

Advancing Graduate Student Agency

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The purpose of this essay is to consider the role of agency in the lives and careers of graduate students. Three questions guide the discussion. First, what is agency and what does it look like in the careers and lives of graduate students? Second, what can departments do to cultivate and support it? Third, what can individual graduate students do to assume agency?

What is agency?

Building from an extensive literature review of social science literature (for key works see for example, Alkire, 2005; Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Ganz, 2010; Marshall, 2005; Neumann, Terosky & Schell, 2006; Sen, 1985), colleagues and I have developed a definition of agency in the academy as a professor, instructor, or other academic member *assuming strategic perspectives, and/or taking strategic actions toward goals that matter to him/her* (O'Meara, Campbell & Terosky, 2011). Agency has two forms: perspective, or making meaning of situations and contexts in ways that advance personal goals, and the actions taken to pursue goals in a given situation (Campbell, 2012; O'Meara et al., 2011). Agency is always enacted in relationship to something and individuals can display agency in one area but not in another. For example, a graduate student may assume agency to balance family commitments with completing her dissertation, but not feel much agency in determining the direction of her research agenda, in assuming leadership positions within her department, or developing a network in her field.

This view of agency asserts that individuals are embedded in social contexts that deeply shape the range of agency they may experience at any given time. Yet their fate is not determined by that social context. Individuals have free will and can “produce” their worlds (Elder, 1994; Lawton, 1989; Lerner & Busch-Rossnagel, 1981). Indeed, the sense of agency graduate students will feel during the pursuit of their degree will be influenced by their individual identities and interactions between those identities and their academic department and institution (Rhoades et al., 2008). Likewise, institutional policies, practices, and field norms will influence the range and degree of agency they assume in pursuit of their goals. For example, a graduate student who wants to write her dissertation on sexual assault may feel inhibited by the fact that few graduate students or faculty are writing on this topic, and that the initial reactions to the topic she received from her adviser and peers were not supportive. However, what she does next is still up to her. She can decide to assume a perspective that she should give up her topic, because it will not receive the support she desires. Or she can decide to forge ahead, and convince others with compelling work of the significance of the project. This does not mean that her department colleagues do not have an important role to play in scaffolding the agency this doctoral student feels in pursuing her topic—it just means that they both have a role to play. Likewise, institutions that have allowed graduate student parents to extend the time to completion clock or provided funds for parental leave have created policies that scaffold those students' agency in balancing work and life priorities.

For the purposes of this essay, I will focus on agency in completion of the Ph.D. and pursuit of career goals—whether those career goals are toward the professoriate or not. Neumann & Pereira (2009) explain this form of agency as

meaning-making which “entails a reflexive purposefulness, a thoughtful directedness born of personal desire and valuing” (p. 139). Archer (2003) refers to this expression of agency as “reflexive deliberation of agents” (p.135). A graduate student who assumes an agentic perspective is not naïve or simply an optimist. They do not deny constraints, but instead acknowledge the reality of a situation and decide to see choices where others see only walls. For example, a graduate student may have a poor personal relationship with his adviser. They do not seem to communicate, collaborate, or inspire each other. Yet the adviser is the most knowledgeable about the student’s topic, and is helpful with requirements, feedback, and other aspects of their work together. A student taking an agentic perspective decides to view the situation as one where he will get certain things from the advisor and other supports elsewhere. He decides to see the situation as something that can be overcome. The key point is assuming an agentic perspective means noticing both constraints and potential opportunities, acting as a strong evaluator of situations, and then moving forward with a belief in choices and possibilities (Archer, 2003).

Agentic action is discrete from, but often closely follows, and is related to, agentic perspective. In the same situation mentioned above, the individual graduate student might take strategic actions to get those other supports he needs and is not getting from his advisor. These actions might involve developing relationships with other faculty, forming peer support networks, or offering to assist the faculty member with some of his research in order to see if there are other ways to connect with his adviser. In recent years, scholars have studied faculty assuming agency via asserting free will when prioritizing teaching within a publications driven context (Terosky, 2005; 2010), embracing an institution’s aspirations to become a world class research university (Gonzales, 2012), engaging in race-related service (Baez, 2000a), taking parental leave (O’Meara & Campbell, 2011), and creating a campus-wide outreach program (Kiyama, Lee & Rhoads, 2012). Whether faculty member or graduate student, the key is that agency actions taken are strategic. They are enacted with self-awareness of goals and contexts.

