
Unveiling the Cloak of Competence: Cultivating Authenticity in Graduate Sociology

ANTONY J. PUDDEPHATT, BENJAMIN W. KELLY, AND MICHAEL ADORJAN

In the summer 2005 issue of *The American Sociologist*, there were a series of essays that applied the sociological eye to the issue of graduate school experience, providing insightful and, at times, uncomfortable examinations of the “underside” of this competitive endeavor.¹ In this issue, Ferrales and Fine (2005) presented an incisive analysis of the realities of labeling processes that inevitably emerge in graduate school, and the repercussions this carries with it.² The authors argue that the quest for supervisors is competitive, and that the professoriate must make typifications about students rather quickly, in order to choose whom to work with and whom to avoid. Beyond simply passing the minimum requirements of the program in terms of courses, comprehensive exams, and the dissertation, they argue that the cultivation of a positive reputation (conveying the image of a hardworking, intelligent student) is an essential part of success. Thus, if the student is ignorant of a relevant theorist or issue in classroom discussion, this should be effectively hidden. There is such a thing, Ferrales and Fine warn, as a “stupid question”; as such, displaying this sort of ineptitude should be avoided. Further, students who are planning to vacation over the summer, or invest time in leisure pursuits, ought not to advertise this, as it is a sign that they are not fully committed to the demands of the discipline. Under the constant monitoring and surveillance of the professorial gatekeepers, students must be active in censoring that which could serve to harm their academic reputational identities.

It is this piece of advice we take issue with, as we argue that it has negative normative ramifications for our profession in the long term. Further, we believe that the degree of bureaucratic impression management enacted by graduate students (and others) varies

Antony J. Puddephatt is a postdoctoral fellow in the Science and Technology Studies Department at Cornell University. His interests include sociological theory, science and technology studies, and ethnographic research. He is currently studying the dynamics of multidisciplinary research collaborations in the natural sciences. **Benjamin W. Kelly** is a doctoral candidate with the Sociology department at McMaster University. His interests include qualitative methods, social problems work and identity formation within organizations. He is currently doing research on the social construction of competence and authenticity within the teaching profession. **Michael Adorjan** is a doctoral candidate with the Sociology department at McMaster University. He is interested in everything, though presently studies crime and deviance, social problems, and the construction of identity. He is currently conducting research on the implementation of the new Youth Criminal Justice Act in Canada.

considerably by academic setting, and should be studied with respect to situated academic cultural contexts. Overall, we consider the widely neglected positive aspects of a “cultivation of authenticity” within academic discourse in contrast to impression management. We believe exercising sincerity is essential to developing strong bonds within the network spaces of academia, and is necessary for maximizing innovation and creativity at the collective level of our discipline.

First, we will argue that the papers written in the *American Sociologist* are based largely on the experience of participating in a “top 20” American graduate school sociology program, and thus refer to the unique culture of these upper-tier schools. We argue that the structural realities that are present at these institutions are different, and exert different pressures, than those at universities that are found lower in the hierarchy. Thus, our place in a middle-range Canadian research-oriented department provided the necessary standpoint to spot the elite bias in the special issue, and we argue that the absence of a rigid pecking order at lower-tier schools exerts different pressures in the micro context of face-to-face behavior. Second, we argue more generally that the development of a positive reputation is not entirely contingent on a Machiavellian approach to identity management and the presentation of self. Rather than reducing the self to a set of burocratic roles, we argue that the cultivation of the “authentic self” (Trilling, 1972; Erickson, 1995) can be a workable strategy for the individual to enter successfully into scholarly networks. Finally, we try to demonstrate that while presenting a false, “front stage” self where necessary is important for individual advancement, adopting this as a normative strategy for the collective is detrimental to the cultivation of scholarly culture generally. The adoption of a “cloak of competence” (Haas and Shaffir, 1991) often translates into a “cloak of conformity,” serving to jeopardize the innovation and creative potential of scholarly meetings and work. Applying Steve Fuller’s (2002) method of “social epistemology” to the sociological disciplinary culture, we consider the merits of encouraging the cultivation of authenticity in graduate school. We argue that this provides a better normative vision as a way to socialize graduate students into participating in open scholarly exchanges that may serve to enhance the creative potential of the professional sociological collective.

Elite Structures in Sociology: A Canadian Perspective

The need to advance through the Bourdieuan hierarchy of the sociological institution, mindful of the hidden “rules of the game,” is clearly essential. The development of an appropriate sociological academic *habitus* is vital for an individual to enjoy upward mobility within the “field” of graduate sociology at first, and then the larger discipline (Bourdieu, 1988, 1993). Goffmanian impression management is clearly part of the requirement in the pursuit of career advancement, as under the scrutiny of the panopticon-like labeling processes of the professors, one cannot afford to front a bad image (e.g., ignorance, laziness) to those who are in power (Ferales and Fine, 2005). Indeed, entrance into the right scholarly networks is the key to success, especially in a discipline like sociology, where “objective” measures of quality are fuzzy, ill-defined, and often based more on a consensus logic than established universal standards. Randall Collins’ (1998) network study of philosophy shows the vital importance of students latching onto influential mentors if they are going to successfully enter the remarkably small “attention space” within the discipline that is afforded by the law of small numbers. Hanneman’s (2001) study of the hierarchical network relations that govern sociology specifically leave absolutely no

doubt that in our discipline, entry into the right networks early on are extremely important (see also Burris, 2004).

