Power-based harassment among postdoctoral workers at Columbia University

Report from a 2021 survey

Columbia Postdoctoral Workers
April 12, 2022

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Summary

In 2021, Columbia Postdoctoral Workers (CPW) conducted a survey about power-based harassment that was taken by 239 Postdoctoral Research Fellows, Postdoctoral Research Scientists/Scholars, and Associate Research Scientists/Scholars at Columbia University.

Over two-thirds (69%) of respondents reported having experienced at least one form of power-based harassment (Figure 1). Some of the most frequently reported behaviors included: receiving belittling, humiliating, or malicious remarks from a superior (40%); being given unreasonable workloads (41%); not being given appropriate credit for work contributions (45%); and superiors refusing to take their concerns seriously (46%).

Women reported having experienced such behaviors in greater proportion than men (Figure 2). Reporting power-based harassment was also higher among respondents 35 years and older, among those who had been employed at Columbia for longer periods of time, and among Associate Research Scientists (compared to those with postdoctoral titles; Figure 3).

Among the 168 respondents who reported any experience of power-based harassment, about half (49%) said the behaviors had a detrimental effect on their psychological well-being such as anxiety or depression (Figure 4). Few (27%) had ever discussed their issues with an office or someone in a formal role at the university (Figure 5), and many of those who had done so said that nothing had been done to resolve them (Table 3). Respondents expressed concerns that reporting power-based harassment could lead to losing their job or hurt their professional reputation (Table 5). Many felt that the only way to resolve these issues was to leave the institution or leave academia (Table 4).

More than half (56%) of respondents were international scholars. Although they did not report power-based harassment in greater proportion than respondents from the US, they expressed greater concerns about trying to address these issues, as their visas were tied to their position. A small number (7%) reported that a superior had threatened them not to renew their visas.

Respondents felt that people in supervisory positions often lacked mentorship and leadership skills, which the university could resolve by implementing relevant training (Table 7). They also felt that the university should have a more efficient system to handle complaints of power-based harassment, including reliable record keeping (Table 8), protections for the person reporting, and consequences for the perpetrators (Table 9).

This survey highlights that power-based harassment is an important issue at Columbia University. Because there seems to be disparities in how different demographic groups experience power-based harassment, addressing these behaviors should be part of a commitment to promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Introduction

In the workplace, power-based harassment is a form of harassment based on the perpetrator's higher rank or power in relation to the victim. Like with other forms of harassment, power-based harassment includes unwelcome conduct, whether verbal or physical, that creates an intimidating, hostile, or abusive working environment, and unreasonably interferes with an individual's performance and professional progress. Power-based harassment is akin to bullying (which can also be peer-to-peer) and may include verbal abuse such as yelling and screaming, the use of insulting language or negative stereotypes, threats, intimidation, or spreading malicious rumors. Power-based harassment also includes behaviors through which perpetrators abuse their authority to take unfair advantage of the work of subordinates or stifle their career progression. Examples include setting unreasonable expectations, punishing trivial errors, unreasonably scrutinizing work and performance, giving unfair performance reviews, or failing to give appropriate credit for work contributions.

In academia, the hierarchy existing between different ranks of faculty members, postdoctoral scholars, and graduate and undergraduate students creates power differentials that can lead to different forms of abuse. By rewarding independent research achievements, the competitive nature of academia in research-focused universities leads to practices in which some people try to further their own career progress at the expense of others. The constant pressure to publish in high-impact journals and to obtain external research grants can lead faculty, principal investigators, or laboratory directors to exploit the work of the people they supervise. Postdoctoral scholars can be particularly vulnerable to power-based harassment in such a setting as they hold temporary appointments and are usually under the supervision of a single faculty mentor or principal investigator, with few links to others in their department or the university. They possess the skills to produce high quality research, but are often subjected to poor work conditions and unreasonable expectations, and not always given credit for their work.

In the US, federal policies regulate sexual harassment and discrimination based on protected categories such as gender, racial/ethnic identity, sexual identity, or religious affiliation. The decision on whether or how other forms of harassment should be regulated are left to individual organizations. At Columbia University, the administrative code of conduct expects employees to refrain from abuses of power, but does not offer a definition of what would constitute such abuses. Few academic institutions have policies regulating power-based harassment or bullying, but many are taking steps to develop them. In recent years, some funding agencies have taken the lead in expanding policies on harassment beyond the ones regulated under federal law. The National Institutes of Health (NIH), for example, have recently expanded their definition of harassment to include "inappropriate conduct," which

"may not constitute harassment under the law, but raises concerns about a safe and respectful workplace." The NIH expects recipient institutions (such as Columbia University) to have policies in place to foster a harassment-free environment, making it a priority for the university to develop and implement a policy to address issues of power-based harassment and bullying within its walls.

Columbia Postdoctoral Workers (CPW) is a union representing Postdoctoral Research Fellows, Postdoctoral Research Scientists/Scholars, and Associate Research Scientists/Scholars at Columbia University. Establishing policies that address power-based harassment has been one of the major drivers for forming the union. The university declined to add a policy that provides recourse to victims of power-based harassment in the first Collective Bargaining Agreement on the basis that such a policy should be university-wide. As a solution, the university included a side-letter in the collective bargaining agreement, which established a University-Wide Anti-Bullying Working Group whose purpose is "to make recommendations to the University to address complaints about misconduct that do not constitute policy violations on sexual and gender-based harassment or other forms of prohibited discrimination but which nonetheless may be abusive and/or intimidating to Employees."

We conducted the following survey as part of our ongoing efforts to address issues of power-based harassment within our constituency, and to aid the efforts of the university-wide committee. The survey was designed to gather more information about the experience of power-based harassment among postdoctoral workers at Columbia University, and understand how they felt the issue should be addressed by University policy.

Methods

This survey was developed by the CPW working group on power-based harassment and bullying. Through emails and meetings, every constituent was invited to participate in the working group. After initial meetings and conversations, a core working group was formed, including four union members who had been consistently attending the meetings. The activities of the working group then alternated between meetings of the four core working group members and meetings open to every constituent interested in contributing to union activities related to the issue of power-based harassment. The development of the survey questionnaire was initiated by the core working group, with extensive review and input from other union constituents who volunteered to provide feedback on the process.

The working group reviewed published literature on power-based harassment and bullying in academia to develop the questionnaire (see References and resources). A few published studies included their questionnaires, which we used as a basis for developing the series of questions used in this survey. Other questions were developed based on the internal conversations about power-based harassment within the union and working group. The questionnaire we used is included at the end of this report (see Appendix – Survey Questionnaire).

The final questionnaire was programmed into the online survey software Qualtrics. The survey was only made available to people who held the titles of Postdoctoral Research Fellow, Postdoctoral Research Scientist/Scholar, and Associate Research Scientist/Scholar within Columbia University at the time we conducted it (July to November 2021). We distributed the survey link through union communications, including emails to the constituents and in-person conversations during union activities. When accessing the survey online, respondents had to complete an authentication procedure that confirmed that they were current postdoctoral workers and had not previously completed the survey. Survey responses, however, were completely anonymous. Respondents were also informed that they could decline to answer any specific question on the survey.

Email invitations were sent to 1560 individuals who, at the beginning of the recruitment period (July 2021), were listed as holding one of the titles listed above on the university directory. By the end of the recruitment process, 239 individuals had completed the survey. Table 1 shows respondents' characteristics.

In this report, we present descriptive statistics compiled using Excel and the statistical analysis software SPSS. Open-text survey responses were organized using the qualitative analysis software Dedoose.

