



# **Paying attention to tension: Towards a new understanding of the organizational mechanisms enabling sexual harassment**

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## **abstract**

Research on sexual harassment in professional settings has enabled a conceptualization of transgressive behaviour by naming, defining, and mapping the phenomenon. Yet, the problem shows little sign of being eliminated. This article mobilizes a perspective of dis/organization to shed new light on the continuous (re)production of sexual harassment, suggesting that organizational contradictions create tension within which sexual harassment is enabled and (re)produced. The study employs a tension-centred research approach and draws on empirical data from two different professional settings in Denmark, namely academia and the military. Attending to the tension that arises in the organizing of these professional settings, the article identifies four contradictions that enable sexual harassment. Connecting these findings to the work of Butler, the article argues that navigating such contradictions is deeply entangled in the un/doing of professional subjects, thus making it a sensitive matter, not least for newcomers striving for intelligibility in a new professional setting. In addition to this contribution to the field of sexual harassment research, the article proposes the concept of un/doing as an analytical tool to critically examine tension and contradictions in the realm of dis/organization.

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## **Introduction**

Recent events, including but not limited to the #MeToo movement, highlight that despite research efforts, legal and organizational prohibitions as well as feminist activism, sexual harassment in professional settings shows little sign of decreasing in its occurrence, let alone of being eliminated (Ahmed, 2015; 2017; FRA, 2015; McDonald, 2012; NIKK, 2020). In this article, we mobilize a perspective of dis/organization to shed new light on the continuous (re)production of sexual harassment. We suggest that organizational contradictions create tension within which sexual harassment is enabled and (re)produced. Moreover, we employ Butler's (2004) concept of un/doing as an analytical tool to critically examine contradictions and tension in the area of dis/organization.

In opposition to historically-dominant organization studies literature which focuses on certainty and order (see e.g. Thompson, 1967; Weick, 1979), critical organizational scholars have argued that disorganization and disorder are inherent elements of organizations (Böhm and Jones, 2001; Cooper, 1986; 2001; Hassard et al. 2008), thereby challenging the 'enduring myths of rationality and order that shape the prevalent logics of organizational theory and practice.' (Trethewey and Ashcraft, 2004: 81). Focused on revealing the complex ways in which disorganization takes part in shaping organizations, these scholars embrace rather than "sort out" contradictions and tensions that appear to cause disorder. Picking up on these claims, our ambition is to utilize an approach of tension-centred scholarship (Martin, 2004; Putnam et al., 2016; Trethewey and Ashcraft, 2004) in the field of sexual harassment.

Research from a variety of fields, including critical (feminist) organization studies, has addressed matters of sexual harassment in professional settings (Cortina and Berdahl, 2008; Fernando and Prasad, 2019; MacKinnon, 1979; McDonald, 2012; NIKK, 2020; Swedish Research Council, 2018), efforts that enabled a conceptualization of transgressive behaviour by naming it, defining it, and giving it political and organizational attention. We seek to extend this field of research by focusing on how sexual harassment is (re)produced, arguing that it is enabled within the tension created through organizational contradictions.

Data from two professional settings in Denmark, namely academia and the military, form the empirical foundation of this article. By bringing these two settings together in one analysis, we illuminate how sexual harassment is (re)produced in very similar ways even within quite different organizational contexts. Engaging with four empirically identified contradictions, we link the matter of sexual harassment to the challenge of becoming *intelligible* within a professional setting. Here, we draw on Butler's (2004) concept of *doing* and *undoing* as co-constitutive elements in the process of subjective becoming to introduce the risk of being undone as an explanatory factor for the persistence of sexual harassment.

In the sections that follow, we first elaborate on the problem of sexual harassment and its continuous (re)production in organizational settings. This is followed by a presentation of the dis/organization perspective which we utilize to examine the contradictions within which sexual harassment is enabled, suggesting the concept of un/doing as an analytical tool for this examination. We then outline our methodology before we present our empirical findings, discuss the article's analytical contributions, and conclude with implications for research and practice.

## **The problem of sexual harassment**

In academia, discussions under the label of 'sexual harassment' started in the late 1970s, key conceptualizations of this phenomenon typically being ascribed to Till's (1980) empirical categorization and Fitzgerald et al.'s (1988) Sexual Experience Questionnaire, as well as Crenshaw's (1998) intersectional perspective. Commonly, studies following these conceptualizations differentiate between forms of verbal sexual harassment (e.g. inappropriate comments, jokes, or questions) and physical sexual harassment (e.g. unwelcome touching, hugging, or kissing) (McDonald, 2012; Swedish Research Council, 2018). Some studies also refer to non-verbal sexual harassment, such as inappropriate staring, and more recently digital sexual harassment (FRA, 2015). In our work, we recognize that the line between physical and verbal acts as well as the (in)appropriateness of these acts is blurry and constantly shifting. Conceptually, 'inappropriate touching' might be deemed sexual harassment, but finding agreement on what an

‘inappropriate touch’ entails is more difficult (Guschke et al., 2019; see also NIKK, 2020). For this article, we therefore follow the EU’s official definition of sexual harassment as ‘any form of unwanted verbal, non-verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature [...] with the purpose or effect of violating the dignity of a person, in particular when creating an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment’ (EU, 2006). Importantly, however, we understand this as subjectively and relationally defined, so that determining an act as unwanted, violating, or intimidating becomes an issue of individual perspective as much as (gendered) social and organizational norms, as will be elaborated on in the following.

