Kaleidoscope: A Graduate Journal of Qualitative Communication Research

2009

"They're Supportive, BUT…": Female Graduate Students and Their Parents' Reactions to Graduate Education

Rosalie S. Aldrich
University of Kentucky

Follow this and additional works at: http://opensiuc.lib.siu.edu/kaleidoscope

"They're supportive, BUT. . .": Female graduate students and their parents' reactions to graduate education

Rosalie S. Aldrich
University of Kentucky
Rosalie.Shemanski@uky.edu

In 2001, there were approximately 1.9 million graduate students in American universities, and a majority of them were women. Graduate students are under a considerable amount of stress and strain, and parents can be a source of social support for their children; however, little research has been done regarding graduate students and the support they receive from their parents. The purpose of this study was to explore parents' reactions to their daughters' choice to pursue a graduate degree. Data were collected through open-ended interviews with 18 female graduate students. Results indicated that parents' reactions to their daughter going to graduate school could be placed into five categories that varied in level of supportiveness.

Imagine my excitement when I received a letter of acceptance to a large Southern university to study in the communication department with a goal of obtaining a doctorate degree. That excitement quickly diminished when my mother's first response was, "Why are you putting your life on hold?" This translated to, "Why are you not getting married, settling down, and getting a job?" I was surprised by her response; this was my opportunity to get a Ph.D. and to become a college professor. Why could she not see that? I was equally surprised by her reaction because she was a teacher and had always emphasized the importance of education in her children's lives.

Her reaction was unfortunately not a unique one, as some additional family members and friends also appeared to be confused by my decision. Some had difficulty understanding how I could move six hours away from my longtime boyfriend; others seemed annoyed that I was delaying getting a "real job" and wanted me to "grow up" already. Further, even though my family taught me that both men and women were deserving of, and capable of, equal opportunities in education, I could not help but wonder if the same response would have been given to my brother had he decided to pursue a graduate degree.

Over time, my less than excited family members and friends gradually began to see what a wonderful opportunity getting my doctorate was and how happy I was to work toward it. Some even soon expressed feelings of admiration, as I would be the first in my family to receive a doctorate degree. However, I was still puzzled by their initial reaction, and I wondered if other graduate students had experienced similar situations when they decided to enroll in graduate school and how they dealt with the resulting tension. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to understand the different reactions

female graduate students received from their parents when they decided to attend graduate school. Due to limitations discussed later in the manuscript this study does not include same-sex parents; therefore, the term "parents" is used synonymously with "mother" and "father."

I was specifically interested in studying female graduate students because of the unique conflict with which they must deal; the tension between fulfilling traditional gender roles (i.e., becoming a mother, wife, or homemaker) and fulfilling roles in the work/academic world. Male students rarely have to decide between achieving a higher education and having a family as they can often do both without external criticism. Currently, there is no research that focuses on this complex relationship between parents and their female adult children and the decision to obtain a graduate degree. Therefore, the following research questions were posited:

> *RQ1: How do parents and important others react to women's decision to go to graduate school?*
>
> *RQ2: Do women receive social support from their parents and important others when they decide to go to graduate school?*
>
> *RQ3: How do women graduate students respond to the support they do or do not receive?*

This manuscript begins with a review of the literature on student trends and social support. Then the current study is described and the results are discussed. Finally, discussion of future directions and limitations are presented.

Review of Student Trends

The proportion of young women enrolled in college has exceeded the proportion of young men since 1991; moreover, this gap has continued to widen over time. In 2005, approximately 43% of all women between the ages of 18-24 were enrolled in college compared to only 35% of young men. This gender gap has shifted to the extent that women now make up the majority, with 54% of the 10.8 million young adults enrolled in college (U.S. Census Bureau, 2005).

In 2001, there were approximately 1.9 million graduate students in American universities (U.S. Department of Education & National Center for Education Statistics, 2003). Hyun, Quinn, Madon, and Lustig (2006) found that 46% of graduate students reported significant emotional distress during their educational experiences. This may be due to the fact that graduate students generally function in an environment with less guidance than they experienced in their undergraduate programs, and they are required to have significant self motivation to complete their degrees (Peters, 1997). "Graduate students are particularly vulnerable to pressures related to conducting research and teaching, publishing, and finding employment, in addition to stress from the often ambiguous expectations of advisors" (Hyun et al., 2006, p. 248).

