
How to Make Out in Graduate School One Observer's View*

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Abstract

The establishment of new graduate sociology programs and the rapid expansion of such programs in general have created a deficit of peer socialization as to the latent, unwritten "requirements" of successfully attaining the Ph.D. The present paper seeks partially to correct this deficit through explicating a number of existing but unwritten requirements of success in graduate sociology. The explication focuses upon six informal aspects of the graduate experience that affect student success and it makes recommendations on how to manage each aspect: 1) being conscious that one should early decide his personal "data style" and substantive interests; 2) performing early a sizing up of the faculty in terms of their congruence with one and in terms of their national repute, as well as developing relations with congruent faculty; 3) knowing the factors professors employ in sizing up students; 4) realizing that accomplished papers are the key to graduate success, and knowing how to manage one's papers; 5) recognizing the relative unimportance of formal examinations; and 6) knowing how to chose and manage one's doctoral thesis topic and committee.

* Editor's Note: This article first appeared some twenty-five years ago in an early issue of the *Kansas Journal of Sociology*, a predecessor of this journal. It remains a clear and apt analysis of the social situation of graduate students in Sociology programs and effectively reduces the "social ignorance" of tactic rules upon which graduate students are judged. We are very grateful to John Lofland for allowing us to reprint this article, and for submitting the addendum—dk.

Poor graduate student performance is often attributed to lack of motivation and self-discipline and/or to lack of intellectual skills and ability. While not denying these sources of failure, I think we too much overlook a third source of student difficulties: *ignorance* of what is wanted and what one has to do in order to make it in graduate sociology. What, on the more *informal* side, is involved in making out in graduate sociology? What are the unwritten, the latent requirements of making it?

This paper attempts to reduce such social ignorance, an ignorance that seems so needlessly present among far too many otherwise smart, motivated and self-disciplined students. The paper will be something of an exercise in ethnomethodology in that it asks: In what procedures can a graduate student engage in order to be constructed, imputed or ratified as being a competent or coming apprentice sociologist?

Let it be recognized that the "data" of this explication are informal and impressionistic. The generalizations and directives to follow have developed crecively and non-intentionally out of my six years as a graduate student (at two graduate schools) and seven years of involvement with graduate students in the role of sociology professor (in two graduate departments), serving at various times as graduate advisor and as chairman and member of committees overseeing graduate programs, doctoral examinations, and doctoral theses. As the subtitle declares in earnest, this is "one observer's view." That other views exist, I do not deny, I welcome their expression.

My analysis and suggestions are directed to graduate students who desire to "make out" (that is, to secure a job in one of the better universities where research and publication are expected). Students who desire only to "get-by" (that is, to attain the Ph.D. and to teach almost anyplace without fretting over research and writing) will likely find my remarks of less interest. Nevertheless, the drop-out and termination rate of getting-by students is high

enough to suggest that successful getting by may well require many of the procedures discussed here.

For lack of sex-neutral terms, I use throughout the pronouns "he" and "him." They refer to a person of either sex.

Making Existential Choices

From the first day of graduate school you-would-be graduate student on the make-should be contemplating two kinds of existential decisions. One, what is your basic *data style*, or combination of data styles? Two, what are your *substantive interests*-the two to five areas (depending upon the graduate school)-in which you will present yourself for doctoral examinations?

Data Style. As a practical operating matter, sociology is done in only five basic styles. Most sociologists pattern themselves primarily on the basis of only one (or two) of these basic styles. These are:

- 1) The Laboratory Style. Although minor in sociology as compared with psychology, some sociologists orient themselves to a specifically outfitted set of rooms, often wired for sound and possessing one-way mirrors. They generate social data from placing people in such rooms. The products of this enterprise are coded substantively, often, as social psychology, mathematical sociology and small group research. This style frequently involves learning to use observational check lists and to administer and analyze paper and pencil tests.
- 2) The Census Style. This and other countries count various properties of their populations, thereby providing materials for an almost infinite array of correlations and trends, often in the context of specially financed research institutes. The style involves learning the intricacies of census data and of making valid

inferences from varying quality census taking. The products of this enterprise are often coded substantively as population studies, demography, and human ecology.

- 3) The Survey Style. In the manner of Gallup and Roper, some sociologists administer questionnaires to large numbers of people. This style involves spending one's time designing, administering and analyzing questionnaires, as well as fretting over computer programs. The survey style tends to generate the largest-scale formal organization for doing social research, sometimes attaining five or six authority levels—housewife, interviewers, coders, secretaries, research assistants, research associates and project director. Some products of this enterprise are often coded substantively as public opinion and attitude research, among a wide range of purely substantive codings in such areas a political sociology, sociology of religion, sociology of economic life, etc. (A fact, too, of all the other data styles.)
- 4) The Observational Style. In the manner of field biologists, some sociologists muck about among real existing groups as a manner in which to do sociology. This involves the making of field notes or the doing of intensive interviewing and the writing of more or less ethnographic reports. Products of this style are often coded substantively as formal organizations, deviance and ethnomethodology.
- 5) The Library Style. The historically oldest style is that of writing articles and books out of articles and books. It typically involves becoming adept at using libraries of various kinds, at digging out historical documents, at employing book search services and at the haunting of used book stores. The products of this enterprise are often coded substantively as historical sociology, sociological theory, social institutions, and social thought.

