

Pulled In or Pushed Out? Diversity, Discrimination, and the Recruitment of the Next Generation of Archaeologists

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SAA Presidential Forum 2021

I want to begin by acknowledging that I am recording this video in Cambridge, Massachusetts, on the ancestral lands of the Massachusett and Pawtucket peoples, and I am employed by Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia, on the ancestral lands of the Muscogee Creek people. I also want to let you know that if you need to read along with my paper today for accessibility reasons, a pdf of the text is available at www.lauraheathstout.com/saa2021. The title of my talk is “Pulled In or Pushed Out? Diversity, Discrimination, and the Recruitment of the Next Generation of Archaeologists.”

Introduction

For the past five years, I have been conducting ethnographic research on the effects of systemic oppression on the discipline of archaeology (e.g., Heath-Stout 2019; 2020; Heath-Stout and Hannigan 2020). Over the years, I have conducted both a survey and approximately 100 in-depth interviews with academic archaeologists from a wide array of subfields and career stages and holding a variety of gender, race, sexual orientation, class, and disability identities.

Whenever I give a presentation about this research, I am immediately met with the same question: what should audience members be *doing* about these problems? Almost always, my answer includes the word “mentorship.” Therefore, when I was asked to join this presidential session to speak about the effects of harassment and oppression on early-career researchers, I

decided to focus my remarks on the roles of mentors in recruiting and supporting early-career marginalized scholars. Using qualitative data and stories from my interviews, I will discuss a variety of ways that individual mentors shape our disciplinary demographics. I hope that all of you hearing this will take it as a call to action, to proactively offer your support to the budding archaeologists you know, especially those who are targeted by racism, sexism, heterosexism, classism, and/or ableism.

Mentors Can Pull Marginalized Students In

My interviewee Taylor entered college with no knowledge of or interest in archaeology. They were an undergraduate student at a small-town public college in a rural, conservative, working-class town. There was just one anthropology professor at the college, and Taylor happened to take her class to fulfill a general education requirement. They enjoyed it and signed up for the same professor's classes in following semesters. Their anthropology professor saw that they were interested and motivated. As Taylor told me, "She said, 'You need to get out of [here] You need to do something else. Why don't I introduce you to my friend [so-and-so], or my friend [so-and-so], or my friend over here?' And I was like, 'Okay. I have no idea who these people are.'" The professor had connections at a major research university, and took Taylor to visit: "She actually drove me up one weekend and I stayed with her, and she set up interviews for me with a lot of people to get a feel of the department. It was entirely out of the way, and the best thing that's happened to me to get into this career." After the visit, this mentor supported Taylor in transferring to that research university, where they could focus on anthropology and pursue a career as an archaeologist. Furthermore, the research university is located in a town that is more welcoming to queer people like Taylor than the town where they lived at the time, so this mentor

facilitated their move to a safer and more comfortable place to live. One of the people she introduced them to became their adviser and shaped their research interests. Taylor would likely not be an archaeologist if they had not met their first mentor, and would not have become interested in their particular research specialty without the second.

This isn't the story that is most often heard when we ask our colleagues how they got into archaeology. We've all heard stories like my own, of the child who discovers archaeology through a book, movie, museum visit, educational vacation, or all of the above. Those of us who have cute stories of being precocious children fixated on archaeology from a young age love to tell those stories. It has become enough of a trope that interviewees who didn't commit to the field until after turning the ripe old age 18 often commented to me that they were unusual in that way. But actually, less than half of my interviewees told me stories from childhood when asked how they first became interested in archaeology. Those who did tell childhood stories were disproportionately white and from middle- or upper-class backgrounds. Their privilege facilitated early access to knowledge of archaeology, whether through expensive travel, parents with weekends off from work to take children to museums, or school curricula that incorporate topics that are rarely covered on standardized tests.

My less privileged interviewees were much more likely to tell stories like Taylor's. They were less likely to have come across archaeology as children, or if they had, it had not occurred to them as a viable career path. But once they got to college, they would find themselves in an anthropology or archaeology classroom due to general education requirements, friends' recommendations, or even administrative mix-ups, and they would catch the bug. They would meet a professor who recognized their interest, intellect, and work ethic, and that professor

would take them on as a mentee, inviting them into an archaeology career, just as Taylor's mentor did.

Unfortunately, these courses and mentorship activities are often seen as low priorities by administrators and faculty who value research over teaching and the mentoring of graduate students over the teaching of undergraduates. We must resist this metric- and research-focused value system and highly prioritize our introductory courses, incorporate diverse cultures and perspectives into our curricula, and actively offer mentorship to marginalized students. The rich white kids like me will find their way into archaeology: if we want the next generations of archaeologists to look different, we will need to work harder on our mentorship and actively invite a different group into the field.

Mentors Can Lower Barriers to Entry

One of the first steps to entering an archaeology career is attending a field school. Unfortunately, as my research with Elizabeth Hannigan (Heath-Stout and Hannigan 2020) has shown, the expectation or requirement of attending a field school can be a barrier to entry since these programs are so expensive. Students must not only pay thousands of dollars in tuition, fees, and travel expenses, but must also forgo income that they could otherwise earn through summer jobs. Given the racial wealth gap in our society, these costs disproportionately exclude potential future archaeologists of color from the field. Although there are a variety of scholarships that students may seek, very few are sufficient to cover the costs of field schools. When we celebrate the existence of a few small scholarships as an adequate solution to the problem of prohibitive field school costs, we overlook the scale of the problem and excuse ourselves for funding our research by offering training to wealthy students to the exclusion of their less privileged peers.

