Entering Academic Advising:
Theorizing Professional Socialization

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Abstract—Primary-role academic advisors come to the field from a wide variety of social, academic, and vocational backgrounds. There are likely a wide variety of ways these advisors are socialized for the work of academic advising and in the larger community of practice of advising. We present an analysis of our reflections on becoming primary-role advisors through a collaborative autoethnographic study of advisor professional identity. This analysis produced nine interconnecting themes in an emerging substantive theory of advisor professional socialization. Though it is not generalizable, our model is a proposal on which future research can be built.

Keywords: advising profession, professional socialization, collaborative autoethnography, reflective practice, personal component.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study was to explore the professional socialization of three academic advisors. Academic advising does not occur in a vacuum; an advisor's backgrounds, beliefs, experiences, knowledge, skills, and dispositions influences their advising practices. Experiences shape practice, which in turn, shape future experiences. Professional socialization describes a process "whereby persons internalize behavioral norms and standards and form a sense of identity and commitment to a professional field" (Weidman et al. 6). Understanding the professional socialization of academic advisors affords an opportunity to identify components of a process that ultimately shapes the work and effectiveness of academic advisors.

Primary-role academic advisors come from a wide variety of social, academic, and vocational backgrounds. It is not unusual to come to the field mid-career, having never recognizing advising as a viable career option. For advisors, socialization occurs through the influence of immediate colleagues on the local level, the direct student interaction of advising, and in the larger community of practice of academic advising. Given the current status of the field and the predominance of training on campus or departmental levels, there are obvious questions that scholarship in the field must begin to address: How do academic advisors become socialized to the field? What draws them to the field? What processes shape how they develop and commit to the field?

The status of academic advising as a bona-fide profession continues to be debated (Aiken-Wisniewski et al.; McGill "Leaders"; McGill "The Professionalization"). There is much to be unpacked about the use of the word "profession," but in our view, academic advising is an emerging profession. Despite advisor professional socialization being a

critical issue for the field, it has not been the subject of much scholarship. Our study contributes to the understanding of advising as an emerging profession by exploring the formative period of three advisors as they entered the field. Research has delineated values advisors should have, but there has been considerably less emphasis on understanding how life (and professional) experiences shape professional identity, which influences an advisor's work ethic, motivation for learning and continued professional development. In our review of the literature, most of the published scholarship does not explore the personal and professional selves of advisors. We aspire to close this knowledge gap through the use of a collaborative autoethnography (CAE), a research method which, "enables researchers to use data from their own life stories as situated in sociocultural contexts in order to gain an understanding of society through the unique lens of self" (Chang et al. 18). Unlike quantitative or other forms of qualitative inquiry, CAE affords an opportunity to generate a rich autoethnographic record while providing the checks and balances that occur in a collaborative environment. This leads to the generation of data that not only represents the experiences of the individual participant-researcher, but also the collective critical analysis of these individual experiences. Qualitative research is particularly well suited to understanding the professional socialization of academic advisors because there is limited established theory from which other formats of inquiry could be grounded, thereby leading to a necessity for a descriptive, in-depth understanding of the topic.

In this article, we explore our experiences of socialization to the field of academic advising. Understanding professional socialization of advisors informs advisor training and development, ensures that the espoused values for academic advisors are translating in the formative period of their professional career, and can shed light on challenges in the field which have not yet been addressed.

METHODS

CAE builds on autoethnography, in which a person explores their own unique experiences in the context of their environment (Ellis, Adams and Bochner). As a research method, autoethnography emerged from ethnography, the study of people part of a cultural group. While ethnographers seek to understand the "other," autoethnography acknowledges the role of the self within the environmental context. Autoethnography, therefore, is the study "of

one's own culture and oneself as a part of that culture" (Patton 102). The focus on the self is obviously a feature of biography, but autoethnography is distinguished from autobiography because the study of the self is oftentimes connected to the social science literature.

