



2012

SOCIALIZATION, SOCIAL SUPPORT, AND SOCIAL COGNITIVE THEORY: AN EXAMINATION OF THE GRADUATE TEACHING ASSISTANT

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SOCIALIZATION, SOCIAL SUPPORT, AND SOCIAL COGNITIVE THEORY: AN
EXAMINATION OF THE GRADUATE TEACHING ASSISTANT

DISSERTATION

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the
College of Information and Communication Studies
at the University of Kentucky

By
Kelly Elizabeth Dixon

Lexington, Kentucky

Director: Dr. Michael Arrington, Professor of Communication

Lexington, Kentucky

2012

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ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

SOCIALIZATION, SOCIAL SUPPORT, AND SOCIAL COGNITIVE THEORY: AN EXAMINATION OF THE GRADUATE TEACHING ASSISTANT

Graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) face the unknown as they negotiate their multiple roles and identities within the graduate school and classroom setting as teachers, students, and researchers. The purpose of this study is to identify the role that institutionalized socialization, social support, and behavioral observation and modeling play for GTAs as they navigate their way through the organizational socialization process.

Interviews with twenty two current and former graduate teaching assistants from a Communication department at a large, southeastern university (GSU) were conducted and analyzed. Findings indicate that institutionalized socialization, which exists at both the graduate school and departmental level, serves to both reduce and create uncertainty and anxiety for GTAs based on messages communicated and also serves the purpose of relationship formation. In examining the social support aspect, findings indicate that the socialization process is facilitated for GTAs through House's (1981) four categories of emotional, instrumental, informational, and appraisal support. Finally, behavioral observation aids in the socialization process for GTAs. Observation is used by GTAs to obtain information about teaching behaviors, specifically what they should and should not do in the GSU classroom. Observation also highlighted both positive and negative aspects of the departmental culture and helped GTAs to understand how things work in the department.

Implications, limitations, ideas for what can be done to improve the process for GTAs, and areas for future research are also discussed.

KEYWORDS: Socialization, Social Support, Observation,
Behavior Modeling, Graduate Teaching Assistants

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EXAMINATION OF THE GRADUATE TEACHING ASSISTANT

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The following dissertation, while an individual endeavor, benefited from the input and direction of many people. First, I would like to thank my dissertation chair, Dr. Michael Arrington for the many hours of council and feedback he provided. Although it seemed as though I might never finish, he always believed in me and encouraged me. Next, I would like to thank my entire Dissertation Committee, particularly for the patience they showed as I slowly made my way through this process. Thanks to Dr. Chike Anyaegbunam, Dr. Alan DeSantis, and Dr. James Hougland. I would also like to thank my outside reader, Dr. Christa Jackson. I also owe thanks to my twenty two respondents (who shall remain anonymous for purposes of confidentiality). I am thankful for their willingness to be open and honest and share their experiences with me. Thanks to all my professors through the years at both North Carolina State University and the University of Kentucky who pushed me, challenged me, believed in my abilities, and helped me to become the teacher, scholar, and individual I am today.

I would also like to thank my colleagues and friends in the Communication Studies Department at the University of North Carolina Wilmington, particularly Dr. Kelli Fellows, Dr. Jeanne Pursuit, and Mrs. Tammy Bulger. These individuals kept me motivated, on track, and always served as a sounding board for me throughout the process. Lastly, I would like to thank my family, especially my mom who has always been there for me as an incredible source of support. I never doubted her absolute belief in my ability to successfully complete this endeavor.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements.....	iii
Chapter 1: Introduction	
Organizational socialization.....	2
Graduate teaching assistants.....	4
Social support.....	6
Social cognitive theory.....	7
Purpose of current study.....	8
Chapter 2: Review of Pertinent Literature	
Organizational communication.....	10
Socialization.....	12
Benefits of socialization.....	21
Graduate teaching assistants.....	22
Social support.....	27
Supportive messages.....	30
Emotional support.....	31
Instrumental support.....	32
Informational support.....	33
Appraisal support.....	35
Support and self-help groups.....	35
Social cognitive theory.....	39
Research questions.....	44

Chapter 3: Methodology

Recruitment.....	46
Sample demographics.....	48
Interview procedures.....	48
Method of analysis.....	50
Positionality.....	52
Conclusion.....	52

Chapter 4: Institutionalized Socialization

Uncertainty/anxiety reduction	55
Graduate school orientation.....	56
Departmental orientation.....	59
Uncertainty/anxiety creation	66
Graduate school orientation.....	66
Departmental orientation.....	70
Orientation process overall	71
Relationship development.....	73
Conclusion.....	78

Chapter 5: Social Support Behaviors

Emotional support.....	81
Instrumental support.....	88
Informational support.....	92
Appraisal support.....	96
Conclusion.....	100

Chapter 6: Observation and Socialization

Teaching behaviors.....	101
What to do.....	102
What not to do.....	109
Departmental culture.....	112
How things work around here.....	112
Positive aspects.....	118
Negative aspects.....	121
Conclusion.....	123

Chapter 7: Discussion and Conclusion

Review of research questions.....	125
Comparisons to earlier studies.....	128
What can be done?.....	137
Directions for future research.....	140
Limitations.....	141
A final reflection.....	143

Appendices

Appendix A: Interview Guide.....	146
Appendix B: Recruitment Email.....	149

References	150
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Vita	171
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

New organizational members face a myriad of challenges as they begin the socialization process, which is aimed at making them knowledgeable and productive members of an organization. Organizational communication, as an area of research within the broader family of communication, is a fairly new discipline. The beginnings of this area of study are grounded in theories such as Taylor's (1911) Scientific Management and Weber's (1946) Theory of Bureaucracy. These theorists examined organizations as systems that had the potential to be more efficient and proposed ways of doing so. Humans were seen as interchangeable parts of the machine and little attention was paid to anything other than increasing the bottom line through productivity. Eventually, organizational scholars began to take a look at the role that human beings played in an organization as individuals, their specific wants and needs (Maslow, 1943), and the role of social interactions. The Hawthorne studies, conducted at Harvard, were the first to uncover the idea that human interaction can affect the efficiency of processes within the workplace. This discovery was an important impetus in the introduction of communication as a significant component of research within organizations (Roethlisberger & Dickson, 1939).

Since then, researchers have examined many aspects of organizations. Although this study focuses on the socialization aspect of organizations for new members, it is important to be aware of other areas of study being conducted by organizational communication scholars to understand the wide net that organizational research casts. Researchers have investigated such varied topics as decision-making and its effect on job

satisfaction (Allen & Judd, 2007) and involvement (Fitzgerald & Desjardins, 2004), the prevalence of change in organizations (Zorn, Page, & Cheney, 2000), the role of emotion in the workplace (Miller & Koesten, 2008), difficulties with gender roles and norms (Litwin & Hallstein, 2007), how technology leads to organizational disaffection (Garrett & Danziger, 2008), and the impact of diversity on organizations (Scott, 2007).

Organizational Socialization

The socialization process is one key area of research within the organizational communication literature. Socialization was found to be the principal process that enabled organizational new members to learn about and adapt to new jobs and roles (Chao, O’Leary-Kelly, Wolf, Klein, & Gardner, 1994). One of the main goals for new members in any organization is to be able to reduce their uncertainty; Jones (1983) found support for the effect of both social and content dimensions of socialization on new member uncertainty reduction. Socialization was defined by Merton, Reader, and Kendall (1957) as “the process by which people selectively acquire the values and attitudes, the interests, the skills and knowledge – in short the culture – current in groups to which they are, or seek to become a member.” Socialization is not a fast or solitary process for an individual; there are many different activities and organizational members that are involved in the process (Miller, 2009). Myers and Oetzel (2003) found that for new organizational members to be effective, the socialization process was a dual one with important roles played by both the new member and the organization itself.

Often, the socialization process is separated into three distinct phases. The first of these phases, anticipatory socialization, occurs before a new member even enters a specific organization (Van Maanen, 1978). As we get older, ideas about work and career

roles are imparted to us by sources such as family and the media (Hoffner, Levine, & Toohey, 2008; Hylmo, 2006). Learning information about a particular occupation or a specific organization, through formal or informal means, is also an element of anticipatory socialization (Miller, 2009). Individuals anticipate what it will be like within a particular organization and develop expectations from that anticipation (Louis, 1980). Encounter, the second phase of the socialization process, occurs when an individual enters an organization. This phase continues for the first 6 to ten months on the job, during which organizational members may experience a type of culture shock based on the incongruity of expectations to reality (Louis, 1980). The encounter phase involves learning new processes and letting go of old ones (Miller, 2009). The final phase in the socialization process is the metamorphosis phase, in which an individual is able to transition from new organizational member to insider. Louis suggested, “Newcomers become insiders when and as they are given broad responsibilities and autonomy, entrusted with ‘privileged’ information, included in informal networks, encouraged to represent the organization, and sought out for advice and counsel by others” (1980, p. 231).

There are many elements involved within these three socialization phases. Van Maanen and Schien (1979) found six tactics that can provide different socialization outcomes; collective – individual, formal – informal, sequential – random, fixed – variable, investiture – divestiture, and serial – disjunctive. Jones (1983) found that these six tactics were able to be divided into two general categories: institutionalized socialization tactics and individualized socialization tactics. Institutionalized socialization included common learning experiences for all new members, specific guidelines for

progress within the organization, utilization of role models, and experiencing social support from experienced organizational members. Individualized socialization included unique learning experiences for each new member, more informal training, and the opportunity for the new member to independently develop his or her role (Jones, 1983). Both institutionalized and individualized socialization involved learning on the part of organizational new members as they adjusted to new roles and expectations (Chao et al., 1994).

Graduate Teaching Assistants

One group of organizational new members for whom the socialization process is particularly significant is graduate teaching assistants. GTAs exist in an interesting and difficult place within the world of academia due to the fact that they are students, researchers, and in many cases, instructors. They must be able to quickly switch in and out of these roles as the situation demands. Jazvac-Martek (2009) found that doctoral students had to consistently transition from role expectations as students and as academics. Each role played by a GTA is characterized by a differing set of expectations and responsibilities. As a student, a GTA is responsible for completing course work and being an active member of his or her classes. As a researcher, GTAs are charged with assisting with the research of others, as well as conducting research in their own interest area. Further, as an instructor, a GTA may have the responsibility of teaching undergraduate courses and/or laboratory sessions. The degree of prior experience with such responsibilities varies across GTAs ranging from none to extensive. Given these diverse roles, it is probable that GTAs will experience some uncertainty and anxiety as they approach the varied situations they encounter on a daily basis. As Park (2004) noted,

“ . . . for many GTAs preparation is both a discovered and a learned experience, as they find out what it means to be teachers as well as graduate students” (p. 350).

For graduate teaching assistants (GTAs), orientation programs serve as one of the first socialization experiences they encounter when entering graduate school. In a study of preservice teachers, Staton-Spicer and Darling (1986) suggested that time involved, the workload, and emotional stress were all reality shocks for the respondents and that engaging in discussions with others helped the new members to adjust to the expectations of the job. These discussions with others also led to individuals feeling like a part of the organizational culture and helped to relieve uncertainty and frustrations faced. Scott & Myers (2005) also found that new members must uncover information regarding the specific tasks associated with their roles and about the norms for appropriate behavior and communication in their new surroundings. Jablin found that organizational new members typically encounter “. . . high levels of uncertainty, surprise, discrepancies between expectations and reality, and related efforts to make sense of these experiences . . .” (2001, p. 758).

Specific research on GTAs is important because, for the most part, college professors are never taught how to teach (Morrisroe & Roland, 2008). A recent study by the US Department of Education (Trends in Instructional Staff Employment Status, 1975-2009, 2009) found that graduate student employees make up almost 20% of total instructional staff in universities and DeChenne, Lesseig, Anderson, Li, Staus, and Barthel (2012) noted that most GTAs are “poorly or completely unprepared to teach” (p. 5). In primary education contexts, students who major in education are given the opportunity to learn and practice teaching skills through instruction and interaction

(Haberman, 1972). Graduate teaching assistants are typically not provided this type of training and are routinely placed in the classroom with little to no formal experience in education (Darling & Dewey, 1990). Darling and Dewey also noted that, contrasted with other levels of teaching, university level teaching is learned through interactions with and knowledge from experienced instructors. The process of learning is one of trial and error. This serves to create much anxiety for GTAs because for many the entire process is so uncertain. For graduate teaching assistants, opportunities to interact with veteran GTAs and faculty members are the lifeblood of the socialization process (Rosen & Bates, 1967). Self-efficacy, or confidence level, for teaching assistants was also found to be dependent upon social support from parents, students, and the institution itself (Shaughnessy, 2004).

Social Support

Gomez (2009) found that receiving social support was an effective socialization tactic that helped new members to assimilate into an organization. Burleson and MacGeorge (2002) defined social support as “verbal and nonverbal behavior produced with the intention of providing assistance to others perceived as needing that aid” (pg. 374). Through social support received from peers (co-workers) and mentors (managers), GTAs learn the role expectations associated with being students, instructors, and researchers. GTAs, or graduate teaching assistants, are either Master’s or doctoral level graduate students who either assist professors in the classroom or teach their own undergraduate courses. Because of their dual roles in a graduate program, they are both student and teacher.

Social support involves two people who are both sending and receiving support (Pierce, Sarason, Sarason, Joseph, & Henderson, 1996). Burleson, Albrecht, and Sarason

(1994) suggested that body and thought processes and emotion can be affected both directly and indirectly by supportive behaviors offered by friends, family, co-workers, and even strangers. Clearly, social support is something that everyone needs to have access to as it is the “cornerstone for the quality of human life” (Albrecht, Burleson, & Sarason, 1992, p. 149). It can have a beneficial effect on a person’s physical health, work performance, and emotional state and can be conveyed in a number of ways.

In looking at specific behaviors that convey social support, House (1981) offered four categories. The first category was emotional support. Behaviors that demonstrated concern, trust, empathy, and caring constituted emotional support. The second category was instrumental support. This referred to helping acts such as loaning money or giving one’s time or help. The third category, informational support, included “advice and counsel” (Tardy, 1992, p. 177). The fourth category was appraisal support. This was most clearly demonstrated by offering feedback and encouragement to the support seeker. House (1981) noted that a key aspect of social support was found in examining perceptions. Social support is likely to be effective only if the person receiving it perceives it as such; the intent of the provider is not the deciding factor.

Social Cognitive Theory

Social cognitive theory can help to ground an understanding of how socialization and social support function within organizations. The basic tenets of the theory indicate that human behavior is often learned by observing others and modeling their behaviors. Bandura (1969) noted how important social models are in the transmission and modification of behaviors. Behavioral, environmental, and cognitive influences all play a role in social learning. In order for behavior modeling to be effective, an individual must

pay attention to the model, remember the behavior, have the ability to replicate the behavior, and have sufficient motivation to want to learn the new behavior (Bandura, 1977a).

Social cognitive theory recognizes the fact that an individual's actions, thoughts, and behaviors are impacted by a combination of observation and direct experience. This involves the modeling of both good and bad behaviors and the type of environmental and social reinforcement offered for these behaviors. Morrisroe and Roland (2008) found that graduate students often had difficulty shifting to the role of teacher from the role of student and had difficulty recognizing the teaching methods that were being modeled. However, Buskist (2002) suggested that for teaching assistants, having the opportunity to observe effective teachers and receiving feedback on their own teaching helped them to become better teachers. Bandura (1969) suggested,

. . . it would be difficult to imagine a socialization process in which the language, mores, vocational and avocational patterns, the familial customs of a culture, and its educational, social, and political practices were shaped in each new member by selective reinforcement without the response guidance of models who exhibit the accumulated cultural repertoires in their own behavior. (p. 213)

Purpose Of Current Study

The purpose of this dissertation is to investigate the ways in which graduate teaching assistants learn about their roles and associated responsibilities and expectations for each through a combination of socialization and social support. GTAs at a large southeastern university (from here on referred to by the pseudonym, General Southeastern University, or GSU) are examined. Social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1969), which centers on learning through observation and imitation, is also used to examine GTAs as it provides a framework through which one can interpret the role of social

support in the organizational socialization process for GTAs. In order to explore this topic in more depth, the following section will review the pertinent literature on socialization, social support, and social cognitive theory.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF PERTINENT LITERATURE

Seeking social support within organizations is nothing new for both new and established members. It is a key component of successful socialization into an organization and in developing feelings of commitment toward the organization. The ability to learn, observe, and model behaviors as put forth in social cognitive theory are also key components of socialization. This is particularly true when examining the university as an organizational structure. Focusing specifically on graduate teaching assistants (GTAs), who are expected to manage multiple roles at once, this chapter will examine how socialization, social support, and social cognitive theory work together to explain how this particular subset of organizational new members deals with the uncertainties inherent in navigating the unknown.

Organizational Communication

Eisenberg and Goodall defined organizational communication as “the academic discipline focused on the nature and effectiveness of human interaction as it occurs in work environments” (2001, p. 5). Organizational communication has a long history within the fields of psychology and business, but is a relatively new discipline within the study of communication as researchers began examining this phenomenon around the 1950’s (Miller, 2009). The first studies of organizations approached the worker as a commodity; the metaphor of a machine was often used to describe these classical organizations. This metaphor characterizes organizations as specialized (each part has its own function), standardized (parts can easily be replaced) and predictable (there are clear

rules that govern the way the machine runs) (Taylor, 1911; Weber, 1946; Fayol, 1949). These researchers conceptualized the worker as simply his or her ability to provide physical labor. They were “uninterested in how employees could contribute to meeting organizational goals through knowledge, ideas, and discussion” (Miller, 2009, p. 35). The focus was on fostering rational organizations, which tended to be very bureaucratic in nature with very little opportunity for communication either vertically or horizontally (Eisenberg & Goodall, 2001). As researchers and practitioners began to conceptualize workers as human individuals and communication as key components in organizing, the focus began to move away from classical approaches of studying organizations to more of a focus on the human as a resource.

This shift began around the 1930s with the Hawthorne Studies, which examined differing factors such as lighting and break times to see what effect those factors might have on worker productivity (Roethlisberger & Dickson, 1939). The results indicated that each individual worker was a unique, complex individual with his or her own needs, values, emotions, and motives (Eisenberg & Goodall, 2001) and this was the impetus for both the human relations and human resources movements. After these studies concluded, organizational scholars began to focus on human needs and the role that social interactions played in the functioning of organizations. They began to believe that workers had something to offer organizations besides physical labor. These approaches “further developed the notion that effective organizations are those that can harness the cognitive abilities of their employees” (Miller, 2009, p. 52).

Many aspects of organizations and organizing have been studied by researchers since the focus shifted to the role of the worker. These are as varied as examining change

in organizations (Zorn, Page, & Cheney, 2000), the role of emotion in the workplace (Miller & Koesten, 2008), gender (Litwin & Hallstein, 2007; Kelan, 2008; Moore, Griffiths, Richardson, & Adam, 2008; Denker, 2009), the effects of technology in the workplace (Garrett & Danziger, 2008), the importance of diversity (Scott, 2007), and decision-making, satisfaction, and performance (Simon, 1987; Poole & Roth, 1989; Nutt, 1999; Fitzgerald & Desjardins, 2004; Allen & Judd, 2007). The socialization process, discussed in detail below, is also one area that has been given much attention by researchers. Generally, the university as an organization is a context that has been understudied by communication researchers. The following will explore the process of socialization within the workplace, how that process functions for graduate teaching assistants (GTAs), and the roles that social support and observation and behavior modeling play in helping GTAs to become fully enmeshed and integrated members of the university organization.

Socialization

Organizational socialization is defined by Van Maanen and Schein (1979) as, “the process by which an individual acquires the social knowledge and skills necessary to assume an organizational role” (p. 211) and is experienced as a highly anxiety inducing and stressful process for new organizational members (Spector, Dwyer, & Jex, 1988). Chao, O’Leary-Kelly, Wolf, Klein, and Gardner (1994) defined socialization as, “the primary process by which people adapt to new jobs and organizational roles” (p. 730) and Van Maanen defined it as, “the manner in which the experiences of people learning the ropes of a new organizational position, status, or role, are structured for them by others within the organization” (1978, p. 19). The current study focuses on the socialization

process for graduate teaching assistants as new organizational members. Scott and Myers (2005) found that new organizational members must learn about organizational expectations and how to communicate in new, unfamiliar environments. The socialization process aids in indoctrinating new members to the rules and norms for behavior and conduct within an organization. Chao et al. (1994) noted that the socialization process is one that takes place throughout the entire life cycle of an organizational member – it is not solely the purview of new organizational members, although the research heavily favors this population (Gallagher & Sias, 2009).

New organizational members face a variety of challenges as they begin the socialization process, intended to make them knowledgeable, productive, and involved members of an organization. The socialization process is an integral part of any organization from a small community group to a large multinational company. A part of the organizational entry process for any individual is engaging in the activities of uncertainty reduction and information seeking (Forward, 1999). Van Maanen (1978) observed that when faced with a transition, people found themselves experiencing anxiety. They sought to quell this anxiety by learning the social and functional necessities of their particular new role.

Uncertainty reduction According to Uncertainty Reduction Theory (Berger & Calabrese, 1975), we seek information to reduce uncertainty about our social worlds. Sunnafrank (1986) summarized work done by Berger (1979) and Berger and Bradac (1982) and found several ways individuals seek information in order to reduce their uncertainty. The first method involved using passive strategies to acquire information by simply observing others' behavior and actions. The second strategy was the active

strategy which included asking others for information. Lastly, the interactive strategy included communicating directly with a person to reduce uncertainty.

Berger and Calabrese found that, “High levels of uncertainty cause increases in information seeking behavior. As uncertainty levels decline, information seeking behavior decreases” (1975, p. 103). Kramer (1993) found employees experiencing a transfer within an organization had increased levels of feedback requests from their peers as their uncertainty levels about the new organization increased. These workers were able to reduce their uncertainty by “. . . determining appropriate and necessary work relationships, differentiating responsibilities, and gaining a sense of the general work cultural and environment” (p. 193). Additionally, Douglas (1990) found that uncertainty did decline across conversational segments and this led to a decrease in question asking.

Findings by Mignery, Rubin, and Gorden (1995) and Teboul (1995) indicated that new organizational members attempted to create stability and deal with uncertainty through the process of proactively seeking out communication encounters that helped them uncover both emotional support and information related to their specific job within the organization. Kramer (1993) noted that communication was an important part of the sense-making process and that communicating with peers and supervisors had a positive impact on adjustment. It also helped to reduce uncertainty. Forward (1999) suggested that communication plays a central role for new organizational members in managing expectations, generating support, reducing uncertainty, and reproducing organizational norms. As previously mentioned, the organizational socialization process involves three distinct phases: anticipatory, encounter, and metamorphosis.

Anticipatory phase From childhood, we develop certain ideas about what the concept of work entails and what is involved in different vocations. This, in turn, will color the expectations we develop about work in the future. Some of the influences on these work and vocational ideas we develop are family, school, work experiences, peers, and the media (Jablin, 1985; Hylmo, 2006; Hoffner, Levine, & Toohey, 2008). We also develop certain ideas and expectations about specific organizations. We acquire this knowledge by engaging in information seeking about a particular organization and through network interactions (Jablin, 2001). Findings indicate that often, organizational new members have high positive expectations about an organization and these expectations are unrealistic. Throughout the recruitment and interview process, organizations tend to stress the positive aspects of the organization and the job (Jablin, 2001). Once a new member enters an organization in the encounter phase, they often face the “reality shock” of discovering that their expectations and the reality they are faced with are vastly different (Louis, 1980).

Encounter phase Researchers identified the encounter phase as beginning the moment the newcomer enters the organization. This entrance may be accompanied by the realization that expectations are not matching up to reality (Nicholson & Arnold, 1991). Barge and Schlueter (2004) found that organizational discourse associated with socialization emphasized the need for newcomers to fit into the existing organizational method and focused on developing an individual’s specific abilities. Their findings also indicated that during organizational entry, richer forms of communication, such as face-to-face interactions, were found to be important in terms of message exchange. Chao et al. (1994) noted that job proficiency, relationship development, politics, history, and

organizational goals and values were all important organizational socialization domains. These elements may be communicated to new organizational members through official company messages, from other organizational members, customers, individuals outside the organization, and/or the task itself (Eisenberg & Goodall, 2001). Clearly, there is much information that new members must be attuned to as they navigate their way through the encounter phase.

In studying preservice teachers, Staton-Spicer and Darling (1986) found that reality shock was experienced in terms of the time consumed, work required, and emotional stress involved in the teaching experience. In looking specifically at academic jobs, McInnes (1992) found that job descriptions for academics were often vague and did not give an organizational new member a clear idea of what to expect in terms of day-to-day work activities. New organizational members face many challenges when encountering their new roles, including finding ways to access organizational information, deal with emotions, and seek social support (Simpson, Cockburn-Wootten, & Spiller, 2007).

During the encounter phase, most organizational new members are exposed to some sort of institutionalized socialization through an orientation program. Jablin (2001) found that these formal orientations may be very short in nature, lasting only a few days at most, and cover vast amounts of information including information related to organizational policies and procedures. Employee handbooks may be distributed and benefits paperwork may need to be completed. He found that the purpose of these orientation programs was to welcome new organizational members, give them information pertinent to the organization, introduce them to existing members, and

perhaps offer them support through a mentor. However, the individuals themselves are also agents of socialization. Van Maanen (1978) found that new organizational members must build guidelines and assign meaning to the activities that they have observed within the organization.

