Author’s response to reviews

Title: Gender differences and similarities in medical students' experiences of mistreatment by various groups of perpetrators

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Author’s response to reviews:

We would like to thank the reviewers and the editor for their insightful and valuable comments. We are confident that by taking the reviewers’ and editor’s comments into account, our article has gained substantially so that it now makes a valuable contribution to the field of mistreatment of medical students. We hope that these revisions improve our paper and that it is now worthy of publication in BMC Medical Education. Please find below our detailed responses to the reviewers’ comments.

Response to the Editor:

Thank you very much for your comments. We have included the page numbers and lines to each response in our response letter.

Comment 1: Ethical approval and consent to participate

The ethics committee at the medical universities in Austria only review clinical studies and applied medical research according to legal requirements (see for example Universities Act, Hospitals and Health Resorts Act). The type of our study does not require ethical review at medical universities in Austria. However, we were concerned that our study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki. All participants were provided with information
necessary to make an informed decision about participation. All potential participants were informed in verbal and written form about the purpose and content of the study and the fact that data would be used only in anonymized form. Participation was voluntary and anonymous. Participants could withdraw from participation without stating a reason. Students were informed that withdrawal from participation would have no negative consequences (line 142-154, page 6).

Reviewer #1 (Sarah Catherine Sheperd, Ph.D) Comments:

Thank you very much for your kind words about our paper. We are delighted that you feel our manuscript addresses important issues, such as the ingrained medical culture. We also hope this work will contribute to promoting change. In the following sections you will find our responses to each of your points. We are grateful for the time and effort you put into reviewing our manuscript.

Comment 1: Why no ethics approval was gained at this sensitive material?

Response: The ethics committee at the medical universities in Austria only review clinical studies and applied medical research according to legal requirements (see for example Universities Act, Hospitals and Health Resorts Act). The type of our study does not require ethical review at medical universities in Austria. However, we were concerned that our study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki. All participants were provided with information necessary to make an informed decision about participation. All potential participants were informed in verbal and written form about the purpose and content of the study and the fact that data would be used only in anonymized form. Participation was voluntary and anonymous. Participants could withdraw from participation without stating a reason. Students were informed that withdrawal from participation would have no negative consequences (line 142-154, page 6).

Comment 2: At which point/year in medical education has this survey been conducted?

Response: Our manuscript now includes more information about participants. The participants were recruited from a compulsory lecture on Gender Medicine at the end of the fifth year of their study program. Choosing this time for recruitment also meant that we were confident that all
participants had already obtained some clinical experience (e.g. various internships) and come to
know the medical culture as they had been enrolled in the medical curricula for several years
(line 138-141, page 6).

Comment 3: It is unclear how the top three perpetrator groups were calculated.
Response: We clarified the information on calculation of the perpetrator groups. For each student
we analyzed whether at least one of the various forms of mistreatment carried out by each
perpetrator group was experienced. Thereafter, we were able to calculate the top perpetrator
groups (line 198-202, page 8).

Comment 4: Two sentences talk about sexual mistreatment and harassment (line 211-212 and
line 217-218).
Response: Thank you very much for this relevant information. We completely agree with you as
we apparently failed to clarify that the second sentence was indeed talking about distress when
experiencing harassment and sexual mistreatment (line 241-242, page 9).

Thank you once again for your valuable comments and suggestions. We are hopeful that they
have enabled us to improve our manuscript.

Reviewer #2 (Victor Mogre) Comments:
We appreciate the time and effort you put into reviewing our manuscript and would like to thank
you for your helpful and valuable comments. We have incorporated your comments in our
manuscript and hope it has been substantially improved and now meets your expectations. Please
find below our responses to your comments.
Comment 1: Why authors decided to assess students’ perception of the university to report sexual harassment but not maltreatment in general?

Response: The paper now includes information on why we chose to assess perception of reporting sexual harassment. One year prior to the study a policy was initiated that aimed at providing information for students who experience sexual harassment. Even though other forms of mistreatment, such as physical and psychological mistreatment, are also not tolerated by this university, these have not been the subject of policies with a specific focus on students (line 125-130, page 5).

Comment 2: The title of the study does not correspond with the type of data collected and methods used.

Response: We agree with you that the title does not fully match the content of the manuscript. We have changed the title and hope it now corresponds better with this study (line 1-2, page 1).