What are the outcomes of acting with agency? Most research in human development, life course, and sociology shows significant benefits overall to acting with agency in work, life, and relationships (Alkire, 2005; Archer, 2003; Elder, 1994; Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Marshall, 2005; Sen, 1985). However, this does not mean that every time graduate students assume agency they will experience positive outcomes. Suppose a graduate student assumes agency to confront a difficult issue with her adviser, makes a decision to move her research in a new direction, or confront a peer who seems to be stealing her ideas. While the long-term benefits may be greater self-actualization, more meaningful work, or a better relationship—the short term results could be a strained relationship, a disagreement, or longer time to degree. As such, the assumption of agency does

not guarantee a fix to every problem a graduate student may have in pursuit of a goal. Rather, assuming agentic perspectives and taking agentic actions should be thought of as one very important way for graduate students to feel in control of their studies, pursue work that is meaningful to them, and remain strategic in the face of constraints and opportunities that present themselves.

How can departments scaffold graduate student agency?

Much research on organizational environments underlines the important role that organizational norms and expectations, climates, resources, policies, and leadership play in scaffolding the agency individuals inside that organization feel to pursue their goals (O'Meara et al., 2011; Archer, 2000; Giddens, 1979).

Here I would like to outline three ways departments (and specifically this means department chairs, faculty and students in them collectively) can enhance graduate student agency in pursuit of their degrees and career aspirations. First, much research suggests that the advisor-advisee relationship is critical to doctoral completion, pursuit of meaningful careers, and productivity (O'Meara, Knudsen & Jones, 2013). As such, departments can scaffold graduate student agency by creating contexts wherein the development of relationships is prized, rewarded, celebrated, and supported. While many departments have awards for faculty mentoring, much more is needed in this area. In a recent study of emotional intelligence displayed in faculty-doctoral student relationships, I and colleagues (O'Meara et al., 2013) found that it was the display of emotional intelligence of both students and faculty that influenced the success of advising relationships. As such, departments can scaffold good relationships by having brown bag lunches and events where they "lay-open" the nature of what is supposed to, or could, happen in the development of productive working relationships. This would result in a system not dependent on a few gifted and agentic students and faculty, but instead careful, strategic attention to what both students and faculty need to do inside relationships to create and maintain good communication, progress toward objectives, and mutual satisfaction from their work together.

Second, departments need to invest in transparency. Graduate students are more likely to assume agency if they feel like they understand the formal and informal rules, requirements, and expectations. Graduate students who do not understand why their peer received a fellowship or travel scholarship and they did not, or who do not understand why one student was able to take the comprehensive exams from home and another was not, will feel less control and confidence in pursuit of their own goals. It is easy for graduate students to feel as if some students are "insiders" and they are "outsiders" or that the requirements are fuzzy, like shooting archery in the dark. Often the reality is not nefarious, it is simply a matter of some students asking for things and others not. Regardless, as Susan Sturm (2006) has observed, building "inclusive" environments means

ensuring as much transparency as possible, for as many individuals as possible. When individuals have a sense of what is expected they can go out and obtain the necessary knowledge and skills to achieve their goals.

Third, departments can support graduate student agency by affirming multiple pathways. By multiple pathways I mean several different things. A key aspect of agency is feeling like one has choices and some freedom in how to achieve their goals. A key way in which those in power can assert dominance is by persuading individuals inside a system that there is only one way to do something. Often this occurs through “institutional scripts” or often repeated sayings or understandings within a culture about appropriate or expected behaviors (Powell & Colyvas, 2008). Norms and institutional scripts have been found complicit in both the shaping and limiting of faculty agency among interdisciplinary scholars negotiating legitimacy for their work (Gonzales & Rincones, 2011) and in how faculty theorize about teaching and learning (Clegg, 2005; Kahn, 2009). Likewise, graduate students can face institutional scripts throughout their graduate years that limit the sense of possibility they feel for how to pursue their goals and manage their lives. For example, graduate students may be told there is only one kind of research they should do, or one set of appropriate topics. Graduate students may be told the only legitimate career aspiration is to become a faculty member in a top tier research university, or that if they have children before they graduate they will badly damage their career. These are all limiting scripts. When graduate students assume agency, they evaluate scripts in light of their own goals, and if necessary, decide to ignore them. Departments can play a critical role by intentionally confronting common institutional scripts they see forming in their departments. Groups of faculty and students can come together to reinforce the idea that, in fact, there is not a single way to accomplish their goals, but many. This might be accomplished by bringing in alumni who are working in multiple higher education institutional types, industry, government, and other organizations to discuss careers in those organizations. Likewise, successful alumni that managed parenting and degree completion can be brought in to discuss strategies they used to be successful. In this way, departments can play an active role in expanding student sense of choice and possibility.