Information seeking on the part of the new organizational member is one crucial aspect of the encounter phase. Gallagher and Sias (2009) conceptualized information seeking as an “individual’s conscious choice to gain information via specific strategies” (p. 26). Information seeking during the socialization process is used to deal with problems faced; things like “insufficient, discrepant, or ambiguous role prescriptive statements” (Darling & Staton, 1989, p. 233). These strategies involved using both direct and indirect tactics and include asking overt questions, asking indirect questions, testing limits, disguising conversations, observing, and surveillance (Jablin, 1991). The type of information gained for an organizational new member will depend on who he or she chooses to consult. In many Ph.D. programs, advisors are chosen from among the faculty by the student. Consequently, this choice may have an effect on the socialization process for the student depending upon the level of mutual regard that is developed between themselves and the advisor (Van Maanen, 1978). For many doctoral students, a one-on-one mentor relationship is one main socialization agent; however, due to individual differences in the mentors themselves, there may be vast differences in the way these students experience their particular program (Hall & Burns, 2009).

Findings by Cawyer and Friedrich (1998) indicated that the encounter phase was less satisfying than the anticipatory phase and was marked by less interaction than expected and ambiguous information. Respondents indicated that more opportunities for

both socialization and mentorship should be provided and encouraged. The encounter process can be broken down into two distinct components. These two components are institutionalized socialization and individualized socialization (Jablin, 1987; Jones, 1983). This interaction is a reciprocal one as the newcomer negotiates his or her role within the institutionalized or individualized socialization process offered by the organization. Jablin (2001) noted that this phase is so important for organizational new members, and the organization itself, due to the fact that the orientation program utilized can affect employee turnover and attitudes about their job and the organization itself.

An additional key aspect in the encounter phase is the development of relationships within the workplace. Feeley, Hwang, and Barnett (2008) found that one important predictor of employee turnover was his or her social network. Those employees who were more active in their social networks within the organization were less likely to leave and that “friends in the workplace provide coping resources that serve to reduce the amount of strain felt by an employee” (p. 66). New organizational members usually have greater opportunities to spend time with, share information, and develop relationships with their peers than their superiors (Teboul, 1994). For those that are formally and collectively oriented to an organization (institutionalized socialization), relationships typically developed between new members and, often, assistance and support was provided (Jablin, 2001).

Metamorphosis phase Researchers identified the metamorphosis phase as one in which an organizational new member has made the transition from outsider to insider (Miller, 2009). Miller also noted that although a member may be considered an insider, there will always be some amount of flux and uncertainty in terms of organizational roles

and culture. The time it takes for organizational members to reach this phase will differ. It could take only a few months or, as is often the case in professional associations and universities, it can take as much as ten years (Eisenberg & Goodall, 2001). The new member is an active agent in making any changes that are required for him or her to remain in a specific organization or occupation and this may take time (Staton-Spicer & Darling, 1986).

As previously mentioned, Van Maanen and Schien (1979) identified six tactics which can lead to different socialization outcomes. These six tactics are collective – individual, formal – informal, sequential – random, fixed – variable, investiture – divestiture, and serial – disjunctive. Jones (1986) then categorized these six variables into two distinct groups. The first group was identified as institutionalized socialization and included collective, formal, sequential, fixed, serial, and investiture tactics. The second group was identified as individualized and included individual, informal, random, variable, disjunctive, and divestiture tactics. The socialization tactics that are chosen by a particular organization will affect the type of information provided and the way it is received by new members.

Within institutionalized socialization, collective tactics are used when organizations put an entire group through a collective orientation process. New members are given common learning experiences to ensure the organization that their future responses will be homogeneous (Van Maanen & Schein, 1979). Using formal socialization tactics means that new members will be separated from other organizational members while they are given information about their specific roles. This increases the chance that new members will share the same values, attitudes, and norms (Van Maanen

& Schein, 1979). Using sequential tactics means that new members will be given information concerning exactly how they will move through the socialization process, what the steps involved will be, and the lengths of time associated with each. This fixed process offers new members more certainty about their organizational futures (Van Maanen & Schein, 1979). Utilizing serial tactics means that established organizational members are able to act as role models for new members (Van Maanen & Schein, 1979). Lastly, investiture relates to the amount of positive social support provided by established organizational members (Jones, 1986).

In testing these institutionalized socialization tactics, Jones (1986) found that they helped to reduce anxiety and uncertainty and they were positively related to organizational commitment and job satisfaction. Baker and Feldman (1990) also found that institutionalized tactics can lead to organizational commitment and job satisfaction and, additionally, found that these tactics were positively associated with trust in peers and management. Moreover, satisfaction with communication and confidence in one's supervisor were also positively associated with these tactics (Mignerey, Rubin, & Gorden, 1995). Using these tactics also reduced the amount of role conflict experienced by new members and led to more cohesion with the organization for new members (Zahrly & Tosi, 1989). However, not everything associated with institutionalized socialization tactics is positive. Ashforth and Saks (1996) found that these tactics cause new members to conform to the ways things are already done in the organization; they are simply maintaining the *status quo*. Interestingly, "the welcoming security that institutionalized socialization initially represented may come to represent smothering paternalism" (p. 172).

In looking at individualized socialization, individual tactics are used. Individual tactics allow the new member to have his or her own unique learning experiences so that in the future, responses from new members will be heterogeneous. When informal tactics are used, new members are not separated from established organizational members. They are placed in work groups so that they are able to learn role requirements while they are actually doing the work (Van Maanen & Schein, 1979). Using random and variable tactics means that the stages associated with the socialization process are unknown to new members and there is no certain pattern that they will follow. This can lead to new members feeling uncertain about their organizational futures. Disjunctive tactics are utilized when new members are not provided with experienced organizational role models. They are left to develop their own ideas and definitions of their roles (Van Maanen & Schein, 1979). Lastly, divestiture relates to the amount of negative social support provided by established organizational members (Jones, 1986).

Due to the fact that individualized socialization gives new members more latitude in organizational development, findings indicated that these tactics were positively associated with internal work motivation and performance (Baker, 1989; Ashforth and Saks 1996). Ashforth and Saks (1996) also found that using individualized socialization tactics encouraged new members to innovate within their particular role and this led to exceptional performance.

Benefits of Socialization

In examining the content and consequences of organizational socialization, Chao et al. (1994) found that, in general, there were several beneficial outcomes to those organizational new members who were well socialized. These included a higher level of

satisfaction and adaptability, a higher level of career involvement, higher pay, and a better sense of their personal identity within the organization. In terms of information seeking, Miller and Jablin (1991) found that the outcomes included less role ambiguity and lower levels of role conflict for organizational new members. Allen and Meyer (1990) found that organizations can accomplish both the inspiration of strong organizational commitment and innovation within new members. Utilizing a focus on the future, “may help promote effective socialization tactics through structures that help newcomers assimilate into the organization by receiving social support and understanding their future within the organization” (Gomez, 2009, p. 200).

The socialization process is one that is important to organizations because it enables an organization to maintain their mission, performance, and survival (Van Maanen, 1978) and, ultimately, the idea behind the socialization process is to make certain that organizational new members are able to complete their duties effectively (Ashforth & Saks, 1996). Understandably, communication is highlighted as a central aspect of the socialization process. “It is through talk with others that interns learn about their new role, begin to feel a part of the culture . . . , and relieve some of their own frustrations and uncertainties in order to survive” (Staton-Spicer & Darling, 1986, p. 228).

Graduate Teaching Assistants

One particular organizational new member that is important to examine is the graduate teaching assistant (GTA). Whether assisting professors or in their own classrooms, Komarraju (2008) found that opportunities to teach are integral in the development of graduate students. She further noted that most GTAs are not provided

ample training and development before they are placed in the classroom. Sometimes, GTAs only have a few days to prepare themselves for their teaching duties (Nicklow, Marikunte, & Chevalier, 2007) and research indicated that GTAs were concerned with their ability to handle the challenge of being both a student and a teacher (Darling & Dewey, 1990). With the US Department of Education reporting around 20% (Trends in Instructional Staff Employment Status, 1975-2009, 2009) of undergraduate classes being taught by graduate students, the appropriate socialization, preparation and development of GTAs should be a pressing concern for students, faculty, and university administrators alike.

Many GTAs experience some form of formal orientation to the university and to their responsibilities as GTAs as part of the socialization process. These orientation programs are designed to impart organizational messages about such things as role and behavior expectations for GTAs, and values and norms (Darling & Staton-Spicer, 1986) and may also include practical issues such as syllabi and exam construction, grading methods, and classroom assignments (Meyers & Prieto, 2000). These formal socialization tactics may also be supplemented with more informal tactics such as meals shared with other GTAs and faculty members (Darling & Dewey, 1990). However, not all GTAs are provided with ample orientation and training for the responsibilities they will face. A national survey found that only one half of the GTAs in noncommunication departments received training (Buerkel-Rothfuss & Gray, 1990). Myers (1995) found that for GTAs, their primary means of socialization as organizational new members was the development of peer supportive communication relationships. Peers were utilized for their ability to provide direction, sense-making, and comfort.

The types of socialization tactics that GTAs utilized early in the process impacted the types of opportunities available to them later in their graduate program (Darling & Staton, 1989). The key socialization agents for GTAs were found to be experienced GTAs and faculty members (Rosen & Bates, 1967). Hall and Burns (2009) found that for doctoral students, they were more likely to be successful if their socialization process was made both explicit and negotiable by their faculty mentors. Because today's GTAs will likely become tomorrow's professors, socializing GTAs is a necessary process (Lou, Bellows, & Grady, 2000). However, as Hardre (2005) noted, there is a tension that develops for GTAs between their training as a teacher and their devotion to their own graduate studies. Developing a comprehensive training program for all GTAs may be difficult as "some TAs will teach after graduation, but others will focus on research; so they differ in their perceived need for teaching development and consequently the time and effort that they are willing to commit to it" (p. 164).

Van Maanen (1978) noted, ". . . graduate students are often said to learn more from one another than from the faculty" (p. 25). Often, in addition to formal orientation or training programs that are provided to GTAs, a trial-and-error process is present in socialization whereby new GTAs learn how to execute certain tasks on their own, without any guidance from existing organizational members. When GTAs are experiencing uncertainty, they will often turn to each other to try and make sense of the situation (Darling & Staton, 1989). They also noted that, as new organizational members, GTAs were expected to actively search for support and information from those around them, including faculty and peers. Because GTAs are often left to their own devices, Davis and

Kring (2001) advocate using group meetings and evaluations as part of the socialization process to help GTAs feel more included.

For many GTAs, being a teaching assistant is the only training they have before they go into the professoriate. In order to ensure that the teaching tactics utilized are as effective as possible, it is important to adequately train and supervise these GTAs (Prieto & Scheel, 2008). The socialization process will continue past the formal orientation program as GTAs “attempt to do their work, build relationships, and use the information they received during the orientation program” (Darling & Spicer, 1989, p. 223). Savage and Sharpe (1998) found that, for a GTA, the first year of teaching was a “survival stage” (p. 1). GTAs were often faced with classroom management issues and found themselves making simple teaching mistakes (Lou, Bellows, & Grady, 2000; Buskist, 2000). In addition to teaching responsibilities and graduate studies, the ability to conduct and/or participate in primary research projects was also an important focus for GTAs (McDonough, 2006).

Research by Darling and Dewey (1990) indicated that GTAs have two main distinct communication concerns: self and task. Self concerns included nervousness and doubts about their ability to assume the authority position while teaching and role conflict. One respondent indicated that “When I set my own work as priority over grading – my students don’t understand, and when I sacrifice class work for teaching responsibilities, my professors are disappointed” (p. 319). Task concerns involved aspects of the nuts and bolts of being a GTA such as grading and preparing lectures and about how, overall, to balance responsibilities as both a student and teacher (Darling & Dewey, 1990). In examining doctoral students in general, the population was found to be

in a “precarious position where they are simultaneously learning about taking on appropriate doctoral student role identities while working on tasks that require enacting academic role identities” (Jazvac-Martek, 2009, p. 256).

One of the goals for organizations in using socialization and assimilation was to encourage new member integration into the organization, which may lead to “longer tenures and reduced turnover costs” (Myers & Oetzel, 2003, p. 451). The university, however, is a distinct organizational site. For professors, researchers, and administration, employment within the university is perceived as career. For graduate students, serving as a GTA is a stepping stone usually lasting between one and four years. The socialization tactics that university graduate departments choose to use should reflect this truncated tenure.

Different organizations will use different socialization tactics with their new members depending on what they want them to think, believe, and know. Some graduate programs use institutionalized socialization, which is more collective in nature and formalized. Some graduate programs may use more individualized socialization and leave the individual with room to develop ideas about the organization and his or her role in it. Ultimately, the research conducted on GTAs indicated that they were underprepared for the many roles and challenges they face in graduate school such as teaching undergraduates, completing their own coursework, and participating in research. The socialization process is highlighted as an important one in helping GTAs to navigate the uncertainties involved in their role as new organizational members and in the duality of their positions as both employee (student) and manager (teacher). It is important to note

that as an organizational subset, the GTA grouping is dynamic and ever-changing. Membership is not static and identities are constantly shifting.

Social Support

As noted earlier, social support is, for organizational new members, an important aspect of the socialization process. In thinking more broadly, social support is an extremely important component of many people's lives. Burleson and MacGeorge (2002) defined social support as "verbal and nonverbal behavior produced with the intention of providing assistance to others perceived as needing that aid" (pg. 374). This is an extremely important area of study because people participate in giving and receiving social support every day. If we are fortunate enough, we experience social support at many different times throughout our lives and social support may become important in our lives in times of personal need. Dunkel-Schetter, Sagrestano, Feldman, and Killingsworth (1996), for example, found that for pregnant women, receiving social support led to lower levels of stress, depression, and anxiety. House (1981) found that,

Social support does not emerge as a panacea for all occupational stress and health problems. But it is clear that the right kind of support from the right kind of people can be of significant value in reducing occupational stress, improving health, and buffering the impact of stress on health. (p. 59)

Social support involves two people who are both sending and receiving support (Pierce, Sarason, Sarason, Joseph, & Henderson, 1996). Burleson, Albrecht, and Sarason stated that, "supportive prosocial behavior received from friends, kin, acquaintances, work associates, and even strangers has remarkable effects, both direct and indirect, on physiology, cognition, and emotion" (1994, p. xi-xii). Clearly, social support is something that everyone needs to have access to as it is the "cornerstone for the quality of human life" (Albrecht, Burleson, & Sarason, 1992, p. 149). It can have a beneficial effect

on a person's physical health, work performance, and emotional state and can be conveyed in a number of ways. Lakey and Lutz (1996) found that individuals who perceived themselves as receiving a low amount of social support actually interpreted the same social information in a more negative light than their counterparts did.

Findings indicated that those who seek out social support were more successful in life both physically and psychologically (Pierce, Sarason, Sarason, Joseph, & Henderson, 1996). Social support can have many different benefits for both senders and receivers. Cutrona (1996) found that support can prevent conflict from escalating emotionally, it can increase intimacy, it can decrease the propensity to see problems negatively, and it can prevent emotional withdrawal during stressful events. Goldsmith (2004) noted other benefits of social support including better health and well-being and a higher level of relational satisfaction. Goldsmith also found that some of the most helpful forms of social support were attentiveness, expressions of empathy and love, normal treatment, providing the opportunity for talk and venting, and honesty.

Cahill and Sias (1997) asserted that, "social support is fundamentally a communication phenomenon" (p. 232). Because of this, social support has been studied in a variety of communication contexts. Computer mediated support groups have become very popular within the last few years and were found to be a beneficial source of social support for the members involved (Wright, 1999; Shaw, McTavish, Hawkins, Gustafson, Pingree, 2000; Wright, 2000). In a study by Christian (2005), focusing on online support groups for stepmothers, findings indicated that members used narratives to share their stories with one another and also to counter the stigma they may be feeling as a step-parent. Through the sharing of their stories, the group members were able to validate each

other's experiences. The use of social support has also been studied in the context of support groups for those diagnosed with an illness (Robinson & Turner, 2003, Rudy, Rosenfeld, Galassi, Parker, & Schanberg, 2001), those who have lost family members, and those who have experienced loneliness or a negative life event (Bell & Gonzalez, 1988).

In terms of gendered communication, research found that men and women used differing types of social support with different frequency (Goldsmith & Dun, 1997). When offering social support, women used longer responses than men and those responses focused more on the emotional aspects of what the other was experiencing whereas men tended to focus on simply trying to fix the problem. For both sexes, responses were influenced by the situation and involved talk about the problem and actions to take. Hobfall, Cameron, Chapman, and Gallagher (1996), reported that women tended to seek social support from their female friendships and also utilized social support more often than males.

Social support is also beneficial in studying health behavior. Schwarzer and Leppin (1991) noted, “. . . social support can prompt health behavior, such as adherence to medical regimens” (p. 123). When an individual is receiving behaviors that demonstrate caring and concern from someone they may be more likely to reciprocate this behavior by taking care of their health, thereby demonstrating the effectiveness of the support offered. However, social support was not always found to improve overall health. In studying social support for individuals plagued with chronic fatigue syndrome, findings indicated that social support did not improve psychological health (Kelly,

Soderlund, Albert, & McGarrahan, 1999). It is important to examine the context of each situation, as social support will not be universally beneficial for all involved.

Social network support is also an important component in the social support literature. Network support was defined by Simons and Johnson (1996) as “warmth, encouragement, and assistance provided by friends, neighbors, and extended family” (p. 277). While network support can be extremely beneficial, Wills, Mariani, and Filer (1996) found that activities among network members can influence personal choices and these may not always be positive choices. For example, their study revealed that amount of integration into the community, availability of emotional support, and substance use among network members can all help to predict substance use among adolescents.

Supportive Messages

There are many different types of supportive messages. House (1981) provided four categories of support. These were emotional support, instrumental support, informational support, and appraisal support. Behaviors indicating concern, trust, empathy, and caring defined emotional support. Instrumental support referred to helping acts such as loaning money or giving one’s time. Informational support included “advice and counsel” (Tardy, 1992, p. 177). House (1981) found that appraisal support is demonstrated through feedback, judgments, and encouragement. A study conducted by Goldsmith, McDermott, and Alexander (2000), found supportive messages to be those that agreed with the other’s point of view and reinforced feelings of relational loyalty. Sometimes a relational partner is not able to understand the other partner’s point of view. In situations like this, a support group can provide the understanding that someone may be seeking. “Sharing a setting provides a frame of reference for the supporter to be

informed and insightful about obvious and subtle stresses” (Albrecht & Adelman, 1984, p. 19). Overall, Goldsmith, McDermott, and Alexander (2000) suggested that supportive messages were associated with terms such as loyalty, availability, agreement, encouragement, and reassurance. One important form of supportive messages is through the offering of emotional support.

Emotional Support

Emotional support offers the receiver caring, concern, trust, and empathy. It also helps the recipient to feel validated and cared for through interpersonal exchanges (Kramer & Houston, 2001, p. 424). One way of communicating and receiving emotional support is through telling stories. Stories can be an emotionally supportive tool in support groups because “people search for stories which justify their efforts and resolve the tensions and problems in their lives, and desire stories that resolve their dissonance and are psychologically satisfying” (Hollihan & Riley, 1987, p. 15). Through the sharing of stories individuals are able to emotionally relate to others experiencing the same things. For many individuals it is comforting to know that they are not the only one that is going through something difficult.

Albrecht and Adelman (1984) found that social support was beneficial because it helped to facilitate coping with different life transitions and helped to mitigate stress. In examining new academics, findings indicated that emotional support, offered in the form of clarifying conversations and the ability to reframe events in a new perspective, was gained from existing organizational members (Simpson, Cockburn-Wootten, & Spiller, 2007). Support groups can also provide an outlet for emotion-based coping and social support. Within support groups, individuals are able to share their feelings and

experiences with others who are in similar situations or have had similar experiences. This can make the members more credible to give suggestions and advice and to define the situation (Albrecht & Adelman, 1984).

One type of emotional support that can be particularly helpful in dealing with distressing issues is comforting messages. Bippus (2001) defined comforting messages as communication through verbal messages that help to support and treat a person's distressed feelings. In a study conducted by Bippus, four skillful comforting criteria were observed in relation to how empowered they made the receiver of social support feel after the support was given. Findings indicated that social support providers that focused on being other oriented, being problem solvers, refraining from negativity, and offering a different perspective helped the receiver of social support to feel more empowered. Burleson (1994) added that the more sophisticated comforting messages a person receives, the more likely he or she will develop the ability to personally deal with emotional distress. Jones (2004) suggested that person centered "comforting messages are not only evaluated as most helpful but also have an immediate and highly desirable effect – these kinds of messages seem to alleviate the difficult feelings experienced by upset people" (p. 354). In studying social support for mothers after the loss of a child, Lakkso and Paunonen-Ilmonen (2002) found that emotional support was perceived as positive if the support provider allowed the mother to share the story of the child's death and their experience of grief multiple times.

Instrumental Support

As previously stated, instrumental support includes things that are given such as time or money. In a study done by Tardy (1992) findings showed that messages of

instrumental support were regarded as more concerned and sensitive than emotionally supportive messages. People were not only willing to offer verbally supportive messages they were also willing to offer supportive resources. Goldsmith and Dun (1997) found that women engaged in more talk about instrumental support than men when did offering social support.

Stress can take a toll on mental and physical health and social support can help to alleviate this stress (Goldsmith, 1994). Instrumental support can provide tools needed to buffer this stress. “Receiving instrumental support may enhance the perception of support availability that has been shown to be an important predictor of adjustment” (Brashers, Neidig, & Goldsmith, 2004, p. 313). House (1981) defined instrumental support in terms of helping people to get their work done, pay their bills, or take care of them. He is careful to note, however, that “a purely instrumental act also has psychological consequences. Thus, giving a person money can be a sign of caring or a source of information and appraisal” (p. 25).

Informational Support

House (1981) defined informational support as information that is provided to an individual as they are experiencing problems coping with environmental and personal issues. He also noted that there was a bit of the blurring of the lines between types of support as the provision of information may, at times, act as emotional or instrumental support.

Informational support is important because it provides advice and counsel to recipients. People receive advice everyday on how to handle myriad situations. In the social support literature, advice is seen both positively and negatively. Often people seek

advice when they are having a difficult time making a decision or solving a problem. They seek another's input to help develop a response. Advice can be viewed in multiple ways. The receiver may interpret the advice as helpful or as butting in (Goldsmith, 2004). They may interpret it as supportive or brutally honest. They may decide to take the advice of another or follow a different path (Goldsmith & Fitch, 1997). Ultimately, advice can be a powerful tool. "When advice is heard as criticism, oppression, or disapproval, the implication can be that the recipient is less worthy in some way than the giver" (Goldsmith & Fitch, 1997, p. 463). It can also put a relationship in imbalance where one individual is in need and the other is providing. Because individuals interpret advice differently, Goldsmith (2004) noted that advice may be perceived as critical and unsupportive if it does not match the beliefs and the interpretations of the individual receiving the support.

Often, social support and advice can be seen as threatening to the ego. Those who give advice must realize that social support is dependent upon the context. The receiver has certain expectations regarding the social support being offered. These expectations or preferences that they hold will affect the way that messages are interpreted (Tardy, 1992). When offering advice one must be aware of the communicative style that he or she possesses and the possible identity and relational implications that may result from offering advice (Goldsmith, 2004). Goldsmith offered some suggestions for giving advice.

First, do not make advice the first or only response to a close relational partner's distress and recognize that sometimes people talk about problems for reasons other than seeking advice. Second, recognize that there is more to advice than just solving the problem. Effective advice givers appear to consider how the advice makes them look, how it makes the other person look, and what it says about the relationship. (2004, p. 78)

These suggestions are beneficial when attempting to offer advice that will be perceived in a helpful and supportive way by the receiver.

Appraisal Support

Appraisal support has been defined by House (1981) as the transmission of information relevant to self-evaluation. Individuals receiving appraisal support used the other person as a means of information for evaluating themselves and that information can be, “. . . explicitly or implicitly evaluative” (p. 25). This can take the form of feedback and positive or negative judgments and enables the individual to engage in social comparison. This social comparison was also found to be present in Bandura’s (1963) social cognitive theory, which will be discussed later. House (1981), in reporting on findings from Mechanic (1970), explained that appraisal support can sometimes be “tension-producing” and that individuals may try to avoid this type of support in the short term, but that avoidance may be maladaptive in the long run (p. 49).

Support and Self-help Groups

It is useful to examine types of support groups and self-help groups to discover what types and kinds of support were most beneficial to members. Arntson and Droge (1986) examined social support in self-help groups for those suffering with epilepsy. Their findings indicated that the opportunity to talk with others who were willing to listen to what they had to say and the existence of another social network were the types of social support that the members of this group sought. They also noted that universality (having the same feelings and experiences as other members), altruism (the opportunity to help other members), and support were important in social support groups. Helgeson and Gottlieb (2000) indicated that support groups served many functions including:

education, peer support, mutual aid through similarity of experiences, and a sense of community that offered ways of coping and a sense of belonging. Gatz (2003) in a study of a support group for mothers of multiples, found that respondents felt like they were not alone in their situation. This helped to make these mothers more open to various coping strategies offered by members in similar situations and also helped to decrease distress.

Hollihan and Riley (1987), in observing a support group for parents of behaviorally difficult children, found that these parents realized that no one else, other than other parents of delinquent children, were able to identify with their struggle. These support groups offered members a way to identify, to participate in dialogue in a safe space where other members were experiencing the same types of events. In the online environment, VanLear, Sheehan, Withers, and Walker (2005) found that for member of Alcoholics Anonymous, “receiving empathy from perfect strangers – people . . . unlikely to be biased by hidden agendas or selfish motives – validates alcoholics’ experiences, and the acceptance and acknowledgment implicit in those empathic messages offered alcoholics hope” (p. 22).

Stevens and Gardner (1994) suggested that men are socialized in such a way as to not allow them easy access to emotional expression and support groups. They may not feel comfortable sharing their feelings and emotions with strangers as is often found in a support group. Frieman found that in dealing with a social support group for men experiencing divorce, “the solutions generated by fathers who participated in professionally run support groups for divorcing men, helped these men to cope with their divorces” (2002, p. 173). Findings indicated that support groups for men can be very beneficial, however, some men may be hesitant to join in. While examining individuals in

stressful situations such as divorce, Winstead, Derlega, Lewis, Sanchez-Hucles, and Clarke (1992) found that talking about the situation predicted confidence and after interacting with friends, subjects perceived more social support and were less depressed.

