Professional Socialization of Graduate Students: A give-and-take process.
Dr. Orpha Kemunto Ongiti

Abstract
Professional socialization of graduate students is a give-and-take process due to its complexity and dynamism. This paper, which falls under organizational behavior focuses on the three approaches to socialization of graduate students – functionalist, interpretive and critical. The author views professional socialization from the standpoint of interpretive approach, which argues that a student plays a significant role in the professional socialization process. While the department puts the student through the socialization process, the student makes a decision and chooses how to behave through the socialization process. Thus, the student influences socialization process just as the socialization process influences the student’s professional preparation. The paper focuses on graduate students because of the assumption that graduate study plays a fundamental role in socializing and preparing students for work and developing an early professional identity.

Key words: Socialization, Graduate students

INTRODUCTION
Professional socialization serves as a driving influence that has a major impact on one’s professional development. Accordingly, a better understanding of professional socialization provides an important first step of identifying educational strategies to improve the recruitment and retention of graduate students. This paper adopted Weidman, Twale and Stein’s (2001) concept of professional socialization to understand the socialization of graduate students and their development of professional identity. Weidman, et al. (2001) define professional socialization as the acquisition of knowledge, skills, and values necessary for a successful start to a professional career requiring an advanced level of specialized knowledge and skills. The department serves as an agent of socialization through which students and faculty interact with each other for the purpose of acquiring knowledge, skills and attitudes. The main focus of this paper is to analyze the three diverse approaches on how graduate students could be socialized.

APPROACHES TO SOCIALIZATION
I discuss the socialization of graduate student from the perspective of the three primary approaches to professional socialization as highlighted by (Zeichner & Gore, 1990, p. 329) – functionalist, interpretive and critical. Each approach is characterized by a distinct theoretical orientation toward describing the socialization research of new students in an organization. Though most studies focus on the functionalist approach to socialization, this paper mainly focuses on the interpretive approach to the socialization of graduate students. The interpretive approach puts more emphasis on human agency and views a graduate student as an active member who makes choices concerning how to react to the process of socialization within the context of university culture. The functionalist and critical approaches are discussed to compare and contrast the three approaches. However, the type of socialization approach the department in a given university adopts plays a significant role in the recruitment, retention and graduation of graduate students.

1 Director, Senior Lecturer; Africa Nazarene University, P.O BOX 51255-00200, Nairobi, Kenya
Email: ongorpha@yahoo.com; oongiti@anu.ac.ke
The Functionalist Approach
The functionalist approach—enthused by Mertonian structural functionalism (Merton, 1968), is the most commonly applied approach to understanding the socialization of new entrants into organizations. The functionalist approach gives social structures analytical priority over individual action, and conceptualizes individuals’ behavior as mainly determined by the social context in which they find themselves. In that context, professional socialization is viewed as the process “by which individuals acquire the attitudes, beliefs, values and skills needed to participate effectively in organized social life” (Dunn, Linda, & Seff, 1994, p. 375). A new entrant is envisioned to undergo a one-way, smooth and unproblematic induction befitting the profession. This theory equates new entrants as passive objects with no ability to react to the socialization process, an assumption which has questionable validity when dealing with diverse graduate students who have already made up their minds to join a profession of their own choice.

The functionalist approach assumes a view of the social world that “regards society as ontologically preceding man and seeks to place man and his activities within that wider social context” (Burrell & Morgan, 1979, p. 106); it assumes that because the society was before man therefore man is supposed to fit in the society. Burrell and Morgan’s (1979, p. 106) argument is compatible with Van Scotter et al.’ (1985) view of socialization as a process of “teaching” and “learning,” where the culture, the society, the community, and other social institutions (agencies of socialization) combine to be the “teacher” and where all members of society are the “learners.” If we take the case of this paper, graduate students would be seen as passive learners to be taught about the culture of graduate school and they would adapt themselves to that culture in order to fit in; a theory this paper does not support.

The functionalist approach tends to view those general sociological concerns from a stance that tends to be realist (in attempting to explain the status quo), positivist (in the methods employed and in the predictive intent), determinist (in determining the orientations of students, who are viewed as passive), and nomothetic (in making law-like statements aimed at molding new students to become part of the group) (Burrell & Morgan 1979, p. 26; Hoy & Rees, 1977, p. 25). If one adopts this view of graduate students’ socialization, it would mean that new students are there to follow predetermined programs without considering their personal needs, interests and values which would confirm Burrell and Morgan’s (1979, p. 107) standpoint of viewing a student as an observer, attempting “to relate what they observe to what they regard as important elements in a wider social context.”