Communication scholars should understand the graduate student experience from the perspective of women for several reasons. First, over half of all graduate students are women (Digest of Education Statistics, 2008). Because these young scholars will one day influence the future of the discipline, a positive and supportive graduate school experience may result in a more well-rounded, stable, and productive scholar. Second, research has found that women graduate students in particular experience higher levels of stress and role conflict than their male counterparts (Mallinckrodt & Leong, 1992). Third, in order to more effectively guide them in their graduate endeavors it is important to recognize the pressures that women graduate students balance as well as what support networks are available to them.

A role is often thought of as a pattern of behavior and the expected social behavior of an individual. It is likely that an individual will fulfill many different roles at once. For example, one woman may be a wife, mother, sister, and graduate student at the same time. For each of these roles there are different expectations for how she should behave. Role conflict is "a condition in which a person faces incompatible role-related expectations" (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996, p. 7). Female graduate students may experience role conflict when family members and close others pressure them to fulfill certain expectations such as getting married, getting a job, or starting a family; their male counterparts in graduate school may not experience as much conflict, as pursuing higher education for men translates to career advancement and monetary gain, not necessarily stress related to work-life balance. These role-related expectations may create tensions with the role of being a graduate student. Therefore, dealing with tensions between their various roles may create added stress to the female graduate students' daily life. Social support can help individuals deal with these stressors; therefore further research regarding graduate students and social support is warranted.

Social Support

Communication offers a unique perspective from which to study the phenomenon of social support as it contributes to relational maintenance, satisfaction, and overall well-being. Relationships are created and maintained through supportive messages that individuals both seek and express. Traditionally, social support has been classified as any behavior that is linked with the emotional caring dimension toward another person.

Thoits (1986) defined social support as "the functions performed for a distressed individual by significant others such as family members, friends, co-workers, relatives, and neighbors" (p. 417). According to Burleson, Albrecht, Goldsmith, and Sarason (1994), social support may best be conceptualized as communication that is necessary to initiate and maintain supportive relationships. It is a process embedded in the structures of ordinary relationships in social life (Goldsmith, McDermott, & Alexander, 2000).

Researchers have identified many different types of support, and the three most often referred to are emotional, informational, and instrumental/tangible (Arntson & Drodge, 1987). The first and most often used type of social support is the traditional concept of emotional support, which was discussed above. Informational support provides someone with knowledge and helps to facilitate problem solving. Instrumental support is considered to be the most practical type of support and is sometimes called tangible support.

Considerable research maintains that social support reduces, or buffers, the harmful psychological effects of exposure to life stressors (Burleson, 1994; House, Landis, & Umberson, 1988; Kaunonen, Tarkka, Paunonen, & Laippala, 1999). Moreover, it plays a crucial role in health.

> Evidence for the causal link between social support and health/health status mounted, with studies repeatedly showing that formal and informal social support between and among intimates, friends, family members, acquaintances, task associates, strangers, and others had profound consequences for mental and physical well-being. (Albrecht & Goldsmith, 2003, p. 264)

One area in the social support literature that has received quite a bit of attention is social support and gender differences (Burleson, & Gilstrap, 2002; Cahill, & Sias, 1997; Kissman, 1990; Pierce, Sarason, & Sarason, 1996; Samter, 2002). Research has found that men are encouraged to approach problems from an individualistic problem-focused manner (at least in the United States). They are encouraged to isolate themselves when they are faced with stressful situations and because of this men tend to cope with problems by taking direct actions against the environment or person. The direct action involves altering or removing the circumstance seen as threatening, which explains why men usually provide more instrumental support than any other kind. Women are socialized to be communally oriented, and therefore feel responsible for the emotional well-being of their families. Women tend to use emotion-focused approaches to coping, such as using actions or thoughts to reconstruct undesirable feelings that result from the stressful circumstance. Therefore, women usually have greater self-efficacy than men in providing emotional support because they view it as a task more suited to their sex-role.

Women and men also differ on where and how they obtain their support. Heterosexual men in a committed marriage tend to see their wives as their primary confidantes. Even though men usually have quite large social networks their social networks are generally not very intimate. Women are inclined to have smaller support networks but often their networks are quite intimate, and heterosexual married women do not see their husbands as their primary confidantes but often indicate that close girlfriends or other women are their primary support providers.

