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## **GRADUATE STUDENTS AS PROXY MOBBING TARGETS: INSIGHTS FROM THREE MEXICAN UNIVERSITIES<sup>1</sup>**

*From time to time over the decades, I have witnessed what I consider to be one of the more disgraceful practices that we as academics can engage in: using students to further our own personal and political ends.— Gary A. Olson (2009)*

Inside universities, struggles between academics often involve mobbing (collective bullying) and suppression of dissent and discontent. Shamefully, in some of these struggles, graduate students become targets of aggression as an indirect method of attacking their supervisors or mentors. Based on anecdotal comments and recollections, it is plausible that there might be hundreds or thousands of cases of this unethical and highly damaging phenomenon, but it has seldom been documented. Our aim is to initiate a discussion of goals, methods, dynamics, and negative impacts of these indirect attacks that use students as proxies and pawns in battles of which, much of the time, they are unaware. To develop an initial classification of attacks and impacts, we draw on three cases in Mexican universities. In each case, students were suppressed as an indirect way of damaging their supervisors' prestige and academic interests, with this suppression being part of a mobbing process against the supervisors.

We begin by outlining the features of struggles between academics, classifying attacks into several categories, thereby putting student-as-proxy attacks in context. Our case studies are from three Mexican universities, so we next provide an overview of the context of current Mexican public higher education. Then we outline the three cases. In the conclusion, we summarize the common features from these case studies and present some ideas on responding to these sorts of attacks. For research and pedagogical analysis, the appendix gives more extended accounts of the three cases.

### **Academic struggles**

Universities, like other organizations, involve power at various levels at all times (Gillies & Lucey, 2007). Just doing one's job, which may seem like a neutral, apolitical activity, can embody the exercise of power because it is related to the establishment and maintenance of policies, practices and authority relations, often linked to the vested interests of internal groups. In addition, interactions between university co-

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workers often involve competition, envy, and explicit attempts to achieve and exercise power and control to meet ends, which in some cases involve blocking, sabotaging, and hurting others' interests.

Struggles between academics can occur for a range of reasons, so each case is different, which is why case studies are important to document and analyze. Academics are under pressure to gain jobs and promotions, obtain personal prestige, add importance to their fields of research or teaching practice, and build networks of supporters. They are also playing out personal, psychological drives. Like other workplaces, some academic units contain people or groups that try to obtain material or symbolic resources in damaging ways. Universities tend to be a good context for narcissistic personalities with grandiose conceptions of their own worth that are threatened by others' success. They can even have types of psychopaths, who think only of their own needs and have no concern for others, but who are often convincing because of the peculiar dynamics of academic environments (Babiak & Hare, 2006). Especially when resources are at stake — funding, research grants, desirable courses to teach, promotions, new positions, new programs, graduate students to supervise, etc. — some academics can become vicious in their efforts to serve their own ends at the expense of others. As is ironically repeated, “Struggles in academia are especially nasty because the stakes are so small.”

To achieve academic ends, professors often organize in groups. Many of these groups enable honest internal collaboration and affect, in a positive way, their institutions, colleagues, fields, productivity, and students. Some, however, act like gangs, mafias, or syndicates (Porter, 2012) and engage in destructive behaviors, including mobbing and suppression of dissent and discontent.

Academics can become targets of attack for a variety of reasons. One of the most important is difference: someone who departs from the norm can be perceived as a threat, whether the difference is gender, class background, sexuality, ethnicity, spirituality, accent, grooming, academic training, academic performance, popularity with students, or research methods. In some places, graduates of certain universities or acolytes of particular theorists are privileged, so outsiders who aspire to join high status groups may be seen as unworthy upstarts (Westhues, 2004b).

Then there are dissenters: academics that promote change or speak out on issues and thereby threaten others. The most threatening form of dissent, in most cases, is against the academic hierarchy or internal groups with vested interests. An academic who exposes or challenges poor management, favoritism, misuse of grant monies, false claims about performance, or plagiarism is a prime target for reprisals, especially if there are groups with a well-developed patronage network. Reprisals can include ostracism, spreading of rumors, obstructing routine activities, rejection of job applications, undesirable teaching assignments, obstructing research activities, denial of research grants, rejection of articles, threats, reprimands, demotions, and dismissal (Martin, Baker, Manwell & Pugh, 1986; Nocella, Best & McLaren, 2010). These are methods for suppression of dissent or discontent.

If these sorts of methods are carried out by a group in a systematic way for sustained periods of time, they can be called mobbing (Westhues, 2004), whether or not dissent is involved. Mobbing can be used to suppress and suppression might be a part of mobbing. They often combine.

Some academics come under attack for seemingly random or pointless reasons. They might be in the wrong place at the wrong time, perhaps caught between competing factions in a departmental war or serving as a convenient scapegoat for a problem that is structural but must be blamed on someone. They can be suppressed or become targets of mobbing.

