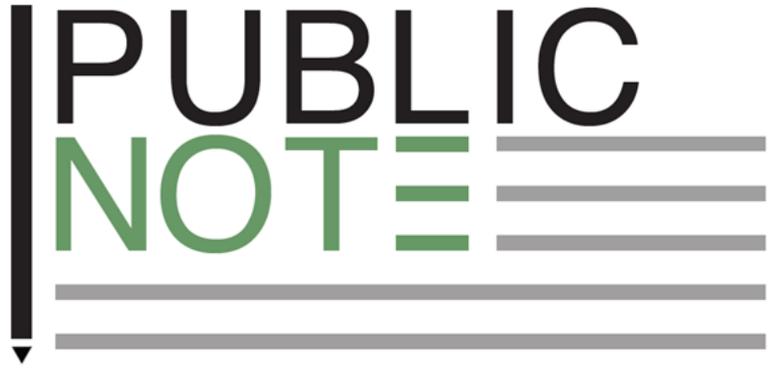


# Dealing with #MeToo in academia Organizational responses through a governance lens

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Recent research shows that female academics who speak up about their experiences with sexual harassment feel silenced by the system. This calls for critical examination of how academic systems deal with #MeToo issues. This short article explores why academia seems to be unable to adequately address sexual harassment. Zooming in on manifestations of different governance logics in attempts to deal with #MeToo, we see that different logics lead to similar patterns. Four governance logics address #MeToo problems through reframing instead of addressing the problem as raised. Consequently, female academics are left in the same or worse position than before speaking up about their experiences. These findings show a blind spot: only #MeToo problems that ‘fit’ within governance logics are dealt with. This is highly problematic, as (1) #MeToo problems as defined by the people who experience harassment are not dealt with and (2) governance mechanisms reconstruct and reinforce existing power relations, in which academics raising #MeToo issues remain in a vulnerable position and end up silenced and oppressed. Further reflection and actions focusing on power imbalances in academia are needed to overcome this blind spot in organizational responses to highly sensitive and complex issues such as #MeToo.

Key words: governance logics, #MeToo, academia, problem definition, power process

## Introduction

The #MeToo movement has shown that sexually transgressive behavior happens everywhere and universities are no exception. Recent studies describe the existence and persistence of sexual harassment in academia and its harmful effects on scholars, organizations and science (Karami et al., 2020; Naezer, Van den Brink & Benschop, 2019). Even more, people who speak up about harassment feel silenced by or the need to self-silence in academic systems (Fernando & Prasad, 2019; Mulligan et al., 2020; Naezer, Van den Brink & Benschop, 2019). These worrisome findings call for critical examination of how academic systems deal with #MeToo issues. This article seeks to answer why academic systems fail to adequately address #MeToo issues. It explores which different governance logics underpin organizational responses to #MeToo and how these logics affect the outcome of the responses. A governance lens is useful to better understand how academic systems deal with #MeToo because it looks beyond #MeToo as a problem of the accused-accuser. Instead, it focuses on how third-party actors play a role in the handling of harassment cases. To grasp the experienced meaning (Yanow, 2006) of dealing with #MeToo cases, empirics of a recent qualitative study in *Human Relations*, ‘Sex-based harassment and organizational silencing: How women are led to reluctant acquiescence in academia’ (Fernando & Prasad, 2019) are analyzed. The study describes many rich stories of organizational responses to female scholars declaring experiences with sex-based harassment in the workplace. The perspective of scholars who raise a #MeToo issue to third party actors is relevant for better understanding how organizational responses fail to create a safe and supporting environment for their employees. Four different governance logics are distinguished in the observed organizational responses to #MeToo: bureaucratic, market, expert and network (Bannink & Trommel, 2019). The #bureaucracy, #market, #expert and #network logic are characterized on the basis of two characteristics: the problem definition process and the power relationship of the actors involved in dealing with a #MeToo case. After discussing how these governance logics manifest in academic systems, the implications of the findings will be discussed.