Although there do appear to be some differences between heterosexual men and women in regards to social support, there are also some similarities

(Burleson, 2003). Both sexes believe person-centered messages, which are messages that explicitly acknowledge, elaborate, legitimize and contextualize a distressed other's feelings and perceptions are the most effective means of support. They also agree that less-person centered strategies (i.e., messages that deny the other's feelings and perspective, criticize the other's feelings, challenge the legitimacy of those feelings, or tell the individual how he or she should act of feel) are less effective. Even though men and women tend to differ in some aspects of social support they have similar concepts of what effective and helpful supportive behavior entails (Burleson, 2003).

Social Support, Graduate Students, and Parents

An obvious support network for graduate students is their parents. Female graduate students' relationships with their parents may become strained, as female graduate students experience more negative life events, have higher levels of depression and anxiety, and receive less social support from their graduate programs and family than men (Mallinckrodt & Leong, 1992).

Most of the research aimed at social support and college students focused on parental support and undergraduate college students, and many of these studies focused solely on parental support as it related to health (Miczo, Miczo, & Johnson, 2006). The research that focuses on graduate students does not include support from parents, but rather centers around how graduate students are socialized into their role as teaching or research assistants (Myers, 1998; Rhodes, 1997). This is a surprising gap in the literature, as parents can be a source of social, emotional, and physical support well into their sons' and daughters' adulthood (Huyck, 1991).

Little research has been done in the area of graduate students and their relationships with their parents or the support parents provide or in some cases do not provide. Further examination focusing on female graduate students and their parents will provide scholars with important information regarding the needs and experiences of these women.

Method

The premise of the study was to understand female graduate students' experience related to the reaction they received from their parents when they decided to attend graduate school. One way to obtain an increased understanding about how these graduate students viewed this experience was to ask them in an interview. "Interviews are particularly well suited to understand the social actor's experience and perspective" (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 173). Through the interview process participants were able to provide stories that described their experience as well as their feelings and reactions towards their parents' responses. These stories helped provide a deeper understanding of how graduate students gave meaning to their experiences and their parents' reactions as well as provided examples with how they coped with the negative reactions. As the interviewer, I also took the opportunity to

ask for clarification or elaboration when necessary, allowing for an in-depth understanding of the respondents' experiences in graduate school. Therefore, interviews were the best method for gaining the most complete understanding of the situation and their overall experience.

Participants

Eighteen female graduate students volunteered to take part in the study. The participants ranged in age from 22 to 40 ($M = 26.06$, $SD = 4.60$). Of the sample, 50% were doctoral students (n=9) and 50% were master's students (n=9). The participants ranged from first semester master's students to doctoral candidates. Each of the participants came from a family with heterosexual parents. The marital status of the parents was not obtained.

Procedures

Participants were recruited through the department of communication graduate student e-mail list serve, and participation was voluntary. The institutional review board approved all procedures for the study, and informed consent was obtained prior to the commencement of each interview. The criteria for inclusion were that the participants must be a female, a graduate student (master's or doctorate) over 18 years of age. Participants were made aware that I would be audio recording the interviews. I also took extensive notes during the interviews in order to capture more detail and accuracy of the interactions. The in-depth face-to-face interviews were semi-structured and guided by a list of questions; however, I did allow for unstructured follow-up questions. Example questions from the interview include "What were your parents' reactions to your furthering your education?" and "Do you feel like your parents support your decision to be in graduate school currently?" On average, the interviews took about 40 minutes and ranged from 20 minutes to 60 minutes. No compensation was given for participation.

I transcribed the interviews verbatim; names were removed and replaced with an identification number to ensure confidentiality. Inductive analysis was used to develop categories after several readings of each transcript. Spiggle (1994) stated that "The essence of categorization is identifying a chunk or unit of data" (p. 493). Therefore, a category is an example of a more general phenomenon and can be derived from a passage of text of any length. Five categories emerged. I then coded the transcripts according to the developed categories.

Research questions one (i.e., how do parents and important others react to women's decision to go to graduate school?), two (i.e., do women receive social support from their parents and important others when they decide to go to graduate school?), and three (how do women graduate students respond to the support they do or do not receive?) were answered by the recurring categories that appeared throughout the interviews, and they were as follows:

(1) *supportive* - both parents were supportive, (2) s*upportive but clueless* - both parents were supportive but did not understand what graduate school entailed, (3) *mothers only* - the mother was supportive but the father was unsupportive, (4) *unsupportive* - both parents were unsupportive, and (5) *unsupportive others* - extended family and friends were not supportive. It should also be noted that these five categories are not mutually exclusive. For example, some participants had very supportive parents but their extended family members were not supportive. To deal with unsupportive reactions, the female graduate students in this study adopted different strategies to manage these negative responses. These strategies will be discussed under the associated themes.