In this article we focus on how and why graduate students were unfairly suppressed as part of a process of ongoing mobbing of their supervisors. However, for reasons of space, we only outline the mobbing of their supervisors, and concentrate on the attacks on students, a phenomenon that has received little attention in print.

Research students are often subject to exploitation and abuse. Supervisors can claim credit for their work, expect them to do menial tasks, cause difficulties in their careers, and sexually harass them. These

problems, however, are analyzed only occasionally (Lawrence, 2002; Martin, 1986; Peña, 2010; Peña & López, in press; Sánchez & Fried, 1997; Witton, 1973).

### **Direct and Indirect Attack**

Suppression and mobbing can be performed as a direct attack, when a targeted academic personally experiences some adverse action. When formal processes are involved, an academic might be charged with an offence, put through a formal hearing and be given a reprimand or perhaps denied tenure, demoted, or dismissed. Informal varieties include a dressing down at a meeting or denial of a verbal personal request, for example, to have some assistance or to teach a particular class. In both cases, the target is in no doubt about what is going on and who is responsible.

Indirect attacks involve using intermediaries, who can be witting or unwitting. The classic example is spreading of rumors. An opponent starts a rumor, for example, by telling a story or leaving a suggestive or damaging document where others can find it. Those who pass on the rumor are intermediary attackers, serving as *de facto* foot soldiers in a vendetta. This sort of indirect attack is hard to counter, because no one takes responsibility for the rumors, and their content can vary. In indirect mobbing, usually a ringmaster or coordinator operates behind the scenes, coordinating attacks by others. Sometimes the mobbing coordinator is able to hide nearly all evidence of being involved.

As well as using intermediary attackers, it is possible to hit somebody close to mobbing targets as a means to affect them. This means hurting one person as a means to hurt another, the true target. We refer to this sort of process as attack through proxies or pawns: here, the target is a proxy for the true target, used by the attacker as a pawn. The proxy can be anyone who is important to the true target, including a collaborator, a colleague, a friend, a family member, or a person with the same orientation to the field.

However, here we focus on a particular proxy target: graduate students being supervised by the true target. They can be potent proxy targets, because they can represent a significant commitment of time and effort by the academic supervisor. Having graduate students is not only a source of status among colleagues, but an important requirement in many academic systems for professors. In many cases, graduate students collaborate closely with their supervisors, and often pursue lines of research that build on or complement their supervisor's research. Thus, criticizing their performance is a way to devalue their supervisors. Because graduate students often contribute to an academic's output, prestige, intellectual orientation, and impact on future scholars, attacking an academic's student is an effective way to hurt the academic.

Graduate students are individuals in their own right, of course, not merely extensions or investments of their supervisors. Therefore, when used as proxies to attack their supervisors, they are innocent victims, having played no role in the struggle, but nonetheless becoming targets. It is for this reason that attacking students as proxy targets is particularly unethical, compared even to the many other unethical methods of attacking academics.

### **The Mexican University Context**

Under neoliberalism, many universities throughout the world — including Mexico — shifted from being social institutions where knowledge was produced, taught, and made public, headed by academics with outstanding trajectories and prestige, to businesses that offer “products” to consumers (students) in the market (Gentili, 2001). This change in social role has had various consequences in Mexico, several of which are important for our analysis.

Universities are increasingly handled using private sector administrative management criteria. As such, the institutions themselves and employees are constantly “evaluated”, e.g., measuring professors' productivity through a set of “indicators” and ranking their overall performance. As a consequence, professors have to fill out all sorts of reports to assure managers that they are meeting assigned goals. This consumes a significant amount of their workloads and distracts their focus from learning, reading, teaching, researching, and writing.

The Mexican National Research System (NRS) was developed in the 1980s to address inequities regarding workloads and performance. Regular salaries were kept low and without major increases over time, but being admitted into the NRS guaranteed a significant extra economic bonus for high performers (Ibarrola, 2007).

With very few exceptions, to be accepted as a member, holding a PhD is required, plus the demonstration of very high “productivity.” Supervising PhD students and ensuring that they obtain their degrees on time, according to study plans, plays a key role in gaining entry to the system and in determining the level at which an applicant is placed. Teaching in graduate school programs and publishing in prestigious indexed journals is also required (Ibarra, 2003). In toxic environments, this has turned students into symbolic “booty,” with professors fighting against each other to supervise them. Students became vulnerable because negatively evaluating their theses or sabotaging their graduation also damages their supervisors.