### #BureaucracyLogic

Lolita: “For even the most ethical and supportive colleagues, the issue is now over, he probably got a

warning so now let’s not talk about controversial things. And when people do this, you wonder if it really *is* over” (in Fernando & Prasad, 2019, p.1581).

Helen: “I was at the point of a nervous breakdown and all they (...) could say was ‘it won’t happen to you again. I am sure they sorted it out’. Nobody wants to go against the organization, although they barely know this man. I suppose it is about conformity” (in Fernando & Prasad, 2019, p.1577).

The quotes by Lolita and Helen reflect a bureaucratic governance logic: the #MeToo issue raised is framed as ‘managed’ when the existing procedures of the organization are executed, e.g. ‘a warning’, it is ‘sorted out’. This way, the problem is framed as ‘over’ by other organizational actors, while it wasn’t ‘over’ for these women. The quotes also reflect a vertical power relationship between the actors involved. It is believed that the system knows what is right and thus, these procedures should not be questioned. Both examples describe how power is exercised through rule application and correcting each other towards the procedures of the organization: ‘conformity’ is the (social) rule.

### #MarketLogic

Anne: “In their (colleagues) view, I am now promoted so it does not matter if my line manager made sexist remarks throughout my probation. (...) I felt traumatized and (...) thought that I will never get tenure” (in Fernando & Prasad, 2019, p.1578).

Husna: “There are other male academics who date young girls – it is an increasingly common practice. One senior person here was dating a PhD student who was much younger than him. Once she completed the PhD she had a career made for her. So in an environment like this, there might be people who are ever willing to excuse him” (in Fernando & Prasad, 2019, p.1583).

These stories of Anne and Husna reflect a market logic in which #MeToo issues are reframed as ‘goods’ for exchange. When this ‘good’ is exchanged for career steps, the problem is ‘managed’. In Anne’s example, her right to complain about sexist remarks is traded for promotion, in her colleagues’ view. Husna’s tells a story of how young PhDs’ careers benefit from dating senior scholars. Power is exercised in the process of commodification: ‘accepting sexism’ is treated as something that can be fairly compensated with economic benefits. The hierarchical relationship between supervisor – junior researcher is not

considered when judging whether the exchange is reasonable or ethical.

## #ExpertLogic

Gracia: “When I heard that he had spoken about me to other colleagues in a sexualized way, I complained. (...) But they (the organization) just dismissed it. They tried to frame it as a personal issue – for which I may be partially responsible. They hinted very subtly that I need to learn to deal with various people at work” (in Fernando & Prasad, 2019, p.1581).

Paula: “That [HR] woman told me that she does not see sexual harassment. She said that if she did, she would have supported me. She said that she has handled many cases of sexual harassment throughout her career. (...) I suppose they need evidence of something like rape or assault. (...) Because she is in HR, she technically should know about what she is talking about and she is an external party so she cannot be biased” (in Fernando & Prasad, 2019, p.1575).

Gracia and Paula’s stories show how organizational actors act as experts who decide whether the raised #MeToo issue is a ‘true’ problem or not. In the first example, we see how organizational actors reframe the issue by shifting the responsibility for problem solving to Gracia and excluding themselves from taking responsibility. In the second example, we see how the HR person refers to expertise and experience to convince Paula that HR has more legitimate framing power than she does. Power is exercised through expertise and seniority to reframe the problem definition as a way to handle, and in these examples dismissing, the case.

## #MarketLogic

Andrea: “Her view [HR officer] was that I never refused to attend the first few occasions, which was clearly outside professional interests. So he would have thought that I am interested in a non-professional relationship. (...) I just got into academia, I was vulnerable, I didn’t want to displease him, (...) I really needed someone to write with. (...) This was probably the most humiliating meeting in my life” (in Fernando & Prasad, 2019, p.1576).

