Institutional betrayal and the role of male allies in supporting women in higher education

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Abstract

In response to persistent gender inequality, institutions have been making commitments to gender diversity, equity and inclusion through funding, initiatives, and policy. However, when everyday institutional practices and social norms fail to protect women from inequity, women experience institutional betrayal. Using data from an open-ended survey of 202 faculty in male-dominated disciplines, we explore how male allies can engage in intentional action to interrupt gender injustice and buffer institutional betrayal and what consequences accrue to the male allies. Findings show that institutional betrayal occurs at four levels, and while at the first two, male allies buffer institutional betrayal of women with varying degrees of success, at the other two, male allies experience institutional betrayal themselves. As such, the opportunities and limits of male allyship as an avenue for driving structural change for gender equity are discussed.

Keywords: allyship; gender equality; higher education; institutional betrayal; STEM; sciences; male allies

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Female faculty in North America, particularly in male-dominated disciplines, such as Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM), have historically faced challenges to success across the career life-cycle - from hiring (e.g., Glass & Minnotte 2010) to promotion (e.g., Bonawitz & Andel, 2009; Van Miegroet, Glass, Callister, & Sullivan, 2019) to earning prestigious administrative and leadership appointments (Daldrup-Link, 2017; Hart, 2016; Qamar et al., 2020). As such there is a large body of research, funding, and practice on female faculty advocating for greater equity and inclusion in higher education. In response, institutions have been developing diversity, equity, and inclusion strategic goals (e.g., Williams, 2013), creating diversity and inclusion statements (e.g., Wilson, Meyer, & McNeal, 2012) and otherwise signaling inclusiveness such as via recruitment materials, brochures, and websites (Ford & Patterson, 2019). Yet, women, particularly in male-dominated disciplines of academia, experience institutional betrayal. Women faculty of color and intersectional identities are particularly vulnerable. They are more likely to encounter “the quadruple threat of racism, sexism, homophobia, and class-based subordination...combination of ‘isms’ [which] can be lethal to their careers, bodies, and spirits” (Niemann, 2012, pp. 446).

Institutional Betrayal

Institutional betrayal is described as “wrongdoings perpetrated by an institution upon individuals dependent on that institution, including failure to prevent or respond supportively to wrongdoings by individuals committed within the context of the institution” (Freyd, n.d.; Smith & Freyd, 2014). In academic institutions, betrayal may occur via various agents, such as administrators and colleagues who act on behalf of the institution, and whose acts of betrayal are protected by the institution. Women faculty dependent on the institution expect that they will be

treated equitably because institutions routinely make these claims in diversity and inclusion statements. Failure to prevent inequity constitutes institutional betrayal. It is even more egregious when, after a transgression, a victim reports an incident to the authorities, trusting that the institution will support them and mete out justice, yet the institution betrays this trust by failing to respond or inadequately responding to the transgression. As one potential solution, Smith and Freyd (2014) called for research on protecting institutional members from betrayal. We move this work forward by considering the role of allies as agents who can prevent institutional betrayal by intervening *before* the potential victim is involved (e.g., hiring practices), or interrupt institutional betrayal by intervening *during* or *after* a transgression has occurred (e.g., wrongful denial of tenure and promotion) and push the institution to adequately course-correct or repair the betrayal. We explore this by considering the stories of allies.

Men as Allies

Washington and Evans (1991, p. 195) describe an ally as “a member of the ‘dominant’ or ‘majority’ group who works to end oppression in his or her personal and professional life through support of, and as an advocate for, the oppressed population.” We approach issues of inequitable treatment of women in male-dominated disciplines of academia in North America by considering the role of male allyship. In this chapter, male allies are identified as those men who advocate in support of women by leveraging their power and privilege (Erskine & Bilimoria, 2019) and engage in “intentional action to interrupt sexism or gender injustice” (Madsen, Townsend, & Scribner, 2019 p.4). Research has shown that there are significant benefits of male allyship (Warren, Bordoloi, & Warren, 2021) as calling out of sexism is more effective when it is done by men than when done by women (Cihangir, Barreto, & Ellemers, 2014), and other men hear male allies differently than they do women because of systemic patriarchy (Berkowitz,

2004). Given that men continue to be the numeric majority in a number of STEM and other academic disciplines, male allies can be powerful resources in bringing about changes in gender dynamics and androcentric structures within academic institutions (Warren, Donaldson, Lee, & Donaldson, 2019). As such in this chapter, we examine stories by male allies to unpack the consequences of men interrupting institutional betrayal toward women faculty¹. Of note, substantial past scholarship on gender equality and institutional betrayal has examined both actions and failures at the structural level (Pyke, 2018; Smith & Freyd, 2014). Yet, the role that male allies can play at the individual and interpersonal levels in interrupting institutional betrayal remains relatively unknown. In this chapter, we extend past work by focusing on the role of male allies in contributing to gender equality through individual and interpersonal actions and the consequences that accrue from these behaviors.

