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ADAPTING TO THE TRANSITIONAL STAGE OF THE DOCTORAL ENVIRONMENT: AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHY OF SOCIALIZATION

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ABSTRACT

Purpose	Adapting to the doctoral environment can be a difficult transition. This article emphasizes the importance of academic socialization as a means of integrating into the doctoral culture and persisting during the initial transition to doctoral study.
Background	To address the problem of doctoral attrition, I share a personal narrative of problems and persistence during the first year of doctoral coursework. By sharing my initial resistance to social learning and eventual appreciation of merging the social into the academic, this narrative demonstrates the positive impact of socialization on my first year, thus promoting socialization as a means of acclimating to the doctoral environment.
Methodology	This project utilizes the qualitative research method of autoethnography to examine my personal experiences adapting to the doctoral environment and connects those experiences to the larger higher education community.
Contribution	Since people often connect more with stories than with numbers, my narrative offers struggling doctoral students an opportunity to see possible aspects of themselves in the lived experiences of someone who persisted, to see that they are not alone with their struggles and understand that supplementing their independent studies with social experiences could be a good way for them to persist in their own doctoral studies.
Findings	Although I preferred independent work and significantly underestimated the value of social experiences when entering my first year of doctoral study, peer-to-peer interaction quickly became an essential element in my adaptation to the doctoral environment.
Recommendations for Practitioners	Results of this study suggest that even when new doctoral students typically prefer solitary work, they should still seek out social learning experiences as a means of acclimating to the doctoral environment. University faculty and staff

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	should incorporate social learning activities into the first year of their programs to promote socialization of their first-year doctoral students and increase their chances of persistence.
Recommendations for Researchers	Researchers should use a variety of methods to examine the experiences of doctoral students and look at the data in new ways to better understand doctoral student needs and uncover new ideas to assist them.
Impact on Society	By sharing storied experiences of struggles and success, I hope to inspire doctoral students to work with their peers and support one another as they try to persist.
Future Research	More personal experiences of doctoral students are needed to give us a better understanding of the obstacles they encounter, so we can uncover additional strategies to combat those issues and improve persistence.
Keywords	doctoral adaptation, doctoral socialization, transitions, persistence, attrition, autoethnography

INTRODUCTION

Roughly half the students who enter doctoral programs drop out before graduating (Allum, 2014; Council of Graduate Schools [CGS], 2010, 2015a, 2015b; Sowell et al., 2008; Terrell et al., 2012). While there may be a combination of reasons rather than one single reason that students do not persist, socialization has been found to be one of the essential elements of doctoral student success in the first year of study (Gardner, 2009; Li & Collins, 2014). If we define doctoral socialization as interacting and integrating into an environment to become a part of that group (Johnson et al., 2017), then doctoral socialization occurs when a student engages with other members of the doctoral culture—fellow students, faculty, and staff—so the student becomes familiar enough with the norms and expectations, the skills, abilities, and even values of their departments to eventually become a member of the community. Recent attention has been given to socializing doctoral students into their future professions (Elliot et al., 2019; Rubinstein-Avila & Maranzana, 2015; Russell et al., 2016) and the benefits of mentoring (Anekstein & Vereen, 2018; Duffy, et al., 2018; Esposito et al., 2017; Malin & Hackmann, 2016); however, less attention has been given to the experiences of incoming students as they navigate the unfamiliar territory of new expectations and academic uncertainty during their first year of doctoral coursework, and even less attention has been given to students resistant to social learning. This article fills that gap by sharing an autoethnographic narrative of my adaptation process during the first year of my doctoral program.

My first year of doctoral study felt so radically different from what I had expected. The vast differences between doctoral coursework and previous work in my master's program intimidated and startled me so much that I could have easily quit, not even returned for the second semester. I later learned how typical that was, not just from my peers but from people who successfully completed their degrees (Bochner, 2014; Pecero, 2016). Looking back on my notes from first-year coursework showed me how important my peers were during that stressful time. Before starting, I had expected doctoral coursework to be difficult and keep me far too busy for socializing with peers. I perceived time with them as getting in my way and believed that keeping to myself would be my path to success. It turned out that peer interaction supplemented my solitary work unexpectedly, and despite my initial resistance to social learning, socialization played a key role in my persistence. It helped me make sense of my new doctoral program, the doctoral environment, and successfully adapt to doctoral culture. This article is intended to show first-year doctoral students that they need not feel alone and that interacting with peers could be a vital part of their success. As part of a larger study on doctoral attrition that used Tinto's (1994) model of the doctoral process, my study examined the doctoral experience in three segments: transition, development, and research. This article focuses on the initial transition to the doctoral environment during my first year of coursework. Results suggest that even

if they feel hesitant, nervous, or insecure, first-year doctoral students should embrace social learning to successfully adapt to their new environment and increase the chances of completing their degrees.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The Ph.D. Student Navigation System model (Cunningham-Williams et al., 2019) suggests a combination of advising, mentoring, formal and informal supports, and research participation for doctoral students to achieve “socialization into the academy” (p. 283), and Grover (2007) offers a model of doctoral student maturation which divides the doctoral process into four stages: exploration, engagement, consolidation, and entry. Tinto’s (1994) model of doctoral student development divides the doctoral process into three stages: transition, development, and research.