Table 1. Respondents' characteristics (*n* = 239).

	n	%
Age group		
25 to 29	28	12.4%
30 to 34	91	40.3%
35 to 39	58	25.7%
40 to 44	26	11.5%
45 to 49	7	3.1%
50 to 54	5	2.2%
55 to 59	8	3.5%
60 or older	3	1.3%
Gender		
Woman	115	51.6%
Man	105	47.1%
Nonbinary/nonconforming	3	1.3%
LGBTQ+ identified		
No	193	84.3%
Yes	36	15.7%
Racial/ethnic identity		
Asian	60	27.1%
Black	2	0.9%
Latinx (any race)	14	6.3%
Middle Eastern	5	2.3%
White	121	54.8%
Multiracial/Other	19	8.6%
International scholar		
Yes	128	56.1%
No	100	43.9%
Current title		
Postdoctoral Research Scientist/Scholar	107	46.9%
Postdoctoral Research Fellow	41	18.0%
Associate Research Scientist	80	35.1%
When first joined CU as Postdoc/ARS		
2021	18	8.1%
2020	47	21.2%
2019	50	22.5%
2018	28	12.6%
2017	14	6.3%
2016	14	6.3%
2011 to 2015	24	10.8%
2001 to 2010	22	9.9%
Before 2001	5	2.3%

Experiences of power-based harassment

The first question of the survey presented respondents with a series of 18 types of behaviors that can constitute power-based harassment and asked if they had experienced any of them from a superior at Columbia University. For each listed behavior, respondents could select: Never, Rarely, Sometimes, or Often. The items and responses are presented in Figure 1.

Over two thirds (68.6%) of respondents reported having experienced at least one of the listed behaviors, while 31.4% reported having never experienced any of them. For each specific behavior listed, there were between 20% and 46% of respondents who reported having experienced them at least rarely. As detailed below, similar proportions of respondents reported having experienced behaviors from each of the four broad types of power-based harassment we defined: verbal harassment, poor managerial practices, diminished professional role, and obstacles to career development and scholarly contributions.

Verbal harassment. Many respondents indicated having been the target of offensive communications from superiors: belittling, humiliating, or malicious remarks (40%), verbal or written harassment (26%), shouting, swearing, or unprofessional remarks (24%), and being humiliated or ridiculed in professional meetings (24%).

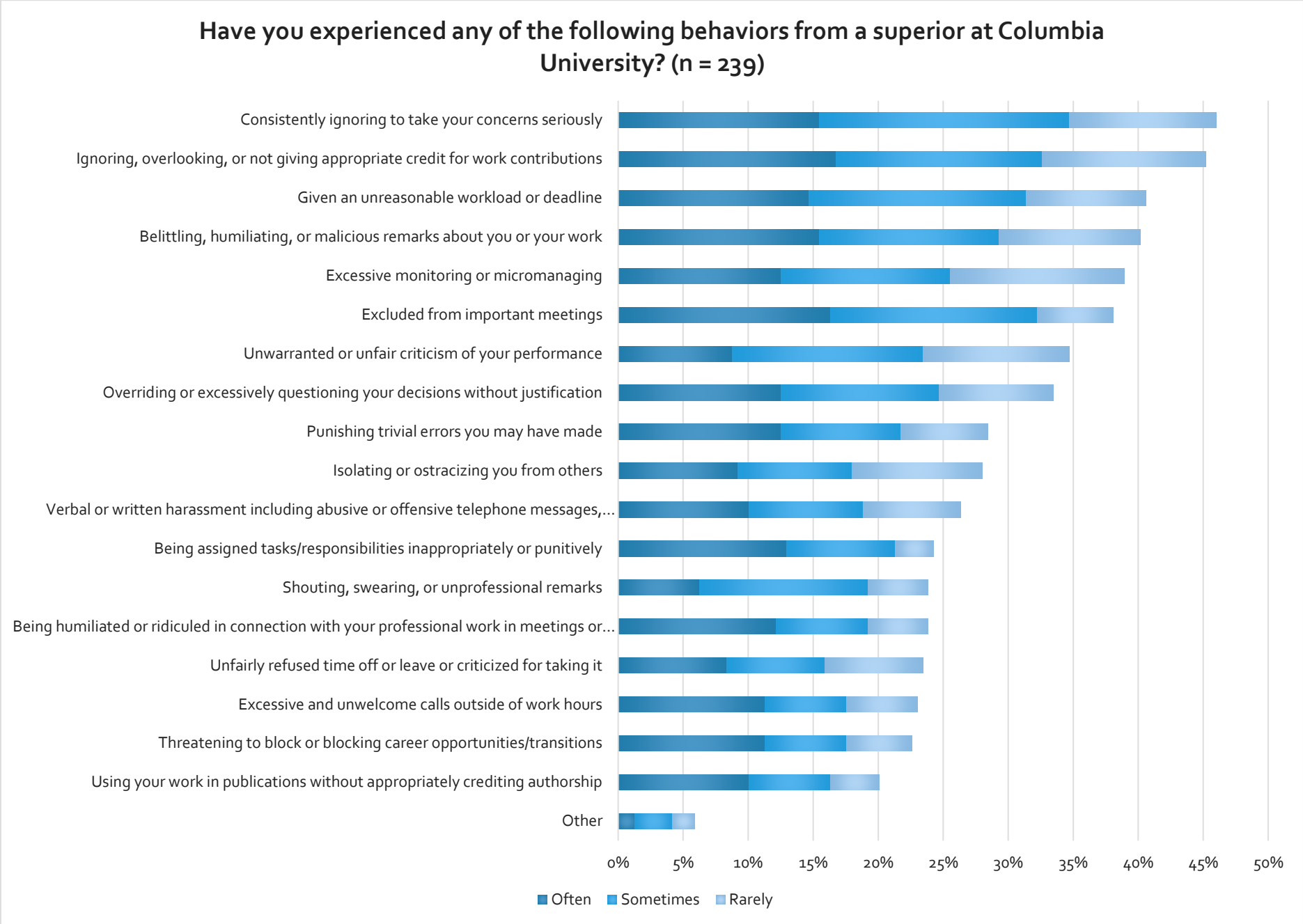
Poor managerial practices. Many respondents also reported poor managerial practices: being given unreasonable workloads (41%), excessive monitoring or micromanaging (39%), receiving unwarranted or unfair criticism of their performance (35%), being punished for trivial errors (29%), being assigned tasks punitively (24%), being refused time off or criticized for taking it (23%), and receiving excessive calls outside of work hours (23%).

Diminished professional role. Respondents also reported behaviors aimed at diminishing their role in professional activities: not having their concerns taken seriously (46%), being excluded from important meetings (38%), having their decisions questioned or overridden without justification (34%), and being isolated from others (28%).

Obstacles to career development and scholarly contributions. Many reported behaviors related to respondents' contributions and professional development: not being given appropriate credit for their work contributions (45%), a superior blocking or threatening to block career opportunities (23%), and a superior using their work in publications without appropriately crediting them (20%).

There were 6% who indicated having experienced other behaviors. Some examples provided were variations from those listed, for example, receiving excessive emails or chat messages (e.g., on Slack) outside of work hours. Others mentioned experiences of harassment based on gender, religion, race/ethnicity, or immigration status.

Figure 1. Experiences of power-based harassment.



There were some differences across respondents' characteristics when comparing those who had never experienced any of the behaviors to those who had experienced any of the listed behaviors at any frequency (Figure 2). A higher proportion of women than men reported experiencing any of the listed behaviors (74% vs. 63%). Respondents who were LGBTQ+ identified also reported these behaviors in a slightly higher proportion than those who did not identify as such (72% vs. 67%). The proportions who experienced any of the listed behaviors was also different across racial/ethnic groups, though some of these groups included very few respondents. Both respondents who identified as Black had experienced some of the listed behaviors, as well as 75% of the 121 who identified as White, 71% of the 14 who identified as Latinx, 68% of the 19 who identified as multiracial, 55% of the 60 who identified as Asian, and 40% of the 5 who identified as Middle Eastern. Having experienced power-based harassment did not differ based on being an international scholar.

