Report of the AEA Ombudsperson

Introduction

Time spent during the period since the last report included receiving requests for help from constituents, assisting people on a limited basis, and documenting reports of harassment and discrimination. I have also responded to several inquiries/requests for assistance from leaders of AEA constituent organizations, journal editors, or faculty leaders seeking guidance on policy development and implementation. Several people have asked for guidance in how to make a formal complaint with the AEA about the conduct of an AEA member.

The summer was fairly busy, and then contacts tapered off in October and November. Two members reported the conduct of multiple individuals over the years. Several members named multiple individuals who had repeatedly used very sexist language in public settings, especially where young male academics were gathered.

All persons who contact me are advised at the outset that I do not represent them or the AEA and a complaint/report made to me is not a formal complaint to the AEA.

Number of Reports/Requests for Assistance

Since the last report (April 14, 2020) we received 59 new reports from 38 individuals in addition to a number of requests for assistance with policy/codes of conduct questions from leaders in the profession. Most of the persons contacting us have spoken directly to the ombudsperson. Several communications have been only electronic. Most people speak by phone, but I am always available by Zoom or Skype, which is a bit more comfortable for people outside the United States. All persons my staff and I speak to are first identified as either AEA members or calling about an AEA member or are persons calling about an AEA-sponsored activity. Nearly all persons, after a discussion about the ombuds protocol, have consented to the making of a permanent record of the complaint.

Who Has Contacted the Ombudsperson?

Almost all people contacting me are AEA members. Three or four persons have been employees of economics-related entities, and I have directed them to appropriate sources of assistance.

Of the persons who have contacted the ombudsperson with reports/requests for assistance, almost two-thirds have been female.

The racial/ethnic/nationality mix, when known, was the following: 19 white, 4 Black, 4 Asian, 3 Asian-American, 1 South Asian-American, 1 African.

As before, the persons with reports or requests for assistance mostly work in academia. There is a good mix of tenured professors, younger academics, and graduate students.

Some callers/persons reaching out have preferred to remain anonymous from fear of retaliation.

Several persons have contacted me from countries outside the United States.

Some people have sent me direct messages on Twitter.

Types of Conduct Complained Of

I have received reports of sexual harassment as well as discrimination based on sex, race, national origin, and disability status.

Again, the largest number of reports involved allegations of sex discrimination, with the vast majority of those involving sexual harassment. Of the reports of sex discrimination that do not involve sexual harassment, most involve allegations of bullying based on sex and retaliation for complaining about sex discrimination.

The sexual harassment complained of includes, again, rape. Rape has so far always been reported as having happened in graduate school. Then there is unwanted touching, grabbing, and propositioning. The advisor of a woman graduate student makes himself available to talk with her only under circumstances and in a location in which she is at a severe disadvantage physically.
Male faculty members publicly complain about their wives to visiting female faculty members, to job applicants, and to other assembled males. Some of these complaints involve graphic discussions of what is wrong with the wife sexually. Most of these men, but not all, have tended to be older, as in, I’m guessing, above 60.

Again, men contacted me this period to report the perceived sexist conduct of their male colleagues and department chairs.

A significant number of reports have involved allegations of race discrimination. These include Black women being called stupid and unfit for the profession online. People report that the work of Black women is subjected to harsher scrutiny than that of white economists, with some academics documenting the disparity in critiques by their white male counterparts of the work of Black women, nonwhite women and women who are white as well.

Reported bullying based on sex and race this period occurred primarily online. It was reported to me that women economists this year have been subjected to the same phenomenon that occurs across many professions and fields—the higher any woman advances, the more likely she is to become a target of harassment, including online harassment. Therefore, greater achievements do not shield one from harassment—they make harassment even more likely.

This leads to another significant complaint: that Black men from the time they enter graduate school tend to be sexualized by their classmates. They are touched inappropriately by white women who pass their phone numbers on pieces of paper. This treatment is neither nonracist nor inclusive. It has the effect of objectifying and belittling Black males, putting them in an awkward position, and is stressful to them. Or if it is not, it can have deleterious effects on young men who take up the offers.

It was reported by multiple individuals that professors make gratuitous references to race in their teaching when race has nothing to do with the subject being taught. The references may be to hypothetical gang membership or the murder of a Black student. I have received the same type of report about gratuitous sex jokes but fewer this period.

It was suggested to me that foreign graduate students should be offered, or required to take, an American history course so that they might better understand the experiences of Black students in their cohorts.

Asian and Asian-American women reported that they are subjected to gratuitous jokes and comments, with many academics seemingly not understanding, nor caring to understand, the difference between someone born and raised in an Asian country versus the United States. They and their colleagues have reported that their work is subjected to harsher scrutiny.

There were several complaints about the overworking of graduate students, which may not appear at first glance related to harassment or discrimination. It was pointed out to me, however, that harsh working conditions in graduate school are something that the children of wealthy people are far better able to withstand. Students from low-income families are less able to weather a temporary health or situational setback and are often pulled out of work or school to help with family crises.

Again there have been multiple complaints about ejmr.com. It was pointed out to me several months ago that the administrator of this website will take down offensive posts when asked. Since learning this, I have been able to discuss/explore this with complainants.

There are continued complaints that the profession and the AEA suffer from elitism. Examples given include invitation-only groups that concentrate power; the lack of term limits for economics journal editors and AEA committee chairs; the practice of editors reviewing their own students’ papers; the fact that AEA leaders are disproportionately from the top five departments, compared to that percentage being only 12–20 percent for APSA and ASA, for example. The complaint is that academic and institutional elitism reinforce a climate with a lack of diversity in demographics, and therefore in thought, and impedes progress in the profession.

