

*“Communication and Social Solidarity between
faculty and graduate students:
Disconnects when entering new academic institutions”*

The Research Problem

Academic institutions generally offer disciplines that provide students with undergraduate degrees, master’s degree, and medical and Doctor of Philosophy degrees. Within these disciplines are a plethora of programs that provide individuals with skills related to their specific interests.

Undergraduate students who advance their goals in higher learning by entering graduate programs are often stratified by age, gender, ethnicity and cultures. These breaks in routine patterns of behavior (5) may cause disconnects—breaks in routine patterns of behavior¹. Especially, if students are leaving familiar spaces in which they have created an organic collective consciousness, where they have learned to navigate, and often manipulate, the rules and structures of hierarchical institutional systems to their advantage (Simmel).² Students often place faculty in positions of *power* because they can influence access to *knowledge* because of the hierarchy in academic institutions³. Students also measure access to forms of knowledge by *events*⁴ in their lives (112), and displacements and transformations to new public spheres⁵ with different frames of reference, can present challenges because of prior relationships with faculty who had positions of power.

It is this stratified group upon which I would like to focus my research study. Before presenting the proposal and hypothesis, I would like to provide some background to the problem.

¹ Foucault, Michael, 1972. *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*. A. M. Sheridan Smith, New York: Pantheon Books. Pp. 3-17, Introduction; 215-237, Appendix.

² Georg, and Kurt H. Wolff. 1950. *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*. Glencoe, Ill: Free Press. Chapter 4 The Metropolis and Mental Life; Pp. 3-13, 21-23.

³ Foucault, Michael, 1972. *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*. A. M. Sheridan Smith, New York: Pantheon Books. Pp. 3-17, Introduction; 215-237, Appendix.

⁴ Foucault, Michael, and Colin Gordon. 1980. *Power and Knowledge: selected interviews and other writings, 1972-1977*. New York: Pantheon Books. Pp. 109-133.

⁵Habermas, Jürgen, and Steven Seidman. 1989. *Jürgen Habermas on society and politics: a reader*. Boston: Beacon, Chapter ten: The public Sphere Pp. 189-228.

Background of the Problem

Per Michael Foucault,⁶ discourse in every society has historically been *controlled, selected, organized and redistributed* to limit the transfer of knowledge, to restrict verbal communication and social interaction (216). Institutional systems are organized by hierarchical systems into disciplines that have rules, definitions, techniques and instruments that regulate dialogue and social interaction. These institutional systems have the *power* to include or exclude individuals in *discourses* related to *knowledge*. Foucault believes the events that cause historical paradigm shifts are not continuous, but have discontinuities related to shifts of power in structural relationships.⁷ Structural relationship disconnects—which can affect social status and economic power—depend upon discourse and the transfer of knowledge (112-116). Intellectuals, who control the transfer of knowledge, have economic and political advantages that can stratify the social status of individuals within the division of labor—graduate students (132).

Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann posit that individuals (actors), feel in control of their everyday lives when they can use common-sense knowledge to interpret and manipulate typifications to their advantage (331-333). When navigating through difficult or unfamiliar social interactions, actors draw upon past *symbolic actions* and *knowledge* to reorient behavior; for example, children interacting during play, and adults having face to face encounters at work; both synchronize their actions for positive outcomes (336).⁸

Erving Goffman supports the concept that correct interpretations, and positive actions related towards the verbal symbols and body language emitted from social interactions, will gain acceptance into groups.⁹ When individuals enter new social environments, their first instincts are to glean from the expressions emitted by groups, expected behaviors. Goffman believes that

⁶ Foucault, 1972. *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*. A.M. Sheridan Smith. Incls. NY: Pantheon Books. Pp. 3-17 Introduction; Pp. 215-237 Appendix: The Discourse on Language (Org. 1971).

⁷ Foucault, Michael, and Colin Gordon. 1980. *Power and Knowledge: selected interviews and other writings, 1972-1977*. New York: Pantheon Books. Pp. 109-133.

