Sociology as a Vocation: Reputations and Group Cultures in Graduate School

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Graduate training in sociology involves more than meeting organizationally imposed demands such as satisfying departmental requirements, taking exams, and completing a dissertation. More central is the development of identity through institutional and interactional forces. We examine the experience of graduate students as tied to the social psychological processes associated with professional training. We consider the faculty-student relationship, identifying how student identities as future sociologists are negotiated and constructed within a reputation market linked to status politics. Through this process, graduate students construct frames of interpretation that make sense of a status system in which criteria for evaluation are often variable, uncertain, or undisclosed. To recognize how graduate students fit into their occupational routines, we build upon three core disciplinary constructs: identity, reputation, and group culture. This perspective permits graduate education to be grounded in sociological understandings, underlining the role of a sociological imagination. We propose strategies that sociology departments might follow to facilitate the professional socialization of graduate students, emphasizing the establishment of group culture and presentational norms. In the absence of these changes, we offer advice to graduate students on navigating their current programs.

You wish me to speak about "Science as a Vocation." Now, we political economists have a pedantic custom, which I should like to follow, of always beginning with the external conditions. In this case, we begin with the question: What are the conditions of science as

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a vocation in the material sense of the term? Today this question means, practically and essentially: What are the prospects of a graduate student who is resolved to dedicate himself professionally to science in university life?

– Max Weber (1958: 129).

In his classic essay "Science as a Vocation," Max Weber analyzes what it means to engage in intellectual activity as a profession. This question, haunting the souls of aspiring academics, still generates great concern. In 1987, *The American Sociologist* commissioned a special issue entitled "Graduate Education: 'The Promise' Lost?'" in which both students and faculty assessed the state of graduate training. Students were asked how their expectations changed since entering graduate school, what features of their education had been most valuable, and what they considered to be the most needed reforms. One recurring theme in the critiques lodged by the student contributors was disenchantment with the faculty-student relationship (Negrey, 1987), perhaps arising from the same romanticism of communalism found in other locales in which images of "the good" trump images of "the possible." Graduate students described their professional training as isolating, fraught with negative social psychological ramifications including feelings of inferiority and alienation. Today the same critique can be made. Why does graduate school training leave so many aspiring sociologists disillusioned? More importantly, can or should sociologists address this issue? What reforms should be instituted in graduate training in sociology? Or do students simply require a chill draft of realism? In the absence of reforms, what measures should students take to navigate their graduate programs?

As Cahill (1999) noted in his study of the professional development of funeral directors, there have been many studies that have focused on the professional socialization of medical students (e.g., Becker et al., 1961; Fox, 1957; Haas and Shaffir, 1977, 1982; Broadhead, 1983); others have focused on cooks (Fine, 1985), lawyers (Granfield, 1992), teachers (Lortie, 1968), clergy (Kleinman, 1984), nurses (Davis, 1968; Simpson, 1967), and social workers (Loeske and Cahill, 1986). However, there has been little empirical research examining the professional socialization of sociologists (but see Kleinman, 1983; Keith and Moore, 1995). Surely we sociologists are a little embarrassed studying ourselves—and getting our mates to sign IRB forms can be a challenge—but the rarity of ethnographic examinations of sociological training is notable.

Several published works have advocated for changes in sociology graduate school curriculum (Folse, 1991; Sullivan, 1991; Eitzen et al., 1999). Moreover, other discussions have addressed how sociology departments can integrate new cohort members into their programs (Kelleher, 1991; Eitzen, 1988; Maurer, 1999; Davis et al., 2001). Most recently, Shulman and Silver (2003) articulated the informal culture of graduate school. There has also been recent attention to the underside or unpleasant aspects of graduate sociology training (Ault, 1996; Crothers,1991; Plutzer, 1991). This is to the good, but further discussion and research exploring the social psychological dimension of graduate school training for sociologists is necessary.

We examine the faculty-student relationship, identifying how student identities as "future sociologists" are negotiated and constructed within a reputation market (Sauder and Fine, 2004), linked to status politics. Borrowing from Becker et al. (1961), we explore the behavior of graduate students as tied to processes associated with professional education. "Becoming a sociologist" is facilitated by faculty assisting students in conceptualizing the meaning of an academic community. By addressing social psychologi-

cal aspects of student communities, we hope to spark discussion about the current state of graduate education, and about changes feasible and fantastical. Put another way, we urge that student socialization explicitly recognizes the sociological processes that affect other forms of occupational socialization.

Faculty-Student Relationships and Status Games

Sociologists have taken special interest in how professionals attain and reproduce their social positions (Bourdieu, 1973; Freidson, 1970; Abbott, 1981). The professional education of graduate students should attempt to orient the student to the *habitus* of the academic: how to talk, think, write, dress, and behave as a future scholar. The academy constitutes a social field (Bourdieu, 1988). In this field, student identities and possible futures as sociologists are created within structural constraints. Intellectuals, such as sociology faculty members, are motivated by local politics, and wield forms of power that are specific to the academic field. Power is based on academic capital, "the control over the material, organizational, and social instruments of the reproduction of the faculty" (Wacquant, 1990: 680). Faculty members have the power to assess graduate students' worth as future scholars and decide who are worthy of being considered colleagues. Graduate students are painfully aware of this status assessment as they present themselves as plausible future faculty. Subordination and mobilization of power begins early. The academic field, like any other, is characterized by exclusion and a political struggle involving the monopoly of authority and competence, "a particular agent's socially recognized capacity to speak and act legitimately (i.e., in an authorized and authoritative way) in scientific matters" (Bourdieu, 1975: 19).

