

# Producing the Graduate Student: A Textual Analysis of Funding Through Scholarship Application

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## Abstract

This paper originated from the fierce debate on graduate student funding that arose at the University of Toronto in 2000. As a graduate student at the time, I was very interested in the social processes of becoming a graduate student in Canadian universities. Using a textual analysis of graduate students' scholarship applications, the paper examines the ways in which the funding process sorts graduate students into worthwhile recipients; in effect, replicating the processes that produce a business-as-usual ethos in funding practices.

## Résumé

Cet article tire ses origines d'un débat vif sur l'octroi de financement pour les étudiants du troisième cycle qui surgit à l'université de Toronto en l'an 2000. Étant une étudiante du troisième cycle à cette époque, j'étais très intéressée aux processus sociaux pour devenir une étudiante du troisième cycle aux universités canadiennes. En se servant d'une analyse textuelle d'applications pour bourses d'études pour les étudiants de troisième cycle, cet article étudie les façons par lesquelles le processus de financement trie les étudiants du troisième cycle qui sont dignes d'être récipiendaires de bourses d'études; en fait, en utilisant en parallèle les processus qui produisent un ethos du maintien du statu quo dans les pratiques de financement.

## The Problem

The issue of graduate student funding in Canada has been largely absent in higher education research. Graduate students' concerns about rising tuition costs, inadequate funding provisions by universities and such provincial government funding programs as the Ontario Student Assisted Program (OSAP) have created an atmosphere of anxiety and frustration. In 2000, the University of Toronto Task Force on Graduate Funding found that graduate students were not funded equitably across departments. The University then instituted a universal policy that offers graduate programs guaranteed funding for four years after which the guarantee is withdrawn regardless of whether or not students complete their studies. In the social sciences and humanities, graduate students take, on average, six years to complete their studies, compared to those in engineering, the physical and life sciences, where 4.5 years is the average. This refers to PhDs in the University of Toronto and in Canada as a whole (Gonzales 1996; Liang 2003; Nerad and Miller 1996; Thomas-Long 2007). Since most female graduate students are located in the social sciences and humanities, access to sufficient funding is an ongoing problem. At the same time, graduate programs have intensified pressure on students to apply for external grants at the federal (Social Science and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC)) and the provincial (Ontario Graduate Scholarship (OGS) program) levels.

These aspects of graduate studies are invisible in research on higher education funding in North America. Studies that address funding policy implications tend to focus on the undergraduate level and are primarily concerned with the distribution of

student loans across universities, departments and the student population (Cronin and Simmons 1987; Finnie and Schwartz 1996). There are a few studies that have critically examined graduate student experiences (Mazzuca 2000; Turner and Thompson 1993), graduate student supervision (Acker 1999), socialization practices (Smith and Simpson 1992; Williams 2000), and mentoring (Turner and Thompson 1993), but these studies do not concentrate on funding. Even more problematic is the distinct lack of analysis of class, race, and gender in the literature on higher education (Apple 1999; Ball 1993). This sentiment is echoed by Mazzuca (2000) in her study of Italian graduate students, Singh's (1990) examination of the British context and Friedman's (1987) exploration of the American context. Given these gaps, this paper examines how female graduate students are produced and shaped by the everyday funding realities of academic life.

There are two fundamental issues involved in producing the graduate student. The first concerns the positioning of students as workers, consumers and entrepreneurs in the higher education labour market. The second issue involves technologies of power; that is, how the funding process becomes a way of monitoring, controlling and eventually normalizing institutional discourses around the production of graduate students. For instance, SSHRC application guidelines now require that professors provide detailed assessments of students and their work in their reference letters, whereas in the past, only more general comments were needed (conversation with K. Dehli 2001). Dehli's observations stress the management of efficiency and accountability within the university's governance (Currie 1998; Keast 1995; Knowles 1995; Jones 1997; Magnusson 2000; Newson and Buchbinder 1988; Shanahan 2002).