⁸ Farganis, James. Ed. 2003. *Readings in Social Theory*. New York: McGraw-Hill. Pp. 331-339. Chapter 10. "Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann: Foundations of Knowledge in Everyday Life."

⁹ Goffman, Erving. 1959. *The presentation of self in everyday life*. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday. Pp. 1-16. Introduction and pp. 238-255 Conclusion.

interactions happen within fixed barriers of perception controlled by several boundaries, shown in Figure 1 (240-242); these boundaries determine patterns of behavior.

Figure 1

<i>technical</i>	an intentionally organized space that can be efficient or inefficient in social interactions
<i>political</i>	how the actors can control the images portrayed to the audience
<i>structural</i>	horizontal and vertical, and forward and backward status divisions between the actors and the audience
<i>cultural</i>	moral values that influence the actions of both the actors and audience
<i>dramaturgical</i>	a quality that interacts with the other four qualities

Graduate programs in academic institutions have fixed spaces in which students are expected to socially interact with faculty. The political dynamics of these spaces vary, depending on how faculty establish ground rules for dialogue and social interaction.

Randall Collins¹⁰ addresses social interactions that arise in *micro-social networks* (for example, a graduate program), housed within *macro-social structures* (academic institutions). Macro-structures measure micro-units by time, space and the number of *interaction ritual chains*—social interactions that occur (196-198). Collins refers to Durkheim’s *principle of social density*, as an example of how encounters between individuals in large populations provide more diverse social networking experiences, while the inverse—encounters between individuals in small one-dimensional populations—have the opposite effect of limiting social interactions (196). These social interactions—“*chains of interaction rituals*”—create “*cultural capital*” for participants that relate to inclusion or exclusion within social situations (199-200).

Undergraduate students have greater opportunities for developing social networks and creating cultural capital because of proximity to large groups, while graduate students—who participate in smaller and more controlled academic environments that place demands upon their time and social interaction—have fewer opportunities for creating “*chains of interaction*”

¹⁰ Alexander, Jeffrey C. et. Al eds. 1987. *The Micro-macro link*. Berkeley: University of California Press. Chapter 8: Randall Collins: Interaction Ritual Chains, Power and Property: The Micro-Macro Connection as an Empirically Based Theoretical Problem. Pp. 193-206.

rituals” that accumulate “*cultural capital*.” Social interaction and networking with faculty, which may eventually provide outcomes for job opportunities upon graduation, depend upon graduate students’ abilities to find faculty who are willing to spend the time to transfer *knowledge*.

Jürgen Habermas posits that each time individuals change sociocultural lifeworld’s, stratifications in communication systems occur. While individuals remain within cultural systems that are familiar, rational correspondence and social interactions are easily mastered, but changing into unfamiliar cultural systems, may cause disconnections and problems of adaptation—security is exchanged for uncertainty, and feelings of a loss of power occur¹¹ (190-195). Finding methods for adapting to new social environments and dealing with disconnections can help individuals navigate through *hierarchical power systems*.

Research Solution Proposal

George Herbert Mead posits that childhood experiences in social networks develop patterns of behavior that shape future social interactions.¹² He believes that shaping, through role playing and in games, help children present a public persona to their peers. As children develop into adults, they continue to use role playing to gain prestige and authority relations, and to maintain inclusion in social networks. Talcott Parsons posits that actions and ideas in cultural collectives are shaped by beliefs and values embedded in social structures. Actions are relational and are reducible to behaviors that help individuals and collectives achieve their specific goals. These behaviors have significance and cathexes attached to them and are regulated by three modes of organization: social systems, personality systems, and cultural systems—which can be single or collective environments (54-55)¹³. Parsons brings forward the notion that higher authority, which is regulated by universalistic norms, takes precedence over lower authority in

¹¹ Habermas, Jürgen, and Steven Seidman. 1989. *Jürgen Habermas on society and politics: a reader*. Boston: Beacon Press. P.p. 231-236, Chapter ten: The public Sphere; Chapter nine: The Uncoupling of system and Life world, pp. 189-228.