However, if students are more interested in finding employment at some research university, rather than landing in scarce elite spaces within the sociological field, these issues are less important. All students require networks of one sort or another to find employment; elite networks are only necessary for elite jobs. Certainly at a top 20 American school from which most of *The American Sociologist* articles are based, there is a rat race of sorts on the part of the students who compete for the small numbers of “big name” supervisors. Who would not want to gain the specific insights, and enjoy the network connections, of people like Michael Burawoy, Patricia Adler and Peter Adler, and Gary Alan Fine, just to name a few? Entering into these “invisible colleges” of network relations is proven to be invaluable and almost mandatory for elite advancement at the cutting edge of the field (Crane, 1963). Playing the Machiavellian game of aligning one’s beliefs to these powerful few certainly pays big dividends in the hallways that are found at the top level of our discipline. However, as one moves down the hierarchy from these elite institutions, the same pressures are not there, or at least not to the same magnitude. For example, Canadian schools are much less hierarchical, and do not have the same competitive pressures for “big name” advisors, which provides a nice comparative example in contrast to top elite American schools.

Thus, following Burawoy’s (2005b) call for the importance of “provincializing” American sociological contributions appropriately within its larger global context, we offer a discussion from the perspective of Canadian graduate school to offer a comparative example of how less hierarchical structures affect graduate school culture and experience. We argue that flatter hierarchies lessen the pressures of labeling and the related need for impression management, which may open up space for a greater cultivation of authenticity within the professional culture. As such, the Canadian case offers a useful contrast to elite American departments, and provides comparisons to lower and middle tier American schools. McLaughlin (2005) has provided three reasons why Canadian sociology is challenged by various historical, institutional and cultural factors, leading to what he calls a “coming crisis” for the discipline North of the border (see also McLaughlin, 2004; McLaughlin and Puddephatt, forthcoming).

Canadian sociology departments are clearly not stratified in the same manner as top-tier schools in America, and the range of diversity that is acceptable in Canada is probably broader overall. Furthermore, there are less “stars” in Canadian sociology departments, as the top people who occupy the extremely narrow “attention space” (Collins, 1998) of our field tend to work at top American research centers, where they enjoy much higher salaries and greatly reduced teaching loads. For all of these reasons, we believe the Canadian case of graduate school experience offers a nice comparison to more elite institutions. Graduate school in Canada offers an excellent example of lower tier departments with flatter status hierarchies, which probably characterize the majority of North American graduate programs, in contrast to the “top 20” and Ivy League schools that were the focus of *The American Sociologist* issue examining graduate school.

As such, the structural hierarchies of schools have a great deal of influence on what Ferrales and Fine (2005) describe as the three core disciplinary constructs of identity, reputation and group culture. For example, Canadian schools are characterized by much less “inter-inequality” (inequality between institutions), and they are also characterized by less “intra-inequality” (inequality existing within departments, between professors). As mentioned, the “big names” of our field tend to gravitate to the top research universi-

ties in America, where the most symbolic, financial, and resource-based rewards are to be found. While the changing political climate in the United States has helped Canada to attract some more of America's top scholars, certainly those scholars who carry the most reputational prestige are living south of the border, centered largely around the top elite research institutions. The lack of a few clear "heavyweight" scholars in Canadian departments greatly reduces the intensity of the rat race by which students have to compete for particular supervisors. If one makes a bad impression to the strongest scholar in a Canadian department, he or she does not have a long way to fall by working with the next person down the symbolic totem pole. The status differences within departments in Canada are simply not as great, reducing the pressure to impress those at the top of this flatter internal hierarchy. The same is likely to be true at less prestigious schools in the United States as well.

Professors have to evaluate the ability and potential of their students, a process that is replete with subjectivism (Cicourel and Kituse, 1963). This process of "tracking" and "streaming" is complicated, and made possible by way of typifying student success along categories that resonate with personal, professional, and organizational goals. The competence of graduate students is a social accomplishment that has gatekeepers drawing on "collective representations" generated by the faculty to determine who among the students are worthy of investment. This is an inevitable structural reality in any system where there are gatekeepers and large numbers of people who want in. However, the egalitarian structure of the Canadian graduate school culture lessens these pressures considerably, and probably shares much with non-elite departments in the United States.