Some sociologists will certainly feel I vulgarize the discipline in so reducing it to only five basic data styles. I nevertheless defend this reduction on the basis of how I see bodies characterizes and sold on the job market and how I see faculties displaying concern over not having enough of, or having too much of, a given type. These are the five basic categories of professional identity (elaborated by substantive interest) abroad in the discipline of sociology.

There is here, then, a clear message to the student on make. You are going to have to assume one of these data style identities or some combination of a selected few of them. Or, if you are truly energetic and creative, you will need to attack and articulately claim to have transcended these data style identities. Or, you must invent a new identity and articulately defend it.

In any event, start coping early on with the social fact of the existence of these data style identities and assessing yourself for your emotional proclivities and talents along one or another of these five lines.

Data style choice is best thought of as an "existential choice." Your later life, daily life style, reading, and friends within sociology are importantly determined by the data style decision. What sort of persons do you prefer to hang about with at conventions? What kind of things do you want to read on a typical day or in what journal that has just arrived in the mail? What do you want to talk about in class? To what degree do you want to supervise directly a flock of graduate assistants and hassle with research grant agencies of what kind over what? How many trips a week or month do you want to make to the computer center or to Washington, D.C. to straighten out program foul-ups and grant hang-ups?

Along a different dimension, the library and observational styles are essentially lone wolf styles, *sans* many assistants, secretaries

or larger research organization of any significance. The survey style tends to be a large organization matter, involving levels of authority, subordinates to be managed, relations to be negotiated with computer processing units, and the like. Choice of style is an existential choice: What kind of life do I want to live? Do I want to work alone, with low visibility and low supervision as in the library, observation and sometimes the census style? Do I want to work with others, under supervision as in the survey and laboratory styles?

Commitment to a data style, then, is a commitment to a life style. Indeed, sociologists sometimes choose (or change) data styles in terms of their proclivities for life styles.

Substantive Interests. Graduate programs require doctoral examination in either sit-down, oral, or paper form. They ask competence in two to five "areas" of sociology. From the start, begin thinking about your areas. If possible, decide early as to what these areas are going to be. *Then*, you can begin to plan your graduate course-seminar choices around your examinations in specific areas. Dilettantism is nice, but it will not strongly advance you through the doctoral examinations. Ideally, you should take a course/seminar/independent study (at least one) from the professor most identified with each area in which you want to be examined. Since the professor is very likely to be involved in the doctoral examination, through previous work with him you learn his particular slant on the area of examination. Not to study directly with professors likely to give the doctoral examinations is to run the risk of a great deal of surprise and dismay when you find that your private construal of an area is quite different than theirs. They ask questions of which you never thought. They want you to treat books of which you have never heard. Avoid such trauma by getting to know the proclivities of the persons who are likely to examine you.

Sizing Up the Faculty

During the process of deciding upon your data style and substantive areas, you should also be sizing up the faculty. By sizing up the faculty I mean determining each one's 1) data style, 2) substantive interests, 3) prestige and influence in the national arena of sociology, and 4) personal style.

Why to Size Up. You want to perform sizing up with the aim of cultivating relationships with about four professors who are most *congruent* with your data style, substantive interests, personal style, *and* who have the highest national reputation in sociology. The discovery of these congruences and high reputation are directly related to the ease or difficulty of your passage through graduate school and your eventual placement on the job market. The four or so you discover and cultivate are the people most likely to 1) administer your preliminary doctoral examinations, 2) serve on your thesis committee, and 3) make efforts to place you in a good job. The longer standing these relations (the earlier you develop them), the more commitment faculty will feel to you. Therefore, start early in this cultivation so that you will have known each for at least two years and hopefully three, four (or more) years, when your job placement becomes a question.