> Autoethnographers use personal stories as windows to the world, through which they interpret how their selves are connected to their sociocultural contexts and how the contexts give meanings to their experiences and perspectives. Intentional and systematic consideration of various autobiographical data give rise to autoethnographic interpretation that transcends mere narration of their past to help researchers reach explanations of the sociocultural phenomena connected to the personal. (Chang et al. 18)

CAE is like other forms of qualitative research involving self-exploration, allowing unique access to internal mental events with the added layers of collaborative critical questioning and support. Thus, because the researcher is also the subject/participant of the study, it is important to position ourselves as participant-researchers. All three of us are white, cisgender, temporarily able-bodied men who began this project as primary-role academic advisors working in higher education institutions. See Table 1.

Table 1 – PARTICIPANT-RESEARCHER CHARACTERISTICS

	Craig (37)	Mark (36)	Drew (39)
States lived in	Nebraska, Florida, South Dakota	Illinois, Wisconsin, Florida	Minnesota, Wisconsin, Colorado, New Hampshire
Additional salient identity characteristics	Single, gay, feminist, orphan, uncle, musician, scholar, qualitative researcher	Married, father, heterosexual, liberal, atheist	Middle class, father, musician, Lutheran-ish,
Education: Bachelor's (B) Master's (M) Doctorate, (D)	*B:* Music; English; Communication; Film Studies *M:* Music Theory; Academic Advising *D:* Adult Education & Human Resource Development	*B:* Psychology; Social Welfare *M:* School Counseling; Educational Leadership *D:* Educational Leadership & Policy Studies (expected: 2021)	*B:* Music Education *M:* Student Affairs in Higher Education *D:* Educational Leadership

This study involved four processes of reciprocal data collection and analysis. Initially, we answered a series of 25 questions. Process two brought us together to discuss the convergences and divergences of our writing. This allowed us to critically question and examine our responses, using the conversations themselves as further data. In the third process, we coded the written data while drawing

upon the insights of the conversation phase. We conducted three rounds of coding including initial coding, focused coding, and thematic coding. Though not part of our original design, we began grounded theory analytic procedures when we saw the relationships in our emerging themes in our original coding. Finally, in the fourth process, we engaged in a prolonged period of collaborative scholarly writing in which we further refined the interconnected themes and attempted to link them to existing conceptual frameworks.

Although creating a model was not our original intention, the model described below became an expression of the interrelationship of themes within the extensive data of our own narratives. We gathered additional insights from our interactions with one another in semi-weekly phone meetings over the course of several years. Additionally, we presented our work to colleagues at two regional and four annual conferences held by NACADA: The Global Community for Academic Advising. The responses of the audience feedback on the ideas presented became data for consideration as well as means of checking our ideas.

FINDINGS

We present a collaborative analysis of our reflections on becoming primary-role advisors in an emerging model (see figure 1). We agreed upon nine themes: 1) Life Events; 2) Opportunity; 3) Transferable skills; 4) Idealism; 5) Competency; 6) Ambiguity; 7) Struggle; 8) Communities of Practice; and 9) Habits of Practice. Within these themes, evolving perception is a core category. Evolving perception takes on the form of how we, as advisors, entered an emerging profession that has many paths of preparation both academically and via numerous professional experiences. First is the point when we come to advising (pre-advisor: the threshold), in which our life events have led us to perceiving opportunity in the work of advising and identifying transferable skills to offer the emerging profession. Next, is a stage (socialization: becoming an advisor) wherein our perceptions of advising can become idealized and simultaneously ambiguous, resulting in dissonance about the field of advising. Simultaneously, in the midst of, and as a result of, the struggle with dissonance, we are socialized by communities of practice shaping habits of practice which we perceive as varying levels of competence (establishment: communities of practice and habits of practice).