We argue that the reduced pressure afforded by such flattened hierarchies allows more room for the cultivation of the "authentic self" in the socialization process. Trilling (1972) defines "authenticity" as a prediscursive and internally felt state of being (one's own self-feeling), not to be confused with "sincerity," which involves the projection of authenticity to others in contexts of interaction. Can a notion like "authenticity" be treated as something that is variable in relation to differing social locations, historical epochs, and structural hierarchies? Alvin Gouldner (1970) argues that it can. Goffman's dramaturgical social theory itself, he argues, is a symptomatic sign that the modern middle class are moving towards a greater concern with "utility" at the expense of more classical concerns with "morality." The very fact that the modern world has become a stage for insincere and false selves in interaction is a sign of the (somewhat disturbing) historical period we are facing that is marked by increased market competition and the solidification of bureaucratic roles. This concern is largely echoed in the work of Marshall Berman (1970), who argues that the radical individualism associated with the increasing modernization of Western society serves to alienate the authentic self by suppressing it in the pursuit of upward mobility.

As well as authenticity being a historically contingent product, it also varies in terms of race and class. Rawls' (2000) study of racial tensions between white and black workers shows that blacks had a much greater concern with displaying their inner feelings, while in contrast, whites were much more likely to value the suppression of the same, being much more comfortable with assigned, categorical definitions of selfhood. Undoubtedly, this results out of differing cultures of opportunity between groups. If access to opportunity structures is almost entirely blocked, certainly one has increased freedom to cultivate authenticity. In the words of Janis Joplin, "freedom's just another word for nothing left to lose." In line with this, we suggest that flatter hierarchies of status will tend to foster a greater level of authenticity in face-to-face interactions, as there is less pressure for

attaining upward mobility. Thus, Canadian graduate programs, as well as lower-tiered schools in America, are likely to enjoy greater freedom in cultivating authenticity than elite schools, but at the obvious cost of jeopardizing their place within the sociological opportunity structure. Certainly, this is only at the level of theoretical conjecture, and only more detailed, comparative studies of graduate culture can give us greater confidence in this point.

Nevertheless, we argue that cultivating the “authentic self,” as opposed to the Goffmanian (1959) “role self” is another viable, and perhaps even essential, strategy for gaining favor with those in power, and hence gaining entry into the important network spaces at all levels of the discipline. While this is a lesson that is almost necessarily generated from our own particular structural standpoint within the lower tiers of the academy (where we believe the cultivation of authenticity and sincerity is less problematic), we argue that the normative orientation we suggest may offer lessons for those occupying the most elite positions of the academy.

The Oversocialized Conception of Graduate Students

Ferrales and Fine (2005) warn students that as the labeling process within the structural hierarchy of status of graduate programs proceed, they must effectively promote a favorable impression in order to cope with and resist potentially negative designations attributed to them from the professoriate. This must be done in at least two ways: (1) never admit ignorance (e.g., questions like “Who is Karl Marx?”), and (2) never give off the image of non-commitment (“I am planning to sign up for pottery lessons soon”). Both of these types of statements lead to negative identities, and will likely be warning signs to prospective supervisors to steer clear. Both indicate that the student is not serious, and does not have what it takes to pursue what is expected in a graduate career. To gain employment in academia, gaining favor with important gatekeepers and academic networks is vital. As a result of this structural reality, Ferrales and Fine (2005) argue that the student should keep their identity masks on tight at all times (Strauss, 1959).

While this may seem to be sensible advice for students who have a vested interest in protecting their identities to the eyes of the faculty, we would like to make a case that this sort of advice can lead to a slippery slope whereby behavior turns pathological and potentially counterproductive. Let us consider Haas and Shaffir’s (1991) case study of the use of impression management at a graduate medical program. They argue the evaluation process that goes on in medical school is not an objective of meritocratic process. Rather, drawing on Edgerton’s (1967) notion of the “cloak of competence,” Haas and Shaffir show that it is those students who are able to more or less successfully win a favorable impression at various critical moments (especially early in the assessment process) that leads to positive reputational outcomes and evaluations. And, once this positive reputation is secured early on, this often sticks—the “cloak of competence” has been securely donned. If this form of assessment, and strategy on the part of students was taken to its logical extreme, the type of manipulative behavior that could ensue would border on the psychopathological. Students could spend all their time studying faculty’s theoretical, methodological, and political preferences and work hard to exploit these in deceptive interactional routines. Students, as Goffmanian (1969) envisioned “players” who actively manipulate the professors as “marks,” might wait until a faculty member is in earshot, and proceed to deliver the sort of “strategic interaction” among each other that would lead

the professor to believe they have been spoken about with high praise. The myriad imagined situations of the potential “hustles” that could take place follows a well established literature in Chicago school ethnography about cons, grifting, and thieving practices of the most licentious sort (Shaw, 1930; Sutherland, 1933; Goffman, 1952, Prus and Irini, 1980; Prus and Sharper, 1991).