In examining support groups, Arnstron and Droge (1986) noted what they term the “restaurant effect” (p. 155). Often, after a support meeting had ended, members of the group went out for coffee or dinner. This offered support group members the chance to get extended support and provided an opportunity for social interaction for those who did not have large social networks.

Support groups allow people who are coping with difficult life events to share their story. “As time goes by, stories serve to bind experiences together, maintaining them in relationship to each other as parts of distinctive memory segments” (Bosticco & Thompson, 2005, p. 3). Bosticco and Thompson also found that stories served a sensemaking function and a cathartic function. By telling stories, people were able to make sense out of their experience. They were also able to share their thoughts, feelings, and perspectives on events with others, which served a cathartic function. Especially in a support group setting, other members have experienced the same types of situations before and can help members by sharing their own experiences.

In terms of graduate teaching assistants, Cawyer and Friedrich (1998) found that graduate students were usually socialized as a group, which helped to create bonds as they were all traveling a similar journey. These groups can become support groups both academically and socially. Van Maanen (1978) noted that when a group is collectively socialized, “an ‘in-the-same-boat’ collective consciousness” developed (p. 24). For GTAs, the workplace is an important area for social support. Brotheridge (2001) found

that coworker support can help to diminish the stressors inherent in a heavy workload. This support “may help employees to reframe the nature of their work situation or even provide employees with practical time-saving advice” (p. 4). When individuals utilize social support, “the exchange helps reduce mutual uncertainty, not only about the stressors experienced but towards one another” (Albrecht & Adelman, 1984, p. 17).

Supportive communication in the workplace includes the development of relationships that improve a person’s work life (Myers, 1998). For GTAs, these included both mentor and peer relationships and involved both task and social elements. For preservice teachers, having conversations with others about ways to conduct their classes, manage the classroom, and handle their various responsibilities helped organizational new members become aware of their options (Staton-Spicer & Darling, 1986). In researching AIDS patients Brashers, Neidig, and Goldsmith (2004) found that support helped HIV and AIDS patients deal with uncertainty in several ways. Support assisted with information seeking and avoiding, provided instrumental support, provided acceptance or validation, facilitated skill development, allowed for venting, and encouraged a perspective shift.

The literature provides much support for the benefit of social support in people’s lives. It is, however, important for those offering social support to consider the content of their messages and the consequences these messages might have. Burlison and MacGeorge noted that, “a single message can contain both helpful and unhelpful elements that compete with, undermine, or otherwise interfere with each other” (2002, p. 403). Additionally, House (1981) reported that social support was a perceived construct. Social support only exists, regardless of the intent of the provider, if the receiver

perceives it to be supportive. DeLongis and Holtzman (2005) found that support providers must receive cues indicating that there is a need for them to provide support. If they do not receive those cues, they may miss the opportunity to provide needed support. Ultimately social support, whether offered by a friend, family member, co-worker, anonymous individual over the internet or through a support group, can be extremely beneficial in helping individuals to deal with difficult life events.

Social Cognitive Theory

Social learning theory, developed by Albert Bandura in the early 1960's, is used to describe how humans learn behaviors. This theory was intended to explain how humans use observation to learn certain behaviors, although, just because an individual has learned a particular behavior does not necessarily mean that he or she will adapt that behavior. Cognitive expectations of rewards or punishments due to behavior will play a role in an individual's determination of whether or not to display a particular behavior. In addition to simply observing behavior, individuals may choose to model the behaviors that they see performed. However, Bandura identified four conditions that must be met in order for an individual to successfully model another's behavior: attention, retention, reproduction, and motivation. The first condition was that the individual must pay close attention to what is being modeled. Second, the individual must be able to remember what he or she observed. Third, the individual must actually have the ability to replicate the behavior that was demonstrated. Lastly, the individual must have the motivation to demonstrate the behavior he or she has learned through observation. Once the behavior was performed, depending upon the results, the individual may or may not be motivated

to adopt the behavior and utilize it in the future (Bandura & Walters, 1963; Bandura, 1977a).

In 1977, Bandura broadened this theory, renaming it social cognitive theory and adding the component of self-efficacy. Self-efficacy is an individual's perception of his or her ability to perform a behavior that has been observed; the level of confidence an individual has in his or her own abilities (Glanz, Rimer, & Lewis, 2002). Self-efficacy, of course, must be considered in addition to skills and knowledge possessed. Confidence in one's ability is not enough to produce a successful behavior. This theory is useful in attempting to understand human behavior. The theory posits that human behavior is the mixing of three different elements: personal factors, the environment, and behavior (Bandura, 1977b, 1986). These three elements are always influencing each other, which Bandura termed reciprocal determinism. Bandura (1986) recognized that humans are agents that are actively involved in their development and have agency in their actions. He noted, "what people think, believe, and feel affects how they behave" (p. 25).

Social cognitive theory has been studied extensively in many fields including psychology, medicine, communication, and management. Researchers have studied it in various contexts such as career development (Lent & Brown, 1996), family communication about sexuality (Lehr, Demi, DiIorio, & Facticeau, 2005), and e-commerce (LaRose & Eastin, 2002), but there is a heavy emphasis on its impact on health behaviors and media consumption. In terms of health behaviors, social cognitive theory has been used to study nutrition, exercise, seat-belt use, flossing behaviors, and breast self-exams (Anderson, Winett, & Wojcik, 2007; Hertz, 2008; Schwarzer, 2008). It has also been used to study the effects of the media such as television shows, advertising, and video

games on observation and modeling behaviors (Bandura, 2001; Lee & LaRose, 2007; Ortiz & Harwood, 2007; Behm-Morawitz & Mastro, 2008; Eyal & Kunkel, 2008; Nabi & Clark, 2008).

One aspect of this theory that is of particular interest in terms of the socialization process is behavioral observation and modeling. Observational learning occurs when one individual observes how another individual acts in a situation and observes the type of reinforcement provided.

Virtually all learning resulting from direct experience can also occur on a vicarious basis by observing the behavior of others and its consequences. The capacity to learn by observation enables organisms to acquire large, integrated patterns of behavior without having to form them gradually by tedious trial and error. The abbreviation of the acquisition process through observational learning is vital for both development and survival. (Bandura, 1978, p. 14)

Simple observation, however, is often not enough. Individuals must have the ability to perform the behavior themselves. An individual's self-efficacy will also play a role; how confident they are in their ability to replicate the behavior.

Within socialization, learning from others is an important component. New organizational members will look to those around them to decipher the ways in which to proceed. "Thus, colleagues, superiors, subordinates, clients, and other work associates can and most often do support, guide, hinder, confuse or push . . ." (Van Maanen, 1978, p. 20). In studying GTA socialization, Darling and Staton (1989) interviewed one GTA that reported relying a great deal on her peers in order to "make sure she was on the right track" and to attempt to ensure consistency across sections (p. 229). Shaughnessy (2004) noted the importance of receiving social support from both parents and peers as well as from the institution itself. This support helps teachers to maintain, and perhaps increase, their self-efficacy. Gibbs and Coffey (2004) found that when university instructors were

able to increase their self-efficacy it resulted in more affirmative feedback from students and a tendency to focus more on the student. When teachers felt confidence in themselves and in their abilities, they demonstrated more competency in teaching, more motivation to teach, and attempted to create an atmosphere of learning that was conducive to high achievement by their students (Shaughnessy, 2004; Vaidya & Urias, 2008).

Learning from others takes many forms but one central method is through behavior modeling. This can be both positive and negative. For instance, as faculty members begin to mentor and socialize new doctoral students, they are often not provided with any training themselves on how to properly mentor. These faculty members often rely on their own experience of being mentored in their own graduate programs.

However, emulation is not always viewed as adequate or positive. This could perpetuate negative behaviors and may “reproduce the status quo” (Hall & Burns, 2009, p. 50).

Austin and Wulff (2004) found that faculty members should not be preparing graduate students to become carbon copies of them as the work expectations for faculty are changing. Simply mimicking faculty behavior may not be appropriate or prepare them adequately. The same goes for teaching in the college classroom as Grasha (1978) discovered that most university instructors developed their teaching methods from how they themselves were taught.

In observing how role modeling functions in the clinical workplace, Armstrong (2008) found that modeling behaviors offered those in the learning process a wide range of experiences. Observation, involvement, and having the opportunity to question the role model made the learning experience one that was meaningful and active. However, an individual’s level of self-efficacy affected their adoption of these modeled behaviors.

Bandura (1993) suggested that those with high self-efficacy were willing to take on difficult tasks and approached them as challenges; even if they failed, they were quickly able to regain their sense of self-efficacy. Those with low self-efficacy were hesitant to take on difficult tasks, focusing on their own shortcomings, and tended to dwell on the possible negative outcomes. It can also work the other way around; the social comparison process can also affect self-efficacy. When someone perceived to be similar to you is able to succeed in a behavior, your own beliefs about your capabilities will increase (Wood & Bandura, 1989). Clearly, for those individuals engaged in a new situation, such as being socialized within a new organization, having a high level of self-efficacy should make the transition smoother.

Having the opportunity to observe established members within an organization is found to be helpful for new members. Ostroff and Kozlowski (1992) found that new members repeatedly utilized observation of organizational members, as an institutionalized socialization tactic, to uncover information about their work groups, roles, tasks, and about the organization itself. In studying training programs for teaching assistants, Komarraju (2008) found that their confidence in their ability to teach and make a difference in the lives of their students was strengthened because of the training program. In short, their self-efficacy was increased. This training program also led to an increased liking of teaching for respondents. Komarraju noted, “when TAs are more sure about what they are supposed to do and are confident about how to do it, they are more likely to anticipate a positive experience when teaching” (2008, p. 331).

As an effective method in preparing teachers for post-secondary education, behavior observation is not the only option (Savage & Sharpe, 1998). Komarraju noted,

“as suggested by social cognitive theory, opportunities for practicing teaching, receiving feedback directed at improving teaching skills, observing peers and experts teach, and receiving support from peers and supervisors. . . are important in strengthening personal efficacy” (2008, p. 331). It is through a combination of the above factors and through possessing or developing a strong sense of self-efficacy that successful behaviors can be performed.

In general, this study examines the socialization process for GTAs in a communication department at General Southeastern University (GSU). The role that social support from peers and faculty plays in the socialization process is examined. Additionally, the role that the observation and behavior modeling aspects of social cognitive theory play in the socialization process is also examined. To that end, three main research questions were addressed.

Research Questions

Research question 1: What role does institutionalized socialization play for GTAs as new organizational members?

Research question 2: Which specific social support behaviors, if any, facilitate the socialization process for GTAs?

Research question 3: What role does peer and/or faculty observation serve in the socialization process?

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

GTAs represent a unique and understudied population in the communication literature. The purpose of this study is to explore the socialization process for GTAs and the role that both social support and the social cognitive theory elements of observation and behavior modeling play in that process. In examining GTAs, socialization, social support, and observation, researchers have used a variety of approaches in past studies. This study utilized qualitative research methods in order to discover and understand the lived experience of the respondents. Lindlof and Taylor (2002) noted, “For interpretivists, it is axiomatic that we need to see social action from the actors’ point of view to understand what is happening” (p. 31).

The type of qualitative data used in this study was interview data. Patton (2002) defined interviews as, “Open-ended questions and probes yield[ing] in-depth responses about people’s experiences, perceptions, opinions, feelings, and knowledge” (p. 4). Lindlof and Taylor (2002) noted that qualitative researchers use interviews for a variety of reasons. These reasons can include the desire to foster trust with respondents, to understand sensitive relationships and perspectives on a scene, to retrieve an experience of a past event, or to understand an event that may not be available for observation. This study used three research questions as a framework to uncover how graduate teaching assistants experience the socialization process. The study yielded one data set consisting of twenty-two interviews.

Additionally, in providing advice to graduate students interested in utilizing qualitative methods for their dissertation, Patton (2002) noted the importance of making

sure a qualitative approach fits the research questions guiding each study. He believed qualitative methods are good fit if a researcher is trying to ask, “. . . questions about people’s experiences; inquiry into the meanings people make of their experiences; studying a person in the context of her or his social/interpersonal environment. . .” (p. 33).

Recruitment

The respondents for this study were GTAs from one large Southeastern university, General Southeastern University (GSU). General Southeastern University is a pseudonym that is used throughout this dissertation to ensure anonymity for respondents and the institution. All GTA respondents were from the same communication department at GSU.

There were several criteria for inclusion in this study. The first criterion was that any and all participants had to be over the age of 18 so they could legally make the choice to participate. The second criterion was that participants had to be current or former Master’s or Ph.D. graduate teaching assistants at GSU. The last criterion was that all participants must have taught or currently be teaching at least one undergraduate class at GSU. This means that they are individually teaching their own class, not assisting a professor in a class. There were twenty-two respondents in this study and those respondents were a combination of current and previous GTAs at GSU.

Respondents currently attending GSU were recruited through a mass electronic mailing (Appendix B) before the data collection process began and through a sign-up sheet on the door of the GTA office once interviews had begun. When potential interviewees responded to the email, I would email them back to set up a time and a

specific location to conduct the interview. As discussed above, the criteria used to narrow the sample was that a respondent must be or have been a Master's or Ph.D. student at GSU. They needed to be teaching or have taught their own class at GSU. They also needed to be over the age of 18. This narrowed down the population and once the criteria were identified, all members of that particular sample population were invited to participate in the study. Convenience sampling was used to solicit former GTAs from GSU. Patton (2002) defined this as "doing what's fast and convenient" (p. 241). Specific respondents were contacted either through email, social networks, or through a personal phone call.

These recruitment tactics allowed me to obtain 22 respondents for this study. Not all current GTAs chose to participate in the study. This could be due to the fact that I lived out of state and was only able to travel to collect data one week a year for two consecutive years. The times that I had available to interview may not have been convenient for all GTAs eligible to participate. All former GTAs contacted to participate in the study were willing to be interviewed. All interviews with current GTAs were conducted over a two-week time span. These two weeks were March 8th-12th, 2010 and March 14th – 19th, 2011. Former GTAs were interviewed at a variety of times throughout the year.

For all current GTAs at GSU, interviews were conducted in the building that houses the Communication department. To ensure that all participants were comfortable with the process, respondents were able to suggest any location for an interview. Since current GTAs all have classes and offices in the communication department building that seemed to be the easiest and most convenient place to conduct the interviews. All current

GTA respondents chose this location. Interviews were held in a number of different places within the building ranging from the graduate student lounge to empty faculty offices. For each interview conducted, the respondent and I were the only ones in the room. For former GTAs, interviews were conducted at a variety of locations, mainly in their homes, depending upon where the GTA currently lived.

Sample Demographics

Data was collected for this study over a period of one year from March 2010 to March 2011. I recruited and interviewed 22 respondents. The respondents were a mix of current and former Master's and Ph.D. graduate teaching assistants. The final sample consisted of 5 former GTAs and seventeen current GTAs. Of these, 15 were current doctoral students and two were current Master's students. All 5 former GTAs interviewed had been doctoral students. The gender breakdown was 7 males and fifteen females. All respondents were white. Glaser and Strauss's (1967) saturation theory posits that during data collection, information becomes redundant and the need for more interviews ceases. In this study, the saturation point was reached with twenty-two respondents.

Interview Procedures

This study consisted of 22 face-to-face interviews with current and former GTAs at GSU. Institutional Review Board guidelines were met by both the participating institution and by all participating individuals. Before the interviews, each participant was given a consent form to sign and any questions they had about the process were answered. They were also informed of their ability to cease participation in the study at any time without penalty. In discussing the findings of this study, pseudonyms have been used in place of respondents' real names to ensure anonymity. All data collected will

remain confidential in order to protect the identities of the respondents. There were approximately 30 interview questions asked of each participant and each interview lasted anywhere from one to two hours. Upon completion of the interviews, respondents were debriefed and thanked. All respondents in this study participated voluntarily. There was no compensation offered for participation in this study.

Respondent interviews were used as a stand-alone data collection procedure, as is common in qualitative research (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). My interviewing approach was to ask open ended questions by using a relatively structured interview guide. Patton (2002) noted that interview guides can be helpful in limiting the number of issues to be investigated and in making the process more systematic across the respondents. Lindlof and Taylor (2002) explained that although interview questions may differ a bit from respondent to respondent, the standard order is used “so that responses can be directly compared across the entire sample” (p. 178). Different follow-up questions were asked of each participant as the interviews progressed depending upon the information offered in their answers.

To begin the interviews I asked questions to determine basic demographic information such as name, year, program, and class or classes taught. Next, I utilized a grand tour question about the orientation process to “understand how an activity or event usually transpires from start to finish” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 195) in order to get an idea of how GTAs remembered and perceived the orientation process. The specific interview questions and the larger research questions used to guide them are contained in Appendix A.

Each of the interviews was recorded on audiocassette. By recording all of the interviews, I was able to focus my listening on the interviewee as opposed to trying to listen and take notes at the same time. Immediately after each interview ended, I would rewind the audiocassettes to make sure that they recorded properly. One interview failed to record. I immediately took notes on what I could remember from the interview but was unable to get a direct transcription of the interview.

Method of Analysis

Data analysis was conducted through both deductive and inductive strategies. Deductive or etic analysis works down from prior theoretical categorization (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Lindlof and Taylor defined etic analysis as seeing “. . . the scene through categories derived from disciplinary knowledge and theory . . .” (2002, p. 81). Inductive analysis, or emic analysis, has as its main purpose to “allow research findings to emerge from the frequent, dominant, or significant themes inherent in raw data, without the restraints imposed by structured methodologies” (Thomas, 2003, p. 2). Lindlof and Taylor defined emic analysis as seeing “. . . the scene through the meanings that the members attribute to their own communicative actions” (2002, p. 80). Data from transcripts was analyzed using coding procedures informed by both deductive and inductive categorization methods.

Once all interviews were completed, they were transcribed as a group. A professional transcriptionist was hired to transcribe all interviews. When the transcriptions were finished, they were put in alphabetical order according to respondents’ real names. Additionally, each transcription was in a different color and font to make identification easier. I read through each transcription multiple times before

moving on to the next one. The next step in the procedure was to cut and paste (using the computer) passages or quotes from each transcription that were relevant to each research question. Then, these sheets were printed out and I hand cut each passage into strips for ease of coding. I then began to group information based on commonalities in the information. I went back through the data several times to ensure consistency in the coding scheme. When all data had been categorized, I devised names that represented each category.

Data pertaining to research question 2 was coded deductively using House's (1981) four categories of social support. These categories are emotional support, instrumental support, informational support, and appraisal support. These codes were laid out in advance and passages were placed into the category that best represented the idea communicated. Inductive analysis was used to examine the remaining data and identify themes that answered research questions 1 and 3. In using inductive analysis, categories were not named until all passages had been placed into categories. At that point, all passages in each category were reviewed several times to construct names which best reflected the content of each category.

Utilizing Glaser and Strauss' (1967) grounded theory or the constant-comparative method allowed categories to emerge from the data. Lindlof and Taylor (2002) pointed out two important features of grounded theory. The first was that "theory is grounded in the relationships between data and the categories into which they are coded" (p. 218). The second was that codes and categories that are developed are fickle and changing throughout the process. Solidification of categories occurs at or near the end of the coding process. For this study, the formal coding process did not begin until all data had

been collected and transcribed. Additionally, the categories were not finalized until the very end of the coding process.

Positionality

As the author, I must acknowledge previous membership in this particular graduate teaching assistant community. I served as a graduate teaching assistant at GSU from August 2005 to May 2008. This insider status means that as I researcher I am familiar with the setting, the language, and the experience of being a graduate teaching assistant within this particular department at GSU. However, one can be both an insider and an outsider as people hold a “multiplicity of identities . . . that shape subjectivity and influence interpersonal dynamics” (Suzuki, Ahluwalia, Arora, & Mattis, 2007, p. 300).

Although I did not act as a participant-observer, my previous experience in the field helped me to “adequately understand the complex, lived experience” of this particular population (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Additionally, I believe that my insider status informed my questions as a researcher and allowed me to gain a rich understanding of GTAs’ experiences. After several of the interviews with respondents had concluded, they asked me about my own experience as a GTA at GSU, which I shared.

Conclusion

Utilizing a qualitative approach for this study worked well in helping to understand the lived experience of GTAs at GSU in terms of the socialization process. The findings from this study will be discussed in the following chapters. Chapter Four will discuss the institutionalized socialization process at both the graduate school level and the departmental level. Chapter Five will address the experience of social support for GTAs at GSU including a discussion of emotional, instrumental, informational and

appraisal support. Chapter Six will discuss the role of observation and behavior modeling for GTAs in the socialization process. Chapter Seven will offer a discussion and reflection of the results and some areas for future research.

CHAPTER 4

INSTITUTIONALIZED SOCIALIZATION

Nolan: It was necessary and it was helpful and I think the good outweighed the bad because I couldn't imagine coming and not . . . having anything . . . being thrown to the wolves. At least I had a sense of what was going to happen.

The important role of institutionalized socialization, as seen in such things as orientation or training programs, should not be underestimated for new organizational members. “Anytime a newcomer enters an organization, he or she is expected to change, adapt, and become one with the organization – in short, become socialized into the organization” (Myers, 1994, p. 221). Institutionalized socialization plays a major role for GTAs beginning their journey at GSU. Young and Bippus (2008) found that one of the main purposes of training programs was to improve GTA teaching effectiveness in the undergraduate classroom. In emphasizing the importance of training for GTAs, Williams and Roach explained, “With increasing expectations and pressures on GTAs, it is likely the percentage of those who feel they are able to fulfill their duties will decrease unless adequate training in how to manage these demands is available” (1993, p. 184). With that in mind, research question one was developed.

RQ 1: What role does institutionalized socialization play for GTAs as new organizational members?

For GTAs at GSU, the institutionalized aspect of socialization has two distinct elements. The first portion is a graduate school-wide orientation that is required for all new graduate teaching assistants (whether on the Master's or Ph.D. level) attending the university. The second portion is a departmental orientation. Both orientations are geared toward acclimating individuals as both graduate students and as GTAs. Broadly, the

findings indicate that GTAs perceive that the entire orientation process (combining both the graduate school portion and the departmental portion) is beneficial. In conducting a case study of a GTA training program in a large, urban university, Young and Bippus (2008) found “a positive effect of training on GTA’s perceptions of competence in handling the challenges of their positions” (p. 123). Additionally, they noted,

The combination of skill building exercises, informational presentations, and interactive discussions with peers, mentors, supervisors, and support staff were effective in meeting the stated objectives of the training. After receiving training, GTAs reported significantly higher self-efficacy across three instructional areas: classroom management, student involvement, and instructional strategies. (p. 123)

Taken together, the orientation process for GTAs at GSU has three specific outcomes.

The first outcome is uncertainty/anxiety reduction, the second outcome is uncertainty/anxiety creation, and the third outcome is relationship development. All three of these outcomes are experienced by GTAs at both the graduate school level and the departmental level at GSU.

Uncertainty/Anxiety Reduction

Rodes (1997) noted, “Because many. . . GTAs have not had previous teaching experience and are suddenly bombarded with multiple duties and roles, they often face a great deal of uncertainty” (p. 56). For GTAs, uncertainty/anxiety is reduced in a number of ways. At the graduate school level, it is reduced as a consequence of the presentation of information related to policies and procedures for the university as a whole and also through the microteach sessions. Each GTA is required to participate in this graduate school orientation. At the departmental level, uncertainty/anxiety is reduced through clarified expectations from the course director, concrete tools for teaching, and through emphasized messages from the department via the course director.

Graduate School Orientation

At the graduate school level, uncertainty/anxiety is reduced through two main avenues. The first is through the explanation of university policies and procedures. While most of the GTAs are not new to teaching or to university life in general, each university has a different set of structured policies and procedures that need to be understood before a GTA enters the classroom. The second avenue to reducing uncertainty/anxiety is through the microteach teaching sessions.

Policies and procedures

Morris: . . . a general overview of what would be expected of you as a role of an authority figure in the classroom. A lot of the stuff they have to cover is clichéd stuff like sexual harassment and some things are more useful like here is what the ombudsman does, here's the relationship between the student and you as a teacher.

GTAs find it helpful to know what the policies and procedures of the university are as they make their way into the GSU classroom for the first time. Andrew states, "I liked that they told me what to do if something happened and what the policies were. I don't know if it makes one a good teacher by itself but it lays the groundwork on the protocol." These discussions help GTAs to become more familiar with GSU's campus, what services are offered (HR, disability office, etc.), what the student body is like, and what the university as a whole has to offer. Abby explains, "TA orientation at GSU is helpful in terms of learning about university policy, like the ombud and student rights. Protecting grades. There's a lot of policy inundation, which is helpful."

Some GTAs find that the university's discussion of policies and procedures leave them feeling like just another cog in the wheel. Ruby notes, "It was more logistics. It wasn't very personalized." Similarly, Jensen states, "The grad school orientation was

more impersonal, procedural, establishing the hierarchy, and resourceful in that I felt I had most of the people I could contact and most places I could go to seek more information. . .” While GTAs perceive this information to be helpful and beneficial, there is a sense that the graduate school can and should work harder to make the process a more personalized experience.

There is also discussion about the multiple roles that each graduate student is expected to fulfill. For the majority of GTAs, they are facing a teaching role, a student role, and a researcher role. As these are all major components of being at a Research I institution, Besty states that the graduate school

. . . recognized that we were both students and teachers or research assistants or whatever we had gotten. And they wanted us to know that if we got overwhelmed or something, that [graduate] classes should come first. They did stress that the whole time. They wanted you to know that they had resources available to you. “If you get stressed out or if you need help with teaching or if technology is just being difficult . . .”

