

Graduate Assistants' Self-formation to Transformation: A Positioning Theory Perspective

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Abstract: This paper, grounded in Positioning Theory (Harré & Van Langenhove, 1999), investigates the intricate journey of graduate assistants from self-formation to transformation. Through examining the pivotal themes of social interaction, dynamic roles, workplace culture, and professional development, the paper reveals a nuanced interplay of factors shaping graduate assistant experiences. The major themes collectively contribute to understanding the multifaceted nature of graduate assistant experiences, thereby advancing scholarly discourse and guiding future research.

Keywords: positioning theory, graduate assistants (GAs), professional development, identity formation

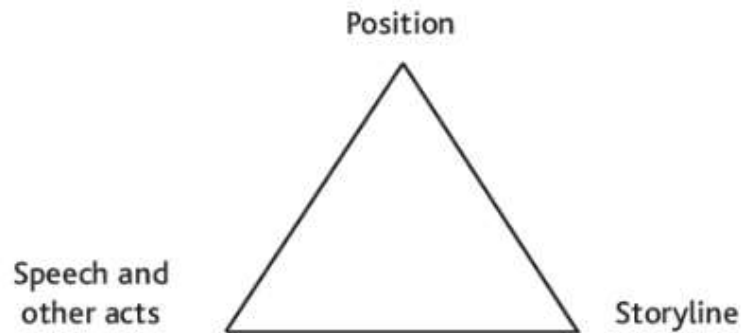
Research on Graduate Assistants (GAs) has unveiled a complex interplay of factors influencing their experiences (Jung, 2021; Offstein et al., 2004; Wu, 2021). Rooted in *Positioning Theory* (Harré & Van Langenhove, 1999), this paper explores the transformative journey of GAs from self-formation to transformation. It begins by examining the pivotal role of social interaction in mentorship and highlighting the fluid construction of identities. The focus then shifts to dynamic roles, workplace culture nuances, and the interplay of enabling and constraining factors, emphasizing the transformative impact of professional development. This paper aims to comprehensively explore the challenges, dynamics, and transformations within the context of graduate assistantships. It provides insights for adult educators, higher education leaders, and policymakers to conceptualize graduate assistants' experience and the role of agency in their self-exploration, self-positioning, and professional transition.

Background

One of society's basic functions is to stimulate and contain the possibilities of human agency (Van Langenhove, 2021). *Positioning Theory* (Harré & Van Langenhove, 1999) stresses that understanding what people do and don't do depends on the positions people take in that order. Positions, speech acts, and storylines constitute the "mutually determining triad" (p.17) within the framework of *Positioning Theory* (see Figure 1). Positions refer to groups of shared norms that all participants in a particular interaction context agree upon (Moghadam & Harre, 2008). Speech acts cover the actions during interpersonal exchanges (Harré & Van Langenhove, 1999). Storylines indicate a combination of narrative conventions (Harre & Moghaddam, 2003).

In the context of graduate assistants' experiences, these components play a crucial role in shaping their self-formation and learning transformation. For example, positions, as clusters of acknowledged norms, influence how graduate assistants position themselves within their academic roles and social interactions. The concept of speech acts, involving the performances during interpersonal exchanges, reflects how communication and engagement contribute to constructing identities and roles. Additionally, storylines, representing flexible narrative conventions, contribute to the narrative construction of the graduate assistants' experiences, emphasizing their journey's dynamic and evolving nature. Together, these components provide a framework for understanding the complexities of graduate assistants' experience as student-workers, influencing their self-formation and transformation throughout their academic journey.

Figure 1
Positioning triangle



Note: adapted from Harré & Van Langenhove (1999, p.18).

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Methodology

Scholars have extensively utilized *Positioning Theory* to delve into various aspects of identity construction. For instance, van Langenhove & Harré (1999) examined how stereotypes are (re)produced and maintained, while Berman (1999) focused on the formation and maintenance of national identities. Moreover, researchers have applied *Positioning Theory* to explore the formation of professional identities among English as a Foreign Language teachers (Eslamdoost et al., 2020), the construction of identity in religious and spiritual meaning-making processes (Schwab, 2013), as well as veterans' experiences (Laskey & Stirling, 2020).

This literature review utilizes *Positioning Theory* as a framework to examine how graduate assistants construct their identities and roles through social interactions. It focuses on their self-formation within the context of higher education, examining key concepts manifested in their experiences. This approach offers a dynamic and nuanced perspective on how graduate assistants navigate the complex landscape of higher education, including their roles, identities, and professional development. By employing *Positioning Theory* as a tool for understanding “strategic interactional moves” (Ribeiro, 2006, p. 49), this review aims to “capture the ways people locate themselves and others onto a map of social realities” (Lee, 2018, p. 421). This draws attention to the notion of graduate assistants’ “self” as an individual’s constant negotiation of their sense of personhood in which a “multiplicities of self” exists” (Davies & Harré, 1990, p. 47).

Literature Review

To comprehensively explore the challenges, dynamics, and transformations within graduate assistantships, a 20-year search range from 2000 to 2023 is utilized in this literature review. This extending search range allows for a comprehensive analysis of historical trends, longer-term impacts of interventions, identification of emerging trends, integration of interdisciplinary perspectives, and a more thorough

understanding of educational practices and policies, providing valuable insights for practitioners, policymakers, and researchers. Keywords such as graduate assistants, graduate research assistants, graduate teaching assistants, GRA, GTA, experience, perspective, and challenge are employed to systematically execute the search within peer-reviewed academic journals, specifically utilizing the EBSCO Database. This comprehensive strategy aims to capture and analyze current trends and insights in the research landscape related to graduate assistants' experience and self-formation. Examining peer-reviewed journals through the positioning framework offers a unique lens to comprehend the self-formation and transformation within graduate assistantships.