### *The (re)production of sexual harassment*

Reviewing the academic debates that have unfolded since the initial studies in the 1970s, we identify two prominent streams of research in the field of sexual harassment. The first stream offers a variety of studies primarily aiming at determining the occurrence of sexual harassment in different settings (ESTHE, 2016; FRA, 2015; Loy and Stewart, 1984; Murrell, 1996) and its multiple, detrimental effects on individuals and organizations (Cortina and Berdahl, 2008; McLaughlin et al., 2017; Sojo et al., 2016; Willness et al., 2007; see also NIKK, 2020). While we acknowledge the importance of studies outlining the extent and effects of sexual harassment, this article seeks to add to the understanding of *how* sexual harassment is enabled and (re)produced in organizational settings, especially considering gendered norms and power structures.

The (re)production of sexual harassment is investigated in a second stream of research, which can be separated in two types of studies: those generally focusing on mistreatment in the working environment and those particularly highlighting gendered power structures. The former position sexual harassment within a broader frame of disrespect and uncivil behaviour (Berdahl and Raver, 2011; Perry et al., 2021; Robotham and Cortina, 2021), stressing the co-existence of sexual harassment with other forms of incivility, such as rudeness and condescension (Lim and Cortina, 2005) as well as arguing that a climate of intolerance and disrespect is a predictor for persistent sexual harassment (Cunningham et al., 2021; Hulin et al., 1996). The latter, often studies within the field of critical organization studies,

especially from feminist perspectives, explore how gendered organizational structures, norms, and workplace culture enable and support the occurrence of sexual harassment (Bell et al., 2019; Fernando and Prasad, 2019; Hlavka, 2014; Phipps and Young, 2015). These scholars identify cultures of (heteronormative) masculinity (Phipps and Young, 2015), a culture of reluctance to change (Fernando and Prasad, 2019), an interplay of informality, consistent competition, and gendered inequalities (Hennekam and Bennett, 2017; Ortlieb and Sieben, 2019) as well as the normalization of sexism (Ahmed, 2015; Calder-Dawe, 2015; Hlavka, 2014) as important factors supporting and enabling continuous sexual harassment. Likewise, studies examine the underreporting of cases of sexual harassment and a reluctance to speak up when one's boundaries are violated, suggesting insecurities about the legitimacy of the claims, distrust in support mechanisms, and the risk of being stigmatized as overly sensitive as the main underlying reasons for a consistent underreporting (Ahmed, 2017; Welsh et al., 2006; Wilson, 2000). In addition to this, an important contribution by Karam and Ghanem (2021) highlights how multilevel power dynamics that shape sexual harassment need to be understood within a contextual, situational, and geopolitical frame.

While sexual harassment has often been approached – if at all – as an HR matter, what connects these scholars is that they are conceptualizing sexual harassment in the context of management and organization, thus framing the issue not just as something that happens *between* and is caused *by* individuals, but as a problem closely tied to organizing and managing. With a starting point within organizational structures and the highlighting of gendered power differences in organizational settings, these scholars emphasize that sexual harassment is embedded in structural gender hierarchies rather than individual sexual interest (Leskinen et al., 2011).

Interestingly, contradictions seem to appear across these studies. This is for instance seen in Phipps and Young's (2015) study in which the inclusion of more women is shown to lead to the emergence of a culture of masculinity that works to exclude and demean women. The existing body of literature indicates that issues of sexual harassment might be caught up in contradictions and disorder rather than merely being exceptional behaviour within an otherwise rational and ordered setting. Seeking to build on these studies' indications and extend our understanding in this field, the current

article mobilizes a perspective of dis/organization to contribute new insights on how sexual harassment is (re)produced in organizational contexts.

*Dis/organization, contradictions, and tension*

Not least since Cooper's (1986) iconic work on 'Organization/Disorganization', critical organization scholars have argued that irrationalities, contradictions, and paradoxes are an integral part and routine features of organizations (Böhm and Jones, 2001; Cooper, 2001; Hassard et al., 2008; Putnam et al., 2016), a consequence of how 'organizations and their members are pulled or are purposefully moving in different, often competing directions' (Trethewey and Ashcraft, 2004: 81). These scholars suggest that the seemingly opposite phenomena of organization and disorganization are not only interconnected but mutually dependent and thus inseparable. According to Trethewey and Ashcraft (2004: 82-83) 'organizational tensions are not simply ruptures or anomalies' but rather 'routine features of organizational life that attest to the fundamental irrationality of organizing.'