Results

Supportive

Some students found both of their parents to be completely supportive of their decision to attend graduate school. These students shared comments like, "They were both really excited" and "They were very excited; they encouraged me to do it." One student stated, "They really wanted me to keep going. They have been completely supportive and really want me to continue with my education." The stress and coping perspective of social support would hypothesize that this support from parents would reduce the effects of stressful events (Cohen, Underwood, & Gottlieb, 2000). Graduate students often experience stress related to mid-terms, publishing, teaching, financial strain, and fulfillment of service roles. The social support provided by their parents, if the assistance matched the demands of the stressor (e.g., encouragement before a big exam or money for books at the beginning of the semester), could protect these students from adverse effects such as depression or sickness. Unfortunately, only a few of the graduate students I interviewed experienced this unconditional support. Many more experienced the "supportive but clueless" parent.

Supportive but Clueless

Many participants in the sample mentioned that although their parents were supportive, they did not understand what the student was doing in graduate school. Over and over again, I heard how each of the students' parents were endlessly supportive, (e.g., "My mom and dad are like my biggest cheerleaders"); however, shortly after such statements I heard modifiers such as, "I've had to try to explain a lot of things to them about the whole process and that gets kind of tedious sometimes." Parents also tended to become frustrated when they did not understand what the student was doing. Overwhelmingly, parents were worried about practical issues such as finances and what an advanced degree would do for their daughter in the "real world."

In order to cope with this type of reaction, the students often tried to overlook or ignore the misunderstandings and said that their parents were still endlessly supportive even if they did not understand why they were still enrolled in school. However, some students shared their disappointment and frustration about their parents' reactions (or lack of reactions) to their continuing on to get a graduate degree. "I was a little disappointed (about her parents' reaction to her getting her master's degree), I still kind of am when I talk to them about things and I get, they don't really, I guess understand, and I mean I wouldn't either I guess."

Mothers Only

Also interesting, but perhaps not as surprising, participants often noted that their mothers frequently asked about how the program and classes were going. This may be explained by the fact that women who embrace traditional femininity are socialized to feel responsible for the emotional well-being of their families. Fathers hardly ever inquired about school except for checking on how the sports teams were doing or when the semester ended. As one participant put it,

> My mom still asks me if I have done my homework every time I talk to her . . . My dad and I don't really talk. He'll ask when the semester is over and that sort of thing but we primarily talk about sports.

Another student put it this way: "My mom is more into the daily interaction of everybody's lives ... my dad kind of gets it secondhand from her." These results support Huyck's (1991) findings that mothers were more likely than fathers to offer assistance in daily living in their adult children's lives.

One student shared that her parent's reaction about her going on to get her Ph.D. was mixed, stating that her dad was not very supportive of her getting an advanced degree at first: "I don't think he understood and I think I can remember crying a couple of times ... I don't think he gets it. He doesn't get it." When this same participant was asked if her dad's reaction surprised her, she said yes because "who doesn't want their child to get their Ph.D.? My mom has always been very supportive of whatever I want to do ... I don't really know what his deal was." Unfortunately, many participants cited their fathers as being less understanding or interested in their obtaining a graduate degree than their mothers. These results may help to explain the push-pull tension felt by female graduate students because without validation of their life goals from their fathers, they may have a lower self-esteem (Welsh & Stewart, 1995).

To combat the negative reactions from their fathers, a number of participants created lists of counter-points and reasons graduate school was important, how they would support themselves, and their ultimate goal. They believed that showing their fathers they had thought everything through and that it would be worth it in the end seemed to be their best defense when their father was unsupportive. As one participant put it,

> I felt like with my dad I had to really defend myself.
> Actually what I did is make a list of questions that he had
> asked me, things to think about, about finances, quitting
> my job ... I just went through and told him this is what I'm
> going to do, this is the money I'm going to make, this is the
> amount of money that has to be spent on food, this is how
> much needs to be spent on rent and things like that.