Why "four or so" supporters? First, that is about the number of sponsors listed on a typical vita, the biographical document you draw up and circulate in search of a faculty job. Future candidate employers tend not to trust the recommendations of only one or two professors—they could well be wrong. Four or so positive evaluations by, especially, diverse professors reduces their risk of error. Furthermore, some very famous sociologists have reputations as extremely poor judges of young talent and I know of at least one who is alleged to lie (positively on the students behalf) to prospective employers. Since it is difficult for you to know such matters about your professors, it is in your interest to spread your own risks through developing a sizable set of

diverse supporters. And, four is about the number you need to cover fields of the doctoral examinations and for the doctoral committee. In some places, four or so gives you a spare professor or two in case of unexpected ruptures of relations, e.g. the two of you fight, the professor leaves for another school. Third, it is about the largest number of faculty you can really develop relationships with and still earn your doctorate within a reasonable number of years—three, four or five years. In effect, Ph.D.'s are not earned from universities or even from entire sociology faculties, but from small and shifting sub-sets of faculties ranging mostly, it seems, from three to seven professors. Fourth, professors talk to one another about the promise of students and are influenced by each other's evaluations of students. If you study with and are known to, say, only one or two professors, these one or two can wonder how good you are in areas other than their own. They can wonder why you are not allowing yourself to be evaluated by a variety of professors. "Is the student weak of anything but the kind of thing he does for me?" the professor can ask himself. Therefore, you are advised to show that you have multiple substantive interests and talents that are perceived independently by a reasonable number of professors.

How to Size-Up. Relative to sizing up data style and substantive interests: look over the courses each offers and at their course outlines; go to the library and look up their publications; be on the look-out for materials circulating in ditto or mimeograph; ask other and older graduate students. Don't, however, be so naive as to ask a professor directly what he is interested in or has done. Such questions only reveal you as a lazy or inattentive student who doesn't use the library, talk to other students or look over course offerings.

When you discover a professor who seems from these kinds of sources to do your kind of sociology, take a course, seminar or independent study with him.

Relative to prestige and influence in national sociology, maximizing of the following markers maximizes the likelihood of national clout. First, full professors are likely more influential than associate and assistant professors or persons with other appointments, such as lecturers, acting assistant professors, instructors, and visiting appointments. If possible, try to develop the four or so sponsors from among full professors. The degree of a professor's influence is importantly a matter of how many years he has been around the field. Full professors have been around the longest, on the average, and have therefore taught at more schools, have been to more conventions, have given more invited lectures, served in more professional association positions, and so on over the range of activities that build a wide knowing of people around the country and the world. Such knowing implies trust, and trust implies influence. Reciprocally, all other slots in the academic system are filled by younger people, or by professionally marginal people. This is of course aside from the obvious point that full professors have published more, in all probability, and are better known on that account.

Look also at a second matter: How much has each faculty member published and with what impact? The more the publication and the more recent the publication, the greater the likelihood of national repute. But this is not invariant. The more central the journals in which his articles appear and his books are reviewed, the more repute he likely has. Look, in addition, at the text and footnotes of recent books and journal articles in his areas of substantive interest. Is his work recounted? Are his publications cited? In addition, look for recency of writing book reviews in central journals and advertisements of his books in journals.

Third and finally, check out his participation in professional societies. Has he been president of the American Sociological Association, or held any other office (elected or appointed) in that or any other association of scholars? The more of these one finds, the higher his national repute—within broad limits. And,

has he won any awards for his work? Equally as good, is he a strong published critic of professional associations, awards, and "establishment sociology?" Ironically, the strong *publishing* rejector of "professional" sociology is likely to be as famous and influential as those who fully embrace sociology status games—and as strong a sponsor on the job market.

As an operating procedure all of this means you should be reading the current journals and books of sociology. In this connection, journal keeping-up is important not just for sizing up professors but for *being in the know*. If you want to be more than a dumb student, if you want to appear *with it*, you should be reading the journals so that you can enter into exchanges on the latest happenings.

Relative to personal style, be concerned to check out two dimensions of a professor's conduct. One, how tough is he? Does he set impossible standards that intimidate graduate students? Do his doctoral students have to extend and revise their theses in incredibly extensive and picky directions? Conversely, is he notoriously easy and accepting of everything you say and do without offering much critical or helpful comment? Avoid both types, if feasible, in view of the other matters mentioned above. Two, how even-tempered versus erratic and "away" is he? Does he throw temper-tantrums or inexplicably change moods and degree of attentiveness when speaking with you? Or, is he consistently helpful and self-controlled?

Assessment of these matters is difficult and delicate. Other—and older—graduate students are good initial sources of information. However, be very careful. Make sure you get a broad sampling of opinion and impression. Even if graduate student opinions are negative, do not take this as final. You may be speaking with graduate students judged by a professor to be the loser varieties (to be discussed) and he has therefore purposively treated them in a gruff manner in order to be done with them. Or, informant

students may think his standards are impossible because they are poor students. This is not to deny that there exist professors with impossible standards and/or with extremely difficult personal styles. It is to say that beyond preliminary reconnaissance, you are going to have to check out the professor yourself in direct face-to-face contact. One way to do this is to visit him in his office in advance of an up-coming course or seminar and to inquire regarding what will be read, discussed, and required. Mention to him the kinds of interests you have and the kind of specific things you have in mind to read, research and write about at present and in the future. In such conversations try to be more specific about your interests than such vague declarations as "political sociology," "sociology of religion," or whatever. Decide beforehand, if possible, something more specific: what *kind* of problem in political sociology or the sociology of religion? One can begin to gauge his personal response to *you* from his responses to the above matters. Professors are like yourself: They like some people better than others; they vary in how they interact with people as a function of the situation and their assessment of the particular person. The upshot is the possibility that one can establish a quite even, positive, good humored relation even with a professor of the roughest-toughest personal reputation. Do not, then, avoid all contact with a professor on the basis of his bad reputation among graduate students. Give him a chance with you personally, especially if his data style and substantive interests are congruent with your own—and his national repute is high.