In addition, almost every university has created its own productivity reward system for professors (*estímulos a la productividad*). Criteria of measurement are diverse because each university establishes its own, usually with different levels attached to scaled economic bonuses. Professors who belong to the NRS and have productivity bonuses are able to increase their official base salaries by a factor of two or more. In general, supervising students, especially at graduate schools, is highly valued in these internal evaluation systems, with the same potential negative side-effects as noted earlier.

Without question these public policies induced many professors to earn MAs and PhDs, presumably with a positive impact on the quality of their research, publishing, supervising, and teaching. Also, it can be assumed that the number of scholarly publications increased too, along with productivity indicators overall. However, there is controversy around this issue, with some authors remarking critically on the impact of the NRS on the educational system and performance of professors (Ibarra & Porter, 2007), including negative outcomes on their health (Martínez, 2010); others have defended the system (Rubio, 2006; Urbano, Aguilar & Rubio, 2006). For our purpose, though, this debate is not central.

Professors in some Mexican university teaching programs, departments, and universities, in their quest to be considered highly productive, have organized teams and developed strategies to discredit and undermine colleagues and their work, including attacks on students, thereby creating toxic academic environments. By planning tactics and sometimes “ganging up” on others, they guarantee for themselves and their allies valued outcomes, including teaching in graduate programs, supervising PhD and MA students, publishing in indexed journals, and having generous research budgets and conditions (including external funding).

These strategies have included blocking colleagues’ advancement, blocking their opportunity to have graduate students, creating “sham peer review academic committees” (Huntoon, 2007) to fail them, and suppressing or mobbing their “enemies” — meanwhile presenting facades that they are acting fairly and legally. Porter (2012) calls those who use such methods “academic gangsters.” In using illegitimate tactics to guarantee their qualification as “highly productive,” while they destroy competition by attacking their “enemies,” sadly enough, sometimes they act against students as a means to attack their supervisors. Thus, as an unplanned result of these policies, Mexican universities now experience a greater level of mobbing, suppression of dissent and discontent, and other toxic behaviors.

## Cases

The nature and identification of mobbing and suppression of dissent/discontent, and interlinks between them, have been pointed out elsewhere (Martin & Peña, 2011). Our analysis here is based on three cases in which these relationships are clear. As part of the process of mobbing of professors in three different Mexican universities, their students were suppressed. Greater detail of each case is provided in the appendix.

**Case 1.** Professor Raquel worked in the graduate program of a public university in Mexico City. A group of professors had been harassing Raquel for over three years. In 2011 they targeted her brilliant and hard

working Masters student, Eduardo, attempting to stop him receiving his Masters degree and pass to the next level, PhD. To achieve these goals, a sham committee falsely accused him of dishonesty. Eduardo was able to graduate but Raquel's enemies were successful in preventing him from enrolling in a PhD in the same institution. The authorities knew about the case and did nothing, ensuring impunity for the perpetrators.

**Case 2.** In a graduate program in Guadalajara, a gang of academics, who were part of a union faction, took power, creating a toxic environment as they exercised revenge. The gang attacked anyone who was part of the former administrative team, or who opposed or threatened the gang. This included attempting to deny promotion to professors they considered "undesirable." One professor, Ana, antagonized the gang because she requested and received a standard promotion.

Mirna, a gang member, was in charge of the graduation process and harassed one of Ana's students, Lucía, by requesting debatable changes in her work and slowing down approval for her graduation. Mirna harassed another one of Ana's students, Amalia, by appointing herself as Amalia's supervisor, making fun of her work and refusing to give suggestions in writing. Both students graduated, but only after serious victimization. Ana supported admission of an indigenous student, Alfredo, but the deputy academic director blocked this on technical grounds; later, Ana was accused of discriminating against Alfredo.

**Case 3.** Azucena served as director of a major social science institution, trying to take initiatives and introduce fairness into decision-making. She was mobbed by a clique that had previously monopolized control of the institution and used the control to benefit themselves by manipulating rights and regulations. After Azucena's term as director ended, she returned to her usual role as a professor, and was repeatedly attacked by a colleague, Elsa, the coordinator of the graduate program. Some of Elsa's attacks involved students supervised by Azucena.

For administrative reasons two of Azucena students, Sofia and Manuel, were assigned to be supervised by Teresa, who was negligent in her duties. Sofia and Manuel, because they received no feedback from Teresa, sought assistance from Azucena. Elsa supported Teresa. Azucena was accused of being disrespectful to Teresa and the students were undermined and discredited as a way of covering up Teresa's faults. Emotional abuse to the students included Elsa and Teresa ignoring Sofia and Manuel or making faces at them, and discrediting their work. Teresa and Elsa also tried to prevent Sofia from getting her degree on time, failing to sign a work approval form, causing her serious anxiety. Sofia and Manuel were able to graduate but only after serious victimization. The rest of the committee knew what was going on, but by being passive they supported Elsa by omission in her attacks on the students.