Figure 2. Experiences of power-based harassment based on respondents' characteristics.

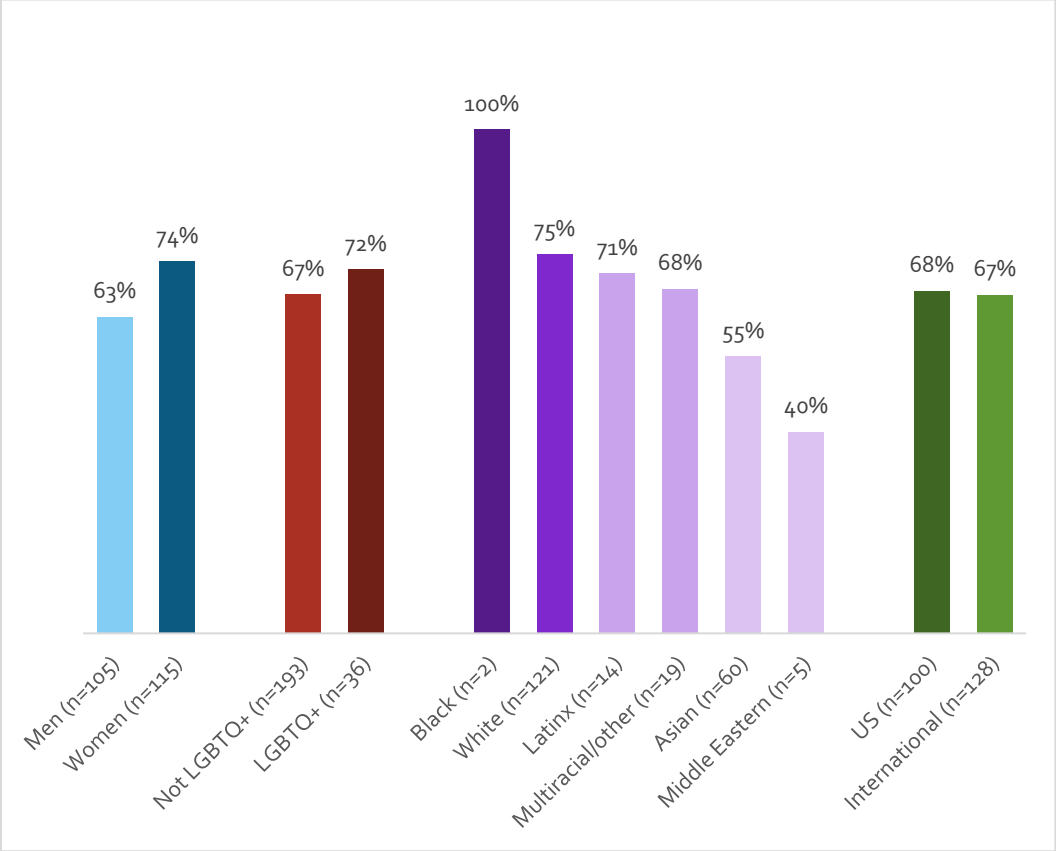
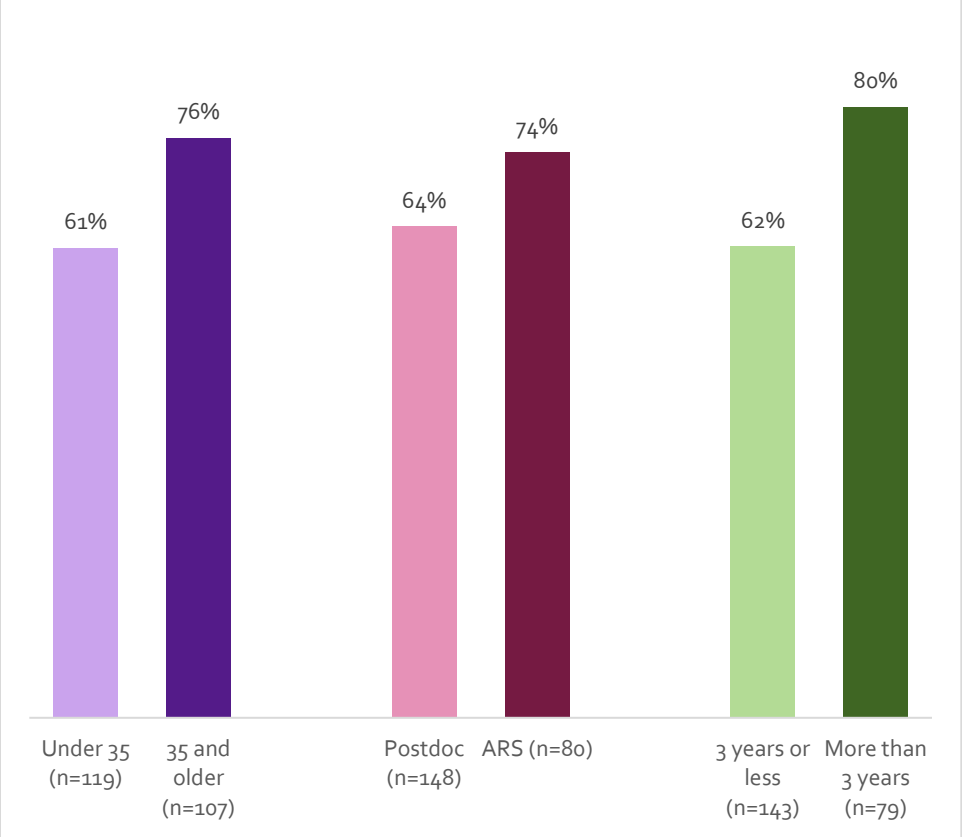


Figure 3 shows that respondents who were in the upper age group (35 years or older) reported having experienced any of the listed behavior in much higher proportion than those who were under 35 years old (76% vs. 61%). Those holding the title of Associate Research Scientist were also more likely to report any of the behaviors than those who held one of the postdoctoral titles (74% vs. 64%). Respondents who had been in a postdoctoral/ARS positions at Columbia for more than 3 years also reported experiences of power-based harassment in much higher proportion than those who had been in such a position for less than 3 years (80% vs. 62%).

Figure 3. Experiences of power-based harassment based on age, title, and length of time at Columbia.