¹² Mead, George Herbert. 1959 *The Social Psychology of George Herbert Mead*. Ed. Anselm Strauss. The University of Chicago Press: Phoenix Books. Part Five. *Self*. The Self and the Organism Pp. 212-260.

¹³ Parsons, Talcott, and Edward Shils. 1962. *Toward a general theory of action*. New York: Harper & Row. Pp.53-109, Chapter 1: Categories of the Orientation and Organization of Action.

conflict resolutions. These universal norms determine patterns of behavior in complicated social systems (421, 423)¹⁴.

Ludwig Wittgenstein believes that power in social structures lies in the hands of those individuals who control naming conventions of objects (*the essence of human language*), every word has a meaning because it signifies something. Wittgenstein outlines his argument for the power in language skills by referring to the *ostensive* teaching of words in *Philosophical Investigations*,¹⁵ as “*establishing an association between the word and the thing.*” This profound naming convention focuses on structural exactness for things (objects), by using linguistic symbols through *language-games*. Wittgenstein believes that language-games are meant to bring into prominence that speaking language is part of an activity, or a form of life.

The above social theorists presented in the research problem and research solution proposal may vary in notions, but selective concepts from each of their theories provide theories that may help first-semester graduate students to better adjust to the new public spheres that contain different frames of reference related to space, time, and personalities. For example, Parsons looks at how authority figures in social networks redirect the actions of actors during stressful situations to maintain equilibrium in institutional settings, while Habermas focuses on the intimate situations occurring in the lifeworld’s (external and internal spaces) of individuals, by focusing on work, language and power. Mead’s belief of shaping behaviors through role playing, and Wittgenstein’s symbolic language games are tools that first-semester graduate students can use when interacting new public spheres.

Research Experiment Study Design

I propose a research study based on a series of social interactions between a faculty member and first-semester graduate students, that is designed to help minimize the communication and social solidarity problems first-semester graduate students may develop when disconnects from transferring into a new academic institutional system occur. These

¹⁴ Calhoun, Craig J. et al. Eds. 2002. *Classical sociological theory*. Malden, Mass: Blackwell. Talcott Parsons. Pp. 421-440. Chapter 33 “An Outline of the Social System” [1961].

¹⁵ Wittgenstein, Ludwig. 1953. *Philosophical investigations*. New York: Macmillan. Pp. 2-17

students are stratified by age, gender, ethnicity and cultures, and acclimating into new public spheres may take time away from focusing on academic priorities their first semester in graduate school.

Experimental Research Study Design:

This experimental research study will explore cause and effect relationships in communication and social solidarity between a faculty member and first-semester graduate students; where the cause, i.e., game playing, will be manipulated to produce the effects of improved communication and social solidarity within specific groups. Experimental groups will be labeled A and B, and control groups C and D.

Subjects:

The study sample will consist of the Director of the Graduate Program (JK), in the School of History, Technology & Society (HTS) at the Georgia Institute of Technology, and twelve first-semester graduate students. The graduate student sample comprises a mix of ages, gender, ethnicity and cultures.

Design and Measures: The Director of the HTS Graduate Program, JK, will ask first-year graduate students if they would like to participate in a research study related to communication and social solidarity. He will explain that the study is designed by a graduate student, and that he/she has agreed to participate as a representative of the HTS program. He will further explain that students have options to decline, but if they accept, their participation will provide opportunities to spend time with the Director of the HTS Graduate program.

The twelve first-semester graduate students who decide to participate in the research experiment will be asked to sign a consent form (attached), and then randomly assigned to one of four groups (three in each group). Groups A and B will contain experimental participants, while Groups C and D will contain control participants. The four groups will meet once a month for the months of September, October, and November, for three hours. Group A will meet the first Friday, Group B the second Friday, Group C the third Friday and Group D the fourth Friday, in Room 204 at the School of the History and Technology & Society (HTS), 221 Bobby Dodd Way, Old Civil Engineering Building, Atlanta, Georgia, 30332-0225.

