

Constructing a Personal Model of Research: Academic Culture and the Development of Professional Identity in the Professorate

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Doctoral students pursuing academic careers are educated in awkward and mostly tacit apprenticeships. As students, they are expected to learn professional knowledge and the technical skills associated with their program of study. Yet, they must simultaneously absorb the culture of academe and learn their future roles as faculty members. Because learning and thinking are situated in a social milieu, socialization is a process initiated and established in contexts that construct knowledge through activity (1). In other words, academic culture and educational knowledge “act together to determine the way practitioners see the world” (p. 33).

Generally, socialization studies have investigated academic culture as context for student learning and development. Many of these studies focus on the social aspects of academic culture, particularly relationships between students and their colleagues or professors (2, 3, 4, 5). These socialization studies concentrate on students’ experiences *as students* in higher education and are centered on classroom modality.

Likewise, inquiry into new faculty socialization segregates faculty roles and responsibilities into particular genres of experiences such as teaching success (6) and tenure and promotion processes (7). Unfortunately, faculty socialization studies fail to address how graduate school experiences, particularly as they are situated in an academic culture, affect the development of professional identity and ultimately professional decision-making and activity.

When the concept of professional identity and competency *is* addressed in the faculty socialization literature, the discussion surveys the development of the faculty teaching roles but ignores the complex faculty identity as teacher, researcher, and service provider. This lack of attention to an integrated identity that begins to emerge during graduate studies portrays faculty socialization in perfunctory terms. For example, Boice discusses new faculty success in terms of teaching style and mastery (6). The author notes the characteristics of “quick starters,” but these are teaching characteristics of new faculty, with no attention to the development of these characteristics. Pollard, Pollard, & Rojewski also investigate the college teaching experience of new faculty (8). They argue that doctoral students are academically prepared for their careers in higher education, but their study concentrates only on the impact of higher education culture on new faculty.

Purpose of Study and Research Focus

The purpose of this study is to describe the role of academic culture in determining a personal model

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of ethical research practice in the professorate. While little is known about the construction of faculty identity and role expectations during graduate studies, even less is understood about the impact of student experiences on professorial activities and decision-making, particularly research competence and reasoning. Two questions demand consideration. First, how are doctoral students socialized into the practice of academic research? Further, how do these students construct a model of research standards and ethics that will inform their future practice as faculty members?

Two general assumptions guide this inquiry:

- Socialization into the professorate is a developmental rite of passage rather than two discrete phases of socialization marked by graduation and/or faculty appointment..
- Preparation for the professorate is situated in an academic culture that shapes one's personal understanding of the professorate and professional identity and perceived roles.

This study initiates a two-phase longitudinal qualitative investigation. Using case study methods (9), this study focuses on doctoral students' perceptions of research ethics in education. Interview questions concentrated on emergent definitions of research ethics, training in research ethics, and experiences of ethical dilemmas.

Case study research is uniquely geared toward description and understanding of institutional culture and its impact on perspective. Merriam describes case study research as an ideal design for exploring participants' understanding and perspective (9). Further, she says case study is appropriate when inquiry is interested in "process rather than outcomes, in context rather than a specific variable, in discovery rather than confirmation" (p. 19).

Sampling for this phase of the study is network sampling, which locates participants through recommendations of initial participants and key informants based on selected criteria (10). Participants were located at three universities in Georgia and Texas, including institutions identified as Research I, Research II, and Doctoral II. Participants were doctoral students in education preparing for a faculty career in academe.

Data were collected through in-depth interviews with doctoral students and faculty

members at three universities in two states, and through archival data such as program materials and reflection journals supplement the interview data. Interviews were conducted using a semi-structured format to allow comparison of data across participants (11). In general, interview questions addressed student and professional identity, academic culture, training in teaching and research, and ethical decision-making as a professional. Journaling allowed students to explore and document their process of decision making as relevant issues arose, the entries were guided by the following statement: *Describe your decisions that are most important to your preparation for the professorate.*

Standards for Quality Research

Emphasizing qualitative inquiry as a creative process, Patton (10) reminds researchers of the "technical side to analysis that is analytically rigorous, mentally replicable, and explicitly systematic" (p. 462). Merriam (9) adds that qualitative research findings "are trustworthy to the extent that there has been some accounting" (p. 198) for quality. In general, the criteria for trustworthy qualitative research include rigorous and systematic data collection and analysis techniques, credibility of the researcher, and belief in naturalistic inquiry (10). The quality of this study is enhanced by several factors. First, I have experience as a qualitative researcher and have taught qualitative methods at the graduate level. Further, triangulation of methods and peer review of data and analysis will enhance the trustworthiness of the data. Finally, the multi-site design encourages usability of the findings beyond the university settings included in the study.