I chose to use Tinto’s (1994) model for this study, because the focus of this article is exclusively on his proposed first stage, the transition stage, which emphasizes socialization in the first year of coursework.

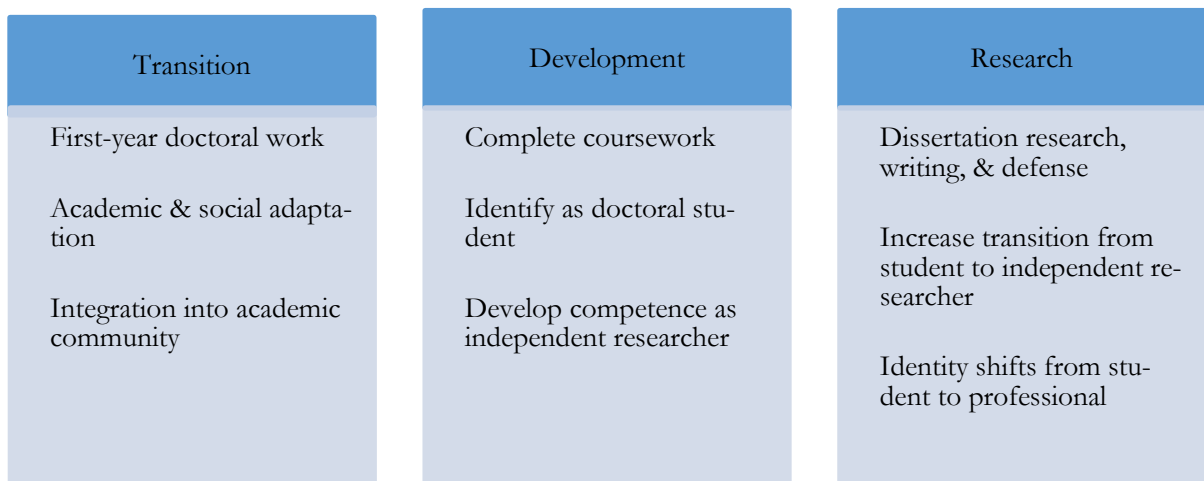


Figure 1: Model of the doctoral process (Tinto, 1994).

As mentioned, Tinto’s (1994) model, the doctoral process can be divided into three stages (see Figure 1): transition, development, and research. The transition stage takes place during students’ first year of the doctoral program. During this stage, students begin their socialization process (Golde, 1998, 2000). “Socialization encompasses the process of learning about a particular culture and its attributes” (Gardner, 2008, p. 331), so students integrate into the academic community and become a part of their respective departments. After students successfully complete the first year of coursework, they enter stage two, the development stage. During this stage, students continue their socialization by adapting to the doctoral environment, completing their coursework, and passing their final examinations or equivalent. In the final research stage, students research, write, and defend their dissertations. When students successfully complete the entire doctoral process, they earn their Ph.D. degrees.

In the first stage of doctoral study, the transition stage, students enter their first year of doctoral coursework. They transition into the new world of graduate study, both academically and socially. Research expectations in doctoral programs are significantly more demanding than those of master’s-level programs, so students must adapt to the increasingly difficult workload. Not only do new doctoral students need to adapt to more demanding academic work than that required of bachelor’s or master’s students, but they also need to adapt socially to their respective academic departments and learn how to become members of the doctoral community. One of the most important aspects of doctoral culture is socialization (Gardner, 2007, 2010; Golde, 1998, 2000; Tinto, 1994). In the world of doctoral studies, this culture often includes the larger world of higher education, the specific culture of an individual institution, and the smaller sub-culture of students’ specific departments and

disciplines. Students need to socialize into all facets of the new culture of higher education, their university, and their departments to adapt successfully.

Acclimating to the new doctoral environment requires obtaining information about course material, protocols and procedures, and expectations about academics, but it also includes social expectations and behaviors. In fact, Solem et al. (2011) found that doctoral students' sense of belonging often related to informal, non-academic experiences, and they utilize both formal and informal networks to learn about their new environments (Maher et al., 2019). In order to understand expectations, new students tend to listen carefully to directions and observe the behaviors of upper-level students (Weidman et al., 2001). Observation allows new students to see and then emulate successful behavior. New students also begin to form relationships with peers and faculty members. At this stage, both formal and informal interactions within the academic community become pivotal (Tinto, 1994). Formal interactions include conversations focused on scholarly achievement, and informal interactions include communication not directly linked to the doctoral program. In the formal academic settings of the classroom, as well as the informal social settings of hallways, offices, and libraries, students interact with faculty members and peers as a part of the adaptation process.

