The Identity Career of the Graduate Student: Professional Socialization to Academic Sociology

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Gazing back over the sociology of work, professionalization has been a primary interest of sociologists.[1] Work and occupations were a primary agenda item for early American sociologists dating back to the Chicago School, (Colomy and Brown, 1995). Symbolic interactionists, in particular, portrayed professionalization as a process by which novices gradually adopt the identity of the professional (Davis, 1968; Hughes, 1945, 1958). However, save for a few exceptions (Bates, 1967; Cotten et al., 2001; Keith and Moore, 1995; Kleinman, 1983; Rosen and Bates, 1967; Shulman and Silver, 2003), sociologists have rarely shone the light on themselves to analyze how neophyte practitioners become transformed into seasoned professionals.

Most social psychologists agree that, after the family, our work settings are where much of our adult socialization takes place (Gecas, 1981). For those entering the professions, occupational socialization occurs in specialized graduate programs (Becker et al., 1961; Blau et al., 1979). This article looks at the stages through which graduate students in sociology pass en route to a Ph.D. and the status of academic professional. We look at the process by which people who enter into the profession choose this path, the stages that they enter, and the key turning points in their identity transformation.

This reflective essay is based on our experiences in graduate school and our 25 years as college professors. During that time, we have observed literally hundreds of students enter graduate school and go through the various stages we describe here. In addition, for much of the past two decades, Peter has conducted workshops at professional conferences and at numerous graduate departments on "conquering the academic marketplace," a practical seminar on how to approach the vagaries of the hiring practices in academia. For the purpose of this paper we augmented our own thoughts and experiences with data from a dozen of our current and former students. We solicited responses from those still in graduate school and those graduated, and from those who we mentored in graduate school as well as undergraduate students who went on to get graduate training in differ-

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ent programs. We asked them to write about their reflections on their socialization experiences and its relation to their identity development as professional sociologists.[2] This analysis is further informed by informal conversations we have had with graduate students and colleagues in a variety of settings.

We begin by discussing the fears, experiences, and status measurements new students experience when they arrive in graduate school. We discuss the effect of the cohort structure and the way this bonds people into a group. We look at students' movement away from their cohort as they select areas of specialization and bond more closely with their key faculty members and the older students in that network. We discuss how students are influenced in adopting the identity of professional sociologists by their experiences teaching and attending conferences. We analyze the way they move from being consumers of knowledge to producers of knowledge as they write and submit their work to peer review. Finally, we discuss how their experiences in engaging the discipline at conferences, paper competitions, journal submissions, and on the job market rounds out their training and professional socialization.

The Professionalization Process

As Becker et al. (1961) noted years ago, what attracts people to a field are not the same things as they ultimately find meaningful and rewarding. How they navigate their way through the requirements of various graduate programs, learn the inside facts about the field, and emerge as credentialed professionals with a unique combination of training and interests follows certain patterns.

Initiation

Collins (1998) noted that people tend to enter graduate school in sociology for one of two reasons: to pursue the "sociological eye," or to make the world a better place. Those who entered to pursue the intellectual challenge often enjoyed their undergraduate studies, in sociology or related fields, and wanted to delve more deeply into the perspective. They were encouraged by their faculty to continue their studies, either because they wanted an academic career or because they were not sure what else to do and they considered graduate school a good place to hang out while they figured it out. Another group came to graduate school in sociology because they felt that the discipline fit into their (perhaps idealistic) dreams about "changing the world" (see also Bates, 1967). Seeing sociology as an avenue to express their political beliefs for liberal causes or their already established identities as activists, they thought that the discipline could provide a pathway to legitimately pursue their passionate ideals. The thought of becoming a university professor was not necessarily in their plans, as they had very little knowledge of how the practice of sociology blended with the implementation of their desires to affect social change.

Introductions

Once they arrived on their new campus, novice graduate students felt a great deal of apprehension. In addition to the usual difficulty in transitions involving logistics, such as finding a place to live, moving away from friends, separating from lovers, and taking care of life's business (driver's license, insurance, furniture, etc.), they were often thrown

into a fray that they knew little about.[3] Some departments offered an orientation seminar for first-year students, ranging from a few days before the start of classes to a weekly meeting throughout their first term. This experience eased some of the tension. A graduate student at a large university on the West Coast explained:

> My introduction to the culture of the department began a few days before the start of classes fall quarter. A committee of older graduate students organized and ran a two-day TA training course that all incoming students were required to attend. I was nervous, excited, and scared. This was the first time I met other members of my cohort and other graduate students. I was anxious to see what people were like. There were only eight people in my cohort and we were all around the same age, 21–23, and coming either straight out of undergrad or with just a few years off. I felt comfortable with the other students and was relieved to see that they didn't appear to be total nerds or anti-social intellectuals, which I had envisioned.

