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A Thematic Analysis of Faculty Advice for Doctoral Students

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Abstract

The present study examines advice given by the graduate faculty in a department (n=24) to new Ph.D. students in the department. The thematic analysis employed inductive coding to draw themes from the data, and seven salient themes emerged from the interviews: *relationships, openness, individuality, purpose, academic work, self-care, and logistics*. Grounded in a theoretical framework of social constructivism, the present study analyzes how knowledge is created as a social artifact that is passed down from faculty to graduate student and highlights the ways in which doctoral students then shape the meaning of said knowledge through their own interpretations and actions. This study analyzes the interview data to examine the ways in which systemic challenges of pressure and power are perpetuated within academia and highlights the many ways in which graduate faculty are truly invested in their students and their well-being. The findings serve as a catalyst for introspection for the various actors in academic systems, while providing an uplifting motif of genuine care for the overall wellness of doctoral students.

Keywords: constructivism, thematic analysis, faculty advice, sociocultural learning theory, doctoral studies

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Introduction

Extensive research has been done on the experiences of doctoral students entering academia, the roles of university faculty, and the complex dynamics between doctoral students and their mentors (Antony, 2002; Astin, 1984; Weidman & Stein, 2003). Research has also paid close attention to the areas of graduate student recruitment, retention, career choice, involvement, and academic success. Studies like Zhang (2018) have looked at effective mentoring strategies to help faculty members in the process of mentoring, and findings from various scholars have focused on the elements that lead to success in graduate school. However, there is no previous research that has specifically analyzed advice given from faculty to doctoral students.

The advice faculty choose to give students provides a unique window into their own experiences within the academy – both as faculty members and previously as doctoral students – into their priorities, and even into what they hope to see in the future. We are as much concerned with *what* advice is given as we are with understanding what that might mean about *why* faculty have chosen those particular words of wisdom. The purpose of the present study, therefore, was to better understand faculty members' shared priorities for doctoral students across an entire department as illustrated by their advice to doctoral students, and to explore the implications of these commonalities. By synthesizing the perspectives of the faculty in a university department when advising new students, this study provides insight regarding the construction of human knowledge and mechanisms of socialization in academia.

As part of an introductory course required for all first-year doctoral students, the faculty in the department were interviewed by the course instructor - a tenured professor - and asked to provide their advice for new Ph.D. students. This study seeks to analyze and synthesize the

advice in order to answer the research question: *What are the shared priorities of faculty when it comes to advising doctoral students, and what can be learned about the PhD program experience from these priorities?* We will first establish a theoretical framework that positions social constructivism and the construction of knowledge as a human product at the core of our argument in an effort to illustrate the notion that the advice given from faculty to graduate students shapes the graduate student experience. The method section will then outline how this study was carried out, followed by the findings, and concluding with implications for future research.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in Vygotsky's (1978) social constructivism theory, especially as this theory pertains to knowledge construction. As shown in the literature, social constructivism theory is deeply tied to both socialization processes (how we learn from social interactions), and to the emergence of cultural artifacts (what we pass down from generation to generation), including knowledge in the form of advice. A closer look at existing research about graduate student socialization within the framing of sociocultural theory can be useful in analyzing the implications of the advice being given from faculty to Ph.D. students.

Constructivism, as conceptualized by Piaget (1966), proposes that learning is constructed through the accommodation and assimilation of past and present experiences. Bruner (1960) takes constructivism further, adding that social interaction plays a significant role in cognitive development. Stemming from Bandura's 1977 social learning theory and Vygotsky's 1980 sociocultural learning theory, social constructivism highlights the interplay between learners and models as well as the importance of cognitive processes that derive meaning from experiences. The theories of behaviorism, cognitive theory, and sociocultural theory scaffold a foundation for

understanding of social constructivism (McMahon, 1997). First, behaviorist theories propose that learning happens from stimulus-response cycles that either reinforce or discourage patterns of behavior (Skinner, 1963). However, cognitive theory argues against the oversimplification of operant theories, adding that there is an important dimension of individual cognitive awareness, introspection, and reflection which cannot be neglected (Bruner, 1960). Finally, Vygotsky's (1980) sociocultural learning theory positions the co-construction of knowledge as a socially-mediated process in which observation of models serves as the main source for the construction of knowledge.

The aggregate of behaviorist theory, cognitive theory, and sociocultural theory leads to the logic behind Vygotsky's 1978 theory of social constructivism, which states that learning takes place through reinforcement in social contexts and from the meaning that is individually and socially derived from various experiences. Social constructivism holds true the idea that interactions between individuals serve as the core for construction of knowledge, adding that learning happens from and within the reinforcement obtained in social interactions (Vygotsky, 1978). Constructivism posits that the ways in which learners interpret experiences and the conclusions they draw from those experiences with others are as important as the experiences themselves.

