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Strata of Gender Equity

In a graduate seminar Amber VanDerwarker taught in 2016, “Archaeology of Gender,” the UC Santa Barbara professor of anthropology and her students confronted an odd fact: Although the majority of archaeology graduate students in California are women, roughly 70 percent end up choosing careers in cultural resource management (CRM) over academia.

They wanted to know why: Is sexual harassment a factor? What role does mentorship play? How is gender inequity expressed in CRM and academia? What is the relationship between gender and publication?

Their inquiries led to the UCSB Gender Equity Project, which produced five papers exploring multiple issues associated with women in archaeology, all now published in the journal California Archaeology. They found a number of factors that challenge women in archaeology, said lead author VanDerwarker, who lays out the biggest of them in “The UCSB Gender Equity Project: Taking Stock of Mentorship, Equity and Harassment in California Archaeology Through Qualitative Survey Data.”

Sexual harassment, a dearth of female and minority mentors, discrepancies in the number of women in academia, pay inequality and gender-based disparities in publishing all challenge women in archaeology, VanDerwarker said. To get a better understanding of the issues, UCSB anthropology graduate students conducted two detailed surveys — one on mentorship, the other on equity and sexual harassment — of members of the Society for California Archaeology (SCA).

What they found was a microcosm of greater American society detailed in four additional papers: “Gender, Race and Mentorship: A Perspective from California,” by Kaitlin M. Brown; “Perceptions Versus Reality: A Comparative Analysis of Gender Equity Trends Within Academia and CRM in California,” by Toni Gonzalez; “Sexual Harassment Among California Archaeologists: Results of the Gender Equity and Sexual Harassment Survey,” by Hugh Radde; and “Controlling the Narrative: A Comparative Examination of Gendered Publishing Trends in the SCA and Beyond,” by Dana N. Bardolph, a 2017 UCSB graduate who is a postdoctoral anthropology scholar at Cornell University. Brown, Gonzalez and Radde are UC Santa Barbara anthropology graduate students.

Of the issues affecting women’s academic and career options in archaeology, having too few female mentors is among the most serious, Brown and VanDerwarker agreed.

“What Katie’s research has shown is that women who have women mentors do better than women who have male mentors,” VanDerwarker said. “Male mentors who have male mentors do better than male mentors that have women mentors. If we want women to do better and end up, maybe, in the academy someday, we need more women to mentor them so they have better outcomes.”

And it’s not just a lack of female mentors, said VanDerwarker, noting the SCA is 85 percent white. With limited mentors of color available, people of color have few role models. It’s a situation universities need to address, she said.

“We have to preferentially make an effort to hire more women and people of color in archaeology,” VanDerwarker said. “I think this is especially important for people of color because we’re not going to be able to get the students’ interest. They’re not going to come and major if they don’t see someone they want to seek mentorship from. And looking at archaeological societies throughout the U.S. the percentage of people of color is very low, and this is a problem.”

One of the revelations of the #MeToo movement was that sexual harassment pervades most every corner of American society. The surveys showed archaeology is not immune, Radde said. Women, people of color and members of the LGBTQ community have all experienced verbal and physical harassment, the surveys showed. (Men also reported harassment, but in much smaller numbers.)

One unique aspect of archaeology — spending weeks in the field digging, sifting and taking notes — also turned out to be a common environment for harassment, the survey found. Classrooms and labs/offices were also cited by respondents.

The survey findings met the researchers' hypotheses, Radde said, but "the important takeaway is the awareness that this brings about." The more people know, "It makes it something that is less acceptable to turn a blind eye to in the field."

As it is, he said, many people see verbal harassment in the field as "just part of field work," he said. "That's just how archaeologists act and behave, especially when camping for several weeks in remote locations."

As for gender equity, Gonzalez said, the survey responses show that disparities persist in both academia and CRM. She noted that while the men and women who responded to the survey generally don't perceive significant gender inequity, the data shows it's found in both sectors, "and have taken more subtle forms of discrimination, such as gendered task assignments and gendered-segregated workplaces."

To combat these inequities, Gonzalez said, they need to be acknowledged as part of our larger social structures as well as within archaeology. In addition, she noted, it's important to maintain a conversation with under-represented people in the discipline who've been affected by these inequities.

"As a woman of color in the field of archaeology," Gonzalez said, "I have personally experienced and witnessed subtle forms of gender inequity and harassment — at times, from individuals who did not consciously know that what they were doing was wrong. For a long time, I too, was complacent with what was happening because I was conditioned to think of these subtle disparities as 'the norm.' But these behaviors shouldn't be 'the norm.' "

In her paper, Bardolph explores the relationship between gender and authorship in publications and presentations in archaeology. Her research reaches beyond California to include Southeastern archaeology and the North American archaeology community at large. She finds that despite greater numbers of women in professional organizations and presenting at regional and national conference, disparities remain in publication rates in peer-reviewed journals.

VanDerwarker argued that while there are more women in academia, numbers alone don’t bring parity.

“Ensuring equitable representation (of women and minorities) is only solving part of the problem,” she said. “We must simultaneously shift the culture in the field and the lab. We can start small in our own local departments and institutions, certainly, but our goals have to be larger and make impacts that reverberate across the discipline and academia more broadly.”

About UC Santa Barbara

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