We argue that to gain access to networks, and build strong bonds with important gatekeepers, supervisors, and the like, the cultivation and presentation of the “authentic” self, as well as the “role” self, is absolutely essential. The reader may ask if it is even possible to make such a conceptual division. Is there such a thing as an “authentic” self that is in some way separate from the “role” self? And, once a role is internalized for long enough, doesn’t this fall out of awareness such that the individual no longer has to put on an act, such that the “real” self and the “role” self are indistinguishable? Mead realized that people are actors in everyday life, yet he did not think that the self as an object could be reduced to a set of internalized dramaturgical roles. Mead’s consideration of the “I”-“Me” dialectic refers to the very issue that the self cannot be reduced purely to an amalgamation of role-categories and socialization processes, but also biologically generated impulses that are in some measure autonomous from the sociosymbolic realm (Zeitlin, 2001). This understanding of the dialectical self (a product of the biologic and the social taken together) is consonant with Wiley’s (1994) definition of the semiotic self, and escapes a full encapsulation of the self in what Wrong (1961) famously coined an “oversocialized conception of man.” The fact that the self is in part a product of the interplay of internal impulses guarantees that we can never be fully programmed by the social contexts within which we are embedded.

Even if one were to reject the Meadian account of self, a distinction still ought to be made between the “self as experienced” versus the “self as presented.” In a brilliant article, Erickson (1995: 125) criticizes Goffman in that he “did not delineate [the backstage] aspect of self as completely as his ‘impression manager’.” Erickson argues cogently that actors’ felt senses of authenticity (e.g., value frameworks) are relatively stable across social contexts, and precede role identities as important concepts for self and identity. Despite this, she argues rightly that they have been grossly under-studied and overlooked in sociological research. While Erickson views this “authentic self” as a social product that emerges in part through an immersion in socialization contexts, it is still clearly separated from any *particular* socialization context. Georg Simmel (1908) recognized long ago that the self never emerges within one specific context, but rather, comes about through the overlapping and complex “web of group affiliations” the individual straddles. Thus, an individual picks up values, beliefs, and thoughts from a number of social spheres that are not always appropriate across all contexts equally, including graduate sociology programs. Hence, there is a tension that emerges between the individuals’ internal feelings/experiences of self versus the presentation of the self to specific audiences. Even Goffman’s (1959) very argument about the presentation of self implies that there is a real self lying underneath of the presentation that should be kept hidden and censored; otherwise, there would no need for such elaborate strategies to be enacted on the “front stage.”

Thus, if there is in fact a distinction between the experienced self and that which is presented within a specific context, the question is whether or not the authentic self ought to be presented if it diverges too much from the localized expectations of the graduate school context. How much should one conform to norms, roles, and specific positions and opinions of those in power, and how much should one allow potential felt conflicts to emerge at the level of interaction? As we have argued, there is no question that

entrance into scholarly networks is absolutely essential to success in the job market that awaits the student after graduate school. The question is how much “face-work” is necessary to accomplish and win favor with important gatekeepers. Certainly, Granovetter’s (1983) argument that “weak ties” are important in gaining employment probably hold true in academic markets much like in the business world. However, the roots of a few strong bonds must lie at the bottom from which a potential tree of weak ties is possible. Much like in snowball sampling, one needs an initial gatekeeper to hold the potential entrant in high enough regard to introduce, recommend, and go out of one’s way to help. In the academic game, strong ties are everything for the student. This begs the question of what it takes to build strong ties to begin with, in, for example, a student-supervisor relationship? We argue that the presentation and cultivation of authenticity within the interactional dynamics of graduate school is absolutely vital for the development of strong, non-superficial bonds that allow for the forging of broad networks down the road.

The presentation of authentic and potentially divergent points of view and argumentation are important in developing strong interpersonal bonds on at least four counts. First, we argue that too much agreement and “impression management” strategizing can have negative reputational effects. Developing the reputation as a “player” is clearly counterproductive, particularly when one is concerned with developing strong ties. Goffman himself admits that implementing “spy games” that play too perfectly can be detrimental. Once the tactician is “found out” as an inauthentic game-player, the level of trust that might have been generated between actors is severely jeopardized. Goffman (1969: 67) writes: “few persons can manage to [lie] without expressing in some way that they are not telling the truth ... these giveaway signs can be strategically crucial when opponents are in one another’s immediate presence.” There is nobody on more tenuous reputational ground than one who is thought to make a good used car salesman. The label of “bullshitter” or “ass-kisser” is an identity imputation that is difficult to extricate. To prevent this, admitting disagreements or lifestyle/academic imperfections is a sound strategy to settle the worries of people that you are always on guard. By dropping their guard intentionally, actors says to others that they are not sycophantic, and not always engaged in a confidence game while in scholarly interactions, which pays dividends in the projection of reputational integrity and trust.