In the domain of advice-giving and receiving, social constructivism would emphasize that giving advice reveals plenty about the giver's experience, and receiving advice shapes the receiver's future experience and perception. For instance, if you enter a restaurant and a friendly stranger offers you the advice to steer clear of the oysters, three things are likely to occur. First, you will be unlikely to order the oysters, or you might feel hesitant about them if you do choose to order. Second, you will wonder what is wrong with the oysters and perhaps generalize that

advice onto other aspects of that restaurant. Finally, you might even pass that advice on to others, whether or not that experience has been your own. In the domain of doctoral programs, advice from faculty directly impacts the experience of graduate students and, if faculty are advising for or against something, it also shows that they themselves have had that experience.

One key concept of social constructivism is that the human mind is *mediated* through social interactions and social artifacts (such as knowledge and advice) embedded into our thought processes (Lantolf, 2010). The concept of the mediated mind relies on external actors shaping our cognitive and affective perspectives. Mind mediation can happen through various actors, such as “shared modeling of social customs and hierarchies,” (Nelson, 1998). The process of having faculty at a university give advice directly to doctoral students is social constructivism and mind mediation in its purest form. The faculty construct knowledge based on their own past experiences and schemas, passing it down to doctoral students who then receive that knowledge and actively alter it through their own interpretations and conclusions.

When researchers have examined advice, they have usually drawn upon advice given horizontally, across disciplinary hierarchies, meaning what faculty thinks faculty should do, or what students think students should do. The present study, however, is not concerned with the utilization of advice and organizational behavior (Van Swol et al., 2018). Instead, this study’s focus is on analyzing the possible reasoning behind advice given from mentors to mentees in academia and understanding what might be revealed about a system when looking at commonalities across various individuals navigating the same system in unique yet similar ways. Returning to our restaurant analogy, we are interested in understanding what the advice of two dozen restaurant managers might reveal about the restaurants themselves. In the world of

academia, what can be learned about the Ph.D. program experience by analyzing the commonalities between the advice faculty choose to give new doctoral students?

In analyzing the construction of knowledge between faculty and doctoral students (mentors/mentees), systems theory is another beneficial framework as it highlights the interactions between different levels in an environment. Bronfenbrenner's ecological model (1979) illustrates the ways in which social environments shape individual human development, and Zhang (2018) uses Bronfenbrenner's ecological approach to examine academic advising for students, focusing on the interaction between individual and contextual factors at play in the experience of college students. Various studies like Zhang's have looked at such interactions, analyzing best practices for faculty advisors or for graduate students, but an analysis has not been done on general advice given directly from faculty to doctoral students regarding their doctoral journey.

When individuals who are further ahead or higher up within a system provide advice for those just entering a system, the advice itself can outline the organizational power hierarchies and common challenges faced within that system. As noted by Kukla (2000), members of a society together invent the properties of the world. Bandura's 1978 reciprocal determinism theory likewise states that there is a tri-directional relationship between a person's behavior, individual attributes, and social context. In other words, a person's behavior shapes their social context and personality just as much as the behavior itself is shaped by the context and personal attributes.

Additionally, Bronfenbrenner and other systems theorists posit that systems actively work to maintain themselves, so top-down advice within a system must also inherently function to reproduce some of the same challenges previously faced by those with more

experience. In *Introduction to Sociocultural Theory*, Lantolf (2000) states that, “Physical as well as symbolic (or psychological) tools are artifacts created by human culture(s) over time and are made available to succeeding generations, which can modify these artifacts before passing them on to future generations” (p. 1). Advice passed down from generation to generation can therefore be conceptualized as psychological artifacts, built upon and modified by each generation. A thematic analysis of these psychological artifacts within the culture of academia can reveal aspects of the academy and the dynamics within it that might otherwise remain unexplored.

Method

Participants

Participants for this study included all of the faculty members from a university department (n=24). Faculty were asked to participate by the course instructor, a tenured professor in the department, and all agreed to be interviewed. Every faculty member in the department participated, including the course instructor, who provided their advice to the authors via email following the completion of the course. While the sample size is relatively small and having faculty from only one department is a possible limitation, we believe that the demographics within the department are quite diverse in age, gender, race, and the nature of individual professional experience and personal background. 33% of participants were male (n=8), while 66% of participants were female (n=16). Out of the 24 participants, 75% (n=18) identified as White, roughly 4% (n=1) identified as Asian, roughly 8% (n=2) of the participants identified as Latino, roughly 4% (n=1) identified as Indian, and approximately 8% (n=2) of the participants identified as African or African American. Every participant held a Ph.D. and was a full-time faculty member, though their individual experiences ranged from recent immigrant to American citizen, no experience outside of the university domain to decades

of domestic and international teaching experience, and a wide variety of specializations and disciplines within the field of education.

Procedure

Data collection. The interview data was collected by the professor teaching the required doctoral seminar. The course instructor asked all faculty members in the department to meet with them individually via online video conferencing and all of the interviews were recorded and made public. The authors were both first-year Ph.D. students and enrolled in the required course at the time of the interviews. 22 of the 24 interviews were conducted by the course instructor through individual online video conferences. One faculty member was unable to schedule a time for the interview, so they sent their advice to the instructor via email. The final piece of advice was that from the course instructor, which was sent to the authors of this study via email upon their completion of the course. It is important to note that faculty members were asked to provide just one piece of advice for new Ph.D. students, so responses were limited to what each faculty member chose to prioritize above everything else. All faculty members were asked to answer the interview question, “What is one piece of advice would you give first-year Ph.D. students?” during their faculty interviews.

