Stress and graduate school

Irene D. Gordon

University of Northern Iowa

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Abstract

Graduate students face an increased number of activities and responsibilities while in graduate school that, taken together, can be stressful. Upon entering graduate school, a graduate assistant becomes involved in activities such as becoming a staff member, teachers assistant, advisor, counselor, or research assistant. The student must also carry a heavy course load in addition to the requirements of a graduate assistantship. This increase in activities is in addition to other problems the student already may face: family anxiety, unevenness in preparation and experiences among students, program inflexibility, and lack of support services for graduate students. Researchers have determined that stress is a possible cause of attrition among many graduate students. Some known sources of stress in graduate school are as follows: a) fear of academic failure, b) interpersonal problems, c) concerns over the unexpected, uncontrolled situations (fate failure), d) general uncertainties of graduate school and concerns about its support systems, e) finances, f) family and marital problems g) gender differences, and finally h) age difference. The purpose of this study is to identify sources of stress for graduate students and to suggest alternatives for alleviating stress. First, stress and its various forms will be discussed. Second, the sources of stress will be examined. Finally, related solutions will be presented to meet those needs.

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STRESS AND GRADUATE SCHOOL

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Michael D. Waggoner

11/8/90
Date Approved
Adviser/Director of Research Paper

Thomas W. Hansmeier

11/8/90
Date Approved
Second Reader of Research Paper

Dale R. Jackson

11/9/90
Date Received
Head, Department of Educational Administration and Counseling
Graduate students face an increased number of activities and responsibilities while in graduate school that, taken together, can be stressful. Upon entering graduate school, a graduate assistant becomes involved in activities such as becoming a staff member, teachers assistant, advisor, counselor, or research assistant. The student must also carry a heavy course load in addition to the requirements of a graduate assistantship. This increase in activities is in addition to other problems the student already may face: family anxiety, unevenness in preparation and experiences among students, program inflexibility, and lack of support services for graduate students. Researchers have determined that stress is a possible cause of attrition among many graduate students. Some known sources of stress in graduate school are as follows: a) fear of academic failure, b) interpersonal problems, c) concerns over the unexpected, uncontrolled situations (fate failure), d) general uncertainties of graduate school and concerns about its support systems, e) finances, f) family
and marital problems g) gender differences, and finally h) age difference.

The purpose of this study is to identify sources of stress for graduate students and to suggest alternatives for alleviating stress. First, stress and its various forms will be discussed. Second, the sources of stress will be examined. Finally, related solutions will be presented to meet those needs.

THE PROBLEMS OF STRESS

Stress has no standard definition. Some researchers, (Whitman, et al., 1984) defines stress as a reaction to anxiety, depression, boredom, or just discomfort in general. Selye (1983) called it "the rate of wear and tear on the body" (Quoted in Cambra, p. 143). As a result, stress is associated with physical and psychological symptoms which affect the body in many ways. Whitman, Spendlove, Clark and Clark (1984) described physical stress as "change in heart rate, blood pressure, and skin conductancy and various hormonal responses" (p. 8).
Psychological stress is related to the psychological, cognitive and social reaction of the graduate student. A classical study of stress among graduate students, reported by Mechanic (1978), defined stress as "discomforting responses of persons in particular situations" (Quoted in Whitman et al., 1984, p. 8).

However, stress can be twofold. It can be viewed as positive or negative. Payne, Todd, and Burke (1982) stated that stress is viewed as positive when one accepts a problem or situation as a challenge (Cited in Whitman, et al., 1984). Being able to manage one's time to get his/her work done, then take a moment for relaxation, is an example of positive stress. "Negative stress--or distress--is associated with threatening situations" (Quoted in Whitman, et al., 1984 p. 9). A misunderstanding between the instructor and student, which may result in fear of a lower test score, is an example of negative stress.

Payne, Todd and Burke (1982) stated that a considerable amount of research has been devoted to
stress, but its knowledge, when related to various problems, is limited. "One problem with the research is that it has not been adequately designed to look at casual relationships" (Quoted in Whitman et al., 1984, p. 9).