For Ruby, it is not just about the stresses that she knows she will encounter in each of her roles but more about the positive function that the intersection of these roles could serve. In discussing one of the guest lecturers at the graduate school orientation she notes that there was “. . . talk about the role of teacher/student/researcher . . . he made some good points about researching informing teaching.”

Microteach Uncertainty/anxiety is also reduced for GTAs through the microteach sessions that are held as a part of the university’s graduate school orientation. Kendra explains that the microteach sessions are run by instructors or experienced GTAs from different disciplines on campus. GTAs are divided into groups of about eight. They then meet with their group and the instructor in charge of their group. In these sessions, discussions focus on how to be an effective teacher in the undergraduate classroom at

GSU. The following day, each GTA presents a short microteach, which runs for about five minutes, on a topic of his or her choosing related to his or her specific discipline. After the session, the lead instructor offers feedback to each GTA individually and the other group members have an opportunity to offer feedback and suggestions related to teaching.

Betsy: We had the microteach sessions where we had to go into the little classroom and practice teaching to the people who were paired up to us. And they gave us feedback just to help. . . How do we come up with a lecture, that sort of thing. How do we get people engaged? And that was very, very helpful.

Martha perceives the microteach to be “extremely beneficial” and feels that the individual meetings with the head instructor are helpful in terms of clarifying what went well in the teaching session and what could be improved upon. Although many GTAs feel that they are more prepared for the classroom simply based on the fact that they are in the communication discipline, Abby notes, “Even as being a communicator for a living, it’s still helpful being in there, seeing people from other disciplines attempt to teach.” Nolan states, “In the microteach I felt like the COM [Communication] people were way more prepared.” So, if nothing else, the microteach confirms GTAs abilities and, perhaps, makes them feel as if they have a leg up on other GTAs from other departments in terms of their teaching abilities.

Some GTAs do find that the microteach sessions are helpful but not integral if they had taught their own classes before coming to GSU. Many graduate students who are entering Ph.D. programs have had the opportunity to teach in their Master’s programs in their prior institutions, although that is not a universal experience for all GTAs.

Andrew notes that the purpose of the microteach is in “. . . reducing anxiety of first-time instructors.” Abby feels that although she received very positive feedback and it was a

fun experience, “. . . it’s always good to practice. It wasn’t a skill-sharpening, more of a skills confirming thing.”

Departmental Orientation

Ruby: With [graduate director] Stephen talking about “Welcome to the grad program. Let’s register for classes. Here’s what the grad program’s all about.” Then it moved into . . . [course director] Heather talking about “here’s what teaching is going to be like in this department.” And then moved into more specific, here’s what teaching is going to be like in . . . the class we were teaching at the time, Public Speaking. And that was probably the longest, most intensive part of the orientation—the actual classroom information.

Ruby provides a snapshot of the overall progression of the departmental portion of the orientation process. Within the departmental orientation, there are three main ways in which GTAs are able to reduce the level of uncertainty/anxiety they face. The first is through clarified expectations, provided by the course director. The second is through the concrete tools they are given by the course director. The third is through emphasized messages from the course director and from the department as a whole. In a 1990 study comparing GTA training in speech communication departments with training in noncommunication departments, Buerkel-Rothfuss and Gray found that the fact that most speech communication departments had someone in the specific position of a course director lent a sense of stability to the GTA training. However, because most respondents indicated that training took about a week or so, Buerkel-Rothfuss and Gray questioned how well GTAs were able to be trained based on the short length of time.

Clarified expectations The clarification of departmental expectations is an overwhelmingly positive aspect of the departmental orientation. As discussed earlier, GTAs feel the need to know what the specific university expectations are in terms of policies and procedures. “The transition from student to teacher is an anxiety provoking

experience for graduate students. Training programs can help alleviate GTA uncertainty in part by providing specific GTA job descriptions” (Williams & Roach, 1993, p. 189). Similarly, there is a need for GTAs to be clear on what the departmental expectations are in terms of policies and procedures. Andrew states, “We talked about what it meant to teach a college class, what was expected of you as a department . . .” Candice notes, “I knew who the key resource people were and what the expectations were,” and Ramona remembers, “. . . we distinctly talked about typical student experiences – what students expect.”

For new GTAs, spending time as a group discussing rights, responsibilities, and expectations serves a sensemaking function for both the GTA and the department itself. Jensen finds, “. . . at the end of the orientation I felt – from the department – I knew what was expected of me and what I expected of myself.” Colleen adds that the course director is well organized and gives lots of pertinent information to new GTAs in order to help them feel as prepared as possible for their first semester of teaching at GSU.

One of the prominent expectations that GTAs perceive is the idea of consistency or standardization across course sections and across the department in general. Two of the main courses that GTAs find themselves teaching are Public Speaking (COM 101) and Interpersonal Communication (COM 202). There are multiple sections of both of these courses offered each semester, and each course has its own course director who oversees all of the GTAs for that course.

Ruby: It was very structured. Having a structured syllabus and point breakdown. Here are the policies we go by. The message I got was that they wanted you to all be on the same page, which is why [they] designed it this way.

That uniformity did reduce some of the uncertainty/anxiety that the GTAs are facing. This uniformity or expectation of consistency is covered in training sessions for each course. Sasha states, “. . . it’s very specific about how I have to do this because it’s uniform so I have to be given very specific instructions to know where I’m going with this.” The departmental orientation serves that specific purpose – to orient GTAs to the way that each course should be run at GSU. GTAs teaching Public Speaking and GTAs teaching Interpersonal Communication are separated and Kendra notes that the sessions in which expectations for each course are covered are extensive.

While that uniformity provides some GTAs with a sense of comfort and clarity, several GTAs do not like the restrictions that the course standardization expectations places on them.

Jacinda: It felt very much like a dictatorship. This is the book you will follow, this is the syllabus you will follow. Even when we try to make suggestions – this year I tried to get them to change the text for one of the classes I teach and nope, it won’t be heard.

Sasha also feels that there is very little room for personal innovation and creativity in terms of teaching her classes.

. . . precisely follow [course director] Heather’s instructions and make sure everything you do is standardized as possible. This test will have this many questions. You’ll have this many multiple choice and this many of these types of questions. You will teach these chapters on these days. This is what you will do.

These mandates make it difficult for GTAs to test the waters or to see what works best for them as instructors. Candice explains, “. . . she [course director] gave very little flexibility on how things were to be done from a course perspective.” Although these mandates help to clarify expectations, Ruby feels that they go a bit too far. “. . . almost too specific at times. I felt like ‘I need more freedom!’” These specific expectations serve

the dual function of clarification and constraint for GTAs during the orientation process and throughout the semester.

Concrete tools One of the most beneficial aspects of any orientation program is the actual tools you receive that will help you to do your job. For GTAs, they are given several concrete tools by the department that they feel help them to get on track to be successful in the classroom. These tools separate into two distinct categories. The first category is physical objects and the second is technique suggestions.

In terms of physical objects, GTAs are given a variety of things to help them succeed. Morris says, “It felt like all the tools were given to me to be successful.” Not all objects are used by all GTAs but each GTA is given all of the same resources. These resources include things like the textbook, textbook supplements, chapter powerpoints, videos, the course syllabus, and a semester schedule. For Public Speaking specifically, Ruby discusses how GTAs are given a workbook that contains all the assignments and critique forms that students and the instructor will need for the semester. For both introductory courses, Betsy notes, “. . . they gave us a model syllabus and a model schedule for what the class should look like. And that was helpful to have that because I would not have known where to start.” Abby agrees, stating, “For me, it lowered a lot of my anxiety to be handed a syllabus and handed a semester schedule. If I had to create that I would have felt overwhelmed.” Being given these physical tools helps GTAs to feel less overwhelmed and more certain about what direction they should be heading in in their classrooms. The physical objects that they are given also help to clarify departmental expectations and further ensure consistency across sections since GTAs are all working from the same syllabus.

In addition to being given physical tools to help them succeed, GTAs are also provided techniques and suggestions for the classes they are teaching. Rochelle states, “. . . a lot was lecture – how to teach, how to do good powerpoints, what not to do. There was a lot about how to deal with difficult students. There’s always what to do on the first day of class.” Some other topics that are discussed by the course director include an overview of teaching styles, instructions on how to utilize the technology, and icebreaker and activity ideas – practical information that GTAs can take directly with them into the classroom. The GTAs are given a clear idea of what this specific department expects in terms of how to be an effective teacher. Beyond that first year, Kendra notes, “. . . every year that [course director] Heather does an orientation, I feel like I’m renewed. I learn new techniques, she gives us new examples we hadn’t thought about for new activities. So I always feel prepared after leaving.”

Emphasized messages For GTAs, much uncertainty/anxiety is reduced through the departmental messages that are communicated throughout the orientation process and beyond. There are two main types of messages that GTAs picked up throughout the course of the departmental orientation. The first are messages of help/support from the course director and department with an emphasis on the idea that “we have your back.” The second are messages about the importance of being a student-centered teacher.

The notion of “we have your back” is one that is clearly recognized by the GTAs. This is a message that they perceive to be important because their course director returned to it throughout the orientation.

Ramona: . . . the idea that my course director would back me in any situation. That was reinforced on a regular basis. There was someone I could go to if I had questions or needs and they would provide as much assistance for me and as much backing for me as they possibly could.

Although this support or backing is a reassuring message, for some GTAs it appears to come with a caveat.

Lissa: [course director] Greta was very welcoming and very understanding and very willing to help us. But she wanted to make it clear that she was in charge, you do what she says, you don't veer from it and she's got your back.

The caveat here is that the course director is there to support GTAs and will have their backs in any given situation, as long as they are doing things the way that she feels they should be done. Clarified expectations and standardization is even more important in situations where a GTA feels that he or she needs help or support from the course director. The GTAs perceive that the support and backing for them will not be as strong if they are not toeing the company line.

Additionally, Rochelle notes, “. . . the big thing that came across . . . ‘we’re here for you, you don’t need to take on ultimate responsibility for things.’” For GTAs, knowing that they do not have to take final responsibility for things helps to reduce their anxiety. Also, through the communication of these messages, GTAs do not feel that they have to be the final word when dealing with student issues. When discussing a student who he believed had cheated on a paper, Baxter states, “I didn’t know how to deal with it. Thankfully . . . higher-up people took care of it.” The idea that the ultimate responsibility, for the fate of a student in this case, does not rest in the hands of GTAs helps them to feel more secure, especially since most of them are relatively new to the classroom and to dealing with student misbehaviors.

The second message that GTAs feel helps to reduce their uncertainty/anxiety about teaching in the department is the emphasis the course director places on the idea of being a student-centered teacher.

Baxter: The one thing they really focused on was the learning cycle process. They made a big deal of that. They were using that as a guide in terms of developing lesson plans. I still hear people talk about that. We were at an event the other day where we were talking about job talk, teaching philosophy, stuff like that preparing for the job market. “In your philosophy, be sure you address the learning cycle process, the different types of learning.” That was very important.

Having a clear idea of where the course director and the department as a whole expects GTAs to place their energy, in terms of teaching, acts as a guiding force for GTAs throughout their first semester in the GSU classroom and beyond.

Ally explains, “I walked away from [departmental] orientation thinking, I’m going to be the face of GSU for these students and I need to socialize them in and make them feel included and get to know them.” Elena notes,

. . . I got more of the sense that what you are doing is important. You should take it seriously. It’s not just, come to class and do whatever you want. This is a college student’s education. You should do your best every day to make sure they’re getting a quality education.

Lastly, Martha remembers, “The big thing was understanding the importance of being student centered . . .” It is clear that the course director feels there is a need to discuss the departmental expectation that a GTA be student focused, use his or her time in the classroom wisely, and take his or her position as a GTA seriously.

In terms of the departmental orientation, those clear, focused, specific messages that GTAs receive help them to feel more certain and less anxious about how to approach the classroom and their students. For the GTAs, the perception that everyone is in the same place also offers them the opportunity to seek support and guidance from their peers because they are all approaching their teaching using the same overarching guidelines. That support from peers is an extremely important component of the socialization process and will be discussed in detail in the next chapter. Ultimately, being given a clear idea of

departmental expectations, particularly focused on the idea of standardization, receiving concrete tools to aid the teaching process, and understanding the departmental messages of support and student-focused teaching help GTAs to enter the GSU classroom for the first time feeling less of a sense of uncertainty and anxiety.

Uncertainty/Anxiety Creation

Not all aspects of the orientation process serve to reduce uncertainty and anxiety. Both the graduate school orientation and the departmental orientation also create some uncertainty and anxiety for new GTAs. Both are created in the graduate school orientation through the overwhelming amount and ineffectiveness of information communicated. Both are created in the departmental orientation through the uncertainty GTAs face in terms of how to put the ideas they are given into practice.

Graduate School Orientation

Ruby: I felt like a lot of what was talked about in the grad school orientation were things that could have been handed to us on a piece of paper. There was very little information I felt I needed to be attentive to. Overall, I felt like it wasn't very useful and it wasn't useful for preparing me to be on campus or to be a TA.

As discussed earlier, one of the uncertainty/anxiety reducers used by the graduate school in the orientation process is a discussion of GSU specific policies and procedures that will help guide new GTAs as both instructors and graduate students. While some GTAs find this information to be helpful and clear, many do not. It is clear that for many GTAs, the perception is that the graduate school's discussion of policies and procedures is overwhelming, confusing and ineffective. Candice and Jacinda mention leaving the graduate school orientation feeling lost, and Nolan feels that "It was just such a blur." Myers (1994) discussed the possibility that GTAs would not be able to remember all of

the information covered in an orientation program and that is the case for many GTAs at GSU.

GTAs (or any new student for that matter) coming to GSU for the first time face many uncertainties. They do not know many or any people, they do not know where to park, they do not know what classes to take, they do not know what the culture of the department is or what their relationship will be like with their professors. They are coming in with the expectation that they will be taking on three different roles simultaneously, that of teacher, student, and researcher, and they recognize there will be a large learning curve.

Nolan: I didn't feel super prepared.

Sasha: I felt like I didn't know what was going on.

Ally: . . . it was hard to pay attention.

Abby: I just got conflicting messages.

Kendra: . . . there's a lot of uncertainty.

Baxter: . . . The grad school part wasn't important because it was mainly an introduction to the school. ". . . you have this many women, men, this many buildings on campus. You're shooting for the top ten." I get all that. For me it wasn't that . . . It was "eh." Which may be why I have a hard time remembering it because I tuned it out.

For many GTAs, the sheer amount and nature of the information they are asked to digest during the graduate school orientation causes them to feel uncertain or anxious.

Sasha finds, "I felt a little more confused about what was going on than informed. There was so much information . . . a lot of it didn't seem to apply to me." Martha notes, "I'm not even going to remember in a week . . . what are you talking about? I'm so overwhelmed, it's not even funny.'" The implication is that GTAs are given too much

information to process and, because of that fail to absorb much important information from the orientation.

The perception of a majority of the GTAs is that the graduate school fails to highlight the most important pieces of information. Betsy explains, “I’m like, oh my gosh, this is a lot to remember. What do I need to remember from this?” Elena finds that it made her more confused. “I wasn’t sure at all what I was supposed to be doing. It was so broad. Didn’t have many take-away points.” Sasha notes, “I don’t remember this big message they wanted us to walk away with. It was more ‘Here’s 100 handouts and good luck.’” As Lissa points out, it was

Information overload. I was overwhelmed. I don’t remember anything. It was just “Here’s information for you.” And we were stressed out and worried about getting paid and making friends and meeting people. It was really overwhelming, the whole thing. . . A lot of the stuff – I feel like it was pointless information but they had to give it to us because otherwise we didn’t know anything. So you’ve got to start somewhere. You may as well start with “Here’s everything.” It was better than nothing but I don’t remember anything.

Lissa’s statement highlights the fact that GTAs have concerns other than information acquisition throughout the orientation process and things are made all the more difficult by the fact that the graduate school does not emphasize any particularly important messages. GTAs would like the graduate school to make clear the key pieces of information that they should take with them from the orientation.

Also at the graduate school level, many GTAs feel that they are receiving information that might someday be important to them, but was not going to be of immediate concern. Delivering this content is ineffective because it does not seem necessary to know at the time. Lissa explains, “Coming out of the grad school orientation we were brain dead – we were zombies because they told us so much that isn’t useful

until you need it.” Nolan remembers, “. . . trying not to put a lot of stock into what they said because I think if I had my head would have exploded. I was like, ‘If I need this information, I can find it.’” There seems to be the feeling that the information GTAs are getting is not pertinent or would not be until they found themselves in that particular situation. In researching GTA training programs, Williams and Roach (1993) found that issues related to sexual harassment, disabled students, and information pertaining to racial and ethnic concerns were not viewed as significant by GTAs. They stated,

While grading and lecturing are of obvious concern to beginning graduate teaching assistants, they may not anticipate having to deal with ethnic awareness. It is likely that they are interested in dealing with what seem to be the most immediate and pressing concerns of basic classroom procedures and therefore do not perceive problems in these other areas as critically urgent in comparison. (p. 190)

The information retention level for GTAs coming out of the graduate school orientation appears to be low. Colleen thinks, “Information would be more substantive if they gave it when you need it. Or when you start having issues to address – throwing all the information at you before you know what you’re getting into is useless.”

Ramona: I don’t remember many messages making it through. It was a lot of talking heads chattering at you about a lot of different issues, some of which did not seem to flow well with one another or make much sense for folks who might not have been in the classroom before.

Elena: . . . that made it difficult to identify with because I hadn’t actually been in the classroom yet. So for me to talk about what it was like to talk about something that’s controversial, to rein in a wild student, I had no idea what that was like. It was kind of outside-looking-in . . . it was hard for me to make that information useful.

That is not to say that the information communicated is not important. On the contrary, learning how to reign in wild students and have a controversial discussion in class is extremely important for any teacher. However, what the GTAs highlight is that it is too

early in the process for them to give much thought to the possibilities that might exist in the classroom when they are not even clear on the certainties.

Department Orientation

Abby: I felt a lot of anxiety – of being in the deep end.

Uncertainty/anxiety is also created for GTAs through the departmental orientation process. This uncertainty centers on the idea that GTAs are given important departmental ideas or messages but are not given the tools or information necessary to put these ideas into practice. There seems to be a sense of an expectation of self-navigation once the orientation process itself is over and that creates anxiety for many of the GTAs.

As discussed earlier, GTAs are given concrete tools to help guide them through the teaching process, such as a class syllabus. However, what the GTAs find is that often, just being given the syllabus does not take things far enough. In discussing that Ally notes,

You can read someone's syllabus a hundred times but you weren't the one who conceptualized it so, not knowing how the class fit together was what I felt most unprepared for. I felt very unprepared for the logistics of the assignments. How does week one fit in with week eight? How is this going to build on each other?

GTAs feel uncertain about the expectations they will face based on the very specific information they are given by the course director. They are also unclear about how to meet those expectations and carry out those behaviors. When discussing the multiple roles that GTAs take on (teacher, student, researcher) Abby notes, "I didn't hear clearly which I'm supposed to be first. I heard, be excellent in all capacities but how do you do that?" Similarly, Ramona picked up on the message that "... it was our job to help with retention. Little was provided in terms of specific steps that we could take to assist with that – just that we should be concerned about it."

The self-navigation aspect also seems to be one that stood out to GTAs. The orientation process does not deliver all the information that GTAs think they need. Sasha explains that she felt very comfortable in terms of what she needed to do on the first day of class but did not feel confident about how she was supposed to proceed with the rest of the semester. There are also expectations for GTAs that directly relate to their teaching but are outside the classroom. The GTAs are expected to write tests and quizzes, make lesson plans, and put a portfolio together for review by the course director at the end of the semester. However, as Martha notes, “. . . you’re not told how.” GTAs want the certainty of knowing what the expectations are but also specific instructions on how they are to meet or exceed those expectations. The specific skills that it takes to meet these expectations are not fully understood by the GTAs because they are not communicated clearly by the department.

There is also an underlying assumption that within the department there is a right way of doing things and a wrong way of doing things and that if a GTA did things the wrong way, there would be consequences. Candice finds,

I remember us practicing grading essays and speeches. Not only in orientation but also throughout the first year. That was very anxiety-creating for me because I felt that if I didn’t grade it right, I was going to be in trouble.

The message that the department is communicating here is that there is a “right” way to do things. The anxiety the GTAs experience stems from the fact that the department does not do enough in terms of clarifying the “right” and “wrong” way of doing things.

Orientation Process Overall

Overall, most GTAs find the departmental portion of the orientation process to be more beneficial than the graduate school portion. Martha notes, in a simple sentiment

reflected by many of the GTAs, “the departmental orientation was more beneficial than the grad school orientation.” Similarly, Myers (1994) found that GTAs perceived campus-wide training programs to be unhelpful. Delving deeper into why this is the perception, the GTAs note that comfort level and perception of preparedness for the classroom play a role. Jensen explains,

. . . the department orientation gave me something I could clutch, grasp, hold on to and carry with me so it did a better job in making me feel comfortable and ready . . . I felt very prepared to teach class based on the department orientation. Not as much from the university orientation which was protocol. Something they had to do almost for legal reasons.

Echoing that feeling, Elena states, “. . . the department one we had, we had the content – the information – and the people that we needed to meet to get ready to teach. So our department orientation was the one who – that actually prepared us to start.” Abby sees the graduate school orientation as a necessary evil but not a helpful one.

Abby: The campus wide orientation, they only make you do it once. That’s their way of admitting, “We stress policy. If you’ve been trained in this policy then we’re released in liability because we’ve told you this” . . . if I took away anything – follow the protocol and policy of the university.

Jensen notes, “The university orientation came across as being a big hoop you had to jump through . . .” The perception of GTAs is that they receive more relevant and specific information from the departmental orientation, whereas the graduate school orientation is seen as something they have to do, that on the whole, is not very helpful.

Additionally, while the graduate school orientation lasts 3 days, departmental orientation is ongoing. Rick states, “[course director] Greta did a good job of having course meetings all during the fall. So there’s a whole fall semester worth of orientation.” This continuous inculcation for GTAs serves to constantly reinforce important messages

over an extended period of time rather than in an onslaught of information on one occasion as the GTAs experienced with the graduate school portion.

Betsy comments:

I feel like the department orientation covered everything that the university orientation covered plus the details that were specific to our department. Or they honed everything that the university talked about in a way that was more specific and it applied to our department. I didn't feel it was excess information that didn't apply. So I got so much more out of the department one. I probably would have been happy just having that. And I think that really would have been enough. Because I did get the information I needed in a way that I could apply it and the way it applied to me in the department I would be in.

Relationship Development

Baxter: We wanted to get to know one another because it was a very scary time.

GTAs comment that both orientations serve the purpose of getting to meet people and socialize. This is broadly defined as relationship development. This chance to meet people appears to be the real gem of the entire orientation process for the GTAs at GSU.

Lissa explains,

I was excited about getting to know people in the department because my biggest fear going into it was that I would not make any friends. I don't know why—I should have been worried that I wouldn't get an advisor or I'd fail my classes. Should've been worried about paying my bills, but I was so worried about making friends. That was my one concern. I didn't even care about being told what to do because I'd taught before. That was secondary. I wanted to know who I was talking to or would be working with.

This line of thinking reflects the idea that as long as new GTAs can make friends, everything else will fall into place. If it did not fall into place, at least because of the friends made, there is a support system to turn to or the reassurance that you are not alone in terms of what you are feeling or experiencing. The relationship development outcome of the orientation process encompasses three main areas. The first area of relationship development is the opportunity to meet people and engage in social events. The second

area is the assigned buddy program instituted within the departmental orientation. The last area is feelings of universality (Arnston & Droge, 1986).

Meeting people/social events The orientation process serves as an opportunity for new GTAs to meet other new GTAs in various disciplines, new GTAs and older graduate students in their own discipline, and faculty members. For some, that seems to be the only benefit to the orientation process. Looking back on things, Rick notes, “I don’t remember anything from the orientation process except I met some very good people who became very good friends . . .” When asked about the effectiveness of the orientation overall, Colleen notes,

On a scale of 1 to 10, I’d give it a 3 or 4. . . I typically don’t gain much from it. More than anything, it’s exposure to people – these are the people you are going to encounter at GSU . . . at your job.

Similarly, Ally finds the orientation process to be “above neutral” but only because it presents the opportunity to meet people. Additionally, Betsy sees it as more of a networking opportunity than anything else.

In looking specifically at the departmental orientation, mixing policy/teaching sessions with social experiences is an important component in relationship building. During the orientation, lunches are held that enable new GTAs to meet others in the department as well as faculty members. Jensen explains,

It was really welcoming because you had the opportunity to meet who you wanted to meet. Lots of big groups – going around the room, making an introduction. “My name is so-and-so, I study this, I’ve been at this school this long, this is where you can find me.” So even if it wasn’t someone I knew I got a sense of that person, what he or she did, whether that was as a grad student or faculty member. So that was helpful to me – getting used to people who were my colleagues. . . everyone was there to kind of break the ice and help people feel comfortable with the people they were going to be working with as well as those they were coming in with. So, yeah, there was lots of social interaction. Half of a day where it was more social interaction than business-like work.

These social experiences are built into the orientation process so it is expected that there will be some level of relationship development between GTAs, other graduate students, and faculty members.

This planned socializing aspect is perceived both positively and negatively. Lissa explains, “The lunches were better, were more fun because we were more off-guard and just hanging out. We had to be there and eat together. It’s like camp, where you’re stuck. I’m surprised we didn’t make up songs and chants.” When discussing the getting to know the faculty aspect, Betsy states, “. . . we didn’t sit together. We were in the same room but on different sides . . . because you are a little intimidated. But they did do a good job of trying to invite that whole dialogue.”