Issues relating to graduate funding have become hotly debated due to several factors, including the deregulation of tuition, whereby universities have the power to increase fees to whatever levels are deemed

appropriate. The definition of "appropriate" is driven by the university's worth; that is, how much potential students are willing to pay for a degree in the higher education marketplace. The immediate impact of deregulation is felt by minority and working-class students, who have less access to financial resources while pursuing graduate education (Thomas-Long 2007; Williams 2000). Another factor is the increased marketization of education, whereby universities are now being run like corporations (Dei and Karumanchery 1999; Dehli 1996; Magnusson 2000). Faculties more closely aligned to the private sector (such as law, business, and the sciences) are generously funded through private donors and government research grants (Slaughter and Lesley 1997). As graduate faculties strive to become more competitive in attracting the "best" students, there is also an increasing need for students to sell or reinvent themselves in managing their academic life. Producing graduate students is not only about discursive practices; it is also about how students come to understand the structures of funding as a mode of care of the self.

This paper therefore aims to examine how textual modes of governing select who should be counted as worthy recipients of prestigious awards by providing alternative re/conceptualizations through the following considerations: 1) how socially constructed definitions of graduate students aid in producing self-defined standpoints for students; 2) how the goals of funding agencies such as SSHRC and OGS, as well as university policies, interact and define each other; and 3) how the discursive practices around funding produce gendered, racialized and class-based outcomes in graduate education.

### **Theoretical Framework/Methodology**

The theory utilized in this paper is one of lenses or a set of epistemological distinctions in which theory and descriptions are involved in continual interplay with events in the real world (Popkewitz 1998). This theoretical position is linked to the methodological tools utilized in the paper:

institutional ethnography (IE) developed by Dorothy Smith in 1987 and Foucault's research and writing on governmentality, which refers to a form of activity that aims to shape, guide or affect the conduct of some person or persons (Foucault 1980). In using Foucault's method, I am interested in how institutional practices are investigated as a regime of practices; where what is said and done and where rules are imposed, and reasons given, the planned and the taken-for-granted, all interconnect (Foucault 1991). This also involves looking at language as codes of practices. For example, the rhetoric around funding guarantees becomes a way of organizing social relations that intensify the work of students and faculty.

Smith's IE allows me to begin with the understanding that social relations of ruling are put together through coordinated human activity (Smith 1987). As a feminist epistemology (Collins 1990), Smith's IE starts from the standpoint of women's everyday lives to expose the ways in which they are connected to institutional structures. In my IE, I use my own experience as a graduate student, and later as a faculty member to explore the fundamental nature of ruling relations in Canadian graduate studies. I also draw on interviews conducted with graduate students between 2000-2001, and 2003-2004, to generalize my findings and analysis. The primary application forms for SSHRC and OGS formed the groundwork of my interrogation of ruling relations as they represent ideological codes in the organization of graduate students as workers and learners. Smith (1987) uses the term "ruling" broadly to encompass varied and interconnected practices of management, administration, government, law, finance, education, business and the professions. Smith argues that understanding organizational power in contemporary society requires attention to the textual practices through which they represent the social and physical world as the object of administrative and professional functions (McCoy 1998).

### **Textual Analysis**

Conducting a textual analysis emphasizes the uncovering of ideological practices that shape the production of certain events as facts; that is, specific forms of text-mediated knowledge, which allow one to look at how ruling practices are organized in the academy (Sharma 2000; Smith 1974). The adoption of Smith's IE approach to this form of analysis asks questions that Foucault does not address and makes assumptions which Foucault does not share, especially in regard to the focus on ideology and the centering of human activity and social relations in the making of textual facts. The analysis presented in this paper proceeds by examining how key texts - graduate students' scholarship proposals to SSHRC and OGS - are spoken about and rendered meaningful in the institutional setting. In the University of Toronto funding guarantee scheme, the scholarship application is designed to reward high-achieving students defined as those with an accumulative grade point average (GPA) of between A- and A+. Graduate students enter into a relationship whereby they are compelled to produce themselves as best on these terms. This involves producing detailed outlines of their academic production, work and extra-curricular experience.