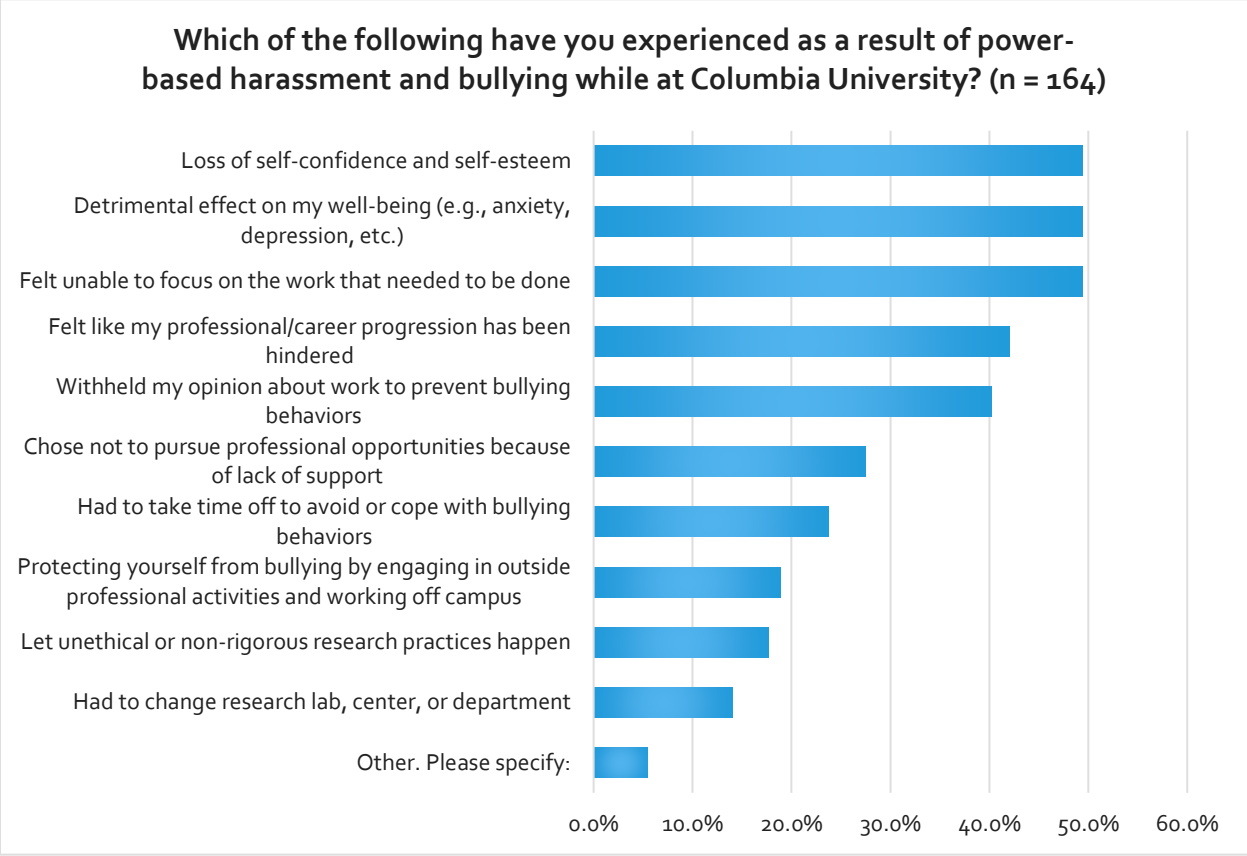


Impact of power-based harassment and reporting experiences

The 164 (68.6%) respondents who had reported experiencing at least one of the listed behaviors were asked about the impact they thought power-based harassment had on themselves, and about any steps they had taken to address the issue.

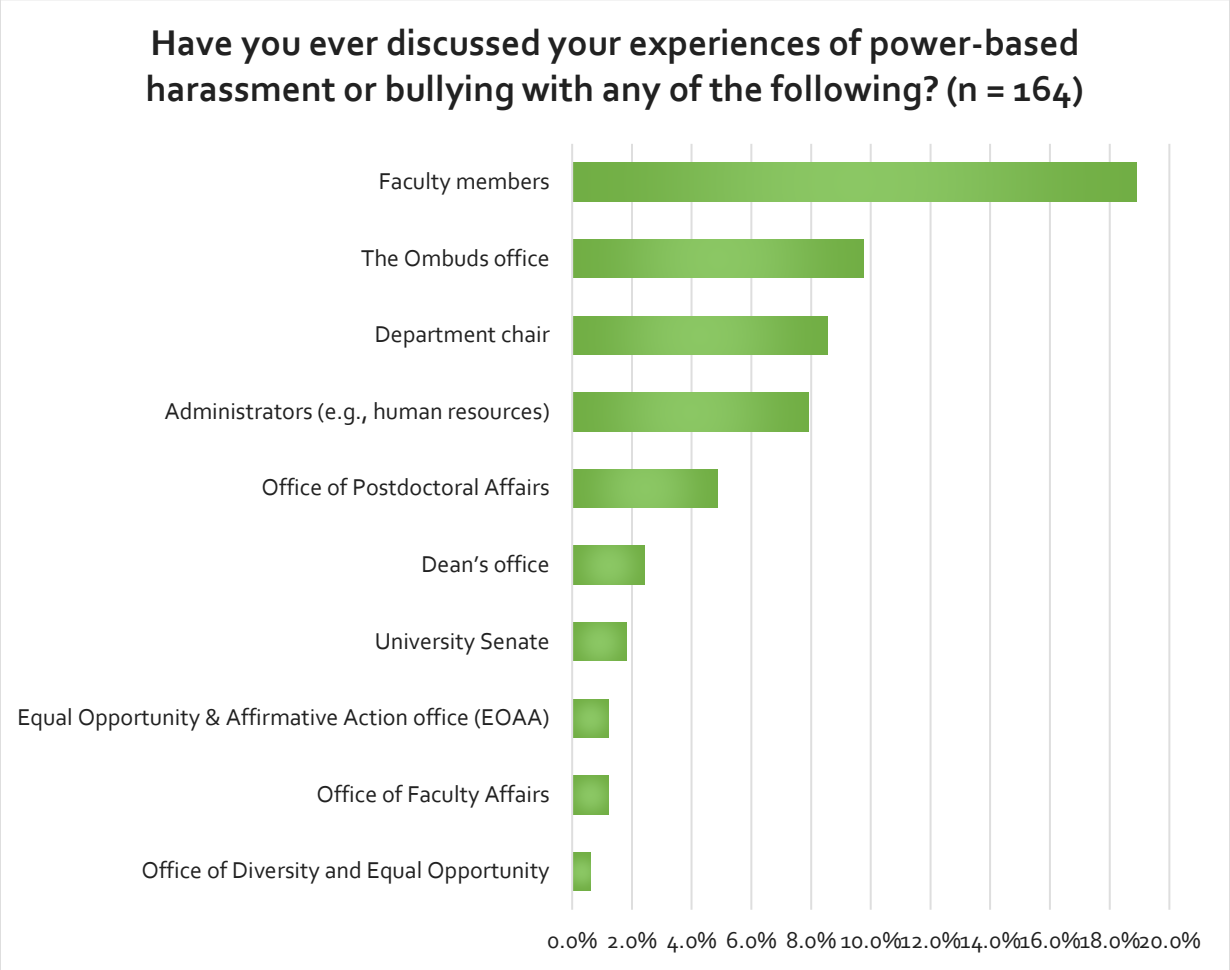
We suggested a list of impacts that power-based harassment could have, and Figure 4 lists them from most to least endorsed. Impact on psychological well-being seemed high as about half (49%) reported a loss of self-esteem, and the same number indicated detrimental effects such as anxiety or depression. Power-based harassment also seemed to impact productivity and professional development: 49% said they had felt unable to focus on the work they had to do, 42% felt their career progression had been hindered, and 27% had chosen not to pursue some professional activities. These experiences also seemed to lead to avoidance: 24% said they took time off to cope or avoid bullying, 19% said they tried to spend their time off campus or in outside professional activities, and 14% said they had to change their research lab, center, or department. Finally, respondents seemed to dissociate themselves from the work: 40% said they withheld their opinion about work, and 18% said they let unethical or non-rigorous research practices happen to prevent being the target of bullying.

Figure 4. Impact of power-based harassment.



We then asked respondents who indicated having experienced any form of power-based harassment if they had discussed the issue with anyone at Columbia University (Figure 5). Few had done so: 19% said they had discussed it with faculty members, 10% had brought the issue up to the Ombuds office, 9% to their department chairs, 8% to administrators, 5% to the Office of Postdoctoral Affairs, and very few discussed it with other university offices. Combining all answers, 27% indicated having discussed their experiences of power-based harassment with any of the people or offices listed in Figure 5.

Figure 5. Experiences of reporting power-based harassment.



In open-text survey answers, respondents further described their experiences of power-based harassment, how it had impacted their well-being and careers, and what they had done, if anything, to try to address the issue.

