



A Conversation with Leila Wood

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[Editor's Note: This issue's conversation features an interview with Suzanne Sankar, MSW Executive Editor of Field Educator, and Leila Wood, PhD, LMSW, Research Assistant Professor at the Institute on Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault (IDVSA) at the University of Texas at Austin School of Social Work. Dr. Wood discusses her research with Dr. Carrie Moylan on sexual harassment experienced by social work students in field placement. A summary of their article on this topic is in this issue's What We're Reading section.]



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Suzanne Sankar: Leila, in your recent article “No one talked about it’: Social Work Field Placements and Sexual Harassment,” you and your coauthor, Dr. Carrie Moylan, display a thorough knowledge of field education. As researchers on interpersonal and intimate partner violence, how did you both decide to investigate harassment in field placements (Wood & Moylan, 2017)? How did you become familiar with the dynamics of field placement learning?

Leila Wood: That’s a great question. Dr. Moylan and I had both read a 2014 article “Survey of Academic Field experiences (SAFE): Trainees Report Harassment and Assault” from the STEM fields and written by Clancy, Nelson, Rutherford, & Hinde. They had done a survey of sexual harassment and sexual assault in fieldwork in zoology, primatology, anthropology, and a lot of the field-based sciences. They had found extraordinarily high rates of sexual harassment and sexual assaults. I

started thinking back to my field experiences. I have three social work degrees: BSW, MSSW, and PhD. I've supervised students: both as the on-site field instructor and as a professor. Because I'm from a more rural area, I've been the MSW off-site field instructor particularly for domestic violence and sexual assault agencies. So, I've done a lot of field supervision! As I was reading the article about sexual harassment in field-based sciences, I started to think about experiences with my students and my own experiences in field. I thought, "I wonder if we have this problem in social work, too?"

I used a listserv for interpersonal violence researchers to ask, "Has anybody seen this article? I wonder if we have this same problem in social work." Dr. Moylan and I had never met, but she emailed me back right away and said, "I think we do. I've had experiences with students and supervising field placements. I think we have this problem, too." We decided to do a study together.

Suzanne Sankar: That's a great story.

Leila Wood: One thing that was unique in us coming together is that we both had social work degrees; we'd been through field placements, we were both social work educators providing field supervision, and we were both sexual harassment campus violence scholars. We had all of that in common.

Suzanne Sankar: Clearly, you could both bring a rich knowledge of the range of field placement settings and the dynamics of the supervisory relationship, including the power dynamic.

Leila Wood: Another dynamic that interested us is that social work is a profession of mostly those who identify as female, LGBT, and people of color. In some ways, when we think about it, those are the same groups that are most vulnerable for occupational sexual harassment. Also, thinking about social work students who are often young, age increases the risk for sexual harassment. And, as a young person, it's likely you are in a professional setting and role for the first time. Something else unique to social work is that we expect to work with clients who are facing difficulties or have difficult behaviors. It can be challenging for a social work student to determine what is normal client behavior and what is harassment behavior. In our study, in the open ended comments, we heard about the difficulty of determining what's normal client behavior, to be expected in a social work role, and what is sexual harassment behavior that merits safety concerns and creates a hostile environment.

Suzanne Sankar: This could be an area where more field instructor training is needed.

Leila Wood: Yes, it could also be that there is some confusion about the social work role that comes in. We're preparing students for direct practice, and there's an implicit

expectation that students need to toughen up and to weather crisis and chaos as part of learning about social work practice. But, at times, it can be hard to distinguish sexual harassment from organizational environmental stressors, especially when a student is just beginning to learn the social work role. This was one of the challenges that we heard about in our study and, also, when we presented our work to students, social work academics, and violence researchers.

Suzanne Sankar: Yes, I think this can be a challenge for social work field instructors in terms of providing supervision that's sensitive to the issue of sexual harassment. Another question our readers might have for you is, are you planning any follow-up or new studies?

Leila Wood: Yes, we have a lot of research activities going on here at the University of Texas at Austin that are aimed at broader campus violence issues. We are particularly looking at experiences of harassment in diverse professions, including social work, and understanding, through longitudinal efforts, the impact of those types of violence over time. One thing that is really important about the sexual harassment conversation is that sexual harassment is misunderstood. Sexual assault and intimate partner violence are more concrete, so people get it. When we're talking about sexual harassment, people sometimes focus on unwanted sexual attention.

However, the kind of sexual harassment that our students mostly experience is sexist hostility or heterocentric hostility. It's things that are about gender, sexual orientation, and sexism. All of this contributes to create a hostile environment. There are repeated behaviors that happen again and again that signal to a person that they will not have equal access or opportunity because of their gender, body, or sexuality. These aspects become the focal point, and they're not going to be treated equally. Part of the solution is understanding more from a research perspective, and through a qualitative inquiry, how people are experiencing sexual harassment and all the different nuanced ways that it's happening for social work students in field placements. This understanding will help us to improve communication about the reality of sexual harassment.

We have a tremendous amount of data about the impact of sexual harassment, but it is still an uphill battle to convince people that sexual harassment, by itself, is creating long-term health and mental health consequences. It's an emerging challenge for social work field education in terms of a training perspective, because sexual harassment is nuanced. It's about sexuality and sex, but it's also about unwanted sexual attention, and harassment based on gender, sexual orientation, and gender identity. I think that we've been, perhaps, talking about sexual harassment in a really limited way. What the data bears out is that all of these types of sexual harassment have really devastating consequences for educational outcomes.

Suzanne Sankar: You're really trying to expand how we think about sexual harassment, and how we think about its impact on someone over time.

Leila Wood: Exactly. We're focused on longitudinal work and qualitative data collection to understand more about the impact of harassment over time, the range of harassment experiences, and the impact of peer disclosures and how peers can support each other or can injure each other. We want to enhance our capacity to address these issues across the curriculum, and then begin to pioneer some new ways of dealing with harassment in the field where the rubber meets the road. Dr. Carrie Moylan is focused on policy remedies and macro issues that can help set the tone for schools of social work and institutions to implement different training policy remedies.

Suzanne Sankar: We have a lot to look forward to! Thank you so much for sharing your thoughts with the *Field Educator* and for your contribution to field education.

References

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