Having attended to these four classes of matters in terms of which to size up faculty and to determine congruence between you and them, you can with more intelligence decide upon courses, seminars and units of independent study. The general principle of such choices is to maximize all four classes of sizing up and developing sponsors. These begin to feed you directly into the doctoral examinations, the doctoral thesis, and the job market.

In fine, there is no such thing as a "sociology faculty." Sociology faculties are a collection of *individuals*. Therefore do not think of "it" as "it" or "them" but as professor A, professor B, and professor C. Upon arrival at a graduate school, a prime task should be that of studying each professor, of assessing "what kind" of creature each is.

How Professors Size Up Students

All social groups operate with typifications of "kinds of persons." Sociology professors are no different. They operate with a typology of "kinds of graduate students." For sociology professors there are four main kinds of graduate students. These are constructed out of dichotomous distinctions in two variables. The first variable is "bright" or "smart" versus "not very bright," "dumb" or "dull." The second variable is "industrious" or "organized" versus "lazy" or "disorganized." The four resultant types are themselves ordered from best to worst, in this manner:

The best students are "smart and industrious." Professors are constantly looking for them (and another type that ranks highest of all but is so rare that it need be mentioned only peripherally: the *creative, original, smart, industrious student*).

The second best is the "not very bright but industrious, organized student." His works show little flair, but he does get things done. He does read and write. A few professors, especially in the survey and census style, actually rank this student highest, but more generally he is second.

Third best is the bright-smart but disorganized or lazy student. Graduate schools are full of this kind of student and they are the constant lament of graduate faculties. "He really has the stuff, but he never gets anything done." These students make excellent first impressions. They over-awe their graduate peers, and shine brilliantly in graduate seminar discussions. They tend also to attain

graduate degrees, or take ten or more years to get them and not to make it in sociology.

Fourth and worse in the eyes of professors are the dumb, lazy, disorganized students. They are the bane of graduate programs and are eventually terminated with an M.A. or less.

If professors are coding and typifying in this way, the task of the graduate student on the make is to manipulate these codings. The first thing to know is that between the two dimensions, the more important is that of industrious-organized versus lazy-disorganized. Graduate sociology professors are protestant ethic types *par excellance*. They respect accomplished work perhaps above all else. Many of them seem much more forgiving and accepting of student dumbness (when combined with industriousness) than they are of laziness and disorganization (even when—perhaps especially when—combined with smartness). Extremely dumb students who keep plugging along tend finally to be awarded the Ph.D., but lazy, disorganized students are not. Perhaps it can be said that graduate sociology professors epitomize an ethic of salvation by work.

Therefore, your initial task is not to establish yourself as bright, brilliant, creative, smart and all that, but to show self-organization initiative and industriousness.

Becoming a Comer: Writing as the Key to Making Out in Graduate Sociology

If professors are coding for industriousness, how does one best bring off that impression? What *kind* of accomplished work do they most respect? They respect *writing*. They respect papers actually written. Not just ideas for papers; not just verbally delivered ideas; not just seminar repartee; not just formal examination answers, but the content of such utterances set coherently into successive sentences as a paper or book. That is

the value, the maximization of which (within limits of reasonable quality), they want most, and most respect.

Therefore, exploit every opportunity to write a paper. Given a choice between written examinations and papers in a course, seminar or doctoral examination, write a paper. When a paper is required, don't weasel around with an incomplete. Come through with at least what one can label a draft of a paper.

Writing Real Papers. In graduate school, one goal should be that of writing about four papers that have some professional potential. That is, one must shed the undergraduate mentality of writing a "term paper," the usefulness and meaning of which ends at the conclusion of the term in which it was written.

Think of yourself as writing a paper that could and *will* be published. Put yourself in a frame of mind of writing *real* papers not simply papers done to meet formal requirements. The "requirements" of paper writing of your graduate training should, rather, be conceived of as *opportunities* to both meet requirements and get some real work done. Graduate students really on the make, in fact, publish one or more papers while still in graduate school. When they first go into the job market they have at least a modest bibliography to show on their vita. Even if your papers are not published while in graduate school, they can form a backlog of work further to be polished and later put into print.