LITERATURE REVIEW

During the first stage of the doctoral process, the transition stage, socialization into the doctoral culture is a vital element of doctoral persistence (Gardner, 2007, 2010; Golde, 1998, 2000; Tinto, 1994) while social isolation (Ali & Kohun, 2006, 2007) and an inability to integrate into the academic community (Herzig, 2002) may contribute to students' leaving a doctoral program before completion. Since students may leave if they feel as if they are not a member of their academic community, student involvement (Bair & Haworth, 2005) and increased participation can increase persistence (Church, 2009). Students should actively socialize with their campus community (Pyhalto & Keskinen, 2012), utilize a variety of formal and informal networks (Maher et al., 2019), and consider creating intentional learning communities (Seniuk-Cicek et al., 2020) to engage with other members of the environment and become a part of that community.

Students maintaining positive relationships both with peers and faculty members are more likely to persist than students who lack those relationships (Tinto, 1994). Poor relationships, or even a lack of close relationships with peers, may leave students feeling too isolated and dissatisfied with their academic lives to continue, but creating and maintaining close relationships with a network of peers can offer students both academic and emotional support to help them persist. Advising or mentoring relationships can also play a positive role in persistence (Esposito et al., 2017; Gardner, 2010; Mason, 2016). Mentors who are social and accessible to their students (Barnes et al., 2010) and who display empathy and emotional support for their student mentees may be especially well suited to encourage persistence (Duffy et al., 2018). At each stage, mentors should be adjusted according to student needs, which vary depending on their stage in the doctoral process (Gonzalez-Ocampo & Castello, 2018). Since the focus here is on the first year of coursework, those advising, mentoring, or supervising students should take care to focus on those needs, such as information sharing and creating social networks (Congleton, 2017).

Making the transition to the world of doctoral study leaves many students in identity crisis, feeling as though they are partial but not full doctoral students (Buss, 2019; Leach, 2020) as they learn how to navigate the new world of doctoral studies. Often, students may oscillate between identifying as a graduate student and identifying as a burgeoning academic scholar (Jazvac-Martek, 2009). One way to feel a sense of belonging may be to embrace the in-between spaces and work in liminalities, where "words and things do not fall into easy categories, and the work is to maintain uncertainty, a joyful perplexity in the in between" (Cannon, 2019, p. 1112), but this would take a confidence that many transitional doctoral students lack. When students are able to feel as though they have solved or overcome some of their academic problems, such as academic writing and research, they may be more likely to feel a sense of belonging and identify as scholars even when those positive experiences

mingle with negative experiences (Sala-Bubare & Castello, 2017). Participating in a wide range of academic activities may also help doctoral students feel like academics and may help them persist (Emmioglu et al., 2017). A supportive campus environment that encourages global collaboration may additionally help first-year doctoral students adapt to their new roles as emerging scholars (Guo et al., 2018).

Women and underrepresented minorities may be less likely to feel as though they belong in their departments than men and well represented minorities (Gibbs et al., 2015; Esposito et al., 2017), so predominantly white universities need to make sure they create a supportive environment to allow marginalized groups to feel as though they are welcomed. Even first-generation students may also face challenges and social disconnect that may hinder their ability to access and benefit from social capital at their institution (Gardner & Holly, 2011). When marginalized groups do not integrate into the academic culture, they may be more likely to feel dissatisfied with the environment, which could lead to attrition (Duke & Denicolo, 2017), so institutions should implement specific programs and policies to help promote a supportive and welcoming community to all entering students.

METHODOLOGY

This study sought to examine socialization in the context of first-year doctoral students because the transition from master-level student to doctoral student can be a difficult transition (Congleton, 2017; Matthews, 2017), and socialization is a key issue for persistence during that time (Gardner, 2009; Li & Collins, 2014). I chose narrative autoethnography as my method because it allows us to study ourselves in the context of our culture (Nash & Bradley, 2011) and helps make the study of social sciences less alienating and more human (Bochner, 2013). Human beings are narrative, “storytelling organisms” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 2). People are drawn to stories, telling them and hearing them, reading them and writing them, and stories often leave a bigger impact on people than numbers, because people make sense of their lives and the lives of others through narrative constructions” (Richardson, 1990, p. 10). Narrative offers researchers the ability to be a part of the research as well as part of the research process—to be intimately involved in the study—and this process of getting close to the text provides knowledge not found from passive observation (Dewey, 1980).

NARRATIVE AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

Before readers can understand autoethnographic research design, they should first consider the broader category of how narrativization functions as a methodological approach. When we use narrative as a method of inquiry, we construct knowledge through the process of writing (Richardson, 1994). Because writing involves cognitive understanding as we process our lived experiences (Denzin, 1984), the act of writing itself helps us generate thoughts, uncover new conclusions, and make sense of what we uncover. Our ideas grow and develop as we write. When we then share our writing with readers, social scientists function as narrators that help readers interpret and understand the data of lived experiences (Bochner, 1994). In this case, sharing personal experiences, reflection, and analyzes will engage readers with the narrative and, hopefully, inspire new doctoral students as well as university staff through those experiences. Arguably, “narrative is the best way to understand the human experience, because it is the way humans understand their own lives” (Richardson, 1990, p. 65).