Data analysis. The 22 interviews were transcribed by the authors and inductive coding was used to look for overarching themes through numerous iterations. Four transcripts were first randomly selected for the initial round of thematic analysis and coding. Initial codes, illustrated in Figure 1, sought to capture commonalities across participants. After four rounds of recoding, the authors were able to identify seven codes that accurately captured the data and created the coding frame for the data analysis. The resulting coding frame was flat, with equal value assigned to each code. With the organizational structure in place, each author

individually coded the interviews, extrapolating and organizing direct quotes by theme. Using the coding frame, the authors were able to quantify the results and interpret the significance of that numerical data in conjunction with the qualitative data (see Figures 1 and 2).

The original thematic analysis yielded seven general themes, which included: relationships, passion/interest/affective, intellectual immersion, purpose, pressure, micro vs macro thinking, mindfulness, imposter syndrome/self-efficacy/belonging, the game of academia, and patience/humility/personal growth. By the last round of coding, seven salient themes emerged from the interviews: *relationships, openness, individuality, purpose, academic work, self-care, and logistics* (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Seven Themes

Relationships	Individuality	Purpose	Openness
Relationships Advisors Pursuing faculty Taking initiative Courage	Hike your hike Agency Self-efficacy Belonging Experience Self-advocacy Individuality Marathon vs sprint Belief in self	Passion What is your why? Sand in your shoes	Humility Flexibility Transformation Growth Failure
Logistics	Self-Care	Academic Work	
Planning Setting priorities Time management	Self-care Joy Mindfulness Pressure	Reading Writing Exploring methodology Early scholarship Intellectual immersion Interdisciplinary curiosity Effort Hard work	

Findings

Of the seven themes that emerged from the data (relationships, openness, individuality, purpose, academic work, self-care, logistics), five are concerned with intangible aspects of the

doctoral journey, and two remain focused on the concrete obstacles that doctoral students might face. 29% of participants (n=7) spoke about the importance of various relationships. 42% (n=10) focused largely on the importance of remaining open-minded. Three of the themes – maintaining one’s sense of individuality, focusing on purpose and passion, and handling logistics – were each mentioned by 25% of participants (n=6). Finally, 38% (n=9) focused on aspects of academic work, and 21% (n=38) focused on the importance of self-care. Table 1 illustrates the results by percentage of participants per theme, while Table 2 illustrates the results by number of individual participants per theme.