Second, we argue that displaying a less-agreeable authentic self allows for the possibility of an identity associated with originality, and the positive identity attributions associated with those who are willing to “paint outside the lines.” Imber (2005) bolsters this point in his advice for students that ambition, leadership, and integrity are qualities that ought to be cultivated, and that these are often rewarded over and above conformity to specific camps, highlighting the necessity of forming multiple networks. Thus, we are sure the reader knows all too well the reputational dilemmas associated with “walking textbooks” who merely recite memorized vernacular of the “gospel” of some school of thought. Students often try to earn points in class by reciting rehearsed and pre-established facts rather than exercising speculative, probing, exploratory, and *in vivo* arguments that diverge from established theory. Thus, students must go beyond the recital of uncontroversial truths and orthodoxies in order to stand out in a positive way both in the eyes of faculty and fellow students. “Gut checks” are essential to progress; there is no safe way to earn reputational capital in classroom debate. No risk, no reward.

Third, ritual theory tells us that there is a deeper level than the symbolic that bonds people together in successful interactions. Goffman’s use of Durkheim in his analysis of

successful rituals (1967), and Collins' (2004) synthesis of these thinkers in his exposition of the requirement of "emotional energy" within encounters, all assume a level of connection between actors that runs at a deeper level than traditional sociological understandings of "impression management." Turner's (2000) of the importance of connecting hardwired emotional feelings in social intercourse alludes to the fact that impression management is not sufficient in the development of strong social bonds. While it is arguable that great hustlers could feign these emotional connections that serve to bolster interactions and closeness, certainly deep emotional rituals are much more difficult to fake. There is no question that the emotional aspects (largely neglected to the detriment of much of microsociology) find their root at a substratum below the diplomatic enactments of roles in process. If one wishes to develop strong ties to faculty, certainly the emotional energy attached to genuine, passionate exchanges are required, to move the relationship beyond the superficial level.

Finally, while a presentation of authentic and conflictual selves in relation to academic social contexts may indeed bring about conflict, it is again Georg Simmel who teaches us about the functional necessity of this for the forging of strong interpersonal bonds (1908). Simmel argues that in the absence of conflict, strong bonds such as marriages and close friendships are likely to weaken to the point of rupture. As such, ongoing conflicts serve as an integrative force at the interpersonal and group level. Certainly it is those students who are able to passionately challenge their mentors with new, conflictual ideas that garner the most respect in the long run. No group can be entirely harmonious and hope to stay together; conflict is a necessary social glue for the maintenance of solidarity. As Lewis Coser (1956: 39-40) eloquently writes:

Conflict is thus seen as performing group maintaining functions insofar as it regulates systems of relationships. It "clears the air," i.e., it eliminates the accumulation of blocked and balked hostile dispositions by allowing their free behavioral expression. Simmel echoes Shakespeare's King John: "So foul a sky clears not without a storm."

We can see here that Simmel and Coser emphasize the "free expression" of conflictual dispositions as a way to diffuse tension and maintain bridges between actors who carry lingering disagreements. This lets others know where they stand, diffuses pent-up frustrations (which if left to fester would be far more damaging) and forges authentic bonds of mutual understanding in the most genuine sense. Thus, without the introduction of conflictual argumentation, it is impossible, even in principle, for the graduate student to forge a meaningful and lasting social bond with a higher-up.

Hopefully, we have demonstrated that students have much to gain through the cultivation and presentation of a divergent authentic self to others in graduate school as a complementary strategy to traditionally conceived Goffmanian impression management. It is also worth noting that strong bonds between student and teacher arise through the adequacy of personality fit, common outside interests (in which case admitting extra-curricular interests could actually be beneficial) and other intangible things that are in certain ways removed from the scholarly game and the academic "circuit of exchange" (Zelizer, 1994). Certainly, playing the bureaucratic roles found in academic status games are not the be-all end all to the formation of a positive reputation. Whether or not we have convinced the reader that the cultivation of authenticity is a good career move at the individual level, we hope to prove without any doubt that, at the level of the sociological collective as a whole, the cultivation of authenticity is vital to maximizing innovation and the production of knowledge.

On Socializing the Next Generation of Sociologists: Identity Work versus Authentic Exchange in the Academic Arena

At this point, the reader may not believe that authentic exchanges are fully advisable and that Goffmanian face-work (covering weaknesses and feigning competence) is the most important interactional strategy to get ahead in graduate school. Ferrales and Fine (2005) argued very convincingly that students should be status conscious and aware of the labeling processes that are going on. Thus, the selective presentation the self is vital so as to neutralize or exploit these processes as they go on. Still, we must be careful of the implicit normative vision that accompanies this advice. What if we were to switch our level of analysis from the individual student to the collective? If all students take this advice, it becomes much harder for professors to make fair assessments along the way, since real weaknesses are far less visible; the selection process might be even less meritorious than it is now, hurting deserving students. Further, training students to be effective “impression managers” will result in behavior that is utilized not only in graduate school, but will become internalized, and carry on to infest their behavior at the professional level as well. Do we want professors and graduate students to operate at a level of status and identity consciousness that is higher than what is currently seen at conferences and other academic settings now? Or, do we wish to instead cultivate a level of authenticity and sincerity in the sociological culture that might serve to break down status competition and enhance collective scholarly interchange? We argue for the possibility of the latter.