Method

Data were collected through an online open-ended survey from 101 male faculty in male-dominated disciplines of science, technology, engineering, math, philosophy, religion, business, and law in 64 elite research-intensive universities in the U.S. and Canada. Men were asked, “Please write about an incident at work that stands out in your memory as a time when you went out of your way to support, empower, or advocate for a female colleague. Perhaps, you did something when she was being treated unfairly, or you stood up for her, or you did something that was supportive of her. Please think about the incident and describe it in vivid terms. Please share exactly what happened. Who was involved? What were your thoughts and feelings? Why

¹ Race/ethnicity may complicate the effectiveness of male allies and the women faculty (including women of color, LGBTQ+, etc.) they wish to support. However, we are not able to engage in an evidence-based discussion on these issues in this chapter because the data were limited around these categories.

is this significant for you?" We selected stories that fit with the concept of institutional betrayal. Using thematic analysis, we identify patterns and themes that we describe below.

Findings

Overall, the stories suggest that institutional betrayal may occur on multiple levels constituting betrayal not only of women but also of the male allies who seek to support women (see Figure 1).

Levels of Betrayal

- 1) Institutions fail to prevent harm toward women, and male allies intervene where women are not present to advocate for themselves. The failure of institutions to secure the interests of female faculty in processes such as hiring and promotion were areas where male allies had to intervene to prevent harm. Within academia, where hiring and tenure/promotion decisions are often made by a small group of faculty members who carry disproportionately high levels of power, women faculty are placed in circumstances wherein due to the structural processes that are inherently male-dominated the full extent of institutional betrayal is not visible to them.

AB² shared an experience where a female candidate for a mathematics position “was being trashed by a small but influential group of senior colleagues. They harassed her in private meetings during her interview, asked nasty and dismissive ‘questions’ during her job talk, and one even sent an email to faculty-all questioning her intelligence.” Even though the ally worked in a completely different area of mathematics he “wrote a long letter praising the potential applications of her work and sent it to (the) department head,” which was instrumental in her hiring.

² To protect the identity of the allies, random initials are used when quoting the allies throughout the chapter.

BC shared how the promotion case for a female colleague was being undermined, necessitating his intervention: “student comments in question were not appropriate and should have been dismissed, yet several faculty members raised concern and continued discussion when it was not appropriate.” Moreover, some faculty members wanted to count the faculty candidates’ maternity leave against her: “I also made it quite clear the time allotted for maternity leave should NOT be considered in the time to tenure, as explicitly stated in our university’s policy.”

- 2) Institutions fail to prevent harm and women have limited recourse; when male allies step up in solidarity they may have more success due to their relative privilege. Men’s roles as allies matters because women often face a double bind within institutions, if they attempt to speak up they are penalized for appearing agentic and yet when women advocate for themselves, they face backlash that silences them (Bosak et.al. 2018). ‘Doing their part’ toward gender equity and inclusion means that men must step up as allies at the interpersonal level as well. Allyship intervention is necessary so that women do not have to suffer continued betrayal and be burdened with combating betrayal alone.

CD shared a story of a female staff member “who was administratively involved but not responsible” for a human subjects’ review document. She was “being bullied on email by a male professor who is both powerful and well liked” but had a history of treating female staff poorly. He sent her “a nasty email in all caps describing in many awful words his frustrations with the feedback he had received. He attacked her personally.” CD noted that the staff member “had little recourse because the faculty member is well liked and also good friends with the staff member's boss,” and it compelled him to intervene via “a little chat with the faculty member, calling him out on

his lack of professionalism and his being an \$@#%\$@#...he apologized to the staff member, and the staff member certainly appreciated it.”

Another male faculty member, DE, shared how a female colleague found her application for promotion to full professor being challenged within her department due to an administratively ordained change in campus location: “her field of research changed when she moved...and her current department head ‘just did not know what to do with her’ and told her she could not see a way to get her promoted.” DE became actively involved in ensuring that this situation was rectified: “I worked to get her tenure home moved to my department, worked with her to prepare her dossier (including putting her up for a major award which she won and helped her case), and shepherded her case through the process...She was indeed promoted.”

- 3) Institutions betray women and also fail to respond to allies. In this category we consider the experiences of allies who intervened when they discovered female colleagues faced institutional betrayal but found that their efforts were thwarted despite their best efforts.

EF shared how a female colleague “was denied midterm continuation in a Tenure Track faculty position.” He advocated for her at multiple levels and hired her as a research associate while she looked for employment. He noted that unfair gender expectations played a part in the decision process “the bar was being moved with regards to necessary requirements... Others were not held to the same standard.”

Similarly, FG shared a story of how a female colleague was denied promotion to Full Professor due to failed and unjust administrative processes at multiple levels: “external letter solicited by the department head from a close colleague that was needlessly negative...errors in interpretation by the university P & T committee...factual

errors in reporting funding amounts by the dean.” He attempted to intervene by meeting the provost and president and expressing his displeasure at the situation. He noted that institutional betrayal was not just that of administrative failures but against the very rhetoric of equality and inclusion employed by institutions: “(its) not okay given all of the talk from many of the same individuals on empowering women in STEM!”