As shown in Table 2, respondents described a wide range of power-based harassment behaviors from their superiors at Columbia University. Some respondents talked about being expected to work during the day, night, and weekend without taking time off, and having to respond to work communications at all times. If they tried to maintain a work-life balance, they described being punished for it by receiving disparaging comments or being excluded from professional activities. Respondents also expressed receiving criticism about their work that was unfair or delivered in a humiliating way. They described receiving such comments both in one-on-one settings (where there were no witnesses) and in public settings (where it was disguised as professional critique). They also expressed how trying to talk about these issues with perpetrators only exacerbated them.

Respondents described impacts on their professional development such as their superiors taking credit for their work or blocking them from promotion. The impact of power-based harassment on well-being was also clear in these responses and others presented in the following parts of this report; at the extreme, one respondent admitted to having contemplated suicide.

Table 2. Respondents' comments about experiences and impact of power-based harassment.

"Asked to work day and night and on weekends based my single status. Unfairly criticized for not producing useful data. Humiliated for having a weak background and 'not performing well.' All these happened during one-to-one conversations; publicly, everything looks fine. I had a really dark time for a period, and even thought of committing suicide."
"Humiliating me publicly in meeting, always about my professional work, so any harassment could be considered professional critique."
"Yelling at lab, constantly ignoring my comments, sending overwhelming number of emails, arranging meetings without checking my time and accusing me if not attending, spreading false statements to collaborators."
"Telling me it is all my fault when I try to talk about these things. Telling me I am too passive, but when I stick up for myself with them, telling me I am "unprofessional" and cut me out of collaborations. Constantly uses my work and presents it as their own."
"Made to feel irresponsible when returning from time off."
"Not given leadership roles that others receive. Delayed career progression and promotion from absent supervisor."

Respondents who described their experiences of reporting power-based harassment generally conveyed that it had not resolved the issue (Table 3). Some of them described having conversations with people at the Ombuds and other university offices such as Postdoctoral Affairs and Faculty Affairs, but said that no action had been taken to try to address the issues. Some said that the problem only got worse, and that nothing had been done to try to prevent others from experiencing such behaviors.

Respondents who described a positive outcome out of consulting with other people also told how they had to be proactively involved in finding a resolution. That is, the university offices provided them with input on how they could work to improve their situation, and the respondent had to work to resolve their issues, for instance, by reaching out to other faculty members or by addressing their concerns with their problematic supervisor.

Table 3. Comments about reporting power-based harassment.

"Nothing was done. On the contrary, the bully was protected all along the multiple accusations. I had to end up leaving the lab. Many more came after me and suffer the same behavior."
"I submitted a complaint against a senior faculty member about power-based harassment I was experiencing. Some high-level administrators read my complaint and spoke with me about it. I was interviewed by two lawyers working for the university. As far as I know, the university took no further actions regarding my complaint."
"Someone had a conversation with the PI about how to be a good mentor, which the PI knew was because of me. It made the situation worse."
"It has taken months since I reported my work bullying issues and I am not sure if my career will proceed."
"I went to the Ombuds office to help me navigate the situation and consulted with the Office of Postdoctoral Affairs to get some insight. I basically took it to my own hands and tried to network outside of my lab to find another research team who did not work with my harassing PI's team. This was during a 2-year period which ruined my mental health and substantially hindered my career progression."
"I brought in other faculty members to provide input on my work and have included them in many of my meetings with my advisor. Their presence and positive opinions have added pressure on my advisor to limit his disparaging remarks."
"Sought Ombuds office then Office of Faculty Affairs. I found incredible support and it was very nice to be listened to. I have talked to the bully faculty, who then apologized."

Many respondents expressed how they felt unable to address their issues of power-based harassment with anyone at the university. The only solution for some was separating themselves from the problematic individuals (Table 4). Some of them described isolating themselves as they tried to avoid their harassing superior, others talked about having taken steps to change labs or departments within the university. Many respondents also mentioned their decision to leave Columbia University imminently, some of them also saying they would have to leave academia because their superior might negatively affect their reputation within their field.

Table 4. Comments about avoiding perpetrator or leaving.

"Isolating myself, feeling constantly afraid to self-advocate."
"Avoid mentor to prevent potential issues."
"I gave up a higher profile lab where I was not listened to and was not able to do independent research for a much smaller lab that gave me freedom."
"Leaving academia as too afraid of being sabotaged."
"I just want to finish my project and leave this insane country where we let people without any managing experience become group leaders just because they're from famous labs."

Respondents also described several barriers to taking action against problematic superiors (Table 5). They conveyed that the risks involved in trying to address the issue outweighed the benefits they might gain from the process. Some felt that the process would be long, stressful, and would risk negatively affecting their reputation more than the one of the problematic superiors. The outcome would also mean job loss for themselves, and possibly for anyone else at a lab if it meant the supervisor would lose their research funding.

Table 5. Comments about barriers to reporting.

"You can go through a long arduous process to prove that you've been treated terribly, but it is humiliating and your fate is decided by the PI's peers. Your work is gone, your reputation gets ruined and you get labeled a problem."
"Too afraid of repercussions. If this got back to my supervisor in any way, she would definitely set everything in motion to ruin my career."
"Because funding is tied to this person in power, the members of his research group would probably lose their job at Columbia due to lack of funding, which overrides the non-retaliation policy. Therefore, no one in this research group reports bullying and abuse."

"The emotional toll it would take to try to fight to address it is put wrongly on the person experiencing it. The cost does not equal the outcome, and the outcome is unlikely to be anything that would help the person experiencing the bullying, especially if they are on a job-dependent visa."
"I couldn't say anything. I'm an immigrant and I don't have a good network here. I know that I would be blacklisted and retaliated for speaking out."

There was also a lack of trust in Columbia University in respondents' explanation for not taking action regarding power-based harassment (Table 6). They felt like the people who would have to intervene in the issue would always be on the side of the abuser, if they were not themselves bullies. They felt like no Columbia offices would care about protecting them and ensuring that they could keep working there.

Table 6. Comments about lack of trust.

"I do not trust Deans or Chairs at all for handling workplace harassment and bullying. They are the ones who are mainly involved in bullying."
"The university is not a neutral party that can arbitrate between two employees with a power imbalance. The whole department where these people work has much more invested in the powerful employee than the less powerful one. It is hard for colleagues of the powerful one to take a stand."
"People always suggest going to HR or someone higher up in the department, but the chance is that they are on the abuser's side. Everyone is scared of being fired or losing immigration status."
"We all know that any tool that Columbia (or any institution) offers is just to wash their hands of the issue. Those tools are not real, especially for immigrants."
"I don't trust any Columbia office enough to ensure that my complains remain anonymous or to protect me from losing my job."