This stands in stark contrast to much organization literature that has considered organizations to be rational enterprises within which tension has been framed as problematic and something to be eliminated (Cooper, 1986; Mumby & Putnam, 1992; Wendt, 1998). As presented by Knox et al. (2015), disorder has been understood as intimately related to the 'problem' of uncertainty with writers such as Thompson (1967: 159) identifying uncertainty as 'what "organization" is meant to overcome', and Weick (1979) describing 'organization' as the pursuit of certainty or, at least, reducing uncertainty. Yet, by acknowledging disorder and disorganization as integral to organization, uncertainty is allowed into the realm of what we study as part of organization studies. Contradictions and tension can from such an approach be investigated without an aim of overcoming or releasing them.

In this article, we build on such scholarly efforts by cultivating the concept of organizational contradictions. We examine how these enable sexual harassment in professional settings by foregrounding the tension these contradictions bring about, aiming for 'richer understandings of actual practice' (Trethewey and Ashcraft, 2004: 81-82). Homing in on the

perspective of dis/organization, we aim to add to the field of critical studies that highlights the lived experiences of those who find themselves caught in tension that comes from contradictory norms and expectations. Accounts have been offered as to how professionals in practice navigate such tension (Hall et al., 2007; Martin, 2004; Pilgeram, 2007; Tracy, 2004), highlighting the cautiousness needed to stay within recognizable patterns of social and organizational norms. To advance the studies in this field, we suggest Butler's (2004) concept of un/doing as a critical analytical tool for examining contradictions and tension in the area of dis/organization.

### **Subjective becoming as constant un/doing**

Embracing contradictions as the core of our analysis, we turn to Judith Butler's (2004) conceptualization of subjective becoming as a seemingly contradictory process of un/doing and being un/done. Through a continuous and simultaneous process of *doing* and *undoing* of the self, Butler suggests, subjects are always in a process of becoming. This duality can be described as a subject producing its coherence in order to be recognized as intelligible, at the cost of 'undoing' its own complexity (Butler, 2004). The term 'undoing' here stresses the effort involved in continually striving for subjective coherence by maintaining semblance to the norm.

At the same time, the notion of undoing elucidates the constant threat that subjects face of 'being undone' by others, since subjectivity is understood to be the outcome of a process of 'social organization through which certain performative acts come to be recognized as viable subject positions, while others are disavowed' (Riach et al., 2016: 2074). As their recognition depends on others, subjects constantly risk losing their viability if not performing according to the social norms that govern intelligibility. A lack of recognition means the undoing of one's subjectivity and being 'forced to live a life that is not worth living' (Pullen and Knights, 2007: 506). This immanently threatening consequence calls for an analytical scrutinizing of the norms determining intelligibility within the specific empirical setting that researchers engage with. Translated to our research field, being recognizable within one's professional setting becomes a crucial matter; a matter sensitive

not least for newcomers who have yet to learn to navigate normative expectations.

While the existing body of literature on sexual harassment has connected workplace cultures, organizational structures, and social norms to the occurrences of sexual harassment (Ahmed, 2015; Fernando and Prasad, 2019; Hennekam and Bennett, 2017), the question of how these issues relate to (norm-governed) subjective becoming is still underexplored – not least because studies have typically *either* emphasized an individual *or* a structural perspective on sexual harassment. In this article, we explore the (re)production of sexual harassment in relation to Butler's concept of recognition-based subjective becoming understood as a process of constant un/doing. In highlighting in our analysis the contradictions enabling sexual harassment, we illuminate the difficulties and insecurities recruits and students face when dealing with experiences of harassment, and how these struggles can be related to the risk of being un/done.

## **Methodology and empirical foundation**

### *Empirical setting(s)*

In its empirical foundation, this article brings together data from two different research projects. One study is situated in the Danish military while the context of the other is a Danish university. Denmark, as part of the Nordics, is often seen as being at the forefront of gender equality, putting forth the post-feminist 'myth' that gender equality has been achieved and no further efforts against different forms of discrimination are required (Christensen and Muhr, 2019). However, as a recent systematic review of sexual harassment research from the Nordic countries emphasizes, 'sexual harassment is a major social problem in working life in the Nordic countries' (NIKK, 2020: 7). The conditions of denial arguably make it especially challenging to address problems of gendered power relations and relatedly sexual harassment. At the same time, they point towards an even bigger need to engage with these issues that otherwise risk being side-lined in public and academic discourse.