Narrative autoethnography offers “a way of writing about the culture, using the self as a starting point for inquiry” (Leavy, 2020, p. 56). A combination of autobiography and ethnography, autoethnography combines elements of the personal and the cultural to examine their intersections. Unlike traditional autobiography, which focuses on the self, autoethnography uses the self as a starting point to understand cultural issues. Unlike traditional ethnography, the researcher does not need to immerse herself in a culture to interview and observe, because she is already immersed in that culture. The researcher is the subject; observations are internal, researcher and participant are intertwined (Mat-

thews, 2019). Autoethnography expands on the traditional research paradigms to include both academic and personal elements of the culture which it seeks to examine (Anderson & Glass-Coffin, 2013).

Autoethnographic researchers “want readers to be able to put themselves in the place of others, within a culture of experience that enlarges their social awareness.” (Ellis, 2004, p. 30). The autoethnographic process utilizes personal experiences of the author (auto) and analysis (graphy) of those experiences to better understand cultural practices (ethno) of a specific social environment (Ellis et al., 2011). It starts with the experiences, the thoughts, and the feelings we question, those experiences leave us uncertain (Adams et al., 2015). In this case, I began with my first day of doctoral coursework and the vast uncertainty I felt about belonging there; in other words, I began with my personal experiences in the context of first-year doctoral studies. This autoethnographic writing was a “form of self-narration that places the self within the social context” (Reed-Danahay, 1997, p. 9). I then reflected on those experiences and analyzed them in order to better understand the culture of the doctoral environment in relation to other first-year students. The autoethnographic study became both process and product (Ellis et al., 2011).

DATA COLLECTION: THE PROCESS

Autoethnographers’ “ethnographic data are situated within their personal experience and sense making” (Atkinson et al., 2003, p. 62). In traditional ethnographic data gathering, the researcher enters the field to observe participants in a specific cultural setting. She immerses herself in the environment of participants for an extended period and records notes in response to her observations, conversations, and interviews. She develops overall impressions of the culture and identifies patterns of behavior in the people. Field notes are based on observers’ experiences in the world of the participants. Autoethnography is a methodology in which “we make ourselves experimental subjects and treat our experiences as primary data” (Jackson, 1989, p. 4). The researcher is the participant and “the field is a state of mind” (Anderson & Glass-Coffin, 2013, p. 67). The researcher is already a part of the world she is studying, so observations are internal. Autoethnographic field notes require autoethnographers to recall memories of pivotal experiences in their lives and as many details about those experiences as possible, so rather than gathering field notes by observing others, autoethnographers gather data by looking inward at past experiences.

The primary source of data collection for this study was my field notes. I developed these field notes from personal journals and class notes I saved during my first year of doctoral coursework. Journal entries recorded daily overviews, impressions, and feelings; class notes contained comments about coursework as well as diary-style marginalia that reveal my thoughts, responses, observations, and state of mind from that time. Additional artifacts that helped me remember details and compile my field notes included saved e-mails, text messages, and graded papers, all of which helped me recall previous experiences and reveal my state of mind, reactions to coursework, classmates, conversations, and peer behavior throughout our first year of coursework. In stage one of the data gathering process, I reviewed these journals, notes, and artifacts that recounted my experiences as a doctoral student and wrote field notes based on those journals and class notes. Autoethnographers should write selectively about epiphanies that arose from being a part of a specific culture (Ellis et al., 2011), and their field notes should record as many details about specific events as possible. After recording my field notes, I read, reviewed, reflected on the field notes, and then created a list of themes. As one aspect a larger project, for this particular study I selected one predominant theme that stood out during the first year of coursework—socialization. Then I created a series of vignettes based on moments that were pivotal in my socialization process and my transition to the doctoral culture.

According to Mitch Allen (Ellis et al., 2011), analysis of these experiences begins by looking at our experiences analytically and framing them around theoretical knowledge and outside research; therefore, my vignettes are each followed by my reflections of looking at those experiences analytically and

framing them with outside research (see Figure 2). Each vignette captures a significant moment during my time as a doctoral student which specifically addresses socialization.

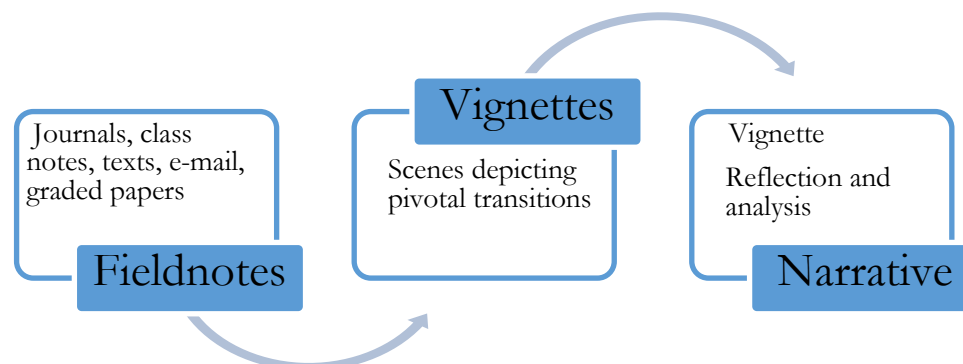


Figure 2: Data-to-narrative process.