Abby: “My team members were like ‘even if you leave the organization, the nature of the industry means that getting the wrong person on your bad side can effectively ruin your career, especially if it’s someone in your area. So just keep quiet. You don’t want to be

known as a parasite” (in Fernando & Prasad, 2019 p.1582).

Andrea’s and Abby’s examples reflect a network logic because they show how actors make decisions through anticipation to expected actions of others in the academic network – HR, colleagues, people within their research field who can affect their career. In the first example, we see how Andrea initially accepted inappropriate behavior of a senior academic because she expected that he would not write with her if she refused. In the second example, we see how Abby anticipates to the relationship between smaller and bigger networks: reputation damage in this organization (e.g. being known as ‘the girl who accuses men’ or the ‘troublemaker’ in Fernando & Prasad, 2019) could cause problems in other relationships. Power is exercised through processes of inclusion and exclusion from the academic network, in which power is not equally shared – having the wrong person against you can ruin your career. Both examples show how the anticipation process to overcome exclusion from the network determines the way in which a #MeToo case is framed.

**The #MeToo problem definition is ‘fitted’ to the governance approach**

## Conclusion

Organizational silencing after raising #MeToo cases in academia calls for critical reflection on academic systems. To better understand how silencing can be overcome, this article explored which governance logics underpin organizational actions to address sexual harassment cases. This short exploration based on existing studies provides several interesting directions for future research on both the question how to deal with #MeToo and for a better understanding of problem definition processes in governance.

First, zooming in on the manifestations of different governance logics in attempts to deal with #MeToo, we see that *different* governance logics follow *similar* patterns with *similar* outcomes. The four approaches address #MeToo problems through adopting a new problem definition, one that fits with the governance approach that is applied. While governance literature generally reasons which approach fits to which problem (Bannink & Trommel, 2019), we see in #MeToo cases how this is turned around: the problem is ‘fitted’ to the governance approach. Bureaucratic procedures only solve problems that can be handled within these procedures; experts only see problem definitions that fit within their frame of reference; problems are solved when they are exchanged as a ‘good’ for an economic benefit; and the academic network only allows problems that pose no risk of

exclusion. Thus, the chosen governance approach deals with *newly defined problems* to make them fit within this logic. Therewith the actual complexity of the problem is simplified, specifically through dismissal of the voice of the most vulnerable actor. This helps to explain why women who speak up about harassment are dissatisfied with the outcome of organizational procedures (Mulligan et al., 2020), experience no help at all (Naezer, Van den Brink & Benschop, 2019) and/or feel silenced (Fernando & Prasad, 2019).

Second, addressing #MeToo in academia requires being attentive to power imbalances at stake. While #MeToo issues in academia arise from power differences (Mulligan et al., 2020), the four governance approaches discussed in the examples do not seem to take this power imbalance into account. In fact, the existing power relations are reconstructed in all four logics: the governance approaches protect accused parties from serious consequences through redefinition of the problem, while women raising the issue face difficulties to push their problem definition forward. The women remain in a weaker position in the system than the people they accuse. Through the reconstruction of this power imbalance, the existing power relations were even reinforced in these cases. Reframing of the problem definition led to normalization of the issues, leaving women unheard, stressed and oppressed. These findings underscore the idea that governance should not be considered as neutral and power differences between actors in the context of application need to be considered (La Grouw, 2020). Neutral application of a governance approach, as in these MeToo cases, may result in reinforcement of existing power imbalances and leaves weaker actors in a worse position than before.

In sum, this article illuminates a blind spot in dealing with #MeToo issues in academia: only problems that 'fit' within governance logics are dealt with. This is highly problematic, as (1) #MeToo as defined by persons experiencing harassment are not dealt with, and (2) governance practices reconstruct and reinforce existing power relations, which places academics raising #MeToo issues in a vulnerable, unheard and oppressed position, with detrimental consequences for these scholars, for their organizations and science in general. We need further research, reflection and action focusing on power imbalances to overcome this blind spot in academia's responses to highly sensitive issues such as #MeToo.

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