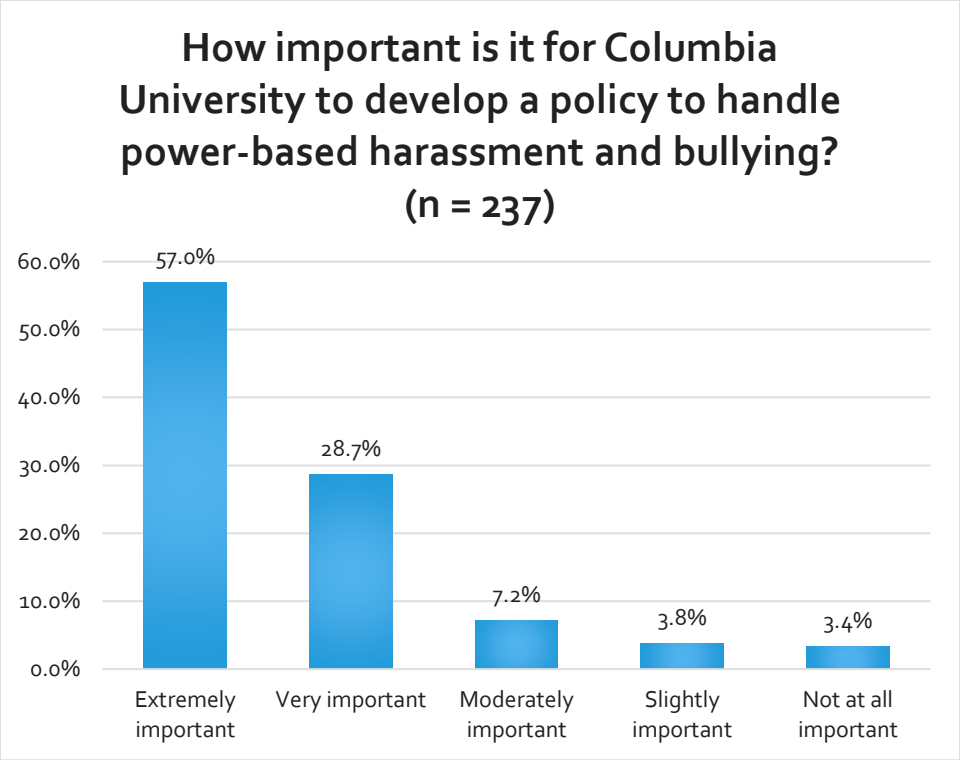
In the above responses respondents also described the particular vulnerability of immigrants or international scholars in the face of power-based harassment. For people whose visa was tied to their work at Columbia University, the risk of reporting issues of power-based harassment felt particularly risky, because they would have to leave the country if their position at Columbia ended. Out of all survey respondents, 56% said they were international scholars who had needed visa sponsorship for their postdoctoral position at Columbia University. Of these, 7% indicated that a superior had threatened them not to renew their visa.

What the university should do about power-based harassment

All respondents (whether they reported having experienced power-based harassment or not) were then asked about what should be done to address these issues at Columbia University.

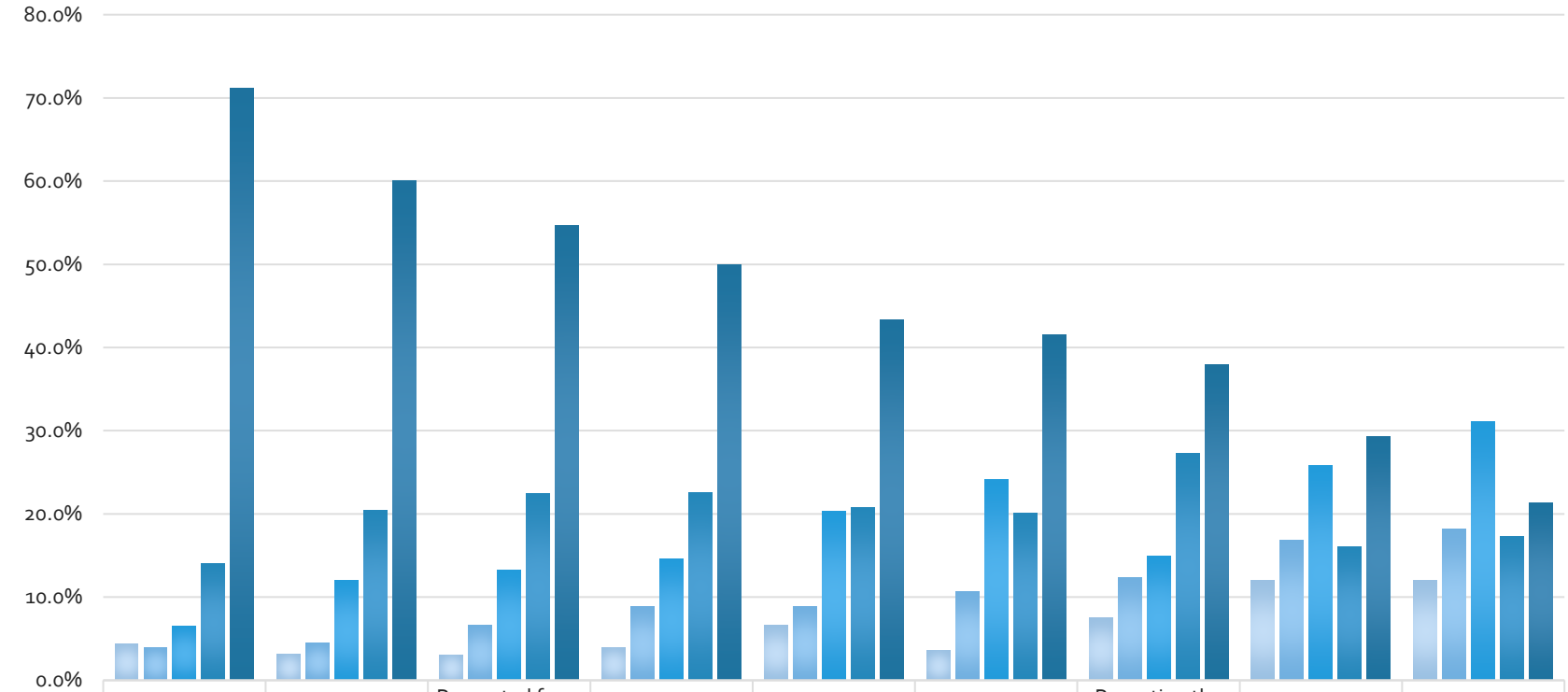
As a first question, we asked respondents how important they thought it was for Columbia University to develop a policy to handle power-based harassment and bullying on a scale of 1 (not at all important) to 5 (extremely important). The majority of respondents (57.0%) felt it was extremely important, and another 28.7% thought it was very important (Figure 6).

Figure 6. Importance of a policy on power-based harassment.



We then presented respondents with a series of nine possible consequences for perpetrators of power-based harassment or bullying (Figure 7), and asked them how appropriate they would be on a scale of 1 (extremely inappropriate) to 5 (extremely appropriate). Requiring perpetrators to take leadership training was the most endorsed solution. Preventing them from taking leadership roles at the department or university level and putting a hold on promotion were also highly ranked. Measures like preventing perpetrators from applying to research funding or requiring them to take a leave of absence were the least endorsed, though still appropriate to at least 40% of respondents.

Figure 7. Attitudes towards suggested consequences to power-based harassment.



	Required to take training about proper leadership/ mentorship	Notifying the relevant Deans and department chairs	Prevented from taking on any leadership position within departments, schools, or university	Putting a hold on tenure or promotion process during investigations	Temporarily prevented from having graduate students work on their projects	Temporarily unable to hire research staff to work on their projects for a period of time	Reporting the bullying behaviors to institutions that provide funding to the offender (e.g., NIH)	Temporarily precluded from applying to research grants	Required to take a leave of absence
Extremely inappropriate	4.4%	3.1%	3.1%	4.0%	6.6%	3.6%	7.5%	12.0%	12.0%
	3.9%	4.4%	6.6%	8.8%	8.8%	10.7%	12.3%	16.9%	18.2%
	6.6%	12.0%	13.2%	14.6%	20.4%	24.1%	15.0%	25.8%	31.1%
	14.0%	20.4%	22.5%	22.6%	20.8%	20.1%	27.3%	16.0%	17.3%
Extremely appropriate	71.2%	60.0%	54.6%	50.0%	43.4%	41.5%	37.9%	29.3%	21.3%

Finally, respondents were invited to write any comments they had about the issue of power-based harassment at Columbia and how to handle it. Many respondents explained that their rating to the items provided above would depend on the severity of the cases, for instance, that they would see some of the most consequential measures (such as requiring a leave of absence) appropriate for the most egregious cases of harassment.