Most people saw this time as one in which impression management was crucial. Trying to put on their best academic game faces, they exaggerated their relationships with famous faculty at their undergraduate institutions, talked in the jargon of sociology, and dropped hints about the latest books they had read. One male respondent admitted the following:

> As an undergraduate, I had been told by a mentor to impress my professors with hard work. Especially at the beginning, I tried to demonstrate my drive, enthusiasm, and commitment to graduate school. I remember spending a whole weekend reading Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* just so I could tell my methods professor I had read it. It seems funny now, but I put a lot of effort into my first semester just to look good.

This "feeling out" period was often marked by severe lack of confidence, doubts about whether they chose the right profession, and fear that they would not be able to perform adequately. For instance, one woman who attended a little-known college but was accepted to a top-five ranked department was intimidated by the undergraduate "pedigrees" of her other cohort members. All of the other people, at least in her opinion, had come from prestigious schools with a lot of clout. She mumbled about where she was from, steered conversations toward topics with which she felt familiar, and hid her noticeable regional accent. During her first year in graduate school, she published an article in a well-respected journal, and at least temporarily, was able to relax and accept the kudos that came her way.

Many people with whom we spoke admitted to feeling like an "outsider" or "pretender" during these early phases of graduate school. Either because they felt as if they did not have the same amount of training in theory and methods as others or because they were led to believe that graduate schools quickly filtered out the imposters (some were told, "Look around you and in five years only one out of every three of you will be here"), they felt as if they didn't belong. An assistant professor at a small liberal arts college explained:

> I entered the program having a rather vague notion of what I wanted to study and felt that I was a bit of an outsider having come from an institution that was critical of the sociological canon. I considered jumping ship to the fields of communication or cultural studies which I perceived as having less rigid boundaries of scholarship.

Low self-esteem was a common emotion that people reported. Graduate school was daunting, the professors' reputations were known to them, and they had little of their

previous identities upon which to draw. While many were considered the "stars" of their departments as undergraduates, they were now just rookies who had to make a name for themselves all over again. A graduate of an Ivy League college explained:

> Research is a foreign concept your first year. I wasn't a sociology major (or even a social science major) in college, so I never got the theory-methods-stats background. I caught up after my first year, but other students, who had had that stuff in undergrad, were ahead of me in that regard. So my confidence was low with regard to my own work in the area of sociology.

It was perceived by some that the professors assigned to teach the first-year sequence were particularly abrasive, confrontational, and downright mean. Likening the indoctrination to the process that people undergo in total institutions (Goffman, 1961), they felt as if they were deliberately stripped of their identities, humiliated, mortified, and degraded (see also Conti, 2001). Moreover, the core curriculum at many programs kept them away from the interests that had steered them into sociology, and they often felt disheartened and confused about whether they had made the right decision.

The Cohort Phenomenon

The first-year experience was usually guided by the make up of the cohort that arrives each year. For some, there was instant relief in finding others with similar (non-academic) interests, people who shared values with them, or friends they made. Though the departmental admissions committees attempt to create a diverse population, most students entering into Ph.D. programs in sociology are women.[4] This kind of gender, status, and role consistency could help to forge a cohort that related well to each other, supported each other, and provided extracurricular activities for the group. One respondent described her cohort this way:

> I started grad school with ten other women and three men in our cohort. The 11 women were very similar—all but one of us was White, we were all roughly the same age, and were mostly from middle-class backgrounds, so it was easy to bond.

A cohesive cohort was not always the case, however. Others reported that divisions within the group left them feeling alone. A student in her second year at a Big Ten institution described her initial feelings:

> Because my cohort is comprised of people with very diverse research interests, backgrounds, and ages I found that, initially, I had little in common with other first year students. Though there were several opportunities to get to know them, I found the demands of school to be overwhelming, thus giving me little time to concentrate on making friends.

Within some cohorts, a competitive milieu developed that made getting along more difficult. It was not surprising that some found this first year group, with whom they were randomly chosen, pernicious. Anecdotes of cheating, backstabbing, gossiping, and cliquish behavior were not uncommon.

Graduate students, exposed only to cohort members and core curriculum professors, relied on each other to interpret their surroundings. Rumors ran rampant, and gossip about older students and other professors that were spread through the graduate student grapevine were taken as fact.

Teaching

The experience that connected people the most, and perhaps not coincidentally scared them the most, was serving as a Teaching Assistant (TA) for a large lower-division class. Since almost no student who arrived at graduate school had spent time in front of a classroom, everyone who spoke with us expressed a great deal of concern about being "thrown to the wolves." Some departments have instituted required teaching seminars that new graduate students must attend, but rarely were these practical workshops enough to mitigate the initial fear of having to talk to a group. One respondent described it this way:

> As a TA, I was thrown into the classroom with little preparation or training, which made the transition from student to instructor an abrupt one. Being in close proximity in age to my undergraduate students made it difficult, at best, to carve out a clear identity that was distinct from the undergraduate population. In many ways, I was *still* an undergraduate and *still* a young adult and *not* a scholar or college professor (though I was increasingly expected to be so by my professors and peers). I was all of 21 years old when I entered the program!