Most of the research related to stress has essentially been unsuccessful, because its focus has been placed on personality traits, rather than how one copes with it. What is also complex about stress, and the reason for its definition constantly changing, is that many individuals are able to cope with it.

**SOURCES OF STRESS**

Researchers Kjerulff and Wiggins (1976), in a study consisting of students and faculty members at the University of Illinois, discovered that there are various kinds of stress: academic failure, interpersonal problems, concerns over the unexpected, uncontrolled situations (fate-failure), general uncertainties of graduate school and concerns about its support systems, finances, family and martial problems, gender differences, and finally age differences.
Academic Failure

Many colleges rely on high standard admission criteria to predict entering graduate grades. This has caused some graduates to be fearful. Willingham (1974) stated several possible reasons for this. In the earlier times, there were too few graduate students to fill the space schools had provided for them. The growing number of applicants in the 1950s and 1960s led to the development of some screening devices, such as the Graduate Record Examination (GRE). Admission standards were gradually raised. Such screening was thought to produce fear, anxiety, and depression among many potential applicants.

Kjerulff and Wiggins (1976) found that academic failure often occurs when faculty and students do not meet each others expectations. For example, "Flubbing a class presentation and taking 3 years rather than the usual 2 to finish a master's thesis" (p. 250). Experiences like this could lead to self-doubt: "you begin to wonder if you are really cut out for graduate school" (p. 250). Anxiety can also result from failure.
For example, a letter grade lower than a "B" is not traditionally acceptable for a graduate student. If a graduate student fails a qualifying exam by earning a "D" in his/her course work, it may be necessary to repeat the course. As a result, this can extend a two-year program by an additional semester or longer.

**Interpersonal Problems**

Interpersonal problems stem from the uniqueness of an individual. Therefore, problems that induce stress may vary. Payne, Todd, and Burke, (1982) stated that problems of stress can also be viewed as positive or negative depending on the individual and situation (Quoted in Whitman et al., 1984). When students consider what is involved in graduate school, and include their family as a part of their decision to enter, positive stress is viewed as a challenge. On the other hand, if a student faces a situation where there is a lack of support from the institution and family, negative stress may be looked upon as a threatening situation, which contributes to failure or attrition.
Interpersonal problems, based on situations in the Kjerulff and Wiggins (1976) study, involve faculty members. For example, "Your program chairman is a hostile difficult person and you are consider leaving [the program or], your research advisor is being very distant and unhelpful" (p. 251). Another interpersonal problem may involve conflict among family members and spouse. Interpersonal problems in this situation involve depression, anxiousness, and ill feelings toward others.

Fate-Failure

Fate-failure (uncontrolled situations) is defined by Kjerulff and Wiggins (1976) as an unexpected situation that is clearly not anyone's fault. It may involve many different things; for example: an unexpected pregnancy, not having considered all of the possibilities involved in graduate school, concerns over getting a job near your mate, and being depressed because your subjects are not offered when needed. Of the most affected causes of stress, fate-failure is more likely to happen than the previous two causes of stress.
General Uncertainties About Graduate School

In the initial stage, graduates' fears and anxieties, compounded by the complex stories of the differences between undergraduate and graduate school, are stressful. To them, it means sacrificing sleep, leisure, fulfilling new roles as a teacher assistant, research assistant, academic advisor/counselor, etc. However, the real reason for the fears, anxieties and/or uncertainties remains unknown. Despite the fact that graduate students are mature adults, Butler (1972) stated that the graduate school resembles the developmental stages of adolescence, with its stresses involving identity crisis, financial and emotional dependence, on others. Other researchers (Taylor, 1975; Kneller, 1965) perceive graduates as being anxious and frustrated because of loss of income, culture discontinuity, lack of support from faculty members, and because they cannot assume their "adult roles" (Cited in Lange, 1980). Hartnett, and Katz, (1977) and Strupp (1974) stated: "At times, faculty/student relationships may be more important to students than course work" (Quoted in Lange,
1980, p. 146). Thus, there seems to be a need for support from the institution, to encourage faculty/student relationship, to provide advisor support to help students with identity crisis, and to be tactful in preparing them with information on problems they may or may not encounter. This is also a developmental procedure to prevent the graduate student from experiencing a cultural shock, and to help him/her to make a successful transition to the collegiate environment.

