

Abusers and Enablers in Faculty Culture

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With all the post-Harvey-Weinstein wringing of hands about why it takes so long for abuse to be revealed, especially when everyone clearly knows it's happening, I was reminded of what my department head had said to me when I asked for a member of my dissertation committee to be removed:

"Please don't ask me to do this. He'll make my life miserable."

I had approached the chair for help after it became clear that this professor and I had an "unworkable relationship." Ditching him, another faculty member told me, was the only way I could finally finish a lagging doctorate. I'd even sought help from a therapist who told me, "He doesn't seem to want to let you go," and added, "but you have to get away."

My department chair had all the security that race, class, gender, and tenure at a top-10 university can bestow. And still he was too afraid to do his job properly. I was a woman, a student, crushed under debt, without institutional support, and minus parents or any other safety net back in the working-class world from which I'd come. How was I supposed to confront this professor on my own when people who could have — and should have — would not?

So I did what a lot of women do. After earning my Ph.D., I walked away from a life in which I'd invested time, money, and work. I spent the next several years blaming myself, replaying the scenes, repeating the words of those in power. I had mixed feelings of relief and resentment as I met others who told different versions of "Yes, everyone knows he's like this."

Anytime you have a highly competitive system in which a single person has the power to make or break someone else's career — whether it's the crowded, greasy pole of Hollywood or a flooded Ph.D. pipeline — you will have abuse. Not only rape and overt sexual aggression, but also the many complicated and twisted forms of abuse that can sink a woman's chances of succeeding in an already biased business.

In the humanities, our approach to bullying, manipulation, coercion, and control is made worse by the fact that we spend our days critiquing gender norms, power structures, and injustice — convinced that we will speak truth to that power if we ever run across it in real life. We are all good liberals, we think. Abuse couldn't happen here.

And yet it does. As a writing consultant now and an academic coach, I help scholars — most of them women — with the anxiety that underlies their procrastination and avoidance of writing. Often that anxiety can be traced back to bullying, manipulation, coercion, and shame that they experienced as a graduate student or faculty member.

For many of them, there's a low hum of worry that makes each step take twice as long. These are women who spend a good deal of time feeling that no matter what they do, it will never be good enough. Several avoid their own work while devoting themselves to teaching and administration — tasks at which they feel more in control and their achievements more recognized. Others skip workshops and conferences where they know their bully will hold forth. Sometimes, like me, they slip quietly away from the profession they love.

Most of the clients I work with have not experienced a specific extreme trauma like rape or assault but are grappling with the long-term effects of systemic, sexist dysfunction in academe. It goes without saying that too many women are harmed in this way, and that their experiences and stories matter for their own sake. But from a purely pragmatic standpoint, it also means that departments and institutions are missing out on getting the full benefit of the talent they pay for.

It doesn't have to be that way. Here are just four ways that abuse negatively affects academe. By recognizing the following behaviors as abuse, we can more quickly change them at the institutional level without constantly expecting women to adapt at the individual level.

Abuse is normalized. "That's just how things are done, and if you can't take it, you shouldn't get a Ph.D." The idea here is that pain and suffering give the profession its soul. Kindness is for saps.

I hear from academic clients all the time who have either internalized this message or convinced themselves that the treatment they are subjected to is not abuse. After all, they haven't been hit, or raped, or even asked to give naked massages in exchange for tenure. But they have been attacked by colleagues online and in department meetings. They've been denied promised jobs and promotions because of an ever-moving goalpost. Viciousness in a reader's report masquerades as a professional critique, and depression and anxiety become badges of honor that supposedly show how hard you are working.

You would be hard-pressed to find a mental-health professional, a productivity expert, or a writing coach who would suggest that — rather than recognizing people's talent and rewarding their hard work — the way to get good results out of people is by making them feel inadequate or confused.

If you read this and think, "Yes, this is just how academe has always been," or, "Well, I had to go through it, so you should, too," or, "By being hard on people, we weed out those who don't deserve to be here," then you are part of the problem.

