

Grad to Grad Fall 2003

Go Ask Rog—Sexual Harassment Advice for Graduate Students

(The following situation is fictitious and utilized solely for educational purposes. Any similarity to actual persons or circumstances is coincidental and unintentional.)

Dear Rog:

I have a question about behavior that might not be sexual harassment exactly, but it's making me feel uncomfortable. A faculty member in my department has a habit of using nicknames to refer to us. Dr. Friendly usually calls women "Cookie" and he refers to men as "Champ." For example, if I finish a project, Dr. Friendly responds "Hey thanks, Cookie." I've also overheard the Dr. say "So, when are you going to turn in that research, Champ?" Some of my fellow students don't seem to mind; they find it harmless and amusing. It seems overly familiar to me, but am I just being hypersensitive?

Dear Grad:

You have raised an interesting question about the appropriate use of nicknames in work and education settings. Nicknames can be used as both terms of endearment and as put-downs. It is important to consider the context in determining whether Dr. Friendly's behavior is problematic.

Many of us are comfortable having a friend or family member refer to us by nickname, but we do not like having the nickname used by work or school colleagues. Your Uncle Ben can get away with calling you "Sugarpuss," but your P.I. can't. Problems arise when someone uses a nickname that we believe is derogatory, belittling, sexist, racist, or otherwise offensive. Nicknames can have a damaging effect when they cause us to feel embarrassed, disrespected, or intimidated. You are the only one who can decide whether your nickname is acceptable or not depending on the circumstances.

Think about the degree to which Dr. Friendly's behavior adversely impacts the work or education environment. Dr. Friendly uses a delicious snack to describe women and a sports term to describe men. It could be argued that he has demonstrated gender bias through his behavior. However, if this is the only objectionable thing he does, it is probably not sexual harassment. Sexually harassing behavior is serious or repeated and unreasonably interferes with your employment or education. It must be so severe or pervasive that it denies you equal opportunity to work or study. While Dr. Friendly's conduct might seem inappropriate, the use of "Cookie" and "Champ" alone does not violate the law or University policy.

However, if you are uncomfortable with Dr. Friendly's nicknames, you have a few options. Dr. Friendly may be unaware that you find his behavior offensive. First, you can let him know that you do not like being called "Cookie" and that you

prefer to be addressed by your proper name. Second, you could ask someone else to address the nickname issue with Dr. Friendly. Third, you may decide to give yourself a new nickname and encourage him to call you “The Oracle” instead of “Cookie.” Finally, you might conclude that the nickname is something you can live with so long as he gives you appropriate respect for your intellect.

If Dr. Friendly repeatedly engages in behavior that perpetuates sexual stereotypes, if he demonstrates favoritism based on gender, or he continues to call you “Cookie” even after you have asked him to stop, contact the Office of Sexual Harassment Prevention and Policy (OSHPP) for assistance. You don’t have to wait until a situation escalates before you ask for help. You can get advice from OSHPP without filing a complaint. Call (858) 534-8298, email oshpp@ucsd.edu, log on to <http://oshpp.ucsd.edu> or visit 201 University Center (corner of Gilman and Myers).