To theorize based on autoethnographic data, researchers should connect their experiences with those of other people within a specific social environment to learn more about that culture (Bochner & Ellis, 2016). Autoethnographers, then, move from their personal experiences, through the ideas that developed during their writing and reflect on how those experiences relate to what others within that same culture go through. They “must use personal experience to illustrate facets of cultural experience, and, in so doing, make characteristics of a culture familiar for insiders and outsiders” (Ellis et al., 2011, para. 9). For me, that meant I examined my experiences as a new doctoral student and asked myself what my stories have to do with other first-year doctoral students. This analysis and theorizing process involved outside research, connecting the academic and the personal to compare, contrast, and look at the experiences in new ways.

Several cohort peers and doctoral graduates read my work as a form of member checking. If their interpretations had differed greatly from mine, I would have realized that I needed to analyze my work more thoroughly and re-visit my theories. Instead, they confirmed my analysis and identified with many of the struggles I wrote about as issues they had also faced. They connected with my work and appreciated reading about the many struggles we shared. They felt connection and satisfaction in knowing that others felt the same way they did, and I loved knowing that I connected with my readers, with my peers. Those connections can be valuable resources for helping other doctoral students persist in their studies.

All participants are from one large research university in the American Midwest. Some were my cohort peers and others were faculty or advisors in our program.

FINDINGS: THE PRODUCT

This narrative is a collection of the vignettes I created specifically about my first-year socialization, with an intentional focus on those moments of trepidation about belonging in my doctoral program, disinterest in social learning, and eventual understanding and appreciation of the forced group projects that contributed so greatly to my successful socialization. Each narrative vignette is followed by a reflection and analysis section to create a non-traditional form of data, findings, and discussion, what Richardson (1997) has referred to as a “pleated text”: evocative narrative side by side with reflection and analysis. For clarity, a series of three asterisks separate each vignette from the reflection and analyses that follow.

DAY ONE

My hands shook as I pulled out my text and notebook, comically early to my first doctoral class. Our meeting room felt cold and empty. Vinyl floors, dingy walls, and square windows all gave me an overall distant and stark impression, which was a sharp contrast to the intimate roundtable setting of

a writing or literature class. *This higher education doctoral program is going to be nothing like earning a master's degree from the English department.*

I found a seat close to the door at the end of a row and started freewriting to calm my nerves, but when a group of four walked in together talking, I felt like I was in high school again. The same group of people would take classes together during the entire program, so much like high school. Our path was already laid out for us by our program director. Instead of finding a handful of familiar faces in each new class because we enjoyed the same literature, the entire cohort of 30 students moved through a pre-determined path of higher education leadership classes. The same faces in virtually every class.

Each time I looked up from my notes to glance around the room, I thought that all the other students looked younger than me. *I guess not too many people decide to start working on their Ph.D.s after turning 40. Can't say I blame them. Not everyone wants to be a perpetual student. Fewer people still probably shift away from the field that has been their life for decades. Now let's see how that brilliant strategy works out for me.* The last of the students slipped into the room just before the clock struck 8 a.m., and the introductions began.

“Good morning! For those of you who don't know me, I'm Dr. Caught, director of the higher education program, and I'll be teaching this course on the independent college.” He handed out the syllabus while he talked. My stomach turned when I saw that we would have team presentations soon and the class would wrap up with large group presentations.

Teamwork with people I've never even met before. Blah!

“Okay, let's go around the room and introduce ourselves. John, we'll start with you and then go up and down the aisles.” We went around the room learning who was who and what each of us did for a living. Nearly all the other students worked in non-teaching positions at a college or university, and many already knew each other from work. *People here know each other already. Weird. This is not what I expected.*

After introductions, we listened to our first lecture on the history of private colleges. Possible threats to liberal arts colleges. What do I know about that? Competitive marketing, merit-based aid, private support for state schools? Good grief! How will I ever hold up my end of an intelligent conversation with these people? Everybody here works in administration: admissions, financial aid, career services. Panic worked through me so thoroughly that I even started forgetting things I knew. What does “provost” even mean? What the heck is an “HBCU” or the “NCES”? What's with the love of acronyms? These people use a different language! They know about the whole college operation, not just the tiny bubble surrounding their classroom. Why did I not poke my head out of the books more often to learn about the rest of the college? These people know the attrition rate in their schools off the top of their heads. Attrition, attrition... what the hell is attrition? I'm drawing a blank! What am I doing here?

The new roles and expectations of being a doctoral student surprised me, and I felt a high level of anxiety from day one. My feelings about starting doctoral work were not at all similar to my feelings about starting my master's work in English. Instead of looking forward to the books we would read and discuss, I dreaded the upcoming conversations. They would not be about character, motivation, or rhetorical maneuvers. Instead, they would focus on policy, practice, and administration in higher education, preparing us for careers at universities. Some people would go on to conduct research, writing about and developing theories related to the teaching/learning process, student retention, or program funding. They would develop theories that help enlighten our knowledge and perception of higher education, theories that could help universities provide a better teaching environment for faculty, a better learning environment for students, or a more successful university. Most of the students in this program, however, would go on to work as administrators at universities. That was a future I had imagined for myself too, but I felt horribly underprepared that first day. I had known I needed to

learn more about how colleges function outside of my classroom and department, but I hadn't realized just how much I needed to learn until I listened to the other students talk about their jobs. Although filling a gap in my understanding was a part of my motivation for returning to school to earn my Ph.D. in higher education rather than English, most of my motivation came from pragmatism. I wanted to open job possibilities for the future. I was about to tackle something that needed to be tackled rather than embracing and enjoying something I loved. College had never felt like that for me before—i.e., a chore instead of a pleasure.