Abusers destabilize their targets. An academic friend recently posted a quote from the actress Gwyneth Paltrow,

characterizing her experience with Weinstein: "He was alternately generous and supportive and championing, and punitive and bullying." My friend footnoted: "I feel like I know this mentorship model well." Nods all around. "Charming" and "manipulative" often come as a pair.

Which is why it can take a long time to even realize what is happening to you. Several of my clients grapple with deans, department chairs, and heads of tenure committees who maintain control precisely by keeping people guessing about what's expected and where reality lies. At the same time, even though (or because) the abusers can never be pleased, the women I work with will keep trying to do just that. Some might head in too many directions at once, hoping that one of their efforts might just lead to a win. Others remain stuck in loops of trying to please — as I did during the writing of my dissertation, doing revision after revision, with each new set of comments suggesting I do the opposite of what the last set of comments insisted, until I was ready to believe the sun was the moon and the moon was the sun.

And then, after you are exhausted from always getting it wrong, someone will tell you how much your abuser admires your work, and you will question whether you have misunderstood everything. Academe is full of Petruchios looking for their next Kate.

If you read this and think, "Those are small things," or, "Of course people change their minds, and that's the nature of critical inquiry," you are part of the problem. Destabilizers work with a steady drip of small things — no one of which, when pointed out, seems outrageous. So listen up the next time your female colleague tells you she feels gaslighted or exhausted from mixed messages telegraphed by a senior professor or administrator.

Abuse thrives because co-workers enable it. Senior colleagues, like my department chair, often reason that they have to keep working with the abuser, while grad students and untenured faculty members are just passing through. This is not unlike what spouses sometimes do in abusive families: They allow their children to bear the brunt because it keeps the person in power happy and maintains a status quo, however dysfunctional it might be.

But silence and inaction are the mild forms of enabling. Often abusers send in their "flying monkeys" — abuse by proxy. Students are unwittingly used to tell you how great your abuser is, colleagues are given projects you began, staff members are deployed to spread rumors.

If you read this and think, "This just doesn't go on in my department," you are wrong. If you've ever said, "Well, he's on his way out, so it's better to let retirement take the place of discipline"; if you have ever tried to convince a woman who tells you that something is wrong that she is crazy or simply misguided; or if you have found yourself riled up to act against a woman in your department on the basis of one man's stories — you are part of the problem.

It's easier to blame the victim than change the system. Abusers weaponize their own idiosyncrasies and parade them as high standards, shaming anyone who falls short. That often sets in motion a cycle of low self-esteem, late work, and less polished writing to prove that the accuser, not the abuser, must be problem.

The feeling of being unheard, untrusted, and not believed keeps the cycle spiraling further out of control. Too many of my clients feel guilt creep into their professional lives. Some can be quick to blame themselves. Others hesitate to turn down requests to give a talk or contribute to a journal, because they think they "owe" colleagues "favors" and will be criticized for not delivering. This is often the legacy of chronic, institutionalized abuse — of people breaking others rather than building up their confidence and helping them be successful colleagues.

If you find yourself saying, "Look, what he did was wrong, but really, her work isn't that good, anyway," or, "If she were strong, like me, she would have stood up for herself," or, "If she didn't have something to hide, she would have spoken out" — you are part of the problem.

So what is the solution?

I work with people on problems directly and indirectly related to a culture that thrives on abusive practices like those

four. But we need a global solution. Institutions need to own up to their systemic mechanisms for abuse and help to solve the problem rather than perpetuate it. We need to change the way committees are formed and the power that chairs wield. We need pedagogical ethics to be a part of every curriculum. We need to educate the educators about what abuse is — how to spot it, how to stop it, how to speak up. And we need to give people access to mechanisms for doing so.

Only then can we begin to capitalize on the brilliance, the talent, the hard work of every member of an institution. Departments and institutions need to ask how to make that happen and finally admit that we aren't going to get there just by being good liberals.