**Finances**

Most students can adapt to financial problems, because it is viewed as a temporary situation. For others, it depends on whether the student is single or married or whether he/she is seeking a Ph.D. Single students seem to be quite comfortable with their level of income. Lozoff (1976) stated: "Most students manage to live in comfort despite limited means ... although many feel (41 percent in our survey) that their finances are pretty adequate" (p. 157). However, the differences, especially where there is a multiple of others stressors
associated with financial difficulties, are more than likely to be experienced within married and doctoral student families. Laughlin (1985) stated: "A combination of financial constraints and other factors, however, may become a significant source of tension" (p. 488). Researchers have found that lack of financial support, in certain situations where the man or woman is working to support the other, may result in divorce. The husband/wife feels neglected, and isolated. He/she feels that the sacrifices he/she makes as a working husband/wife is taken for granted when the student is always tired, cannot assume his/her role as a spouse, or help with household chores.

**Family and Marital Problems**

Married students sometimes experience situations in graduate school that many other students do not experience. Graduate school is more demanding, and its hours of involvement can go beyond a traditional 40 hour work week. It often requires spending more time away from the family than one desires. This can be time consuming and a difficult task for new marriages or
families with children. During the first year of graduate school, students may encounter many changes. In one sense, they are perceived as freshman inasmuch as they are on a college campus for the first time. The change in lifestyle and the academic stresses have caused many to be somewhat anxious; many find little time for social intimacy and for meaningful activity with family and friends. Valdez (1982) concluded that a number of first-year graduate students may be undergoing considerable stress (Quoted in Whitman et al., 1984). Therefore, the family and the institutional staff seem to have the greatest impact on graduate/professional students. This impact involves multiple complex situations within the environment and a student's self-image.

**Environment**

Stress in the university environment is inherent for graduate students. For example, many married students may have inordinate demands placed on them by a professor or by university related work (i.e., assistantship). This may result in spending long hours
at the library, lack of communication with spouse, and being unavailable to the children. This places a strain on the marriage. The spouse and children, who seemed to understand in the beginning, feel isolated, alienated, and unappreciated because of the lack of his/her presence.

In recent years, a doctorate degree was obtained for prestige, and it had job potential in a stable job market. Today, that may not be quite true. Halleck (1976) stated that changes within society as a whole will also affect the individual’s environment. As a result, today’s larger number of doctoral candidates may have deprived their families, and still there is no guarantee they will get a job in this unstable market (Whitman, et al., 1984). The key to success for some students (i.e., non-traditional) in graduate school is family involvement. Family involvement in the decision to enter professional school and studies could alleviate some of the pressures the student faces.
Self-Image

Self-image of the graduate student and the impact it has on family is a somewhat complex situation. How one feels about oneself determines the height of his/her self-esteem. Researchers have shown that graduate students have a tendency to depend on others. Of course, there are positive and negative aspects of self-image. Students who are strong and competent enough to succeed despite the institution and faculty/staff shortcomings are positive. Most of their mistakes are perceived as a part of the learning process rather than as a hindrance. A student who depends on a professor, who does not keep office hours, or on advisors, who are not aware of the student's problems and/or do not explain the difficulties of graduate school, tends to develop low self esteem. As a result, negative self-image has caused many first-year students to drop out of graduate school because of interpersonal problems involving family, in combination with institutional problems. Knox (1970) stated that of all the students who enter graduate school
with the intention of earning a doctorate degree, less than 50% achieve their goal.

Gender Differences

Gender differences can produce stress (Halleck 1976). There are four areas where this can be apparent: cognitive styles and abilities, decision making, discrimination, and conflict of personal and professional lives. Males have always played a dominant role in society. They were considered the bread winners; they were the most likely candidates to enter college or graduate school; they engaged in many professional fields such as education, medicine, law, engineering, and business. Halleck (1976) stated that stress related to gender differences results from role conflicts.

