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End of silence: Sexual harassment norm shattered

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The continuing revelations about Harvey Weinstein tell us something important about sexual harassment and sexual violence and also about civil rights movements and social change more broadly.

Because of social norms, people often shut up. Even if they are humiliated, hurt or angry, they will not say a word. It is only when norms start to shift that people feel free to disclose what they have experienced and to say what they think.

Once they are unleashed, social upheaval can result. But it is hard or even impossible to predict whether that will happen – and what form it will take.

I learned something about self-silencing and sexual harassment in the late 1980s, when I was a visiting professor at Columbia Law School. In the hallway near my office, a law student (female) was speaking to an older law professor (male). To my astonishment, the professor was stroking the student's hair.

I thought I glimpsed a grimace on her face – a quick flash. When he left, I said to her: “That was completely inappropriate. He shouldn't have done that.” Her response was dismissive: “It's fine. It's really not a problem.”

Thirty minutes later, I heard a knock on my door. It was the student. She was in tears. She said: “He does this all the time. It's horrible. My boyfriend thinks I should make a formal complaint, but I don't want to do that. Please, I don't want to make a fuss. Do not talk to him about it and do not tell anyone.”

After hearing my comment, the student was willing to tell me what she actually thought. But back then, the norm against making any kind of public complaint was apparently pretty firm – firm enough that she was unwilling to confront her harasser.

In the past decades, of course, that norm has been greatly weakened. In some places, at least, victims have been unleashed, in the sense that they can disclose their experiences. But as shown by the length of time that it took for the accusations against Weinstein to come to light, there is still a taboo, in other places, against public complaints.

In these circumstances, “norm entrepreneurs” – people who are willing to speak out and try to change the norm – can be crucial. It helps if they're famous. But sheer numbers can be enough. Eventually there can be a social cascade, as people are influenced by the thoughts and deeds of others, so that what was once silence is replaced by a loud and continuing cry: #MeToo.

That is what we're observing for sexual harassment and assault, but similar processes have occurred in countless domains.

As late as 2007, it might have seemed preposterous to predict that, within a decade, numerous states would recognize same-sex marriages, let alone that the Supreme Court would require all states to do so.

But that happened, above all, for one reason: Many gays and lesbians came out of the closet. When faced with one's own son or daughter – or neighbors, colleagues and heroes – it became much harder to be homophobic or to support bans on same-sex marriage.

When norms shift, so that people stop silencing themselves, injustice and cruelty can be exposed, and societies can advance. But sometimes the opposite can occur. Self-silencing is often a product of norms that hold societies together – and that help to prevent terrible things, even horrors.

Changes in social norms can liberate malignant human impulses as well. For example, Adolf Hitler could be characterized as a norm entrepreneur early in his rise to power, when he helped free people to express anti-Semitic sentiments and encouraged them to do so. Some contemporary leaders in Europe are pushing to loosen norms that suppress various forms of racial, religious and ethnic hatred.

In the United States, both the right and the left are now feeling silenced. A recent report from the Cato Institute finds that 58 percent of Americans believe that the political climate stops them from saying what they really think. Revealingly, the number is higher among Republicans (73 percent) than among Democrats (53 percent).

In this light, it should not have surprised anyone that in the 2016 elections, Republicans did far better than pollsters projected. Many of those who supported Republican candidates, and Donald Trump in particular, were silently simmering. In voting booths, they could express views they may have felt reluctant to talk about openly.

Seen in this light, Trump's repeated denunciations of "political correctness" have been an ingenious strategy. He is signaling that a lot of people are being pressured to shut up about their actual beliefs – which, he believes, often overlap with his own. He's trying to relax existing norms and to give people a kind of permission slip. To some extent, he is succeeding.

Regrettably, some left-leaning people on college campuses have worked to weaken norms in favor of freedom of speech, unleashing students to call for suppression of speakers whose views they abhor. In well-functioning societies, healthy norms promote freedom of many different kinds, and they can be both precious and fragile.

All social movements are different, of course, but changes in social norms, and various forms of unleashing, help account for the collapse of Communism; the rise of disability rights; the fall of authoritarianism in parts of North Africa; and the antismoking movement. They also account for McCarthyism and the recent increase in xenophobia.

Ours is an era of unleashing – for better or worse. Buckle your seat belts: A lot of people are in for a rocky ride.