Opportunities for socializing and relationship building are also offered outside of the traditional orientation programs, though these are optional and a GTA has to make the decision whether to attend these events him or herself. Colleen remembers several welcoming events, one at a faculty member’s house in the evening. “It was a meet and greet. Just food and hang out sort of deal. It was helpful and necessary.” These social events provide new GTAs the chance to get to know one another before the official orientation process begins. Betsy explains,

[Faculty member] had hosted a barbecue the day before, just for our department. So we kind of picked each other out at the orientation [graduate school-wide, the next day] and we all sat together and it was nice to have our little group. So I’m glad he did that barbecue just to get to know each other, otherwise I would have been so alone at that orientation, and so lost.

The perception here is that this outside social event allows the new GTAs to become familiar with their cohort and that familiarity allowed them to feel more comfortable as

they entered the orientation process, both at the graduate school and the departmental level.

At the end of the orientation week, many GTAs note the importance of what they call the Friday Afternoon Club. Baxter explains that this is an opportunity for students and faculty to come together to socialize. He notes that it was usually “half students and half faculty” and Lissa explains,

. . . we went to . . . this bar. . . it was with faculty and students and no one knew anyone and we were all scared and it was the most awkward situation ever. It wasn't until we got to know one another that our interactions became less awkward and more fun.

The perception of the GTAs is that this is a lower-stakes, more casual opportunity for interaction and relationship building. There is also the acknowledgement that things are expected to be a bit uncomfortable and awkward at the beginning of the process since people are relatively unfamiliar with one another. However, without these types of events, those relationships would take longer to develop or may not develop at all. Ruby notes that the Friday Afternoon Club that first week of orientation is the place she feels she “. . . socialized the most and got to know people.” Nolan enjoys the advantage of getting to know and spend time with people in the department outside of school. He notes, “It was really fun to hang out with some people. I think that was the best part about it.”

Sasha mentions that the graduate school provides an ice cream social during the orientation but that does not seem to be as pivotal as no other GTAs mention it as an important aspect of the process. Much like the information aspect of the orientation process, GTAs find the relationship building much more beneficial at the departmental

level than at the graduate school level. Overall, Rick explains, “. . . the social events do serve a purpose of orientation more so than formal orientation . . .”

Assigned buddies One important component of the departmental orientation specifically is the Graduate Student Association’s (GSA) buddy program. Abby explains that a buddy is an older member of the graduate program who will seek out new graduate students within the department to help guide them, answer their questions, and make them feel comfortable. These questions cover many areas including where to live, what classes to take, what their students are like, etc. Each new graduate student is assigned a buddy. “In planning GTA programs, planners should help facilitate GTA interaction and allow experienced GTAs to provide instruction or respond to incoming GTAs questions” (Williams & Roach, 1993, p. 189). In speaking about her buddy experience, Rochelle states,

. . . they buddied us up and there was a lot of talk going on, “oh yeah, well wait ‘til you hear what happened to me once when I was in the classroom.” I think that was one of the most reassuring, effective parts of orientation that they built in the get-together afternoon, the buddy lunch, so it made what happened during the day more effective.

The idea highlighted here is that each new graduate student’s buddy can serve as an organizational sensemaker – a way to organize and put into perspective all of the information presented during the orientation process.

For Betsy, the buddy program helped her to feel more comfortable in the process of the orientation. In speaking about her buddy, she notes, “. . . she was friendly. She made me feel comfortable. She asked if there were any questions I had. She offered to meet me for coffee or lunch . . .” Because the buddy program is a formalized component

of the orientation process, GTAs do not feel as though they are being annoying by asking questions or seeking guidance. Candice finds value in the idea that

. . . whether it's formalized or informal, the whole idea of buddies is a good one because you know there's a person you can go ask questions and you don't have to feel like you're bothering them because that's how it's set up.

Feelings of universality In having the opportunity to meet and develop relationships with their fellow GTAs, many find in that a sense of not being alone. There is comfort factor in knowing that there are other new GTAs going through the same process and experiencing the same uncertainties and anxieties. These GTAs are experiencing feelings of universality (Arnston and Droge, 1986). Candice explains,

That sense of "we're all going through it together" from learning how to teach and all being a part of it to having then be able to take that into the classes all of you are taking. So you have that shared experience.

In discussing the departmental orientation specifically, Elena notes the sense of community that she feels. "You're not in a vacuum by yourself being asked to go out into the world. . . I appreciated that [orientation] more for that community aspect." Colleen also finds it helpful that most of the new GTAs are not only new to the university but new to the city and starting a new job. Knowing that she is surrounded by others experiencing the same challenges is an anxiety-reducer and provides feelings of comradeship.

Conclusion

In summing the findings of the institutionalized socialization process as whole for new GTAs in this department at GSU, it is clear that the overarching belief is that the departmental portion of the orientation is more beneficial than the graduate school portion. In studying GTA training programs, Williams and Roach (1993) emphasized the importance of four issues that training or orientation organizers should be considering.

These are clarification of teaching expectations, providing opportunities for interaction with other new GTAs, instruction on proper grading procedures, and help with planning the first day and/or week of class. The departmental portion of the orientation process at GSU addresses these four areas. However, not all GTAs feel the same way about the orientation process. Some find the graduate school portion to be helpful in terms of teaching and policy clarification. Others find the graduate school portion to be overwhelming and largely forgettable. Most find the departmental portion helpful in terms of clarified expectations and messages of support but many GTAs commented that things need to be taken farther in terms of how to actually put the ideas presented into practice.

So, while there are aspects of each orientation that serve to reduce the uncertainty or anxiety faced by GTAs, there are also portions of both that create uncertainty and anxiety for GTAs. Fortunately, all GTAs find the relationship development aspect to be an important part of the orientation process overall, particularly so in the department. This opportunity to develop relationships reduces uncertainty and anxiety.

CHAPTER 5

SOCIAL SUPPORT BEHAVIORS

Elena: I feel like there's something to be said for the social support that I think the grad students have. I personally feel like we're all very close. And I would have no problem talking about, even a sensitive topic . . .

For GTAs, social support is an important component in the socialization process.

Burleson and MacGeorge (2002) defined social support as “verbal and nonverbal behavior produced with the intention of providing assistance to others perceived as needing that aid” (p. 374). The second research question was developed to uncover the roles that social support plays in socialization.

RQ 2: Which specific social support behaviors, if any, facilitate the socialization process for GTAs?

The results were coded according to House's (1981) four categories of support. In looking at specific behaviors that convey social support, House found emotional, instrumental, informational, and appraisal support.

Emotional support is offered through behaviors that demonstrate concern, trust, empathy, and caring for another. Instrumental support refers to helping acts such as loaning money or giving one's time or help. Informational support includes “advice and counsel” (Tardy, 1992, p. 177). Lastly, appraisal support is most clearly demonstrated by offering feedback and encouragement to the support seeker. House (1981) noted that a key aspect of social support is the perception of the person receiving the support. Any support offered is only found to be supportive if the receiver perceived it as such; the intent of the support provider is not the defining factor.

Emotional Support

For GTAs at GSU, emotional support is an important element in terms of helping them get through the socialization process, particularly in their first semester, though the social support behaviors continued throughout their time at GSU.

In addition to dealing with their multiple roles, graduate teaching assistants must also learn how to handle problems that may arise in the classroom. They must learn how to deal with disappointment, conflict, or emotionally challenging situations. A new teacher's first negative confrontation by a student, for instance, may be an awakening experience. A GTA's training and social support system can provide an emotional outlet for such experiences. (Rhodes, 1997, p. 52)

Emotional support is communicated to GTAs at GSU in several ways. The first element of emotional support is the discussion that GTAs engage in with one another about the fact that they are sharing the same experience. The second element of emotional support is most clearly demonstrated through venting and the sharing of stories with other GTAs. Lastly, the sites at which these emotionally supportive incidents play out are an important component as well, as demonstrated through the "restaurant effect" (Arnston and Droge, 1986, p. 155).

Discussion of equivalent experiences As discussed in the previous chapter, GTAs take solace in the fact that they are not facing all of these new experiences on their own, what Arnston and Droge (1986) termed as "feelings of universality" (p. 150). Jensen notes, "I think we leaned heavily on one another . . . we're in the same boat." There are other GTAs going through the same experiences as they are and, for many GTAs, that serves as an anxiety reducer. Jensen states, "I felt a whole lot less nervous or worried about my problem when I sat down next to someone experiencing the same things I was – I knew I wasn't alone." It also served as a form of emotional support for GTAs. In discussing a stressful moment, Ramona notes,

. . . for support in that instance I went to my friends in my cohort. They were in the same place academically and professionally that I was and had or would be experiencing the same thing in the future. So there was a sense of camaraderie and to get support. To have a shoulder to cry on and have someone say, “It’s okay. I’ve survived this, you will too.”

GTAs realize that there are many outside sources of support available to them. Their friends back home, family members, and significant others can all act as sources of emotional support. However, many GTAs note that these people are not able to provide as strong a level of emotional support because they do not understand what the GTAs are experiencing. Colleen explains,

I formed very close relationships. I had two people in my cohort stand up in my wedding if that tells you anything. I think these are people – you’re doing the same things with your life and you have similar goals and you’re all stuck in this situation that only you understand. You can tell other friends from high school and college and they don’t really get it. These are people who understand. These are the people you want to talk to and want to tell. You’re with them all the time – you’re taking classes and everything. . . There were times when I wanted to say, “I’m done.” And I would talk to some people on the phone, crying and being stuck in this journey that no one else would understand. Just having someone to talk to – that network and support was important.

Similarly in discussing a grad school comrade, Martha finds,

. . . she’ll always be the biggest source of support in terms of any stressful situation. But even more so with school because she understands where I’m coming from. There are certain things that while my sister and brother are very successful in their professions, can never understand because they haven’t been here.

Echoing that sentiment, Besty notes it is

. . . nice to have that socializing with somebody else that understands the pressures, the responsibilities. If you talk to someone outside of grad school they’re like, “Yeah, that’s a lot of work,” and they don’t understand. “No, no, no, you don’t get it.” So it’s definitely nice to have that support.

Because of that level of understanding, GTAs find other GTAs to be their best sources of emotional support. Lissa finds, “I trust the information I get from my grad student friends

the most because they're going through it – struggling like I am.” Shannon finds that her fellow GTAs are the only ones she can go to for support. “The only resources I felt like I had were my peer group coming in that were brand new and students who had taught the class previously.” So, while new GTAs may have many sources of support available outside of the program, those who are in the same situation are able to serve as the most beneficial sources of emotional support. In examining graduate students, Aldrich (2009) found that peers were an important source of social support.

These individuals can provide valuable support because they know exactly what stresses graduate students experience. They can help current students prepare for the different challenges they may face (e.g., comprehensive exams), celebrate the victories (e.g., a revise and resubmit notification), brainstorm new ideas, and vent when a program of study, class, or advisor is causing stress. (p. 68)

Additionally, GTAs perceive other GTAs to be more trustworthy and in a better position to serve as emotional support than other individuals in the department. Abby explains, “. . . I feel like I could go to them and it wouldn't be a matter of going to someone I could get into trouble with.” Lissa adds she is, “. . . way more comfortable talking to my peers than going to a supervisor because I felt they knew as much or more than a supervisor or other faculty members.” While professors and course directors can potentially serve as a source of emotional support, many GTAs shy away from seeking that type of support from them. This is due to their fear of being perceived as unable to do the job or handle the pressures of being a GTA. It is also due to their perception that there is the possibility of punishment if a higher-up does not feel as though they handled a stressful situation appropriately. As Ramona notes, “. . .very few faculty members now would not eventually punish a show of weakness or what they perceive to be a show of weakness or a need for help beyond what's normal.”

Venting Venting, or “bitching” as many GTAs put it, serves a cathartic function for GTAs as they navigate their way through the GTA and graduate student experience.

Williams and Roach (1993) noted that

. . . informal discussions were more effective than department orientation programs or weekly GTA meetings. GTAs most important interactions, at the beginning of the term, were with other new GTAs. These informal sessions allowed them to talk about occurrences in each other’s classes and vent frustrations. These gatherings also served to reassure GTAs that their concerns were similar to those of their peers. (p. 189)

The specific site for most of the venting done by GTAs is in the TA office. The TA office is one large room that houses all the desks for GTAs in the department. Rochelle explains,

It was more support, being in the TA room. It was the age old, students driving you nuts and you close the door and bitch to each other and know they either have the student too or they’ve had a similar case and even if there’s not a solution, you can know you’re not alone.

Andrew echoes that and states it is “. . . impossible to get any work done in the TA office where all the interpersonal revelry happens. But it’s also where we share ideas about classes, complain about professors and assignments.” Jensen finds,

. . . put 10-20 teaching assistants in one office does wonders for the cohesion in that group. . . It’s a place to share common experiences with your fellow TAs. It’s a place to socialize . . . it’s a very informal, casual conversation heavy environment that I see as being very enriching to the overall experience.

Lastly, Sasha explains, “The TA office is where you hang out and socialize and bitch and complain and moan about people and goof around, but it is not a place you go to get work done.”

However, even if GTAs are not able to get much work done in the TA office, it serves an important function as a site for supportive behaviors to emerge. Being able to have fun, relax, and de-stress with peers functions as emotional support for the GTAs. It

also serves as a site for relationship development. As Rochelle notes, “bonds start forming.” Nolan states, “. . . there’s a lot of joking around, picking on people.” In recounting a specific story about a fellow GTA, Ally says, “. . . we’ll make fun of the person whose desk isn’t decorated. One guy had nothing and we were joking that we were coming to decorate it with boas and tiaras and pictures of us.” This social element is one way that GTAs are able to decompress from the stresses placed on them by their multiple roles and responsibilities.

For many GTAs, time spent together serves an almost therapeutic function. Ally explains,

. . . get in these stories about talking about their worst students. “I had a student . . . can you believe . . . I had a student” It’s kind of a therapeutic session because we all have these students that have these crazy excuses. Sometimes we can all share those stories. You don’t have to one-up each other, you just try to sympathize.

Almost every GTA mentions the importance of the venting process with other GTAs.

Sasha: In terms of emotional support, venting kind of stuff – that was big. We all talked. We all “This person sucks and this person gives me shit.” Then it’s, “I know how you feel.” . . . Most of the conversations were, “I am so pissed off about this.”

Baxter: It can be a lot of venting. As soon as one person mentions “Oh . . . here’s . . . look at this . . . it’s horrible.” . . . Then someone else will say, “Well I had this student once.” And that triggers a sort of war story telling for a good half hour at least . . . It snowballs.

Shannon: I need to talk to people to get the frustration off my shoulders.

Rick: We go to relieve the stress and bitch about it.

Morris: You sit there and listen to them try to be as tactful as possible and then you commiserate with them after the student leaves and you say, “Man, that guy was a jerk.”

Emotional support is also offered through a combination of talk about school and life outside of school. Elena states,

. . . we can come together and talk about the good things that are going on in grad school and maybe sometimes the bad things. We talk about the classes we're taking. We talk about the classes we're teaching. We absolutely talk about social things. We talk about Justin Bieber and Taylor Swift. We're playing music videos. We're showing funny clips on YouTube. We do talk about what we're doing in our qualitative class and what journals we got accepted to and who's going to ICA . . . normally I walk in and people are on the computers laughing about something or telling stories which is nice because when I come into school, I don't necessarily want to just throw my things down and dive into . . . so it's nice to be able to walk in and be like, "Hey, what are you guys doing? What are you working on?" And there's always something to talk about in there.

The social aspect to these conversations allows the GTAs to focus, for a time, on something other than their school work and teaching. Jacinda explains, "It's complaining non-stop and it's about personal life, about favorite television shows being canceled, about breakups or marriages or having kids. It's about classes but not about content, its social – 'This person was talking too much in class.'"

Some of the GTAs do recognize that while venting serves a cathartic function, it also has some drawbacks. Kendra notes, "A lot of times it's complaining, which gets old." Abby notes, "It can be therapeutic, but there's a healthy way and some just like to trash talk." In discussing the negative aspects of the venting process, Rochelle explains,

. . . someone was bitching about one of their students and then we all started bitching and I went home and it was probably not what I needed. Sometimes you need that camaraderie of "I'm not alone," but other times we were just feeding off one another and that was not good.

"Restaurant effect" Although the cohort of GTAs is not formally identified as a support group, many of their behaviors match the purposes of a support group. The "restaurant effect," as defined by Arnston and Droge (1986, p. 155) is the tendency of some group members to establish friendly relationships within the support group and maintain those relationships outside of the group context. This includes spending time together outside of the confines of the support group and engaging in activities such as

going out to dinner together or participating in other social activities.

The majority of GTAs discuss the importance of developing their co-GTA relationships outside of the academic realm and find that time spent together in a social setting serves as a form of emotional support. Ruby explains,

We had the American Idol ritual last semester so every Tuesday and Wednesday night we met at my house after such and such a class and then we watched American Idol together. Last semester Tuesday nights were dinner nights so we always had dinner at one of their houses . . . we talk about class some but we talk about class so much at school that once we get outside of school there's no need to. So it's more about general, "what's going on in your life?" Talking about faculty and what's going on with them. Gossiping. Talking about other students – how we perceive them. Sharing information, things like that.

Ally notes, "We have a Wednesday night TV night. We pick up Pizza Hut . . . sometimes we'll talk about people or students but it's a time when we don't talk about school and we make stupid jokes." There are lots of activities that GTAs engage in that help them to deal with the stress they face in their academic lives.

Kendra: We'll get dinner at Panera and study. We'll go shopping or to a movie.

Betsy: . . . girl's nights . . . outside of the school atmosphere we'll hang out and socialize.

Rick: We socialized a lot. We hung out at each other's houses.

Shannon: . . . girls started doing a Monday night group thing.

Ramona: . . . have lunch or dinner every week . . .

Ally: . . . basketball games were fun – getting to go to games together was fun. Tonight people are going to meet us to watch the game because we didn't have tickets. And we had a wedding shower for a friend who just got engaged. So we do a nice job of planning outside activities.

Andrew: We go to movies, go out and have a drink or dinner. Go to parties. If the TA office is where we let some of it out then when we're out it's where we let all of it out.

These social engagements allow GTAs to spend time with members of their

cohort and these happenings act as stress relievers. Additionally, most of the GTAs are from out of state and do not have a previously established network of supportive friends and family in the area. The people they live with, go to school with, work with, and spend social time with are their cohort members.

Instrumental Support

Instrumental support was defined by Barbee and Cunningham as “something active or physical to help the seeker; gives money or a loan; offers to help now; offers to follow up in the future” (1995, p. 389). For new GTAs, instrumental support plays an important role in helping them to feel more prepared and less anxious about facing the graduate program as a whole and the GSU classroom specifically. Instrumental support is offered in two main ways. The first is through concrete artifacts provided by fellow GTAs. The second is through the offering of ideas from other GTAs.

Concrete artifacts For new GTAs especially, concrete artifacts such as syllabi, activities, and powerpoints are invaluable. Ally notes, “I did rely heavily on what people gave me my first semester.” GTAs access these concrete artifacts in a number of ways. Some artifacts are available in the TA office for all GTAs, some are shared on the departmental graduate student listserv, and some artifacts are sought out from other, usually more experienced, GTAs. These artifacts are in addition to those that are provided to all GTAs during the departmental orientation.

Sasha: . . . a book in the TA office with examples of exercises. I think one of the TAs compiled it. I thought, “This is cool – this is what I need.”

Betsy: I got more information about my TAing position from the TAs who had done it before. They sent me handouts they used. Attendance sheets they had used.

Candice: “I’m at a loss, I need an outline.” And someone says, “Great! Here’s one you can use.”

Colleen: We shared activities that were working.

Kendra: I had three doctoral students just give me their stuff and say, “If you need anything . . .” In conversation I would say I was excited to teach something and they’d offer.

Jensen: . . . people who’d taught the class were very open to sharing information, sharing activities, sharing old syllabi.

Abby: [Co-GTA] Jensen offered me every resource he had.

There is the expectation that GTAs will pay it forward after their first semester. In discussing the incoming GTAs Betsy explains,

I tried to return the favor with people coming in. “Anything you need, let me know.” . . . the COM TAs, we kind of met with them – the incoming ones and gave them the low-down on, “This is what you’re going to have to do. And if you need me to send you attendance sheets or anything like that I can do that. If you need to look at my notebook I still have that if you need to look up some notes.” . . . I definitely think that succession of COM TAs, it gets passed down.

As Nolan points out, “. . . we preach that it’s not your intellectual property.” The GTAs express a focus on developing and maintaining a collaborative environment. Abby finds,

In terms of being a TA you could ask anyone, “How did you do this” and they’ll tell you, “Here is the powerpoint I created.” I shared all of my powerpoints with every TA . . . It’s very collaborative. I don’t feel like people wanted me to fail or to be embarrassed that I didn’t know how to do it.

The GTAs genuinely want to help and guide one another in any way that they can. Ally explains, “I can use their books and don’t have to ask. We share staplers, tape, Post-its. . . if someone was at my desk getting a paperclip, I would never be, ‘Oh my gosh, what are you doing in my desk?’” GTAs demonstrate instrumental support by helping and guiding each other. Betsy finds,

. . . if I do need help with a lesson or a lecture or finding clips, it’s nice to have other people around that I can just turn around and say, “Hey, what’s a good clip?”

Anybody have any good activities to use for this lesson?" You have that right there at your fingertips if you need it so that's been very, very helpful.

GTAs experience instrumental support in forms other than just being given powerpoints, syllabi, and activities. As Betsy points out, ". . . if you need someone to cover your class, you can run in there [TA office] and maybe there's someone who can."

The course director is also able to serve as a source of instrumental support. In recounting a disturbing incident with a student, Elena shares,

I had a student come up to me in class and she was unhappy about her paper and she called me a . . . not nice word in front of the whole class. And I was kind of in shock. Afterwards I sent an email to [course director] Heather and she was really helpful and told me not to worry about it. She told me – gave me a format for an email I should send her back.

Sharing concrete artifacts also helps the GTAs to conform to the department's expectation of consistency across sections. Jacinda finds, ". . . someone was already teaching the class . . . so I was able to jump on with her, as far as syllabus and text goes. Keeping the class consistent, which is helpful." Rick states, "If two or three people – if there's a group teaching then we do share assignments. . ." Lastly, Shannon notes,

I really relied on my peers who were teaching the class or had taught the class before to lead me through it. There were three of us our first semester teaching here that went through and made activities and quizzes together so we could have consistency between our classes.

Idea sharing The offering of ideas from other GTAs or from the course director is another important component of instrumental support. Morris explains,

. . . there is that support there. If I have a question or are working on a lecture and am trying to come up with a good activity or are looking for a good video to use in class then they'll all chime in and say, "Oh well I used this video last week" or "I've done that lecture before, here's something you might try."

Some new GTAs have a specific individual that they look up to and go to for ideas for their classes. Abby says, "My mentor was Lissa . . . I would go in to her and say, 'Today

I'm going to talk about this,' and she'd be like, 'Why don't you try to do . . .'" In discussing his unofficial mentor, Baxter notes, ". . . she was very good in terms of 'How do I get people to talk?' . . . 'This is what I do. Or you can have people write lists on the board. Or do the pair and share with people.'"

The course director, Heather, is also able to provide ideas about teaching. Morris explains, "Heather worked with me a lot, personally . . . she'd offer ideas for activities I could do in class and material that I might want to include." Jensen finds the course director, ". . . did a really good job showing us more advanced things we could utilize in our classrooms to make our classes more engaging and interactive with the students." This type of information sharing is offered in course specific meetings held throughout the semester (run by the course director) or is sought out by individual GTAs.

For new GTAs teaching either Public Speaking or Interpersonal Communication, there are course meetings throughout the first semester. It is in these meetings that GTAs have further opportunities to share ideas with each other and for the course director to offer suggestions. Kendra explains, "We would all sit around at the . . . meetings and would write down activities and switch activities, also." Betsy states, ". . . throughout the semester we met with her [course director] to stay on task . . . also had us grade speeches together to make sure everybody was on the same page that way. So I found that very, very helpful." Lissa finds, ". . . we'd watch speeches and have a little primer on how you grade them throughout the year." The finding here is that ideas are continually shared throughout the first semester and beyond. These ideas are shared so that GTAs have a firmer grasp on how to teach their classes and the expectations that go along with that.

On occasion, something that began as an idea became a concrete artifact that GTAs could use. Kendra states, “We use a listserv. So we could send something right along, ‘Hey, everybody, this is what I was talking about in our meeting – please feel free to use this for your students.’” This is beneficial in that GTAs do not have to go out and search for ways to put that idea into practice for themselves – all the materials they need are provided to them.

Informational Support

Informational support is defined as support that provides “advice and counsel” (Tardy, 1992, p. 177). For GTAs, informational support is communicated in two ways. The first way is in the offering of general advice from fellow GTAs who have been there before. The second way is when GTAs are able to have their specific questions answered.

General advice People often seek advice when they are having a difficult time making a decision or solving a problem. For new GTAs, advice from more seasoned GTAs enables them to feel more confident about the decisions they are making both in and outside of the classroom. As Jensen indicates, “Whenever I found a situation when I needed advice, whether it was minor or major, I knew there were lots of people I could count on.” The perception here is that the asking for, and offering of advice is an expected part of the socialization process for both new and returning GTAs. Myers (1994) found that for GTAs, the most helpful thing were the daily interactions with other GTAs. “. . . GTAs may simply learn more, and desire to learn more, through interaction with their peers in a relaxed setting” (p. 226).

The more seasoned GTAs, those in their second year or beyond, often function as the advice givers. Baxter explains, “I’ll offer advice to people. People ask because they

know I've been here forever, but also because they know I'm Ph.D. co-chair of GSA (Graduate Student Association) and so a lot of people come to me, which is great.”

Jensen feels like “. . . people really did turn to me for advice – what's this place like, will I fit in here, will I like it here?” and Kendra notes,

I felt like I helped a lot of people this year with the new doctoral students because I was in the same boat they were – unsure of myself even after being here two years. “Should I take this class, am I going to survive this class?” I say “It wasn't fun all the time but I survived it.” So they came and talked to me sometimes.