This problem was exacerbated when the TA was a young woman. Being close in age to students and having to deal with the sexual dynamic as well was a difficult experience. Several women with whom we spoke were "hit on" by male students, challenged in ways that they thought a man would never be, and felt uncomfortable assuming this authoritarian position. One respondent said, "One of my biggest fears that persisted all quarter was that the undergraduates wouldn't respect me based on my inexperience, my gender, and how young I looked. I was sure they would know I was a fraud."

The initiation phase of graduate school was fraught with numerous roadblocks, hurdles, and obstacles that got in the way of producing scholarship. The novelty of the experience, the lack of training, the assumptions of faculty and other students, and the continual existential questioning about the path to the professoriate made this a particularly tough time as people tried to embrace the identity of being a sociologist. The end of the first year was usually accompanied by a series of examinations that created situations of high stress. Students who failed were forced to leave with a "terminal" Master's degree.[5] A number of others also decided that graduate school was not what they had imagined or that pursuing the degree was not worth it, so they dropped out. Those who remained shuddered at this weeding out, but were reinforced by their successful completion of this milestone.

Inculcation

Returning in the second year, most students were over the initial shock about the rigors of graduate school, they felt more at home in their department, and they developed more confidence.[6] Several variables signified the increasing status and concomitant confusion that graduate students felt at this phase.

Division of Cohort

After their initial year, students commonly branched out to take elective seminars. This thrust them into classes with graduate students who shared their interests and away from the cocoon of the cohort. Breaks in the cohorts appeared by substantive, method-

ological, and theoretical persuasions. In addition, according to the assistant professor at a small liberal arts school, differences emerged in how seriously members took their studies:

> I began to differentiate myself from other members of my cohort as a serious scholar compared to what I saw, at the time, as their intellectual laziness. There seemed to be two divergent groups of students that emerged out of the first years of graduate school: one group consisted of serious, driven, intellectually minded scholars who took their work and time in the department seriously; the other group consisted of people who would not read or come to class prepared to engage the course discussion and would then complain how the material was too difficult or that they didn't understand or see its relevance.

This marked a severe split in the professionalization process that students experienced: although some retained close bonds with their cohort mates, others felt stifled by them and sought out people with like interests. As one woman, currently a professor at a large state university, recalled:

> I really didn't like the whole cohort experience and found myself, if I can be honest, ideologically not in-tune with some members of my cohort. I was forced to be with them and just grew out of that. In fact, it was great to get involved with members of other cohorts through the feminist study group I joined.

The splitting of the cohort marked the first time that students could define themselves, find their calling, and seek out intellectual buddies who could help them navigate through the often troubled waters of substantive specialties and departmental politics.

One of the most common questions graduate students were asked at this point was, "What's your area?" Kleinman (1983) described this question as intensely uncomfortable. Most students, she reported, felt threatened by this question, as if they were on the spot at a time when they could not possibly provide a coherent answer. There was a sense that they had to select an area of study, as partitioned out by the discipline, before they were ready. As they took advanced seminars, they searched for fields of study they liked and mentors with whom they could work.

Further progress through seminars brought with it the pressure to select a dissertation topic. Students who had difficulty finding mentors, selecting areas of interest, and choosing a line of research to pursue questioned their presence in graduate school and their commitment to the field. In contrast, finding a substantive area in the discipline quickly was one pathway to success for many graduate students. This allowed them to zero in on the faculty who could best serve them, to select classes that suited their interests, and to solidify their identity as a sociologist.

Department Politics

Universally, all of the people with whom we spoke expressed dismay about the politicization of academia. Although they came in idealistically thinking that they would be free to pursue whatever subjects interested them,[7] they soon learned that they were shut off from some areas because professors did not get along, that there was an orthodoxy about methods and theories that was hard to cross, and that people they had come to work with were either unavailable or disinterested in them. The backroom politicking, divisiveness, and backstabbing was so insidious in some departments that people could not even be in the same room together. In our own training at an institution where there were acute divisions, people from different "camps" would not even ride in the elevator together and faculty had "secret" seminars in their homes that were by invitation only.

The problems of finding a mentor and picking a committee increased the awareness of splits in the department. Rather than being able to work with anyone they wanted, students found out that some people would not be on committees with others, faculty had moved on to other substantive interests and were no longer doing the kind of work that attracted them in the first place, or that the professors were "one-trick ponies" who forced them into their areas of specialization. One woman at a prestigious graduate department said:

> I came to this school because I was interested in gender and knew that the faculty was outstanding in that area. However, due to the topic I chose for my thesis, gender is, at best, a tertiary aspect of my research. I find that my committee members keep trying to force me in the direction of gender, but it seems like I am trying to fit a round peg into a square hole.