Other AEA members have contacted me to challenge some of these ideas, pointing out, for example, for an advisor to review their own students’ work is an ethical transgression that should be reported to the journal editor and that AEA committees are always looking for volunteers from the membership.

**Actions Taken**

As before, my response to the vast majority of persons contacting me has been to
listen, counsel, advise, and document, when given permission. There were several instances in which I let multiple complainants know that at least one other person had registered a complaint about the same economist. In one of those instances, I believe two complainants communicated with each other. In at least two other instances they chose not to.

Several persons were given information about how to file a formal complaint with the AEA and indicated every intent to do so but in the end apparently chose not to.

Following the receipt of some informal complaints, I engaged in several discussions with various persons and with AEA leadership about the use of racial and ethnic tropes and stereotypes in academic presentations. These are not permitted in AEA-related activities.

I received and followed up on an informal complaint connected to the ASSA/AEA conference in 1969, during which the members who would go on to form the National Economic Association had an initial meeting. While unknown to the meeting attendees at the time, they later learned a member of the AEA leadership had called the police to wait on standby in the hotel during the meeting. The complainant asked that the AEA apologize. Investigating the complaint was very interesting, as it led me to discuss the situation with long-time economists/policymakers Bernard Anderson and Richard America. Neither one thought an apology was necessary. One stated, “The times were crazy. The atmosphere in the country was boisterous. Disruptions were happening in professional meetings.” He said if he were in the leaders’ shoes, he might have considered it a prudent move. On the other hand, if the then-AEA leaders had been thinking they wanted to nip these economists’ aspirations in the bud, that would not be about a disturbance, it would be about the proposals—quite a different matter.

It was pointed out that the early years of the organization were a time of more overtly racist conduct on the part of AEA leadership, and the history of the organization with respect to this topic is worthy of exploration/examination.

Both Dr. America and Dr. Anderson made proposals about making the profession more welcoming to aspiring Black economists. I passed these proposals on to the leadership and would be glad to pass them on to any interested constituent. The original complainant was satisfied with no action being taken but agreed with and supported the idea of exploring the racial history of the AEA, perhaps by having someone review past minutes of board meetings.

Limitations

As it did to everyone, the pandemic made it more difficult to perform this work. When the country first went into lock-down, I temporarily stopped reaching out to members for discussions, knowing everyone was under stress trying to adjust. In the ombuds profession, it is observed that people without privilege reach out to an individual for support, whereas people with privilege reach out to an office. This is why it’s so important for an ombudsperson to reach out to affinity groups, and that’s harder on Zoom.

Recommendations/Suggestions for the AEA

It will be helpful for the AEA and me to point out and remind people of the difference between making a report or informal complaint to the ombudsperson and making a formal complaint to the AEA, seeking that the AEA sanction a member for improper conduct. We are all working to address this.

Many AEA members appear unaware of the efforts undertaken by leadership to make the profession more safe and diverse. I have discussed with the organization what steps might be taken to make its work more transparent. This is difficult since many of these efforts are focused on helping constituents with individual concerns and the AEA is committed to maintaining the privacy rights of individuals who seek its assistance.

The AEA website is chock-full of information and in general is relatively easily navigated, but I’m hopeful it can be updated in some way to make the diversity and inclusion efforts more accessible.

Several members suggested that someone review the early minutes of AEA meetings to see whether racial issues were addressed, and if so, how. This seems like a great idea and has been passed on.

It has been suggested that the AEA develop a metric to measure the effectiveness of its recent diversity and inclusion efforts. Whether or not this is done, I have explored the prospect of
doing this for the ombuds initiative. It is not an ombuds standard practice, although some institutions do poll their constituents on such topics. I have several ideas but would like to get more input from AEA membership and leadership. This will continue to be explored.

**Suggestions for Members/Academic Institutions**

I hope that academic departments continue to adopt the AEA Best Practices, as found on the AEA website. These are evidence-based and provide concrete standards against which to measure behavior. That should be helpful to people who need guidance for their behavior as well as to people who wish to report unprofessional behavior.

Please note the AEA Best Practices discourage the use of student evaluations in providing performance appraisals. They often contain statements that reflect students’ personal biases, are hurtful to young professors, and do not objectively measure teaching quality.

Since a significant amount of complained-about conduct occurs at bars, restaurants, and parties, I suggest not mixing work with drinking or the use of mood-altering substances. These activities cause people to lose their judgment. You may be used to consuming wine with dinner at a restaurant, but if it’s during a job interview, it’s best to wait until the candidate has left. Similarly in mixed company, at a conference or meeting with colleagues, it’s wise to limit alcohol consumption. It’s easy to say something against your better judgment during that second glass of wine—and for some people, the first. Know your limits!

I also suggest that when job candidates/guest lecturers are traveling again, that academic departments set aside funds to be used to transport these guests back to their hotels. Car services sometimes provide better safety that just hailing an Uber or Lyft. Professor X can go straight home, and so can the guest.

**Conclusion**

In performing this work, I have received tremendous support from Presidents Yellen and Bernanke and from Secretary-Treasurer Peter Rousseau and his team. The staff of this organization is unparalleled in its competence, efficiency, and professionalism. Adriana Lleras-Muney has been very patient and supportive for the past nearly two years, helping me understand the profession. Several members have reached out to volunteer to serve as a resource on issues of racism and sexism within the profession, and their feedback has been invaluable.

I look forward to continuing to serve at your pleasure and to hearing from more of the membership.

*Leto Copeley, Ombudsperson*