Situating Faculty Identity Development in Academic Culture

This study is framed by the concepts of research ethics and integrity, faculty socialization and enculturation, and professional identity development.

Research Ethics and Integrity.

Research is often messy and complicated. Best-case scenarios of theoretical contributions and improvement of practice are weighed against questionable issues of right and wrong research behavior. In these cases, research decisions may evolve as uneasy guesses with no obvious consequence. Confronted with uncertain choices,

how do researchers define and respond to ethical dilemmas?

Ultimately, ethical decision-making reaches beyond the local boundaries of specific research projects. Because research is fundamental to higher education, it could be argued that research decisions symbolize the moral character of higher education. Under the guise of exploration and discovery, research is a noble enterprise. But research agendas are realized within the “publish-or-perish” mentality of higher education in which ethical dilemmas may become stumbling blocks to promotion and tenure. This is the context where doctoral students are socialized toward the professorate; this is the culture that trains future faculty members as future researchers.

Faculty Socialization and Enculturation. Tierney & Rhoads (12) remind us that “organizations exist as social constructions” (p. 1) that revolve around shared understandings. This organizational culture shapes behavior and expectations, bounding faculty socialization. Tierney & Rhoads define faculty socialization as “the process through which individuals acquire the values, attitudes, norms, knowledge, and skills needed to exist in a given society” (p. 6). Their definition of faculty socialization as transmission of culture complements this study of professional identity development.

Tierney & Rhoads (12) describe academic culture as the nexus of five forces: national, professional, disciplinary, individual, and institutional. Although these are conceptualized as distinct subcultures, these forces are synergistic and do not operate independently of one another. Professional identity is an aggregate sense of self that develops across these subcultures. This process of socialization occurs in two overlapping stages: anticipatory socialization and organizational socialization. The anticipatory stage “pertains to how non-members take on the attitudes, actions, and values of the group to which they aspire” (p. 23). The organizational stage, on the other hand, involves initial entry and role continuance. Noting the importance of the transition process, Tierney & Rhoads comment that when anticipatory socialization and organizational socialization are consistent, the socialization process is affirming. When socialization experiences are not consistent, the organization will attempt to modify or transform the

individual’s values and beliefs to fit the “cultural ethos of the institution” (p. 25). Tierney and Bensimon continue this emphasis on socialization in academe, focusing on the tenure process as the locus of organizational socialization (7). Although they offer strategies for anticipatory and organizational socialization, the authors do not focus their attention on the transition process.

Bergquist examines academe within the framework of organizational culture, concluding that there are four distinct cultures: collegial, managerial, developmental, and negotiating (13). Culture, he says, “provides meaning and context for a specific group of people,” adding “the culture holds the people together and instills in them an individual and collective sense of purpose and continuity” (p. 2). Further, Bergquist says culture defines the nature of reality for members of a given culture, providing the “lenses through which its members interpret and assign value to the various events and products of the world” (p. 2). Although there are four distinct cultures within academe, one will usually be dominant. Bergquist notes that the interaction among the four unequal cultures helps “to produce the often confusing and paradoxical conditions in which contemporary faculty find themselves” (p. 7).

Both Bergquist (13) and Tierney & Rhoads (12) note the influence of academic culture on faculty perspectives, decisions, and behavior; also, they agree that cultural differences create a backdrop of conflict for members within a given culture. This study extends their conclusions to graduate education, adding that students also are influenced by academic culture. Further, the transition process from doctoral studies to the professorate adds another layer of possible conflict between academic cultures.

Developing a Professional Identity. Marcia defines identity development as a self-constructed organization of drives, abilities, beliefs and individual history (14). Bruss & Kopala (15), building on Marcia’s definition, define “professional identity” as “the formation of an attitude of personal responsibility regarding one’s role in the profession, a commitment to behave ethically and morally, and the development of feelings of pride for the profession” (p. 686). This definition directly connects professional identity to professional behavior.