Echoing the responses on the survey items above, respondents wrote about the importance of Principal Investigators and lab leaders receiving adequate leadership training (Table 7). They expressed that such training should be required to anyone holding a supervisory position, and suggested that yearly trainings on power-based harassment and bullying (similar to the ones that currently exist about sexual harassment and discrimination) should be required. Some respondents also suggested psychological counseling, recognizing that bullying behaviors are often tied to mental health issues. Respondents also talked about the importance of periodical leadership or mentorship reviews. They mentioned that instructors already receive teaching reviews and staff receive performance reviews, and that it would thus make sense for faculty to receive mentorship reviews. Such reviews should be taken into account in tenure and promotion processes, but also before hiring new faculty. Trainings and reviews were not only to keep people in check, but with the hope that leaders understand how better leadership and mentorship practices would lead to improved productivity and work quality.

Table 7. Comments about training and mentorship evaluation.

"Yearly mandatory education on bullying might help, similar to the one we have to take yearly for anti-harassment, but designed specifically for lab PIs."
"It would be great if all people in management positions (e.g., PIs) would have to take a training on mentorship and being a boss."
"Some form of therapy offered by the university for the offender to correct the behavior. Punishment alone may not change the tendency to a certain behavior, which may occur again once the punishment period is over."
"Graduate student progress is subject to review and in a sense the faculty's mentorship is also under review at the same time, which provides incentive to the faculty to be fair."
"Applicants for PI positions should be questioned not only on their research but also on their understanding of power imbalances, bullying, harassment and mental health."
"It is so important to work in a safe and peaceful environment. We produce much better quality research when we feel safe and appreciated."
"I wish my supervisor knew some people are functioning better when they do their own research without micromanaging."

Respondents also wrote about their perceived lack of a mechanism for investigating reports of power-based harassment and record keeping (Table 8). They felt that allegations of power-based harassment would be taken more seriously if the people receiving them had a way to know whether other people had made allegations against the same individuals in the past. They also thought that the university should do more, when they receive a complaint, to find out if other people had experienced power-based harassment from the same perpetrator. Respondents also felt that it would be helpful to have a public record of cases of power-based harassment, as it could help trainees make decisions about which lab or department to join.

Table 8. Comments about record keeping.

"A permanent centralized record of complaints made and actions taken with respect to power-based harassment allegations against any PI. Harder to write any one event off if there is a way to document a pattern."
"If Columbia actually kept records, they would see that many of their PIs have a history and pattern of bullying and harassing behavior. These are almost never a one-off."
"University should conduct a thorough investigation and interview all the people who worked with or under the bully. Bullies have patterns; they use the same methods to bully people."
"In the short term, their actions should be made as public as possible after being shown to be the case. It is because the knowledge of it is kept hidden by Columbia that this is possible."

In their comments, respondents also emphasized that any remedy put in place to address power-based harassment should take particular care to protect the person reporting (Table 9). For instance, transitional funding could allow the victim to remain employed and academically active while they secure another role within the university or elsewhere. They also conveyed that only protecting the victim would not be enough to prevent the perpetrator from continuing their bullying behavior, and that there should be consequences affecting them. Some respondents felt that no measures to try to prevent power-based harassment would have much impact if there were no actual consequences to the perpetrators. Losing privileges such as promotion, the possibility to hire staff and trainees, or to apply for funding, might be the only consequences that would actually resonate with some people to make them feel like they need to change their behaviors.

Table 9. Comments about consequences to perpetrator.

"Trying to ensure that the survivor can continue their work without changing fields or research specialty."
"In order to effectively address bullying, the university has to ensure that the bullied person will continue to be funded and employed at the university."
"There needs to be penalties in place that remove the burden from the victim and place it on the perpetrator. There must be high-stake consequences for the PIs."
"I hope the record would be used in the future for limiting an offender from having future trainees or opportunities for departmental advancement."
"Trying to ensure that a bully is prevented from becoming a serial-bully by either not allowing them to hire new students/personnel or making it very public that they have been determined to harass previous employees."
"There is no point whatsoever in sending them to training or having them talk to the dean, department chair, etc. But anything that impacts issues related to grants, money, or power are extremely useful since this has become the common language of most universities."

Respondents also saw the issue of power-based harassment as tied into a broader culture governing academia in general and Columbia University particularly (Table 10). For some respondents, policies would not have any lasting impact unless more would be done to address the broader structural and cultural factors that lead to power-based harassment.

Table 10. Comments about culture change.

"The institution needs to change its culture, reward structures and expectations rather than punishing people who get caught. This is about a centuries-long culture of imperialism which seeps into the fiber of everything in the institution where people's talents are extracted through exploitative labor practices. If change is desired, then the culture, power system and reward structure must change."
"I don't see any path to resolving the issues because the entire culture is built on this structure and behavior. Hierarchical power and its use is a fundamental part of Columbia and frankly part of how the university dominates other institutions."

Conclusion

This survey shows that power-based harassment is a concern at Columbia University. Out of 239 respondents, 164 (68.6%) indicated having experienced at least one form of power-based harassment behavior while in a postdoctoral position at Columbia University. Respondents reported negative impacts of such behaviors on their well-being and their professional development. Those who had experienced power-based harassment generally felt like there were no effective mechanisms in place at the university to address their issues.

Establishing a policy on power-based harassment aims at addressing types of harassment that are not already protected by federal laws because the behavior does not explicitly target aspects of the person such as sex/gender, race/ethnicity, religion, etc. However, our survey results show that power-based harassment is still an issue of diversity, equity, and inclusion. For instance, women reported power-based harassment in greater proportion than men. Though the representation in some racial/ethnic groups was very small, there seemed to be differences in how likely certain groups were to experience power-based harassment, which should be further examined in other studies.

Respondents also expressed in open-text answers that immigrants and international scholars were particularly vulnerable to power-based harassment because of concerns about losing visa sponsorship. Although international scholars did not report power-based harassment in greater proportion than those from the US, they composed the majority (56.1%) of our survey respondents. Only 7% of them reported that a superior had threatened not to renew their visa, but such behavior is extremely problematic. International scholars represent a sizable proportion of postdoctoral workers at Columbia University, and the precariousness of their immigration status creates important barriers to addressing issues of power-based harassment. Columbia University already has a commitment to promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion, and addressing issues of power-based harassment and bullying should be an integral part of this effort.

The results also raise some concern about how postdoctoral workers who spend more time at Columbia University seem more likely to experience power-based harassment. That is, respondents who were in the older age group, who held titles of Associate Research Scientist (which do not have a limited term, like for postdoctoral titles), and who had spent more time in a postdoctoral role at the university reported having experienced power-based harassment in much greater proportion. Of course, spending more time at an institution provides higher odds of experiencing any specific type of behavior, but the results also raise questions about the situation of long-term postdoctoral workers. Associate Research Scientists are more likely to be in a precarious position as their appointments are usually renewed year-by-year compared, for example, to postdoctoral fellowships that might be secured for a few years. Some

postdoctoral positions might also provide better mentorship and professional opportunities, while Associate Research Scientist positions might be perceived as closer to staff roles. Further research should examine how postdoctoral researchers who work at the university in the long term experience power-based harassment and how it could be prevented.

The results suggest multiple ways for Columbia University to address the issue of power-based harassment. Respondents emphasized a lack of mentorship or leadership training. Although better training could help prevent issues of power-based harassment from happening in the future, some respondents emphasized that actual consequences to perpetrators would be a more effective way of preventing such behaviors. Therefore, implementing tools to gradually change the culture surrounding power-based harassment and to improve the quality of mentorship should be done along with establishing a process for reporting, investigating, and adequately acting on specific cases. The policy recommendation of the University-Wide Anti-Bullying Working Group offers solutions that would address the concerns expressed by this survey's respondents. Implementing these recommendations promptly and efficiently could resolve or prevent issues of power-based harassment among postdoctoral workers at Columbia University.