One meaning of the respect that professors have for writing is that you do not have to be terribly bright or creative in order to make it in graduate sociology and in the profession, *as long as* you are industrious and organized. If you work, you will far out distance large numbers of flashy, brilliant graduate peers who are also lazy or disorganized relative to writing.

Papers For Professors. You should plan to write at least one paper for each of four or so faculty members. Avoid writing all your

papers for one faculty member and then simply passing them on to other possible faculty supporters. Often a professor does not feel he "knows" a student unless he 1) has talked with the student about doing the paper and given preliminary advice, 2) has seen the student a time or two while the paper is in progress, and 3) has had it submitted to him for evaluation. Then, if he likes your work, he feels some sense of responsibility for your intellectual development and, eventually, for your job placement (assuming you write other things and perform a credible thesis). You should expect, therefore, to write about four solid papers in the course of your graduate career (which might include an M.A. thesis but *not* the doctoral thesis).

Kinds of Papers. What *kind* of papers should you write, more specifically than simply "good ones?" While this varies a great deal from professor to professor (and can be gleaned in good part from the kind of papers he has written), it can be suggested that many look for *novelty*, in two senses. First, they respond to the novelty of *new data*, new census tabulations, survey tabulations, observations, obscure historical instances, laboratory variations. Second, they respond to *new ideas*, an infrequent but powerful occurrence. Thus, given a choice between, say, an analysis of what Weber said about charismatic leadership (including criticisms, comparisons, reformulations, etc.) and reporting new data on charismatic leadership (and an application of Weber's ideas to them) I would say the latter will be seen as more "interesting." Of course, there are times when the treating of a person's thought or a body of established thought cannot be avoided. (Some professors, of course, actively prefer such papers.) In that event, strategies that lend "interest" and transcend mere recounting and criticism include: 1) claiming that a set of things among which distinctions are made are actually only one thing (or vice-versa), 2) claiming that a process of logical deduction contains a crucial error such that a set of conclusions is impossible, and 3) claiming that the basic data upon which a system of thought

was built was erroneous. (One must of course offer some substantiation of such claims.)

In addition and ideally, the papers should display a degree of *diversity* of topic and approaches. Despite allegations of a penchant for narrow specialism, your professors and school hiring committees do worry about young sociologists being merely “one topic-one talent” persons. “Can he do anything more than run lab experiments?” “Worry about anomie?” “Work on the beach-buggy world?” or whatever. Frequently, the concern is with the student being more than a narrow technician—of whatever data style. Therefore, you must also be concerned to do at least one paper that indicates your capacity to deal with the “grand issues,” the ideas of the “great men,” the epistemological foundations of social science, or some other such topic that signals your capacity to rise above narrow and concrete mere research. Likewise, suspect is the graduate student who writes all his papers on a single substantive topic, even though he may employ diverse data styles, *unless* in connection with that topic he shows a capacity and willingness to employ a variety of substantive frameworks and to place the topic in the context of “grand ideas,” great mens’ ideas, and/or epistemological-philosophical issues. Not to display diversity is to run the risk of having others characterize your work as merely “religious cults meet the wolfman” (or whatever your topical, conceptual or substantive specialty). That is, the titles change but the plot remains the same.

Getting Commentary. When you write a paper, a professor is likely to give you written comments along with your grade. Do not settle simply for that. Go and talk with him about the paper. Get from him directly his suggestions and criticisms. Speak with him about his suggestions for making the paper better: tables to run, census material to look up, things to read, observations to make. By such conversations, you signal your interest in doing good work, in doing more work, in caring. By such conversations you set in his mind more firmly your 1) name, 2) the topic of

your paper connected with your name, 3) your physical features connected with your name and paper topic. He is more apt simply to *remember* you, and to remember you in a positive way.

In order to remember you in a positive way, however, it is unwise to challenge his grade or assessment and bargain for a different grade or assessment. You merely establish yourself as a person who does not properly perceive the quality of his own work. You give off the impression of being arrogant and/or dumb. Professors tend, it is my impression, to be quite permissive on the whole and even to overgrade graduate students. To challenge a low grade is simply to convey dumbness and to feed the professor’s already incipient doubts about your intellectual competence.

This is not to say that one should won’t argue with professors about substantive topics, about relevance of various frameworks, about approaches, about needed data, about what factors account for some variation, about what are important features of a phenomenon, and so on endlessly. Professors judge students partially in terms of the degree to which they are willing to be argumentative. Students who do not argue, who are not to a degree aggressive, are even suspected of being a bit dumb.

Papers as Identity Tags. Accomplished papers have a function beyond establishing your “smartness” and industriousness. They provide you with *identity tags*. Professors think of students (and other professors) in terms of the topic or topics about which they have written papers. When talking among themselves and a graduate student name comes up, one typical means of providing tags for remembering students is in terms of what they have written about. “Oh, he’s the student who wrote the paper on ...” Students who have never written real papers are students in an important sense without identities.