This barrier to entry is one that mentors can lower for their students, however. One of my interviewees, Brendan, who is now a co-director of the project where he attended his first field school, emphasized the importance of offering students low-cost or free research opportunities. One of his undergraduate professors was director of the project and invited him to attend an information session. Brendan told me that “if I went to this info session and the professor had said, ‘And it’s a \$5,000 program fee,’ I don’t think I ever would have become an archaeologist.” Now, as co-director, he continues to prioritize not charging students any money beyond their plane fare to participate in the project, by writing “a shit ton of grant applications.” Brendan’s mentor lowered the barrier to entry so that he was able to join the field project, and he has paid that forward by continuing to offer low-cost field opportunities to his mentees. Following their example, we must all work to lower barriers to entry to fieldwork and other opportunities for our students, whether by charging less or no money, offering local or on-campus fieldwork opportunities, paying students for their labor, helping students find low-cost opportunities created by our colleagues, and/or supporting and expanding scholarship programs.

Mentors Can Push Marginalized Mentees Out

Unfortunately, abusive mentors can push aspiring archaeologists out of the field. My interviewees told me enough horror stories of mistreatment that I could spend much longer than my time limit for this paper enumerating them. These ranged from microaggressions (defined by Derald Wing Sue (2010, xvi) as “brief, everyday exchanges that send denigrating messages to certain individuals because of their group membership”) to outright assault. Feminist archaeologists have amply demonstrated that sexual harassment and assault are endemic in the discipline, and that they are perpetrated by both peers and superiors within the hierarchies of

departments, firms, and projects (Clancy et al. 2014; Nelson et al. 2017; Meyers et al. 2018; Radde 2018; Jalbert 2019; Colannino et al. 2020). Although mistreatment is unacceptable from any archaeologist, when the perpetrators are mentors of their victims, their actions can be especially devastating. They use the same power that they hold to invite mentees into the discipline, and turn that power against them, pushing them out of the field.

Several of my interviewees had been harassed, bullied, or assaulted by the directors of field projects they attended as young students, causing them to leave particular subfields of archaeology. I think of Nick, a young man of color who became the scapegoat for all of a project's problems. The director would insist that he ride in the cab of the project pickup truck with her, windows rolled up, while she screamed at him for things that were far outside of his control. Nick didn't know whether her verbal abuse was motivated by racism, but ultimately it didn't matter: he left the project early and changed his regional focus to avoid this director. Another interviewee, Amanda, was raped by a project director when she was an undergraduate, causing her to give up her dreams of studying the part of the world where he was an influential scholar. She, too, changed her regional focus, and submitted a Title IX complaint against her rapist many years later, once she felt she had enough job security. Both Nick and Amanda are now excellent, well-regarded scholars, whose work I admire. I am so glad that they continued to pursue archaeology after these experiences. But for every archaeologist who manages to stay in the discipline by switching subfields, there are others whom we lose entirely.

Mentors Can Hold Onto Marginalized Mentees

Of course, good mentors do not engage in these abusive behaviors, but not assaulting one's mentees is a low bar. An excellent mentor can do a lot to shield their mentees from abuse,

and to support mentees who have been mistreated by others. This support can make all the difference for a survivor who is considering whether they want to continue pursuing an archaeological career. One graduate student I interviewed, Jordan, went to another country to do a full year of dissertation fieldwork, and when she had been there for only a week, her local co-director sexually assaulted her. Jordan called her adviser to discuss the situation, expecting him to say that “well, that’s just part of fieldwork. You just got to go through it.” She was pleasantly surprised when, instead, he told her, “You know what, if you don’t feel safe, just come home and we’ll figure out a new project. We’ll transfer the grant money. It will be okay.” If this adviser had told her to just tough it out, he would have sent Jordan the message that her only options were to continue working with her rapist or to quit. By offering her support in her choices, the adviser made space for a creative solution: she ultimately was able to find a different local co-director with whom to collaborate and decided to continue her project. This adviser fostered Jordan’s well-being as a human as well as her career, and in so doing made it possible for her to continue in archaeology while also valuing her own safety. Mentors like Jordan’s can play essential roles in the retention of marginalized archaeologists facing violence or abuse from other colleagues.

Conclusion

Through mentorship, every individual archaeologist has the ability to shape the future of our discipline. We can invite in smart, thoughtful, hardworking people of all backgrounds, including those who might not otherwise encounter archaeology. We can lower the barriers that face them as they begin their careers. We can treat them well, and defend and support them if our colleagues mistreat them.

So, no matter what your career stage or position is, I challenge you to take part in recruiting, nurturing, and retaining a diverse next generation of archaeologists. Do the most underfunded public schools in your area have access to high-quality archaeology media and outreach programs? Does your research project do public outreach? Does your field school offer low-cost options or scholarships, or even free or paid opportunities? If you are an instructor or TA, have you spoken to your students about research opportunities, including local and low-cost options and field school scholarships? Do your workplace and your research projects have clear and enforced harassment policies? Have you built relationships with the most promising young archaeologists you know and offered them your support and mentorship? If your answer to any of these is no, you have at least one place to start. Let's build a better disciplinary future together.

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