Figure 1 – MODEL OF PROFESSIONAL SOCIALIZATION
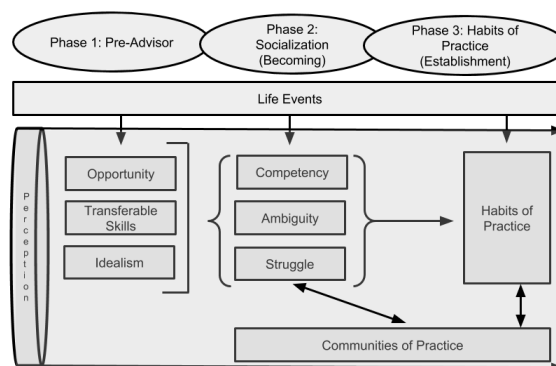
Pre-Advisor: The Threshold

The first part of our model describes the conditions of entering advising. We entered the field of advising without a clear understanding of what the day-to-day work of advising truly involves. Life events are an obvious and omnipresent phenomenon that can directly and indirectly lead us into the opportunity of advising. Securing a job in advising and having the base competence to pursue a job requiring transferable skills. The themes of life events, opportunity, and transferable skills constitute the threshold into the field.

We acknowledge the ways socialization within the emerging profession of advising is not an isolated set of circumstances within an advisor's work life limited to a single domain. *Life events* are experiences, controlled and uncontrolled, that are part of the self and environment before, during, and after initial socialization. Life events influence all parts of the socialization process to varying degrees.

We assigned the code *opportunity* to data that showed a perceived set of circumstances that was potentially advantageous to our pursuit of advising. Opportunities provided chances for professional development, further committing us to the work of the emerging profession. However, our data displayed a tension between the welcoming of opportunities that shaped our professional identity by connecting us to the work we loved, but also led to over-commitment. Being energized by the work you do, being recognized for the work and afforded opportunities might lead to commitment to academic advising but can also lead to professional burnout. Mark saw the opportunity of applying his helping skills with a different population, with a different set of is-

sues, in a different environment. Drew perceived advising as an opportunity to depart from residence life work at the time he was expecting his first child, setting up a workday he believed would be more amenable to work-life balance. Craig was teaching music as a part-time adjunct and concomitantly enrolled in Kansas State's graduate certificate program in academic advising, which solidified his desire to pursue a career in advising. These examples show the interconnection between opportunity and life events.

Transferable knowledge and skills are the application of outside experiences to academic advising builds upon the previous two themes. For instance, Mark, burned out in school counseling and welcoming his newborn son, saw academic advising as a closely-related field where he could utilize transferable skills. Academic backgrounds shaped our skill sets and knowledge base prior to, and in the beginning of, our work as advisors. Drew's undergraduate major in music education and master's degree in student affairs emphasized reflective practice and social justice. Mark explained how his academic background provided relational skills and a respect for the landscape of education. Craig described how his master's degree in music theory shaped his interaction with students pursuing majors in the humanities. Since academic advisors come from a wide variety of backgrounds, this lens of disciplinarity in combination with personal experience serves as transferred knowledge and skills that connect to habits of practice. We also came to advising from different work environments and advising allowed us a chance to use transferable knowledge and skills.

We define *idealism* as an attitude or belief about the state of the profession and what the work of the profession ought to be (we use "profession" here to connote the ideal state). This study revealed two facets of idealism: that it can be based on conceptual ideals (i.e. "I thought it would be this way, but it isn't") and that it can come from experience ("It should be this way but isn't"). We pondered the purpose and function of advising. We each articulated a vision for what advising ought to be, but not necessarily what it is. Whether or not it is always practiced as such, each of us attempted to define what we felt advising should be. For Craig, advising was the process of helping students establish educational identities and aspirations. He believed students achieved these goals through the process of exploration with the support of an academic advisor. Our idealism arose from expectations of advising and our conceptions of how academic advising ought to be practiced.