When the reality of their program falls short of student expectations, students often leave before graduating (Bair & Haworth, 2005; Golde, 1998; Golde & Dore, 2001). I did not love the setup of the program—a cohort model with specific class requirements rather than choices based on a list of possible classes. Instead of enrolling in classes that looked interesting to me during any given semester, I would need to take what was offered, what I was told to take, and what all the other cohort members would also take—no choices, no flexibility, no freedom. In addition to a lack of selection in classes I would take, there was also little choice about when I would take them. Each new cohort had class on the same day and time every single semester for three years. While this made sense to me as a means of accommodating adult learners with day jobs, I was not accustomed to the lack of freedom. For my entire undergraduate and graduate education, I had looked forward to reading the new schedule of classes each semester, looking through my selections, going to the bookstore to see the reading lists, planning out my schedule. Freedom of choice was not a part of this new doctoral program. Right away, this left me feeling that I had very little control, and that left me anxious and unsatisfied. Unfortunately, stress, burnout, and other negative experiences can occur when the individual learner and their new doctoral environment do not align (Stubb et al., 2011), increasing the odds of attrition.

Not only did I lack control over my educational path for the next several years, but I also felt insecure and a little intimidated about the subject matter: Most of the other students had already been working as administrators at their respective colleges. Only four other students were also faculty members, and they were full-time faculty, not part-time, like me, so they also had more knowledge about the day-to-day operations of a university than I did. The first day started with an almost overwhelming sense of trepidation about my choice in doctoral programs, even about the very idea of earning a Ph.D. in any subject. At the time, I felt flooded with doubts. Since then, I have realized that it was a typical reaction to entering a new doctoral program. Bochner (2014) wrote about his reaction to looking at the syllabus in his first day of doctoral class: “My excitement turned to fear. I didn't recognize a single author on the reading list, no one. I felt utterly unprepared and intimidated” (p. 60). Apprehension is just a natural part of the doctoral transition process. We may feel as though we do not belong there at first and not know if we can finish. Knowing that others feel this way may help though, as having realistic expectations about the program can help students persist (Luna, 2010). Adapting to the doctoral environment is a process that takes time. No one adjusts to it overnight.

PRESENTATIONS

The first group of two took the floor as Dr. Caught slid into a chair in the back of the room. Tom bumped into the podium and dropped his notes, spilling pages in a three-foot radius around his feet. While Tom fumbled to collect his scattered pages, Harry stood stiff as a mannequin and stared at the podium. Neither uttered a word nor even looked at their audience while they pulled up their PowerPoint presentation.

My jaw dropped and eyebrows shot up while I watched how awkward and uncomfortable they were. *These guys don't do a lot of public speaking, do they?*

Tom took a deep breath and pulled his shoulders back before his faltering voice enlightened us about how electronic teaching posed a threat to small, liberal arts colleges. Harry hid behind the podium, nodding his head and changing slides.

From my seat in the front row, I swiveled my head back and forth between both presenters, nodding my head, hoping to appear interested and engaged so they would think they were doing well and maybe feel more confident. I tried to make eye contact with one of them and smile while I took notes. I wanted to hear some specific examples to back up their general comments but worried that asking them questions while they spoke might throw them off and fluster them even more. They did not need to feel more nervous than they already seemed.

After ten minutes of monotones broken by the occasional voice crack, team one wrapped up with sighs of relief and hurried to their seats. Jay and I walked up front. I pulled up our presentation about different economic strategies liberal arts colleges have tried to remain competitive with state schools while Jay raised his voice two or three octaves and shouted out, “How is everyone doing today?!” The audience laughed, of course, appreciating the comic relief, but I saw the sweat on his forehead and heard a slight tremor in his booming voice.

It seemed strange and extremely surprising to me for these adults to be so nervous delivering a ten-minute presentation, and then it hit me: Most of these people do not speak in public daily the way faculty do. They communicate one-on-one or in small groups during most of the workday, not in front of a room filled with people. They were more nervous than I was. Empathy washed over me, and I felt much more at ease with the cohort.

Observing this vulnerability in my peers also gave me a boost of confidence before our presentation. Jay opened with a boisterous welcome to everyone, but I heard the catch in his voice and saw the sweat break out on his forehead. He felt nervous too, and he tried to overcompensate for his anxiety with a display of bravado. I loved seeing both the weakness and the bravery in him. It made him so human. I had been practicing my section so often that I used the slides only as a reference point for the class, just like I do when I teach. It felt good, knowing the material well enough to appear calm and confident and knowledgeable. It was quite a relief to realize that I did not ruin my chances for success by picking the wrong program. I would be able to keep up with the other students. *I might even be good enough to succeed.* Emmioglu et al. (2017) believe that these types of affirming experiences “give students a sense of progress (p. 74), which helps them feel as though they belong to their academic communities.