Consider the following exchange one of the Canadian-trained student authors had recently with a professor who was trained at a top 20 American school. The student began to argue with the professor about an issue that was closely related to the professor’s specialty. Before long, the student noticed a sudden change of verbiage, closely followed by an *ad hominem* dismissal of the students’ credentials. This statement effectively cut off the dialogue, and stopped the discussion from continuing on. The professor said the following:

You’re not going to *win* this one, Frank. *I have thought about these issues far longer than you have.* You should just give it up.

It does not take much background in discourse analysis to decode the meaning that undergirds this statement. In a sense, this rhetorical tactic is the reversal of Blumer’s notion of the “sensitizing concept,” what Will Van den Hoonaard (1996) has referred to as a “de-sensitizing” concept, a definition brought to bear that is intended to cut off and stunt inquiry, rather than encourage it. Further, the emphasis is not on what is actually said, but the identity of who is saying it. Bourdieu’s (1988) emphasis that “who” is often more important than “what,” especially in the status tensions of academic discourse, is clearly demonstrated. Not only did the statement convey the message “no matter what you say, it is really irrelevant, since you are not an expert and cannot be trusted on this, while I am,” it also cut off dialogue. The professor tried to communicate that the debate must end now, or the young professor may need to display his/her own ignorance within a topic of specialty in which s/he is trying to gain legitimacy. At all costs, there was a need to avoid the potential “fool making” encounter that might unfold if the discourse was allowed to continue (Klapp, 1962). What might have been an occasion to dialogue and learn from one another turned into a contest, whereby *winning* was defined as the desired end. Obviously, this slant toward the identity ramifications of a dialogue increases

in situations where there is a peer audience casting judgments. In this case, there was indeed a fellow professor sitting to watch the identity ramifications associated with the debate that would stop so abruptly.

Of course, this is not an isolated example. We can all think of occasions within academic discourse where concerns with status dynamics and identity outcomes curtailed the genuine pursuit of knowledge. It is either the professors with trumped up egos trying to win points in the eyes of their followers, or meek students who are far more afraid to speak up and contest an idea. There are the neurotic professors who are so status conscious he/she is fearful of opening oneself to attacks that would jeopardize their professional identity. Then there are professors who are so identity conscious that they refuse to admit they are wrong or ignorant where they are, which effectively prevents the generation of what might have been a healthy public dialogue. Further, there is the temptation by sociologists to win points by reciting sociological clichés and fancy jargon in order to win out in the scramble for reputational and symbolic capital. There are professors who shut up students with *ad hominem* dismissals to protect their own expert authority, as the above example illustrates. Such a system harkens back to Fromm's (1941) discussion of sadomasochistic hierarchies of authoritarianism in the military, whereby one bows down to those above, and kicks at those below. Alternatively, this rings true of Weber's patrimonial domination where "loyalty and fidelity" is demanded from those in lower positions (e.g., Jackall, 1988). This is certainly a far cry from Merton's (1973) ideal norms of communism and universality in science.

What we have in the end is a zero-sum game whereby academics compete for scarce resources of symbolic capital, where winners emerge and losers fall by the wayside. Collins (1998: 34) argues that the would-be gains in emotional energy that accrue through interactions in academic contexts of discourse can be stifled when "the power situation in the immediate interaction is unfavorable, reducing one's emotional energy, and leaving one unable to have the confidence and initiative to use one's cultural capital to good social effect." Hence, power imbalances create difficulties in reaching the Habermasian (1987) "ideal speech community" that would enable open and emotionally energizing discourse. Hence, status battling is a detriment to the free flow of ideas. There is no doubt that status and identity management get in the way of honest and open intellectual exchange, and, as Collins reminds us, this becomes even worse as those at the bottom of status hierarchies are most likely to stay there, since a lack of emotional energy through exchange tends to breed a culture of failure, while cultures of high emotional energy (found near the center of research networks) are more likely to continue to output high levels of emotionally inducing collective discussion.

Fuller (2002) has characterized this power imbalance as a permanent fixture in our current organization of knowledge, and has termed this the "authoritarian theory of knowledge" (ATK). This is the notion that since power and status are ever present and tightly connected with expertise, there is a system upheld where constant deference to the relevant experts is the norm, even in cases where this is not warranted. The academy is characterized by a hegemonic, top-down structure, whereby the few deemed worthy of esteem are allowed to determine the course of inquiry and the shape of the field. Dissenting, marginal, and unorthodox, "fringe" sciences are afforded little chance in the scramble for academic scarcity, and are rarely if ever rewarded with material and symbolic resources for development (see Collins and Pinch, 1993). Thus, in order to be successful under an authoritarian knowledge regime, the rational actor is best to conform to established approaches, trends, fads, and fashions in order to garner the greatest academic and profes-

sional rewards. Thus, authoritarian structures of knowledge, arguably the most prevalent in today's academic climate, serve to create an overwhelming substratum of conformity; innovation and creativity is jeopardized since the risk/reward payoff is often judged to be unprofitable career-wise. Within this system, it is a no-brainer that admitting ignorance in order to move a conversation forward and learn something is not a good move, as a result of the status and reputational costs.