As early as graduate student recruitment, faculty members assess which students have the potential to be candidates for positions at prestigious research institutions, which students are better candidates for employment at liberal arts schools, which are suited for applied employment, and which students may find receiving academic positions difficult. This process is generic to circumstances in which winnowing a population must occur—whether sorority rush, Little League drafts, or last call at bars. It is critical for professional advancement that students understand this process of labeling, how and by what barometer faculty assessments are made, and the criteria for evaluation. Most importantly, students must learn to recognize how each exchange with a faculty member has the potential to shape a student's budding professional reputation. Faculty assessments depend on a number of factors including students' presentation of self; the quality of the comments and questions posed in course discussions; the caliber of papers written during coursework; a student's publication record; obtaining outside recognition such as prestigious grants, fellowships, and awards; endorsements by other faculty members; and information gleaned from the graduate school application. As graduate education progresses, evaluations based on these measures continue, but they often are not communicated directly. As few graduate students flunk out of graduate school, the separation of the student from his/her dream involves "cooling the mark out" (Goffman, 1952), subtly persuading students that they should voluntarily and spontaneously come to recognize that they do not truly belong, while their mentors can express dismay at what was known all along.

The faculty-graduate student relationship is one of structured inequality (Negrey, 1987). Faculty members constitute the gatekeepers limiting entrance to the profession, even when exit is ostensibly elective. Faculty constitutes a particular type of status group;

they are the "bearers of specific conventions," share a common identity and make a claim to occupational honor (Murphy, 1983: 635): they are integrated professionals. The graduate student often occupies a marginal role until gatekeepers establish his/her role as a scholar. Some students gain this reputation early, either because by their background, as filtered through faculty gossip, because of personal endorsements of members of the faculty, or because of some production that is judged worthy of notice. For example, receiving a publication in a prestigious publication early in one's career captures the attention of faculty members. Conversely, not publishing, not acquiring accolades, or not receiving other forms of departmental recognition may lead to the perception that a student will not be a contributing scholar. Reputational claims are swathed in a mist of uncertain symbols and ambiguous remarks. Faculty feedback in any form has the power to cut to the heart of graduate students. Advising a student that s/he is a poor writer, lacks theoretical insight, demonstrates poor time management, and/or lacks essential analytical skills is not easy news to deliver even for the most insensitive faculty. Students who receive such comments feel the pain and isolation of exclusion, but as sociologists-in-training, they must recognize that this is how all status systems operate. For a few to gain institutional rewards, most must be denied them. If rewards are not scarce, they will have little value. Graduate school is not so different from life.

To understand the dynamics of how graduate students fit into occupational routines, we rely upon three core disciplinary constructs: identity, reputation, and group culture. We conclude by suggesting how such a model might permit graduate sociology education to be grounded in sociology and offer advice to both graduate students and faculty members. In the absence of such measures, we offer advice for both prospective and current graduate students on how best to navigate their current graduate programs.

Identity: Becoming a "Sociologist"

How does an individual come to define him/herself within a social surround (Gecas, 1995)? Although graduate training requires satisfying institutionally imposed demands, becoming a graduate student is more than the organized curriculum, meeting departmental requirements, taking exams, and completing a dissertation. More central is the transformation of identity through institutional and interactional pressures (Snow and Anderson, 1987). During graduate school, students who are successfully socialized redefine themselves from being a "student" to being an "academic," "scholar," or "sociologist" (Keith and Moore, 1995; Egan, 1989; Weiss, 1981).

Students do not experience identity transformation on a predefined or routinized timetable (Negrey, 1987). Like tubercular patients, they are continually attempting to read ambiguous cues, creating timetables and comparing themselves to others in similar circumstances (Roth, 1963). Students within and across cohorts compare their progress with their peers, judging who has the most publications, who was awarded the most grant money, who is closest to completing their dissertation, or who is asked to collaborate with faculty members.

Although in a formal sense, students may be seen as equivalent (or even as interchangeable) and are processed as a cohort, but this does not do justice to their differences. They do not enter graduate programs in the same place with regard to disciplinary sophistication, intellectual development, and social psychological affiliation. Although it has not been sufficiently recognized, graduate students are recruited from diverse back-

grounds (Karp, 1986; Grimes and Morris, 1997). Thus, generalizing to intellectual development and identity transformation is difficult. Graduate student identities build on those in place prior to admission. Entering a graduate program does not create identity *de novo*. The lack of integration among intellectual development, identity transformation, and departmental requirements helps explain why some students have difficulty staying on "schedule," and why some students exit graduate school (Negrey, 1987).