As a unique population with multiple roles, graduate assistants may encounter more challenges related to time, expectations, and role conflicts (Quinn, 2011; Smith et al., 2018). The challenges underscore the complexities that graduate assistants encounter as they strive to harmonize their various roles and responsibilities within their academic and personal lives. More and more graduate students are expressing elevated levels of anxiety, which affects their mental well-being and contributes to higher attrition rates in graduate programs (Evans et al., 2018; Levecque et al., 2017; Rummell, 2015).

In the academic context, graduate assistants may encounter a spectrum of opportunities and limitations contingent on their position within their academic settings. Numerous studies have explored the significance of a positive workplace climate and supportive relationships with supervisors, exploring the direct impact of these factors on the overall experiences of graduate assistants (Castro et al., 2011; Sturhahn Stratton et al., 2006). Research findings indicate that graduate programs prioritizing the cultivation of personal connections among professors and students, coupled with an emphasis on balancing academic and social dimensions of students' lives, tend to exhibit elevated levels of departmental integration and support (Ali & Kohun, 2007; Earl-Novell, 2006).

Research consistently underscores the significance of robust mentorship and support systems for graduate assistants (Kirk & Lipscombe, 2019; Saudelli & Niemczyk, 2020). Positive mentorship experiences have been shown to significantly impact the academic and professional development of GAs (Barnett, 2008; Jeong et al., 2018; Rose, 2005). However, it is crucial to recognize that not all assistantships provide positive experiences for graduate students (Rossouw & Niemczyk, 2013).

Numerous studies have also investigated the experiences of graduate assistants as teachers and the influence of pedagogical training on their effectiveness (Kendall & Schussler, 2012; Kurdziel et al., 2003; Schussler et al., 2015; Jonathan et al., 2019). Throughout their journey, graduate assistants undergo a transformative process where they acquire explicit knowledge and skills and internalize the deeper aspects of their chosen field, shaping their professional identity and contributing to their future roles as professionals.

Major Themes

This analysis has unveiled several significant themes, unraveling the dynamic interplay among social interactions, role dynamics, workplace culture, and professional development. Collectively, these themes form a comprehensive framework, offering insights into the challenges, dynamics, and transformations inherent in the domain of graduate assistantships.

Dynamic Roles and Identities in Social Context

Positioning Theory emphasizes that roles and identities are not fixed but are dynamically constructed and context-dependent. In various social situations or contexts, GAs may adopt diverse roles (e.g., teaching assistant, research assistant) and identities (e.g., student, scholar). The complexities of balancing work, academic pursuits, and personal life are intricately explored within GAs' positions (Hardré & Hackett, 2015). Viewed through the lens of *Positioning Theory*, stress and burnout become a delicate interplay between the positions occupied by GAs and the time constraints imposed by their assistantships, academic responsibilities, and additional administrative tasks (Musgrove et al., 2021).

Workplace Culture as Enabling and Constraining

Positioning extends beyond the mere adoption of roles; it involves understanding how these positions both

enable and constrain actions. How individuals position themselves or are positioned by others creates opportunities for certain actions while simultaneously imposing limitations or constraints on others. This delicate interplay between enabling and constraining factors significantly shapes people's behaviors and choices.

Social Interaction and Positioning in Mentorship

Positioning Theory posits that individuals do not possess fixed or inherent identities but construct them through ongoing social interactions. People actively position themselves and are arranged by others through communication and engagement with the social world. Successful mentoring relationships contribute to the overall development of graduate students (D'Abate & Eddy, 2008; McDonald et al., 2007; Schlee, 2000).

Shifts and Transformations through Professional Development

Positioning Theory acknowledges the dynamic nature of individuals' positions and identities, allowing for shifts and transformations over time. Within the realm of graduate assistantships, profound personal and professional growth can occur, prompting alterations in how individuals position themselves. In this context, the concept of professional development encompasses explicit and implicit learning processes throughout the entire graduate school experience. These processes are inherently social, requiring the assimilation of norms, values, and behaviors associated with a specific profession (Trede et al., 2012; Webster-Wright, 2009).

Discussion

Identity formation can be complex and fluid, shaped by multiple experiences and relationships within specific places and spaces (Holland, 1998). GA experience is a multifaceted and intricate process of learning. Graduate assistants bring diverse identities and experiences as they navigate their graduate studies. As highlighted by Irby et al. (2013), this experience is a “process in which we use prior experiences and interpretations to form new or revised interpretations to make meaning and guide future action” (p. 134). As active learners, individuals engage in the transformative process of developing knowledge by internalizing the social environment (Simpson, 2002; Schunk, 2020). Exploring how graduate assistants navigate the structured environment of assistantships, construct their identities, and negotiate the meaning of their experiences within this framework provides valuable insights. Such examination contributes significantly to the ongoing scholarly discourse, shedding light on the intricate processes involved in the figured world of assistantships. For instance, in advancing mentoring programs, there is a pressing need for additional research to identify the specific elements that foster successful mentoring relationships. Despite some progress in exploring graduate student mental health issues, the understanding of how students cope with various stressors remains in its early stages (Gin et al., 2021). Consequently, higher education institutions must delve into the specific stressors experienced by GAs, their utilization of campus resources, and their overall mental health. Further research in this domain holds the potential for uncovering discoveries and deepening our understanding of the multifaceted nature of the graduate assistantship experience.

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