In contrast to this currently practiced "authoritarian" system of knowledge, Fuller (2000) puts forward what he terms a "republican" vision for knowledge governance. This system allows for a culture with a normative vision that would promote diversity, dissent, and a greater degree of unorthodoxy, as well as a flattening, broadening, and democratizing of the knowledge collective. Fuller (2000: 15) presents the republican thesis as follows, centering on three major principles:

- (1) People's opinions might change for the better as a result of hearing opposing opinions.
- (2) People need not fear the consequences of their expressed opinions on their material well-being.
- (3) That there is a "public good" or "civic ideal" to which people may appeal in deliberation which transcends specific individual and group interests.

Fuller envisions a normative culture where people are allowed to voice both ignorant and unorthodox views without fear of material repercussions. If one's views were to be used against them, there would be a higher "civic ideal" people could appeal to in order to prevent the unpopular person's chastisement. While this model is obviously an ideal type, and can never be fully attained, it raises interesting questions about degree. How close are we to realizing Fuller's ideal, and what realistic steps might we take to get closer to this? Certainly, the collective advice that students should mask their ignorance at all costs (which carries over into professorial behavior) only serves to reify the importance of symbolic status outcomes, and reinforce the authoritarian model of knowledge.

Fuller's first assumption, that people have much to gain from encountering and dialoguing with opposing views, is bolstered when we consider Georg Simmel's explication of a social exchange. We will show how this is directly related to the more specific case of academic exchanges in conference settings and other similar contexts. A discourse of oppositions contains the seeds for innovation and the maximizing of creative products of knowledge. Simmel (1907: 44) writes the following:

What one expends in interaction can only be one's own energy, the transmission of one's own substance.... The meaning of exchange, moreover, is that the sum of values afterward [is greater] than it was before, and this implies that each party gives the other more than he had himself possessed.

Thus, Simmel reminds us that an exchange is defined by its *sui generis* nature; that the collective product holds a greater value than the sum of the individual component parts. As such, each actor's individual investment is enhanced by what Blumer (1969) called the "overbridging" social act that creates an emergent product that is formative in nature, and beyond what either participant could have anticipated at the outset, and is worth more than the sum of the individual investments. This is the ideal maximization of intellectual exchange at the level of joint interaction. Clearly, actors will have the most to gain the less the preformed opinions carried into the discourse by actors are convergent (see McLaughlin, 2001; Burt, 2004). Indeed, if there is full agreement (as a product of

student “impression management”) between actors beforehand, neither offers the other insight, and the collective product that could have otherwise emerged is stunted. The wider the divergence in views of the actors, the greater the collective product that is to be generated through their cooperative, yet ironically conflicting, discourse.

As Fuller (2002) further reminds us, this is consonant with Karl Popper’s (1963) vision of an “open science.” Mutual criticism is to be enhanced by maximizing scrutiny through diversity, by fostering a scientific community that is characterized by pluralism and a range of intellectual positions from which to judge claims in a community of intellectuals. It is the active encouragement of dissenting and unorthodox views that serves to maximize creativity and collective scrutiny. This is the ideal type advocated by Habermas (1987), whereby different and seemingly incommensurate cultural groups can settle differences and collectively improve as a result of rational communicative exchanges. Here again, the collective product of exchange affords advances by not only those who enter the interaction at a higher level of privilege, but all actors gain as long as there are genuine attempts at rational, communicative action. However, to gain this ideal state of collective interchange, Fuller (2000) recognizes the need for transcendent, overarching cultural norms to protect intellectuals (and especially newbie graduate students!) from being chastised or ostracized for their ignorance, or for their unorthodox, unpopular, or politically incorrect ideas. There must be a collective will in place to enforce what Fuller terms the “right to be wrong,” such that it is the individual who tries to use a participants position against them who is severely chastised and punished. These normative sanctions would actually create a more free-flowing culture of ideas, and prevent those in power from being able to use opinions and utterances of any kind against a student or colleague in granting status, power and opportunity.