New graduate students are uncertain about proper emotional and intellectual responses to the novel experiences that they are facing. In this they are perhaps not so different from the novice marijuana users described by Becker (1953). For example, students sometimes break down crying in front of a faculty member after receiving negative feedback. Such a strategy can be embarrassing for both parties, and perhaps vexing for tough-minded, disciplined faculty. Students must learn how to challenge a faculty member's opinion, learning when to back down and when to push a point. In an intellectual roller derby, verbal elbowing may be admired. While criticism needs to be accepted, a wise student can agree with the criticism, exhibiting role distance, claiming that s/he imagined the same problem and now knows how to solve it. While anxiety is normal, most students have learned to cover their internal feelings. Graduate students need templates to understand these new experiences, and in this they examine their past, compare the responses of their colleagues, and assess the interpretive models provided by mentors (Schnaiberg, this volume; Keith and Moore, 1995).

Crucial to socialization is communication with the important others in one's social world. However, while the desirability of communication seems straightforward, it occurs within a status system in which faculty members are continually evaluating graduate students (and each other) and students are comparing themselves to others. The academy is awash in social comparison. Some innocent questions or comments may leave a reputational smudge. Students, for example, should avoid comments that reveal a lack of sociological training and/or demonstrate a lack of commitment or passion to a rigorous academic career. Of course, it is easier to display the preferred pronunciation of Weber, Znaniecki, or Zajonc if one has had previous social science exposure prior to graduate school. Even if one does not assume a bumptious cynicism, a hierarchy emerges through these interactions, shaping identity. This process is, of course, a sociological truism. While it can be ignored, it is precisely this ignorance that sociology hopes to remedy.

Still, talk happens. Faculty mentors or more senior graduate students point to aspects of the experience that they believe are salient, creating a new conceptual organization and the student's place within it. If the identity work of students does not support those behaviors and the self-images necessary to thrive, disruption in a student's progress or exit from graduate school is likely (Ault, 1996; Egan, 1989).

By the end of graduate training, students must confront their negative experiences and neutralize feelings of inferiority (although never eliminating them entirely), redefining what it means to be a scholar. To be a professional academic is to be able to accept—and perhaps profit from—a jolting string of bad news, recognizing that most articles, grants, and job applications are rejected, and other sources of status, such as book manuscripts or applications for leaves or promotion, fare little better. Being a scholar involves coping with "one damn thing after another," with, hopefully, enough sweet news to take the edge off the bitter and sour. Although building a career in academia may appear to be an insurmountable challenge, students should not be so easily tempted to

throw up their arms up and run to the nearest exit. It is possible to succeed in this business and remain enthusiastically invested in the professionalization process with proper guidance. Students must learn to manage their emerging reputations.

Becoming an academic does not occur at the same rate for all students. Graduate departments must be cognizant that students' experiences of the structured, monolithic, unidimensional role of graduate student are variable (Ault, 1996). Students who enter graduate school directly from undergraduate study expect graduate work to be an extension of college (Becker et al., 1961). Those who enter graduate school with careers in other fields possess different expectations of graduate training, as do students who have spent time away from college but have not yet developed a career. For a graduate student to adopt an effective identity, a transformation of meaning must occur in which s/he develops a new perspective on graduate training and the ability to fit into this interaction order. For example, graduate students who have recently graduated from college often approach graduate education with an undergraduate mentality characterized by passive learning. They have the skills to be a good student (Becker et al., 1968) but have not yet developed other skills—creativity, problem solving, or time management—that help them become an academic. Their undergraduate experience has taught them to consume knowledge but not to produce it, much less to embody that knowledge. Acting as a faculty member is foreign. Significantly the graduate school application does not capture these abilities, assuming that they can be taught—or at least absorbed—while in graduate school.

By contrast, students who have been away from school for a few years, who have traveled or worked various jobs without building a career, face different challenges. One student described the return to graduate school after working for a marketing firm for two years as "an attempt to recapture the romanticism of university life." Upon graduation from college, this student saw traveling as an important cultural experience and working in the "real world" as essential for personal growth before returning to school. However, she described her experience of a corporate environment as disillusioning, marred by hierarchies, and devoid of the ideals she cherished as a college student. After this blast of reality, she decided to return to school; not knowing for which program she was best suited (she applied to sociology, communications, and anthropology). Nostalgia was her motivation. Graduate school for students such as this represents a haven from a heartless world of responsibilities. Unfortunately, these students are disappointed when they find that graduate school does not meet their romanticized images of university life. Hierarchies, politics, rejection, and disappointments lurk in the shadows of the ivory tower.

Similarly, graduate students with careers in other fields experience challenges upon returning to graduate school. Compared with a few decades ago, current cohorts include a larger proportion of persons who enter graduate school from start-up careers. In a recent cohort at Northwestern University, over half of the students had been employed in other professions. The cohort included a biologist, an advertising executive, a criminal prosecutor, a business consultant, a social worker, and a case manager at a community criminal court. Yet, these students were not admitted because of this experience, but based on their previous sociological training.