On the other hand, this was a time when students felt less pressure to impress the entire faculty. Even in large departments, there were probably only, at most, a handful of people who were possible targets for their interests. Therefore, where there might be 30 full-time faculty, only four or five would even possibly be interested in their work. This made students feel more sanguine in the knowledge that there was a circumscribed group of people to whom they would have to direct their attention. One woman expressed it this way:

> I wasn't sure what to expect in terms of mentors, but I was hoping to connect with one or two people. This also seemed a common hope among my cohort mates and we were asked immediately by other grad students to identify the scholars in the department we wanted to work with. I quickly got the sense that grad students developed professional identities based on who their committee member were and this made me anxious to quickly find "my people."

As long as there were no political rifts and the professors acknowledged the students' intellectual acumen, this process went fairly smoothly. In these cases, the mentors also advised students on which other members of the department would make a good committee. Once these connections were made, students' anxiety levels decreased and they felt as if they had found their path. Others, though, floundered unable to find people with whom to connect.

Transition into Teacher Role

By this time, students had several semesters of TAing under their belts. They had prepared their own lectures, perhaps given a lecture or two to a large introductory audience, had the chance to write and grade exams, and had the experience of the close one-on-one counseling that invariably came with the status of teacher. More comfortable in this role, students did not have to spend as much time prepping their classes, and they felt more confident in the classroom. A young man, a second-year student at a Big Ten university who had just given a guest lecture in his advisor's class, wrote the following:

> I was giving a guest lecture and had an "identity moment" that I feel is fairly typical of the professional socialization of graduate students. What happened was, in a very powerful way, I felt like I was a "sociologist" for the first time. When I was lecturing in that class today and saw the students' eyes filled with interest and their hands raised to share engaged thoughts, I felt a powerful sense of certainty. I was knowledgeable and I could do what I had seen other sociologists do when I was a student. I could see students having "ah-ha" moments like I once did when I was lectured by a sociologist.

Teaching was demanding and required constant tinkering to keep pace. It also was all-consuming because the deadlines were real, the undergraduates were there, and the rewards were immediate. At this stage, students began to feel the role conflict so common in the profession. Balancing the multiple roles of their life, both professional and personal, became difficult. A feeling of anomie ensued. This is how one young man described himself:

> I had a bit more experience under my belt as a TA and my primary role identity for my students was that of "professor." I often felt compromised by my expectations to be a "researcher" and "graduate seminar student" and "colleague." I never felt I had enough energy or time to devote to all of these individual and competing identities which made for a great deal of frustration and reevaluation of my life goals.

For the most part, though, classroom experiences enabled students to feel comfortable about their teacher role. They reported that they now had sufficient knowledge to field questions, could refer students to appropriate literature, and had a sense of how the puzzle of sociology fit together.

Transition into the Scholar Role

Unless students were fortunate enough to obtain a fellowship where teaching was not mandated, the transition to the scholar role was a much more arduous path. Still in a liminal state between teacher, scholar, and student, they experienced a great deal of anxiety about their burgeoning academic identity. Older graduate students who they looked up to were finishing their dissertations, getting published, and were on the job market, a place they wanted to be but that seemed so far off. For those who were fortunate enough to find a mentor or who knew what they wanted to study, the process was not as daunting. For one woman who moved through her program at a rapid pace, everything just fell into place:

> I had heard [professor] give a talk at a colloquium and she sounded interesting and engaging. Her reputation as a scholar made me eager to learn more about what she did. I took her class and came out with my first significant relationship with a professor. She became my mentor. She took such an interest in me, personally and professionally, and took so much time getting to know my strengths, weaknesses, professional goals, that I found my pathway easily. Without her attention and mentorship, I don't know where I would have gone.

A few others found their scholarly pathway outside of the department. They attended conferences, joined specialty societies, and deliberately networked to meet people who shared their interests. Since their mentors urged them to attend conventions they went, but most shyly surrounded themselves with other graduate students, too reticent to approach "famous" people in the field.

A turning point came in settling on a dissertation topic. Some were fortunate enough to either fall into research that suited them or to dovetail onto a mentor's project, while others were left adrift, desperately hoping to find a subject that could hold their attention for years. Most students put enormous pressure on themselves to find a research project that was unique, that would make a splash, and that would serve as their magnum opus, but this only made them more anxious. One respondent remembered that she "searched and floundered for things to write about."