In Fall 2001, I examined the SSHRC and OGS applications of six female graduate students as the basis of my inquiry. Because the applications are anonymous, they could not be matched to particular persons. When read together, these proposals exemplify that a major focus of institutional activity is engaged in producing a particular typology of graduate students. Reading the outlines from these proposals clarifies an understanding of ideology, which focuses not only on content issues, such as what and why questions, but also on form and style (McKenna 1991). It is evident that graduate applications require a standardized way of writing and portraying individuals on paper. Treating aspects of graduate training as data brings into view some of the assumptions embedded in everyday academic practices. In practical terms, these proposals suggest that a

doctoral scholarship application is a very particular way of going about thinking through and constructing oneself on paper (McKenna 1991), or in this case, producing oneself as a worthy investment. It becomes apparent then, that applicants are doing two things simultaneously; that is, they are producing themselves as workers and as students.

### **Producing Self As Worker**

In the SSHRC application, students show themselves as workers by linking research assistantship positions to the work produced by supervisors and advisors, or as members of a research team, under the direct supervision of a professor. This is the area in which some female students experience the most challenge. My research (2001; 2007) on graduate student funding suggests that female (and male) students who are members of racial minorities experience the most difficulties in securing research and teaching assistantships. These students tend to get assistantships in the later stages, usually in the third year of study. Similarly, my interviews with male and female graduate students in 2004 found that regardless of gender, students from racialized backgrounds struggled with funding throughout their studies. Ashley, an African-Canadian psychology doctoral student, was into her sixth year when she took "out another student loan and just worked on [her] dissertation for one full year" (Interview 42, July, 2004; pp. 3-4). Ageism is another problem confronting female graduate students seeking funding. My casual conversations with female graduate students suggest that in some graduate programs - especially those in the United States - age is seen as a deterrent in granting assistantships and scholarships to graduate students who are in their late 30s. While SSHRC and OGS grants do not overtly discriminate against age, female students think that they have less chance of getting them if they are older (Thomas-Long 2007).

Female graduate students who are members of racial minorities, single parents, or working class are concerned about their ability to continue with insufficient funding.

The fourth year is the most difficult for students to remain on course; yet this is the time when departments provide the least financial help. For most female students, it is assistantships, not scholarships, that are reliable sources of funding. Assistantships provide not only practical skills, but are instrumental in accessing mentoring opportunities. Graduate students with assistantships were more confident and felt a greater sense of connectedness within their departments (Thomas-Long 2001; 2007). Duncan (1976) and Williams (2000) conclude that graduate students who are members of racial minorities are not socially connected or integrated into their departmental communities, and many report having little dialogue with faculty and peers in their field of interest. The SSHRC application guidelines encourage this relationship of connectedness, or at least there is the assumption that graduate students will experience this relationship. Inadequate funding compounds the problem as it pushes students to work longer and outside their department.

Another way in which graduate students produce themselves as workers is through their volunteer activities in the university community. In SSHRC and OGS fellowship applications, most applicants create a section titled "administrative work/duties" where they list various committees on which they have volunteered, mostly within the academy or related to their area of work. Female students, in particular those who are parents and who work off campus, miss out on these activities and might find themselves less favored when applying for grants because these activities are highly valued. Graduate education needs to be examined as a site of state formation; I am not referring to state as a structure or object as in the Hobbesian model (Foucault 1980), rather, as a set of practices, or ongoing social relations between individuals.

### **Producing Self As Student**

In SSHRC and OGS scholarship applications, the applicants must demonstrate their academic competencies and level of

scholarly attainment through academic activities such as conferences, publications, and other scholarly reports. Here, too, the task of submitting conference proposals can be seen as an entrepreneurial and self-promoting activity showing students to be competent managers and risk-takers through individual initiatives. For many students and faculty, this may be a blue-print for future success if it enhances students' profiles within (and outside) their department; it also involves an enormous degree of competitiveness among students. The push for fellowships creates a winner/loser atmosphere, whereby some students might be treated differently by virtue of their success, or lack thereof, in obtaining these awards. There is, therefore, a tension between the promise of a funding guarantee which suggests it is for everyone and the competitive process of showing oneself to be a good student.