Circulating Papers. It is common practice for professors to ditto, zerox or otherwise make multiple copies of their writings prior to putting them into print. They send or hand these to their friends, acquaintances or perfect strangers whom they think might have an interest in the topic of the paper/book. It is wise practice for a graduate student on the make also to do this, although perhaps to do it with modesty and discretion. Certainly one will circulate his papers among graduate student friends. And certainly he will pass them to faculty who know him and who might have an interest in the topic of the paper. But be careful here. Don't pass one of your papers to a professor who evidently does not have an interest in work of whatever sort you have done. Such a practice can appear to be only crass self-promotion. Making our, of course, possesses its own subtleties.

Asking For Help. When writing your papers and your thesis avoid going constantly or even very frequently to your sponsors and unburdening your psychic woes, difficulties and muddles. You only give them the impression that researching and writing are terribly difficult for you and that you are unlikely long to continue in those endeavors. They can get the impression, too, that you are terribly dependent and are likely unable to work up or sustain the kind of initiative and enthusiasm necessary to the independent and creative scholarly life. This is not to say that you should avoid seeking help. But when you seek it, have a relatively clear sense of what your problems are and have some definite goals in mind with which you want help on means. Or, if you are having trouble formulating goals, then be clear to him that *you* are clear that this is your problem. Above all, avoid dribbling out every little tiny thing you have done in a paper or thesis and parading it as a major accomplishment. If your candidate or developed sponsors possess any scholarly accomplishments at all, they are well aware that tiny dribbles constitute but short distances along the long and lonely road that scholars must travel. They then may wonder about your staying power.

In fine, all the buddy-buddy chumminess, home visiting, cordial relations and bull sessions you can bring about with professors will in the end make little or no difference on the job market unless one has also done several graduate papers and a thesis that shows promise of publication. While personalism certainly operates in the academic world, the sponsorship of an unknown novice to an external audience imposes a giant and proper constraint on personalism.

Graduate school typically involves a degree of formal examination and grading. Perhaps importing their view of undergraduate school into graduate school, many student seem to feel that formal examinations are terribly important. My impression is quite the contrary. As long as one gets by such formal examinations, they are of little import. It is papers and books that are important.

When you go on the job market, neither your professors nor your prospective employers are likely to ask what your grade point was in graduate school or any place else. How well you did on your doctoral examinations is unlikely ever to come up. They want to know what you have written, how much you have written, and how good it is. When you are judged for competence, it is in these, not examination terms.

It is in this context that I must warn against the pathetic spectacle of the graduate student who spends, quite literally, years preparing himself for doctoral examinations. He draws up mile-long reading lists—and he reads everything in sight. This is an utter waste of time. You should read and prepare yourself for doctoral examination by 1) taking directly related courses/seminars/independent study and 2) doing private review of at most two or three months in order to get on top of a field in a broad way. Then *take* them and get them over with. It is no great disgrace to fail so long as you are also doing credible papers—the only performances that truly count.

Remember, you are going to be reading sociology the rest of your life (if you stay in the field). To pass doctoral exams does not mean that you stop reading and learning. The student must surmount the mentality that somehow he is going to store up all he needs to know about sociology while in graduate school and then simply use it for the next forty or whatever years. The doctoral examinations are more in the nature of a pledge to go on reading and learning and a signal that you have tried to read broadly and to understand issues. The doctoral examinations signal a beginning, not an end.

The Doctoral Thesis

Avoiding Thesis Trauma. If you do what has been described so far writing the thesis should pose little problem. I have previously noted the necessity of writing four or so papers of some substantial dimensions—papers in the range of 25 to 100 pages. If you do this *and* you receive positive feedback from your faculty supporters, you are set up easily to *write* a thesis (as distinct from getting data and other purely logistical problems). A Ph.D. thesis is simply a larger and longer paper. If you have previously written positively evaluated papers, all you need do is apply your previously developed skills on a larger scale: the logic of papers and the thesis is identical.

But, as is well known, there is the all too common phenomenon of “thesis trauma” that happens to graduate students when starting to do a thesis. It is my impression that thesis trauma is most frequent among graduate students who have never actually written anything worthy of being called a paper. What is called thesis trauma might more accurately be called “writing my first real paper trauma.” And one can well understand how having to write a two to four hundred page paper as one’s first paper is indeed traumatic. It would be traumatic for almost anyone. The point then is this: Writing papers not only earns supporters; it prepares one for the avoidance of difficulty with the thesis itself.

Thesis Topic and Publication. Choose a topic for the thesis and design its structure with future publication paramount in your mind. With this statement I move a bit beyond simply “making it” in graduate sociology, but not entirely so. Your sponsors are also evaluating the potential of your thesis for publication and judging your job market placement accordingly.