Seeing their nerves and insecurities was pivotal for me. It reminded me that we were all in the same boat. We just climbed aboard with a unique set of equipment, and each of us would need to adapt in different ways. When reassuring my students, I remind them that they are in college to learn. Learning is a process, and it takes time. No one is expected to be an expert on the first day. That applies to new doctoral students too, not just new undergrads. Knowing that my peers felt just as anxious about their doctoral work as I did, albeit in different ways, helped remind me that I was not expected to be an expert during my first week of class either. I was there to learn, and that process would take time. My peers felt just as nervous about our new workload as I did. We just each handled it differently. We all had different strengths and weaknesses, but I could still be a part of the cohort. That realization ended up being extremely fortunate for me because students need opportunities to learn from one another (Holmes et al., 2014). While I did not whole-heartedly embrace social learning that day, I did open my mind to the possibility that I could be a part of the team, a part of the cohort. This was a vital step for me. Without the team presentations that I so dreaded at first, I might not have given myself the opportunity to socialize with them and learn from them, and an inability to socialize into the doctoral environment often leads to doctoral attrition (Golde, 2000; Tinto, 1994).

TURNING CORNERS

“I’ll send around this sign-up sheet for team presentations,” Dr. Nichols announced while pausing from our syllabus review to wave a piece of paper in front of our class. *More teamwork? Great. Do these*

group presentations never end? Does every class require them? Why? Why can't I work alone? Dr. Caught assigned the teams and even the topics in our last class. At least now we're getting choices. I barely know anyone yet though.

The sign-up sheet started at one end of the room and nearly filled up by the time it arrived to me. Karen and Cassandra, the two women sitting on either side of me, and I decided that we three could collaborate on a project together since we all worked on the same campus and could meet easily during the week, but there were no open slots for three people available, only individual slots for each of us to join an existing group.

“Damn it,” Karen whispered under her breath. While she looked over the list to find a day she could present on and a team she wanted to work with, I looked up and found Kendra across the room trying to make eye contact with me and mouthing “work with us,” pointing to Mara, the woman beside her. Kendra and I had presented a SWOT analysis of HBCUs in our last class. The presentation went amazingly well, especially since I needed to search HBCU on Google when I saw my assigned topic. None of us had known one another going into the project but collaborated every day and worked well together. We all turned out to be anxious personality types willing to stay up late and skip out on leisure activities or a good night’s sleep to finish the job successfully—not just passably but impressively. I let out an audible sigh and nodded my head, grabbing the sign-up sheet to add my name before anyone else claimed that slot.

I felt renewed annoyance at being forced to depend on other people when it came time to sign up for groups yet again in our second class. I wanted to work alone and resented the forced teams but felt incredibly relieved when someone I knew made eye contact with me and invited me into her team. Although I was not happy about working in a group again, I still felt relieved that a group was willing to accept me. Kendra was, and probably still is, a hardworking, ambitious person. She never would have invited me to participate unless she felt confident that I would pull my own weight and do a good job. *Someone who worked with me before wanted to work with me again. This feels good.* Kendra’s acceptance and approval reminded me that I was good enough to be successful, and that encouragement helped me keep going when my doctoral program became stressful and I felt like quitting.

During those first few classes, other students visited with each other before classes started while I jotted down notes about what I saw and how I felt. Perpetually the loner, I devoted far more attention to my notebook than the living, breathing human beings around me. This could have prevented my academic success because social isolation often leads to attrition (Ali & Kohun, 2006, 2007) while positive peer interaction and good relationships with peers is an important aspect of doctoral socialization (Bair & Haworth, 2005; Golde, 2000). Thank goodness for our small-group work. I would not have sought out a peer community on my own, stubbornly clinging to my independence. Whether it was designed intentionally or not, our enforced group presentations helped us build a community of practice, a group of people sharing the same interests or needs, working together regularly, and creating a bond while collectively learning (Wenger, 1998). Working in smaller groups helped me adapt to the larger community of our cohort, which, in turn, helped me adapt not only to the community within the higher education department but also the university community.

My sense of being an outsider and not belonging faded during the first year of coursework. Talking about classes and research with my cohort peers was a true pleasure. We were able to help each other in little ways but little ways that seemed to add up to big help. Gwynne showed a few of us how to compute our math work in Excel spreadsheets to avoid the long-hand and time-consuming math for our quantitative research methods classes. I kept Mara from changing the direction of her presentations and papers when she panicked at the last minute, which she did regularly. Kendra, Robert, Shannon, and I supported each other through our dreaded online Quantitative Research Methods II class. I helped Jay organize and edit his papers. We gave each other job leads and offered recommendations. I found myself jumping at any opportunity to help a member of our cohort, and they seemed just as eager to help me, any one of us. The entire cohort model offended me at first—always

seeing the same faces again and again, not having a choice of classes—but it became a valuable source of support filled with positive experiences, and valuable social experiences need to be a part of an effective doctoral program (Jairam & Kahl, 2012).

