

Episode 43 – Socialization Theory and Your First Year in Grad School

Welcome to Grad-post! I'm your host, Brian S. Mitchell, and we're here to talk about life before, during, and after graduate school, and whether an advanced degree is right for you. I'll draw upon my experiences as a graduate dean and research mentor, as well as my network of students, colleagues, and experts to bring you the most complete information on graduate education that I can.

We focused on applying to graduate school in Season 2, so it only makes sense that we follow you into your first year of graduate school here in Season 3. We'll look at some of those unique experiences you'll face in your exciting first year. Some things have already been addressed in previous episodes, like selecting a research advisor in [Episode 2](#), but there are still plenty of things to talk about. So, let's start with some generalizations on what to expect in your first year.

There's a common misconception about graduate school - the PhD in particular - that it's a solitary endeavor. While it's true that the single mentor model is still the most prevalent and that your thesis or dissertation demonstrates your aptitude as an independent scholar, your journey is hardly taken alone. And the research on something called "socialization theory" supports this assertion.

There are a lot of theories on socialization and those of you in the social sciences will find any overview I might give vacuous and vapid. But it's important to identify what you are socializing **TO**, that is, socialization to something like a culture or society, or in our case more specifically to graduate school or a graduate program. For those in research doctorate programs like the PhD, there's the concept of socialization to the role of scholar. Weidman and co-authors have some interesting papers in this regard. The first from [2001](#) looks at the socialization of graduate and professional students to graduate school. The second from [2003](#) investigates socialization of doctoral students to scholarly and academic norms. In the first case, socialization to graduate school comprises such institutional factors as academic program, interactions with peers and faculty, and the learning that takes place. The outcomes of socialization to graduate school include knowledge acquisition, investment, and involvement. Knowledge acquisition is most directly related to the learning input. But investment and involvement are heavily influenced by peers, advisors, and mentors. I dove into the topics of selecting a research advisor and mentorship more broadly in [Episodes 2](#) and [10](#) so I won't go into those topics here, but socialization theory makes it clear that good advisor and peer relationships lead to better investment and involvement in the graduate school experience.

So, the upshot of these findings is to get involved with peers and potential mentors right from the start. How do you do that when you may not be selecting advisors for months after you start a program, or when your degree program is focused solely on coursework? Here are three ideas to help you out.

First, find a study buddy in your program. If you didn't have one (or need one) as an undergrad, you'll need one now. Study groups work, too, but attendance can fluctuate and motivations are not always uniform across the group. Find someone you trust and who has a similar study style as you. Not necessarily the same **learning style**, because studying with someone who learns and thinks differently than you can be useful. I mean finding someone who is on the same schedule as you and can concentrate for about the same amount of time. If you are a night owl and your study buddy is an early bird, you're going to have problems. Similarly, if you like to get work done ahead of time and your study partner waits until the last minute, then there's not much benefit to either of you. The workload in graduate school increases dramatically, so it's even more important to get the semester off to a good start and develop good study habits early on.

Second, take part in department and program events. You're now a part of the department or program in a way that you really weren't as an undergrad. You're a junior colleague in many respects, and while hierarchies still exist and you should expect to maintain a healthy professional relationship with the faculty,

you'll be included in events that you weren't before. Departments have – or should have – social events that include graduate students, postdocs, staff, and faculty. Go to them. Take your significant other if they're invited. Making these professional networking connections is an important part of belonging.

Third, get involved in university and community activities as time allows. There's a tendency to put your head down and focus solely on what's in front of you in graduate school. And that's not a bad approach, especially at first. But it can also lead to disengaging from important networking functions and cultural awareness opportunities. As an undergrad, you probably went to sporting events and concerts and participated in extracurricular activities. Try to continue a subset of these activities in graduate school. Time will be at an even bigger premium now, but if you were in a choir as an undergrad, continue as a graduate student. If softball or hockey is the major sport at your new institution instead of football or basketball, learn to love it. Find out what new produce is offered at the Farmer's Market. You get the idea. Engage. You never know when you might meet someone outside of your discipline that furthers your career.

Finally, if you are an online or part-time graduate student, you'll have to work extra hard to socialize to your new environment. In this case, you obviously can't do all of the above, but pick one or two. Make an effort to be on campus for a program or university activity, even if your classes are at night or online – or a little of both. Once you've obtained your advanced degree, you'll find that not only does every degree count, but every acquaintance you make does, too.

Welcome to graduate school! I wish you every success.

Links

<https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED457710>

<https://link.springer.com/article/10.1023/A:1026123508335>

<https://spotifycreators-web.app.link/e/3X6gERTYVVb>

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