Once they had a dissertation topic, the selection of specialty areas became easier. Since many departments require specialty exams as part of the journey to the Ph.D.,

passing this hurdle necessitated focusing their interests. The most successful students reported that they looked for a constellation of three areas within which they could frame their research. One young woman stumbled upon a topic accidentally, knew she wanted to study it, but had no idea how this fit into the substantive areas of sociology. With the help of her mentor, she was able to select three areas, deviance, social psychology, and family, which would inform her work about teen mothers. Thus, she knew that when she went on the job market, she could apply for jobs in these three areas. As she stated:

> I transitioned from feeling an identity as a pseudo-student, going through the motions, to a *real* graduate student. My teaching identity was still firmly in place, but I added to it the identity of novice researcher. I started to envision myself as a sociologist.

Not every graduate student had such a smooth path. Many experienced a great deal of frustration, anxiety, and pressure to perform. A difficult transition involved their transformation from being a good student (a consumer of information) to becoming a scholar (a producer of information). In discussing her problems locating a suitable topic for her Master's thesis, one woman complained:

> I felt frustrated and lost. I desperately wanted to find an interesting project. I dreaded having conversations with other grad students and professors whom I didn't know very well because we inevitably ended up talking about research interests and I didn't know yet! I felt a lot of pressure to pick the "perfect" topic, as this was how we were identified in the department. I was nervous about committing to a literature I wasn't interested in and I was feeling even more behind and discouraged. This extra pressure almost did me in.

This was the breaking point for many graduate students. Either they made it past this hurdle or they terminated their relationship with the program. Capturing the identity of a scholar can be elusive, and without the proper guidance, a little luck, and the intellect to research, write, and analyze, it could be daunting. Those who found a suitable dissertation topic, framed this with marketable areas of interest, and selected a committee were ready to move on to the next stage.

Incubation

Finished with their coursework, students were set adrift from regular contact with other graduate students. Their life was more likely to settle down to a rhythm of teaching, dissertation work, and more direct communication with their mentor and committee members. Now that they had received some reinforcement for their performance by passing comprehensive exams, specialty exams, and a dissertation proposal, their identity as budding professional sociologists began to solidify.

Forays into Research/Writing

At the "all-but-dissertation" (ABD) stage, many students felt unstructured and directionless. They were used to the graduate student role, balancing the teaching of their own sections with taking their own classes. Now, they no longer were required to take seminars and were expected to branch out on their own. This transition came with mixed emotions, as one woman told us:

I was so excited after finishing course work because I thought, "I'll never have to read anything I don't want to again." I was anxious to get going on my dissertation. Unfortunately, I had no idea what I was doing and I felt like I was rowing upstream without a paddle.

Students approached the early stages of their dissertation research writing with trepidation. Although people hit roadblocks along the way, they at least had an idea, it was approved by their committee, and they felt as if they were now "on track." Their relationships with their mentor became more collegial, they were better equipped to handle feedback, and although they could not yet see the "light at the end of the tunnel," they realized that they were, at least, in the tunnel. A recently tenured professor at a small liberal arts college reminisced about this period:

Because I had a firm dissertation project underway, I approached my elective courses and professors more pragmatically. I was no longer in doubt about my ability, and I learned to see them as people who could help me further my research agenda. My mission was not to impress them, but to see what contributions they could make. That was a significant change for me as a student. I began to welcome constructive criticism, whereas previously I was turned off, humiliated, and embarrassed.

With the approval of their mentor and committee members, they were free to pursue their own research agendas.

Conference Presentations

Just about everyone mentioned their first conference presentation as a turning point in their professional careers. Some had attended conferences before, but usually as quasi-observers, getting the lay of the land, attending sessions, and meeting friends. Delivering a paper to an audience of interested scholars yielded them several positive rewards. First, getting outside their own departments, they learned that there was a cadre of others who were involved in research similar to their own. The young man in his first year teaching at a liberal arts college said:

I think a large part of discovering my role in the larger discipline, and thus outside of the narrow confines of my department, came when I began presenting my work at professional conferences. I realized that the narrow ways of looking at research were somewhat constructed by the narrow thinking of certain members of my department. When I actually went to see what sociologists look like and sound like and what their research looks like and sounds like, I realized I had far more allies in those doing work at other institutions.

Second, conferences were the entry-level place for meeting scholars with similar interests. This sort of networking was invaluable for the burgeoning identity of the graduate student. Some organizations, such as Sociologists for Women in Society (SWS), have specific mentoring programs available where senior scholars take on students from other institutions. Braver students developed strategies about how to network on their own. One man explained that he would carefully cull the preliminary program, highlight the names of people he wanted to meet, read their work, show up at their sessions, and "schmooze" them with conversation he hoped would interest them. He then followed up this meeting with an e-mail, reminding the person of their interaction, and asking if he or she would be interested in reading his work. Attending conferences, particularly ones that were small and specialized, allowed students to network, to exchange ideas, and to develop professional ties.