## Analysis

We have looked at struggles between academics, focusing on a neglected phenomenon: attacks on graduate students as proxies, used as a means of attacking their supervisors. Although it is likely that there are many instances of this sort of attack, there is little documentation available, perhaps because student targets, who need to pass exams and graduate, seldom feel safe in openly describing such events. We have presented cases from three Mexican universities, putting them in the context of competitive pressures created by the Mexican higher education system for evaluating and rewarding academics.

Three cases do not make it possible to make generalizations about patterns of attack, but the richness of these cases — see the appendix — does provide sufficient information to propose an initial classification of types of attack and the sorts of impacts they cause. Future studies should be able to determine which types and impacts are more common and to augment and modify our preliminary classification.

In each of the three cases, an academic was being mobbed. In a context of abuse with impunity, attackers used a form of indirect action against their target academic, namely attacking graduate students supervised by the target. The students were thus proxy targets, serving as surrogates for the true target, the supervisor.

Five unfair methods were used against students:

- blocking entry to a degree course
- administrative action to prevent or delay completion of degrees
- emotional abuse
- devaluing their academic work
- devaluing students as persons by questioning their honesty or intellectual capacities

Each of these methods potentially has the consequence of preventing completion of a degree and reducing the value of academic work, but they operate in different arenas. Blocking entry to degree courses is a way of diminishing the number of students certain supervisors will have, affecting their productivity outcomes in this matter. Administrative action is a method of blocking advancement after a student has begun a degree. Emotional abuse can provoke distress and potentially cause a student to withdraw or to be unable to complete work on time for psychological reasons. It also sends a message to the rest of the students: see what will happen if you become a problem. Unfair devaluing of a student's research work or person affects academic evaluation of the student's performance, causing delays or even termination of a degree. With each of these methods, a crucial contested element is successful completion of a research project and graduation. Because completion is the goal of the student and supervisor, attackers seek to undermine or oppose this as a means of harming the supervisor, with the impact on the student being collateral damage about which they seem unconcerned.

Proxy attacks can have a serious effect on supervisors. Most obviously, their potential students are not accepted or may not complete their theses and graduate. Given the large investment by supervisors in their research students, in time and emotion, this is a serious consequence. When students are prevented from enrolling in degrees, or prevented from having a particular supervisor, this reduces opportunities for collaboration and intellectual stimulation. Attacks on students often require supervisors to provide considerable emotional support. Finally, the intention is to lower the supervisor's prestige. Supervising students and enabling them to produce high quality work and to graduate add luster to an academic's career, and students' subsequent work in the field can become a lasting legacy of the supervisor's contributions and intellectual orientation. All this is jeopardized when students become targets. Proxy attacks thus can be serious indirect attacks on academics, but at a very high cost, because they affect negatively the whole environment.

Whatever the impacts on supervisors, students are the primary victims in these sorts of attacks. Being early in their research careers, and usually without a lot of experience in academic politics, they are especially vulnerable. The consequences of being attacked include being blocked from being accepted into graduate programs, not getting degrees, unnecessary delays in graduating, having work unfairly criticized, and being discouraged from undertaking further research work. No doubt some are deterred from pursuing an academic career; others suffer long-lasting emotional scars. Attacks also have an impact on other students, who are not personally in the line of fire. Other current students may be frightened; potential new students may be deterred from enrolling. Finally, proxy attacks contribute to a toxic research environment, with damaging effects on everyone in the unit involved.

### **Some possible responses**

From the cases we have examined, it is also possible to obtain ideas for effective responses (Martin, 2008). Proxy attacks do not always succeed, and sometimes resisters may emerge with greater strength and insight. A crucial means of resistance is to expose what is happening. How best to do this depends on the circumstances. It usually involves carefully written accounts of events, which can be circulated through email, memos, submissions, and articles. In many cases, targets of attacks within universities feel humiliated and do not want to speak out because it will involve further degradation. However, to resist, some exposure is necessary.

Another important step is to validate students and their research work, thereby countering the devaluing tactics by attackers. Validation of students and their work can be through clear statements by supervisors

or by other academics, and by obtaining external assessments, as in Case 3 when a student's work was accepted by a refereed journal.

Defenders need to explain what is happening very clearly, emphasizing the injustice involved. In many cases, students being attacked are subject to a double standard: other students, with similar or worse performance, are not attacked. Explaining the events and their significance in a clear way is vital for resistance by providing emotional support.

In some of the cases, students and supervisors made official complaints. Notifying authorities is only proper, but complaint procedures are sometimes overseen or influenced by the attackers or their allies. Therefore, in resisting student-proxy attacks, it is unwise to rely only on official channels such as grievance procedures. Building support through networking and campaigning is far more likely to be effective (Martin, 2013).