At minimum, your thesis should be of a character such that it can eventuate in at least one published article. In the hard data and more esoteric styles of sociology one article may be all that is expected. In the softer data styles, a book or at least a couple of articles may be expected. In between styles—such as much of the survey style—may allow you to design the individual chapters of the thesis so that you can publish each chapter directly as a separate article and later collect the published chapters as the book it was in the first place—a practice alleged of several well known sets of papers and subsequent sociological books.

Therefore, do not chose your thesis topic with complete abandon. Have an eye upon the journal outlets and the book market. Although it may well change, anything on imperialism, power elites and inequality, race and ethnic strife, women, low income people, public schools, cities, youth, or environment, among others, seem to be preeminently publishable in recent years. (Ah, the irony of the collusion between moral relevance and successful making out.)

Choosing a Thesis Chairman and Committee Members. If you have developed four or so supporters, then you can simply choose a thesis chairman from among them. It might be wise to discuss your thesis informally with several of these supporters to develop a sense of what they might expect. Certainly you want to talk to other students who have done and are doing theses with particular faculty. Some faculty are almost impossible to satisfy, wanting enormous reviews of the literature, being very picky about wording, treatment and the like. Others are notoriously easy.

Here you have to play off professional fame of various professors against how hard they are. You want a famous professor as a thesis chairman: a professor with wide, national contacts who is very well known and respected. If such a professor is also very picky about the thesis, you may just have to settle for it, if no equally or almost equally famous person is available among your previously cultivated supporters.

The same kind of advice applies to committee members, although not so forcibly since it is usually understood that committee members will accept whatever the chairman accepts, even though they privately might want more work.

Submitting the Thesis to the Committee. Some students feel they should give the thesis to their chairman and/or committee members a chapter at a time, as they become available. This is typically a disastrous course of action. The chairman/committee members usually make all manner of detailed critiques, commentaries and calls for revision on any such singly submitted chapter. The student then revises and resubmits. Again comes an enormous critique. Is the thesis terrible, as the student comes to believe in his anger and frustration? No, not necessarily. His committee members are simply being responsive to the task set for them. We must recognize the fact that *any* written work can be criticized *ad infinitum*. The smaller the piece of work one looks at, the more elaborate the criticisms will be. In making elaborate criticism on a single chapter the committee members are only trying to earn their pay. They are giving the student that for which he has asked. But, in their trying to be responsible, they are killing the student with work.

The moral is this: if you can avoid it, do not give individual chapters to your committee. If possible, hold them off until the entire thesis is complete and submit the entire thing at once. Then one gets the benefit of the rule of criticizing long works: the longer the piece one has to read, the less one is critical of

small individual parts. There would appear to be a "criticism quotient" for a piece of written work. The upshot is, one is likely to receive the same amount of criticism on 300 pages as he received on 30 pages.

In addition, a single chapter is taken to mean you are not very far along. A complete thesis signals to them that *you* think you are just about done. Therefore, they are more tempered and cautious in the depth of their criticism. The complete thesis defines the situation as "approaching the end" rather than simply "in progress."

An allied gambit is to submit the complete thesis to the committee in fairly polished form. By that I mean the typing should be well done, the paper of good quality, the footnotes complete, the citations complete, chapters completely written, the appendices present, a table of contents included, and the like. The less rough the document itself, the more the committee is signaled that you feel the end is near, and the less warrant they have to fiddle with your product. Remember, acceptance of a thesis is an all or none affair: it is acceptable or it is not. The further along your document, the more polished it is in formal ways, the more they must confront the question of whether it is over or under the line for acceptance.

The Temptation to Take a Job *Sans* Ph.D. Once you pass the doctoral examinations and are admitted to candidacy, you are a marketable product. You are, in the jargon, an "A.B.D."—all but dissertation. You are eligible for an assistant professorship at a school, or at least an instructorship or an acting assistant professorship. Since your income is likely low and you likely have a spouse and children, you are easily tempted to get out of the graduate student role and to take a job before the thesis is begun or very far along. I cannot suggest too strongly that you ought to resist that temptation. If humanly possible, stick it out physically close to your graduate school at least until your thesis

is very well advanced, if not completely finished. The first year of teaching is usually a very difficult and even traumatic year in one's life. One is suddenly teaching courses for which one is not prepared, adjusting to a new home, getting to know one's departmental peers and the school. Quite typically, young professors write nothing in their first year out of graduate school, at least until that next summer. New aspirations for money and new opportunities tempt one to teach summer school, to enter into new summer research projects, to do a great deal of work on one's new home, and the like. The thesis gets shoved down the list of priorities despite good intentions to the contrary. Whatever the reasons, people who leave graduate school before the thesis is done or much underway, tend to take several years to finish and many of them *never* finish. The consequence is low morale, a sense of frustration, lower salary, suspicion about your capacities at your new school and, if it is a good school, eventual firing.

