

Cannibalism and the Darker Side of Graduate Education

By Steve Swartzter

Paolo Raphael is a promising second year PhD student in the Department of Anthropology at Fancy Pants University. He was admitted to the program after completing an MA at Major Columbian University, for which he wrote a thesis on Mayan myths. He came to FPU specifically to work with Dr. Pennywise, the chair of the department and a world-renowned expert on ancient Mayan culture.

Among the graduate students, Dr. Pennywise has a reputation for being impatient and difficult to please. Given his weight in the department (and in the field at large) he consistently has a cadre of graduate students who are eager to work with him.

One day, in a seminar on Mayan iconography, Dr. Pennywise asserted that a particular set of Mayan carvings depict cannibalism as part of a ritual sacrifice. Paolo had studied the carvings extensively and prefers an alternative interpretation—he suspects that the carvings depict a king's funeral and that the cannibalism hypothesis doesn't fit in this context. When Paolo brought up this alternative in class, Bailey Gray, one of Dr. Pennywise's advanced students, quickly jumped in. "If you had actually looked at the carvings, or if you had bothered to read Dr. Pennywise's paper—you know, the one he assigned for us to read today—you would have known that your interpretation is just silly. His interpretation is an established archeological fact."

"I couldn't have said it better myself," Dr. Pennywise added. "You would do well to learn from Miss Gray's example, Paolo. If you were to work as hard as she does, you would be less likely to waste the class's time with such sophomoric ideas."

Stunned, Paolo slumped in his seat. He couldn't say anything. He knew that his ideas had not been fully worked out yet, but he did not think that they were *that* incomplete or implausible to merit such a hostile response. Could he really be so blind about his own ability? Were his ideas really that bad? He felt crushed and could not concentrate for the rest of the class. To make matters worse, Dr. Pennywise would occasionally punctuate his claims with "Or do you know better than the rest of the archeological community, Mr. Raphael." In response, Paolo could only shake his head silently, staring at the floor in embarrassment.

Immediately after class, Paolo retreated to his office. Ravi, another student in the seminar followed close behind. "Whoa, that was dumb of you! Never second guess Dr. Pennywise, especially if you didn't do the reading!"

“But I did do the reading!” Paolo insisted. “I had been thinking about writing my seminar paper on this topic and I am smart enough to know that Dr. Pennywise’s article is mandatory reading on the matter. The paper was cutting edge research when it was published, but that was more than a decade ago; we have learned so much since then! I think that some of the new evidence supports my interpretation, but I didn’t even get a chance to explain why before he and Bailey cut me down! It’s not fair!”

“Look,” Ravi responded, “Pennywise might be a jerk, but he knows way more about this than either of us ever will. Do you really think that you know more about recent findings than he does? Get over yourself. If he thinks your idea won’t fly, then you’d be smart to drop it. And besides, if you ever want to complete your degree or get a job, you are going to need him on your side. So you better toughen up and quit being an idiot.”

Questions for Discussion:

1. What reactions do you have to Bailey Gray’s behavior? Dr. Pennywise’s? Ravi’s?
2. How does bullying affect graduate students? If you were in Paolo’s situation, how would an incident like this affect you? If you were a bystander, how might witnessing such an incident affect you?
3. Does bullying threaten the academic freedom of graduate students? If so, how? If not, why not? If it depends, what does it depend on? How should the academic freedom of grad students be protected?
4. What causes do you think contribute to bullying in higher education? What can be done to prevent faculty members (or other students) from bullying graduate students?
5. What recourse does a bullied graduate student have? How should a graduate student respond when he or she sees another graduate student being harassed? What can graduate students do to create and maintain an anti-bullying culture?

For more information, see:

Dan Colson, “Paranoia and Professionalization: The Importance of Graduate Student Academic Freedom,” *AAUP Journal of Academic Freedom* 1 (2010), available at: <http://www.academicfreedomjournal.org/VolumeOne/Colson.pdf>

Amy Durmaskin, “Graduate Students Face Bullying Concerns,” *Minnesota Daily*, October 26, 2009, available at: <http://www.mndaily.com/2009/10/06/graduate-students-face-bullying-concerns>