It is interesting that these graduate students felt the most effective way to change their fathers' mind about their decision to get a graduate degree was to provide evidence that they had thoroughly thought about the logistics and consequences of their decision. Participants' strategic response to their fathers' initial lack of support may have resulted because of how men are socialized. Men are socialized to value logical reasoning over emotional arguments, and the participants understood this. The participants understood that their fathers were most interested in understanding the facts such as the cost and pragmatics of pursing a graduate degree.

Unsupportive

Unfortunately, some of the participants felt completely unsupported by both parents. These women experienced the tension of both parents expressing disapproval of the idea of their daughters going on to get a graduate degree. One participant distinctly remembered the conversation when she told her parents that she would be applying to master's programs and their response. "They looked disgusted and disappointed, and they said that I should just get a job instead." Their reaction shocked this particular participant because her mother was a teacher and both of her parents had always pushed the importance of a good education. Even though she now assures me that her parents have come around and support her decision to be in graduate school, they still do not appear to understand what it is she does. "I think they think it is just extended college. I think they just really don't understand what's going on." Another student also shared her disappointment in her family's lack of excitement: "I always wanted them to be more excited about it and be proud of me for doing it ... I wish they would have been more enthusiastic of me going on and seeing the benefits of it."

Perhaps the most confusing finding had to do with how parents' expectations shifted so dramatically from obtaining an undergraduate degree to completing a graduate degree. Every single participant stated that they were expected to complete a four year degree after high school. Many used the words, "there was no question" or "it wasn't even a choice" when discussing their parents' expectations for them to attend an undergraduate program. However, a majority of the sample also noted that their parents showed signs of distress or disapproval when they were informed of their daughter's decision to go on to graduate school. The disapproval, however,

tended to be less prominent the closer to graduation the student came. As one participant put it,

> At first they were kind of opposed to the idea (of going to graduate school). They thought that I should get a job. They wondered why I was going to school and spending more money when I should be getting a full time job and starting to pay off my student loans kind of thing. But since I've been here they've been a lot more supportive of it.

This reaction was not uncommon in this sample. The further along the participant was into her degree, the more understanding and supportive the parents tended to become. Even parents who were very opposed to the idea of graduate school in the beginning seemed more open to the idea as their daughter moved closer to degree completion. Perhaps the realization that their daughter would have the title of "doctor" or have an "MA" after her name led parents to take a different, more positive perspective.

When an individual is considering attending graduate school, it is a very perilous time for parents to be unsupportive; when faced with the initial non-support, the potentially outstanding scholar may decide not to attend graduate school at all. Unfortunately, this lack of parents' initial understanding of the reality of graduate school is almost uniform across the sample. Still, participants insisted that even though their parents may not understand why they were in graduate school, they were proud of them. "I think my parents are proud of me despite their times of unsupportiveness; they've always been supportive of me in general and have always told me they are proud of me." This particular student attempted to focus on her parent's overall supportiveness in life rather than their lack of supportiveness in graduate school. She was not alone in this management strategy.

Research on coping strategies (Kahn, Wolfe, Quinn, Snoek, & Rosenthal, 1964; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Mechanic, 1978) usually identifies two major ways of coping with stressors, problem-focused and emotion-focused. Problem-focused coping is used when action can be taken to change the environment or the self in order to remove or alter the threatening circumstances. When individuals use emotion-focused coping strategies they focus their actions or thoughts on controlling the undesirable feelings (Thoits, 1986). It appears that the women who were unsupported by both of their parents in their decision to achieve a higher education used emotion-focused coping strategies.

Unsupportive Others

Even more surprising than the many negative reactions from the parents was that of the extended family. Like parents, extended family members often did not understand what it meant to get a graduate degree or what occurred at graduate school. As stated by one participant, "I mean they don't get it. If they ever knew I was like a doctor or whatever they would wonder

why I can't operate on their spleen or something." She continued later by saying, "my extended family has no concept of the whole graduate thing." This participant tried to decrease the tension by understanding their point of view by stating, "I guess if I did think the way they did I would seem pretty bizarre." This lack of understanding among extended family members was supported by another participant's declaration: "My extended family is sort of supportive but they don't really get what I'm doing." This same participant later mentioned that her older relatives especially did not understand why she was still in school and not starting a family. They felt she had more than enough time to be in school and was already married so they were confused about why she was not yet having children.