As an experienced GTA, Jensen finds that he is,

. . . able to give her some advice on activities that maybe would work in her class. Or she would look at my lesson plans and say, “I like that activity.” I'd say, “It's a little intense to do in the beginning of the semester, maybe you should move it back a couple weeks.” So we have an extensive network of peer mentoring . . . I find myself answering more questions than asking them. But even in answering those questions there was a sense of comfort – it made me feel great that I may know something and would be able to help someone.

For those GTAs seeking advice, topics range from what classes they should take to how to handle student misbehaviors in the classroom. Lissa states, “I talked to other grad students about what I should take. They were kind of my advisors as well.” Advice is also sought in terms of specific classes that GTAs are teaching. In teaching a new, upper level course, Sasha finds, “It was definitely helpful to talk to people who'd taught it before.” Similarly, Ally explains, “. . . hearing a perspective from a person who'd created really good activities and had tested them for a semester and saying, ‘This is what worked and this is what didn't.’ So a lot of it is an advice process . . .” In discussing new GTAs and the advice process, Ramona finds,

To begin with, we pretty much started from the same place though some had taught the course and others hadn't, but even then some people still had suggestions and questions so there was still that kind of discussion to be had that was definitely a resource and the further we went—as we encountered more students and had more experience in the classroom and as we had more formal

and informal meetings about things that had happened in the classroom—they became even more of a resource. To the point that I still communicate with those ladies when we’re putting together new courses that maybe three or four of us are teaching brand new at the same time. We’ll talk over email—what do you think about this, this may give you some ideas.

As Ramona explains, the advice process for GTAs does not stop after the first year.

GTAs continue to be a resource for one another, through discussion and advice, throughout their tenure at GSU.

The idea that there are other GTAs who have traveled the same path previously seems to resonate with the GTAs. They seek advice from experienced GTAs because it is beneficial for them to be able to communicate with someone who has been there before. Morris notes, in speaking with a more experienced GTA, “. . . talk to him about similar experiences and to relate that to my own experiences and then use his advice for how to improve . . .” Andrew explains that he was, “very comfortable asking questions of people who’ve already done it because I want the real skinny on what’s expected.”

Lastly, although fellow GTAs serve as the main resource for advice, faculty members also serve as a resource for some GTAs. As Elena explains,

. . . just realizing, “I have a ten page paper and a speech tomorrow.” When I’ve had some of those moments—my advisor is Juan. And I’ll go to him and say, “I have all these things going on and how am I supposed to handle this? Am I crazy? What am I supposed to be doing?” And he’s always been very, very receptive and eager to listen and helpful when those moments arise. His door is always open. So whenever I feel like I need to talk to somebody I know I can go there and he’ll listen to what I have to say and be honest.

Jensen also finds faculty members to be helpful resources. In discussing the course director, he states, “She really maintained an open door policy . . . ‘let me help you with my experience and the knowledge I’ve accumulated over time.’ That was very reassuring.” Regardless of the source, and whether GTAs act as the giver or the receiver,

advice is perceived to be an integral component of the socialization process as GTAs navigate their way through their coursework and their teaching load.

Answering specific questions The opportunity for GTAs to have their specific questions answered by their fellow GTAs or by members of the faculty functions as a source of informational support. Candice explains, “. . . the more useful interchanges I’d have would be when we were sitting around the TA office and saying, ‘How are you going to handle X?’ Whatever X might be.”

Ruby: “What should I do about this person who just emailed me?”

Abby: I get 2 or 3 questions a week from first year teachers. . . they just want to know how you think through things.

Elena: I’ve had people ask me everything. “What are you doing in your class? What kind of research are you doing? What is this professor like? Should I live in [town]?”

Sasha: If I was having a problem with a student or if I was having a problem running the class. It was one of the other TAs generally. Like, “Are you having this issue?”

Betsy: I was always double-checking . . . “When you graded this, did you . . .?”

Baxter: I went to James who teaches it . . . “How do you do this?” And he told me how he dealt with the situation. And he made it seem really easy, and it was.

Andrew: I’ll ask someone else and they’ll say, “Here’s what I do.” There’s no competitiveness between TAs.

The TA office appears to be the main environment in which these questions are asked. GTAs engage in both asking and answering questions and, again, that expectation seems clear. As Andrew notes, “If someone . . . a student who’s newer has a question, I take the time to do that because [someone else] did it with me and it was very helpful.” Jensen explains, “I was never hesitant to ask someone who’d been there, done that ‘how’d you handle this situation?’ And sometimes you’d be having that conversation

with one person and someone else would overhear and offer their opinions on your situation.” The specific space of the TA office offers GTAs the opportunity to have their questions answered and to gather advice from a large pool of their peers.

Appraisal Support

Appraisal support is defined in the literature as providing information that is perceived to be helpful for self-evaluations (McKinley, 2009). For GTAs, appraisal support is demonstrated in two ways. The first way is through feedback and validation, which is either stated directly or comes from GTAs working through an issue together. This category is closely aligned with the advice component of informational support. The emerging difference in the data is in the element of communication as a transaction. For advice-giving as informational support, it is a one-way interaction with an individual offering general advice or answering specific questions. In the feedback aspect of appraisal support, GTAs are involved in a transactional process where they work together to create a desired outcome. The second way appraisal support is demonstrated is through encouragement, which is a one-way provision of support.

Feedback and validation GTAs often receive direct feedback about choices or decisions they make from their peers. This feedback helps GTAs to feel validation about their choices. Abby and Candice both discuss the importance of being able to brainstorm as a group and get that feedback from one another. Similarly, Elena finds a benefit in being able to discuss ideas with one another and Ramona explains, “. . . conversations would occur when you were looking at a paper or a speech and wanted some feedback or, ‘Here’s an idea about what I’m going to do in class today – what do you think?’” In

discussing a specific student, Lissa explains the role that feedback plays and the advantage of being able to work through issues with her peers.

I remember very distinctly a student I had from Pakistan—a very thick accent. He’s in my public speaking class—he’s freaking out because he barely speaks English and he was an engineering student. So the whole world of liberal arts to him made no sense. So here I am—he came to the office every day to sit down with me and talk about his speeches and it was so stressful and painful. It’s a common office—I’m not going to go away and talk to him. He left and everyone was, “Oh my god, are you okay? Here’s a piece of candy. Do you need anything?” So that’s how we would talk about it. Even if I wanted to forget about it I couldn’t—because we had to talk about it. . . With that student in particular they were like, “I wouldn’t do it. Tell him you’re busy. You don’t have to spend that much time with him.” And others were like, “I understand why you’re doing this, because you feel bad for him and you owe him as much as you owe anyone else”. . . I find it way more comfortable talking to my peers than going to a supervisor because I felt they knew as much or more than supervisors or other faculty members because we were the ones on the front line.

GTAs find peer feedback to be useful and it helps them to work through ideas. In discussing her research, Betsy notes, “I went to my peers . . . it was nice to have that outside reflection.” Candice explains, “. . . being in the TA office, there was always space you could say, ‘Just listen to me. I want to say this out loud and figure out how it makes sense,’ you know?”

Feedback from peers also serves as validation for GTAs. When discussing an issue with a peer, Abby explains, “It affirmed your idea . . . when they got upset on my behalf, I felt vindicated and not crazy.” Ally specifically notes the importance of that validation, particularly from the course director. In explaining how she decided to deal with a difficult student, she states, “I needed to get validation from [course director] Heather that what I had done was okay.”

GTAs are also able to utilize their peers as feedback sources as they work through problems, issues, and concerns together. As Abby explains,

So as TAs you collaborate on how you teach classes. You talk through how you're going to prepare your final – you talk through all these ideas. So that's the strongest thing - I'm proud to say I'm from GSU and that this is a collaborative environment . . . even though we're teaching upper level different courses we talk about the experience of upper division students and what kind of quality are you getting. . . So even though we're teaching different classes, we still collaborate and talk through what it is to be a TA together.

The presence of other peer GTAs to collaborate with helps to build confidence and certainty for GTAs. Ally finds, “. . . when you're with a group of people all figuring it out together you get to use what they're trying to figure out and help.” Candice notes that GTAs compare notes often and Nolan finds that getting together with other GTAs to talk through what works in the classroom and what does not work is an important component of the process.

Encouragement GTAs also find encouragement from peers and faculty members to be an important source of appraisal support. At different points in their schooling, GTAs experience stress, anxiety, uncertainty, and a lack of self-confidence. When faced with these issues, GTAs turn to their peers for support. In discussing a stressful school event, Betsy explains, “When that happened I went to . . . [co-GTAs] Shannon and Kendra and Ruby . . . and was freaking out. I just needed a sort of, ‘It's going to be okay, here's a plan of attack. You can do it.’” In describing another stressful school situation, Lissa notes,

The people who talked me through it the most were my grad student friends. The ones who had been through it were encouraging and the ones who hadn't gone through it were happy optimists. “You'll be fine! You're smart! Don't worry about it!”

In examining statements from GTAs regarding encouragement, the perception that emerges is one of non-competitiveness. Jensen describes, “. . . just sitting around we go back and forth and try to help one another. It's a zero competitive environment. I'm

not trying to become a better teacher than you, I'm trying to become better because of you, through you." Similarly, Kendra explains, "I went to other grad students to get support and tell me not to quit the program. I felt like, 'I'm not good at this anymore. I've failed at my own ridiculous standard.'" Those other graduate students are perceived to be strong sources of support because they are all sharing the same or similar experiences.

Encouragement from faculty members is just as important as encouragement from peers. Lissa remembers, "encouragement from [course director] Greta. I remember her telling us that it would be okay, we could do this, she was there for us. It would be fine. We were worthy of being there and we COULD do it." Many GTAs express their own feelings of inadequacy in terms of being a student at the graduate level and a teacher at the undergraduate level. These messages of encouragement serve as important positive impressions that help GTAs to feel more secure and confident in their abilities.

Throughout the graduate school process, encouragement continues to be an important aspect. Although in the beginning stages of the socialization process, GTAs desire the confidence boost gained from encouragement, it continues to play a role throughout a student's academic tenure. Jacinda explains, in discussing a specific committee member,

I've kept [Frank] on my committee because of his emotional support. He doesn't push me the way my chair does and I need that. My chair is really helpful but, emotionally - I know I need [Frank] there in my defense so even if I'm wrong - I need him there just to give me that reassuring look. Like "Go Team!" Everyone needs that little cheerleader.

For GTAs, appraisal support offers them validation and boosts self-confidence. When faced with all the anxieties and uncertainties of a new school, new classes, and

new responsibilities, this support helps them to feel more comfortable and confident in their abilities.

Conclusion

In summing the findings for GSU GTA's experience with social support behaviors, support is perceived as critical. Every respondent interviewed received and provided support to their fellow GTAs on multiple occasions. GTAs receive emotional support from discussions with other GTAs about their equivalent experiences. They also experience this type of support by being able to vent to other GTAs and by spending time together outside of the workplace. GTAs experience instrumental support from the concrete tools or tangible artifacts that are given to them by their fellow GTAs. GTAs also receive instrumental support through idea sharing. GTAs experience informational support when they receive general advice or when specific questions they have are answered. Lastly, GTAs experience appraisal support by receiving feedback, validation, and encouragement from GTAs and faculty members.

CHAPTER 6

OBSERVATION AND SOCIALIZATION

A variety of research has indicated that the same learning which occurs from direct experience can also occur on a vicarious basis from observation of another. New responses may be learned or behavior may be changed from simply observing the behavior of others without the observer enacting any behaviors or receiving any reinforcement (Staton-Spicer & Nyquist, 1979). Observation and behavior modeling is an important part of the socialization process for GTAs, which led to the development of the third research question.

RQ 3: What role does peer and/or faculty observation serve in the socialization process?

Findings from this study show that GTAs use observation to help them secure information about the expectations associated with teaching and the culture of the department at GSU. Observation helps new GTAs to evaluate behaviors they want to emulate in their teaching and those that they do not want to incorporate into their teaching. Observation also facilitates GTAs in their information gathering about the way things work within the department and about the perceived positive and the negative aspects of the departmental culture.

Teaching Behaviors

Some new GTAs do not have much experience teaching in the college setting. Even for those GTAs that have previous experience teaching at the university level, GSU is a new school that they are encountering for the first time. This uncertainty about teaching in general, or at GSU specifically, creates some uncertainty and anxiety for

GTAs. GTAs reduce this uncertainty and anxiety they are facing by observing their peers and/or faculty members within the department to get an idea of what they should and should not do as teachers.

Social cognitive theory, developed by Albert Bandura, explains the observation and behavior modeling process. An individual chooses to engage in observation of another individual's behavior. Once the behavior is performed, depending upon the results, an individual may or may not be motivated to adopt the behavior and utilize it in the future (Bandura & Walters, 1963; Bandura, 1977a).

In general, interactions and observation between GTAs help them to become better teachers. As Lissa explains,

Being on the other side of it now – where I don't have an office that I share with other communication teachers, I miss that. Because I don't feel like I'm as good of a teacher, honestly. I don't get constant new ideas every day. New stories about problem students or very good students that are inspiring. The TAs in the office and my cohort are the ones who kept me on my toes.

The constant infusion of new ideas about teaching helps the GTAs to develop into better teachers and keeps them continually refining their techniques.

What To Do

By engaging in observation of their GTA peers and/or professors, GTAs are able to pick up some solid information and ideas about what it means to be an effective teacher and the behaviors that embody that. Because all GTAs share the same large office, they are able to observe their peers in their interactions with students who come in to meet with them about a variety of issues. So, from their peers, GTAs are able to observe specific teaching behaviors and to observe how their peers deal with their students one-on-one. In discussing the natural observation of GTA peers that takes place,

Ramona finds that she is able to pick up some helpful information on how to deal with students. She states,

I know there are things that I picked up from other people during those more informal accidental moments that I stored away. It is helpful to see how someone else diffused a situation when a student is clearly unhappy about what their grade is. . . It's always helpful to see how someone deals with a student in a sort of one-on-one basis. It's also nice in that position, as a group, to support one another if things are not ideal when dealing with a student.

Often, opportunities for observation are not sought out by GTAs but, due to the circumstance of being in the same office, just happen. Also, in addition to being able to observe peers, support is offered to fellow GTAs if it is perceived that a student is getting out of hand.

These observations give GTAs specific behaviors that they can then model themselves with their own students. Kendra explains,

I'm impressed with how my friends deal with students who come to challenge grades or come in with his or her tail between their legs because they've been sick or whatever. Even if the student is going to get very penalized, the teachers are still like, "Hey! It's good to see you! Have a seat, how you doing?" So I think I need to make sure I do that with my students rather than acting like, "I know you don't care about my class." In terms of challenging behavior, I've seen my friends be very, "I appreciate where you're coming from but you have to understand this is the policy I have to adhere to." And I sometimes let people walk all over me so it's good for me to see that and grow a backbone because—my first semester teaching—I really let my students walk all over me.

Similarly, Martha states,

I observed her class . . . she had some trouble with some football players and she subtly twisted things around and says, "You know, I'm really worried about you," instead of saying, "I don't like that fact that you're not doing . . ." and putting them on the defensive. It is like, you know, "Your weight coach must really be riding you, I'm sorry. Can I help with anything?" So seeing it in her and me enacting it. So I called her up and said you know, you enacting that has me doing it . . .

Being present to observe these behaviors also offers GTAs the chance to see how the students respond to particular behaviors. Seeing the student response then plays a role in the decision a GTA makes as to whether or not to model that behavior with his or her own students.

In engaging in peer observation to see how they deal with their students, observation also serves as an affirmation for GTAs if they have handled a particular student situation similarly in the past. Ally notes,

. . . we rarely get the opportunity to engage in that practice of conflict-management or “I don't like this grade,” or XYZ. So it's nice to see how other people handle situations. Sometimes I think I'm being too strict and then I'll see someone else who's holding up the rules and I'll think, “Okay, the teacher didn't back down.” . . . seeing how other people handle those situations, that's the best type of comparison we get in the grad office.

Peer GTA observation is not only helpful in terms of how to deal with student issues in or out of the classroom. It also serves as a teaching guide. As part of the ongoing socialization process within the department, GTAs will sit in on a peer's class and give them feedback about their teaching style. From this exercise, GTAs are able to observe behaviors that they wish to emulate in their own classrooms. Candice notes, “You always learn things. You can borrow/steal things from somebody else . . . recreating the wheel is a bad idea.” Elena states, in discussing a peer she observed, “. . . I've always thought his teaching style is fantastic. Very open. Always fluid in his transitions. Keeps people engaged. Really good at learning names. I've always tried to emulate what he's doing.” Martha says, “. . . he is a natural in the classroom . . . He has a certain poise in front of his classroom in dealing with questions that I try to emulate because I'm not that good when I get questions.” Lastly, Nolan explains, “There are many times . . . when we are teaching similar stuff . . . they'd explain something a certain way and I'm like, “Oh my

god, I didn't explain it nearly as well." Engaging in peer observation is one component of the socialization and learning process for new GTAs.

Engaging in observation also allows GTAs to get very specific ideas about teaching tactics that they would like to implement in their own classes. Ruby notes, "I'm really bad about calling students out in class. Every time I observe [peers] teaching I think: I should start calling students out in class more." Nolan states,

. . . she uses Turning Point. And then she put up a multiple choice test and let everyone compete against each other . . . I think that is much more interactive . . . They are talking to each other but they are talking about the answers. So I would definitely like to use that.

Kendra explains, when discussing observation of her fellow GTA Abby,

I tend to get into my students' lives and get to know them, but I don't initiate picking on them . . . I say that in an endearing way. She does it and the students love it. Right now, we're getting to the middle of the semester and my students will pick on me. Because we've gotten to know one another and like one another. But she'll really want to get to know them deeply. "How's this going in your life?" So I've tried to take that on. Really try to get to know them – even in the first 10 minutes of class, before class starts. And I feel like it's really paid off this semester because I watched her last semester and I've tried to do that this semester.

Kendra was able to pick up specific behaviors by observing Abby. She made the decision to institute those behaviors in her own class the following semester based on how Abby's students reacted. She discovered that these were worthwhile behaviors that paid off in regards to her relationship with her students. These behaviors then continued to be replicated when Shannon observed Kendra's class. She states, "I went to watch Kendra and she always started class with a question . . . that sometimes related to the coursework and sometimes it is just a fun way to get them up and talking. I adopted that from her."

GTAs are also able to gain ideas from their observations about teaching that they may not choose to use now, but could see themselves incorporating in the future. In observing a fellow GTA, Elena explains,

. . . she had this. . . negotiation contract system with the syllabus and asking the students to write how they would ideally like the weighted percentages of the tests, quizzes, papers - all the different types of assignments - asks the students for their preferences for how they'd be rated. And after they did that - I think she looked at the response and kind of formulated how it is going to work. And I was like, "That's so cool." I'd never heard of anyone doing that. So the syllabus is negotiated like a contract with the students. And I heard the students loved it. . . They still had to take the tests and write the papers. But they decided how they are weighted. I had never thought of that. I wonder if that would work. I still haven't done that yet but I filed it away to maybe try it some other time.

Engaging in peer observation about teaching tactics also provides these GTAs a chance to follow up with their peers about specific behaviors that they observed. Ruby states,

It's more of the question and answer so if I see something I think, "Why did she do that - what did he do that?" So I might say, "Hey, can I ask why you did that - that is interesting or different from what I would've done." Then I'll decide, "Oh, that's a good idea, I'll include that."

The chance to follow up with peers is a valuable component of the observation process because it allows GTAs to discover why specific choices are made by other GTAs and the effects that GTAs experience from those choices.

As discussed earlier with observing how fellow GTAs deal with students, classroom observation also provides an opportunity for comparison. As Jensen states, ". . . it gives you something to compare yourself to. I think everyone thinks of themselves as good teachers who can be better. And I think you can always find some way to be better by watching someone else." GTAs are able to compare their teaching behaviors to other GTAs and then incorporate those behaviors they perceive will make them better teachers.

Observation of peers also offers GTAs the opportunity to get an idea of what their own actions look like in the classroom if the GTA they are observing uses the same behaviors. Rochelle explains,

You go in your own class and you've been doing it the same way for so long . . . one of the things about observing, you're like, "That's what I look like when I turn my back to them and talk to the board." Its stuff you don't realize because you're on the outside looking in, because . . . you can't see yourself teaching from the outside.

Becoming aware of how a GTA's own behavior appears to his or her students is an important benefit gained from engaging in peer observation.

Required peer GTA observation as part of the ongoing socialization and learning process is perceived to be a positive experience and the feedback from peers is also beneficial. Sasha notes, ". . . it is nice to see how someone else did it. To compare and contrast and think of ways you might do things differently." In discussing her close friend and co-GTA, Kendra explains,

I've got her to come in twice and watch me. I really value the comments that she gives me. She'll say, "You need to make sure your definitions are more clear. I was worried about the definition on this." And I'd think, "You know, I wouldn't have thought that."

Lastly, Betsy feels ". . . it is very supportive. If there is anything she thought I could add she is very open about that. But at the same time she highlighted the stuff I did well. It is done very productively, very supportively."

In terms of observing teaching behaviors, GTAs do not just observe their peers in the classroom they also observe their own professors in their own graduate classes. Faculty observation is perceived to be constructive for GTAs and provides ideas for teaching in their own classrooms. Jensen explains,

. . . when I'm in a classroom I feel like I'm not only there to get information as a student but that I'm also getting and learning things about how to become a better instructor. Especially at the grad level . . . If I can actually observe and learn from someone who's done it while they are doing it, it will help me immensely . . .

Baxter states,

A lot of times I'll observe faculty and think about how I would do things. What examples they use, what kind of activities they use, and how I feel about whether or not they're working or not and if I could do those things in class.

Elena notes,

I personally am always, always, always looking at teachers and what they're doing and what's effective . . . Always learning new teaching styles and think about in your head, "What could I . . . I like this, is there a way I can use that particular method of what that person did?"

Lastly, Lissa declares, "I'm always watching and critiquing and thinking, 'Can I use that? Is that a good idea? Is that a good strategy?' . . . because I'm interested in becoming a better teacher." For GTAs, a measure of their development as teachers comes from their observation and interpretation of their own professors' teaching behaviors.

Stephen and Rob are two faculty members that stand out in the minds of the GTAs as professors whose behaviors in the classroom are ones to be emulated. Betsy notes,

Stephen is definitely one of my faves in the classroom. He is just so aware of everybody in the classroom – so good at getting people involved. Extremely good at facilitating discussion and giving people feedback based on their discussion but not interrupting the flow of the discussion . . . I was like, "Oh wow, I hope I can channel that into my classroom."

Rochelle explains, "Somebody I've probably learned most of how to teach by observation would be Stephen because he just knows his content so well but there's a passion there but there's also room for questions and discussion and getting off topic." In explaining the benefit she gained from observing Rob, Kendra notes, "he's wonderful

because he's very engaging and he gets on their level – not their age level but he actively finds things that will appeal to their age group so I think he's a great teacher for that.”

Similarly, Morris states,

. . . watching Rob in the class, he's got to keep 300 people fixated on the material – seeing how he does that compared to how people teach 35-40 people. I think I've gained a lot from both of those types of courses in how to keep it entertaining, relevant to how students are living their lives now.

As discussed earlier in terms of peer observation, GTAs may observe behaviors now that they will not use immediately but plan to use in the future. As Morris discussed above, Rob has great tactics for keeping a large class of 300 students involved with and interested in the material. However, GTAs are not teaching classes with enrollments of 300 students. They are teaching classes in the 20-30 student range. Perhaps GTAs are aware that in their future jobs, they may be responsible for teaching large lecture sections and so are tucking away those observed behaviors for future use.

What Not To Do

Lissa: We had one TA . . . who is the most inappropriate dresser. She had huge boobs and we just used to stare at them. She dressed very provocatively. Not like a slut, but she wore things that were way too low-cut and I remember one day she wore a sundress and it didn't look like she was wearing a bra underneath it. And she graded speeches like that! How did her poor students give speeches?! So of course that is something all the TAs talked about.

GTAs have the opportunity to observe and learn what they think they should do as teachers and they also use that observation to discern what they should not do as teachers. Stating it rather bluntly, Shannon says, “From the faculty I learn what not to do. From my peers it's more of collaborating on classroom ideas and lesson plans.” While not all GTAs feel this way, it is clear that peer GTA and faculty observation help GTAs to

decide what behaviors they do not want to enact when teaching their classes or interacting with their students.

In describing peer observation, Ramona explains,

There are definitely times when I heard people talking with students and say, “Oh, okay, since you came to see me I’ll take this late.” What I would consider to be going too easy on students in a given situation based on my style . . . There are also a few times I remember seeing, especially in the TA office, examples where I felt like people let students get a little bit out of hand, get a little too ramped up, inappropriate. I remember thinking, “I don’t think so. I’m going to ask you to leave now because I’m not going to let you yell at me and curse at me.”

Echoing that sentiment, Abby notes, “I see these others teach and I think, ‘You are really going to have to struggle for any amount of respect.’”

In observing specific behaviors that they hope to avoid in their own teaching,

Ruby notes,

I observed a peer last year who – the way she interacted with her class is not a way I would ever interact in my class. It was a bit too much like, “I’m your friend.” So it was – I’m all for being casual – but it was more like, “Let’s hang out after class.” And some of the language that person used was – I would never use that slang term when lecturing.

Lissa explains,

I learned about the importance of eye contact because we had one colleague who never looked up when she presented and we used to dread listening to her. I thought, “Her poor students.” So I learned . . . what not to do from those observations.

Engaging in these peer observations is, again, an affirmation. GTAs are able to observe what they perceive to be teacher misbehaviors and the student responses to those misbehaviors. This reaffirms their decision not to utilize those particular behaviors in their teaching.

