

Toril Moi
James B. Duke Professor of Literature and Romance Studies
Duke University

[Written for *The Grind*, The Duke Graduate School Magazine
July 2003]

**Discussion or Aggression?
Arrogance and Despair in Graduate School**

Among graduate students there is often a feeling of depression, as if out of humiliation, or a feeling of disappointment, as if out of arrogance. There is also, sometimes, a feeling of elation, which can arise out of narcissistic triumph but also out of delight at the discovery and mastery of new insights.

In the struggle to make a brilliant impression, to persuade everyone else that you are the smartest person around, some people will inevitably end up feeling despondent and others elated. Cultural sociologists inspired by the late Pierre Bourdieu would speak about the struggle for symbolic capital in graduate school, the relentless fight to become "consecrated" as one of the legitimate heirs to institutional power and glory. A psychoanalyst would point out that this makes graduate school an institutional environment in which most of its members are particularly vulnerable to intense experiences of transference, countertransference, projection and identification.

In graduate school, then, it is easy to start believing that everyone else is smarter than you. That is a sign of loss of self-esteem and is bad for work. It is equally easy to start believing that you are so obviously much smarter than everyone else, including your professors. That is a sign of smugness and arrogance, and is actually also bad for work. Of course, these feelings often coexist in complicated ways. Perhaps my arrogance

makes me despondent at being surrounded by so many people who fail to perceive my true worth, or perhaps I veer from one extreme to the other according to situation and mood.

Competitiveness, arrogance and depression are common human phenomena. They arise in people of every race, sex, and class. But such socio-psychological tendencies do not exist in a social and political vacuum. On the contrary, they tend to get mixed up with oppressive and unjust ideologies concerning gender, sexuality, race and social class. When that happens, they are no longer just phenomena of anthropological interest, but political problems.

Many of us are used to discussing sexism, racism, homophobia and class prejudice on a general, ideological, social and theoretical level. On that level, most people agree that discrimination and oppression are bad things. Unfortunately, it doesn't follow that we suddenly understand how such ideologies operate in our own everyday lives. To realize how we may collaborate in the production of injustice in spite of our best intentions, it is necessary to study cases and situations from everyday life.

The situation I want to look at here is the graduate classroom, the kind of seminar that most of us in the humanities engage in every week. (I shall discuss gender. But similar mechanisms can – and will – produce classrooms divided by race, sexuality or social class.) Every year some female graduate students tell me that they feel overlooked, marginalized, silenced in some seminars. They paint a picture of classrooms where the alpha males – so-called “theory boys” – are encouraged to hold forth in impossibly obscure language, but where their own interventions elicit no response. These women, in short, say that they are not listened to, that they are not taken seriously, and that they get the impression that their

perceptions of the matter at hand are of no interest to anyone else.

Such experiences tend to reproduce a particularly clichéd ideology in which theory and abstract thought are thought to belong to men and masculinity, and women are imagined to be the bearers of emotional, personal, practical concerns. In a system that grants far more symbolic capital, far more intellectual power, to abstract theorizing than to, say, concrete investigations of particular cases, these women lose out in the battle for symbolic capital. This is bad for their relationship to the field they love, and it is bad for their careers in and out of graduate school. This is sexism, and all this goes to show that sexist effects often arise from the interactions of people who have no sexist intentions at all.

But there is another side to this. Sometimes I have a conversation with someone who has been described to me as a theory boy. Then I invariably discover that the theory boy doesn't at all sound like an intellectual terrorist. He is, simply, profoundly, passionately interested in ideas. He loves theory and precisely because he loves it, he has strong theoretical views.

But this is exactly what graduate students should be like, for intellectual passions are the very fuel of intellectual life. The problem, then, is not the intellectual passions of the theory boys, but the women's sense that they are not given the same freedom and the same encouragement as the theory boys to express their intellectual passions.

None of this means that all male graduate students are theory boys. Nor does it mean that every female graduate student goes around feeling intimidated and depressed. A problem does not have to affect every single member of a group to be serious. No graduate student, whether male or female, should have to

experience life in the classroom as depressing and intimidating.

Graduate school – indeed, the whole of intellectual life – is a place for learning. We can't learn if we are unwilling to admit ignorance. In so far as the theory boy holds forth as if there were no limits to his own wisdom, he is engaged in ideological mystification. In so far as the climate of graduate school makes both men and women feel shy about admitting to ignorance and uncertainty, it encourages an intellectually destructive stance of all-knowingness.

The problem, then, is how to express one's passionate commitment to specific theories, ideas or methods without implying that those who are not equally enamored by them must be morons. To speak with Bourdieu: the challenge is to find a way to express our own views without inflicting symbolic violence on our colleagues and classmates.

There are two ways of saying what we think. One way is monologic: it leaves no space for others to respond or attempts to coerce a specific response. In either case the speaker is deaf to the words of others. The other way is dialogic. Such speakers have mastered the art of saying what they think, passionately, strongly, but in a way which invites others to respond, to state their own views as forcefully as they just stated theirs.

This is where the theory boys and girls – and their professors – err. The theory boys and girls get so intoxicated by their own passion for certain ideas that they forget to ask themselves whether they are listening to anyone else. The professors aid and abet them by allowing classroom discussion to become a series of monologic speeches, which other participants may experience as pure narcissistic display. In such "discussions" everyone – speakers and listeners – lose sight of the most important thing: the subject matter at hand. As a

result, the theory boys and girls come out of class glowing with narcissistic energy, and a goodly number of other students (often, but by no means always, women), come out of class feeling as if they are sinking steadily deeper into the slough of despond.

The opportunity to argue passionately about ideas is the best thing about graduate school. But we are not born with good discussion skills. Graduate school is the place to learn this, but I think we – the professors – teach it badly, probably because we are not always that good at it ourselves. (We didn't learn it in graduate school either.)

Some of us – professors and graduate students – need to learn to stop being so touchy, vain and self-regarding, so that we can listen to well-founded criticism without becoming defensive. Others need to learn to become more assertive, and how to stand their ground when their views come under pressure. We all need to care more about formulating our thought precisely and less about the impression we make on others. Finally, we should learn to distinguish between an attack on our ideas and an attack on our person. This would be easier if we also learned how to engage in free and hard-hitting debate without being unduly aggressive and domineering, and without silencing others.