Students with significant work experience in organizations outside of academia often enter graduate programs with more focused agendas. These students experience different obstacles compared to new B.A.s (Schellenberg, 1987). Faculty members retain the illusion that their incoming students are fresh from college, they typically know little of

the work backgrounds of new students, and may be predisposed to be skeptical of older graduate students, concerned that they will be unable to handle the rigorous theoretical training. Their work experience is often treated as a break before they decide to pursue their true academic calling. Substantive expertise is downgraded as of secondary importance. These students may not only experience difficulties adjusting to the student-professor relationship, but they may encounter this additional bias from faculty. In addition, graduate students with professional backgrounds are often frustrated in becoming a "graduate student in training." These students resent what they perceive to be excessive supervision by faculty after being accustomed to leadership roles in former careers (Borawski, 1987). This adjustment can be thorny and may lead to abandoning the program. These students must subjugate other personal identities (such as lawyer, business leader, executive) to that of professional sociologist-in-training before they can become a sociologist (Egan, 1989). However, these students may experience advantages as well. Preparation for the academic world and for other careers does not necessarily require a different set of skills. For example, these students enter the academy with a range of relevant skills including analysis, management, and networking techniques.

Whether considering "returning students" or those fresh from college, each must construct the meaning of being a sociologist. Like all novices, they engage in identity work in a world that they only slowly come to appreciate or disparage. It is not only that they must discover if sociology is for them, but if they are for sociology.

Reputation: Becoming Judged as a Sociologist

It is a truism of sociological analysis that all social worlds are status systems. The demands for a social cartography are insistent. Hierarchy routinely emerges from social interaction, just as it shapes it. Yet, this flies in the face of the romanticism of graduate education: the image of a cohort as a "band of sibs."

We cannot escape the dark heart of the matter: those with authority judge those without. Of course, the judging goes the other direction as well, although with far less consequence for those assessed. Graduate students recognize and agonize about the fact that they are being evaluated and that this is a process over which they have little control and of which they may have little knowledge. Hazy cues suggest their standing in the cohort, but this standing may have a considerable impact on their career options, and, perhaps of greater moment, their assessment of their position affects career aspirations. Being told that one is a poor writer may discourage a student from continuing in school, considering the emphasis on publication as a necessity for career building. The underlining reality is the belief that "some of us are smarter [more professional, better researchers, superior teachers] than others." Students come to define themselves in the eyes of others. Although Charles Horton Cooley (1902) used the construct of the Looking Glass Self to refer to the process of primary socialization, it applies to the creation of public reputations at all stages of the life course, including those moments of graduate education with which Cooley was so familiar.

But the dilemma stretches beyond the recognition that an objective thing called talent drives the status system. A fundamental tension exists that claims on the one hand that a graduate department constitutes an intellectual community, comprised of a Mertonian scientific communalism (Merton, 1979) in which the qualities of one's ideas are the markers of status, and simultaneously a world in which authority, power, and network position determine standing. During socialization, trainers—faculty members—keep

trainees at social distance until they have proven their bona fides. This emphasizes the importance of role in an intellectual organization. Maintaining distance from students "preserves the image of authority and the right to judge" (Negrey, 1987: 59).

Part of the problem is that an academic department is not an efficient system for maintaining group standards. In important regards, a department is little more than a collection of individual reputational entrepreneurs. Each faculty member constructs his or her standards for appropriate professional behavior. These standards can be at considerable variance from those set by other faculty members, and, again, in a form of pluralistic ignorance, faculty members may be quite unaware of—or indifferent to—the standards of others. The basis for the evaluations by faculty may neither be shared with other faculty or with students. Faculty may know how their colleagues view students, but be uncertain exactly the grounds for those evaluations. Students may select a faculty advisor less on substantive compatibility and more on relational contours. (These choices might systematically differ between recent college graduates and returning students, not to mention choices based on gender, race, or ethnic background.)

For some students, distance always remains, while others develop intimate intellectual relations (and sometimes extra-intellectual relations). Whether these ties are desirable is a function of student and faculty preferences. No single standard exists for the relationship between faculty and students, again recognizing the idiosyncratic and personalistic nature of university control systems. But however faculty and graduate students structure their ties, these relationships, grounded on extra-role intellectual activity and power-based hierarchy, are marked by contradiction and tension.

Graduate students often participate in their own subordination, not recognizing the demands for reputation work in creating the stature of a scholar. Some graduate students do not position themselves as ambitious, productive, and creative. They fail to identify and adhere to informal rules on how to present themselves, using strategies such as social networking or impression management. They do not treat graduate school as an entrepreneurial space. These graduate students may become so absorbed in the routine of coursework, grades, teaching, and exams that they fail to appreciate that they must appear to be independent scholars with sponsorship ties to those who can promote their careers (Goffman, 1959: 30–34). They buy into the formal role, and perhaps succeed too well, while ignoring the crucial underside of the occupation.

Faculty members often find it in their interest to promote their own graduate students. These students are a reputational extension of their advisor. Part of the reputational capital of a faculty member is the number and quality of his or her students (see Schnaiberg this volume). This is the case for three reasons. First, other faculty know—in some measure—which of their colleagues produce star students and place students in good jobs. The student is a means of judging a faculty member's competence. Second, the student's work extends the intellectual reach of his/her faculty mentor. This is particularly true in those substantive areas in which scholarship builds on itself. The work of a student augments and deepens the work of the faculty mentor. As ideas are a key measure of reputation, this contributes to the reputation of the faculty member, just as it creates the reputation of the student. Third, the student serves—through networking—as a reputational entrepreneur for the faculty mentor. These students provide reach for a faculty member's influence in the profession, and indirectly expand the reputation of the mentor, just as the mentor may do for his/her students.

