

By Rochelle Poole

Bullied out of research

We were 4 days into the field expedition when I overheard my Ph.D. supervisor making disparaging remarks about someone. He was speaking in Dutch, probably assuming that I wouldn't understand because I'm American, saying that "she"—or "*zij*"—was simple, physically weak, and loud. He compared *zij* to his "other stupid students." I listened carefully to the crimes *zij* had committed, gradually becoming more and more certain that I—the only woman at the research station—was *zij*. This was the bully who pushed me out of research.

My experience was all the more disappointing because I had been very deliberate about my decision to pursue a Ph.D. It had to focus on predator-prey ecology, contribute to conservation, and offer adventure. Unlikely as it seemed, I came across a Ph.D. opportunity that ticked all of my boxes. I applied immediately and was thrilled to be selected by my future supervisor and an independent scientific board. My adviser-to-be seemed friendly and ambitious. It seemed too good to be true—and, indeed, it was.

On the first day of my first field expedition, my adviser abruptly shifted all the field resources to a different topic that didn't match my experience or career ambitions, ignoring our rigorous research plans—and my growing objections. Such a capricious change was unacceptable, I said, but my adviser countered my resistance. "I have the power to do this," he said. "This is how science works; you are just naïve." To some extent he was right: Ph.D. advisers wield the power to create or destroy research careers, and students typically have few—if any—ways to protect themselves from advisers who misuse this responsibility, especially during remote fieldwork. I was upset, but he was the field manager, so I put my head down, carried on with the work, and kept a log of his behavior. I assumed that we would talk sensibly and find a solution once we had returned home and enjoyed the Christmas break.

Instead, while I was away visiting family for the holiday, my adviser began sending me emails about my contract, copying heads of the department. He organized a disciplinary meeting with human resources (HR) for the morning of the day I returned to work, where he recommended that my contract be terminated. He said that I was too stupid to be one of *his* students and made bizarre false claims about my personal habits. The meeting ended when the HR manager cut him off and suggested that we meet another time.



"Students typically have few—if any—ways to protect themselves from advisers."

initially set for myself. I felt I was being punished for my supervisor's behavior, but I was optimistic that I would be able to persevere despite the disruption of moving my family, the 4-month lapse in research, and my general emotional exhaustion. After a few months, though, my need for self-care overpowered my guilt about leaving and I resigned.

I have struggled with how to think about this experience. I've found a fulfilling life in science communication and education, but I sometimes feel disappointed that I had to abandon my doctoral studies. I remind myself, though, that resigning doesn't mean that I "lost." I would have lost if I had accepted bullying as a rite in academe and sacrificed my mental health and quality of life. I know that taking on this bully was right for me, and I hope that speaking about my experience will encourage others to stand up for themselves, too. Doing so may put their career plans on hold or even at risk, but it's the only way to make academic life more egalitarian. ■

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