Table 1: Results by Percentage of Participants per Theme

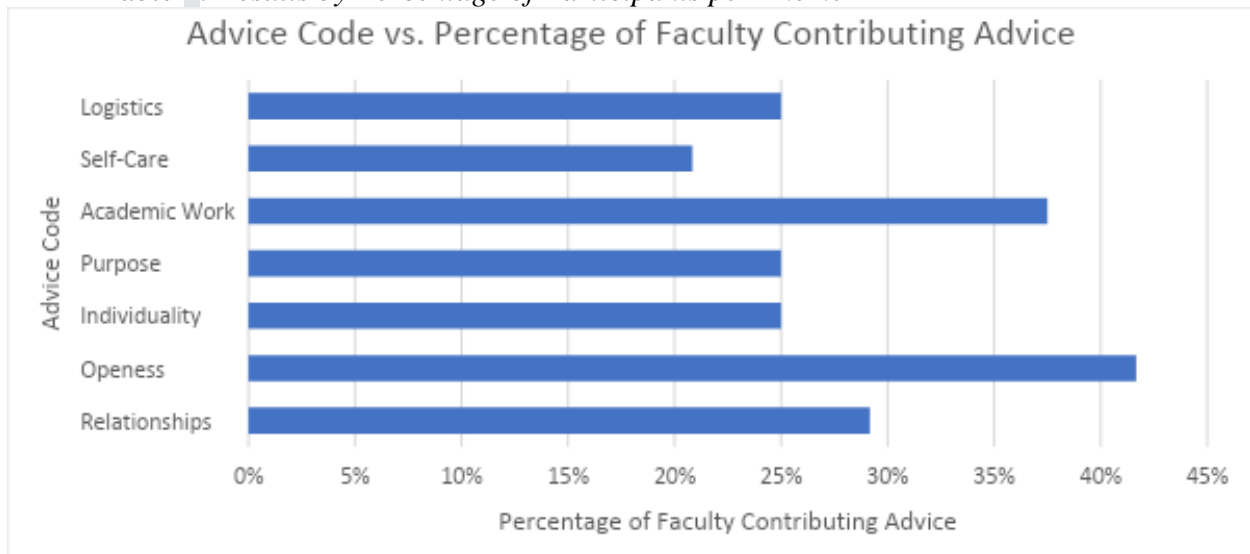
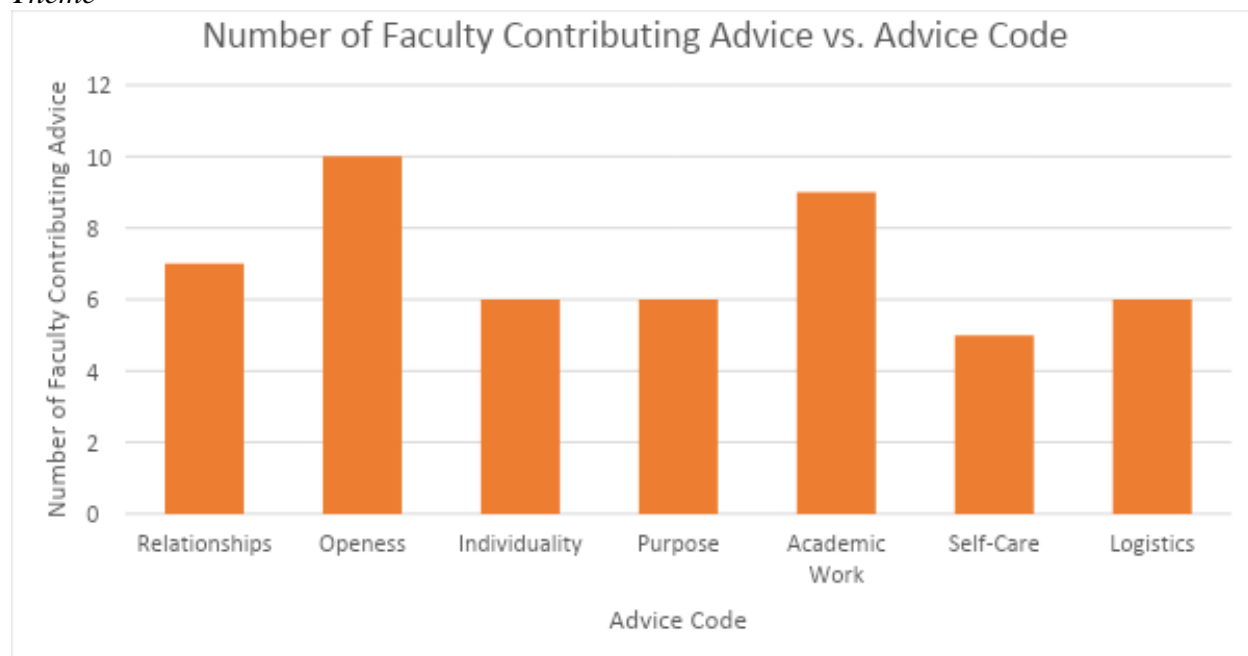


Table 2: Results by Number of Individual Participants per Theme



The theme found in the data most frequently, with 42% of faculty speaking to its importance, is the theme of *openness*. This theme across the data encompasses the ideas of humility, flexibility, transformation, growth, and failure. Another theme we identified is *individuality*. 25% of UNL graduate faculty contributed advice about individuality, which includes doctoral students having a sense of belonging and agency, having autonomy over their Ph.D. program, and an understanding that a doctoral program is a marathon where one must navigate the system bravely as an individual. Nine of twenty-four faculty members' advice extended into *academic work*. Academic work is centered around reading, writing, and leveraging different opportunities for research, acknowledging the fact that completing a doctoral program is not possible without immense amounts of effort and time, especially time devoted reading and writing. 25% of graduate faculty contributed advice about navigating the *logistics* of a doctoral program. The theme of logistics across the data includes elements such as having a clear plan for which classes to take, setting priorities for time management and commitments, and utilizing tools needed to successfully complete a Ph.D. program.

Five of the faculty members (21%) referenced the idea of *self-care* and mental health in their advice. Being present, keeping the journey in perspective, and showing kindness and compassion for oneself are all elements of self-care that the faculty proved to value. Another salient theme throughout the interviews was that of *relationships* and their significance and impact on a graduate students' trajectory. Seven faculty members (29%) referenced this theme in their piece of advice. Finally, six out of the 24 faculty members (25%) spoke about the theme of *purpose and passion*. This theme highlights the idea that doctoral students must ensure that they do not lose sight of why they embarked on this challenging journey and the greater purpose they are working toward in order to draw strength from that passion and meaning, particularly in moments of need. In the sections that follow, we will provide a broader explanation for each of the themes, including specific examples from the data.

Theme 1: Openness

Openness was found across the data as the ideas of humility, flexibility, transformation, growth, and failure. Faculty member Q's advice was entirely centered around this idea. They encouraged students to remain humble and open to learning, regardless of their level of experience, and spoke about the importance of revisiting literature or concepts that might seem familiar, because they can hold entirely new levels of depth and complexity as our perspectives evolve with time and experience. This faculty member gave the example of taking the same course as a master's student and later as a doctoral student and getting completely different value out of the course each time. They encouraged doctoral students to jump into new opportunities and to not shy away from big responsibilities.