The military and academia can seem worlds apart; yet important similarities exist between these settings. Notably, higher education and the military

exhibit some of the highest rates of sexual harassment and assault (ESTHE, 2016; Fisher et al., 2000; Kovitz, 2018; NIKK, 2020; Øhrstrøm et al., 2003). In addition, newcomers entering the university or the military as an undergraduate or a recruit tend to share the following similarities: Newcomers are typically in their early adulthood, many of them coming straight from high school and moving out of their parents' home, hereby establishing themselves as independently 'out in the world.' In both settings, newcomers are subjected to a basic training that will enable them to become part of a specific profession. Yet, to become intelligible, they also need to obtain an understanding of the social and organizational norms within the professional setting they are entering. Following Butler (2004), they need to learn how to perform in ways recognizable within the prevailing norms.

#### *Data generation across two cases*

The decision to combine data from separate cases for the aim of this study emerged from discussing prior research that the two authors conducted in the field of the military (Sløk-Andersen, 2018) and academia (Guschke et al., 2019). Our curiosity was awakened by noticing an abundance of similarities in our findings despite the differences in organizational contexts as well as methodological approaches. We began to wonder what re-analysing our data through a shared lens would yield. While we are aware that our different methodological approaches create asynchronous datasets, we maintain and show that there is value in exploiting the variances in research methods when combining – not comparing – the two cases in this article.

Our first case stems from the first author's study at a Danish university which was carried out as part of a research project aimed at understanding, discussing, and tackling different forms of harassment in the student environment (Guschke et al., 2019). It consisted of an online survey which was sent to students at the university and resulted in a total of 429 participants completing the questionnaire. This was followed by three focus group interviews which Guschke conducted. The survey inquired about perceptions, experiences, and the normalization of sexual harassment, while the focus group discussions more specifically circled around questions of how to delineate sexual harassment, including 'grey areas,' and which factors to take into account when describing an experience as sexual harassment.

Our other case stems from the second author's ongoing research relationship with the Danish military profession. The majority of the data included in this article is from fieldwork among recruits doing military service in the army, which was motivated by an overall aim to explore what it means to be a good soldier and the entailed process of becoming recognizable as such (Sløk-Andersen, 2018). To gain an insight into the tacit knowledge and shared assumptions (Ehn and Löfgren, 2010; Löfgren, 2014) that such recognition requires, Sløk-Andersen joined a platoon of recruits through their four months of basic training. Besides 'performing the phenomenon' (Wacquant, 2006), the study included 36 interviews with recruits and commanders. Finally, this article will also draw on other snippets of fieldwork, such as observations from another army platoon and interviews carried out more recently with soldiers employed in other parts of the Danish military.

### *Data analysis*

Following our curiosity towards apparent overlaps in our previous studies, we re-read the empirical material with a focus on how sexual harassment is (re)produced in the organizational contexts. We identified similarities between the cases but struggled with neatly 'ordering' or categorizing them. Becoming interested in tension-centred analytical approaches, we mobilized an 'attention to tension' as the analytical frame and re-coded the empirical material with a focus on inconsistencies, contradictions, and tension. In what Ashcraft and Muhr describe as an "unfaithful" attitude towards analysis' (2018: 211), we tried to avoid jumping to any normative and fixed conclusions and instead sought to play with alternative, non-linear and tension-centred ways of understanding our data. From these codes we developed a list of 11 contradictions, which we took as a starting point for a phase of selective coding. We (I) sorted and re-grouped the empirical elements describing each contradiction, (II) identified overlaps between categories to merge corresponding ones, and (III) determined which of them were strongly represented in both cases. Through an iterative empirical coding process, we narrowed the analytical categories down to four contradictions which we identified as salient in both data sets. We present these not as a comprehensive list but important examples of the contradictions that create tension within which sexual harassment is enabled in organizational contexts.

## **Analysing tension through organizational contradictions**

The four contradictions we empirically identified are formal/informal, fun/serious, whole/fragmented and cohesion/rupture. In the following, each contradiction will be unfolded and exemplified before turning to a discussion of how they relate to matters of un/doing in the final section of the article.

### *Formal/informal*

The first contradiction locates tension between a formal and informal handling of experiences with sexual harassment. In the Danish military, there is a formal system for reporting cases of sexual harassment, within which any formal complaint will be investigated by the Military Prosecution Service and potentially raised as a legal matter. This is in line with the general tendency towards formality in the military, as noticed by the author doing observations in this setting. Here, a norm of formality was supported, for example by the formal tone in which soldiers are supposed to address anyone with a higher rank than themselves and an extensive use of written procedures and rules. As one sergeant noted, 'Trust is good, control is better' (Field notes, 2016).

Yet, despite a clear and formal system being in place to deal with sexual harassment, few cases are investigated (Military Prosecution Service, 2018). One reason why this formalized system is almost never used to tackle cases of sexual harassment seems to be the principle of sorting out problems 'at the lowest possible level' of the organization (Field notes, 2016); a principle recruits are introduced to during their basic training and which was equally echoed in interviews with more experienced soldiers. Reflecting on how soldiers rely on building close bonds with each other, one commander noted that if someone oversteps your boundaries, you should be able to just talk it through because filing a formal complaint will create 'a massive breach of trust' (Male commander, interview). Consequently, instances of having one's boundaries violated, for instance in cases of sexual harassment, should be handled informally; this is in itself an informal expectation as it contrasts formal procedures.