Functionalism, which dominated the period of social conformity following World War II, envisioned professional students as virtual tabulae rasae (blank slates) to be filled with professional identities in an unconscious, passive uniform process of socialization (Artkinson, 1983). Eccentricity from the order was professed as deviation from the rule. This argument is supported by earlier studies (Knowles, 1972; Robinson, 1978), which affirm that students became professionals through natural, developmental processes to which “learners” are constantly becoming accustomed, and that teaching is prominent in strengthening adjustment to the profession.

Equally important are the views of Merton, Reader, Kendall (1957) in their description of medical student socialization, the medical school was seen to “fill students with the orientation, the knowledge, and the skills fundamental for living the life of a physician” thus supporting Artkinson’s (1983) “blank slates” theory. Accordingly, the structural functionalist definition of professional socialization involves induction and assimilation, into an existing and unchanging social order.
If one assumes this approach in the socialization of graduate students, then the students’ prior knowledge and skills will be considered irrelevant at the entry level and students will be seen to be filled with new knowledge perceived by faculty to prepare them for future professions.

The functionalist approach emphasizes reproduction of existing arrangements and assumes that professional socialization produces continuity (Wentworth, 1980, p. 53). This supports Goode’s (1957) argument that if an individual decides to join an occupational group, he/she must simply accept a common core of relatively homogeneous values, norms, and role definitions of that group. Thus, functionalism aims towards providing explanations of the regulated nature of human affairs (Burrell & Morgan, 1979), and in so doing focuses on central tendencies and de-emphasizes complexity, contradiction and human agency. Moreover, the functionalists explain hegemony within professions, but not diversity, conflict, or social change (Barretti, 2004). In certainty, the hegemony theory is problematic at the graduate level because of the ubiquity of heterogeneity (of students, disciplines, content, departmental cultures) in higher education.

The functionalist approach has been criticized because of the following reasons:

- Functionalism has been described as giving men and women the status of puppets, pulled by strings of the society in which they live (Wrong, 1966). It is therefore suggested that apart from the natural structures that give coherence and relative permanence to social practices, it is also important to recognize human agency, the ability of people, individual or in groups, to consciously or unconsciously change those practices into which they are being initiated.

- Functionalism accepts the cultural status quo and reproduction by arguing that the culture is as it is and that the task of the new entrants is to assimilate. What is left unclear is the tension and conflict which arise when aspects of organization’s cultural characteristics are undesirable or even disgusting to the new entrant or conceivably disadvantageous to some new entrants in systemic ways (Boice, 1992).

- The new entrants are treated as an undifferentiated mass (homogeneous) and abstracted from specific contexts, backgrounds and histories (Boice, 1992): a practice that ignores that heterogeneity (for example, gender, race, ability, values, experiences, background) of human beings can affect the socialization process.

- Functionalism lacks emphasis on unrecognized aspects of organizational life—for instance, organizational culture such as ceremonies, rituals, and rites of passage—which provide the necessary experiences by which values, beliefs, and attitudes are learned (Tierney & Rhoads, 1993).

- Functionalism emphasizes that the new entrants’ acquisition of only some forms of knowledge; the exceptional and those considered fundamental to the institution’s interest: organizational structures; the university’s mission and strategic direction and formally taught academic classes and learning approaches. Trowler and Knight (1999) argue that while these are necessary they are not sufficient factors.

In sum, functionalism puts more emphasis on social structures and de-emphasizes human agency. Students are viewed as empty slates to be filled (inducted) with new knowledge for the future professions; students are passive observers during the process of socialization. Functionalism argues that organizations predetermine guidelines and requirements that must be met by the new students in order to fit in the group. New students and professions are viewed as homogeneous, therefore applying the same socialization procedures which should be smooth and
unproblematic. This view assumes maintaining the status quo to be reproduced by
the school for continuity.
I argue that the standpoint of the functionalists on socialization does not befit the
socialization of graduate students. Graduate students are heterogeneous and have
already experienced socializations before they joined the department and have
actively made choices on how to react to the socialization process at the
department. Viewing graduate students as empty slates to be filled or passive
observers in the socialization process may be out of the ordinary. Alternative
approaches (interpretive and critical) to understand how graduate students are
socialized should be considered. These two approaches put more emphasis on the
role of the individual, and in practice, on human agency.

