

# End bullying and harassment in academia

Bullying and harassment are systemic, pervasive problems in academia. We reflect on our role as editors and commit to taking steps that we hope will contribute to ongoing efforts to make academia safer for all.

Periodically, high-profile cases of bullying and harassment in academia make the news. Although some cases receive wide attention, these are often portrayed as extraordinary incidents. Some scholars are working hard to change that perception, arguing that — rather than being an exception — these well-publicized cases are just the tip of an iceberg in a system in which bullies and perpetrators of harassment thrive.

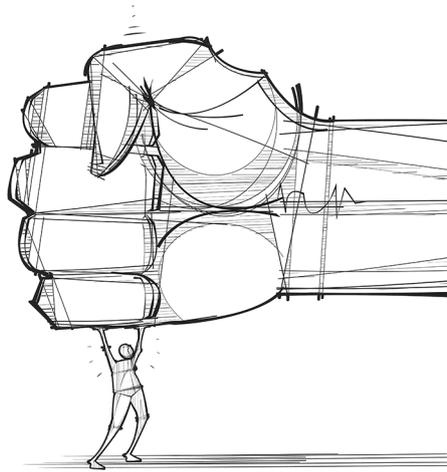
In a [Correspondence](#) in this month's issue, Täuber and Mahmoudi<sup>1</sup> describe why researchers may resort to bullying and harassment, and how — instead of penalizing this behaviour — the prevailing culture in academia rewards it and enables perpetrators to thrive. We have also heard from other voices in our pages that there is a significant intersection between known targets of bias and discrimination, and targets of bullying<sup>2,3</sup>. In the absence of support structures, junior academics, women in male-dominated fields and members of under-represented and minoritized groups<sup>2,3</sup> are disproportionately exposed to bullying and harassment.

As Täuber and Mahmoudi<sup>1</sup> state, academia needs systemic change to put an end to bullying and harassment as career tools. This call to action sits alongside, and in solidarity with, calls for systemic change to put an end to racial and sexual discrimination in science<sup>4</sup>.

We recently had the opportunity to take part in a panel discussion for journal editors at 'STEM the Bullying: Solutions Edition', a conference hosted by the [Academic Parity Movement](#). This has prompted us to discuss and reflect further on our role as editors, and to consider the actions that we can take to promote a safer environment in academia.

## Publishing on bullying and harassment

First, we welcome and value submissions on this topic. This includes primary research submissions: bullying and harassment are afflicting scientists, and more research is urgently needed. We seek to publish robust scientific studies that further our understanding of the implications and effects of bullying and harassment, and the conditions that foster or prevent such behaviour, including at an institutional level. Likewise, in our magazine section we are committed to offering a platform for



Credit: jcgwakefield / DigitalVision Vectors / Getty

discussion, and are especially interested in opinion pieces that offer diverse perspectives and forward-looking proposals on how stakeholders can work together to create a safe and equitable environment in which researchers can thrive. We believe that there are several ways that we as editors can act in ways that make it more challenging for bullies to operate: through our handling of the peer-review process, through our scrutiny of authorship and through responding to concerns raised by our community.

## Managing peer review

A poorly moderated peer-review process is vulnerable to an imbalance of power, which provides reviewers or authors with the opportunity to use bullying to achieve their goals. We do not wish to be part of a system that upholds, and thus condones, bullying and harassment — rather we hope to be an active part of the solution in the way that we handle the peer-review process.

When we peer review manuscripts, we read reviewer reports and authors' responses carefully. If we consider the content of these to be offensive (*Nat. Hum. Behav.* **6**, 307–308; 2022), we write to the reviewer or author and ask them to amend their comments. When a reviewer has been abusive or included ad hominem attacks in their review, we do not invite them to peer review again. Through these actions we hope to prevent intimidation via the peer-review process.

## Authorship

Authorship is similarly vulnerable to power imbalances. We know from conversations with our community that the order and attribution of authorship has been a tool for exercising and perpetuating inequity. The wrongful manipulation of authorship is one form that academic bullying can take. We try to counter this with our clear [authorship](#) criteria and 'Author contributions' statements, which encourage transparency and accountability. For work we are considering for publication, we resolve to look closely at the author contributions and acknowledgements sections of manuscripts for evidence of both 'gift' and 'ghost' authorship. Gift authorship is when a researcher who has had little involvement in the work is unfairly included in the authorship list, and ghost authorship is when a researcher who has had a key role in the work is unfairly excluded. If we suspect either to be the case, we will query this with authors.

For research manuscripts, we only evaluate the quality of the science, and not the standing of authors in the community. This is a fundamental principle of editorial work on a research journal, and by focusing on the science we aim to prevent both positive and negative discrimination. In the case of manuscripts submitted by perpetrators of bullying, this editorial approach can also protect their co-authors — who are disproportionately likely to be targets of bullying and harassment — from facing unfair hurdles in publishing their work, exacerbating the difficulty of their situation.

## Editorially commissioned content

We routinely invite authors to write for our magazine section and we recognize that these pieces provide scientists with a highly visible platform for their views, which may enhance their standing in the community.

When deciding whom to invite, we have always looked into an author's ability to speak knowledgeably and authoritatively on the commissioned topic. Among the editorial team, we have discussed ways in which we can prevent our commissioned content from inadvertently becoming a tool by which perpetrators of bullying or harassment build their reputation<sup>1</sup>. Going forward, in addition to examining research credentials for our commissioned

academic authors, we will be prioritizing invitations to authors with excellent teaching and mentorship records, and we will not knowingly commission content from authors with confirmed records of bullying or harassment.

### Listening to the community

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, we strongly encourage those who know or suspect bullying or harassment may have had an impact on manuscripts submitted to us to contact us in confidence at any stage. This applies to reviewers as well as authors, and includes instances in which a target of

bullying has been unjustly excluded from authorship, a senior researcher is abusing their power in seeking authorship without substantially contributing to the work, the contributions of local collaborators have not been appropriately credited with authorship when that is warranted, the order of authors has been unjustifiably changed or peer review has been used as a tool of intimidation. In such situations, we will keep your communication with us confidential and we will investigate the issue.

Academic bullying and harassment are insidious and devastating, and have no

place in our community. Systemic change is needed at all levels of the academic ecosystem. Journals have a part to play, too, and we sincerely hope that, through these small steps, we can contribute to much-needed change. □

Published online: 25 April 2022

<https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-022-01349-z>

### References

1. Täuber, S. & Mahmoudi, M. *Nat. Hum. Behav.* <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-022-01311-z> (2022).
2. Davis, M. *Nat. Hum. Behav.* 5, 410 (2021).
3. Landgrave, M. *Nat. Hum. Behav.* 3, 1019 (2019).
4. Diele-Viegas, L. M. et al. *Nat. Hum. Behav.* 5, 672–674 (2021).