In presenting oneself as the "good student" (Grant 1997), applicants often feel that the process creates an insidious cycle whereby those who have obtained funding in the past are in a better position to receive it in the future. In a seminar I attended on writing an OGS/SSHRC application, a female applicant who was successful in obtaining funding commented that "money creates money," meaning that a student who obtained scholarships in the past has an excellent chance of obtaining them again in the future. This is one of the criticisms leveled against the SSHRC evaluation process in that it works in favor of scholars who had received funding in the past and who have an established record of research and publication.

#### **Faculty Re/Producing Good Students**

In the SSHRC application guidelines, it is apparent that graduate students must have assistance from their professors, who carry much influence in the application process, particularly when writing reference letters or appraisals. Reference letters carry enormous weight as evidence of applicants' current and potential academic ability and they set the tone for the selection process. The SSHRC (2001) guidelines for writing

letters of appraisal suggest they must be enthusiastic, focusing on applicants' strengths, skills, past achievements and potential, and why the applicant is of superior calibre worthy of a prestigious national award. Requesting letters of reference is the most difficult part of the scholarship application process for female graduate students. Many do not know their supervisors well enough to ask for a reference, and the process requires that students not see their referees' letters (such letters can be obtained at a later date through the *Freedom of Information Act*). In a seminar I attended on writing scholarship and fellowship applications, the facilitators recommended that professors be specific in providing evidence of a student's competence. The professor must state that a student is among the top 5% in their cohort.

This raises important issues around supervision; that is to say, how does a relationship with a supervisor and advisor affect the ways in which faculty demonstrate that students are deserving of fellowships? My research on funding suggests that female graduate students in particular have a rather difficult time in getting excellent references or believing that they can get excellent references from professors. Those who are parents or who worked outside the university did not have the networks from which they felt confident to ask for references. White female participants observed that class played an even greater role in accessing funding as they had to reconcile their working-class background with that of faculty members, who assumed they had similar class affiliations (Thomas-Long 2007). Female graduate students who are members of racial minorities have a particularly difficult time asking for and obtaining good references. Bernadette, a Black/African-Canadian doctoral student offers this insight: "[Some] students get brilliant letters, but for other people, those who are non-Canadians, British, or Americans...it's like there is nothing to say about you" (Interview 37, June, 2004, p. 12).

The following is an excerpt from the detailed guidelines on the SSHRC's website:

Your Letter of Appraisal should inform the selection committee about the following:

- \* the candidate's background preparation, judgment, written and oral skills, and skill at research;
- \* the proposal's theoretical framework, its relation to the field, and its methodology;
- \* the merits and shortcomings of both the candidate and the program of work;
- \* the importance to the discipline of journals in which the candidate has published and/or the candidate's prospects for publication;
- \* the appropriateness of the institution that will award the degree;
- \* if applicable, the candidate's proficiency in the foreign language (s) necessary to pursue the program of work. (SSHRC 2009)

The guidelines go further in specifying the technical aspects of preparing the letter such as the font to be used, spacing and the number of pages allowed. Ultimately, the application process is about producing disciplined docile bodies and suggests that the production of self-regulating individuals is not an autonomous activity. The process produces active, self-governing subjects who are disposed to participate in these forms of self-regulation, including the regulation of the body. It is evident that graduate faculties actively engage in specific discursive practices that render students visible. Students do not just attend classes and coincidentally become brilliant academics; rather, they are constantly engaged in activities that produce them as such.

### **Discussion**

The following analysis introduces key texts - "graduate students' proposals" that are utilized in the SSHRC/OGS application process. It examines how these texts are spoken about and rendered meaningful in public. What is apparent is the way in which language organizes relations and courses of

action which often include students' individual intentions. Specific proposals vary from student to student, but they rely on standardized methods of descriptions and sequences of coordinated action through which people take up and address texts in concrete settings (Turner 1995). Graduate scholarship and fellowship proposals are thus methods of describing and producing students who are the gold standard for future academic activity. This is central not only to the process of allocating graduate student funding, but also to how graduate students define themselves through courses taken, published work, future projects, supervisors, and so on. Conversely, my analysis draws attention to the ways in which institutional relations are engaged in disciplining the student-subject, technologies of domination and technologies of self. The following discussion examines each of these issues in greater detail.