Socialization: Becoming an Advisor

In the next phase of the model, three additional themes describe the process of crossing the threshold into becoming an advisor. Competency developed over time and in varying degrees; Ambiguity emerges at the point where our (mis)perceptions prior to becoming an advisor encounter the reality of advising in practice. Struggle arises from the tension between ambiguity and idealism.

We define *competency* as the ability (or perceived ability) to perform the work of advising successfully and efficiently. This involved a consideration of the necessary knowledge, skills, and dispositions (e.g. importance of being inquisitive) to do the work of advising well. This took many forms in our data. For instance, competency was expressed as one's ability to integrate formal learning into practice. This might involve taking knowledge from one's academic degrees or prior career experience and integrating it into academic advising. Mark's training in school counseling (his application of active listening with attending behavior to his advising practice) provided one example. Additionally, we each spoke about the use of learning resources—both global and local—to develop our practice. This included institutional resources and NACADA as our professional association. The theme also encompassed learning from others, both alongside our students and observing colleagues. We each perceived competency as including professional development, engaging field literature, and knowing the history and development of the field. We recognize this did not always happen within our own experiences and probably not in other advising settings.

Ambiguity describes the lack of distinction and clarity regarding aspects of academic advising. Evidence of ambiguity included a lack of clarity about advising being considered a profession; variation and inconsistency in job roles, responsibilities, and authority; a lack of a unified model of advising; an overabundance of advising models; and insufficient differentiation of academic advising from other related occupations. For example, Mark noted:

> I would imagine the actual day-to-day duties of advisors varies greatly from institution to institution. For example, some advisors may be more inclined to meet one-on-one

whereas others present in classrooms. Some may focus on creating schedules and ensuring credit requirements are met whereas others focus more on how a student's socio-personal development impacts academic performance. Surely, different institutions and student populations will benefit best from tapered approaches. However, I do not think that disqualifies the benefit of a unified role definition for academic advising.

For understandable reasons, NACADA has taken a cautious and broad stance in defining the purpose and function of academic advising. When NACADA makes such concessions, there are consequences. Drew wrote about the difficulty for NACADA adopting a unified (or minimally unifying) definition of advising because of the plethora of advising models and approaches practiced by the members on the local level. Making too strong a statement about what advising is or does would potentially alienate some members based on local institutional expectations of the function of advising. We speculated that members are not particularly engaged with more scholarly approaches to advising because it is hard to imagine implementing those approaches within the institutional level model and expectations of advising (Bridgen).

We define *struggle* as the cognitive disconnect between the ideal and the current reality of advising practice. Our ideals or higher purposes for our work and the potential for our field conflict with current constraints of time, expectations from others, and the current culture of advising. We noted the support (or lack thereof) that we experienced upon entering the field. Drew articulated struggle in seeking to find the elusive definition of academic advising:

> I go back and forth on whether I think that the elusive "unified theory" of advising is 1) desirable; 2) possible; or 3) inevitable and operating whether we name it or not. I get the point of leaving it open-ended and a space where lots of ideas and other theories can permeate. However, I have lived in the challenges of how we define ourselves if we don't have a common definition which implies a common theory.

The connection of this contemplation of a theory of advising with the practice of advising is further explored:

> It seems to me that purpose vs. function is a very different thing and there is such thing as higher purpose vs. institutional purpose vs. utilitarian purpose. Sadly, I think that my practice tends to serve institutional and utilitarian purpose in far more clear ways than the higher purpose. However, it is the latter that keeps me going. I want my advising to mean something. I don't think that I will change the world in a single conversation, but I want it to inspire students to serve the common good and for me that means social justice.

Establishment: Communities of Practice and Habits of Practice

Our common experiences suggest that both socialization and institutional colleagues influence individual practice. *Communities of practice* represent the reciprocal influences of socialization experiences and the practice of advising. Mark noted:

> When I decided to become an academic advisor, I was given a handbook and two days of meeting everyone with whom I would be working. I was given an opportunity to shadow other advisors, but it was quickly apparent that my school counseling experience prepared me to have academic discussions with students. Therefore, the largest area lacking in my practice was institutional knowledge. The handbook and consulting with my peers allowed me to learn that aspect of academic advising rather quickly. In many ways, I felt that I entered the profession with an advanced skill set that many who come from the admissions side of colleges have to develop after they have become academic advisors.