Finally, it is vital to be able to stand up to intimidation. Some students and supervisors may not be able to handle confrontation; no one should be obliged to engage in resistance, as invariably it is stressful and time-consuming. Nevertheless, for an effective resistance, someone needs to take a stand. Students and supervisors are sometimes put through degradation rituals in which they are humiliated, for example by being subject to a fraudulent investigation, formally reprimanded, removed from desirable teaching or research opportunities, referred to a psychiatrist, fiercely denounced by a supervisor in a meeting of colleagues, or unfairly and brutally criticized in a seminar (Thérèse & Martin, 2010). Students and their supervisors need to be able to either avoid such rituals or develop strategies to counter them, for example through emotional and mental toughness or providing countervailing comments.

Using students as proxy targets and pawns against their supervisors is one of the most unethical forms of academic behavior, especially because students are almost always innocent bystanders to academic disputes and are inexperienced in research and academic politics. Students are especially vulnerable and can suffer long-lasting consequences, and therefore academics should make every effort not to involve them in disputes. Nevertheless, proxy attacks do sometimes occur, so it is wise to be aware of the possibility and to be prepared to defend.

### Final remarks

We have presumed that unethical attacks on students to suppress or mob their supervisors are common. However, few cases have been documented: searching the web retrieves little information about this practice. We invite professors and students to share their cases with us.

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### Appendix: Three Cases from Mexican Universities

#### Case 1

##### *Key characters*

**Real target:** Raquel, a professor harassed by three other colleagues in the same graduate program

**Target by proxy:** Eduardo, a brilliant Masters student supervised by Raquel, hoping to do a PhD in the same institution. He got his Masters degree, but was prevented from enrolling into the PhD program

**Perpetrators:** López, a professor and graduate coordinator, acting in agreement with the three professors that had been mobbing Raquel for three years

Raquel, a professor in a public university's graduate program in Mexico City, was the object of workplace bullying for over three years. Prior to this, she had been close to a group of professors and given them a huge amount of support, doing all she could to help them obtain tenure at the university as professors and researchers. Raquel decided to cool relations with the group after she was embarrassingly harassed by them in a meeting called to discuss the organization of a congress. Before that, she had tolerated underhanded actions to undermine her recognition and her influence in various academic activities.

In June 2011, Raquel's student Eduardo was unfairly beleaguered. With the purpose of damaging Raquel's work as thesis director, the group of professors tried to seriously harm this outstanding

humanities Masters student. The case was perfectly documented and handed over to university authorities but the perpetrators were never sanctioned.

A new professor, López, who was named area graduate coordinator, informed Raquel in writing that three professors were attempting to contest Eduardo's thesis, even though they had not read it, for the simple reason that he had finished it two months before the end of the Masters' program. López also informed Raquel that they would block Eduardo's admission to the doctoral program. Raquel wrote to López asking him to reconsider the decision and he answered:

Obviously, everything is very clear but we are not going to change them. I understand that you are upset. You are justified in feeling that way. I ask you to trust me. At this time, I am calmer than you are and I can see it all in the long run. Trust me. They don't care about the student. If we let them make this uproar and reach their goal of not letting Eduardo graduate and being accepted into the doctoral program, they will have achieved their goal of damaging him. For that reason, again, I ask you to let me take care of it. So as not to hurt him, try to not make any comments. They are trying everything they can to escalate their academic positions (message, June 3, 2011).

Raquel naïvely followed the suggestion to leave everything in the hands of López, the coordinator, according to evidential documents in the file that she turned over to university authorities.

Eduardo had a doctoral program admissions interview with López who deemed his master's thesis "excellent and publishable." Eduardo wrote to Raquel about the pressures exerted on him by López, who apparently wanted to direct his doctoral thesis, suggesting that Eduardo change his proposal to one in his area.

After that, López met with the group of professors who had mobbed Raquel, and, a few days later, something very strange happened. On June 17<sup>th</sup>, professor Raquel received an e-mail from López in which he wrote that Eduardo had committed a very serious fault which deserved: 1) his immediate expulsion, 2) denial of entry into the doctoral program, and 3) the corresponding sanctions that the university tribunal would decide. He suggested that she try to avoid scandal by not permitting her student to graduate that year or start his doctorate. If she didn't follow his advice, he indicated that he would take measures against Eduardo based on this ground.

López accused Eduardo of "self-plagiarism," meaning that he had repeated some of his own words in his thesis: "It is clear that his intentions [referring to the act of 'self-plagiarism'] are to make his very meager document more substantial" (June 16, 2011). The words that Eduardo repeated at some place or other in his thesis amounted to less than 20 lines of text — hardly enough to fatten up a thesis. The repetitions could be quickly corrected by internal cross-referencing in the thesis. The instances of so-called self-plagiarism were basically textual dictionary quotes of definitions of terms from Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century dictionaries that Eduardo had to make very clear so as to construct his arguments. On the other hand, López never mentioned Eduardo's obvious analytical capacity or his important and original contributions to that area of study.