In the case of the university, similar formal systems are in place to deal with social misconduct and transgressive behaviour. Students who experience sexual harassment are supposed to approach one of three student counsellors

who will guide the student through a process that allows the individual to decide whether, and in what way, they want to take the claim forward and start a formal case. However, in cases of sexual harassment the formalized service is rarely picked up. As our data reveals, there seems to be a reluctance to report instances of sexual harassment due to an expectation to speak up informally rather than involve a formal third party. A common claim by the students was that ‘people are capable of standing up for themselves’ (Female, survey). One student highlighted that ‘if you feel like a victim of sexual harassment, you have the obligation to say no to this behaviour’ (Male, survey). Another student stressed that ‘you should not impose any kind of the responsibility on other people. [...] I think the victims should speak up in general terms’ (Male, focus group 1). There seems to be an understanding amongst students, that if you experience sexual harassment, you should (be able to) deal with it informally on your own. Seeking support through formal channels would be read as a lack of taking responsibility.

Numerous studies have shown the benefits of informality in organizations, ranging from better problem solving and sense making processes (De Cremer et al., 2008; Maitlis, 2005) to better overall performance (Gulati et al., 2000; Nohria and Ghoshal, 1994). One could thus assume it to be highly fruitful that both the military and academia accommodate informality amid their formal organizing. However, in the case of sexual harassment we see formality and informality tangled up in ways that lead to problematic contradictions because the expectations linked to collegial informality make following formal rules seem out of place. Consequently, filing a formal case of sexual harassment will be experienced as a breach to professional norms of informality, leaving young professionals caught between contradictory norms for how to tackle experiences of sexual harassment.

### *Fun/serious*

Another significant contradiction that appeared across the two empirical settings relates to the expectations of fun and seriousness. In the academic setting, the labelling of verbal comments as jokes and humour or as sexual harassment was a reoccurring point of negotiation. Some argued that a comment which regards a person’s gender or sexuality is ‘just a joke’ and thus never to be classified as harassment (Male, survey). Other students disagreed

fundamentally, stating that all comments on a person's gender or sexuality constitute sexual harassment, arguing that 'a sexist comment [...] is inappropriate in any setting. It mirrors a culture of sexism that we should work against' (Female, focus group 2).

Another line of argumentation illuminated indecision regarding the role of intent and effect of a comment or joke. Some argued that sexual harassment should be determined by the effect it has on the target independent of the intent of the actor. Reflecting about continuous sexist and misogynist joking in her study program, one female student described that 'these comments might sound funny and insignificant, but they really undermine our authority as girls and make it very hard for us to be taken seriously' (Female, survey). Yet, others reasoned that a well-meant joke should not be labelled harassment, a common statement being that, a 'joke about gender is not okay if it is with ill intent and trying to hurt other people, otherwise I think it is totally fine' (Male, survey). For some, the mere discussion of this issue seemed to trigger a threat of inscribing seriousness in the place of fun, one student for instance stating that 'if we worry too much about being offended, then no one will be able to say or do anything anymore' (Male, survey).

In the military, an otherwise serious tone and hierarchal system was complemented by an extensive use of humour, mocking, and practical jokes (Sløk-Andersen, 2019). A quite plain example of this tone unfolded while the recruits were maintaining their weapons one day. As a female recruit presented a small weapon part and asked her nearby peers 'Where does this go?', a male recruit reacted instantly by saying 'Stick it up your ass' and laughed (Field notes, 2016). Such sexualized jokes were rarely questioned or opposed. Even a recruit who was recurrently mocked by sergeants commented on the jokes by saying 'I think it's great that you get that relationship with the sergeants' (Male recruit, interview). Seemingly, the extensive use of humour appeared to make military service more 'fun' and helped building social relations.

But for some of the women, a specific comment or joke could make them think 'Ugh, that was a gross statement' (Female recruit, interview) or become 'the last straw' (Field notes, 2017) after months of listening to offensive jokes and sexualized comments. An example of this appeared after a group of female

recruits on a daily basis had been asked by male peers ‘This guy could fuck you, right?’ (Field notes, 2017). The women had gotten used to such questions, but as some of them were now also being “surprised” in the showers, the women had had enough and one of them complained to a sergeant. Yet, when they were encouraged to file these instances as cases of sexual harassment, they became very uncertain. The use of humour, it seemed, posed immense difficulties for addressing experiences of sexual harassment because this would transform the comments and jokes from an assumed matter of fun into very serious incidents.