Reputation structures graduate education. Both faculty members and students are enmeshed in a reputation game. While graduate students require the good evaluation

and intradepartmental publicity by faculty, the graduate student has some power as well, particularly if they have the credibility to enter professional networks.

Group Culture: Becoming Sociologists Together

To this point we have focused on the self- and public-images of the individual, but graduate education depends, like elementary school, on the smooth passage of groups through an institution. Graduate students constitute a community, and this community is structured by cohort, although connections will eventually develop among cohorts.

Each community of whatever size develops a group culture—what Fine (1979; Wiley, 1991) has labeled an idioculture. This recognizes that over the course of interaction groups develop sets of meanings, behaviors, customs, and artifacts to which group members can refer with the expectation these references will be understood by others. Groups develop a set of expectations and norms that permits them to interpret and respond to the world around them in ways that generates coordination and community. Members come to interpret the world in light of those experiences that they have shared. The experiences become typified and become the criteria by which future events are understood. While the background assumptions of students shape interpretations—based in part on their occupational experiences—these interpretations are negotiated *in situ*.

Graduate student cultures vary in extent and in intensity, a function of the amount of shared engagement and common focus (Collins, 1981). Graduate cohorts—and the larger graduate student community—have distinctive traditions that shape how individual members think of themselves and of how esteem is apportioned. These microcultures are important in organizing the activities of students, and, significantly, they differ from university to university. While this is, as noted, linked to the previous experiences of the cohort, it also is a function of the moral values of the members of the cohort, their images of the goals of their professional training, and their status hierarchy (what Fine (1979) labeled Known, Usable, Functional, and Appropriate Cultures). This combines with triggering mechanisms in the form of those events and experiences that the group shares, creating specific cultural traditions.

Such a model of occupational socialization emphasizes the local contours of meaning and the effects of small group dynamics on professional outcomes. The intensity of graduate training makes idiocultures salient, but the structure of graduate programs means that some programs will be more culturally intense than others. For example, an intense group culture may be correlated with the number of required classes that first-year students take as a group, whether they are encouraged to develop study groups, whether they live close to each other, whether they share departmental offices, and whether their course assignments are collective. These features of the graduate program are bolstered by the sense of a department culture. Does the department see itself as a community in which individuals collaborate or party together? For some departments such communal activities are desired, whereas elsewhere they may be treated as smothering individuality. Departments located in large urban areas with numerous activity choices may find maintaining a cohesive student community more difficult than those located in smaller towns.

These issues may have a particular salience for those who enroll in graduate school after professional careers. Not only are these students more likely to have families, but they often have established networks that they are loath to give up to spend more time with those whom they may see as younger, less mature, or more interested in under-

graduate culture. While interests in sociology may be similar, this need not build a rich group culture.

Departments that pride themselves on admitting a diverse student cohort may find that this choice weakens the group culture. A group that is homogeneous in race, ethnicity, geography, age, gender or sexual orientation may hew together. In contrast, students in a heterogeneous program may focus their extracurricular interests elsewhere. We are not suggesting that strong cultures are inherently *better* than those that are more diffuse, but without some recognition of common circumstance and cultural traditions, shared support may be difficult to maintain. A sense of shared support may mitigate the effects of a status system.

Seeing Graduate Education Sociologically

In the 1987 special issue on graduate education of *The American Sociologist*, Howard Becker presented an iconoclastic view. Based on his experience teaching at Northwestern, Becker suggested that rather than creating a formal program consisting of a core of materials, sociology departments should encourage a continuing dialogue between faculty and students and incorporate their "sociologists in training" formally and informally in their work. Recognizing institutional constraints and the limitations for change inherent in any status system, we suggest reforms that may alleviate some of the negative consequences of graduate training.

We offer advice concerning graduate school education in sociology by identifying directions that sociology departments might follow to facilitate the professional socialization of graduate students. In the absence of these measures, we offer advice to graduate students on how to navigate their current programs. We wish to shape the professional socialization of sociologists with an emphasis on the establishment of group culture and presentational norms as a source of strength for graduate education. Group culture can tame the fearsome lack of charity of status markets.

Recognize Routine Professional Trauma

We recommend institutionalizing a "pro-seminar" introductory course into the curriculum to facilitate the transmission of the informal presentation norms of academics in light of the hidden realities that stand behind these norms. For a moment the sunny surface of success can be pulled back so that students can learn that the anxieties that they feel are not unique, and can be transcended.