Rick finds that it is much easier to recognize the bad behaviors than it is to identify the good ones. In discussing an observation of a peer, he notes, “I have observed

him. I didn't like his style, to be honest. I would not use . . . it's more of an elimination system. 'I don't want to do that.' It's really hard to find out what's so great." Similarly, Ally explains, "The bad practices are so much easier to pick up on than the good ones." It is important to note that because teacher behaviors and misbehaviors are subjective, there are differences in how each GTA perceives the behaviors observed.

GTAs observe what not to do as teachers from their own professors as well.

Ramona notes, ". . . a lot of it is based on how they taught the graduate classes I was in. You can pretty well tell, as a student, whether a person is someone you should be taking course direction from." The GTAs describe specific teaching misbehaviors they observe from faculty members.

Lissa: Even if you're bored, taking notes on what's boring you so you don't do the same thing in your class. I realize that whenever I'm talked at for longer than 15-20 minutes you've lost me so I really try hard not to do that in my classes.

Baxter: There are blatant teacher misbehaviors that I've observed just in this last semester. Oh, coming into class half an hour late. Letting it out an hour and a half early . . . if you're going to show a video clip in class you should pay attention to it, as well. I think setting those kinds of examples . . .

Morris: . . . he comes off as a little fake or insincere – he has to put on this show so there has to be showmanship so he puts on a façade. So I try to stay away from seeming to pander to them.

Jacinda: . . . realizing that other faculty members take a long time to respond to email or don't respond over the weekend or whatnot. All the while they're on Facebook, updating their status . . . I think I've learned more of what not to do.

Betsy: I've had maybe a professor that kind of dictated the entire class period and gave that lecture the entire class period and it was very boring. I was like, "Oh wow, I hope I don't do that in my classroom."

Ally: One prof, who shall remain nameless, spent two and a half hours going over our syllabus. And we were like, "Okay, never do this to your students."

Kendra: . . . where they literally just read to you their powerpoints. And I think, “What did you do before powerpoints? Did you just read from a piece of paper? This is not teaching, this is reading to us.” I will never do that.

Morris: . . . he’ll get up there and he’ll have fifty slides he thinks he’s getting through in a fifty minute class and he’ll get through twenty five in the first forty five minutes, then in the last five minutes he’s like “bam, bam, bam, bam, here’s what you need to know.” So there are some presentational aspects that you pick up as well. When you do a lecture, that’s something you want to take into consideration in your lecture.

Faculty members provide specific behaviors in their own classes that GTAs are able to observe. Based on these observations, GTAs then make the decision as to whether or not to incorporate these specific behaviors in their own classrooms and student interactions.

Departmental Culture

Engaging in faculty and peer observation also gives new GTAs information about the culture of the department. This helps them to ascertain acceptable and unacceptable behaviors and expectations of the department. Additionally, it helps GTAs to learn behaviors that make an effective graduate student and GTA. GTAs use observation of experienced peers in the department and faculty members. Based on these observations, GTAs learn how things work in the department. They also discover what they perceive to be positive and negative aspects of the departmental culture.

How Things Work Around Here

GTAs receive a plethora of information as they go through the orientation and socialization process at GSU. However, the information contained in handbooks and orientation programs provided by the graduate school and the department does not always reflect the way things actually work. In order for GTAs to get a feel for how the department functions on a day-to-day basis, they rely on observation of their peers and

faculty members to provide them with behaviors to model. These observations aid GTAs in understanding the general norms in the department with respect to interactions, dress, and titles. Observation also helps GTAs to understand how to approach researching with faculty. Lastly, observation allows GTAs to identify specific individuals to model their own behaviors after.

General guidelines For GTAs, observation of their peers and faculty allows them to get a sense of what the expectations are for GTAs in the department with respect to interactions, dress, and titles. Specifically, observation helps GTAs to gain an understanding of the norms and formality level of the department. Speaking about the role of observation in the socialization process, Ramona notes, “When you’re in those situations when you don’t know what to do, you look at other people.” Offering more specifics, Lissa explains,

That’s how you learn the norms of any workplace or any organization. No one’s going to sit down and tell you, “Okay, this person doesn’t like this person so you need to make sure you don’t put them together on your committee.” You have to observe that for yourself and if you have a question about it you have to ask someone point blank who’s not going to lie to you. Because they’ve experienced it themselves, or they have a story to back it up because they know these two people conflict. So that’s absolutely how I learned the norms. It’s how you learn how to dress for work. It’s how you learn what to wear. You learn how to dress, how to act, you learn what’s appropriate to say, what’s not appropriate to say. All that through observation.

In specifically discussing expectations for faculty interactions, Nolan states, “. . . just watching other people . . . seeing their interactions with people. And see students go into Juan’s office and call him ‘J-bone.’ Pop in and say, ‘Hi’ and know who that flies with and who it doesn’t.” Ally discussed using observation in social settings. She states, “. . . watching people at the socials – what do you talk about with faculty as opposed to in the classroom?”

For first-year GTA Betsy, the more experienced GTAs serve as a useful point of observation. She explains,

A lot of observation of maybe older students who'd been here. How did they interact? What is acceptable with what faculty member? And sometimes they would tell you . . . we'd be talking about a faculty member and they'd say, "When you talk to this person don't do this, or make sure you address them this way."

Colleen learned about the norms from her more experienced peers. She notes, "The norm is that you keep up with the stuff – you do the work, you're ready for class." She was able to learn about that departmental expectation by observing her peers. As a new GTA, those behaviors set a specific example for Colleen to follow. Lastly, Lissa explains the importance of her peers in learning the norms.

I learned by observing how students treated other faculty and other students first and then by listening to what faculty said. Because sometimes the faculty could be a little out of touch. What the faculty thought isn't what we thought. So I trusted my friends more than the faculty.

In specifically looking at the expectations of how one should dress in the department, observation again plays a role. Through observation, Candice finds, ". . . dress-wise, it's the most casual department I've ever been in. People don't get dressed up. And yet, it feels like a pretty formal, hierarchical department." Ramona explains,

I would say it's fairly informal in terms of things like dress. Sure, the first year I dressed up to teach class for awhile, then slowly graduated down to a much more casual style. But in terms of dress it's fairly informal. Not dirty t-shirts and hole-y jeans but not suits and ties every day.

By engaging in observation of dress, GTAs are able to begin forming impressions about the formality level of the department.

Another aspect of formality that GTAs discussed is in the use of titles. Colleen states, "The culture is less formal if you are a doctoral student. It is expected that you'd be less formal if you are Master's or Ph.D. with faculty. First name basis is fine with

most of the faculty.” Martha explains, “It is a lot of watching and sending a lot of emails with ‘Dr.’ first and when they would sign it back, ‘Greta’ or ‘Heather.’ Some of the grad students would be more bold and ask, ‘What do you prefer?’” Lastly, in discussing the informality of the department Ruby states,

I see it’s informal in dress, in the way we speak to faculty. So that way we speak to faculty, the way we interact with faculty, things we do outside of school with faculty. Watching in classes as far as joking with a faculty member – talking with them outside of class, in a social setting, in the hall. But there’s always that question of – can they only do that because they already have that relationship with that person?

Research Many GTAs commented specifically about the role that observation plays in figuring out the who, what, when, why, and how of researching with faculty. Rochelle is frustrated by the department because she feels that specific information she needs regarding research is not provided. She notes, “. . . we’re going to spend all this time teaching you how to do a syllabus or how to . . . talk on the first day of class but we’re not going to do anything to show you how these people do research.” Because this information is not always made clear by the department, GTAs rely on observation of their peers to become informed about the expectations.

Shannon: . . . just seeing who is working with who – who is in whose inner circle just from observation.

Sasha: . . . in terms of getting involved in research – establishing ties with professors in the department, that’s something I picked up on from other people.

Colleen: I was told very specifically . . . You have to go approach professors that you want to work with and let them know if they’re working on something that you want to be a part of.

Baxter: I learned it from observing others when it came to wanting to do research with faculty members. You have to go out and talk to them and see what they’re doing and if you can help. It’s not, “Oh, sit and wait until an email comes through the listserv.” So that I picked that up from other doc students . . . how to get involved in research.

Engaging in peer observation aids GTAs in developing an understanding of how things work in the department with respect to expectations for doing research with faculty.

Specific behavior models Many GTAs also take it upon themselves to seek out a specific more experienced GTA to model themselves after by observing his or her behavior. For Lissa, it is Candice. She explains,

Candice is the first person I realized, “You need to act like Candice.” Because she walked into orientation and Greta’s face lit up. And I thought, “Watch her. She’s who you need to act like. She’s the one to emulate.” So I did. Anything Candice told me to do, I did it. She could have told me to shave my head and I would have done it. “Sure Candice, whatever you want.” She had power in the department and she knew it and she used it respectfully. You could tell the faculty respected her. Whenever her name was mentioned, people said positive things about her.

For Baxter, Lissa served as the best behavior model. He notes,

Oh man . . . right away I knew Lissa had it together. We came in while she was the president or Ph.D. co-chair of GSA. But just the way she seemed very confident and . . . I remember her showing me around the TA office. “Who is this person?” She just seemed really bubbly and really, really together. And the fact is, like, that first semester . . . This is so lame, if I needed any kind of office supplies . . . she had a ball of rubber bands on her desk and a million different types of post-it notes. Everything is organized. “I need file folders . . .” And I like to be super organized so that resonated with me.

Ruby notes,

With peers I looked up to Lissa and Robin—they were the only third years who were around a lot. I had desks right next to them and we hung out outside of school. I liked what they had to say. They were honest but would say, “You have to figure it out for yourself.” But they would tell me their experiences. So I would appreciate that. The reason I listen to them is because I connected to them early on but also because we shared that bond outside of school too.

Kendra and Shannon opted not to provide specific names but note that they do model the behaviors of specific GTAs in the department. Kendra states, “. . . she’s a really good teacher and people cling to her. They like to be around her. So I liked the way she interacted with people. I liked her scholastic success. I liked how the faculty respected

her.” Shannon notes, “I follow her lead because she’s already got publications, she came from a very well-respected school, she’s very intelligent.”

For Colleen, it is one of her own professors that serves as a behavior model. She states,

I learned how respected he is by other people in the department and how he is new and productive and is doing a lot but is also—what I respected about him is that he is able to maintain a family—they’re having children and he is earning tenure so he is able to balance these aspects of his life. That is something I respected and wanted to be like. Someone who could balance all these different aspects. There are other people in the department I don’t think are as good at balancing their life. And that isn’t what I wanted for myself. So to see other people do it and do it well that is motivating.

GTAs also use a specific behavior models as a demonstration of what not to do as a GTA and a graduate student. For Lissa, it is Randi. She explains,

Randi – big example of what not to do as a grad student in every possible way. She never kept office hours. Ever. Big deal for us. We had to be in the office ten hours a week. Most of us are in there thirty hours but you HAVE to be there ten hours a week. She was never in the office. She ran in to class late nine days out of ten. Was always flustered. Made a huge racket and fuss when she came in. Everyone else was there five minutes early or on time, we’re professional and ready to go. She was not. I saw it happen to her – no one respected her in that department, faculty or students. So I learned what not to do from her.

Similarly, Colleen notes,

There are a couple people who aren’t keeping up. I don’t know what they are doing when they aren’t keeping up. Just not turning assignments in or turning them in late. Just—when the majority are turning things in on time and have their stuff together—to see someone who is not . . . I kinda feel bad for that person because not only do you look bad in front of the faculty but the students are also critical about who couldn’t keep up.

Specific behavior models are a significant aspect of the socialization process. If something is not covered in the orientation process or through discussion with peers or faculty members, GTAs specifically use peer and faculty observation to find out information about expectations for their own behaviors in the department.

Through this observation, GTAs are also able to discover what they perceive to be positive and negative aspects of the culture. The positive aspects of the culture that are discerned from observation are the openness of the department, the collaborative and supportive environment, and the perception that all members of the department (faculty and graduate students) are on equal footing.

Positive Aspects

Openness Through general observation, GTAs discovered that the department is an open and welcoming one. People are willing to share their stories and, as Kendra notes, “. . . the politics in the department are so small compared to other programs.” Jensen explains,

Through observation and some of the things that are talked about – it is a very open and nurturing culture here in the department. So I think I was able to observe that there is a very cohesive group of people who are openly willing to help you, befriend you. And I guess it is observant through their body language.

When first encountering the department, Ally explains her experience.

. . . I'm walking to the grad office and seeing the decorations and they're joking with me and asking if I've been to [an event] and going to lunch with the faculty and they aren't asking me questions like they are interviewing me. They are saying, “Oh, that research sounds interesting! I'm doing this, have you heard of that?” And I had a conversation with them like they are friends . . . I was like, “This is where I need to fit in.” So it was something about walking in the hallways and you hear laughter in the faculty office or you hear laughter in the TA office. It is . . . I think laughter is a good way to put it because you feel comfortable . . . even if it's an awkward laughter—it's real laughter. Or people sharing ideas. Or the idea that faculty would say my thesis is an interesting idea for research. You think your thesis is that class project you had to do to get that Master's degree and to hear someone say, “Have you thought about publishing that? You should look at this study . . .” And it's like someone sees that I'm a valuable contributor to projects.

GTAs also have the perception that the department is open in terms of faculty willingness to share personal information about themselves with the GTAs. Rochelle

explains, “When Rob was getting a divorce, he said, ‘I want you to know – I don’t want you to hear it through the grapevine – I’m getting a divorce.’ It’s one of those departments where you can say personal stuff.” Similarly, Abby notes,

. . . some stuff happened with one of the faculty’s kid. And they told that to a TA, who told it to two other TAs so we followed that up with, “How’s that going? Are things better?” So you do invite people into your lives. Juan knows a lot about my personal life—that I’m involved in my church here. That I volunteer with the homeless...So it goes beyond.

Collaborative/supportive Another positive aspect of the departmental culture is that the GTAs perceive it to be both collaborative and supportive. This perception is based on observations of GTAs, other graduate students, and faculty members. Jensen explains,

. . . when I stepped in for the department orientation I got a really good sense of the culture they had in the department . . . They really talked about the cohesion in the department. We talked a lot about trying to get people to want to help people . . . there are overwhelming messages of inclusion. People would try to include you in the culture, not the university, but the department, which is like GSU is the big neighborhood and the department is my street. I care a lot more about my street than my neighborhood. That’s the message they gave you, “We are your neighbors and friends, how can we help?”

Many GTAs perceive this emphasis on support and collaboration from the faculty members specifically. During the orientation process, Nolan notes, “Juan gave the whale and shark speech about us swimming with a bunch of whales instead of being a sharky school.” Ruby states, “I think it’s very supportive because we don’t have that competition going on. Because the faculty encourages support.” Elena says, “If I wanted to, I feel like I could talk to any professor here. Or student. About any concerns or, ‘Hey, I want in on a research project.’ I wouldn’t feel the slightest bit of reservation.” Lastly, Betsy finds that faculty members

. . . stress that importance of support and making sure you could balance your teaching responsibilities and your own classes. I think they really tried to stress the fact that the faculty members are there to help you if you needed it. They wanted to be open and inviting and that it is a warm atmosphere and a supportive atmosphere. I did get that feeling.

GTAs also find their peers to be both collaborative and supportive. Lissa notes that “. . . we celebrated everything in our department – whenever someone did anything. It was good. There was plenty of room at the top at GSU. There was room for everybody to succeed and do your personal best.” Morris appreciates the non-competitive atmosphere that exists between GTAs. He states, “I feel like I could talk to any graduate student about my research and not feel like they’re going to steal my ideas.” Similarly, Betsy finds, “Usually when someone gets a publication it’s a positive reaction. ‘Hey, good job!’ It’s not a, ‘She got that now I got to go . . .’ It’s not that dog-eat-dog atmosphere.”

The supportive atmosphere observed by the GTAs is an appreciated and useful part of the socialization experience. In describing the helpful feeling, Ally explains,

One student came and helped me unload my U-Haul when I came into town. Another person was like, “My husband can come help you.” . . . If someone leaves a document open in Word, you don’t close it. You leave it there because it’s somebody else’s who would want it to be there.

In summing up the supportiveness of the department, Lissa notes,

. . . the number one thing is the relationships you make with other people and how you treat other people and how good you are toward other people. And I think everyone had that same philosophy at GSU. And it helped us all.

Equal footing The last component of the positive aspects of the departmental culture at GSU is the idea that everyone in the department, GTAs and faculty alike, are on equal footing. This message is also acquired through observation. Jensen explains,

. . . this is what I've wanted for a long time. To be part of an organization that made me feel like a critical member of it even though I'm a small player so I feel very important to the department even though I'm replaceable . . . So for me, whether you're talking about another TA or a faculty member . . . everyone looks out for each other and is there to help one another. So it's a very warm and nurturing environment.

Similarly, Lissa notes, the departmental culture is

. . . as laid back as a four-year R1 can be. I have heard horror stories of other schools having such formal departments that you don't call one another by first names. And we are on a first-name basis with our professors. They are very kind and treated us like equals for the most part.

Elena states, "I came in, and as . . . a grad student I felt like, 'Bam. I can talk to them more like people than this super high person that I should be scared about.'" Lastly,

Morris describes how he feels about the departmental culture.

As for how to interact with faculty, I think in general . . . there's just a very welcoming atmosphere between grad students and faculty here. So it's not just people I've TAed for, it's not just people I've had courses with but I feel I've had good relationships with everyone in the department. They're pretty good about coming out to GSA events, mingling with the students, being on a first name basis with the students, which seems trivial but it's nice to be able to call your faculty members by their first name and not feel like there's an authority role. There's a good balance between, yes they know the stuff and if you have questions they're there to answer class or course related questions, but they're also there as your friends and they want to know your personality and so it's not strictly a professional relationship.

Negative Aspects

GTAs at GSU feel that there are negative elements to the departmental culture in addition to the positive elements. GTAs are able to grasp these negative elements through observation of both peers and faculty members. Many GTAs feel that not all faculty members are supportive or willing to help them develop as teachers and scholars. Ally notes, ". . . you need to reach out to the faculty if you wanted to meet them. They aren't necessarily going to come to you." Colleen explains,

There are a handful of people in the department that make everyone comfortable and so everyone gravitates toward those people . . . and there's not enough of those people to go around . . . I figured it out as I went along.

In describing who she would seek out if she needed support, Ramona notes,

. . . there are very few faculty members now who I feel like if I had a problem I could go into their office and just let that out either in terms of getting social support or in terms of getting resources.

Additionally, Candice states,

It feels like you're often perceived as wasting time. Faculty makes you feel that way. It feels like if you don't want to go to an R1 when you're done [at GSU] that you're not . . . It feels like, those things for me created a feeling of a pecking order, if you will. So in that respect it may not always be the most positive culture.

Several GTAs also describe their perception that as GTAs they feel they are not important as individuals, they do not have much power, and they should not be questioning the way that faculty members do things. Lissa notes, in describing how she perceives the atmosphere, “. . . don't make waves, just do what you're told and get through it and eventually you'll be rewarded for it, hopefully.” Candice feels that the faculty members want her to understand that “I have a little power but not very much and I should never lose sight of that.” Additionally, Jacinda explains, “I felt like a cog in the wheel. That individually I wasn't important, it was important what I could do for the department, what I could do for that whole.” She also feels that in terms of getting feedback from faculty members, it is often negative. She explains, “. . . if you can acknowledge my problems, why can't you acknowledge that I've taken the chance to fix them. And I feel like they can just point out the bad and not help me.”

Titles for GTAs and faculty members are also perceived by some to be a negative aspect of the culture. Ramona notes, “. . . sometimes your undergraduate students will

make that mistake and call you doctor. And the implication there is that you better quickly correct that because that is not your name.” Ramona’s perception is that the department and faculty members want the distinction between the two groups, those being faculty and GTAs. Also, Shannon explains, “[Course director] Heather makes it clear that she wants to be called Dr. unless you are one of the few that’s in her inner circle, which you learn pretty quickly who those people are.” Shannon’s observation indicates that there are no uniform rules that apply for using titles in the department. For each GTA, it is a process that must be figured out for each faculty member.

In looking specifically at the research part of the graduate experience, Elena notes, “I remembered that our research should come first, our classes should come second, and our teaching should come last.” This information was imparted to her during the orientation process. Echoing that sentiment and speaking specifically about the department, Kendra explains that one of the main messages communicated is, “‘Research is life’ and I hate that about the program.” Rochelle notes, “I think the weakest part in the culture is, as a GTA, there’s support coming down for your teaching, but as a graduate student you have to find your own way to find someone to work with.” This is demonstrated as a negative aspect of the culture because the university and the department make specific references to the fact that research should be a top priority for all graduate students, including GTAs. The GTAs perception is that they have not observed any support or guidance for their expected role as researchers.

Conclusion

Ultimately, the role of observation for GTAs is a key aspect of their socialization experience. Being able to observe co-GTAs, more experienced GTAs, other graduate

students, and faculty members helps new GTAs to navigate their way through the process of being a new organizational member. GTAs use observation to ascertain both strong and weak teaching behaviors. This allows them to get clear ideas about what they should and should not do as teachers at GSU. They are able to observe specific behaviors that others use in the classroom to teach and outside of the classroom to deal with students. GTAs also use observation to gauge the departmental culture. In gauging the departmental culture, GTAs are able to discover how things work in the department, particularly in regards to expectations for interactions, dress, and titles. GTAs are also able to gather information on what they perceive to be both positive and negative aspects of the departmental culture. Using this observation allows GTAs to reduce their uncertainty about the expectations in the department overall.

CHAPTER 7

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The purpose of this dissertation was to uncover the role that orientation programs, social support, and observation played in the socialization process for GTAs at GSU. As these questions were answered and the socialization process was explored, new questions emerged. This final chapter will summarize the results of this study, discuss how these results compare to earlier studies, look at what can be done, examine some limitations, and discuss areas for future research. A final personal reflection on the dissertation is also offered.

Review of Research Questions

RQ 1: What role does institutionalized socialization play for GTAs as new organizational members?

Institutionalized socialization for new GTAs was examined. This type of socialization takes the form of orientation programs at both the graduate school/university level and the departmental level. Results indicate that the process is one that both helps and hinders GTAs. The first role that institutionalized socialization plays for GTAs is one of uncertainty and anxiety reduction. This uncertainty and anxiety reduction exists at both the graduate school and the departmental level. At the graduate school level, uncertainty and anxiety is reduced for GTAs through the discussion of university policies and procedures and through the microteach teaching sessions. Uncertainty and anxiety is reduced for GTAs at the departmental level through clarified expectations, concrete tools for teaching, and through specific messages that the

department emphasizes. These messages communicate that GTAs will find help and support in the department and that being a student-centered teacher is essential.

Institutionalized socialization through orientation programs also creates uncertainty and anxiety for GTAs at GSU. The creation of uncertainty and anxiety is also found at both the graduate school and the departmental level. At the graduate school level, uncertainty is created through the overwhelming amount and ineffectiveness of information communicated. Uncertainty is also created at the departmental level because of lack of follow through. GTAs feel it is unclear exactly how they are supposed to put the ideas that are communicated to them into practice.

Lastly, GTAs are able to form relationships through institutionalized socialization. Relationships are developed through meeting people during the orientation process and at social events offered at both the graduate school and the departmental level. Through departmental assigned buddies (a new GTA being paired with a more experienced graduate student within the department) and the sharing of similar experiences, GTAs are able to develop relationships. These relationships are critical when looking at the role that social support plays for GTAs.

RQ 2: Which specific social support behaviors, if any, facilitate the socialization process for GTAs?

This research question was coded using House's (1981) categories of emotional, instrumental, informational, and appraisal support. Within the category of emotional support, the findings indicate that this type of support takes three different forms. Emotional support is demonstrated through discussions GTAs engage in about their equivalent experiences. This type of support is also demonstrated through the process of

venting, and through what Arnston and Droge (1986) term the “restaurant effect” (p. 155). GTAs receive instrumental support from concrete or tangible artifacts and through the sharing of ideas with other GTAs. GTAs receive informational support through general advice from other GTAs and by having their specific question answered. Lastly, GTAs receive appraisal support through feedback, validation, and from encouragement from other GTAs, graduate students, and faculty.

RQ 3: What role does peer and/or faculty observation serve in the socialization process?

By examining the role that peer and/or faculty observation plays in the socialization process results indicate it is a central aspect. GTAs are able to compile information related to teaching at GSU and to the culture of the department through observation. In looking at teaching specifically, GTAs use observation of their peers and faculty to understand what they should and should not do as teachers and graduate students.

Observation also helps GTAs to learn about the culture of their department. Through observation, GTAs obtain information about how things work in the department. This includes information about general departmental guidelines and the research process with faculty. Additionally, many GTAs are able to discern a specific GTA or faculty member in the department that they can model their own behaviors after. GTAs are also able to gain information about what they perceive to be both positive and negative aspects of the departmental culture. Some of the positive aspects of the culture ascertained through observation include the openness of the department, the collaborative and supportive environment, and the perception of equality with the faculty. GTAs also

use observation to discover what they perceive to be negative aspects of the departmental culture. These negative aspects include the perception of a lack of support from the faculty and an overly heavy emphasis on research as opposed to teaching and graduate coursework.

Comparisons To Earlier Studies

The results of this study confirm many of the findings discussed earlier on socialization, social support, and observation. In specifically looking at socialization, it is clear that GSU has chosen to use institutionalized socialization, marked by the collective and formalized nature of the process (Jones, 1983). As Jablin (2001) indicated, institutionalized socialization often takes the form of short orientation programs. In these programs, vast amounts of information are covered concerning policies and procedures and new members are afforded the opportunity to meet existing organizational members. New GTAs at GSU participate in formal orientations in both the graduate school and the department. Because these orientations are only a couple of days each, this backs Nicklow, Marikunte, and Chevalier's (2007) finding that GTAs only have a few days to prepare themselves for their teaching duties. These short orientations can reduce some uncertainty and anxiety for GTAs. These findings mirror Jones' (1986) that using institutionalized socialization tactics helped to reduce both uncertainty and anxiety for new members.