While a humorous atmosphere was experienced to support bonding in both the military and academia, students as well as recruits found themselves having to balance between fun and seriousness when dealing with sexual harassment. In both settings, the use of humour seemed to make it difficult for the young professionals to trust their own judgement of when it was acceptable to feel harassed, something that studies have shown will lead to underreporting (Ahmed, 2017; Welsh et al., 2006; Wilson, 2000). Calling something out as harassment easily becomes a break with the norm of humorous interactions by inscribing seriousness in its place.

### *Whole/fragmented*

A third contradiction located across the two empirical settings is the matter of whether the involved professionals are considered whole or fragmented; whether there is a distinction between, for instance, a personal and a professional self. For students, it was particularly difficult if not impossible to differentiate between a professional and a personal self in university-related social settings. Many of the students reflected upon this by speaking of experiences during so-called ‘intro weeks.’ These introductory weeks, organized by older students who function as intro guides, are supposed to familiarize new students with the university environment. In previous years it had been a common problem that male guides were making a competition out of how many female students they could sleep with during intro week. Experiences like the following were shared by the female students:

A tutor from my programme slept at my place after an intro party. I had installed him at my couch, but after we went to bed, he came to my bedroom

and tried to have sex with me. I did not want to, but I did not manage to tell him off effectively. Consequently, we had sex (Female, survey).

As a consequence, a rule had been established that forbid intro guides to start any sexual interaction with new students. However, in the following year, new female students turned the contest around, competing on how many male guides they could sleep with. As one female student stated, 'it's fun to play a bit; [...] to know that there's a risk involved; you might be rejected or not. And you approach people in different ways, and you try different things' (Female, focus group 2). Relating to similar events, another female student shared that 'if they [women] are harassing men, women are still below them in the patriarchy. So, it doesn't hurt them as much, [...] they can still shake it off a bit more than a woman can' (Female, focus group 1). Nonetheless, male guides shared the discomfort and uncertainty about their own role in this new situation. They felt bound to their professional role as intro guides but were also supposed to be there as their authentic selves as fellow students. Most students said that they felt unsure how to react when they started feeling uncomfortable about the insistent advances, stating for instance that 'we have the problem that, here at [the university], [the social event] takes place in the school and now you have to distinguish if that event is part of school or not' (Male, focus group 1). Additionally, the situation of women sexually and sometimes aggressively approaching men, which did not fit the gendered stereotype of 'men harassing women', seemed to trouble their assessment. As professionals, they thought that they should have the situation under control but felt overwhelmed, while personally, they felt violated, confused, and uncomfortable, which contradicted heteronormative gendered expectations.

In the military, there is an explicit desire to recruit 'whole persons' (Male commander, interview) because they give a better foundation for making good soldiers. Once inside the profession, it can indeed be difficult to establish a clear distinction between a private and professional sphere, not least when soldiers live together at military bases or deploy to international missions with no private sphere to withdraw to. This is emphasized by the uniform which, as recruits were told during basic training, makes them 'representatives of the Danish Armed Forces' (Field notes, 2016) even when they were off duty. This expectation of recruits committing their whole person to the organization was presented alongside a narrative about the military

profession as being fundamentally different from a civilian “outside” (e.g. Male commander, interview). As was noted by an advisor during a presentation about the working environment, ‘the tone can be rough every once in a while – we have a certain jargon here’ (Field notes, 2016), indicating different boundaries and norms for what behaviour and social interactions might be considered acceptable in a military versus a civilian setting.

Consequently, some soldiers need to differentiate between who they are in and outside the military in order to endure and tolerate the norms in the military setting (e.g. Female recruit, interview), thus fragmenting themselves in a personal and professional self. Nonetheless, the commander dealing with the case of sexual harassment mentioned earlier re-invoked the idea of whole selves as he urged the female recruits to file a formal complaint by asking them to consider ‘what you want to put up with as human beings’ (Field notes, 2017). From being a matter of the military just having ‘a certain jargon’, the young women were now asked to connect their tackling of sexual harassment with their whole selves.

While several studies have analysed how people (try to) create somewhat separate professional and private selves (Costas and Fleming, 2009; Johnsen et al., 2009), a common claim is that work identities nonetheless are established to create a feeling of wholeness and authenticity (Fleming, 2009; van Knippenberg et al., 2004). The young professionals in our studies, we argue, are caught in the tension between contradicting expectations as they are supposed to be their whole and authentic selves, while concurrently a fragmenting of the self is implicitly demanded in order to endure experiences of sexual harassment. The latter requirement rests upon the assumption that one would be able to “cut off” parts of oneself, which we argue is an unfortunate, if not impossible, way to tackle sexual harassment.