Limitations

The survey had a relatively small sample size, and responses may not be representative of the experiences and attitudes of the population of postdoctoral workers at Columbia University. Our ability to disseminate the survey invitation was limited by the fact that it was done through union channels. More individuals might have responded if the survey invitation had also been sent through other means, for example, Columbia University communications.

It is possible that the high proportion of respondents having experienced some form of power-based harassment is due to self-selection bias. That is, people who have experienced power-based harassment might be more likely to volunteer their time to answer a survey on the topic. However, because one way to handle power-based harassment is to leave the institution, it is also possible that many more people have recently experienced such behaviors at Columbia University, but had already left by the time we conducted this survey. Further, although the survey was anonymous, people who have experienced power-based harassment might have chosen not to answer the survey or some of its questions because of privacy concerns.

Despite limitations, this survey provides important data about the issue of power-based harassment among postdoctoral workers at Columbia University. The work presented here shows that it is possible and important to monitor the experiences and attitudes of the community regarding issues of harassment, which could be done periodically through surveys such as this one.

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Inquiries should be directed to CPW: https://columbiapostdocunion.org/contact-us/

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Existing policies including bullying or power-based harassment

National Institutes of Health: https://grants.nih.gov/grants/policy/harassment.htm

Wellcome Trust: https://wellcome.org/grant-funding/guidance/bullying-and-harassment-policy

Appendix – Survey Questionnaire

Columbia Postdoctoral Workers-UAW Local 4100

Working group on power-based harassment and bullying

We are inviting all postdoctoral workers and associate researchers at Columbia University to participate in this survey. The objective of the survey is to understand the experiences of postdoctoral workers with power-based harassment and bullying in the workplace and their interest in different solutions to this issue. The results will help the university-wide working group on power-based harassment proposing policy recommendations for Columbia University.

This survey is anonymous: we will not ask for your name or other personally identifying information. Taking this survey is voluntary and you will have the option to leave any question unanswered. Your contact information will not be associated with your responses. Only the four members of the union's working group on power-based harassment and bullying listed below will be able to access the anonymous data for analysis.

If you have any questions about the survey, you can reach out to any one of the union members participating in the university-wide working group [contact information provided].

The survey will take approximately 5 – 10 minutes to complete.

1. Do you agree to complete this survey?

- Yes
- No

2. Power-based harassment or bullying can take many forms.

Have you experienced any of the following behaviors from a superior at Columbia University? If so, how frequently?

- Never
- Rarely
- Sometimes
- Often

a. Belittling, humiliating, or malicious remarks about you or your
b. Consistently ignoring to take your concerns seriously
c. Ignoring, overlooking, or not giving appropriate credit for work contributions
d. Punishing trivial errors you may have made
e. Verbal or written harassment including abusive or offensive telephone messages, emails, or memos
f. Isolating or ostracizing you from others
g. Overriding or excessively questioning your decisions without justification
h. Unwarranted or unfair criticism of your performance
i. Being humiliated or ridiculed in connection with your professional work in meetings or similar public places
j. Shouting, swearing, or unprofessional remarks
k. Threatening to block or blocking career opportunities/transitions
l. Being assigned tasks/responsibilities inappropriately or punitively
m. Given an unreasonable workload or deadline
n. Excessive monitoring or micromanaging
o. Excluded from important meetings
p. Using your work in publications without appropriately crediting authorship
q. Unfairly refused time off or leave or criticized for taking it
r. Excessive and unwelcome calls outside of work hours
s. Other. Please specify:

[If respondent did not check Rarely, Sometimes, or Often to any of the items under question 2, skip to question 7.]

3. Which of the following have you experienced as a result of power-based harassment and bullying while at Columbia University? Select all that apply.

- Felt unable to focus on the work that needed to be done
- Had to take time off to avoid or cope with bullying behaviors
- Withheld my opinion about work to prevent bullying behaviors
- Let unethical or non-rigorous research practices happen
- Had to change research lab, center, or department
- Protecting yourself from bullying by engaging in outside professional activities and working off campus
- Detrimental effect on my well-being (e.g., anxiety, depression, etc.)
- Loss of self-confidence and self-esteem
- Felt like my professional/career progression has been hindered
- Chose not to pursue professional opportunities because of lack of support
- Other. Please specify: _____

4. Have you ever discussed your experiences of power-based harassment or bullying with any of the following people in your department? Select all that apply.

- Department chair
- Administrators (e.g., human resources)
- Faculty members
- Other. Please specify: _____

5. Have you ever discussed your experiences of power-based harassment or bullying with any of the following entities at Columbia?

- Yes
- No
- I didn't know about this

a. The Ombuds office
b. Office of Postdoctoral Affairs
c. Office of Faculty Affairs
d. Dean's office
e. University Senate
f. Office of Diversity and Equal Opportunity
g. Equal Opportunity & Affirmative Action office (EOAA)
h. Other. Please specify:

6. Please tell us what has been done to resolve your issues, or what you wish had been done.

[Open text box.]

7. How important is it for Columbia University to develop a policy to handle power-based harassment and bullying?

- Not at all important
- Slightly important
- Moderately important
- Very important
- Extremely important

8. How appropriate do you think the following consequences would be for someone who has been determined to do power-based harassment or bullying?
   1- Extremely inappropriate
   2-
   3-
   4-
   5- Extremely appropriate

a. Notifying the relevant Deans and department chairs
b. Required to take training about proper leadership/mentorship
c. Temporarily prevented from having graduate students work on their projects
d. Temporarily unable to hire research staff to work on their projects for a period of time
e. Temporarily precluded from applying to research grants
f. Prevented from taking on any leadership position within departments, schools, or university
g. Putting a hold on tenure or promotion process during investigations
h. Reporting the bullying behaviors to institutions that provide funding to the offender (e.g., NIH)
i. Required to take a leave of absence
j. Other. Please specify:

9. Please share anything else you'd like to say about your experiences with power-based harassment or bullying at Columbia, or possible solutions that could be implemented in a policy.

[Open text]

We want to remind you that you are free to leave any questions unanswered. Your responses to the following questions can help us understand what types of people are subject to power-based harassment or bullying at Columbia University and help in the development of a university-wide policy.

10. How old are you?

- 18 to 24
- 25 to 29
- 30 to 34
- 35 to 39
- 40 to 44
- 45 to 49
- 50 to 54
- 55 to 59
- 60 or older

11. How do you describe yourself?

- Man
- Woman
- Gender non-conforming or nonbinary
- In another way. Please specify: _____

12. Do you identify as a sexual and/or gender minority?

Sexual and gender minority populations include, but are not limited to, individuals who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, asexual, transgender, Two-Spirit, queer, and/or intersex.

- No
- Yes

13. With which of the following racial or ethnic groups do you identify? Select all that apply.

- Hispanic or Latinx
- American Indian or Alaska Native
- Asian (e.g., Chinese, Indian, Filipino, etc.)
- Black or African American
- Middle Eastern or North African
- Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
- White
- Other. Please specify: _____

14. Have you ever needed visa sponsorship from Columbia University as a postdoc or research scientist (e.g., J-1, H-1B, E-3, O-1, TN)?

- No
- Yes

[If answer to 14 is No, skip to question 17.]

15. Would you like to share which visa? Select all that apply.

- E-3
- F-1
- J-1
- H1-B
- O-1
- TN
- Other. Please specify: _____

16. Has a superior ever threatened not to renew your visa?

- No
- Yes

17. What is your current title at Columbia University?

- Postdoctoral Research Scientist/Scholar
- Postdoctoral Research Fellow
- Associate Research Scientist/Scholar
- Other. Please specify: _____

18. When did you first join Columbia as a postdoctoral researcher or employee of any kind?

[Scroll-down menu from 2021 to "1970 or before".]

19. Are you currently a member of the Columbia Postdoctoral Workers union?

- Yes
- No
- I'm not sure