There is another potential source of stress that may be gender related. Women may feel anxious about graduate school due to historically held, but inaccurate, perceptions about their inferior abilities. As a result, the possible dissimilarities between the sexes concerning cognitive and intellectual functions for women were measured by professional and non-professional, non-
career oriented women. The justification for this exclusion by Lynn (1972) and Miller (1974) was that "females are superior on simple perceptual-motor skills or rote-learning tasks, whereas males excel in creativity, higher-order reasoning, and analytic ability" (Quoted in Adler, 1976, p. 198). Other researchers, (Adler 1976 and Maccoby and Jacklin 1974) found that statement to be questionable. The fact that males may be superior in their mathematical ability, and females in their analytical ability, may rest on the strength of their interest, not on their abilities (Cited in Adler 1976). However, Maccoby and Jacklin (1974) stated: "The two tasks used as the basis for asserting difference in analytic ability both involve visual/spatial skills; the differential performance of the sexes on those tasks may be accounted for by the visual component" (Quoted in Adler, 1976, p. 198).

The differences in the decision-making processes between the two sexes involves two aspects: a) women assuming traditionally held male roles and b) change in women status. Hobfoll (1986) stated that over the last
20 to 30 years, and rapidly during the last 10 years, change has occurred. The adaptation to change became a challenge, which broadened the horizon for women in the professional arena. Women have always worked hard internally and externally. However, many alternatives have been offered to them, because, as Smith (1979) stated, "women more than ever are working in almost every field and every level of expertise and authority." (Quoted in Hobfol, 1986, p. 4). The internal barriers that may have once existed for woman seeking higher education are not quite so evident. Most educated men have few conflicting roles in choosing a career, because they have been taught and encouraged to seek professional and decision-making positions. On the other hand, women have been discouraged from assuming professional roles, because they were few in number, and they "often fear that professional success will 'de-sex' them" (Adler, 1976, pp. 200-201).

Second, women assuming jobs that were traditionally held by males, in terms of control and power, became stressed. The concentration of most jobs (i.e., health
care, clerical, etc.), excluding physician and higher education, are still considered "women's work." Barret (1979) stated: "Not surprisingly, the positions held by men have been more rewarded and are accompanied by more of the 'extras' so sought after--the expense account, travel, the key to the executive bathroom, and now tennis courts and even jobs that have the protection of unions" (Quoted in Hobfoll, 1986, p. 4). Women and most minorities were introduced to decision-making and power as the result of the Civil Rights Movement. They are now getting equal pay for equal work. The conflict arises because "taking ground" requires more energy than "defending ground." These jobs become stressful, because women have not had a mentor or have not been engaged in many activities involving the work place. Many women have not been involved in playing aggressive and competitive sports. They were almost always spectators or cheerleaders (Hobfoll, 1986). Discrimination between the two sexes has always and will always be present in some form or another. Discrimination, in this sense, is not necessarily a racial issue; however, it involves lack
of supportive relationships with the spouse. Vanfossen (1986) stated:

...[a] husband’s evaluation of his wife may reflect society’s evaluation of women. The content of the interaction is important here, not just the form. While it is one thing to get the husband to listen sympathetically, it is another to get him to value who and what his wife is. The insights of conflict theory are relevant: in societies still tainted by male dominance, as all industrial societies are, femininity, womanhood, and women’s roles represent qualities that are less respected (p. 82).

The relationship between women’s work outside the home and as a housewife is often considered secondary to the "head of the household." On the other hand, a man, who works outside of the home is considered more valuable. For women, it seems as though they are always on the firing line where stress is involved. They tend to be more emotional and are more at risk where health, and interpersonal relationships are evident. Men are perceived differently because of their dominance.

Age Differences

Many colleges and universities are faced with an influx of "culturally, racially, and socially heterogenous students, lifelong learners, part-time students and non-traditional students" (Gilley & Hawkes,
1989, p. 33). The reason for the re-entry students varies. Cambra et al. (1984) suggested that most of the women are seeking career changes, better paying jobs, and certification. Some middle-aged men are entering for health reasons (i.e., they return to get teaching credentials, after realizing the pressure from their corporate work may have caused problems), change in technology and/or diminishing of the manufacturing sector, and certification. This assumption holds true, especially, for the mass matriculation of middle-aged women.

