



# Musical Chairs for Darvomanics: How Anti-Learning Systems Enable Systemic Abuses of Power in Academia and What We Can Do Together to Help Them Learn \*

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## Commentary

Academic healthcare systems ostensibly aspire to become Learning Health Systems (LHSs) that improve outcomes as a byproduct of experience (Etheredge 2007). Yet, major systemic problems in academic medicine, academia, and elsewhere persist because structures and incentives that engender anti-learning systems are interwoven into the cultural fabric of these organizations (Bravo-Moreno 2022). Divergent issues including sexual predation, racism, antisemitism, plagiarism, quashing free speech, trampling on the rights of patients, and more proliferate at universities in spite of well-funded efforts aimed at addressing such challenges (Svrluga 2022).

These persistent problems can be understood as all fruits of the same poisonous tree of systemic abuses of power. They all represent the same monster surreptitiously wearing different masks. Indeed, when the people occupying seats of power change over time, but the problems persist, we bear witness to a game of musical chairs for darvomanics who cause harmful consequences.

Fortunately, one promising solution emerges from harnessing the transformative magnetism of moral courage. It is worth investing in research (and advocacy) vis-a-vis the cultures, structures, incentives, and power dynamics in such ecosystems that engender the potential to unleash such moral courage in individuals and to render it contagious.

Professionally, I work in the field of advancing LHS (Friedman, J. Rubin, and Sullivan 2017). To oversimplify, LHSs engender seamless learning and continuous improvement by analysis of data from experiences to generate knowledge of 'what works best', coupled with the mobilization of such actionable knowledge to inform decisions affecting health and to empower the people making these decisions (Friedman, J. Rubin, Brown, et al. 2015). I have done this work as the executive director of a philanthropic foundation founded by a self-made entrepreneur and World War II veteran who was the godfather of the LHSs vision, as a co-founder of one nonprofit organization focused on advancing this incipient global LHSs movement anchored in multistakeholder consensus Core Values, as a co-founder of another nonprofit organization building LHSs for mental health in particular, and as a staff and faculty member in a first-of-its-kind basic science department dedicated to the transdisciplinary science of LHSs at a prominent academic medical center (J. C. Rubin, Silverstein, et al. 2018).

Historically, I viewed my role as helping systems that simply did not learn effectively from experiences ('non-learning systems') to learn how to learn better (Fassbender 2019). However, over the past several years, I have recognized what I have termed 'anti-learning systems', whereby the organizational cultures, power dynamics, and incentive structures seem to actively align to surreptitiously prevent systemic learning. It is almost as if these anti-learning systems go through the enumerated consensus Core Values bonding together the LHSs movement and deliberately violate many of them, while paying lip service to ostensible continuous improvement (J. Rubin 2018).

Dr. Carl Taswell, a director at the Brain Health Alliance, coined the term *darvomanic* (Taswell et al. 2022) to characterize the people who end up abusing power in such systems. DARVO is an acronym standing for "Deny, Attack, Reverse Victim and Offender roles" (Freyd 1997; Harsey and Freyd 2020). Linking DARVO with the psychiatric term mania, completes the painting of the picture. There is a pattern in certain organizations where abusers of power utilize DARVO, and the corresponding systems promoting them to such powerful positions, exhibit little capacity for self-correction.

Three recommendations hold the potential for every individual aspiring to make a difference in environments where systemic abuses of power are rampant to engender change. The first stems from announcements one often hears at airports and on public transportation: if you see something, say something. As a corollary, it is important that one not let themselves be gaslit into doubting their own senses when something intuitively seems awry to them. The second involves simply being there for fellow human beings who find themselves at the receiving end of systemic abuses of power. The third entails taking what one is talented at professionally or personally and utilizing such skills to help to make an impact.