While the identity development literature is

concerned predominantly with the psychological aspects of self, identity may be viewed as both personal *and* social. Social identities result in identity relationships within a given culture, and these identity relationships determine identity status and role expectations (16). For the purpose of this study, status and role expectations will be examined as cultural aspects of professional identity development, particularly as they relate to *anticipatory socialization* during the graduate school experience (7).

Graduate training is expected to nurture the development of professional identity. In their discussion of psychology students, Bruss and Kopala (15) described graduate school training as *professional infancy* and “the training institution . . . as an environment wherein it is the task of the faculty and training staff to nurture and promote growth” (p. 686). However, academic culture is not always nurturing; structural problems in graduate education are potentially harmful to students’ self-esteem (17). Attitudes—good and bad—about professional responsibility, ethical behavior, and professional pride are constructed within the cultural context of graduate training. These attitudes produce social identities and role expectations that persist through a graduate student’s transition into the professorate. In short, academic culture exerts directive force over professional decision-making and activities.

Chickering & Reisser, in their study of college student development, define identity as a sense of self (18). The process of identity development results in “a solid sense of self [that] emerges, and it becomes more apparent that there is an *I* who coordinates the facets of personality, who ‘owns’ the house of self and is comfortable in all of its rooms” (p. 49).

Findings

To describe the role of academic culture in determining ethical research practice, data were analyzed within four concentrations: the perceived role of research in higher education, the perceived standards for ethical research, the actual ethical dilemmas experienced by graduate student researchers, and the factors that hinder or support ethical research.

What is the perceived role of research in higher education? Participants in this study experience research and subsequent publication as an institutional priority and a personal badge of prestige. While one participant views the

professorate as a delicate balance of professorial roles, most participants emphasized the preeminence of becoming a researcher, and only one participant noted a teaching role being more important than a research role. For example, Betsy says, “research is painful and boring, but the doctorate is about what the university considers important—getting published!” Echoing this sentiment, Claire says the “doctoral degree is mainly trying to get us into the research part of being a professor and much less teaching; it is indoctrination into the research aspect of being a professor.”

While some participants came in with considerable research experience, most are concerned that they don’t “know what to do with the research” after the dissertation process. Post-dissertation concerns include translation of theory into educational practice, establishing a research agenda, and getting published.

What are the perceived standards for ethical research and who defines ethics in academic settings? Coursework in research ethics is almost nonexistent. As students, participants expect professors to guide them through the process of learning and implementing ethical research, but they are relying instead on their own sense of right and wrong. Julia says she relies on her “internal gyroscope” to guide her decisions; and Claire relies on her “personal ethics and personal morals.” Grace adds that “ethics is about power differences.” Her professors talked about collaboration and high quality, but their practice expressed a disregard for the Institutional Review Board (IRB), quality research, and research integrity.

More than a lack of definition of ethical research, participants are concerned and confused about “grey” areas of research ethics and believe they must define ethical research according to their own experiences and standards.

Interestingly, the two participants with training in medical ethics find research ethics easier to define. The other participants have scattered definitions of research ethics, with most positioning ethical research as a data collection and/or analysis issue. However, a couple of participants have a complex, comprehensive definition of research ethics, including researcher attitude and choices throughout the research process. One participant noted that article readers have an ethical responsibility to read the results thoroughly. Another participant, Grace, is quite concerned with the power issues that

impact ethical decision-making: “power issues come into play, whether we like to admit it or not...these are times we just have to make a mental note, ‘this is not right’.... But I’m at a point where I have no power to address this.”

One participant has a collaborative relationship with her major professor. Kelly says her discussions with her major professor about research methods and ethics have been invaluable, even to the point where she feels comfortable mentoring other students with research problems. Although Betsy claims to have a collaborative and mentoring relationship with her major professor, she often finds herself involved in ethical dilemmas with others in the same department. For the participants in this study, the most beneficial contribution to ethics and methods training is involvement in actual research projects, particularly pilot studies of own research and collaborative efforts as research partners with professors, but only when that contribution is valued and rewarded as equal.