Between 1970 and 1985, the number of non-traditional students twenty five or older in higher education increased from 27.8 percent to 41.6. Minority enrollment increased from 12 percent in 1972 to 16 percent in 1982; female enrollment increased from 32 percent in 1950 to 53 percent in 1987. Part-time students accounted for only 32 percent of enrollment in 1970, but represented 42 percent of enrollment by 1987 (Gilley & Hawkes, 1989, p. 33).

Gilley and Hawkes (1989) also stated that the non-traditional students' needs, lifestyles, and expectations are quite different from those of traditional students. Yet, the colleges and universities have done very little, if any thing, to accommodate these students' needs in
areas such as curriculum, policies, support systems, or services. The campus environment is built around the traditional 18 to 22 year old students. The universities tend to allocate resources to support the traditional students, but do not provide facilities that will cater to nontraditional students' needs and expectations.

Stress associated with middle-age students and change is especially powerful in graduate school, because the environment is not particularly friendly to older women. Adler (1976) stated: "Male faculty members are often uncomfortable with female students" (p. 208). They tend to give mixed messages when responding in terms of sex roles or professional roles. A women reported an episode which occurred while working on a seminar project in pairs in a predominantly male seminar. She chose a topic that no one else had chosen. The professor immediately replied that another student was needed for that topic. After a pause, he appointed a student to work with her and suggested that the male change her mind about the topic.
Women at times suffer from "underattention" when their comments in a seminar or meeting are ignored, and it is assumed that a woman would not contribute much to a professional discussion. At other times, they suffer "overattention" when they receive respectful attention sometimes bordering on amazement that a woman could be speaking about a technical topic (p. 209).

Some non-traditional students are unaware of the support systems and the process of finding their way around the rigorous bureaucracy of the university. They may encounter faculty members who are viewed as unfriendly. There are times when they may feel like outsiders, because they are humorously tolerated. In the midst of all these stresses, the lack of intellectual commitment in earlier years may make it extremely difficult for her to master the rigors of graduate education. On predominantly white campuses, the traditional student may view the middle-aged minority as receiving funds to enter school that other students should receive. As a result, the traditional student may avoid the middle-age minority by excluding them from study groups. Although stress may be evident in both sexes, females tend to be more emotional by nature than males, because women most often play dual roles. Even
as professionals, they are perceived by men as housewives whose place is at home and not in the professional arena.

ALLEVIATING STRESS

Since there are many sources of stress, the problems seem to stem from multiple sources. Researchers have discovered that stress is not necessarily the effect of graduate school. Whitman et al. (1984) stated: "In fact, students may have brought these problems with them to graduate school. ... given that graduate students do not succeed or they succeed, but find the experience distressing, the challenge to administrators, faculty, and students is to develop graduate study programs [that will help the students to make a successful transition]" (p. 44).

There appears to be several ways to alleviate stress. Researchers have suggested methods that may be helpful in stress prevention: new or improved orientation programs, departmental support programs, and marital counseling.
Orientation Programs

First, there is a need for a new or improved orientation programs for graduate students. This is essential, not only to alleviate stress and to improve graduate students, but for the institution as well. As Martin-Reynolds, Edwards, and Schooley (1988) reported:

Bowling Green State University faces a challenge that is shared by most post-secondary institutions today. ... It is the need to maintain excellence in teaching and quality programming in the fact of rising institutional cost, dramatic fiscal cuts and shortages of faculty in critical areas. As a consequence, universities are relying more heavily on retirees, part-time faculty, adjunct faculty, and graduate assistants to carry an increasingly complex instructional burden. In most cases the reliance on part-time personnel and graduate instructors has occurred in the absence of an adequate commitment on the part of the institution to cope with their very real professional needs as teacher/scholar working with both undergraduate and graduate students. Such a situation has not gone unnoticed by concerned faculty and administrators in most institutions, but the resources are seldom at hand to deal with the problem until crisis stage is reached (p. 63).