- 4) Institutions not only betray women, but also actively undermine male allies. In this last category we consider the narratives of allies who faced significant obstruction or were penalized for their actions when they attempted to intervene. GH was the chair of a search committee and shared that some members of the search committee “soured on inviting the two of them” when they found that two of the top candidates were married to each other. He said that they could not consider their marital status when selecting candidates to interview and was particularly concerned that such a rule was discriminatory towards female candidates. He noted that: “among the pool of applicants who were married to each other, 50% of them were women, compared to the overall pool, which was 10-15% women.” However, he found himself in conflict with a few senior faculty and the Chair of the department. He pointed out that: “if we discriminated based on being married to another applicant, we'd be making a decision that had nothing to do with their ability to do the job...[and it] was prohibited by the Civil Rights Act of 1964.” Due to his stand the search committee eventually interviewed both candidates and subsequently “the faculty as a whole voted to offer them two positions.” However, GH was penalized for his actions as he “was never asked to be on a hiring committee again.”

HI intervened when two doctoral students sought his counsel about egregious behavior at an orientation program where: “two male faculty members teaching the class

used an extended (half hour) metaphor about how being good at Computer Science research required ‘big, hairy balls.’” In response to the complaint HI “sent an email to the faculty members, and to their school chairs (their bosses). I told them that it was inappropriate, that it made the female students uncomfortable, and that the instructors should apologize.” Rather than supporting HI, the administration penalized him: “the Dean and the Dean's Cabinet determined that I denied these two faculty due process...they considered firing me, but decided that it wasn't a case that could revoke my tenure. I was reprimanded by the Dean, and had to apologize, (in person and in writing) to the two instructors.”

For allies the pervasive nature of such systemic biases often result in a realization that sustaining institutional change is difficult. IJ, who attempted to help a faculty colleague with a pay disparity, noted one quickly realizes that an individual’s “power and influence is small and insufficient in the massive academic machine.”

Discussion

Research shows that institutional betrayal is widespread in higher education (e.g., Pyke, 2018; Stader & Williams-Cunningham, 2017). We draw from stories of male allies in male-dominated disciplines in higher education to offer a nuanced picture, highlighting the value of allyship in protecting against institutional betrayal of women, but also identifying the limits of male allyship. The stories show that although allies serve an important role in protecting victims or potential victims from institutional betrayal, it is not a foolproof measure. First, allies find that there are limits to how effective their efforts are in protecting victims against institutional betrayal (e.g., feelings of helplessness). Further, even the most successful of interventions by allies are limited to individual circumstances and are unlikely to result in structural changes. In

the long term, individual allyship is also unlikely to be sustainable without changes to the androcentric structures within academia. Allies recognize that the institutional betrayal women experience is sustained by a male conceptualization of academic value that is willing to excuse egregious behaviors if the individual in question is valuable to the institution. As CD shared, “nothing's essentially changed. He's still an oblivious and aggressive SOB who's protected because he's a ‘good researcher’ and ‘doesn't really mean all that stuff - he's just a dramatic guy.’ My perception is that ‘we’ enable this crap so long as the person involved is doing something useful for the school.”

Second, allies themselves are subject to institutional betrayal, wherein they find their efforts to seek justice are obstructed, or worse find themselves subject to punishment. When institutions betray allies, they also undermine future work on equity and allyship. Our findings demonstrate that while allyship makes a useful contribution, institutions cannot rely on individual allies to serve as the sole protecting mechanism against institutional betrayal. If academic institutions are truly willing to engage in institutional courage, that is, “seek the truth and engage in moral action, despite unpleasantness, risk, and short-term cost” (Freyd, n.d.), they not only need to actively promote and boost male allyship, but also focus on disrupting the many structural barriers that women academics face. As male allies are willing to advocate for women by leveraging their power and privilege, they are the ideal candidates to resist institutional betrayal, demand transparency and hold academic institutions accountable for their actions.

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Figure 1

Levels of Betrayal

01	Institutions fail to prevent harm toward women	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Male allies intervene where women aren't present to advocate for themselves	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Male allies succeed in effecting change for the female targets of allyship
02	Institutions fail to prevent harm toward women and they have limited recourse	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Male allies intervene in solidarity with women	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Male allies succeed in effecting change for the female targets of allyship
03	Institutions fail to respond adequately when women advocate for themselves	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Male allies intervene in solidarity with women	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Institutions fail to respond to male allies as well
04	Institutions fail to respond adequately when women advocate for themselves	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Male allies intervene in solidarity with women	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Institutions fail to respond to male allies as well and allies are actively undermined<ul style="list-style-type: none">◦ Obstructed◦ Penalized