In some cases the extended family appeared to be less understanding and less supportive than the parents had been, and they also seemed to feel more verbally free to express their objection. One participant stated, "I had an aunt that told me that quitting my job (to go back to school full time to get her master's degree) was the biggest mistake of my life." One graduate student experienced anger from her grandmother because she was moving too far away and was not married yet. "She was very upset that I wasn't married already and she was worried about me living by myself away from family." The most surprising revelation came from one student who received the most negative feedback from her uncle who is currently a college president. Her uncle reacted negatively and expressed disapproval of quitting her full-time job to return to school for a master's degree. This participant was shocked by his reaction and felt like her uncle was using a double standard; it was all right for him to achieve a degree in higher education, but he did not think it was acceptable for his niece to do the same.

Overall, friends seemed to be more supportive than extended family members, but friends still scrutinized these women's decisions to delay entrance into the "real world." One person stated, "I think a lot of people think that I'm just delaying, I think people think I'm delaying the inevitability of the real world." Some participants mentioned that friends had a hard time understanding the desire to get a graduate degree when they hated college and had reactions like, "Oh my God, why?" and "You're still writing papers, what are you doing?" In reaction to friends' comments, one participant insisted that they must be jealous because her friends hated their jobs and she thought they secretly wished they could still be in school and not at a job from nine to five. Another participant shared this view: "If anything I think some of my friends are kind of jealous because they are working full time and I'm getting paid to go to school."

Many participants, however, mentioned how wonderful their friends had been through the entire process and how their friends had really been supportive and encouraging. Some participants had friends in a different graduate program at the same time so they could lean on each other. One respondent, who was also a mother, emphasized how her group of friends

helped her when it came to childcare issues, such as needing a babysitter or scheduling problems with rides. Overall, friends appear to be a strong social support network for graduate students.

Discussion and Limitations

This study found that female graduate students are impacted by their parents and important others in positive and negative ways. The students felt supported by their parents but often found themselves frustrated by their parents' lack of understanding about their reasons for going to graduate school and what being a graduate student entailed. Extended family members appeared to be the biggest culprits regarding expression of their disapproval of the students' desire to obtain a higher education. This was evident as eight participants mentioned the overt negative reactions they received from extended family members about their decision. However, it was parents' reactions that caused the most distress about the students' choice to continue on in school. This was evident because participants expressed little distress over disapproval from extended family members, but were visibly distraught when discussing disapproval from parents. Based on interview data, participants did little to combat extended families disapproval. This attitude of indifference was not present when discussing parental disapproval, however. Often the graduate students discussed their continued effort to emphasize the importance and significance of their choice to obtain a graduate degree. This was especially true when fathers disproved of their decision. Continued efforts were utilized to gain approval from parents and none were developed for dealing with extended family members' disproval. It is surprising, then, that with sometimes little support and encouragement from family members to acquire advanced degrees, female graduate students are remaining and excelling in graduate studies.

Future research should inquire if these results hold constant across disciplines. It would be worthwhile to examine if female graduate students receive more or less parental support when working toward graduate degrees in what are considered the "hard sciences," such as statistics, computer science, or biology. Women in these disciplines may experience even less support from parents as these degrees are seen as violating traditional gender roles in a more extreme fashion. However, women who study biology, medicine, or engineering may receive more parental support as these disciplines tend to be more highly respected than those in the humanities.

Another area that is calling for more extensive research is that of graduate students' mental health, especially in female students. Hyun et al. (2006) found, "Almost half of the graduate students in this study responded that they had experienced a stress-related problem that significantly affected their emotional well-being and/or academic performance within the previous year" (p. 260). A possible stress-related problem may be linked to tension experienced by female graduate students in this study when trying

to balance pleasing their parents and obtaining their academic goals. It is important to continue to study this dynamic as more and more females attend graduate school. This is especially essential as the responsibilities and roles of graduate students continue to increase. It is in the best interest of the discipline of communication to continue to study and explore graduate students' experience as it will help no one if future scholars are too stressed and emotionally drained (Hyun et al., 2006) to contribute to pushing the frontiers of knowledge.

The juxtaposition of such high pressure to complete a bachelor's degree compared to the disappointment and confusion from parents when these same women wanted to pursue a graduate degree also is worth further study. Future research should consider questioning the parents of graduate students to understand their rationale for their initial reactions to their daughters' decision to receive a higher education. The current manuscript only contains the students' perceptions of communication about an educational, lifestyle, and career choice. I considered the possibility that parents were afraid that their daughters might fail and that they could not help because they themselves had not been in graduate school, but the answer to this issue could only be uncovered by also interviewing parents.

