
*Demystifying the Hidden Magic of Producing Sociologists**

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We are pleased to introduce this special issue of *The American Sociologist* entitled “If We Only Knew Then What We Know Now: Explorations of Informal Professionalization in Sociology.” A great deal of the important professional socialization that transpires in graduate school occurs informally through faculty mentors, individual entrepreneurship, and to some degree, chance. However, little of this experience and knowledge has been analyzed formally. We believe that more of it ought to be. Understanding the informal professional norms through which people actually practice the sociological craft is important. Graduate students must learn to manage relations with faculty, graduate student peers, and publishing gatekeepers; they must develop their research so that it can be published; and they must learn types of impression management and emotional labor that are critical in crafting identities as sociologists. One way to support the next generation of sociologists, then, is to acknowledge, assess, and teach our professional culture more explicitly. The contributors to this volume agree that the norms of informal professionalization have received surprisingly little public dialogue and formal classroom attention among sociologists. Their papers aim to remedy this omission.

The papers from these contributors articulate some hidden aspects of our professional culture in revealing ways. Michael Burawoy and Allan Schnaiberg, in their respective papers, reveal the thoughts of Ph.D. mentors on supervising different types of students. They address how mentors think, the various research orientations of students and the interactions between thesis supervisors and students that produce different types of dissertations. Patricia A. Adler and Peter Adler identify and analyze the sequential social roles that graduate students must tackle as they complete graduate school and enter the profession. Gabrielle Ferrales and Gary Alan Fine illuminate how reputations are appraised in graduate school, and comment on what graduate students can do to

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bolster their own reputations as they make their way through the micro-culture of graduate programs. Jonathan B. Imber explores the tension between seeking out a public intellectual identity and being accountable to professional judgment.

Our introduction to this special issue highlights some themes running through these papers that we believe warrant further attention. Key among these themes is the goal of encouraging sociologists to apply more of their own concepts to an analysis of their own discipline.

Stratification within the Discipline

Graduate school is lengthy and full of individually variable experiences; it can be fairly said that people will have very different recollections and outcomes from their years of study. Some may publish during that time; some may experience financial hardships; some may experience great mentoring; some may find lifelong colleagues; others may drop out of their programs. What bind these variable and possibly simultaneous individual experiences together as a cumulative phenomenon are the sociological features that are common to all graduate training.

For all involved, graduate school is a filter of professional stratification in sociology, in which some students advance to more desirable rewards than others. Class, gender, race, religion, ethnicity, and physical ability impact the experience. There is an implicit organizational hierarchy that is based on a correlation between one's year in a graduate program and his/her various professionalizing titles: research assistant, ABD, teaching assistant, or lecturer. There are the functional needs (reputation, staffing, financial) of the sponsoring educational institution that affect the outcomes and experiences of graduate students, in terms of labor for the institution and material support. There is enough emotional labor, dramaturgy, organizational politics, and organizational culture involved for graduate programs to qualify for analysis in any organizational behavior seminar.

There is also the sociology of scholarly production implicit in learning why some individuals are more successful in their research endeavors than others. Every organizational process, from dealing with the venal personality to seeking to imitate the great intellectual entrepreneurs and stars of a discipline are present in the graduate experience. Yet, ironically, as several authors in this volume note, sociologists seldom use their finely tuned sociological imaginations to better understand the graduate school experience. While we are incredibly adept at analyzing across the spectrum of organizational settings, all too infrequently we do not use our analytic tools to assess our own workplace.

Consider the importance of the example Burawoy notes as a starting point on the first page of his paper in this special issue:

It would seem that dissertations appear by immaculate conception. No one tells you how to write them, no one tells you how to supervise them. It's an ineffable, unique production—a joint product about which we can say nothing, whose fruition is as miraculous as the parting of the Red Sea. Dissertating is so central to the sociological career, and yet so unexamined. We have, it seems, a vested interest in putting the dissertation beyond sociological analysis as though it would endanger the creative process itself.

Raising the stakes, we see two questions emerging from the unexamined sociological character of informal professionalization in our field. First, what “vested interests” influence putting sociological training “beyond sociological analysis”? Second, what kinds of hidden truths can sociological analyses of our training processes uncover?

The first question looks at the investments that propel professionally self-interested behavior. Ethnographies of diverse workplaces have consistently demonstrated that the negotiated order of how “things really get done” occurs in the shadows rather than in the sunlight. The stratified sorting of people within a profession becomes tacitly seen as meritocratic, leaving consideration of how structural forces can explain outcomes uninvestigated. The social structuring of professional opportunity in our discipline, as in every sphere of organizational life, exists yet typically goes unexplored. We need to look at such questions as: who gets which jobs and what programs do they come from?