Comment 3: Authors should revise the word ‘access’ to ‘assess’.

Response: Thank you very much for this remark. This error has been corrected (line 30, page 2; line 124, page 5; line 172, page 7).

Comment 4: The sentence ‘types of experienced mistreatment can differ by gender’ should be revised to ‘types of mistreatment can differ by gender’.

Response: Thank you very much again for your suggestion. We have revised this sentence accordingly (line 50, page 2).
Comment 5: The purpose of the study denotes a qualitative approach meanwhile authors used a quantitative approach (line 118-130).

Response: We carefully revised the manuscript to clarify what methods were used, especially taking into account those sentences and sequences that were misleading with regard to using a qualitative approach. We adjusted the end of the Introduction as well as the Methods and Discussion (limitation) sections to better clarify that we used a quantitative approach (line 30, page 2, line 117, page 5; line 119, page 5; line 132, page 5; line 340-341, page 13).

Comment 6: Why ethics approval was not required for the study?

Response: We agree with your assessment that our study touches on sensitive material. The ethics committee at the medical universities in Austria only review clinical studies and applied medical research according to legal requirements (University Law, Hospitals and Health Resorts Act). The type of our study does not require ethical review at medical universities in Austria. However, we were concerned that our study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki. All participants were provided with information necessary to make an informed decision about participation. All potential participants were informed in verbal and written form about the purpose and content of the study and the fact that data would be used only in anonymized form. Participation was voluntary and anonymous. Participants could withdraw from participation without stating a reason. Students were informed that withdrawal from participation would have no negative consequences (line 142-154, page 6).

Comment 7: What do authors mean by this statement ‘This study included (ex-)partners, patients and patients’ relatives, friends and strangers in addition to perpetrators who were fellow students or university staff’?

Response: We agree with you that this sentence is misleading. We changed the statement to clarify the content. Participants were asked to report perpetrators for each type of mistreatment and were given a list of potential perpetrators to choose from (line 164, page 7).
Comment 8: The sentence ‘the first scale accessed?’ should be revised to ‘the first scale assessed’?

Response: Thank you very much for drawing our attention to this error. The sentence has been corrected accordingly (line 172, page 7).

Comment 9: Authors should indicate the period the study was conducted?

Response: Thank you. The paper now states that recruitment was performed during the three months of the summer term, from April to June in 2015 (line 140-141, page 6).

Comment 10: This is the first time I have seen statistical significance being set at $\alpha = .050$. Do authors have any reason for that?

Response: We considered all p values under .050 to be statistically significant as used in the majority of papers employing quantitative methods. This convention goes back to the suggestions made by Fisher in 1925 (Statistical methods for research workers). The argumentation was that values that are two standard deviations apart from the mean can be assumed to be deviant from this mean. Fisher offered this 5% point as reference point. Other researchers agreed with this value. Bortz and Schuster (references can be found in the manuscript) also explain in their book about statistical analyses in social and human sciences that this value finds common consensus. (line 189-192, page 7/8).

Comment 11: In line 180 of the results section, authors should not begin the sentence with a figure.

Response: Thank you very much for your comment. We have changed the number and spelled out the figure (line 205, page 8).
Comment 12: The sentence in line 187 that reads 'In the following only..' is not comprehensible. Authors should revise.

Response: Thank you once more for your comment. We have revised this sentence (line 212-213, page 8).

Comment 13: Could authors make the following sentence much clearer? "Contrary to our expectations, hardly any gender differences were observed in the current study".

Response: Your point is very essential. We completely revised these sentences as they were definitely not clear. Initially, we expected to encounter several more differences between women and men during their medical studies due to women’s status in medicine, the barriers they face when aspiring to positions of higher rank and the discrimination they experience during their training. However, we felt that including a discussion of discrimination of women and of barriers in their career would add a strand to the article that had previously not been included. Finally, as there were some gender differences as well as similarities, we decided to delete this sentence and discuss these differences and similarities (lines 294-305, page 11/12).

Comment 14: Authors should reconcile the conclusion in the abstract with the conclusion in the main manuscript.

Response: We have reconciled the abstract’s conclusion with the study conclusion (lines 50-53, page 2).

Thank you very much for your valuable comments, which we very much appreciate. We are hopeful that your comments have enabled us to improve our manuscript.