Third, they were able to compare notes with students in other departments. Sometimes they learned that they did not have it so bad, while other times they bemoaned the lack of funding, the heavy teaching load, or the relative inaccessibility of their faculty. Most importantly, they forged alliances with students who were their age, at the same point of their careers, and with similar interests. These people were often the ones who became lifelong professional friends. One woman, now in her first year of tenure-track employment at an urban university, expressed it this way:

> Conference presentations also gave me the opportunity to make contacts in the broader field, with others at different institutions. I got the sense that other universities sometimes treated their grad students much better and gave far more predictable and generous financial support, and others treated grad students far worse and gave no or very little support.

Thus, presenting their first paper at a conference symbolized an increasing professional stature, an identity firmly rooted in this career path, a reinforcement of their work (unless they were unfortunate enough to have a vitriolic discussant in their session), and a "line on the vita."

Teaching on One's Own

In the latter stages of their graduate career, students usually had the opportunity to teach their own classes. Now freed from whatever restrictions professors might put on them, students *qua* teachers were asked to construct their own syllabus, create exams and other types of testing procedures, counsel students, and evaluate them. Many had their first experience in truncated summer school classes, but it was not until they taught a semester-long sequence that they adopted the professorial role. Positive feedback from students had its own rewards, as one woman averred:

> My teaching evaluations helped shape my identity as a teacher, for they reinforced my feelings that what I was doing was working—that students appreciated my technique and approach. The accolades and positive feedback that I received from my students were some of the most powerful influences on my identity because these things told me I could do it.

Others reported feeling as if they were imposters, especially when undergraduates referred to them as "professor." At first, they corrected the students, but after time, they just let the appellation stick and did very little to change these mistaken impressions. For those who did not find teaching a calling, they dissociated from the role, distanced themselves as teachers, and played up the rhetoric that they were primarily scholars who had to teach to keep their jobs. For most, though, this transformation signified that they had arrived, that they were genuine, and that they had a position that their relatives could understand. One man, currently at a teaching college, expressed:

> As I progressed from TA to Graduate Instructor, I found that I was now becoming a more legitimate member of the campus community. I was developing my own class content and syllabi, leading my own class discussions, and struggling with the issues of student evaluation and enforcement of course and university policy.

However, after the initial rush of being a professor passed, which lasted between one and two years, they began to feel exploited. Especially at large, state universities where funding is in short supply and undergraduate teaching is not rewarded, graduate students

form the backbone of the teaching faculty, taking on onerous tasks, often on very short notice. One young man in his first year at a large Southern university said:

> Once the initial excitement, newness, and fear wore off, some of us developed an adversarial relationship with the department. I was no longer starstruck by many professors. Much of the department teaching load was thrust upon graduate students and we were called upon to prepare classes often just before the semester began. One semester I had *two* new preps, Classical Theory and Field Research Methods. I became conscious of being exploited, and likewise, many of the older graduate students were very bitter.

Students, now older, some with families, and no longer wanting to live on the paltry stipends that they received as graduate students, became upset that they were being used unfairly. One man recalled:

> Though I felt like my status was higher than that of TA, and my role carrying far more power and responsibility, I also felt and was treated, at times, like I was a low paid wage slave by the university and a second-rate instructor by the department. Issues of job security, salary, and other issues that arose with the graduate population often made concrete the divisions between our identities as teachers and our role of graduate student as we were reminded that since we were "in training" we did not deserve to be paid as a professor (though we were bearing much of the departmental teaching load).

Despite these resentments, most students felt a responsibility to the undergraduates, took their teaching seriously, and adopted an identity that supported this role. They saw some faculty deriding pedagogical concerns, and this caused some dissonance about their own self-evaluations. Nevertheless, teaching their own class was another step in the solidification of their professional self.

The end of the incubation stage was marked by a definite change in students' identities. They were now ensconced in the sociological canon, had mastered a literature in theory, methods, and substantive areas, taught their own classes, presented papers at professional conferences, and gotten to know other scholars outside their university.

Engagement

With their requirements out of the way, several years of teaching under their belts, and often pressing personal and financial concerns, students at this stage focused their attention on completing the degree. Looming on the horizon was the job market, with all of its horror stories, doomsday predictions, and difficulties that circulated in the graduate students' lore. Successful students focused their attention unidimensionally on doing whatever it took to finish.

Immersion

Ironically, at a time when support systems would be most important, students felt dissociated from their departments, other students, and other than their committee members, just about everyone else. Unless they were part of an advisor's grant or project, they were off on their own, doing research, and separated from the daily vicissitudes of departmental life. A recently minted Ph.D. put it this way:

> I began making more solid relationships with my committee members and really *only* my committee members, as they were the only professors that seemed to matter for me. Other than my closest friends

in the department, I saw and spoke to no one else, unless we bumped into each other on campus or around town. I was leading a monk-like existence, pushing toward the finish line.