Ferrales and Fine (2005) ought to be commended for letting students know the status and identity games that are at stake early in graduate school. However, the more status conscious people are, the more likely they are to treat conference venues and so on as arenas for status-attainment rather than intellectual exploration. There is a normative collective byproduct that accompanies individualistic advice of the sort they suggest. Since the system is unlikely to change, the authors argue it is up to the individual students to “work the system” to their benefits by being aware of the labeling processes and the status hierarchies they are unwittingly competing in. Yet to socialize students in this way also serves to reinforce the very status hierarchy that is identified as problematic in the first place. If students are not measured along lines of true intellectual growth, but rather fleeting face-to-face performances, they will increasingly turn to an emphasis on the latter rather than the former. Rather than a true meritocracy where the best and brightest rise to the top, it is instead those students who are able to put enough “feathers in their cap” by winning successfully timed strategic interactions with the right people and in front of the right audiences (Haas and Shaffir, 1991). The result is that as the identity concerns of interactions are maximized, true intellectual exchanges are jeopardized. Ignorance must be hidden, unorthodox opinion must be censored, and points must be won rather than adapted to potentially interesting qualifications or interjections posed by others. As a result, the sum total of knowledge that would be generated through collective interchange is minimized. While certain ambitious Machiavellian climbers may benefit from a career perspective, those with integrity and honesty lose out in advancement. More importantly, the larger organization of the sociological collective becomes far less productive from a creative standpoint. The systematic repression of authenticity breeds interactions characterized by conformity and identity tactics, devoid of emotional energy, leading to a culture that is far less creative and intellectually productive.

Looking to the Future: From Idealism to Practicality

This piece should not be read as an argument that Canadian schools, characterized by flatter internal and external hierarchies, are in some way superior to top tiered American schools. On the contrary, top American graduate programs produce excellent students armed with cutting edge theory and research training, who often become top contributors to the field, since they have survived a highly competitive culture, and learned from clusters of the very best and most devoted scholars in our discipline. Further, we hope that this piece is not read as an argument for a “kinder, gentler” sociology, where egalitarianism and inclusiveness is supposed to triumph over competitiveness. In contrast, we recognize that there is not a place for everybody in this discipline, and the inclusion of weak members often reduces the collective energy and morale of the otherwise productive groupings in graduate programs. Indeed, the weak members of the proverbial Caribou herd (forgive the Canadian pun!) should be dispatched by the professorial wolves in order to remove the weakest members and strengthen the collective. We argue that these decisions ought to be made according to objective standards that accompany writing and the production of good work, with appeals to theory, evidence, logic, and argumentation. Certainly, divergent points of view ought not to be held against students, nor should fleeting displays of ignorance in argumentative exchanges. If anything, by students adopting a cloak of competence and hiding their ignorance and failure to commit to the discipline, they survive longer than they should. This is not good for the graduate culture, and this is not good for the individual students who end up wasting much more time than they should in a degree they will never ultimately complete.

Neither should this piece be read as an argument that networks and reputational capital are not important. However, the question remains as to what strategy works best in different contexts in order to gain access to these network spaces. While we are making the case that authentic exchanges can create large dividends in forging the strong bonds necessary for sponsorship and career mobility, this can only be tested with future empirical studies. Indeed, comparative studies of the career network strategies of graduate students and young professors can help move us toward more definitive answers. We simply offer the possibility that cultivating the authentic self, and portraying this sincerely to others in interaction may be a workable strategy in the quest for attention and inclusion into sociological networks. Undoubtedly, the success of varying levels of impression management versus sincerity will differ according to the social context within which such schemes are utilized. We hypothesize that the rewards associated with greater displays of authenticity will be maximized in contexts of flatter status structures (e.g., Canadian schools, lower tier American schools), yet the clearer objective standards that are present in top tier institutions may complicate this prediction. In the end, we defer to the need for empirical research that would help to delineate which structural contexts allow for various strategies to be more or less successful at the individual level.

Finally, we hope that this argument is not read as an idealistic hope for a perfect culture of collective exchange that is completely devoid of status or identity concerns. Nor do we naively believe that emphasizing impression management concerns to graduate students will turn our discipline into a culture of psychopaths or automatons. As a corrective to such intellectual extremes, we argue that variegations in the more or less “authentic” underpinnings of graduate culture should be analyzed as they are enacted within situated and socially observable contexts, with an eye to normative standards that are beneficial to the whole collective. Empirical comparisons may be made between less prestigious

regional colleges and more elite institutions in the North America. Furthermore, these differing contexts of authenticity may also vary across disciplines. How close are business, economics or various branches of the natural sciences to Fuller's ideal of a "republican science"? Future studies that consider how "cultures of authenticity" are fostered at both the graduate and professional levels of discourse in other disciplinary contexts could provide valuable lessons for how to practically maximize collective exchanges and minimize status penalties.

Notes

1. For this special issue, see the interesting articles written by Nichols (2005), Shulman and Silver (2005), Adler and Adler (2005), Schnaiberg (2005), Burawoy (2005a), Ferrales and Fine (2005), and Imber (2005).
2. We would like to thank Gabrielle Ferrales and Gary Alan Fine who were both most congenial in debating these issues with one of the authors over e-mail. The exchange was inspirational to us in developing this statement. We would also like to thank Neil McLaughlin, Dorothy Pawluch and Kyle Siler, whose reflections and editorial comments were invaluable in generating some of these ideas.

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