Faculty members W and N each mentioned the importance of being open to new opportunities and experiences, trying new things, and "putting yourself out there." Similarly,

faculty member V said we should “be willing to take some detours along the way,” and faculty member E encouraged students to be receptive to new possibilities and to learning something new that might lead to new and exciting directions. Likewise, faculty member F cautioned against holding on to the “grand notions” with which students enter doctoral programs, and stated that, while it is important to have a plan, it’s equally important to know that there’s no perfect pathway. This professor also spoke about the everyday realities that will change those original plans and assured students that these detours are healthy preparation for the imperfect roads that make up academic life in general.

This theme was presented in a slightly different variation from faculty member X, who encouraged doctoral students to “be a little selfish.” She spoke of a doctoral journey as an “incredibly special and unique time” and “very much the time for students to become who they want to be and learn the things that they want to learn on their becoming journey.” In a tangential piece of advice, faculty member M illustrated the importance of failure as a teacher and “a pathway to success.” The theme was perhaps most succinctly summarized by faculty member I who said, “transformation takes time, effort, and most importantly, openness to others’ feedback and a willingness on your part to grow intellectually.”

Theme 2: Individuality

Individuality as a theme is conceptualized as having autonomy and agency, having a sense of belonging, and being confident in one’s personal purpose and attributes. At some point during a doctoral program, everyone experiences questions of “What am I doing here?” or “Why did I decide to do this?” and these questions are a direct product of doing challenging work that is not always linear and rarely follows a clear or predictable path. Faculty member D commented, “Remember that you do belong here. That who you are matters, and that

you shouldn't reserve what you have to say because you're here and you deserve to be here." For doctoral students, remembering that their program intentionally selected them can be helpful reassurance when challenges feel insurmountable. In the same vein, sometimes advisors might be interested in an area of research or project that doctoral students are not invested in, and faculty member W states that when that happens, self-advocacy is invaluable. Faculty member K expands on this notion by saying that no other advice matters for doctoral students unless they truly analyze who they are as individuals at their core. This professor said, "Own who you are, never forget where you come from because that in itself will fragment you and keep you from enacting change because all of you [first year Ph.D. students] can start changing the world right now." If doctoral students do not yet have a foundational understanding of their own identity and take ownership over that identity, it will be challenging for them to find the sense of belonging and to advocate for themselves within a doctoral program.

Since Ph.D. programs are completed by individuals, there is something to be said about sticking to unique, individual plans and not being distracted or intimidated by others' progress. In a sense, doctoral students have full autonomy over the path they choose. Faculty member C uses the analogy of "hike your own hike," as they want people to understand that graduate school is not the place to be in competition with others but the time to focus on what you want out of the experience. This professor stated:

Grad school is the place for you to pursue what is important for you and to think about how those commitments matter in the larger realm of education. There is no shortage of problems out there. What is your unique contribution to the problem that you see the most pressing?

Faculty members across the study compared graduate school to various sorts of physical journeys. Faculty members T and I compared doctoral programs to running a marathon, emphasizing the notion that truly investing oneself and pacing the work in a way that allows for meaningful scholarship is one of the most important factors for success. Faculty member I advised Ph.D. students to remember that during a marathon there is transformation happening and that professional identities should be transformed by the time a doctoral program is completed. Faculty member T warned students that it is an individual marathon and that doctoral students are the only ones who can prevent themselves from crossing that finish line. This faculty member talked about having the willpower to push through hardship when the end might not be in sight, adding that doctoral students are constantly learning to engage in the highest level of scholarship which can be very challenging, so it is important to push themselves through those hurdles by remember who they are as individuals.

Faculty member F added another layer of complexity to the idea of holding on to individuality within a doctoral program. They focused on the idea of agency and highlighted the fact that “programs don’t just happen to people.” They added that graduate students often struggle with the management of their program, the power or agency to decide who they want to be at the end of the journey. This faculty member stated:

You came into this program with an idea of a particular identity that you wanted. Who is that and how do we flush that out? What are the skills? The content knowledge? The belief structure that we need to push on, collaboratively, to get you there?

They cautioned that faculty cannot make those ideals a reality for their students, and that students must be the ones to forge that path for themselves, with the scaffolding and guidance from

faculty. Faculty member F stated that graduate students must know what their “big dreams” are before they can get support and guidance toward achieving those dreams.

Theme 3: Academic Work

The theme of *academic work* speaks to the importance of immersing oneself in the real work of scholarship through constant reading and writing. “Read, read, and read some more” is one piece of advice offered by faculty member J. Another faculty member expands on that by saying, “Read and write in an interdisciplinary way. Don’t just limit yourself to your discipline, whether it’s social studies education or language acquisition or you know whatever your official academic niche is, go big or go home.” Faculty members acknowledge the tension between everything that there is to do in order to become a successful scholar, and the real time limitations faced by everyone. Reading and writing take great amounts of time, and various faculty members encourage students to cope with this tension by remembering to “relish in those moments during the week when [they] have a couple of hours to sit down and write something or to read something.” Other faculty members suggested that reading is one of the most important ways students can improve their writing.