Communities of practice consists of local and global communities. Each of us saw stark contrasts between what we gained from our local community and NACADA. Mark later reflected on how his initial connection to NACADA brought a change in perception of what advising was, including how he was struggling with ambiguity and developing competency. Through interaction with the global community of practice, Mark made social connections,

which in turn provided new perspectives, subsequently leading to changes in his practice as an advisor.

Both the socialization of the local and global communities of practice influence *habits of practice*, the amalgamation of the other eight themes: the actions in the work of advising that are derived from several factors and sources (e.g. community; habits of mind; environmental reinforces). Habits of practice integrates formal learning, observations of others, expectations of advising work, prior knowledge and experiences, and is influenced by feedback from the environment. Habits of practice develop actively, passively, and with varying degrees of intentionality. These habits exist whether we are aware of them or not: "I have integrated my skill-based training in counseling (i.e. active listening) and therefore do not consciously use it as much as I use what I have learned from the Ed. Leadership degree" (Mark).

Habits of practice can come from formal or informal learning. Drew's master's program required defense of a competency portfolio involving reflection. This was bolstered by his graduate assistantship supervisor instilling a habit of reflecting critically upon the day's work (e.g. contemplating conduct hearings, examining White male privilege). Drew developed the habit of practice of observing other advisors from his supervisor in that role. From those observations, he learned new advising practices and was reminded to incorporate advising-is-teaching into his work with students.

Mood and life events can also impact habits of practice. For instance, Drew noted that fatigue played a factor in maintaining some of his habits of practice. Habits of practice can be good (putting students in the driver's seat) or bad (not using techniques you believe are best for students due to tiredness or shortness of time). For us, feelings of professional burnout, bad workplace morale, and negative personal events led to bad habits of practice regardless of how good of an advisor we may have been in the past.

DISCUSSION

The thematic elements of the model come from our collaborative analysis of our own stories coded as data, while the form of the model comes from drawing connections between those themes via the iterative interpretive processes of CAE. Commonalities within our stories of becoming advisors emerged by identifying our evolving perceptions of the nine aforementioned themes. Moreover, the rate of change in perception seems to slow over time though an advisor may continue to live in relationship to the thematic elements of the model.

One aspect of professional identity considers how a practitioner enters a field and how they become engaged in the work. Advisors must have a sound understanding of themselves and their worldview relating to the advising context to practice effectively and responsibly. Achieving this involves a deep understanding of one's values, levels of concentration, stress, emotions, and commitment. Higginson included advisor self-knowledge within the informational component of Habley's competencies (the other two were relational and conceptual). However, these personal issues go beyond the traditional framework of training new advisors. They include self-awareness, maintenance, and development and therefore, are not purely informational, nor are they likely to be conveyed to students in an advising session. McClellan broadened Habley's original model to include "the personal" as its own component. To activity monitor how one's subjectivity plays a role in their practice requires action: a decision must be made to commit to these (oftentimes difficult) exercises that force advisors to honestly self-appraise. Like all forms of identity construction, the process is iterative and ongoing.

In our model, the thematic interrelationships show hope and tension in our perception of advising as a field and an emerging profession. Through our conversations, we observed that there tends to be a level of shock that new advisors experience when their idealism is met with reality. Ambiguity and struggle emerged for us when we perceived disconnection between our idealized vision of the field and the actual practice of advising at the local level. If this becomes particularly pervasive, the dissonance may lead to burnout and attrition. How many skilled advisors have left the field for other opportunities, or for roles that are more respected or further professionalized? Our stories illustrated our experiences with this disconnect and this, in part, contributed to the fact that we have all accepted positions outside of primary role academic advising. Yet, each of us is highly invested in the research, practice and professionalization of the field.