One major problem of pre-thesis departure relates not to one's new life but to loss of contact at your graduate school. Professors come and go. One's committee can easily dissolve in one's absence, making necessary trips back to the graduate school and replacement of known members, now gone, with unknown people who have little interest in or commitment to you. Out of years of association and your physical presence some professors developed a sense of responsibility for you. If you leave before the thesis is done and diddle with them at a long distance over a period of years, their commitment to you declines. Any new members have graduate students on the premises to whom they owe their prime allegiance. Your problem are simply extraneous to them; they feel little sense of obligation to go out of their way to help you. From them you get only formal duties discharged.

In sum, if you leave the physical proximity of your graduate school before the thesis is done, or almost done, you should expect years of frustration, fretting and trouble; some arising from your

new role, some arising from turnover and decline of concern for you among faculty at your graduate school.

In Conclusion

I have tried to explicate a series of procedures, employment of which expedite passage through graduate sociology. The explication is far from complete, omitting much reference, for example, to relations with fellow graduate students or how to organize your days in a maximally productive way. Nor is this explication likely applicable without modification to all circumstances of all graduate sociology. Abandonment and contrary conduct may be best in a great many circumstances. It is hoped, nonetheless, that a sizable portion of these suggestions will help graduate students cope with many latent, unwritten "requirements" of successfully completing a sociology Ph.D.

We are likely, I fear, to need more and better explications of latent requirements. Such explications have become necessary—and will become more necessary—owing to some recent shifts in higher education. First, there are many new and rapidly expanding graduate sociology programs that necessarily lack a strong student peer culture. Second, this deficit of peer socialization combines with an increasing number of mass educated graduate students who have been given little anticipatory role modeling by their undergraduate professors. The new mass graduate student—the product of the three-hundred student lecture hall—has never, or rarely, known a professor. He erroneously assumes graduate school to be the same kind of grade and anonymity game. Together, these changes produce a new type—a peculiarly naive, graduate student, a lost and floating soul. He wants to "tie in" but his mass undergraduate experience provides no guidance; lack of strong informal peer tutoring leaves him only an atom. Hence, in part, the necessity for explications of the foregoing variety—and the need for corrective measures of other kinds.

In conclusion, it is possible to charge that explications such as this have a crassly manipulative character. Of that charge it needs to be said that any advice on how to do anything in social life must in its very nature be manipulative—even if not crassly so. Further, if we must choose between ignorance (and therefore “natural, non-calculativeness,” meaning less control over our lives) and knowledge (and therefore calculativeness, meaning more control over our lives), let us almost always choose knowledge.

It may be charged, too, that this explication is too accepting and not sufficiently critical of the status-quo, of “the system.” That charge may be true, but it is beside the point. The relative merits of current versus alternative systems of graduate education are not here at issue. The issue, rather, is the empirical one of what student activities facilitate or retard successful passage through the *existing* system of graduate sociology? Moreover, accurate depiction of such successful strategies must (presumably) precede any meaningful debate over the moral merits of successful strategies—or of the system that gives rise to them.

Addendum: Reflections Twenty-Five Years Later

In reflecting on my “How to . . .” article I have come to think that its thesis rests on a false causal proposition and that I therefore proposed a misdirected remedy.

The false proposition is that poor graduate student performance is caused by lack of know-how, a deficit in how-to-do-it skills for navigating a graduate curriculum. Providing such “know-how” is therefore the remedy offered in the article.

I now believe this causal proposition was (and still is) wrong. Or, at least, lack of how-to skills is not among major causes of poor student performance. Instead, the major causes of poor performance are, more likely, 1) insufficient motivation or drive, and/

or 2) intelligence or intellectual talent. How-to knowledge may play some role, but it is quite minor relative to the importance of these other two variables.

This, anyway, has been my experience, which is one of the reasons that the original publication and dissemination of this article had almost no effect on the performance of the sorts of graduate students who prompted me to write it. Ironically, it seems most interesting and useful to those who need it least and on whom it has little effect—the most able and motivated of students.

A curious person might ask, “Why did I make this mistake in identifying major causes of poor student performance?” The answer is not hard to discern. In a situation of pressing action—such as a graduate program—it makes sense to focus on proximate variables one might be able to influence rather than on remote variables beyond one’s reach.

Strengthening the how-to skills of graduate students was (and is) more possible than strengthening their achievement motivation or their sociological brain power. So, I focused on what I could do something about close-at-hand and in the short term. This gave me something to do, but it did not solve the problem.

The lesson in all this is a familiar one: close-at-hand and actionable remedies are seductive for these reasons. But also for these reasons, the remedies may not respond to the real causes at play.