DISCUSSION

This study intended to use narrative in order to shed light on the importance of socialization during the first year of doctoral coursework and show future first-year students that the adaptation process can be long and hard, but they need not feel alone. Other new students go through similar struggles and working through some of them together can be a great way to make the transition from master's student to emerging scholar.

The initial transition to doctoral coursework can be intimidating, but first-year students should know they are not alone; others feel the same way, even others who have gone on to complete their programs (Pecero, 2016) and have long, successful careers (Bochner, 2014). Tense nerves or feelings of intimidation by the workload are all typical responses to the transition process, and transitions take time. One important aspect of successfully making this transition is socialization (Gardner 2010; Li & Collings, 2014), so even independent learners who prefer to avoid social learning should be prepared to socialize and develop a combination of both formal and informal networks to successfully adapt into their new social environments (Cunningham-Williams & Weidman, 2019; Maher et al., 2019). Intentionally creating networks could help students support one another and engage with the academic community (Maher et al., 2019; Seniuk et al., 2020), which may help them persist. While this study focused more on peer socialization, first year students should also keep in mind the importance of socializing with faculty and staff as well and take part in as many opportunities as possible to integrate into the academic community.

Faculty and staff should also keep socialization in mind when creating or revising programs and courses. Creating a cohort model for entering students is a good step but may not be enough to encourage first-year students to socialize with one another or staff and successfully socialize into the full doctoral environment. Incorporating group projects during early courses may force even the most independent learners into activities with their peers and, thus, promote the type of social learning that could contribute to socialization into the doctoral environment. Students need opportunities to learn from one another (Holmes et al., 2014), and success in these projects may give new students the sense that they belong in their academic communities (Emmiogly et al., 2017); feeling this sense of belonging could encourage persistence. Advising or mentoring programs for first-year doctoral students (Esposito et al., 2017; Mason, 2016) could also be a good way to encourage students to learn from one another, start building their academic networks, and integrate into their academic communities. Finally, staff should create policies and programs, such as a summer transition program, (Congleton, 2017) to try and create a welcoming environment for all learners, including those from marginalized groups (Duke & Denicolo, 2017; Gibbs et al., 2015).

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Research based on the experiences of an individual may not be generalizable; however, the member check conducted by my cohort peers and staff members suggest that others do feel the same trepidation about belonging in their new community. When reviewing my study, my former cohort peers and staff members remembered their tense nerves and insecurity starting those first classes. They remembered being intimidated by reading lists and worried about presenting in front of their peers. The outside research I conducted to ensure academic rigor also confirmed that my findings are at least somewhat generalizable to an audience of first-year doctoral students. A future study using a larger sample of participants could elucidate more issues related to first year adaptation, particularly a study with participants disinterested in social learning.

CONCLUSION

During the first year of doctoral work, students begin to transition into the doctoral environment (Ampaw & Jaeger, 2012; Tinto, 1994). My experiences suggest that socializing with peers early plays a key role in successful adaptation to the doctoral environment. To support this, positive social experiences need to be a part of doctoral programs (Jairam & Kahl, 2012). A summer transition program may be one useful way to share information and promote community among incoming doctoral students (Congleton, 2017); however, even when students can adapt to the academic rigors of doctoral work, they may not want to participate in the “all-consuming lifestyle” (Golde, 1998, p. 57) of the doctoral student. If this is the case, then students may not persist. Even if students feel willing to incorporate their programs into their lives, students still need to consider the timing and decide whether they can fit the work into their lives (Boes et al., 1999). Although I felt happy to be a part of the academic world, I also felt an initial resistance to the frequent group projects and forced socialization. Fortunately, I moved past that and learned to contribute to, benefit from, and even enjoy working in teams with my peers. When students do not make that adjustment, remain isolated, and do not integrate into the academic community, they often leave the program (Ali & Kohun, 2006, 2007). Students who feel as if they belong to the academic community are more likely to remain involved; as a result, socialization becomes a vital aspect of successfully transitioning into the world of doctoral study (Gardner, 2007, 2010; Golde, 1998, 2000; Tinto, 1994).

As we develop into doctoral students and work our way toward stage two of the doctoral process, we continue to engage with the academic community and build support networks of colleagues with similar interests and goals (Tinto, 1994). At some point in my coursework, I realized that a small group of us continued to communicate and meet outside of classes, not just to work on group projects but also to study together or drink coffee and talk about family. Peer relationships within the department increased in importance (Bair & Haworth, 2005; Church, 2009), and meeting together began to feel like a personal choice rather than an academic requirement. Academic and social interactions blended together without distinction (Tinto, 1994), social interactions influenced academic skills, and academic responsibilities influenced social exchanges. There were no clear lines to define my social and scholastic life. I also noticed that we each began gravitating toward certain professors, developing relationships with specific faculty members and discussing dissertation topics, methods, and committee members (Gardner, 2008). These support networks helped us avoid feeling isolated (Ali & Kohun, 2007) and allowed me to continue with my coursework when other aspects of my life could have derailed me. I was not alone in this and encourage other new doctoral students to socialize into their programs, departments, and universities, even if they initially feel hesitant or unwilling. It will help them persist.

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