Writing was the focus for three different graduate faculty members. The general sense was that writing is challenging and time consuming, but that it does not have to happen alone. Faculty members suggested that writing often happens most effectively in groups, and one professor expanded on this by saying:

Write with your advisor if they’re willing to write with you, write with other peers that are willing to work with you, or if you’re writing on your own still get together on the weekend mornings, whenever you have an opportunity, and get going on this thing with accountability partners because the writing thing is the hardest thing to accomplish.

Two faculty members spoke to the fact that lazy writing without a commitment to excellence will not prove to be fruitful for doctoral students, and encouraged students to embrace the process of revising and editing various drafts in order to create writing that they are proud of.

Another aspect of *academic work* is the need for doctoral students to work on research projects, to design and carry out their own projects, and to figure out what methodologies and designs work best for them. One faculty member urged Ph.D. students to pursue these insights before their dissertation, as that is not the time to be figuring out what they do or do not enjoy in research. They advised students to start looking deeply in whatever direction interests them, to design studies, pilot studies, and collect data as early as they can, because this is the only way to figure out their own voice as researchers. Another professor urged Ph.D. students to put themselves out there and contact faculty members who they might be interested in working with. Faculty member B encouraged students to immerse themselves in their work, while faculty member V promoted the benefits of attending conferences to share their work and grow their network. All of this advice highlights the need for a strong work ethic, but also underscores the need for strategic decision-making in the work that is done to leverage all opportunities presented.

Theme 4: Logistics

While *logistics* are often dismissed as basic common knowledge, navigating the complex structures of graduate programs can require quite a bit of cultural and systemic understanding of those structures. Even for students who have spent decades in the American education system, knowing where to find forms, how to complete the forms, and where/when to submit them is only one example of the added logistical challenges for doctoral students. Knowing

which courses to take can also be quite overwhelming. One professor spoke about the importance of establishing a clear plan of action as a key component of being successful in a doctoral program. This professor advised doctoral students to read their department requirements, graduate college requirements, the benchmarks that one has to meet in order to obtain their degree and to be in communication with their advisor regarding these milestones.

One professor represented this theme of *logistics* differently by cautioning graduate students against deviating too much from the outlined guidelines and rubrics for various tasks. They gave the example of having written a five-page play based on *Waiting for Godot* as part of their comprehensive exams and explained that a bold move such as that one can easily backfire if the audience is not receptive. This faculty member encouraged students to play by the rules so that "they (the graduate committee) will know what to do with it."

Identifying priorities when there are various opportunities presented is another challenge for doctoral students. Faculty member M wanted doctoral students to feel empowered to say 'no' when an opportunity does not align with their purpose, but also encouraged students to say 'yes' when the opportunities are exciting. This faculty member said, "When you want to say 'HECK YES, I want to do that!' say yes. All the other times, say 'no.' By doing this, you can learn to prioritize your time." Faculty member W echoed that insight by telling students to keep an open mind ready for different opportunities, but to also be realistic about what can be done within time constraints. This faculty member suggested that students should leverage the opportunities presented to them but not over-commit or try to do too much.

As graduate students at a research institution, where research is an expectation for many, the use of tools to keep all information organized is a logistic theme. Faculty members N and J highly recommended that students figure out software for their citations early on in their

program. Faculty member J specifically mentioned “find some good citation software so that you can keep track of all this reading and all of your notes.” Both professors admitted to learning this lesson the hard way and do not wish that for current and future students.

Theme 5: Self - Care

Practicing kindness toward oneself was a key component of this theme throughout the interviews. Two professors, in particular, focused on this idea, but the theme was woven into much of the advice from most of the faculty. Faculty member V talked about the fact that deadlines will be missed, and that rejection is common, so they urged students to have compassion for themselves. They also talked about impostor syndrome and the toxicity that it can inject into an academic’s psyche. The professor went on to say:

This is hard but try not to let rejection - harsh feedback - you know, missed deadlines, or mistakes drag you down. I think as academics, I was once told, ‘get used to the word no,’ because we get rejected more than we get accepted.

They emphasized the importance of students giving themselves grace and coming to terms with the fact that everyone struggles while pursuing such an advanced level of scholarship.

In parallel advice, faculty member X cautioned that, although it might feel counterintuitive, being a Ph.D. student is the most important time to establish norms for self-care. This faculty member explained that, while it is tempting to say ‘yes’ to everything and be a people-pleaser as a graduate student, this is dangerous territory to navigate because these paradigms will follow doctoral students after they finish their program and enter the world of academia as scholars. Faculty member X encouraged students to balance their “ability to do incredibly challenging and high-level intellectual work with [their] ability to take care of [themselves] as human beings.”