What types of actual ethical dilemmas do graduate student researchers experience? While most participants define ethical dilemmas in terms of research methods, their experiences of ethical dilemmas focus more on relationships and issues of power and coercion. One participant reports her professor “uses” students to review his own material prior to publication. Student assignments in non-related courses revolve around this professor’s research agenda, and students are expected align their work to match that agenda. Several participants report being forced to manipulate data to yield desired outcomes; if a student refuses, he or she is no longer funded as a research assistant. Kelly, a research assistant on a grant-funded study, voiced disapproval of research decisions being made by professors on the grant:

I’ve been vocal, but I wasn’t a threat or anything. I was unhappy with the way the professors were doing things I was just going along, and it hit me. Did I feel free to leave? No! To a certain extent, this is part of being a graduate student. I mostly feel free to voice my concerns, but in this case, it was an ultimatum—or I was off the grant! I never want to do this in my own research.

Another participant, Grace, reports working on presentations and articles with more than one professor and negotiating authorship—but the articles were published without her name or with a different authorship order than negotiated. This is particularly troublesome at conference

presentations because funding for student travel to conferences depends on authorship. Grace did try to confront the professor, but to no avail. The professor was on the editorial board of the journal that published the article, and she believed the issue would not be taken seriously. Participants report that even when the research situation is uncomfortable, they “don’t want to sacrifice the relationship” by removing themselves from the project.

Another type of dilemma involves committee make-up. One participant had approval for a mixed design dissertation, but her committee politicized her design and held up her research. She decided “to write it one way for the dissertation” and then publish it using her mixed design approach. Other participants experienced negative “shaping” of their research based on professors’ interests. As one participant reports, “professors stay in their comfort zones” and won’t head committees outside their personal interests. This is particularly problematic in small departments with few faculty members.

What factors hinder or support ethical research? Several factors hinder ethical research: institutional/structural, relational/positional, and technical. First, the culture of academe encourages ambivalence toward the issue of ethical research. Institutions reward research productivity, even at the expense of other professorial roles, perpetuating the adage, *publish or perish*. While some professors “nudge” their students to commit ethical violations, others ignore the need for training and guidance in ethical research practice. Dan, looking toward a future career in academe, acknowledges that “tenure is political, so go way beyond their expectations!”

A second factor hindering ethical research is the role of hierarchy in academic relationships. Graduate students are afraid to report ethical violations; they fear losing their assistantships and professorial support. As a student, one participant notes that “it’s important to know where your allegiances lie; the only way you’ll get lobbied for is if you are clearly in someone’s camp.” Only one student, Kelly, says her professors treat her as a peer. Her major professor, she says, “got me involved with his projects, but told me to ‘find your own thing—academia isn’t just doing other people’s work.’” Several participants alluded to expecting a similar role as junior faculty; coercion will continue to force them to make ethical decisions

that might not be supported by academic expectations.

A third factor that hinders ethical research is the lack of training and exposure to guidelines. Only those participants with medical backgrounds had any courses in ethics, and those courses dealt with medical ethics rather than research ethics. Only one participant reports research ethics discussed in her doctoral research classes. None of the participants in this study knew of any guidelines for education research practice other than IRB guidelines.

Only one participant, Kelly, reports preparation for ethical research. Her major professor and a network of research professors provide guidance through formal and informal mentoring and involvement in various research projects. This particular participant has published with several professors, and her contributions are valued as equal to those of the professors. In fact, this professor reminds the participant that she is his “primary responsibility” and that she is to develop her own line of research separate from his. Another participant feels secure in her relationship with her major professor, but says her other experiences with faculty members in the same department make her bitter and wary. She notes there are two levels of culture in the department, and a “lot of politics gets played below the surface” even though “we represent ourselves as a united front.”

Summary and Conclusion

Almost all participants in this study raised themes of power and censorship. The impact of coercion and fear on the research process must be explored. Graduate students believe their research is censored on several levels: personal, institutional, and systemic. First, graduate students expressed fear of retaliation if they resisted their faculty advisor’s management of their research. Further, these students believe they are bound by the dissertation committee structure and the institutional support of highly productive faculty members. Finally, censorship is systemic, according to these students’ experiences, because certain topics are “favorites” of funding agencies. Likewise, these students believe journal editors and blind reviews control the emergence of new knowledge.

The goal of higher education is the preparation and personal development of competent, well-trained professionals. While

much of higher education focuses on the development of technical competence and critical thinking skills, the transformation from student to faculty member is too often left to chance.

Future inquiry will explore the development of professional identity throughout preparation for the professorate, and how this emerging identity impacts professional decision-making as a scholar.

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