Jealousy was a common emotion that cropped up in graduate school. Whether it was because of a special relationship with a mentor, rewards meted out by the discipline, or what was perceived to be preferential treatment, advanced graduate students sometimes felt that others were watching their every move with envy. One woman, who was accused of being a "sell-out" because she followed her mentor's advice rather than devising her own plan, was the target of a constant barrage of attacks from others. She perceived that they were just jealous of her closeness to this professor, and although it did not change her direction, it ate away at her.

Students who made it through more quickly looked harshly on the "slackers," those who complained, did not get their work done, and blamed others for it. One woman, just as she was completing her degree, expressed it this way:

> It's weird—I feel an affinity for the incoming grad students who are still finding their way, but a frustration with the hangers-on who change their dissertation topics a thousand times and were on the ten year plan, or with people who dwell in the "isn't grad school hard?" and "aren't we exploited?" mentality.

It was almost as if those on the way out were grown-ups and those stuck in the same place still in their adolescence.

Legitimacy

Finally, having attended several conferences, presented papers, submitted to paper competitions, and even published, students sought external validation for their work. It was fine that they were getting positive feedback from their committee members, but this did not seem real, as these people had a vested interest in them.

For a fortunate few, this period marked the first time they had to deal with the gamesmanship of publishing. Especially in departments that required a master's thesis, it was common for students to try to publish parts of these in peer-reviewed journals. Suffering the ignominy of rejection was never easy, and some students who submitted their work only to have it lambasted in the review process grew hesitant and doubted themselves. One woman, whose paper was eventually published elsewhere, described her first rejection:

> I submitted a paper to a journal and it got rejected. It was harsh and I was crushed. A real reality check. I was lost and thought I couldn't do it. So I ignored that paper, put it in a drawer, and just worked on the other ones I was doing.

Getting a "revise and resubmit" also brought a series of self-doubts, but with a modicum of encouragement. Although they appreciated the constructive comments of reviewers, students felt inundated by the process and lost about how to deal with it. A young woman, still in graduate school, expressed it this way:

> Attempting to submit an article to a journal was one of the most valuable and insightful experiences. I had to learn simple things, like the proper way to write a cover letter or how to change my footnotes to fit the journal's requirements. Now after going through two rounds of revise and resubmit, I am anxiously awaiting a response. I benefited from the reviewers' suggestions and felt that my paper was

improving with each draft. I was discovering that the blind review made people more honest and I had to learn not to take their negative comments personally. I was excited to tell my committee about receiving an R&R, but I'm keeping tight-lipped until I see how things play out.

There were few better feelings than getting the letter of acceptance for a first publication. One student beamed:

I can't believe it. It doesn't seem real. I am so sick of this paper, but it's finally going to be published. I feel a great weight lifted off me. I feel vindicated, as if all the negative remarks I have heard don't matter anymore. I'm stoked.

This was also a period when students began to submit papers to competitions in various professional associations. There was a lot less pressure here than attempting to publish because few actually expected to win when they submitted. Still, the mere act of trying made them feel as if they were adequately progressing toward the completion of their degree. For those who won, this "feather in their cap" told them that their work was respected, a huge affirmation of their personal accomplishments.

Buoyed by the legitimacy afforded by their presentations, rewards, and publications, they noticed a distinct change in their self-concept. One man, shortly after receiving a prestigious award for a paper he had written, described his feelings:

It really wasn't until my paper was selected as a winner of [contest] that I had self-awareness as a legitimate scholar. I doubted myself endlessly until someone external to my department acknowledged that I was actually "one of them." I felt that "ok, now people see me as legitimate, I must *be* legitimate, and I must *act* legitimate." Winning that award really lit a fire under my ass.

Having more visibility in the field also opened doors for these emerging scholars. People were writing to them about their research, they were participating in the bureaucratic organizations of the discipline, and they were meeting the "names" attached to the articles and books they were reading. One woman, who had entered a competition but lost, was nevertheless sought out by one of the competition committee members because he liked her work. He introduced her to his colleagues, one of whom was working directly in her area, and they struck up a relationship that resulted in her publishing a chapter in a book he edited.

Marketing One's Self

Though some people think it crass to pragmatically devise marketing strategies, successful graduate students usually have an exit plan for finishing. Most sought jobs when their dissertations were still works-in-progress, participating in the ASA employment service the summer before they expected to finish. Those with "anticipated" degrees had to focus on finishing their dissertations at the same time that they were sending out applications, and hopefully, interviewing. This required several types of preparation.

Part of establishing their role as a professional was building up a marketable vita. In addition, students had to practice job talks, prepare themselves for random questions that might be thrown at them, and fit themselves into departments' needs. One woman, prior to finishing her degree, took a visiting appointment during this latter phase. Picking up her family, moving them to a new state, prepping classes, and taking on the responsibilities of the job was difficult. While this sped up her identity as a "professor," it

put her behind in her march toward the degree. She eventually got a full-time position for the following year, but she arrived at the new job ABD.