Theme 6: Relationships

Relationships emerged as a salient theme across multiple pieces of advice, and faculty spoke vehemently about the vital need for various forms of supportive relationships throughout a doctoral journey. The first of these relationships mentioned in the data is that of doctoral student and graduate advisor. One faculty member focused on the importance of doctoral students connecting with their major advisors early and often. They cautioned that not doing so is a trend they have noticed with their own students, and one that hinders the students' progress. Faculty member S also spoke to the benefits of maintaining a healthy level of contact with one's advisor, stating that doing so allows students to move forward more quickly and gain confidence. They outlined the possibilities that can come from these interactions, such as discussing literature together and collaborating toward the co-construction of knowledge. In this view, faculty member S was advocating for this particular relationship because of the logistical and academic benefits that are sure to come of it. Faculty also talked about the importance of Ph.D. students finding a good mentor whose values and interests align with their own. One faculty member stated that, "a good mentor does work that you're passionate about but is also someone that you like to work with and feel comfortable with. Someone who cares about you and who you care about but also someone that can push you further intellectually."

The second form of relationships that appeared in the data was that of doctoral student-graduate faculty at large. Faculty member W encouraged students to seek out various faculty members to tap into their expertise and reassured students that faculty are willing and happy to help in any way they can. Speaking to this particular department, faculty member W noted that faculty are ready and eager to help and to engage with graduate students, so she urged students to

“take advantage of that.” Along the same lines, faculty member E stated that faculty are invested in student success and encouraged students to seek out those opportunities to learn from faculty.

The third relationship is that of doctoral student-graduate peers. Faculty expanded on this idea by speaking to the importance of collaborating with peers, stating that they are resources - “intellectually, socially, and logistically.” Faculty urged students to connect with other graduates as a source of constant support. Faculty member C said, “Find your people. Find the people who make you feel sane, make you laugh, and make you think” and stated that this is key to success as a doctoral student. This professor went on to say that it is a “unique and stressful thing to earn a doctorate” and stressed the importance of having people you can trust, talk to, and confide in without ego getting in the way of authenticity. Faculty member C spoke whole-heartedly to the fact that there is enough ego and competition in academia without personal relationships adding to that, and they encouraged students to seek out relationships that lead to feeling “fed, nurtured, and supported.”

Finally, faculty member L added the disclaimer that these relationships take time to develop within a new community. They urged students to invest the time into knowing more about the graduate community that they will be working with. This patience could prove to be challenging, and the process might feel lonely, but doctoral students investing in the people surrounding them during their graduate careers can make the difference between success and failure, and, more importantly, can define the quality of their experience.

Theme 7: Purpose and Passion

The theme of *purpose and passion* was illustrated by two faculty members through use of metaphor. One professor stated that purpose is the “sand in your shoes,” meaning that our purpose should be something that “raises questions and is going to inspire us and lead to trying

to understand what is at the root of an issue.” Another professor spoke about the importance of doctoral students knowing “their why” in order to keep them centered and grounded. Faculty noted that having a true purpose or passion keeps doctoral students motivated to do something about the problem they are hoping to help solve.

Faculty member M posed the question, “Why isn’t the purpose of education happiness?” They urged students to find joy in the process of learning and teaching, to find something that they’re passionate about, and to never give up. This professor encouraged students to “find the joy in the things [they] do prioritize.” Faculty member T spoke about purpose as the source of discipline and persistence that will allow students to “keep going when it would be so much easier to just stop” and said that, in many cases, this can be the “difference between who will finish and who won’t.” Faculty member V encouraged students to keep their goals in mind as they navigate this journey, and faculty member A highlighted the importance of savoring each moment, without focusing on the end result. They spoke to the importance of concentrating on the present moment and what they are learning, and to think about why their journey matters in the bigger picture. Faculty member C eloquently summarized this theme by saying:

I would just really encourage you to think - just to remember why you chose to pursue this in the first place. It’s a really big thing you are doing, it’s a huge commitment, and you have experiences and passions and questions that are yours alone, so I would really encourage you to remember what those are.

Discussion

At the most basic level, the themes across this data can be separated into intrapersonal and interpersonal. The themes of openness, individuality, purpose, academic work, self-care, and

logistics all operate at the individual level, within oneself, while the theme of relationships is the only interpersonal thread. This observation points to the often-solitary quality of the doctoral journey, but also underscores the vital need for supportive relationships in navigating all of those intrapersonal challenges. The faculty advice ranges from concrete to abstract, covering everything from practical and logistical concerns to intangible issues of purpose and joy. This range illustrates the need for balance in the human experience, regardless of the intensity of the experience. The holistic range of advice given by the faculty to doctoral students highlights the fact that no one area of a person's can be truly fulfilling if the others are truly lacking.

One of the most interesting findings from this study is the intersubjectivity between faculty about the challenges, opportunities, and necessities within academia (Gillespie & Cornish, 2010). Intersubjectivity is defined as mutual awareness and the shared agreement between individuals when it comes to defining an object or situation (Gillespie & Cornish, 2010; Mori & Hayashi, 2006). While the institution of academia is built upon common understandings about how to collectively navigate various practices, it is important to note that there is an even deeper level of intersubjectivity regarding the challenges, skills and coping mechanisms needed to thrive in the academy. The advice provided by this department's faculty illustrates a strong consensus about the ways in which academia can prove to be a truly challenging space.

