Body-Based Jargon Can Be Harassment When It Turns Sexual

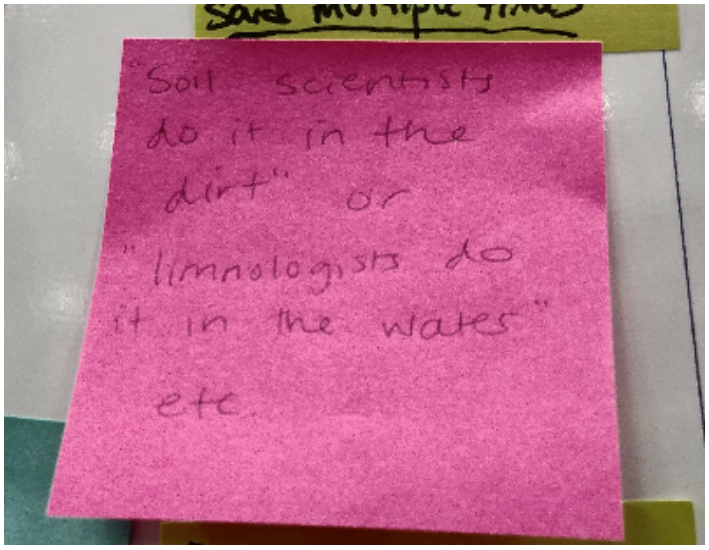
Geology terms based on the human body are extremely common, but they can create a culture where sexualized language in the workplace, a type of harassment, is rampant.

A commonly reported example of sexualized language in the geosciences occurs when people discuss crosscutting dikes and tie the term to a homophobic slur. This crosscutting dike is in Sweden's Kosterhavet National Park. Credit: Thomas Eliasson/Geological Survey of Sweden, CC BY 2.0

By Kimberly M. S. Cartier 7 January 2020

> ***Content warning:*** *This article contains examples of body-based and sexual terms applied to geoscience concepts. In some cases, this language has been used to harass and discriminate against people with marginalized identities.*

Geoscientists frequently use body-related terms to describe scientific concepts, but body metaphors that become sexual may contribute to the high risk of sexual harassment and assault in fieldwork.



A pink Post-it Note, representing things heard at conferences, reads, "'Soil scientists do it in the dirt' or 'limnologists do it in the water' etc."
Credit: Kimberly M. S. Cartier

"It's not a problem to say a rock looks like a head," said Tamara Pico (https://scholar.harvard.edu/tamarapico/home), a postdoctoral scholar studying the last ice age at the California Institute of Technology in Pasadena. "I'm not saying that in itself is dangerous, but rather that it might create a framework that makes sexual analogies more prevalent. And then the use of sexual language is dangerous."

Pico wanted to quantify how common it is to use body or sexual metaphors to talk about geoscience concepts, so she asked attendees of AGU's Fall Meeting 2019 to share their personal experiences (https://agu.confex.com/agu/fm19/meetingapp.cgi/Paper/599426). She found that people of all genders and ages could recognize and identify this type of language and give examples of when they had heard it in the field or classroom. However, she also found that this type of language was more common in some research disciplines, like hard rock geology, than in others, like atmospheric science.

Pervasive and Uncomfortable

Bodied language has been entrenched in how scientists have described geologic concepts for hundreds of years. Landscapes are naked or bare. Scars mar the face of a plateau. Soil is fertile, barren, or sterile. Glaciers go through binge-purge cycles.

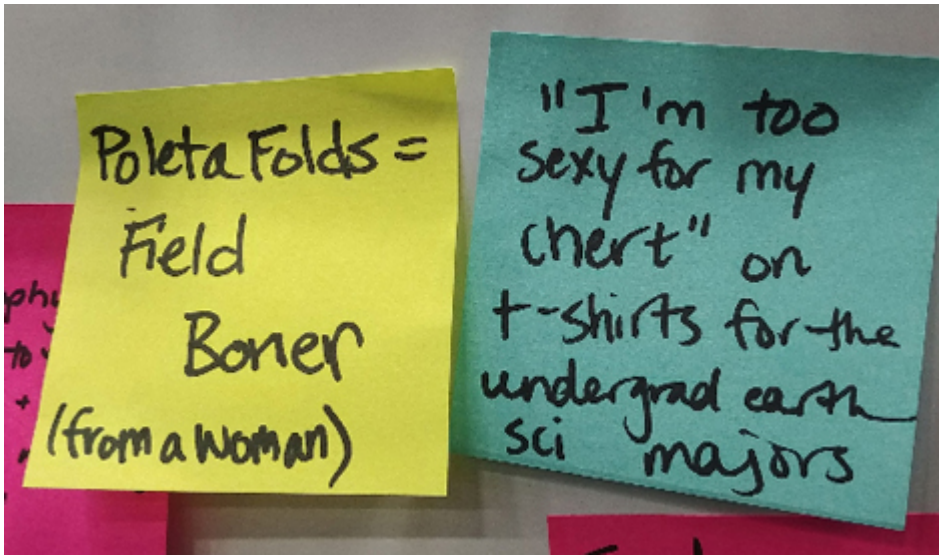
Bodied language can at times help communicate complicated science, Pico said, but it is important to understand that the language scientists use has shaped generations of scientific culture. Moreover, the use of body metaphors can often be sexualized.