It would also be worth investigating how this lack of support affects these women as they continue in the high pressure world of academia. Although the participants alluded to the fact that their parents eventually became more accepting and positive about their continued education, it would be important to examine the long-term effects and how supportive (or unsupportive) relationships change over time. It would also be interesting to see who female graduate students turn to for support when, initially, their families fail to provide what they need while completing their higher education. This may be an area where the support provided by peers and mentors has a unique impact on the success of female graduate students.

Although initially I wanted to focus on how female graduate students related to and responded to their parents, I think that the inclusion of male participants would have provided me with valuable information that would have strengthened my understanding of social support among graduate students. I also would have liked to interview more graduate students. Due to the size of the department and time constraints, only 18 graduate students were able to be interviewed. Although they have provided me with a deep understanding of their experience, the study could have benefited from more participants. Unfortunately, all of the participants were Caucasian and came from heterosexual families, leaving a large gap in understanding of how these tensions occur and are addressed in a more diverse group.

Although the marital status of the participants' parents was alluded to throughout the interviews, as some participants spoke of stepparents, parents' marital status was not directly obtained. It is unknown how many participants came from homes with two biological parents, one stepparent, or a single

parent, which may have impacted the amount of support provided. In the future the parents' marital status should be obtained to ascertain if there is a difference in support provided among the different groups of parents.

One large issue was that parental reactions were voiced retrospectively and may not represent exactly what was said or meant. The participants' reactions to the perceived responses may have changed the meaning to what was actually said. This is an issue with interview data gathered after events have occurred.

Most measurement of social support has included self-report measures or coding schemes that focus on frequencies of social support behaviors (Goldsmith, 2004). The current research project was a starting point, which allowed development of a more theoretically sophisticated understanding of the role social support plays in the parent-adult child relationship in regard to obtaining a graduate degree. This was the first step to shifting the focus away from frequency of various types of support to more context specific situations, in which the support does or does not take place.

Continued research in this area is vital for both communication scholars and communication as a discipline. Understanding the stressors, role conflicts, and how such pressure and tension affects graduate students is a necessary step to ensuring the future success of these young scholars. It is also important to understand the support resources available to graduate students as many of them experience significant emotional distress. Emotional distress may lead to dropping out of a graduate program, being unproductive, or more severe consequences such as depression, hopelessness, or even thoughts of suicide.

My advice to current and future graduate students would be to continue to discuss the graduate school experience with parents and important others. Although they may never fully grasp the graduate student experience (e.g., "Why are you so busy? You only teach twice a week?"), they can still serve as a valuable source of support. Even the parents who at first do not approve, they eventually do come around, so initial disapproval or low levels of excitement should not discourage individuals from pursuing a graduate degree. After interviewing these graduate students it was clear that an important source of social support came from their peers in the program. Pursuing friendships with peers, both in one's cohort and those who have been in the program longer, is recommended. 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.

Conclusion

This study is important to communication as a discipline because it brings to light the strain and stress that current female graduate students

are under when attempting to balance the desire to please their parents and to achieve their educational goals. The results also emphasize the different coping strategies graduate students use when social support to obtain a higher education is not provided by parents. I encourage communication scholars to continue to research parent and graduate student communication as their experiences will shape the future of our discipline.

─────────────────

References

Albrecht, T.L., & Goldsmith, D.J. (2003). Social support, social networks, and health. In T.L. Thompson, A.M. Dorsey, K.I. Miller, & R. Parrott (Eds.), *Handbook of Health Communication* (pp. 263-284). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Arnston, P., & Droge, D. (1987). Social support in self-help groups: The role of communication in establishing perceptions of control. In T.L. Albrecht, & M.B. Adelman (Eds.), *Communicating in social support* (pp. 148-171). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Baxter, L. A., & Montgomery, B. M. (1996). *Relating: Dialogues and dialectics*. New York: Guilford.

Burleson, B. R. (1994). Comforting messages: Features, functions, and outcomes. In J. A. Daly & J. M. Wiemann (Eds.), *Strategic interpersonal communication*. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.

Burleson, B. R. (2003). The experience and effects of emotional support: What the study of cultural and gender differences can tell us about close relationships, emotion, and interpersonal communication. *Personal Relationships, 10*, 1-23.