### **DISCIPLINING THE STUDENT**

Producing graduate students entails an explicit method of doing things. Female graduate students and faculty are actively engaged in producing disciplined, competitive and self-governing subjects with certain levels of commitment and responsibility. For Foucault, a disciplinary block is formed when relations of power, of communication, and of objective establish themselves in a regulated and concerted system (Grant 1997). In thinking about how students become disciplined bodies, McKenna's writing is particularly insightful in showing the ways in which "certain learning practices have been institutionalized and carried as being what education, or scholarliness, or rigor is about. They are the taken-for-granted. Many of us enter graduate studies with this understanding" (McKenna 1991, 25).

In searching through these scholarship forms, we find examples of surveillance which, with panopticon-like features (Foucault 1977), are made more potent by their anonymity and invisibility. The practices engaged in funding procedures can be seen as disciplinary technologies working

at every level in the university to discipline students, to make them conform (Grant 1997). In the everyday life of the university, power/knowledge is exercised through the twin technologies of domination and of the self which come together around the objectification of the body seeking to normalize it, to render it obedient, teachable, governable without recourse to outright coercion, to constitute it as the good student (Grant 1997). Indeed, the power/knowledge relation is exercised in particular knowledge claims through rationalizations about abilities or competencies by both students and faculties. The disciplines that form the university curricula are regimes of truth, developed through the exercise of power and, in turn, are used to further legitimize the exercise of power in dominating the student subject (Grant 1997).

There is another governmental dimension where the emphasis is not so much on the discipline of the docile body, but on the production and performance of the active subject. Due to their race, class, or age experiences, female students find it harder to meet the expectations within the boundaries set out by the SSHRC and OGS criteria. Similarly, it can be expected that students who are transgendered or gender ambiguous will experience difficulties in this process especially when they do not feel safe within their departments. The difference in performance is explained by examining the applications of students who have been successful in the process. They have supportive mentoring relationships with professors and a departmental culture that supports equity and inclusiveness.

#### TECHNOLOGIES OF DOMINATION

Inherent in the funding proposal process is the use of technologies of domination. The processes of codification, assessment and selection classify the applicants and function as forms of surveillance which contribute to the disciplining of students (Grant 1997). The outcome of the proposal (selection or refusal) allows students to be codified, thus

distinguishing individual students as good and successful. These practices of domination are relentless, functioning through time lines, which produce calculable effects that may limit field of action and thus serve to control the applicants' behaviour. In the autumn of each year, there is a flurry of seminars and deadlines that focus on fellowship applications. Students have very little choice as this is an expectation of scholarly activity. These technologies operate through the classification and objectification of the subject via the regulation of space, time and capacities to produce the normalized student, particularly the competitive individual who is responsible for her or his own success or failure (Grant 1997). In this way, the university produces effects that are similar to the panopticon in its constant and unverifiable surveillance. As a result, students tend to normalize themselves through practices of self-discipline and technologies of the self (Grant 1997).

Funding agencies perpetuate the process of domination through their guidelines, which ensures compliance from graduate students and faculty according to the particular criteria. In this sense, the university's policies are collapsed into those of the funding agencies, thereby complementing and reinforcing each other. The ethos of marketization fits in well with the strategy of having students compete for funding to rationalize their access to public funds. Students are pushed into a compromised compliance position in which they may not want to become engaged. However, since these activities are seen as necessary for their own good or benefit, graduate students have little choice but to become involved.

#### TECHNOLOGIES OF SELF

For Foucault, the key to the technology of the self is the belief, now common in Western culture, that it is possible to know the truth about one's self (Grant 1997). The most influential discourse which informs and constructs this truth for students is educational psychology. Through its investigations of human learning, this

discipline has constructed an object, the learner, and informed our beliefs about how normal students learn, how they are motivated, the predictive values of IQ scores and so on (Grant 1997). Graduate education encourages a culture of individualism, which leads students to believe that they are responsible for their own success or failure primarily through grades. It is the re/shaping of self through grades that produces students as an effect. Students are clearly complicit in this process as they seek the validation or pleasure in being recognized as a worthy academic.