At Northwestern University, a pro-seminar in sociology introduces faculty and incoming graduate students to each other. When working properly, this should be more than a weekly advertisement for the hiring successes of the department. Faculty members are expected to share experiences or "war stories" of what it was like to be a graduate student: blood and guts at lunch. In a recent seminar, several faculty members recounted the fears that they experienced in their first year of graduate school. Comparing themselves to the other cohort members, they claimed that they did not feel as intelligent, initially believed that they could not write as well as others, and lacked essential communication and analytical skills. Faculty also shared their anxieties embedded in a profession where one's career is fueled by peer critique. Through such tales graduate students construct new frames of interpretation. They come to recognize that their own pain, isolation, and feelings of inferiority are not only a normal part of the graduate

school experience but may persist throughout their career. Not all faculty are equally comfortable or willing to share their experiences. Some faculty feel more at ease discussing the unpleasant aspects of being an academic. Other faculty members may only share these experiences with select graduate students (Negrey, 1987), while others assiduously avoid discussing any negative aspects of academic life. Nevertheless, to encourage instances where faculty members do share their experiences in graduate school, helping to facilitate the creation of a robust idioculture, we recommend instituting a pro-seminar in the first year curriculum as a means for softening painful feelings tied to graduate school training. Students must realize that their anxiety is not unique, and a group culture with input from faculty experiences helps towards that end.

The pro-seminar also introduces graduate students to the informal professional norms of the discipline. Aspiring sociologists are anxious to learn what is necessary to navigate through the shoals of graduate school and eventual employment. The pro-seminar offers faculty an opportunity to impart the informal professional culture associated with academic sociology, such as the importance of attending professional meetings, submitting papers for publication, writing grant proposals, and social networking. For instance, faculty members at Northwestern informed the incoming graduate students that, in contrast to undergraduate education, success in graduate school is not primarily measured by grades. A student could receive all "A's" in graduate school while not undertaking the necessary steps for landing a job at a research university. Building a professional culture is essential for appreciating the reality of the academic status system.

Encourage Intellectual Discourse

In addition to student-faculty interaction, student interaction is important to the development of professional role commitment (Merton et al., 1957; but see Weiss, 1981). Departments should create workshops or support groups, formal or informal but jointly run by faculty and students, to encourage students to share their knowledge and capitalize on their collective strengths.

Graduate students who internalize the implicit values and norms of their professional reference group attain their desired status more rapidly than their colleagues who fail to embrace what Merton refers to as *anticipatory socialization* (Merton, 1968; Stouffer et al., 1949; Keith and Moore, 1995). In these workshops, students learn to evaluate their graduate school experience and decode their professors' behavior through interaction with more senior students. Graduate students share information about which faculty members are easy to work with, how to obtain grants, how to manage difficult personalities and how to tackle a variety of other issues that plague graduate students. At a recent Northwestern ethnography support group meeting, a group that meets once a month for dinner at a student's home, participants discussed how to negotiate power inequalities with faculty members. A question arose about how diplomatically to inform your faculty advisor that you will not be following their recommendation concerning the scope of your dissertation research. The group discussed a series of solutions to manage a shared problem that too often is treated as unique and idiosyncratic.

We also recommend instituting informal seminars where graduate students critique each other's work and learn the value of collaboration and peer review—for both its substantive and cultural benefits—while recognizing that such occasions add to status pressures. For example, in the second year of study when students are writing their masters theses, students might be required to take a course in which their peers read drafts of

their papers and offer *critical* feedback. Although this exercise can be daunting or distressing, learning how to reconceptualize what at first appears to be personal attacks is mandatory for professional development. Students eventually realize that only through accepting critical feedback from both faculty and peers will they survive in the academic marketplace as it is currently structured. This exercise encourages students early in their professional development to rely on criticism by their colleagues as a source of support and strength.

Promote Student Participation in Departmental Affairs

Sociology departments should encourage active participation by students in the development of the graduate program as well as in other aspects of departmental governance. Graduate students should serve on committees, including both faculty and student recruitment, as much to learn the norms and expectations as to influence policy. These institutionalized sources of voice allow for interaction with faculty and involve students in departmental affairs, including those decisions that most dramatically affect the quality of graduate students' lives, decisions that otherwise would be subtly mysterious (Bouzard et al., 1987).

Graduate students should collaborate with faculty to create course curriculum to meet their research interests. The culture of Northwestern University's graduate program, following Becker's insight, is to provide each student with an opportunity to tailor a program of study to meet his or her research needs. With few Ph.D. requirements, students are encouraged to develop areas of specialization and act as proactive intellectual entrepreneurs by devising independent study courses with faculty members (Ragin and Beck, 1987). This shatters a single status hierarchy, dividing students into research specialties and trajectories, as students come to see each other as specialists, rather than competing generalists.

While some students find this program structure advantageous, particularly those who enter with well-defined research interests, others perceive it as intimidating. It is easy to get lost in such a program if one is not proactive and does not have a clear research focus or someone standing behind in support.

Channel Competition

Competition among graduate students is inevitable and inherent (Crothers, 1991), and in some regards is necessary for occupational success. One might even suggest that there is not enough explicit competition, while too much implicit competition exists in which students never learn where they stand, but inevitably fear the worse. Competition must be structured, rather than be whisked away through airy wishes.

In some domains competition can profitably be minimized. For example, funding is a major source of competition and serves to disadvantage further those who are not selected at first. One finds the Matthew Effect (Merton, 1968a), where those who have been advantaged use that advantage for further benefits. Future success by those who are not selected becomes more difficult because of the burdens that have been assigned. Recognizing that not all departments have sufficient resources, we recommend, when feasible, providing the same funding package to incoming graduate students to minimize competition among students. At least all will begin on a level playing field.