Neither Eduardo nor Raquel accepted Lopez's unbelievable recommendation. On the contrary, Raquel formally fought the contents of the categories of the report that showed bad faith and underhanded agreements that were lacking the obligatory ethical bases necessary in a university. Raquel went to the university authorities and gave them a thick file with documents that demonstrated the sham irregularities that would prevent Eduardo from graduating on time and being accepted in the doctoral program.

When they knew they had been exposed, the four professors involved in the ruse presented their resignations from the graduate program to the division director with the obvious intention of striking a decisive blow against Raquel by making it clear that it was her problem and that there would no longer be a masters or doctorate program as long as she was in the graduate division. What they didn't know was that she had proven her case and that the group's ethical and academic transgressions had been completely exposed.

For Eduardo's case, the university authorities applied the rules: according to the reports, the thesis was demonstrated as being rigorous and of high quality, so he could defend it and graduate. He decided to tell, in a blog, his experience as an innocent victim (Ruiz, 2011). Nothing could be done to gain admission into the doctoral program because López, who had wanted to direct Eduardo's thesis, turned down his admission. Eduardo's achievements, such as finishing his master's thesis on time by hard work, were in vain. He had to look for a job and all of his plans for which he had struggled so hard were arbitrarily and unjustly thwarted.

Despite the substantial evidence, the authorities did not sanction the involved professors at all. They tried to provide a diplomatic solution that put Raquel in the same vulnerable state as in the previous three years, during which she had been the object of repetitive and continuous slander and damage, in other words mobbing.

More recently, when a group of undergraduate students proposed a tribute in Raquel's honor, the same professors told the students to not count on them if they carried it out. The students got nervous and another colleague was honored instead. In the light of the recent circumstances, many people advised Raquel to get a lawyer in order to avoid more attacks from this group of professors, but workplace bullying is not covered by Mexican laws.

## Case 2

### *Key characters*

**Real target:** Ana, professor

**Targets by proxy:** Lucía and Amalia, students supervised by Ana, blocked in their graduation processes. Alfredo, indigenous student, refused entry

**Perpetrators:** Mirna, professor and member of the mobbing gang, who harassed Ana's students trying to stop them from graduating, in accordance with the mobbing group.

This case occurred in a graduate program in a public institution located in Guadalajara, central-western Mexico, offering MAs and PhDs, directed especially to teachers of primary and secondary education levels. At the time, there had been a policy of decentralization from Mexico City to the states, but without providing sufficient resources for public higher education institutions. Consequently, new tenured positions and promotions depended on retirements, leading academics to compete with each other.

The last two administrations of this institution ran parallel with the building and consolidation of a power group of academics who were part of a faction of a union. They fired the previous director by launching a smear campaign involving students, appointed somebody from their group to the position and created a toxic environment that led to general stress, decay, fatigue and irritation.

The power group — called here a gang — took action against other academics, including the outgoing management team, those close to this team, those who had an outstanding track record (possibly due to envy), those difficult to handle (meaning those the gang deemed “uncomfortable” or “dangerous” because they were not submissive) and those simply unsympathetic to the gang.

Gang members and associates vetoed, approved, blocked or facilitated applications and other rights of the academics, and included or excluded people in working teams and projects, according to their interests. For example, additional class hours were allocated in a way to harm those designated by the gang as “undesirable” academics.

In a process of evaluation for promotion, “undesirable” professors were given the impression that they had moved up to the next level of their teaching careers, but two years passed without receiving the payment of such promotion, with the authorities skirting the issue. In response to their request, the union told them that the director and his team had hired new staff using the budget that should have paid for their promotion increments. Ana was the only professor to complain officially. She received her money, but consequently was perceived as being enemy number one of the gang.

The strategies for attacking the opponents of the gang were varied. They included sexual harassment of students and academics, administrative paperwork delays with negative impacts on salaries, denial of participation in teaching and other academic activities, disallowing the development of research carried out or proposed, and attacking students to indirectly damage their supervisors. The toxic atmosphere was worsened by the presence of union forces, which provided support to the gang in carrying out these practices, creating a culture of impunity: attackers had no reason to fear any sanction. This gang even enjoyed the complicity or the neutrality of the former “friends” of the targeted academics, who either denied what was happening or sometimes even sided with the perpetrators. This deprived the victims of the ability to defend themselves, took away their voice, and denied their perspective on the events.

Ana was a professor with a successful track record, was aligned with the previous administration and had fought for and received her promotion. At the time of the attacks, she coordinated a research team whose members were invited by the gang to work with them, but none of them accepted. Susana, a gang member, tried to mobilize groups of students to make formal complaints against Ana about the low quality of the teaching they were receiving. Ana’s team members did not agree.