The Interpretive Approach
Reacting against functionalism, the interpretive approach to socialization focuses
on the theme of human agency characterized by discontinuity, conflict, and
resistance as opposed to social structures, which view the socialization process as
an unproblematic and smooth transition; thus giving preference to human agency.
The interpretive approach views newcomers as active agents in the process of
socialization and as having the potential to actively seek out the information they
need or to develop strategies for coping with uncertainty (Teboul, 1984, p. 191). In
the more practical sense, students are involved in the struggle to construct an
identity or identities, which they consider workable in the new cultural context.
The interpretivist argue that, new students are not “victims of the system,” but
have their own choices to make, which should be assisted by the organization.
Consistent with Teboul’s (1984) argument are Burrell and Morgan’s (1979, p. 28)
interpretive approaches to socialization, which seek explanation “within the realm
of individual consciousness and subjectivity, within the frame of reference of the
participant as opposed to the observer of action.” I claim that these arguments are
well-suited for the socialization of graduate students.
According to Becker’s (1964) paper of medical students, students were ascribed
considerable agency and were understood as being able to turn themselves into the
kinds of persons the situation demanded; this depended on how they reacted to the
professional socialization processes and the choices they made. Likewise, Olesen
and Whittaker (1968) in their paper of socialization of nursing students viewed the
student as an active, choice-making agent in her own socialization. They found that
professional socialization involves: the students’ choices and behaviors that are
actively involved in acquiring a professional role; the lateral life roles of the
students; and their progress through the institution as they confront the demands
of faculty, peers, and patients. Socialization was therefore viewed as a more
complex and problematic process than implied in the functionalist approach.
The interpretive approach views a student as reacting to professional socialization
in an interactive and dynamic manner. Professional socialization is not a static
process in which new students only receive the impression of the organization. It is
a dynamic process in which the new student brings experiences, values, and ideas
into the organization (Simpson, 1979; Tierney & Bensimon, 1996; Austin, 2002).
Becher and Trowler (2001, p. 24) argue that “individuals entering new
organizational settings inevitably import cultural patterns deriving from the wider
environment and do not lose them simply because of the power of disciplinary
epistemology.” I argue that the experiences that new students arrive with act as “a
springboard” to the acquisition of new knowledge for their future profession. If
these experiences are neglected, then the process of socialization is impaired.
I support Tierney and Bensimon (1996) argument that socialization is a two-way process where individuals both influence and are influenced by the socializing organization. In his reconsideration of organizational socialization, Tierney (1997, p. 6) states that, “socialization involves a give-and-take where individuals make sense of an organization through their own unique backgrounds and the current context in which the organization resides.” I coincide with the abovementioned arguments that professional socialization is a give-and-take process involving the socialization process and the reaction of the new student. For instance, while a faculty member teaches, a student chooses to learn; while a faculty member implements policy to prepare a student for a profession, a student develops professional identity; while a faculty member provides retention programs, a student chooses to persist to the completion of degree.

Likewise, the interpretive approach positions the professional student as an active member who makes choices concerning how to react to the process of socialization within the context of the university culture. Universities are characterized by a variety of cultures apparent in different ways and unique to the context (Alvesson, 1993; Trowler & Knight, 1998). Trowler and Knight (1999) advance the cultural theory by asserting that cultural experiences develop at the departmental level and within sub-departmental working groups in which there is recurring social engagement. At this juncture, the interpretive approach recognizes the continuing importance of agency in student’s construction of their world within the multiplicity and conflicting departmental cultures; therefore challenging the functionalist’s standpoint of viewing socialization as a one-way, smooth and unproblematic process. I add that a graduate student’s socialization is complex, conflicting and problematic, especially when a new student comes with different cultural views and encounters different ones from the discipline.

Thus, from the interpretive viewpoint, professional socialization is taken as a unique case of continuous socialization and re-socialization through formal and informal learning opportunities as to the culture of academic departments. Staton and Darling (1989) argue that graduate students experience several socialization processes concomitantly: socialization to the role of graduate student, socialization to academic life and the profession, and socialization to a specific discipline or field of study. Students identify themselves with each of these groups. The multiple socialization in and identification with each group is not smooth, but complex; this departs from the functionalist view of the smoothness and unproblematic nature of professional socialization. Instead, Trowler and Knight (1999, p. 190) contend that “socialization is complex...it is complex when there are multiple conflicting cultural messages and a mismatch between what is said and what is done.” Consequently, based on the foregoing discussion, the distinctiveness of the two approaches to socialization (interpretive and functionalist) can be summarized as follows:

- While the functionalists argue that the socialization process is direct through instructive learning which is smooth, orderly, developmental, uniform, one-way, and unproblematic, the interpretivist’s argument is that it is indirect, complex, unpredictable, dynamic, two-way, problematic and characterized by conflict and resistance.
- Whereas the functionalists view students as blank slates to be filled with knowledge and skills; as passive observers, who approve, and passively conform to performance standards, the interpretive approach views students as active, conscious agents who as new entrants bring experiences, values and ideas to the organization.
- As the functionalist view implies that the new student in graduate school has perspectives in common and subscribes to common values, norms and
role definition of a group, the interpretive approach emphasized the possibility of conflicts of interest.