While we do not suggest routine degradation ceremonies for graduate students (as amusing as this might be for insecure faculty and for students not chosen), students should demand fuller and more honest feedback. Students should resent evaluative inflation, particularly when such evaluation is largely hot and moist air. A culture of candor is not easy for recipients or providers but it does lead to career choices being selected, rather than being assigned by an impersonal job market. Put another way, the truth of a reputation market should be acknowledged within the culture of graduate students and faculty, and not simply hidden in one's cognitive attic like an odd and mortifying aunt. Student evaluations must mean something or they will have no currency until bills are due.

Not surprisingly there is great institutional reluctance to institute a *culture of candor*. It can be an unpleasant task to deliver bad news to an eager, insecure student. On many occasions faculty members have been left to console an emotionally fragile student—pain brought on by their own hands. Not all faculty members relish the idea of crushing a student's dream, "cooling the mark out," or even something more innocuous, like informing a student that they should consider their options. We recommend that faculty display sympathetic candor when offering negative feedback. Both the positive and negative attributes of a student should be discussed in a constructive fashion. If a student, for example, does not demonstrate adequate quantitative skills, a faculty member should not only inform the student of this weakness, but also encourage the student, if appropriate, to pursue qualitative research, perhaps highlighting the student's interviewing skills.

Coping on One's Own

Although we perceive our suggestions as modest and mild, we have no illusions as to their rapid adoption. Given the institutional reluctance to embrace a culture of candor, coupled with organization inertia, paradise is not knocking on the schoolhouse door. In the absence of the hiring Dr. Pangloss, we offer advice to students on how to cope with their current programs, as most are now structured. While we believe, as devout sociologists, that institutional change is desirable, psychology is better than distress.

Think before You Speak

We have all been taught since elementary school that "no question is a stupid question." This may have been true in a second grade class but not for reputation building in graduate school with faculty members. Crucial to socialization and professional development is communication with faculty members. These exchanges occur within a status system in which faculty are continually evaluating graduate students. A student's presentation of self, whether s/he is articulate, asks legitimate questions, or makes insightful comments contributes to faculty assessments of a student's talent. Just as thoughtful questions build a solid reputation, some questions or comments stain a student's delicate reputation.

To succeed in graduate school, students must be aware of the how their comments are perceived and what domains are taboo. First, a student should never inadvertently disclose their lack of sociological training. Asking a faculty member in class "Who is Karl Marx?" or "What is fieldwork?" are two egregious examples where a student inadvert-

ently reveals a lack of disciplinary knowledge. Of course, students are in school to learn and be guided, but students should never mistake the classroom for a space where ignorance is welcomed. Faculty members evaluate students based on class discussion, chatter in the hallways, and exchanges behind closed doors. To avoid making inadvertent errors, students must observe their peers, assessing how they interact with faculty, and gauge the reception of other students' comments.

Second, students should be cautious disclosing outside interests such as time-consuming leisure activities and family commitments, avoiding the perception that they are not serious about work or do not have the time to devote to a rigorous academic program. One Northwestern student described her leisure passions to a faculty member. After disclosing that she was taking pottery classes and had summer travel plans, the faculty member admonished her that graduate school must be her first priority. He instructed her that to succeed in academia she would be forced to make tough life choices. Students must demonstrate that their work is their life's passion, otherwise faculty members will not invest precious time or resources in those students who are perceived as insufficiently dedicated. Indeed, their work *should be* their life's passion.

Revealing ambivalence about becoming a researcher is dangerous in an institution where prestige is linked to graduate student placement. Disclosing that placement in a top research institution is not one's goal may leave not a reputational smudge, but a scar. As in any workplace environment, talk hides behind closed doors. A lack of desire to become a researcher may limit faculty attention or career options. Why would a professor invest five years in a student's career without the repayment of reputational and intellectual reach?

Profit from Criticism

For many students graduate training is associated with isolation and feelings of inferiority, a result of criticism offered by faculty members. When students encounter critique, they often retreat or, worse, define their feelings as unique. They interpret their responses as a psychologist might: I must be the problem. Despite their sociological training, they ignore that their anxieties may be structural, not personal. Therein lies the structural vulnerability of embracing criticism. They lack Mills' (1959) "sociological imagination," finding personal troubles where social problems belong. During their training, students interpret all criticism as harsh, lashing it to their sense of self. Yet, such criticism, often mild in contrast to anonymous reviews, must be managed as an occupational routine for a professional self. If a student does not reconceptualize what they are conceiving as *ad hominem* attacks, professional development is unlikely.

First, a student must contextualize the feedback received. Are the negative comments given by a faculty member with a reputation for slaying students without remorse? Knowing the background, personality, and reputation of the evaluator matters. Deciphering whether one's experience is unique must be the first step. This knowledge permits a student to reconceptualize the experience as routine – or not. If routine, the student has a choice to learn to accept that this is how this faculty member mentors his/her students or search for another advisor who may not have such a pungent mentoring style. It is in students' best interest to acquire this crucial information from more senior graduate students early in their careers, especially when selecting a dissertation committee.