Mirna, another gang member, was in charge of the graduation process. Mirna attacked two students supervised by Ana, Lucía and Amalia. Mirna repeatedly asked Lucía to change the format of her work, which had already been accepted, and slowed down the administrative process of its approval for graduation as long as possible. Ironically, on the day of Lucía’s defense, another gang member invited her to work with their team.

Mirna self-appointed herself as Amalia’s supervisor in order to attack her work. Although Amalia’s report had already been approved, Mirna slowed down Amalia’s thesis work for several months. Mirna then made an appointment to see Amalia. She made Amalia follow her throughout the institution as a humiliation, whilst denying answers to Amalia’s questions. She made fun of Amalia’s work and refused to give her suggestions in writing, demanding that she work under verbal suggestions, which Amalia perceived as mockery. Amalia felt anxious, fearful and angry due to Mirna’s behavior.

The day after this event, Ana met Amalia, listened to her story, calmed her down and looked over her thesis, agreeing that Mirna’s verbal recommendations were groundless. They requested an interview with the deputy director (the director was absent). He heard Amalia’s story and agreed to look over her thesis. At first, his attitude was disdainful: he took a ruler, measured the margins and said, “Well, firstly, it does not have the requested margin size.” Ana replied that what concerned her was the abuse perpetrated by Mirna and that her suggestions needed to be written down. Amalia started to cry. The deputy director apologized on behalf of the institution and suggested that it would be the best course of action for Amalia to assign her another supervisor in order to prevent any retaliation towards her, to which Ana and Amalia agreed. This event led to the worsening of reprisals by the gang against Ana. From that moment on, Mirna refused to speak to her and spread the rumor that it was Ana who was ignoring her. The gang used this tactic often: spreading rumors of alleged attacks against them by academics they considered “undesirable.” Often the latter ignored such rumors, but repeatedly received suspicious glances from colleagues or students, which gradually deepened their puzzlement and fostered uncertainty about their professional relationships.

In another circumstance, treatment of a prospective student was used to attack Ana. The director had ordered Ana and other academics to not accept any new students after the second week of the preparatory course. Alfredo, an indigenous student wishing to join the graduate program, came to Ana’s group, saying that due to his living conditions he did not know about the closing date. Ana felt bad about denying him the opportunity to join the graduate program, but was aware of the instruction they had been given. She went to the deputy academic director to ask if she could have him in her class. He replied: “You know the instructions that we all received. Have you heard any other instruction against that?” Alfredo was not admitted.

A week later, Ana was summoned to the director’s office along with the union representative. The director accused her of not wanting to accept Alfredo, subtly accusing her of practicing discrimination, even

though he himself had asked for the favor of him being accepted: Alfredo was his godson. Ana was very surprised at the statement and rebutted the suggestion; nevertheless, the union representative looked at her in a way that made clear he doubted her word. The serious issue is that just to make Ana look bad, Alfredo was not able to study in the graduate school.

### Case 3

#### *Key characters*

**Real target:** Azucena, professor

**Targets by proxy:** Manuel, PhD student enrolled in Azucena's research topic; Sofia, Masters student enrolled in Azucena's research topic

**Perpetrators:** Elsa, professor, program coordinator; Teresa, professor, nominal supervisor of Sofia and Manuel; the committee (by omission)

*Note:* The detailed cases of the abuse of each student have been analyzed elsewhere (Peña, 2010; Peña and López, in press), so in keeping with and to facilitate the easier reading of previous publications, the hypothetical names used previously are maintained.

Sofia and Manuel belonged to the 2004 cohort of an integrated Social Sciences Masters-PhD program. The graduate school was organized according to research themes (RT), with a full-time professor (FTP) in charge of each theme. Students could enroll in whichever theme they wanted, with the FTP in charge serving as thesis supervisor. Committees responsible for all educational processes were made up of the FTP for each program, plus its administrative coordinator. As internal power is derived directly from the committees' composition, those individuals or groups in power could advocate for the entry of their allies and block their "enemies," irrespective of their work experience or academic qualifications.

Azucena had been director of the institution for four years and been mobbed by the group that previously held internal informal control. After finishing her term as director, Azucena returned to teaching duties but remained the target of attacks by Elsa, her colleague and a member of the group that mobbed her. (Elsa was the sole perpetrator, but was tacitly supported by other members of the committee who, although knowing what was going on, did nothing to stop her.) Elsa had become the graduate school coordinator, enabling her to orchestrate direct and indirect attacks on Azucena. For example, Elsa enabled another professor to compete for teaching of Azucena's subjects and to create a duplicate RT to hers. This was an unprecedented step in the institution.