- Whilst functionalists see roles as being internalized almost unconsciously into a unitary professional identity, the interpretive model conceives the new student as a conscious, role-playing agent in the process of acquiring multiple identities.
- Though the functionalists give priority to social structures—and thus to the academic institution as a monolithic and corporate entity in which individuals are determined by their social context—the interpretive focus is on the human agency.
- Lastly, the functionalist approach demonstrates greater concern for explanation than the interpretive approach, which aims for understanding from the student’s point-of-view.

Nevertheless, there are similarities between the two approaches. Both view socialization as a process whereby the individual engages in role-learning that results in adjustment (change) of the individual to the culture of the profession. Therefore, as I had mentioned earlier, this paper adopts the interpretive approach because it puts more emphasis on human agency and production than social structures and reproduction. The socialization process is viewed as a give-and-take process where faculty takes the students through socialization process and the students actively participate in making choices of what they would like to become. It is prudent to note that graduate students affect policy and the socialization process. In turn, the policy and the socialization process are affected by the students. Consequently, flexibility and modifications to policies can emerge to cater for individual differences and meet the needs of individual students. The interpretive approach is cognizant of the variables that affect the professional socialization process—departmental culture, policies, disciplines and the experiences that new students bring with them. These variables and many more, make the socialization process complex and dynamic.

Nonetheless, Carr and Kemmis (1986, p. 156) argue from the critical perspective that neither the functionalist nor interpretive approach to socialization is sufficient; they are “merely moments in the transformative process” I argue that in comparing the two approaches, the interpretive approach is of greater relevance to the socialization of graduate students because it puts more emphasis on human agency than on social structures. Though the critical approach to socialization contributes to the understanding of graduate socialization, I will not concentrate on the critical approach because it is beyond the scope of this paper. However, for completeness the critical approach to socialization is discussed briefly in the subsequent section.

The Critical Approach

The critical approach acknowledges the functionalist (which emphasizes structure and reproduction) and interpretive (which emphasizes production and agency) approaches to socialization. Thus, the critical approach is concerned with totality, consciousness, alienation, and critique (Burrell & Morgan, 1979), thereby bringing to awareness the ability to criticize what is taken for granted about everyday life (class, gender, and relation). An essential concern of those operating within the critical approach is social transformation aimed at increasing justice, equality, freedom, and human dignity. Reality is viewed as socially created and sustained. The basis of the critical approach is a reflexivity not found in the other paradigms (Zeichner & Gore, 1990). It is important to note that individuals will sometimes challenge and reject messages they receive, even within departments that have policies.
In view of that, Bolster (1983, p. 303) argues that “People must be considered as both creators and the products of the social situations in which they live.” Bolster’s argument implies that people can participate in shaping the society in which they live and at the same time their society can shape them (through training/socialization). Thus, people actively contribute to what they are and what they would like to become. So, the critical perspective disagrees with the functionalists’ induction and assimilation theory and agrees with the interpretive reaction theory. Though the functionalist and interpretivist approaches have been widely practiced in professional schools (medicine, nursing, social work), the critical approach requires more attention to questioning what is normally taken for granted in society, and to participating in social transformation aimed at increasing justice, equality, freedom, and human dignity.

Conclusion:

Overall, the three approaches to socialization have implications for the socialization process of graduate students. While functionalism puts more emphasis on the social structure, the interpretive approach is more concerned with human agency. The critical approach acknowledges the two approaches but introduces the aspect of reflexivity and social justice. However, as mentioned previously, this paper adopts the interpretive approach. I argue that professional socialization is a give-and-take process. Inasmuch as departments design policies on socialization processes, graduate students choose what to take and what to leave based on various variables, among them—student background, personality, academic ability, race and gender. Therefore socialization process should be handled with caution. It should be made crystal clear that departments cannot dictate people how to behave, especially graduate students. However, much the department designs and implements socialization policies, graduate students will choose what to take and what not to take, depending on what they perceive will prepare them for their professions. It is upon the departments to, not only come up with socialization policies, but also understands students from the interpetivists standpoint and provides a supportive environment to facilitate the professional socialization process. The question is: how do you ensure that graduate students have been socialized as intended by the department? My response to this question is: through the students’ choice to accept to join the graduate program, persist and graduate

REFERENCES
Austin, A. E. (2002). Preparing the Next Generation of Faculty: Graduate School as Socialization to Academic Career. The Journal for Higher Education, 73(1). The Ohio State University


©Society for Business and Management Dynamics