Beyond a shared awareness about the challenging aspects of academia, the interview data further reveals that the professionals within the academic systems are socialized to accept the realities of the structure, without generally seeking to disrupt it. Doctoral students are initiated into the academy by learning to navigate its many challenges, so there is little or no incentive to disrupt the root causes of those challenges. People actively shape the systems they are

simultaneously navigate, but those higher in the hierarchy have much more ability to effect change, while those at the bottom of the hierarchy are limited to being reactive actors.

Even as advice is being passed down from expert to novice, the shared knowledge is largely about how to cope with the pressures and demands, and not about how to stop their development altogether. From a social constructivist perspective, this phenomenon illustrates the power of socialization. Doctoral students get advice about how to cope with the demands of academia, learn to cope with those demands, go on to become faculty who are adept at navigating the extraordinary pressures, and then pass down that knowledge to another generation of doctoral students who continue the cycle. The data points to a perpetuation of normalized pressures within academia through imitative learning and shared knowledge.

One of the most significant points of discussion from the advice analyzed for this study is the fact that faculty in this department share a unanimous and genuine passion and care for their students. The data shows that faculty are invested in their students' well-being far beyond ensuring their academic success. They demonstrated a sincere concern with students' emotional and spiritual wellness, focusing on elements of self-actualization, purpose, passion, and self-care. They commonly mention the importance of being present in the moment and not worrying about competing for status or proving one's worth. While these notions are often contradicted by the ways in which academia pressures students and faculty to produce far beyond what is plausible in a healthy work-life balance, those kind-hearted sentiments are still noteworthy and significant. If faculty share that desire to see their students live a happy, balanced life, free of unhealthy pressure within academia, then it is possible for faculty and students alike to come together to create a humanizing academy.

Conclusion

Academia is a structure through which knowledge is constructed on a daily basis by the intellectual forces of individuals committed to moving their fields forward. This intentional merging of old and new ideas is an integral and normal part of the daily lives of academics, and one they are keenly aware of. However, we hope that this study has highlighted the ways in which knowledge is also constructed subconsciously each day through social interactions, through the ways in which we choose to engage with various tasks, and through the boundaries and priorities we define within our own lives. As doctoral students, we learn from our professors, and we become conditioned to see the world largely as they see it. As faculty, it is an important opportunity to reflect on the intentionality with which that example is being set, and the ways in which challenges and obstacles are being recreated each day within our own systems.

Social constructivism highlights the importance of socialization in human development, but it also emphasizes the idea of personal agency over how that learning is interpreted and operationalized. All of us in academia have the agency to mitigate challenges by being intentional about our boundaries, priorities, and commitments. As the advice from the faculty in this department revealed, there is a strong need for self-care, balance, and self-advocacy within academia, and faculty are committed to these notions. Professors want the best for their students, and they believe in their students' agency to forge those healthy and balanced ways of engaging in scholarship. Our hope is that this study serves as a reminder that imagination and awareness cannot take us further than our daily choices and social interactions, so we must all work to construct a balanced environment, one choice and one social interaction at a time.

Implications and Future Research

An important direction for future research would be to conduct a similar study across different disciplines, in different departments. It is also worth noting that having participants share only one piece of advice is valuable in that it reveals what faculty prioritize above all else, but it is also a limitation as it does not allow for a broader dataset that might reveal a more nuanced analysis. If participants had the opportunity to share various pieces of advice for doctoral students, we might be able to observe more patterns and deepen our understanding of the themes outlined in the present study. Future research would also benefit from conducting a similar study, in various departments, in which the faculty members could have the time to elaborate on their reasons for the advice they choose to share.

With systems theories and social constructivism in mind, it is interesting to consider the individual factors that might lead to faculty from various backgrounds to share unique perspectives and advice. What leads an African American professor to provide one piece of advice might be very different than the driving force behind a Latinx professor's perspective. Current research on the construction of knowledge would support the idea that the advice faculty choose to give might be greatly shaped by their own experiences, opportunities, needs, and challenges. For instance, navigating the logistical aspect of pursuing a doctorate might be of much higher importance to a faculty member whose first language is not English and who represents a minoritized background in the U.S. On the other hand, someone who has spent decades navigating the American education system would likely be much less concerned with logistics and have more freedom to focus on the aesthetics of academia. Studying the nature of advice from faculty, whether it focuses on concrete logistics or abstract idealism, by race,

gender, socioeconomic level, home language, and other demographic and individual characteristics would likely yield important findings.

In this study, we have sought to highlight the need for more research around the nature of knowledge construction and mediation between faculty and doctoral students at universities. The systems and structures that dominate academia can be spaces of great intellectual freedom and ingenuity, but they can also be spaces of inadvertent oppression and unfortunate power imbalances that result in a tremendous amount of stress for those working their way up the ladder of academia. We hope that this paper might serve as a catalyst for self-reflection for professors and faculty who have the power to dismantle oppressive and unhealthy structures that work against them and their students. At the same time, we hope that this study can give doctoral students helpful advice to draw from and allow for a deeper understanding of the systems they navigate every day.