On the topic of gaslighting, in early 2022, following the long-overdue termination of an abuser of power who rose to be the president of a large public research university, I listened to a number of individuals spanning the institutional power hierarchy, and then crafted an email for dissemination. In one part of the email, I noted: "Well over half a century ago, Dr. Solomon Asch researched the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral effects on individuals of pressure to conform. His famed social psychology studies, known colloquially as the Asch conformity experiments, illuminated the power of perceived social pressure of groups to drive individual conformity and submission. Variations on these experiments also revealed the extraordinary potential of an in-

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dividual to stand up when they realize that they do not stand alone. One of Dr. Asch's most highly-cited publications is titled, *Studies of independence and conformity: I. A minority of one against a unanimous majority*. These studies by Dr. Asch guide us on a path forward; we need not submit and we need not conform." (Asch 1956)

Elsewhere in that email, I noted that, "the Regents' termination letter to (the university president) chastises him for the evidenced chasm between his lofty words and his reprehensible actions. Pulling the lens back, where questioning is quashed, where diversity of thought is stifled, where power trumps compassion, where trite virtue signaling is seen as holier than actually making a difference, and where faculty and staff and even learners are routinely gaslighted into seeing opacity as transparency, such chasms can grow largely out of sight. In contrast, when principles in our consensus Core Values for LHSs... are operationalized in sociotechnical infrastructures and cultures anchored in learning, the radiant sunlight of truth indeed becomes the best disinfectant." (J. Rubin and Friedman 2014)

In the book, *Armies of Enablers: Survivor Stories of Complicity and Betrayal in Sexual Assaults*, law professor Amos Guiora explores systemic abuses of powers at universities (Guiora 2020). Personally, I have experience advocating for and with survivors of mass sexual assaults and other systemic abuses of power (I have volunteered for almost two decades for a nonprofit organization supporting survivors of sexual trauma, and I served as the president of its board of directors for over seven years). Indeed, within systems that engender such ubiquitous (yet surreptitious) abuses of power, everywhere one turns, they encounter "Armies of Enablers" who are cogs in the machine producing such toxic and horrific (yet largely concealed) outcomes.

I have fused research and advocacy vis-a-vis issues such as sexual predation, antisemitism, racism, patients' rights, and stifling of free speech. These tragedies represent the same monster surreptitiously wearing different masks. An eye-opening experience for me came in 2022 when I returned to my old suburban public high school over a quarter century after I gave my valedictorian speech. I realized that the same types of abuses of power (in this particular case, enabling and endeavoring to cover up for harms perpetrated against special needs students and their families) persisted even though every teacher and administrator I knew had since left; these were system problems demanding system solutions. This experience informed research, social entrepreneurship, and advocacy for and with survivors of abuses of power at universities. My advocacy journey has taken me to US federal government agencies and to the halls of US Congress as well.

Closely related to this advocacy work, I am leading a synergistic effort, with extraordinary collaborators, to endeavor to envision and catalyze a novel academic discipline (and complementary international movement) fusing system sciences, learning health sciences, and other social sciences (J. C. Rubin and Ocepek 2024). Among other things, this transdisciplinary and multistakeholder effort aims to study and address what Dr. Taswell described as a "global pandemic of darvomania" (Taswell et al. 2022).

One insightful question I have been asked regarding this work that jumped out at me was querying how I was able to do all this and not get fired. Importantly, I have been consistently transparent about what I am doing and why. A key element of my job itself is to help organizations that do not routinely learn and improve from experience, to become learning systems. My job is also to advance the stated mission of the organization where I work. Every piece of my advocacy inside and outside of my organization relates to these themes (J. Rubin 2017).

In that sense, organizations are better off in the long run if people within them who see something awry ultimately say something and do something. In the future, when such organizations are one day looking back and authoring their respective stories, self-correcting from within is far more compelling than being forced to do so from the outside after resisting (Nowak 2011). Indeed, when we each say to ourselves that something is wrong, so somebody should say something and somebody should do something, we must also recognize at the same time that each of us is somebody and that each of us has the capacity to make a difference, even if we seem to be Davids struggling against Goliaths (Gladwell 2015). We also need to remind ourselves that bravery is contagious. The solution to these systemic issues is anchored in the transformative magnetism of moral courage.

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