rules that are more formally defined by the university (<https://www.usherbrooke.ca/fmss-respect/ressources/politique-officielle-de-luniversite-de-sherbrooke/>). The most clear-cut is that there should be no sexual advances or innuendo coming from

someone with hard power to someone under their hard power. Beyond that, however, there is a substantial obligation on everyone to try to avoid cases where soft power is abused. It is human to be attracted to others, and it would be inhuman to say that there can't be dating or romantic involvement between lab members, but it is also essential that you actively think through the potential for soft-power dynamics and consider whether the other person might possibly perceive you as abusing a position of power. Is there a feeling of mentorship between the two of you? If so, any proposition should come from the person being mentored, not the mentor.

If you feel abused/harassed

In the hopefully unlikely event that you feel like someone, inside or outside the lab, has crossed a line with you, please feel free to bring the issue to my attention, or, if you feel more comfortable, to Véronique. (Obviously, you could also go directly to university authorities if needed.) We will do our best to make sure it is resolved appropriately, bringing in other resources from the university as necessary. We will take this very seriously, and we ask that you do too: think carefully as to whether it might be a misunderstanding. Even if you think it might be, please feel free to bring the matter up with us.