Perception is important during the malleable periods of an advisor's professional identity. For advising administrators, this means understanding

how advisors perceive opportunities within the role, institution, and global field. Administrators and others who socialize new advisors should ponder the following questions: How does this new advisor perceive advising as an idealized thing (or not)? What life events are shaping this new professional's identity as an advisor? How can I help my new hire contextualize transferable skills/strengths? These questions will help guide those who train new advisors in clarifying the purpose and meaning of the work of advising as that new professional develops their identity as an advisor.

Advising can be a lifelong career. To be a lifelong career, the field needs to have the appropriate level of opportunity, support, and fulfillment to sustain that level of commitment. Our intention with this study was to better understand advisor socialization. Our work identifies experiences wherein we perceive ambiguity, dissonance, and struggle as new advisors. If our experiences are shared by others, then advising administrators ought to develop remedies to circumvent some of the barriers associated with new advisor socialization. Additionally, our work highlights the hopes and aspirations of new advisors. As an emerging profession, we need to capture, encourage, nurture, and retain those hopes and aspirations. That begins and ends with professional socialization and professional recognition.

Moreover, because there is not a uniform path into the field of advising as exists in other professions, advising administrators need to be intentional in socializing new advisors. Advising administrators ought to take actions to lessen ambiguity, affirm the struggles with ambiguity, and engage communities of practice. Being thoughtful about developing habits of practice that meet the ends of advising with a higher purpose and the values of institutions on a local level will further the goal of reducing ambiguity. Habits of practice and the ways advisors know and encounter them may be important to the worklife of advisors and to the ways in which they encounter students. Advising administrators can minimize this ambiguity by making clear connections to the scholarly literature on advising through resources like the *New Advisor Guidebook* (Folsom et al.). Rather than simply handing new advisors a copy to read, advising administrators might consider engaging new advisors in discussion about the various chapters in the text through the formation of reading groups and/or pairing new advisors with more seasoned advisors.

As our emerging profession matures, the need to understand the development of an advisor's personal and professional identity grows in importance. Understanding advisor identity development has the potential to inform many aspects of the field, not limited to advisor training and development, job satisfaction, and program design. We hope our project demonstrates that it is essential for serious advisors to question and have a deep curiosity for the work of advising, to reimagine their practice frequently, and to deeply understand the impact advisors have on students and students' impact on advisors. One means of closing the gap between the idealized version of advising and its practical application is accomplished by critically examining how, when, and why this cognitive dissonance emerges throughout one's professional career as an advisor.

The study was designed and intended to explore the experiences of becoming an advisor and not our shared or divergent identities. Our stories are unique to us. Any other group of three advisors may have developed different themes. Though we propose an emerging model, we stress that this is iterative and descriptive of our experiences rather than a grand all-encompassing theory that is universally applicable to all advisors in all places. But the model is a framework from which to base future research, advisor training practices, and ongoing development of advising as an emerging professional field. From these findings, larger scale inquiry can be inspired, leading to generalizable conceptualizations of the current state of professional socialization for academic advisors. This research can potentially impact advisor training and development, understanding the professionalization of academic advising, and can identify potential causes of advisor burnout and turnover. We invite our work to be challenged and enhanced by those with other identities taking on a similar study of advisor development or rendering critique of our model.

Within the context of our three experiences, one might (mistakenly) draw the conclusion that our experiences with the field of academic advising, especially with regard to socialization, were predominantly negative. The impetus for this study is quite the opposite: we believe there is great promise in the field of academic advising. New initiatives, such as the 2017 redesign of NACADA's Core Values and the creation of a set of Core Competencies for academic advising pave the way for much less ambiguity in de-

fining the field of academic advising. It is our intention to initiate a broader dialogue about the professional socialization of academic advisors with the purpose of improving the experiences of the next generation of academic advisors.

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