Technologies of the self therefore create a kind of identity, that of the good or worthy student, who is in/formed in particular ways, resulting in the shaping of appropriate needs and desires (Grant 1997). The desire to know, to please, to be successful are all part of the discursive practices engaged in producing the successful, or not-so-successful student. As suggested earlier, this has gendered implications such as boastfulness among male students and humility among females. According to Dehli (1993), practices of policy production establish, affirm or change different subject positions and their relation to each other. We need to examine the educational practices through which graduate students are constituted. What are the social relations that enable such practices to continue? Are these practices self-validating (McKenna 1991)? These questions are timely, particularly in discussions about funding guarantees, because they raise issues around power/knowledge relations, how they are put into place and their effects upon the knowers.

### **Resisting Subjects**

This paper is constructed as if it is common for students to accept their situation as normal in that they have no choice in the matter. I must stress that students actively resist this inscription of ideology and ways of doing things within the institution. Foucault (1986) suggests that it would not be possible for power relations to exist without points of insubordination which, by definition, are

means of escape. Graduate students resist in various ways. Many choose not to participate in the fellowship application process since they view this competition as if it were a lottery, or a game of chance. In my interviews with university administrators on funding, one participant, Dr. Douglas, expressed concerns about creating a "two-tier [funding] system...it brings some sort of enmities and distrust among students" (Dr. Douglas, June, 2004, p. 4). Dr. Douglas' comments connect to the reasons for students' resistance to the scholarship application process. In my study on the experiences of racial minority students and funding, several female students remarked that they choose not to apply for funding because it is a waste of their time (Thomas-Long 2001). Instead, some students opt out in order to look for employment because it provides guaranteed income. Students therefore rationalize their withdrawal by claiming that the process demands too much with little guarantee in return.

### **Conclusion**

So what are we to make of this competitive process of applying for scholarship funding? What are the implications for students and institutions? To answer the first question, the intensity of competition in the funding process has become increasingly linked to the intensification of the market model within higher education. In this model, competition and individualism dominate and female graduate students must work with institutional priorities that reinforce these traits. Female (and male) graduate students, who are not perceived as having the time or energy to compete, are disadvantaged because most graduate programs are invested in faculty and students who are seen as producers of successful research grants. In this process, equity issues are not priority. This has become a fundamental concern in the allocation, by the federal government, of Canada Research Chairs (CRC) along the lines of gender (Jones 2000). Recently, the CRCs were allocated to 19 male scholars, all from the natural and physical sciences. Not

only were no women granted the CRC designation, but none of these allocations came from the social sciences and humanities. For graduate students, this is not surprising as participants in my study on funding suggest that male students and students who are in the sciences are better funded (Thomas-Long 2007).

The implications for graduate students and faculty are enormous. Because professors and administrators experience the marketization process through rigid methods of accountability, competition for scarce funds is passed down to graduate students, who are the "natural" inheritors of this experience. It is not coincidental that institutions take great pride in publicizing their research dollars for scholarly work. Like their mentors, graduate students are directly in line to replicate this ethos of prioritizing individual pursuits and are socialized to be productive members of the academy through the scholarships and fellowships they receive. Furthermore, graduate students and faculty might be more specific in prioritizing research interests that fit those of the funding agencies. The emphasis on research and the "publish or perish" ethos encourage discriminatory practices (overt and covert) relating to ageism as students in their 30s and 40s become disinterested in scholarship application process, and eventually have less interest in the academy.

The scholarship application process offers a window into the graduate student experience and the socialization of graduate students into academic work. On the surface, scholarships offer great possibilities in that they suggest everyone is on a level playing field, but when examined closely, the process replicates relationships that produce inequities along gender, race, class, and age lines. It is noteworthy that all graduate programs have explicit policies on gender and race discrimination, but subtle forms of sexism, such as stereotyping and environments unfriendly to women, make it difficult for graduate students to participate in the scholarship process. Furthermore, as women and minority students continue to experience isolation, a lack of meaningful

faculty mentoring, and a lack of collegiality with other doctoral students, they will continue to struggle not only with the scholarship process, but with access to funding in general.

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