Cawyer & Friedrich (1998) found that the encounter phase of socialization, the point at which an individual enters an organization, is marked by ambiguous information. These findings are supported in the current study. GTAs at GSU discuss the ambiguous nature of some of the information they receive about roles and expectations from both the

graduate school and departmental orientations. So, for new GTAs, while some information provided helps to reduce their uncertainty and anxiety, some information helps to create it as well.

As Ashforth and Saks (1996) found, these socialization tactics can also be a constriction to GTAs because they emphasize the *status quo* and do not allow GTAs to explore alternate paths. Ashforth and Saks called this “smothering paternalism” (p. 172). GTAs at GSU experience this because they are provided with concrete tools for teaching. GTAs are given a syllabus, a textbook, and specific assignments that they are required to use. This assures the department that the *status quo* will be maintained at GSU. However, this limits GTAs in their ability to make the course their own. They are not allowed to choose their own textbook or to create their own large assignments. This, in turn, may hamper their development as teachers.

The results of this study also confirm Van Maanen and Schein’s (1979) findings that institutionalized socialization utilizes collective tactics so that an organization can expect homogeneous responses from members in the future. Homogeneity is important at GSU. GTAs clearly recall the departmental focus on the expectation of consistency across sections of courses. Zahrly and Tosi (1989) also found that these tactics led to more cohesion for new members. This is most clearly demonstrated by the GTA’s feelings that throughout the orientation process they are not alone. GTAs take comfort in the fact that others are going through the same process. This feeling helps to build cohesion and sense of community for the GTAs.

Jones (1983) and Van Maanen (1978) found support for the positive effect that both social and content dimensions of socialization had on uncertainty reduction for new

members. Findings of this study support this as indicated by the fact that, for GSU GTAs, uncertainty and anxiety are reduced through both the orientation process (content) and relationship development (social). Also, as Teboul (1994) found, usually members that are new to an organization have more of an opportunity to develop relationships with their peers than their superiors. This is the case with GTAs at GSU because, due to the collective and formalized nature of the orientation process, they are experiencing most aspects of the socialization process together.

The findings of this study also mirror those from Myers and Oetzel (2003) regarding the effectiveness of a dual socialization process. As indicated by the GSU GTAs, the socialization process is one in which they both receive and seek out information. They receive information through the required orientation programs and other GTAs. They also seek out information on their own through question asking and observation of other GTAs and faculty members throughout the socialization process and beyond.

In examining the specific types of information imparted through orientation programs, the findings of this study confirm findings by both Darling and Staton-Spicer (1986) and Meyers and Prieto (2000). Their findings indicated that issues dealing with values, norms, roles and associated behavior expectations, syllabi and exam construction, grading, and classroom assignments were all addressed in the orientation. As the GSU GTAs explain, these are all elements of either the graduate school or departmental orientation. Additionally, this study found support for the use of supplemental tactics such as shared meals with faculty members and other GTAs (Darling & Dewey, 1990).

This allows for relationship development to occur for GTAs with other GTAs, graduate students, and faculty members.

As Forward (1999) found, new organizational members engaged in activities that helped them to seek information and reduce their uncertainty as they joined an organization. For GTAs at GSU, those behaviors include attending orientations, asking questions, developing relationships, and providing and receiving support. These are all proactive behaviors. This confirms findings from Migner, Rubin, & Gorden (1995) and Teboul (1995) that seeking out communication encounters helped new members to obtain role-related information and access emotional support.

The last phase of the socialization process is metamorphosis and Jones (1980) noted that this has occurred when an organizational new member has become an insider. The findings of this study indicate one of the ways that this transition to insider occurs for GTAs is when they are sought out as an information source and are able to answer specific questions asked of them by other, usually newer, GTAs. Serving as a source of information allows GTAs to provide informational support.

Lastly, in terms of socialization, findings of this study confirm those from Meyers (1995), Rosen and Bates (1967) and Darling and Staton (1989) regarding the role of the peer in socialization. The primary means of socialization for GTAs at GSU is the development of supportive peer relationships. These peers are able to provide, as Meyers found, comfort, sense-making, and direction. When GTAs are experiencing uncertainty, they turn to one another to help make sense of that situation. Additionally, more experienced GTAs serve as the main socialization agents for newer GTAs. At GSU the

socialization process is primarily facilitated through relationships with peers – both GTAs in their own cohort and those who had been in the organization longer.

The findings of this study supplement previous studies in some areas. The socialization literature is focused on the phases, tactics and methods of reducing uncertainty and anxiety. Findings from this study indicate that during the socialization process GTAs are able to reduce some uncertainty and anxiety. However, the socialization process also creates some uncertainty and anxiety for GTAs. This is not an area that is addressed prevalently in the literature.

Current findings also confirm the existence of social support as defined through House's (1981) four categories of emotional, instrumental, informational, and appraisal support. GTAs at GSU experience all four forms of support.

The findings of this study affirm many of the previous studies on emotional support. Feeley, Hwang, and Barnett (2008) found that social networks were important and that "Friends in the workplace provide coping resources that serve to reduce the amount of strain felt by an employee" (p. 66). Social networks are important for GTAs and this is evidenced in the amount of time they choose to spend together. As discussed earlier, Arnston and Droge termed this the "restaurant effect" (1986, p. 155). GTAs spending time together watching television, going out to dinner as a group, or attending an event demonstrates this effect at GSU. The GTAs focus on this effect as an important element of the socialization process. During this time together, they are able to vent to one another about frustrations with students, classes, or professors. Hollihan and Riley (1987) found that sharing stories is a way for individuals to be able to emotionally relate to others. For the GTAs in this study, the GTA office and locations outside of the

organization are areas where GTAs can share their stories with other GTAs. From this, they are able to gain validation of their experiences.

Many of the findings of this study also mirror those conducted on support groups. Although GTAs are not a part of any formal type of support group, their behaviors and types of support offered match those that exist for support group members. The GTA office itself serves as a “support group” location because this is one site where GTAs engage in venting and story sharing. Everyone in the office is engaged in the same experience of being a GSU GTA. Albrecht and Adelman (1984) found that, in support groups, people shared their experiences and feelings with those who had similar experiences. Because of this, other support group members were perceived to be more credible when offering advice than those that were not members of the support group. The GTAs in this study make it clear that they turn to their co-GTAs when seeking advice or venting because only those experiencing the same thing can understand their point of view.

Findings from this study also match Albrecht and Adelman’s (1984) conclusion that a shared setting (GTA experience or the actual GTA office itself) helps the supporter to be “informed and insightful about obvious and subtle stresses” (p. 19). GTAs indicate support from other GTAs is perceived to be most the helpful because other GTAs are the ones that can understand the experience. Other GTAs are currently experiencing or have experienced the same process.

House (1981) indicated that instrumental support can take the form of tangible aid such as the giving of money, labor, or time. The findings of this study reinforce previous findings on instrumental support. GTAs at GSU receive instrumental support from both

graduate school and departmental orientations and their peers. For GTAs, instrumental support takes the form of powerpoints, notes, activities, and other concrete or tangible materials that help them in the classroom.

Consistent with prior studies (Goldsmith & Fitch, 1997; Goldsmith, McDermott, & Alexander, 2000), advice is perceived as an important component of social support in the current study. GTAs are able to solicit advice about a number of issues they face in their teaching, research, and coursework. Advice is sought by GTAs when they are having a difficult time solving a problem or making a decision. GTAs expect advice will help them develop a response. Through advice giving, GTAs are able to provide informational support.

Informational support is also used as an information seeking tactic for new GTAs. As Jablin (1991) found, overt and indirect questions were ways that new organizational members can seek information and reduce their uncertainty about their new environment. At GSU, GTAs use both overt and indirect questions to gain information specifically related to their roles and associated expectations. They also use questions to uncover information about the organization itself – both at the graduate school and the departmental level. In answering these specific questions, GTAs at GSU provide informational support. At GSU, all GTAs engage in both providing and receiving this type of support.

Lastly, previous findings on appraisal support were also supported. GTAs receive and provide appraisal support through encouragement and feedback. Using grounded theory, what emerged from the results of this study is the aspect of feedback as a communication transaction. As opposed to informational support where a GTA might

offer general advice or answer specific questions, the feedback component of appraisal support is a transactional process between GTAs. It is not a one-way method of support. Feedback support is demonstrated by two or more GTAs working together to solve a problem or deal with an issue. It serves as a discussion where both parties are participating in the process, offering ideas, and then providing feedback on those ideas with the intent of arriving at the best decision or solution possible.

The findings of this study also mirror previous studies in terms of the benefits of social support (Albrecht & Adelman, 1984; Bippus, 2001; Brashers, Neidig, & Goldsmith, 2004; Tardy, 1992). Social support, in its various forms, helps individuals to deal with difficult life events. Making the transition to a new job in a new organization qualifies for many as a difficult life event. GTAs receive social support from family, friends, faculty, and most importantly, peers. This helps them to deal with the transition by allowing them to have someone to talk with and vent to. This social support also enables GTAs to receive information, feedback, and encouragement.

In examining the observation aspect of social cognitive theory, the results of this study match up with previous studies. Findings in this study indicate that GTAs enact observational learning, both with their peers and their professors. As Bandura (1997) discussed, one important aspect of this was the observation of the reinforcement of the behavior. As many GTAs indicate, they choose whether to adopt behaviors they observe based on the reactions to those behaviors. These reactions came from other GTAs, undergraduate and graduate students, and faculty members.

This study also confirms previous findings on the self-efficacy component of social cognitive theory. Shaughnessey (2004) found that social support received from

peers and from the institution helped teachers to maintain or increase their self-efficacy. In turn, this self-efficacy gave them the confidence they needed to feel that they could replicate or model the behaviors that they observed. GTAs describe again and again the perception that all GTAs are in the same boat and they are all going through the experience together. Although some GTAs had taught at their previous institutions, no one had taught at GSU before. This affects GTAs levels of self-efficacy and their perceptions of their ability to replicate behaviors they observe. This reflects Wood and Bandura's (1989) findings that an individual's beliefs about his or her capabilities to enact a particular behavior will increase if that behavior is demonstrated by someone he or she perceives to be similar to him or herself. As Komarraju (2008) found, "as suggested by social cognitive theory, opportunities for practicing teaching, observing peers and experts teach, and receiving support from peers and supervisors . . . are important in strengthening personal efficacy" (p. 331). Fortunately for the GTAs at GSU, all of these are elements of the socialization process. GTAs feel more confident about their ability to model observed behaviors because of their strengthened personal efficacy.

As Jablin (1991) noted, one of the strategies organizational new members used to seek information was observation. GTAs at GSU observe their peers and professors to acquire information and reduce their uncertainty about expected behaviors for the undergraduate and graduate classroom. Concurrent with Van Maanen and Schein's (1979) findings that existing organizational members acted as role models for new members, GTAs at GSU utilize both experienced GTAs and professors as their behavior models.

What Can Be Done?

Ultimately, while this study supports much of the previous research on socialization, social support, and observation, GTA socialization processes can be made better by almost all individuals involved. This includes the graduate school, course directors, faculty members, and GTAs. An important outcome of this study is the way in which all three of the processes described (orientations, social support, and observation) work together. These aspects comprise the socialization process for new GTAs at GSU. Participating in institutionalized socialization through orientations serves to both reduce and create uncertainty and anxiety for new GTAs. GTAs use social support and observation to help reduce the uncertainty and anxiety that exists before the socialization process begins and that is created through the orientation process itself.

The fact that GTAs combine all three of these processes in their socialization at GSU provides several implications for GTA socialization processes going forward. First, it is clear that GTAs leave both the graduate school and departmental orientations with some level of uncertainty and anxiety. This uncertainty and anxiety is created through the overwhelming amount and ineffectiveness of information presented. It is also created through the failure to provide specific instructions as to how to put ideas presented into practice. Graduate schools and departments should examine these orientation programs in detail to discover how they can be made more effective and less overwhelming for GTAs. It is highly doubtful that programs seek to create uncertainty and anxiety for new GTAs and they may not even be aware that this is an outcome. By closely examining these processes, they may be able to discover those areas that are creating uncertainty and anxiety.

The results also point to the need for GTAs to have more opportunities for peer observation, both formal and informal. GTAs discuss specific behaviors they pick up through observation that they want to incorporate into their own graduate experience. They also discuss behaviors that they do not want to incorporate. Having the opportunity to observe both perceived positive and negative behaviors is a learning experience for GTAs and helps them to understand what the expectations are at GSU. Departments can help by making more of an effort to discuss the benefits gained from observation and set up opportunities for peer observation. GTAs should also engage in an analysis or debriefing activity after each observation where they write down or discuss which behaviors they perceive as positive and negative and why they perceive them as such.

GTAs also state that they not only observe their peers behaviors but their own professors as well. Many GTAs are taking their teaching behavior cues from the ways their professors act in their own graduate classes. Faculty members should recognize the critical role that they play in the socialization process. They should be aware that their own behaviors help to set the standard and expectations for teaching behaviors for GTAs at GSU.

This study points to the necessity of the peer role in the socialization of new GTAs at GSU. Peers provide various forms of support to each other and serve as behavior models through observation. These peers help each other through the socialization process and reduce uncertainty and anxiety for each other through social support. The findings of this study indicate that the peer or co-GTA serves as the most important part of the socialization process. Knowing this, those in charge of orientation and socialization processes should encourage interactions between GTAs through explicit

statements. Williams and Roach (1993) noted, “In planning GTA programs, planners should help facilitate GTA interaction and allow experienced GTAs to provide instruction or respond to incoming GTAs questions” (p. 189). Additionally, because social support is such an important factor, more attention must be given to supportive interactions. As House (1981) pointed out, “most people need some instructions or training to become more supportive” (p. 125). Perhaps part of the socialization process for GTAs can include discussion and training about the most effective ways to offer each type of support.

Lastly, socialization tactics should reflect the truncated tenure of the GTA experience, which is unique in that it is only one to four years long. There is no expectation that GTAs will remain with the organization in the same capacity past that time frame. It will be beneficial for GTAs to clearly understand what the graduate school and department want them to get out of the socialization process. The “take away’s” need to be made more explicit for GTAs. Many GTAs will choose to go into academia and it is important that faculty members understand that they are training the professors of the future. These GTAs go on to teach a wide variety of courses in a wide variety of schools. All faculty members should be aware of and understand that they are helping to lay the foundation for the professors of tomorrow. As Burke (2001) noted,

Doctoral programs typically prepare their students for careers at research universities and assume they will therefore also be qualified to teach at other kinds of institutions. Instead, we should match the training of graduate students with the needs of the campuses where most of them will teach. A recent study supported by the Pew Charitable Trusts found that new Ph.D.'s often felt that their graduate training had prepared them poorly for careers at colleges and universities that focused on teaching.

Directions For Future Research

In the future, this study could be expanded by investigating the ways in which graduate schools and departments can better combine these three aspects of socialization from the start and also how graduate schools and departments can work together more closely in terms of clarifying desired orientation outcomes. Additionally, future research could address if socialization and orientation programs should be specifically geared toward getting GTAs ready to teach their first class in a specific department at a specific school. Or should the goals be more overarching and focus more on the GTA and his or her future as an academic individual? Examining the outcomes of these two ways of approaching socialization would be a fruitful area of research. These are issues that could be examined in more detail using a cultural theoretical framework to examine underlying values of universities as organizations.

In a 2001 study, Jablin found that orientation programs can affect both turnover and job attitudes. This study could be extended to uncover the attitudes that GTAs have about their orientation experience using Babrow's (2009) problematic integration theory. How they feel those attitudes affected them as they went through their programs in regards to their teaching, research, and coursework is useful information. Knowing the attitudes GTAs have about their experience can help graduate schools and departments to better tailor their orientation programs and to make changes that GTAs would perceive to be helpful or beneficial. In addition to looking at attitudes, future research could also place more of a focus on the self-efficacy aspect of behavior modeling. It is important to understand the role that self-efficacy plays for GTAs when they consider which observed behaviors they want to adopt and which behaviors they do not want to adopt.

Future research could also use observation of the GTA office as a specific site of organizational socialization. GTAs commented throughout the study about how important this specific site was in terms of social support and observation. It would be beneficial for a researcher to be able to observe for him or herself the enactment of these specific behaviors. Additionally, the use of House's preexisting categories may have hampered an understanding of other ways that GTAs experience social support. Future research could undertake an examination of social support behaviors experienced by GTAs using a grounded theory approach to see what naturally emerges from the data.

Lastly, as opposed to using institutionalized tactics, Ashforth and Saks (1996) found that using individualized socialization tactics encouraged new members to innovate within their roles and led to exceptional performance. Examining the ways in which some programs use individualized tactics instead of institutionalized tactics could help to uncover which works better for GTAs in the academic setting. It could also be used to find out the pros and cons of each tactic. GTAs also make a point of describing the multiple roles they play as a GTA. They are students, teachers, and researchers. They receive mixed messages about which one of these roles should take precedence and when. Future research could examine the role conflicts experienced by taking a dialectical approach (Baxter & Montgomery, 1998).

Limitations

One of the major limitations to this research is its applicability across graduate programs and departments. GSU is a large university with approximately 28,000 students. The specific department used for this study has approximately 1,200 students. Obviously not all universities and departments are this size. Many are much smaller and

still others are much larger. Because of the role that size and number of faculty and students plays and the expectations for levels of interaction based on those factors, these results may not be applicable and/or useful to all graduate schools and departments. Additionally, previous research indicates that one half of GTAs in departments categorized as noncommunication do not receive any training at all (Buerkel-Rothfuss & Gray, 1990). Because the discipline investigated for this study is communication, the results may not be applicable to other disciplines. However, as Lincoln and Guba (1985) noted, a thick description of data does allow a reader to determine ways that the data might be applicable to his or her own situation.

Another limitation is that graduate schools and departments within universities are very specific organizational sites. This may limit the applicability of the results to other types of organizations. The structure, roles, and focus of universities and departments make them unique sites from which to examine the socialization process. Because of all of the factors involved, results will differ across different organizational sites. Although these results may not be generalizable in different contexts, there are some important findings about the role of socialization, social support, and observation for GTAs that can be helpful as a basis in examining other GTA programs.

I must also report my own position as an insider within this particular culture. I myself was a GTA at GSU for three years. Seven of the respondents in the study were GTAs at the same time I was although I do not consider each of them a part of my cohort. Fifteen respondents were not GTAs at the same time that I was and the interview was the first time we met. However, all respondents did know that I was a past Ph.D. student and GTA at GSU because of the information shared in my recruitment email. As Taylor and

Lindlof (2002) discuss, with this study I am problematizing my experience. When I went through the socialization and orientation process, I recall feeling overwhelmed and anxious, and experiencing a large amount of uncertainty. I felt that it was incumbent upon me to reduce that uncertainty for myself. In doing this study, I sought to discover whether other GTAs experience the same or a similar process. I then wanted to posit some ways that the process could be improved based on those findings.

Another limitation in this study comes from the sample itself. With the exception of one individual, all participants in this study were white. The lack of racial and ethnic diversity in the sample may prevent a true understanding of the phenomena since it was not examined from a variety of cultural perspectives.

As a former member of the community being studied, I knew going in that I was not going to be able to achieve objectivity. It is difficult for qualitative researchers to find the middle ground between trying to fully understand the experience under investigation and remain as unbiased as possible. I feel that my position helped to inform my research. I feel that my respondents felt comfortable with me and that I understood them because I was once a member of their population. As reported earlier in the research on support groups, "Sharing a setting provides a frame of reference for the supporter to be informed and insightful about obvious and subtle stresses" (Albrecht & Adelman, 1984, p. 19). Although as an interviewer I was not a supporter, I believe that my past experience as a GTA at GSU allowed me to align my frame of reference with that of my respondents.

A Final Reflection

One of the things that has always amazed me, and I find myself talking to my students about this often, is that college instructors are usually not taught how to be

teachers. If I wanted to be a high school teacher, I would go to college for that, I would spend a period of time as a student teacher in a classroom with a seasoned teacher, and I would need to pass a state examination and get certified. In my experience as a college instructor, there are no requirements or rigorous verifications to pass through. Usually, instructors are simply placed in the classroom with relatively little training and everyone hopes for the best.

Because of the lack of training and instruction that exists for college instructors, the socialization process and the social support gained from peers is of the utmost importance. GTAs are learning how to be college instructors from their peers. They use activities, powerpoints, notes, assignments, and discussion questions that their peers pass along. They observe their peers both in and out of the classroom and mimic those behaviors. They exchange ideas with one another. They learn how to deal with student issues by observing how their peers handle their own students' issues. The role of the peer or co-GTA is a crucial one in the socialization process and I do not think enough attention or focus is placed on that in the socialization process.

In the past, I found myself in the exact situation as many of these GTAs are currently experiencing. I was given a syllabus for the lower level classes that GTAs are expected to teach but once I got outside those entry-level classes, I was not provided with any assistance. I did not know how to write a syllabus or course objectives, or how to structure a semester. The first thing I did when I learned I would be teaching an upper level undergraduate course was to go to a fellow GTA that had taught the course before and ask her whether I could use her materials (which, turns out, she got from another

GTA who had taught the class previously). I did tweak some things but I did not reinvent the wheel. I used her powerpoints, her handouts, her notes, and most of her assignments.

The results of this study indicate that I am not the only GTA that experienced this. GTAs are facing much uncertainty and anxiety and the utilization of their peers needs to be a more recognized and stressed aspect of the socialization process. Overall, although there are some negative aspects to the process, as a whole, GTAs perceive the socialization process to be a positive one. They are able to learn new information. They have access to social support when they need it. They also have the opportunity to engage in observation of their peers and faculty, which helps them to reduce their uncertainty about expectations. For GTAs, this socialization, social support, and observation help them to become better teachers. GTAs do not see the GSU socialization process as a perfect one but it does deliver the critical aspects needed for them to be effective in the classroom. As Abby notes,

My graduate teaching has been . . . transformative—in a positive sense. It's made me a better teacher. I feel like I've grown. It's given me an opportunity to transform through multiple classes and content. It's been transformative in some of the rose-colored glasses come off and you start thinking through teachers you've had, have and teachers you've heard about. And you start thinking critically and analytically through teaching as opposed to as a consumer of teaching. Now you're a producer of teaching. So how do you process all of this information and experiences you've had. So all of those things are transforming you and me and my ideas and application of teaching. On the whole, it's been positively transforming. Even the negative things I've had have been positive because I've learned so well.

APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW GUIDE

Research question 1: What role does institutionalized socialization play for GTAs as new organizational members?

Interview questions:

1. What year are you in graduate school?
2. Are you a Master's or a doctoral student?
3. How long have you been a GTA?
4. When you started here, was there a formal orientation provided by the graduate school? Describe that experience.
5. When you started here, was there a formal orientation provided by your specific department? Describe that experience.
6. Did you leave with specific expectations of what it meant to be a GTA?
7. If not, when did you learn these expectations?
8. What are the messages that stood out to you from the graduate school orientation?
9. What are the messages that stood out to you from the departmental orientation?
10. How well prepared did you feel for your role as a GTA?
11. How beneficial did you feel the orientation process was? What specifically about it was beneficial to you?

Research question 2: Which, specific social support behaviors, if any, facilitate the socialization process for GTAs?

Interview questions:

1. Describe the tools that your department provided you with respect to teaching your class.

APPENDIX A (CONTINUED)

2. Were you assigned a faculty advisor? What was/is that relationship like?
3. How close are you to the other members of your cohort? What is that relationship like?
4. Do you engage in discussions with your cohort? Are these discussions focused on classroom issues or personal issues?
5. Try to recall the most stressful moment you have felt as an instructor. Who did you go to for support? Can you explain the situation?
6. Try to recall the most stressful moment you have felt as a student. Who did you go to for support? Can you explain the situation?
7. In preparing to teach, who/what resources did you tap into?
8. How are you evaluated as a GTA? What does that process look like?

Research question 3: What role does peer and/or faculty observation serve in the socialization process?

Interview questions:

1. How often do you observe your peers?
2. How often do you observe faculty?
3. Is this observation done by choice or is it required?
4. What are the benefits that you perceive from engaging in this observation?
5. Are there observations of peers/mentors in the teaching or social realm that provided you with information about how to engage with faculty or students?

APPENDIX A (CONTINUED)

6. Can you recall a specific instance when, through observing a peer or mentor, you noted “I should do that”?
7. Can you recall a specific instance when, through observing a peer or mentor, you noted “I should not do that”?
8. I’m interested in gauging the formality or informality of your particular department. Can you describe the culture of your department with respect to areas such as dress and titles?
9. Do you recall specifically being told this information or was it imparted in other ways?
10. How did you decide who would be the best models to observe/follow be it faculty or peers?
11. Do you recall a time where you were approached as an exemplar of the culture?
Describe what happened.

APPENDIX B: RECRUITMENT EMAIL

Hello Everyone,

My name is Kelly Dixon and I am currently a doctoral candidate in the COM department at GSU. I was a graduate teaching assistant from 2005-2008. In 2008 I left GSU ABD to take a job at the University of North Carolina Wilmington. In order to finish my Ph.D., I am conducting research for my dissertation on socialization and social support for GTAs. The sample population that I am using is GTAs at GSU. I am interested in conducting interviews with anyone that is willing to participate. You must be an M.A. or Ph.D. student teaching your own class at GSU. All interviews will be conducted in the department for convenience or a location of your choosing. I anticipate that these interviews will take between one and two hours and I will be asking questions related to your GTA socialization experience. I will be in town to collect data March 8th – March 12th and am willing to meet with you at any time that is convenient for you during that week. If you are willing to participate, please email me back with a time that works best for you. Thank you!

Kelly Dixon, M.S.
Doctoral Candidate
Department of Communication

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