

# Crying off script in workplace can ruin women's careers, researcher finds

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Credit: UC Davis

As sexual harassment allegations against well-known men in entertainment, media and politics make news, everyday office dynamics are under the microscope. Professor Kimberly Elsbach of the Graduate School of Management at the University of California, Davis, has been examining workplace behavior for more than a decade.

In several studies, Elsbach has looked at why women are often criticized for crying at work. This bias that women face and the anger that men in power display are the results of a complex interplay of unspoken social scripts, she said.

Elsbach's most recent research is with Beth Bechky of the Stern School of Business at New York University. They outline four [stressful situations](#) at work that commonly induce crying: personal issues, response to feedback, daily work stress or heated office meetings.

Some crying can be OK, as long as women stick to the preconceived notions of what others in the workplace, such as supervisors and colleagues, expect from criers, Elsbach found. Women who don't follow "the script" are perceived as emotional, weak, unprofessional or even manipulative—negative attributions that often ruin careers.

"For most women, crying is really not in their control," Elsbach said. "We know that boys are socialized not to cry and don't have to think about it when they're adults. But most girls aren't socialized not to cry."

She said more organizations need to educate managers on this.

Elsbach said there is a much larger cultural challenge in how we perceive men and [women](#) differently at [work](#). Rather than crying, men often express strong emotions by raising their voices and pounding on the table.

"So when you see Harvey Weinstein, who's widely known to be a bully, yelling at someone, that behavior may actually give him status," Elsbach said.

It follows what is expected from men in power.

"There's no reason why it should give men stature," Elsbach said. "We make specific attributions of behaviors because we have learned to over time. And these are so hard to undo. It will take generations and generations to unravel."

**More information:** Kimberly Elsbach et al. HOW OBSERVERS ASSESS WOMEN WHO CRY IN PROFESSIONAL WORK CONTEXTS, *Academy of Management Discoveries* (2017). [DOI: 10.5465/amd.2016.0025](https://doi.org/10.5465/amd.2016.0025)

Provided by UC Davis

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