“This is pervasive language that gets used, and it makes people uncomfortable.”

Pico recalled an early field experience in which the instructor related geologic dikes (https://www.britannica.com/science/dike-igneous-rock) to the homophonous homophobic slur. “At the time, [I] and a few other mostly women in the field talked about how it made us feel uncomfortable that the instructor would make jokes about the dikes that we saw, like, ‘Oh, check out that dike on dike action,’” Pico said.

“When I was an older grad student, I heard younger grad students complaining about [that] type of language, and that’s when I realized, ‘Oh, I don’t think this is a one-off thing,’” she said. “This is pervasive language that gets used, and it makes people uncomfortable.”

During her poster presentation, Pico gathered dozens of examples of gendered, bodied, and sexualized language used in the classroom, in field research, and in other professional settings like conferences.



In fieldwork examples of bodied language, one responder reported, “Poleta Folds = Field Boner (from a woman).” A blue Post-it Note, representing things heard in the classroom, reads, “‘I’m too sexy for my chert’ on t-shirts for the undergrad earth sci majors.” Credit: Kimberly M. S. Cartier

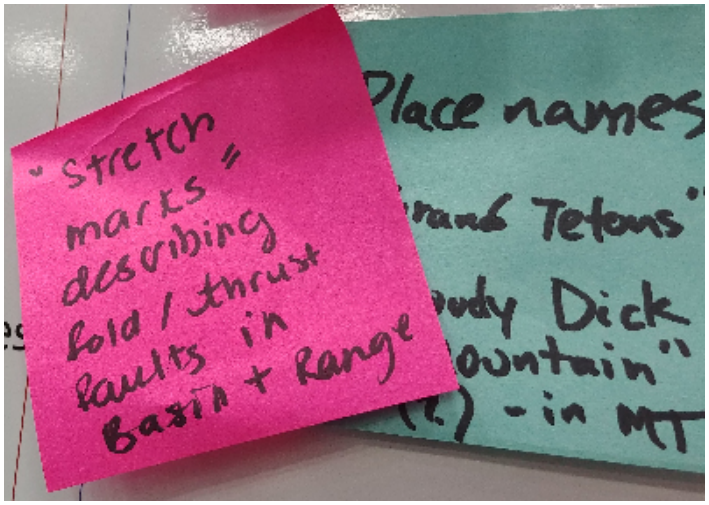
The responses contained some commonalities: “sexy” scientific results; “pornographic” images of a field site; a photo of breasts in a bra to describe rock cleavage; the ocean, Antarctica, or the wilderness described as a mistress to be tamed and conquered; the mineral cummingtonite (https://www.mindat.org/min-1170.html) said with a wink and a nudge.

Research discipline was the most noticeable theme in the responses. Scientists in hard rock geology, geomorphology, and oceanography (https://eos.org/features/women-in-oceanography-still-navigate-rough-seas) seemed most familiar with bodied and sexualized language in relation to their science. For example, in oceanography, boats are given female names, but the “gender” of machines is still argued over, Pico said. Atmospheric scientists seemed least likely to have encountered this type of language in their work.

Unsafe Environment

Title IX (https://www.hhs.gov/civil-rights/for-individuals/special-topics/harassment/index.html) of the Education Amendments of 1972 protects students from sexual- and gender-based harassment, including “verbal, nonverbal, or physical conduct of a sexual nature.”

“Using that type of sexualized language, that in itself constitutes a hostile environment and in itself can constitute sex- or gender-based harassment,” Pico argues.



One person reported overhearing at a conference “‘stretch marks’ describing fold/thrust faults in Basin + Range.” Another response reads, “Place names like ‘Grand Tetons’ [and] ‘Bloody Dick Mountain’ in [Montana].” Credit: Kimberly M. S. Cartier

Moreover, a recent study found that normalizing such language fosters physically unsafe environments (https://eos.org/articles/does-your-institution-foster-a-culture-of-sexual-harassment). In a 2014 survey (https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0102172), 71% of women responded that they had

experienced sexual harassment during a field research experience, and 26% reported a physical assault. The geosciences are no exception to that statistic.

Pico is collecting more examples of gendered, bodied, and sexualized language in the geosciences to better track its use in the classroom and in the field. She says that raising awareness through personal stories helps a great deal but that quantitative data will help define the scope of the problem and bolster efforts for change at an institutional level.

"It's very much in the culture to talk about geology in this way," she said. "But once that becomes sexually explicit, that's what crosses the line in terms of violating university policies."

—Kimberly M. S. Cartier (@AstroKimCartier (https://twitter.com/@AstroKimCartier)), Staff Writer

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