Procedure:

In the first meetings with Groups A and B, JK will explain procedures: After entering Room 204 and taking seats, graduate students will be asked to participate in playing a game. The game will involve putting together a mystery jigsaw puzzle. The object of the game is to solve the mystery in the three-hour timeframe. The first mystery puzzle will contain 500 pieces. The students will be told that the researcher is requesting that they fill out a survey form with two questions: "Please rate Professor JK's communication skills (from one to ten) during the three-hour meeting," and "Please rate the social solidarity between Professor JK and participating graduate students (from one to ten) during the three-hour meeting." They will further be told the surveys are numbered and confidential—and only the researcher will look at the ratings for data collection. Refreshments of cookies and non-alcoholic beverages will be provided at the end of each of the meetings by the graduate student who designed the research study.

Students will have the option of leaving at any time before the three-hour timeframe, but all three students must agree to leave together. If the mystery puzzle isn't solved by the end of the three hours, the graduate student will provide a photo of the completed puzzle, to give the graduate students and Professor JK a chance to solve the puzzle. The second meeting will follow the same guidelines as the first meeting, but the mystery puzzle to assemble will contain 750 pieces, and the final meeting mystery puzzle will contain 1000 pieces.

Groups C and D will have different experiences from Groups A and B. After entering Room 204 and being seated, graduate students will be told that the goal of the three-hour meeting is to focus on communication and social solidarity between faculty and first-semester graduate students. There will be no fixed agenda and the format is open to the design of the students. The graduate students will also be given the option of leaving before the three-hour timeframe, but like Groups A and B, all graduate students must agree on whether to stay or leave. Before leaving, graduate students will be asked to fill out surveys and will also be told of the confidentiality. Refreshments of cookies and non-alcoholic beverages will also be provided at the end of each meeting.

Hypothesis:

Providing an opportunity for first-semester graduate students to participate in putting together a mystery jigsaw puzzle and solving the mystery with the Director of the Graduate Program in HTS, will place Director JK at the same level experience and competence as the graduate students. The interaction will give students opportunities to see how a senior faculty member handles a challenge of completing a task that has time constraints. Unlike Groups C and D, experimental Groups A and B, will be asked to focus on the jigsaw puzzle and solving the mystery, and not on how to communicate and build social solidarity during the three-hour meeting. This will take pressure off experimental Groups A and B to focus on communication and social solidarity skills with a faculty member who has *power* over the transfer of *knowledge*. The faculty member will be able to observe how these graduate students work together to find solutions for a problem within a limited timeframe. This is a win/win situation for both faculty and first-semester graduate students.

The hypothesis is: that after completion of the proposed study, Director JK and graduate students in Groups A and B will improve in communication and social solidarity an average a 55% percent or greater, while JK and graduate students in control Groups C and D will only improve in communication and social solidarity an average of 50 percent or less, +3 or -3 percent.

Discussion on Outcome

Broadly speaking, graduate students like playing, and winning, games on their electronic devices, so solving a mystery jigsaw puzzle will provide a challenge for them to succeed. The graduate students may vary in cultural and social backgrounds but being able to transfer their gaming skills to improve communication and social solidarity skills with a senior faculty member—should help them in future interactions with HTS faculty in classroom and social situations. The goal of this research study is to find a non-threatening means for a senior faculty member—as a representative of an academic institution—who is in a position of *power* to

transfer or withhold *knowledge*, help minimize the stress first-year graduate students may feel about transitioning into new a new academic environment.

The hypothesis “that experimental Groups A and B will improve in communication and social solidarity with Director JK by 55 percent or greater, is an ambitious goal. My hope is that providing a social situation between senior faculty and first-year graduate students that focuses on game-playing or simple conversation, should at least improve communication and social solidarity between these groups by 50 percent.

Research Limitations

The sample size of the graduate student population is only 12 students, and outside stressors, like illnesses, time pressures from graduate courses, family or co-habitation demands on time, etc., might affect participation in the three sessions during the first semester.