### *Cohesion/rupture*

The two professional settings we deal with in this analysis are often sought after with an expectation of or hope for social cohesion with other young professionals. It is essential for most recruits as well as students to build mutual trust and solidarity, hereby making military work and student life more enjoyable. As one recruit said, explaining why he had decided to serve,

‘I think it’s amazing, this feeling of being part of something. A greater collective’ (Male recruit, interview). But in both our studies, speaking up against harassment was perceived as a breach to such cohesion. In the focus groups, one student shared:

It [speaking up] has consequences for you. [...] There’s some sort of relation at stake here. [...] It creates a scene in a way. And then people are gonna create their own opinions about what happened even though they didn’t see it. [...] And these are the people you’re gonna see every day for maybe two or three years or maybe longer (Female, focus group 2).

Speaking up is assumed to entail a risk of creating a scene or being perceived as overreacting. According to Ahmed, those who decide to speak up become *killjoys*, that is, someone who is ‘not willing to laugh at jokes designed to cause offense’ (2017: 261) and someone ‘who gets in the way of the happiness of others’ (2014a: 224). As such, *killjoy* defines that person who will not put up with injustice or wrongdoing but speaks up against it – even when this ruins the good mood. One student proclaimed that ‘speaking up is even harder than being sexually harassed. Especially if it is a friend, a colleague. [...] Because what happens is that you break from that social relation’ (Female, focus group 2). As expected by the student, becoming a *killjoy* does have social implications because being part of a group requires to be part of the same affective flow as the rest of the group (Ahmed 2014b). In this process of affective alignment, we are positioned ‘not only as being with, but being with in a similar way’ (Ahmed 2014b: 16), indicating that if we are ‘not in the mood’ this inevitably affects our possibilities for being part of the collective.

Illustrating how the fear of becoming a *killjoy* is not just an unfounded fear, the female recruits who complained about the behaviour of their male peers were met with a reaction from their platoon right away. As rumours about the case spread, the women were approached by other recruits hissing spiteful comments at them. Why did they have to make a big deal out of it, it had just been fun and games (Field notes, May 2017). Speaking up in the first place had already caused a rupture to the good mood. Reporting their experiences as a formal case of sexual harassment held an even greater threat of turning the female recruits into *killjoys*. Taking the jokes and actions from a context of fun and informality to a context of formality and seriousness, the women did not change the norms at the military camp. Rather they caused a rupture

which made clear that *they* were out of tune with the military profession and its (gendered) normative structures.

Students and recruits exposed to sexual harassment found themselves caught in the tension between desired cohesion and the risk of a rupture. In both settings, the urge for 'being with' seemed to interfere with the feeling of being harassed in such a way that it made students and recruits alike hesitant to address the problem. This reluctance was supported by the honouring of the fun and informal tone outlined earlier. As our analysis shows, the existence of contradictory organizational norms inhibits the use of formal channels to report sexual harassment but also implicitly discourages people from speaking up in the moment due to a fear that this will cause a rupture to the social cohesion and eventually delegitimize their own position within the profession. While Ahmed embraces the disruptive potential of being a feminist killjoy, heralding its 'political potential and energy' (2014b: 224), newcomers of both the military and the academic setting appeared reluctant to act as such.

### **Discussion: The un/doing of professional subjects**

In the previous sections, we have illustrated how contradictory organizational norms create tension within which sexual harassment unfolds and how the young professionals of our studies attempt to navigate these contradictions in ways that keep them within the realm of the prevailing norms. Connecting these findings to Butler's understanding of subjectivity, we see these contradictions intertwining with the possibilities of becoming an intelligible subject.

Butler has argued that we are not just socially *mediated*, but socially *constituted* qua prevailing norms (2004: 32). Translating this claim to our empirical field, we argue that one's existence as a professional is dependent on one's adherence to the norms governing the specific professional context. As newcomers to academia and the military try to decode norms – for dealing with sexist jokes, unwelcomed touching, and other forms of transgressive behaviour – they must make sure to stay within the limits of intelligibility. But how can one stay within norms that are contradictory?

We suggest that organizational contradictions challenge the students' and recruits' intelligibility because they simply leave no viable way to deal with sexual harassment. Understanding subjective becoming as a process of doing and undoing of the self according to social norms, students and recruits who find themselves caught up between mutually exclusive norms for how to tackle sexual harassment face difficult choices. They may try to accept the transgressive behaviour as simply part of the profession, for example, e.g. by fragmenting their private from their professional selves. However, this comes at the cost of undoing their own complexity. Yet, the alternative of speaking up will most likely not be within subjectivity-governing norms either, as they then risk breaking with norms of informality and humour thus being undone by not being recognized. Ahmed's (2014a) figure of the killjoy emphasizes this ever-present risk of being undone; the killjoy represents a subject position that is recurrently disavowed because she causes ruptures and ruins the good mood for others. And as the empirical examples in the whole/fragmented section illustrate, a single act of opposition carries the risk of one's whole person being perceived to be a misfit and thus being undone – a very problematic situation to find oneself in when trying to become recognizable within a professional setting. The gravity of the threatening potential is echoed in Butler's (2004) assessment of the experience of norm breaking as violent, even a question of (social) survival.