Consider this example that one of us overheard at an ASA meeting. A mentor from a top-five Ph.D. program put a word in for a promising graduate student (who is not present) to an acquisitions editor, and arranges a meeting between them, while proposals from unconnected academic hopefuls are ignored at the press’s promotions booth. Said book gets published while the story of access to this pitching opportunity fades into history. The stratification issue is not of the book’s quality, which is scrutinized and vetted for during the publishing process. The story instead is of access to an opportunity to have quality appraised with the engine of a positive self-fulfilling prophecy roaring.

Informal professionalization in terms of stratification is about gaining access, whether by co-authorship, arranged introductions, phone calls to hiring committee members, references from elites or a graduate university’s reputation. The impact of that access provision is as profound as its mechanics are silent. Education about the nuts and bolts of the business and opportunities occur there, and so does constructing the type of working personality that has a more hopeful chance of persisting in the discipline. Informal professionalization is not just about learning to think like a sociologist but about being enabled structurally to survive as one.

To understand the vested interests that are protected by mystifying these happenings requires looking at how self-regarding mentors help some graduate students but not others, at how institutions happily put graduate students to work for meager remuneration and a playing field reality where intellectual products enter a marketplace embedded in affect and social relations. This is a marketplace where no certainty of determining pure scholarly merit exists, yet such a system may be assumed. These realities do not make successful people illegitimate. Many people do work hard and do good research. But to study informal professionalization is to learn more about the conditions under which success is attained, particularly in gaining access to having one’s work appraised. These conditions, in addition to learning the literature and collecting data, are part of the stratification story of graduate training, placement and publication success. Graduate institution reputation, a mentor’s involvement and work quality all matter. Yet sociologists typically treat the work quality and product as independent rather than analyzing how the first two factors have unannounced roles to play in the eventual completed work and person.

In their contribution to this volume, Ferrales and Fine point out that “despite their sociological training, [graduate students] ignore that their anxieties are structural rather than personal.” How is this irony possible? A recurring theme across the papers is the troublesome presence of anxiety in the graduate experience. Anxiety is typically seen as an individual problem, yet anxiety is also, sociologically, a plausible reaction to a situation of uncertain and consequential judgment. What is “smart”? How do graduate students know that their ideas are compelling enough to pass muster when self-doubt combines with the unknown subjectivities of judges? Even the prospect of being judged is enough to daunt students from sharing their work, as all graduate students are quite

familiar with the coin of the realm in academics—harsh criticism of ideas and conjecture. Of course, one has to brave potential criticism to get his/her ideas out, but many people cannot get their work out the door because they silently anticipate negative perceptions and are unwilling to risk those perceptions being made manifest.

The problem with such endemic anxiety is that it is consequential structurally. Students who cannot brave displaying their intellectual wares have no product, or at least not a polished one, to put on the market. They may take too long to write because of an anticipatory fear that paralyzes their progress. In the meantime, their anxiety can radiate out to faculty and other graduate students who worry about the ability to get work out the door. Much of the informal professionalization that occurs in graduate programs, as noted in the papers in this volume, pertains to how endemic managing a student's anxiety about their work is as an aspect of graduate training. Somehow mentors must help graduate students through a process of getting them to give their own ideas a chance while exercising quality control to make the ideas and data stronger, a need that often involves having to criticize a student even while they encourage him or her.

All of this occurs in a context in which students hear about the difficulty of the job market, living in the shadows of successful faculty and graduate student peers who are perceived as smarter, some of whom will be competing for jobs along with them or getting better ones. Clearly, anxiety pervades the graduate experience, not solely as an individual problem, but as one with structural origins and distinct impacts on the outcomes of students and mentors. The papers in this volume consider what mentors, graduate students and programs may do to lessen the impact anxiety has on all involved.

“Having Nothing to Say”

As organizers of this volume, we were also puzzled by one initial reaction that some people had to the subject of informal professionalization in graduate school. This reaction is that sociologists would “have nothing to say” about how informal professionalization works in graduate school—such information is tacit knowledge, tricks of the trade, that are a mentor's bits of scattered advice. To our minds, this view is a further demonstration of the mystification and removal of the nuts and bolts of the discipline from sociological analysis. To subscribe to this view is to argue that people who have publishing experience, some of whom may have been co-authors with graduate students on publications, and who have been participant-observers in helping hordes of graduate students develop a “working personality” as emerging publishing scholars and teachers, all have nothing cumulative to say about tricks of the trade involved in those achievements.