How can graduate students assume agency?

Assuming agency begins with reflection and self awareness of key goals, constraints and opportunities (Archer, 2003; O'Meara et al., 2011). Thus, graduate students can assume agency in pursuit of their degree and career aspirations by periodically identifying, clarifying and re-clarifying their goals, and strategies to achieve them.

Given the importance of the advisor-advisee relationship in doctoral completion, I think a key part of being strategic is for students to ask themselves:

what am I doing to develop, maintain, and engage in my relationship with my advisor? Have I taken classes with my advisor, offered to be a TA or research assistant on a project, attended their presentations at national conferences, congratulated my advisor on papers or awards, read their research, or offered to provide feedback on a paper? A big part of the socialization process inside doctoral education is learning to become a good colleague. One of the key ways doctoral students can show agency is not waiting for others to engage them. Rather students can invest in the relationship by taking specific steps to dig deeper into the relationship and to identify how working together might enable possibilities for both the faculty member and their student. This suggestion does not reduce faculty accountability for support of their students, it just acknowledges that working relationships are two-way streets (O'Meara et al., 2013). Doctoral students can assume agency through their own perspectives and actions in that relationship.

Second, graduate students can assume agency by seizing and creating opportunities. There will be many, many opportunities provided to graduate students during completion of the doctoral degree. Students can assume agency by considering these various opportunities strategically, in relationship to their goals. They assume agency by saying no to opportunities that will not advance their goals and yes to ones that will. Agentic individuals tend to not only seize opportunities put before them, but create them. For example, graduate students who know they want to publish in peer reviewed journals but are finding it hard to get pieces accepted, might request a conversation with department faculty about strategies to improve the competitiveness of their articles for targeted journals. A student who wants to experience teaching a graduate course can offer to act as a teaching assistant for a faculty member. They do not have to wait to be asked.

Third, my interviews, observations, and survey work related to faculty agency at the University of Maryland has underscored the importance of pursuing work that is meaningful as a form of agency. For some graduate students this might mean doing an engaged or interdisciplinary dissertation, and others pursuing academic outreach related to their degree and public policy, education, or extension projects. This might also mean diving into what it means to be a good teacher and new techniques for facilitating learning. My research suggests that individuals who pursue work that is meaningful to them find they have greater persistence in the face of obstacles, greater satisfaction when these projects come to fruition, and greater work-life integration. Archer (2003) has observed that assuming agency requires pulling deeply from one's whole life and all of the identities and talents one brings to any particular project. Thus, I advocate graduate students assume agency by choosing dissertation topics and forms of professional work (GA/RA positions, internships, research team experiences) wherein they will find the most meaning, and success will follow.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Marshall (2005) observes that agency often reveals itself as the structuring of choices. There is no doubt that based on life experiences and individual traits, the environments where individuals reside, and available resources, some graduate students will find it easier to assume agency than others (O'Meara et al., 2011). However, like leadership or awareness of biases, agency is something that can be cultivated, and practiced. It is sometimes easier for faculty or students in any given academic department to complain about how one or the other group is not doing this or that, or to list constraints. Yet we are all the products of our choices to some degree. Departments that try to make program expectations and practices transparent, support the development of productive relationships, and reveal multiple completion and career pathways can go a long way to scaffolding graduate student agency. Individual graduate students who decide to reflect on priorities and then advance them through their own investments in professional relationships, seizing and creating opportunities, and pursuit of meaningful work, are likely to find multiple rewards for their efforts. I have experienced such agency first hand in students who approached me to work on research projects, become teaching assistants, develop their own research teams, and present at international conferences. They stepped forward, and enabled the possibility that followed.

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