Rephrasing Butler, we might say that being caught in organizational contradictions can make professional life unliveable, either because a (re)action challenges norms or because staying within the norms means having to discard those parts of oneself that “cause trouble.” While the first option entails the threat of being undone within organizational norms, the second entails undoing one's own complexity. Either way, one faces the threat of ‘becoming undone altogether’ (Butler, 2004: 3).

Importantly, Butler's concept also enables us to attend to the entanglement of gendered power structures and organizational norms. The heteronormativity governing the intelligibility of gendered subjects links a hierarchal gender binary to the expected behaviours of men and women (Butler, 1990). This leads to certain forms of sexual harassment being normalized and makes speaking up against this normalized behaviour a breach with heteronormative gendered expectations of women as submissive

victims and men as aggressive harassers (see also Calder-Dawe, 2015; Hlavka, 2014). This is not to say that men cannot be victims of sexual harassment, as the example of female students competing to hook up with the male intro guides illustrated. Instead, it shows that on the one hand, subjects are governed by different intersections of gendered organizational norms, but on the other hand, either constellation of how these norms intersect makes it extremely difficult to speak up or act against harassment. Taking the example of the extensive use of sexist jokes in the military, the male and female recruits tend to be implicated differently by the norm of fun and humour between colleagues. Female recruits who break with this norm will likely either become killjoys, falling out of their gendered role as modest and compliant women, or be perceived as “too weak” for the military’s rough jargon thereby subscribing to the idea of women not being fit for military careers. A male recruit on the other hand, who does not contribute to the sexist comments, easily becomes the target of jokes that describe him as “not man enough”, the many jokes about ‘babies’ or ‘fags’ proclaiming a lack of aggressiveness or assertiveness in the men that fall out of their expected role. Either way, under a constant threat of being undone, those who dissent risk rendering themselves unintelligible within gendered organizational norms.

## **Conclusion**

In summary, this article offers two relevant contributions. First, it extends current research on the (re)production of sexual harassment by suggesting that sexual harassment is enabled within tension created through organizational contradictions. We argue that these contradictions leave no viable way of dealing with or speaking up against sexual harassment. Aiming to adhere to the contradictory norms permeating organizations, professionals are caught between the threat of being undone within organizational norms and the need to undo their own complexity. The emerging tension, a constant threat of being undone, enables the (re)production of harassment. While we neither claim to make generalizable claims from our two case studies nor to produce a comprehensive list of contradictions that enable sexual harassment, we do reach beyond the fields of academia and the military by contributing to a new conceptualization of sexual harassment that engages with gendered organizational norms through the frame of dis/organization.

We encourage fellow organization scholars to examine how contradictions enable sexual harassment in other organizational contexts, particularly hoping for a variety in professional and geopolitical settings as well as studies taking an intersectional perspective to the problem of harassment.

Second, following scholars who proposed that dis/organization and dis/order should be acknowledged as an integral part of organizing (Cooper, 1986; Knox et al., 2015; Trethewey and Ashcraft, 2004), we suggest that acknowledging dis/organization also means paying critical attention to tension and contradictions as well as their complex consequences in organizational analyses. Scholars have argued that ‘contradictions and conflicts, as ruptures in the current social fabric, function as opportunities to change prevailing practices’ (Putnam, 1986: 153) and have suggested a *paradox mindset* which makes one ‘accepting of and energized by tensions’ (Miron-Spektor et al., 2018: 26). We maintain a more cautious and critical stance, having shown how, entangled in the process of recognition, contradictions can have negative consequences for the individuals who are caught in the tension they create. We argue that pinpointing problems that may arise from the co-existence of contradictory organizational norms is an essential element of an engaged and critical commitment to the idea of dis/organization. We suggest the use of Butler’s concept of un/doing as an analytical tool in such critical analyses, in cases of sexual harassment as much as in other empirical fields, as it allows to examine how organizational contradictions and the tension that professional subjects find themselves in influence continuous subjective becoming.

### *Practical implications*

In light of the severe consequences of leaving the individual to navigate organizational tension in cases of sexual harassment, we urge organizations to invest in becoming aware of, exposing, and addressing the contradictions that persist in their spheres of influence. As suggested by Tracy (2004: 119), we believe that it is up to organizations to ‘create structures in which employees are more likely to make sense of organizational contradictions in healthy ways.’ While changing norms is by no means something that organizations can easily do, we maintain a starting point will be to explicitly allow and initiate conversations about the prevailing gendered organizational

structures and related transgressive behaviour. Acknowledging the inevitable interplay of contradictory norms in a realm of dis/organization, these conversations would provide an avenue towards a critical and productive engagement with normative expectations, organizational tension, and complex consequences, without aiming at (the impossibility of) releasing this tension. As part of these efforts, feminist killjoys should explicitly be invited in and encouraged to participate in dis/organizing workplaces. Or better yet, they should not be given a reason to kill joy in the first place.

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