After working with so many students and seeing them emerge as scholars, in watching and helping them mold their thoughts and tackle certain pitfalls in research and writing, were there no common patterns across student experiences? Were there no common errors of writing, data collection or analysis that students make to as they move from initial shaky steps as a new graduate student to ready for the job market and beyond?

Schnaiberg notes, as a mentor, how graduate students approach their intellectual problems in set ways, often starting with their picking a dissertation subject that is much too broad to fit into one book, which makes the mentor's task one of showing a student how to temper the research problem into a doable project, while reserving the remainder for later projects. Burawoy shares how he breaks down a dissertation chapter's arguments

and helps the author reconstruct them more powerfully. The Adlers consider how the probationary crucibles of the graduate process are similar across students and can be tackled through sharing the experiences of graduate students that have reflected on what they have learned at each step in the process. Ferrales and Fine show how features of the microculture of a graduate department shape the necessary steps graduate students must take in order to navigate the risky shoals of cultivating the right sort of reputation. Imber maps out dilemmas of choosing an intellectual identity that scholars encounter throughout their careers. All of these papers demystify any sense that the tricks of the trade are simply tacit knowledge that cannot be shared and considered more formally.

The papers in this volume are all worthy of stand-alone attention for how they reveal important facets of unexplored territory. They also share a prescriptive quality and have an admirable bravery in putting themselves and their work out front and center for your reactions. As a whole, the papers contribute to a larger dialogue on how to do sociology. One can read the papers to see how well-known scholars help others overcome roadblocks to producing scholarship. Readers can benefit from considering how the authors dissect the social experience of graduate school, with the implicit aim of considering how people can develop a working personality that is most amenable to making forward progress in the business.

Importantly, the papers also open up lines of collective thought and inquiry into the sociological enterprise that can help us all to reflect on the different ways that people do our work and share our workplace. To address this subject is not necessarily to identify broad abstractions. It is often just sharing simple advice on ways that some people think that they accomplish professionalization effectively. For example, what are the different ways that mentors advise? One argues that thesis students should always write at least five pages a day, because when someone writes in draft form, the written work can be considered and concretely adjusted in ways that the exchange of verbal thoughts cannot produce; plus work is being done. Others tackle getting work out the door by making agreements with colleagues that a submitted article has to be in the mail by a deadline and enforcing those deadlines with one another. Another advisor shares rules of writing with students, alternatively using invective and honey when the rules are not obeyed.

What a great service is rendered when sociologists stop to identify their takes on the nuts and bolts of getting good writing or teaching out the door! Experienced faculty may be inclined to see their own bits of wisdom as sheer common sense—stuff that everybody knows, or that other sociologists might not find scintillating and insightful. In their view, such knowledge is so mundane as to be under the radar. This conclusion is wrong. That faculty was also yesterday's generation of graduate students trying to figure out how to learn and make use of all of this informal knowledge. How about more papers on the day-to-day mechanics of producing publishable writing? Or how to write effective revise and resubmit letters to editors? Or about how to deal with political conflicts that shape the graduate experience? Or on how there is an "anxiety market" in graduate school that impacts careers, with performance anxiety translated into submission anxiety? Or on the dynamics of dissertation committees, in terms of analyzing the different contributions of the faculty members, the pulls of faculty who claim that he or she is "my" student. What should the student do who is caught in conflicts in the substantive, political, and personality differences among committee members?

Sociologists pride themselves on avoiding taken for granted understandings in putting all sorts of social processes under the microscope. Our own disciplinary training should not be excluded. Knowing about how we reproduce ourselves is not simply a

matter of knowing that the Chicago School sent some influential symbolic interactionist professors to the West Coast, or that Merton was Talcott Parson's student, and that he went to Columbia to spread the theory of the middle-range and advance ideas about anomie and the sociology of science. How we reproduce ourselves is also knowing that Burawoy's students are going to be favored for interviews at some graduate programs but not others; that some journals are meaner to graduate student submitters; that teaching-heavy vitas without publications is the sociological equivalent of "such a pretty face" for getting jobs at research universities; that a status-driven discipline, as Imber points out, wants to know your institutional address in order to decide what sort of respectful consideration you warrant. Sociology, like other disciplines, has its own fair share of snobs whose love for and anxiety over status make them blind to all that moves beyond the circles of elite institutions.

We applaud these papers for doing sociology that addresses under-explored but not under-experienced reality. That goal is what sociology is meant to do and what these papers on informal professionalization have done. We hope that they make you think about our disciplinary training in reflective ways and that they inspire you to articulate your own conclusions more about the nuts and bolts of how people enter and practice in our profession.

Note

*David Shulman and Ira Silver have collaborated equally in organizing this special issue.

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