

Naming and Addressing Sexual Harassment in Marriage and Family Therapy Programs

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Introduction and Precursors

- #MeToo Movement
- No studies in MFT Programs on prevalence of sexual harassment
- 3 Goals of this presentation
 - Sexual harassment is present in MFT programs
 - Explore factors that contribute to a climate that allows for sexual harassment
 - Discuss what can be done to stifle possibilities for sexual harassment

Sexual Harassment Exists in MFT Programs

- Taboo of outwardly discussing sexual harassment in MFT programs
 - Mirrors the taboo in the larger culture
 - Naïve hope that we as a field are immune
 - Struggle for legitimacy for MFT as a profession
 - Can minimize serious issues in programs, such as sexual harassment
 - Little written about sexual harassment of students in MFT programs
 - Results in a whisper network of harassment (who is harassing who, what is happening in Programs, in Departments, at conferences and trainings)

Contributing Factors: Gurus

- Faculty/practitioner on-a-pedestal model
 - Field was built on idea that there were “gurus” or “master therapists”
 - Those who are skilled with clients, or those who brought in research grants and had **POWER**
 - Gurus tend to be white men, with few exceptions
 - Also were program directors, full professors, journal editors, book writers, etc. who established true and correct behavior

Contributing Factors: Gurus

- Difficult to criticize or hold gurus accountable
 - Prestige and grant dollars are valued by the academic community
 - Gurus by definition are revered and respected and do not need to “hear” concerns expressed by others
 - Those around Gurus tend not to question them, especially those with less power (students, newer faculty, adjuncts, etc.)
 - Power levels, power in relation to identity

Contributing Factors: Gurus

- Places men (established, respected, used to being in authority) in a position of holding themselves accountable
- Or holding each other accountable as those on a similar power plane may be more effective in holding someone accountable
 - However, men often do not understand/perceive how their privilege functions to protect them and undermine others
 - Men who can perceive this may fear becoming targets if they question the privilege of other men

Contributing Factors: Triangulation

- Idea that 2 people with conflict/anxiety bring in a 3rd person to diffuse conflict and decrease anxiety
- Triangulation is seen as harmful for families, and for relationships in training programs
- To address triangulation, directive is for the 2 people to work out their conflict so a 3rd person is not brought into the relationship
 - This ignores important power dynamics and decades of feminist theory

Contributing Factors: Multiple Relationships

- Multiple relationships in academia
- Additional relationships in MFT Programs that can blur the line between student and faculty/supervisor/advisor
- Historically “acceptable” relationships between faculty and students
 - Faculty marrying students (more men faculty marrying women students?)
 - May be becoming less acceptable – but still occurs in MFT programs and in academia

Contributing Factors: Gender Dynamics

- Views of women and what is acceptable/expected of women (microaggressions)
 - Women held to a narrow, higher standard
 - Being talked over/interrupted
 - Taking notes in meetings
 - Not being given credit for one's ideas or contributions to a project
 - Holding women responsible for cleaning, making social arrangements

Contributing Factors: Link to Multiple Oppressions

- Other methods sending women a message to know their place:
 - Being called crazy, gaslighting, pitting students against faculty
- Presence of and toleration for racial, sexual orientation microaggressions
- Lack of senior faculty, full professors who are women, people of color, openly LGBTQ

Contributing Factors: Individualism & Responsibility for Harassment

- Tend to think of one person as responsible
 - Reflective of our individualistic society
 - Relieves those working with one who sexually harasses of responsibility
- What about culture, context, and relational responsibility?

Suggestions for Stifling Sexual Harassment

– Create Culture of Accountability

- Establish practices of relational responsibility among faculty
- Acknowledge that sexual harassment has occurred, can exist, and be committed to being both proactive and responsive
- Establish a system of accountability
 - Address concerns with each other
 - Be willing to receive as well as seek out feedback
- Acknowledge one's power
- Have ongoing conversations about gender, power, sexual harassment

Suggestions for Stifling Sexual Harassment

– New Student Orientation

- Review University and Program policies & procedures for addressing sexual harassment
- Define and describe sexual harassment
- Include policies on amorous relationships
- Include policies on discrimination
- Include policies and procedures for reporting and resolving sexual harassment complaints
- Include information about protection from retaliation for reporting

Suggestions for Stifling Sexual Harassment

- Discuss the history of the field in relation to sexual harassment
 - Provide examples
- Place responsibility where it belongs
 - Also discuss emotions, connection to victims of sexual abuse
- Discuss triangulation, when it is appropriate in relation to reporting sexual harassment → discuss power issues

Tips for Programs with Current or Previous Incidences of Sexual Harassment

- If needed, find allies to help ground you, to assist in the reporting process within and outside of your university
- Be persistent in holding self and others accountable
- Have ongoing conversations about faculty strengths and weaknesses
- Observe each other's work (classes, supervision)
- Address inappropriate comments/gestures in the moment
- Have ongoing discussions of power and privilege amongst all members of the program (faculty, students, staff, supervisors)