For one woman, her "dream job" came open a year before she was ready. Capitalizing on the opportunity to go back to her hometown, she quickly put together her materials and applied for the job. She described her feelings:

> I was not thinking about applying for jobs, but then [dream job] came open. Even though I was early, I felt prepared. The things that made me feel ready were successful journal submissions, and a concomitant feeling that I knew how to publish, an award from a national association, positive feedback from colleagues at conferences, teaching awards at my university; and feedback from my mentor and other committee members on what was left to do to finish my dissertation (not much).

Of course, not everyone was as successful as this young woman, and the job market could be a cruel place. Sagging emotions, depression, self-doubt, and fear took over at this time. People re-evaluated their goals, re-oriented their lives, and worried that the job for which they had spent the past several years preparing would not appear.

Their identity as a professional sociologist took on full efflorescence when they landed their first job. Their status as a Ph.D. was established, albeit still tentatively, they had a reputation they were building, they could see a pathway for their careers (dependent upon the type of school at which they landed), and they felt grown up.[8] Though life for a new assistant professor is hectic and chaotic, they were relieved to be moving on to the next phase of their lives.

Conclusion

The pathway through graduate school is challenging and difficult. Nearly everyone, at one point or another, confronts the existential question of whether they want to drop out or to continue. Several challenges emerge as key to graduate students' success in progressing through their programs.

The first is moving from the secure but sometimes suffocating structure of a core graduate cohort into the role of independent student. This requires navigating an individual pathway into areas of specialization and a mentor. Programs can do no more than make faculty and courses available; from there, students must make connections and decisions on their own.

The second critical transition involves moving from absorbing to creating knowledge. Accomplishing this requires that students grasp the conceptual foundation of the perspective (the "sociological eye"), learn how to gather data, to master the challenge of moving from immersion in the specificity of their research to contribute to more abstract theory, and to understand the conventions through which they must present their scholarly work.

Along the way there are myriad interpersonal challenges for them to negotiate. Allegiances that they forge are then relinquished to make way for new, more stage-relevant ones. Students often undergo radical changes in their values and consciousness as they progress through their programs. They are bonded into an equalitarian model of evaluation and support in their cohesive, early years in the cohort. But as they forge scholarly accomplishments and turn their eyes increasingly toward the discipline, they recognize that their democratic ideals must yield to the meritocratic reality of the profession.

Notes

1. During the period immediately after World War II, 58 percent of all studies in occupational sociology were about the professions (Smigel, 1954). Although there was a slight decline in the 1950s and early 1960s, studies of the professions were still the central focus of these sociologists (Smigel et al., 1963). Hall (1983) claimed that studies of the professions continued to decline precipitously through the 1980s, but Ritzer and Walczak (1986) disagreed, claiming that Hall's sampling was faulty. In fact, the journal, *Work and Occupations*, in its thirty-second year in 2005, continues to flourish.
2. Although there are obvious biases in selecting our own students, there is also the advantage of respondent honesty and the opportunity to cross-check their answers, as we were present for much of their training. These questionnaires form the basis of some of the data that we present here.
3. Karp, Holmstrom, and Gray (1998) discuss a similar process that high school students undergo as they enter into college.
4. Women currently make up about 70 percent of all undergraduate majors, a statistic that has remained constant since the 1980s. In 2000, women made up 59 percent of sociology Ph.D.s (American Sociological Association, 2004).
5. We have no statistics on the retention rates of graduate students in sociology. Popular lore indicates that about one out of three who begins graduate school will actually finish. According to the American Sociological Association, about 10 percent of the total number of graduate students enrolled each year actually obtains their Ph.D. (American Sociological Association, 2002).
6. For many students, the emotional, financial, and intellectual investments they made in graduate school by this time served to keep them in the profession. For philosophy graduate students, Ritzer and Walczak (1986) stated that these investments make it too costly for them to leave once they began. Becker's (1960: 32) concept of "side-bets," defined as, "When an individual, confronted with an opportunity to depart from it, discovers that in the course of past activities he has, willingly or not, accumulated valuables of a kind that would be lost to him if he makes a change," is relevant here.
7. The transformation of students in professional schools from idealistic to realistic has been studied in many different venues. See, for instance, Becker and Geer (1958) and Haas and Shaffir (1984) on doctors, Granfield (1992) and Lortie (1959) on lawyers, Psathas (1968) and Simpson (1967) on nurses, Morris and Sherlock (1971) on dental students, and Bates (1967) on sociologists.
8. Huntington (1957) found a similar identity change among medical students. Only 31 percent of her sample thought of themselves as doctors when they were first-year students, but 83 percent had the identity of doctors by their fourth year.

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