As a result, active involvement can minimize the environmental stresses faced by first-year graduate students which involves fears and anxieties of academic
failure, interpersonal problems and fate failure. Heiss (1970) stated: "Most of the psychological stress and educational disillusionment resulting from too little independence seems to occur during the first year of graduate study, when many students are locked into a rigid pattern of required courses and examinations" (Quoted in Whitman et al., 1984, pp. 44-45).

Departmental Support Programs

Second, departmental support programs, such as faculty/student and advisor relationships, mentoring, and a buddy system, are supportive measures which can be used in helping graduate students and their families cope with stress. In considering the well-being of the graduate students, academic departments may want to develop support programs that include more faculty/student involvement. Hartnett (1976) stated that lack of accessibility, in addition to interaction with the student and professor, can penalize students, because some students seem to be more victimized than others. For the most part, a barrier can be placed between the student and his/her academic success.
However, the need for faculty student/advisor relationships "become most important ... when the graduate student nears degree completion and begins to search for a job. At this point, if faculty opinion about the student's potential is based more on aggressive personality characteristics than on competence in one's discipline, we must be concerned about the whole question of faculty accessibility" (pp. 64-65).

To foster achievement, retention, and lend support to the academic and personal lives of graduate students, researchers have found mentoring to be helpful. Martin-Reynolds et al. (1988) stated that there are advantages in communication networks for both faculty and graduate students. It serves the new graduate assistants in becoming familiar with their duties and responsibilities. If time is permitted, it brings faculty and graduate students and various staff and group members together who would otherwise rarely find it feasible to nurture mentor relationships, or find a reason to communicate. "Graduate colleges working with
faculty and students at all levels of education have the means and the ability to give the concept of scholar/teacher high priority" (p. 67).

The "buddy system" has been suggested by researchers as a measure to relieve stress. Valdez (1982) suggested a "buddy system" approach in which "incoming students are paired with an advanced graduate student and matched (if possible) according to marital status and number of children" (Quoted in McLaughlin, 1985, p. 490). This approach would provide contact support for housing, day care, schools, shopping, recreational facilities, and other "concerns about moving into a new location," (p. 490) and it would also provide academic support.

**Marital Counseling**

Finally, many researchers have provided information relating to a need for the university to provide marital counseling and other services that will support students who are experiencing marital and family problems, due to multiple roles, financial difficulties, gender, and age differences.
Berkove (1979) and Gruver and Labadie (1975) recommended marital counseling as a means to help couples cope with the life changing situations, and to learn coping strategies to deal with feelings and conflict within the relationships while in graduate school (Cited in McLaughlin, 1985). Another researcher viewed individual counseling for the woman as beneficial for working through priorities and goal-related issues. Van Meter and Agronow (1982) suggested family counseling to prepare families for role awareness and goal setting, to complement changes, and to help the mother or wife when she returns from school.

Research has also suggested a need for counseling to help the spouse to clarify his/her feeling and demands of the student while in graduate school. Hooper (1979) believes that this clarification should be dealt with before hand. It must be realized in order to help him/her make a successful transition through school and family functioning.
SUMMARY

According to many researchers, stress is evident in graduate school, and it has various forms. While it has not prevented people from all walks of life from pursuing the challenge, it may have a great impact on their physical and psychological well-being. Researchers have shown that stress has various sources: academic failure, interpersonal problems, fate-failure, general uncertainties of graduate school and its support systems, finances, family and marital problems, gender and age difference. It may be called anxiety, depression, or even "wear and tear of the body." However, every student is unique; as a result, stress may be handled differently. Several suggestions from previous research have been presented to show that stress is a major issue in graduate school. Increasingly, college faculty, administrators, and department heads are re-evaluating the needs of graduate students. They are evaluating their present status in an effort to implement new and/or improved orientation programs, more effective academic departmental support,
and marital counseling sessions for those who are married and/or contemplating marriage while in graduate school. Although stress may not be completely eliminated from graduate school, these efforts may be positive moves to help them make a successful transition to the graduate student environment.
References


