Eating Our Young: A Call for Civility During Q&As Following Student Conference Presentation

An open letter to our colleagues in academia:

We need to talk. Please excuse us for remaining anonymous, but we are currently working to build our careers in academia and are concerned this letter won't be well-received by some of our past, current, and future colleagues. We'd like to bring to your attention a troubling pattern of behaviour we've observed over the 2023 academic conference circuit. These conferences, in both Canada and the United States, have all been related to education in some way, either as a general overarching theme, or they've been discipline specific; they've been small faculty-centric events, and large international gatherings. The behaviour we need to talk about has occurred at all of them. Picture this: A graduate student, Master's or Doctoral, has completed a research project. They are considering further studies, or they've been encouraged by their supervisor to participate in the conference for the experience. They've prepped their slides, they've practiced several times, and on the big day, they use their 10 minutes to present their research rationale and background, their methodology, their findings, and then their thoughts for future study/how this work contributes to the existing body of knowledge. Then, it happens. The room moderator asks, "are there any questions?" and hands shoot up. This is where the problematic behaviour we've observed begins.

Rather than couching the question in one of the traditional open statements ("great work", "really interesting", "thanks for your presentation", etc.), the questioner, who is usually senior in standing to the presenter, launches into what we call the "gotcha question" in which they try to expose a flaw in the methodology. Or they question why the student didn't consider using a particular conceptual framework. Or they ask the student why their project focused on X and not Y. Or they suggest the findings aren't legitimate for some small reason. The graduate student stands there for an additional 10 minutes watching their work be picked apart. Some of these students rise to the occasion and fend off the questions, others crumble. One of us recently watched a grad student become so overwhelmed that they started referring all questions, even the most basic, to their supervisor who was in the room. It's conceivable that such an experience could dissuade students from wanting to come back next year and present again. We wouldn't want to. Would you?

Here's what we think is at the root of this behaviour: institutional generational trauma. Generational trauma emerged as a theory in academia the 1960s and suggests that people carry with them, both consciously and/or unconsciously, feelings about negative events that happened in their youth or before they were born; it's what Gita Baack describes as "inherited trauma" (Baack, 2017, p. 5). Our view is that that negative legacy can be, and is, institutionalized in higher education because of a culture which is highly resistant to change (Chandler, 2013; Giley et al., 2009; Lenartowicz, 2015), creating what we call 'institutional generational trauma.' The people who engage

in this behaviour likely had a similar experience in their own history and think it's a) normal and b) appropriate. We're telling you, it's not. All this behaviour does is perpetuate the ugly side of our work; the side that tells us we're experts in our domain, that only we know what's best, and that there's no room for personal and professional growth. We firmly believe that this behaviour will drive off some extremely valuable voices in our collective communities that we can't afford to lose, and for no good reason other than one person's desire to feel superior to a student in a conference presentation that, let's be honest, no one but that presenter is going to remember by the time they get home.

We aren't saying that legitimate questions and constructive criticism don't have a place at conferences. Questioning and discussing each other's work is an important element of the peer-review process upon which the academy stands. We take issue with *how* those questions are being asked, and, to a certain degree, *why* those questions are being asked. Are those more senior people asking graduate students questions to help them develop their skills as researchers and presenters, or to make themselves feel like the smartest person in the room? If you do have a concern with a student's work, why not take them aside during a coffee break for a casual chat? You may find your thoughts are better understood and internalized by someone who isn't under the watchful eye of room full of academics, and so they'd more able to learn from your knowledge and experiences. After all, wouldn't you be more receptive to feedback when it's delivered that way?

Our call to action on this issue can be summed up in four words: **Stop it. Be kind.** It literally costs you nothing to either keep silent in the moment or to act kindly to someone who took a risk and decided to present; someone who is learning how to communicate their thoughts and research to peers; someone who you risk turning away from the academy because you couldn't come up with a question to help them develop as a researcher, and rather felt the need to grind them down. We are eating our young with this behaviour. A lack of welcoming and supportive environments may hinder the retention of emerging scholars in academia, when the value of civility is clear (Cortina et al., 2017; Cortina et al.; 2019; Porath et al., 2015; Porath & Pearson, 2012). We definitely carry our own scars from this form of institutional generational trauma and can attest to the fact that those scars can run very deep. We must do better for graduate students in conferences so they have the desire and opportunities to become our future colleagues.

Respectfully,

Two frustrated graduate students

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