Second, a student must interpret criticism and react appropriately. Does the criticism relate to the arguments advanced in a particular paper, one's writing style, facility with

the literature, or one's time management skills? Can the problems be remedied? No matter the substance of the comments, students may treat all negative feedback as a justification for questioning their future without carefully reflecting on the remarks. For example, one Northwestern student received a comment on a paper that read, "You wrote quite badly in this paper so I quite often could not tell what you were arguing." A stream of criticisms followed this line. After seeing only the first line of the comments, this student did not read the remainder of the review. He described the experience as "paralyzing" and questioned whether he should continue in graduate school. The student became afraid to approach this faculty member for guidance believing that he was perceived as an "idiot who can't write." This internalization of negative comments becomes self-fulfilling. Instead of dissecting the critique to decipher the problem and learn from the advice given, this student pitched the paper on a dusty shelf along with hopes of being an effective writer. This experience exacerbated his fear of writing and cemented his resolve not to share his work. Fear of failure, not this faculty member alone, sabotaged his career. A more productive response would have included approaching the faculty member to clarify murky points and offering to rewrite the paper. Tenacity goes a long way in building any career—academia is no different.

Learning to evaluate faculty assessment and understanding the process of labeling is crucial for professional development. If a student demonstrates weaknesses such as poor analytical skills, faculty members may notice these deficiencies and pass this information onto their colleagues. Consequently, faculty members who have no personal experience with a student other than the opinions offered by a colleague may eliminate this student for consideration as a research assistant for fear that the student will not succeed. Departmental recognition such as grants and awards are rarely offered to students who lack faculty endorsements.

Talent does exist. Not all graduate students will be offered faculty positions upon graduation. When should a student determine that faculty feedback is an indication that they should choose another career or aspire to work at a non-research institution? Students must reflect on their passion for the discipline. What aspects of the work are most tedious and unpleasant? Is it writing, researching, data collection and/or reading literature? If completing a research project is torture, perhaps an academic research career is the wrong choice. If writing is a burden, perhaps teaching at a community college or small liberal arts school is a better fit.

Know Thy Department

One of the greatest mistakes of aspiring students is not treating academia as an entrepreneurial space and not recognizing the demands for reputation work. Some graduate students do not position themselves as ambitious, productive, and creative. As a result, they fail to recognize the importance of social networking and impression management. From the moment a student enters graduate school, s/he must perform as a future faculty member by acting professionally, speaking articulately, and treating school as a rehearsal for a career.

Before selecting a graduate program, students must research the department to gain a feel for faculty members and current graduate students. Graduate students should be aware of each faculty member's research interests, current projects, productivity, attitudes to collaboration, and records of student placement. Once enrolled, students must understand the department culture, learning informally who is difficult to work with,

who receives the most funding, who is generous with time, and who is likely to leave the department. This information will facilitate the transition into graduate school as well as identify potential faculty mentors.

Students also need to spend time at the department, attending meetings, participating in student activities, and making their presence felt. Cultivating relationships with faculty members is essential for professional development and reputation building. Faculty have sponsorship ties with other universities and offer students opportunities to co-author articles. In a profession that is driven by the number and quality of publications, opportunities for collaboration must be seized. Those students who lose touch with the daily life at their department are often those who are not on track.

Reputations and Cultures: Sociology as a Vacation

We opened with a quote from Weber's classic address "Science as a Vocation" in which he questioned the meaning of engaging in intellectual activity as one's lifework. This question still plagues young sociologists. What does it mean to become an academic? More importantly, how does one gain entrée to a profession where only a few gain institutional rewards and the recipe for success is variable, uncertain or undisclosed? During the course of training, many graduate students feel isolated, alienated, distrustful, unworthy, and untalented. What is most troubling sociologically is that many students conceptualize their experiences as personal and unique rather than inevitable roadblocks on the passage through graduate school. They lack a sociological imagination.

All social worlds are status systems. No matter how unnerving, academic life is no different. Authority, power, and network position determine standing. Sociology is a profession with institutionalized practices driven by status attainment. Hierarchy and social interaction have a dialectical relationship. The faculty-student relationship is one of structured inequality in which the graduate student occupies a provisional role until authorities confirm his/her reputation as a scholar. Through socialization, student identities are negotiated within a reputation market linked to status politics. The problem is that students do not always know the rules, and even when they do, they do not know how to play the game. Moreover, the uncertainty of not knowing one's standing in a cohort can be paralyzing to professional development. All students must actively consider not only if they really wish an academic career but also if the academic world wants them. During their five to ten years of study, watching debt mount, students agonize over their fate. Will they be offered a position at a prominent research institution, at a liberal arts school, at a community college, or receive no offer at all?

Given this reality, graduate education reform is still possible without resorting to utopianism. Reform begins with the recognition of a status system, group culture, and structural inequalities. Recognizing common circumstances may mitigate these doleful effects. We offer our advice as an invitation for sociologists to think like sociologists. By addressing the social psychological aspects of the lives of student communities and cultures, we hope to facilitate the professional development of graduate students and spark further debate about the current state of graduate education. If these hopes are illusory, at least they pay tribute to our sociological imagination.

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