Azucena had several students in the 2004 cohort, and agreed that two could be assigned to be supervised by FTP Santiago, and two by FTP Teresa, in order to meet quotas and criteria for the performance indicators in the evaluation of graduate schools, as well as for solidarity with these professors. Elsa let the four students know of the change through a notice, not bothering to talk to them personally to explain the administrative need for the change, which very much offended them.

Sofia and Manuel, the Masters and PhD students now officially supervised by Teresa, felt academically unsupported, and believed their work suffered accordingly. In this context, the four students who were transferred to Santiago and Teresa before the start of the fourth semester (the last for the Masters students) asked permission from Azucena to participate in her seminar, as they were officially enrolled in her RT.

This resulted in professional jealousy by Teresa. In the seminar, Teresa's two supervised students defined their thesis structure. When Manuel, now happy, privately updated Teresa of his progress, she became angry and yelled at him: "Azucena suggested you do this, right? I'm quitting as your supervisor right now." From this point onwards, she even refused to greet him.

Elsa and Teresa told the members of the committee, individually, that Manuel's lack of progress was due to his inadequacies. They accused Azucena of being a "pirate academic" and of having little respect by "meddling" with Teresa's students. This reinterpretation conveniently ignored Teresa's lack of commitment to the supervision of the students. It also ignored the fact that Manuel was officially enrolled

in Azucena's RT, meaning that his performance fell within the evaluation of her RT. Elsa helped prevent Teresa's irresponsibility being discussed at the committee; Teresa henceforth became Elsa's unconditional ally.

Elsa emotionally abused Manuel whenever possible, punishing him for revealing somehow Teresa's lack of commitment in supervising him. She ignored him or made faces of disgust and contempt when they ran into each other, and, in addition, routinely discredited advances in his thesis in internal meetings. The committee supported Teresa and Elsa by omission, not addressing Teresa's lack of commitment with Manuel, nor discussing or analyzing the reasons for the case in a more substantial way. This, no doubt, increased Elsa's power and gave her free rein to continue attacking Azucena.

Another opportunity to inflict damage arose when Sofia was about to graduate with her Masters degree (Peña, 2010). She had written both her essay and paper, requirements for graduation requirements, under Azucena's supervision. However, due to the tense, negative atmosphere under Elsa's leadership, neither Sofia nor Azucena complained about Teresa's lack of supervision to Teresa, the course coordinator or the committee. They simply continued working on the student's project because the deadline was approaching.

Sofia participated in a conference and gave the text of her presentation to Teresa for feedback, thus fulfilling one of the graduation requirements, but Teresa did not make any comments on Sofia's work. Another professor and Azucena read the presentation text and made relevant suggestions, which Sofia reworked into a new draft. She gave it to Teresa but once again did not receive any feedback.

In an internal meeting, Sofia reported on her progress, and Teresa realized that Sofia had improved her work under Azucena's supervision. Then Teresa finally called the student to look over her paper — and attempted to discredit it, as a means to discredit Azucena. However, the text had already been submitted to an academic journal and peer-reviewed, then published, receiving positive feedback. This attempt by Teresa at sabotaging Sofia's graduation chances was unsuccessful, but nevertheless inflicted unjust and intense suffering upon the student.

Sofia completed the first draft of her thesis under Azucena's actual supervision too, but in order to protect Sofia from Teresa's reprisals, neither Sofia nor Azucena mentioned this. At the committee's first meeting, Teresa did not make any suggestions about Sofia's work. She did not turn up to the second meeting and made no apologies for her absence. Sofia, feeling nervous due to her supervisor's absence, raised the issue with Elsa as the coordinator, but Elsa downplayed the issue, and simply recommended rescheduling the meeting.

However, the two committee members present decided to go ahead with the session and left a completed work approval form at the coordinator's office for Teresa to sign. Teresa intentionally went days without signing it and Elsa failed to follow up with her obligation to complete this step in the process. Meanwhile, the student experienced a state of chronic anxiety. Nonetheless, this second attempt to sabotage Sofia's graduation was thwarted when the two committee members sent their official approval.

Due to the problems with the work approval form, Sofia and Azucena requested an official transfer of the supervision of her thesis. Elsa did all within her power to block the transfer. Teresa remained as the student's official supervisor. In the student's thesis defense, Teresa finally had read Sofia's thesis, but only in order to criticize it strongly. Sofia replied in a calm and mature manner: "I really appreciate your comments, but I would have appreciated it if you had given them to me earlier so I could have incorporated them into my final draft." The committee again turned a blind eye to Teresa's lack of responsibility and the victimization of the student carried out by Elsa and Teresa. Sofia and Manuel were able to graduate, but only after many obstacles motivated by Elsa's antagonism towards Azucena.