Burleson, B. R., Albrecht, T. L., Goldsmith, D. J., & Sarason, I. G. (1994). Introduction: The communication of social support. In B.R. Burleson, T.L. Albrecht, & I.G. Sarason (Eds.), *Communication of social support: Messages, interactions, relationships, and community* (pp. xi-xxx). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Burleson, B. R., & Gilstrap, C. M. (2002). Explaining sex differences in interaction goals in support situations: Some mediating effects of expressivity and instrumentality. *Communication Reports, 15,* 43-56.

Cahill, D. J., & Sias, P. M. (1997). The perceived social costs and importance of seeking emotional support in the work place: Gender differences and similarities. *Communication Research Reports, 14,* 231-240.

Cohen, S., Underwood, L., & Gottlieb, B. (Eds.). (2000). *Social support measurement and intervention.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Goldsmith, D. J. (2004). *Communicating social support,* New York: Cambridge University Press.

Goldsmith, D. J., McDermott, V. M., & Alexander, S. C. (2000). Helpful, supportive and sensitive: Measuring the evaluation of enacted social support in personal relationships. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships, 17*, 369-392.

House, J., Landis, K., & Umberson, D. (1988). Social relationships and health. *Science, 241*, 540-545.

Huyck, M. H. (1991). Parents and children: "Post-parental" imperatives. In B. H. Hess & E. W. Markson (Eds.), Growing old in America (4th ed., pp. 415-426). New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction.

Hyun, J. K., Quinn, B. C., Madon, T., & Lustig, S. (2006). Graduate student mental health: Needs assessment and utilization of counseling services. *Journal of College Student Development, 47,* 247-266.

Kahn, R. L., Wolfe, D. M., Quinn, R. , Snoek, J. D., & Rosenthal, R. A. (1964). *Organizational stress.* New York: Wiley.

Kaunonen, M., Tarkka, M., Paunonen, M., & Laippala, P. (1999). Grief and social support after the death of a spouse. *Journal of Advanced Nursing, 30*, 1304-1311.

Kissman, K. (1990). Social support and gender role attitude among teenage mothers. *Adolescence, 25,* 709.

Lazarus, R. S., & Folkman, S. (1984). *Stress, appraisal and coping*. New York: Springer.

Lindlof, T. R., & Taylor, B. C. (2002). *Qualitative communication research methods* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage

Mallinckrodt, B., & Leong, R. T. (1992). Social support in academic programs and family environments: Sex differences and role conflicts for graduate students. *Journal of Counseling and Development, 70*, 716-723.

Mechanic, D. (1978) *Medical sociology: A selective view.* (2nd ed.). New York: Free Press.

Miczo, N., Miczo, L. A., & Johnson, M. (2006). Parental support, perceived stress, and illness-related variables among first-year college students. *Journal of Family Communication, 6,* 97-117.

Myers, S. A. (1998). GTAs as organizational newcomers: The association between supportive communication relationships and information seeking. *Western Journal of Communication, 62,* 54-73.

Peters, R. L. (1997). Getting what you came for: The smart student's guide to earning a master's or Ph.D. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Grioux.

Pierce, G. R., Sarason, B. R., & Sarason, I. G. (Eds.). (1996). *The handbook of social support and the family*. New York: Plenum.

Rhodes, T. D. (1997). Graduate teaching assistant training: Examining issues of socialization and emotionally painful incidents in the classroom. *Journal of Speech & Theatre, 10,* 52-63.

Roots, C. (1998). The sandwich generation: Adult children caring for aging parents. New York: Garland.

Samter, W. (2002). How gender and cognitive complexity influence the provision of emotional support: A study of indirect effects. *Communication Reports, 15,* 5-17.

Spiggle, S. (1994). Analysis and interpretation of qualitative data in consumer research. *Journal of Consumer Research, 21,* 491-503.

Thoits, P. A. (1986). Social support as coping assistance. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 54*, 416-423.

Welsh, W. M., & Stewart, A. J. (1995). Relationships between women and their parents: Implications for midlife well-being. *Psychology and Aging, 10*, 181-190.

U.S. Census Bureau, Statistical Abstract of the United States: 2004-2005, p. 133-182.

U.S. Department of Education Institute of Education Services. (2009) Degrees conferred by degree-granting institutions, by level of degree and sex of student: Selected years, 1869–70 through 2017–18.

U.S. Department of Education & National Center for Education Statistics, 2003.