

Building a voice of influence: Supporting social science doctoral students with disabilities

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This chapter draws together experience from two supervisors on the subject of supporting social science doctoral students with disabilities. Our aims here are to illuminate the structural obstacles that students may encounter, and how supervisors might assist their students in navigating the terrain of 'poor listeners', unsubstantiated criticism, and views that are expressed that serve to suppress the voice and influence of the doctoral scholar. It is not our intention here to render the doctoral student as a powerless individual whose identity is one of deficit, on the contrary; rather in identifying structural and disciplinary barriers, supervisors, and their students may better prepare from what they may experience.

Doctoral research: A scholarly utopia?

For those contemplating doctoral research (which may either be a PhD or Professional Doctorate), what is it that you are anticipating? For those who supervise doctoral students, what can you remember of the time before you first registered for your degree? Trepidation, excitement, enthusiasm, energy, intrigue, nervousness may all be relevant adjectives to describe this period of experience. These may also be feelings that continue throughout studies, but rarely will they remain constant (see Klocker, 2011). Doctoral research is hard. It can be a place of pedestrianism punctuated by extremes of feelings of self-doubt and fragility. Similarly, it can be a place of feelings of self-doubt and fragility punctuated by pedestrianism. It can be a lonely enterprise, something which puts pressure on other aspects of life such as family and relationships. Paranoia and imposter syndrome may proliferate at certain times (Cope-Watson & Smith Betts, 2010), and for periods longer than one would hope. Twenty to thirty per cent of those who start a doctoral programme do not finish, and attrition rates in this level of study are exceptionally high (The Economist, 2010).

Investigations into the high drop out and failure rates are abounding, and thematically reasons include the field of research undertaken, sponsored/non-sponsored study, mode of study (full time or part time), and the quality of the student-supervisor relationship(s) (Lovitts & Nelson, 2000; Cyranoski et al., 2011). It is incumbent on universities then to understand, work with, and cooperate with students throughout their doctoral journey to understand struggles or challenges that may be predictable or unexpected. Doing so avoids the costly issues associated with attrition,

but more importantly, there is a moral imperative at work here as supervisors watch over the student's development – not just in terms of expertise, but also in respect of the politics of the academy.

Universities too are building their profile of doctoral students from 'non-traditional' backgrounds. Widening participation agendas are proliferating the higher education landscape – attempting to challenge structural deficiencies in social and education systems that have provided impediments of access and retention. In doing so, the landscape of the doctoral (and more broadly the university system) is developing (albeit slowly), but barriers persist. Deliberate actions such as widening participation scholarships are just the tip of the iceberg. Once the 'non-traditional' student is 'in', how can conditions be created that retain those individuals?

So then, in just a few words we can see the work of supervisors is one which extends wildly beyond 'simple' academic guidance. The supervisor, leadership in the academic schools where students are based, and more broadly, the academic community needs to remain cognizant of the plight of doctoral students. Student experiences, the obstacles they encounter, the attitudes they are confronted with, the multiple demands on their time and attention (personal circumstances, the need to work for income, illness or disability etc.) is too important to overlook. By identifying the myriad of factors that impact, supervisors and the academic community can be part of the process of shaping the individual experiences (more) positively. It is our contention here that to not do this would be remiss of all those involved in support of tomorrow's academic supervisors.

The doctoral student's voice

For those reading this who have passed through, in part, or to completion of a doctoral journey, we are almost certain that at one time or another you felt that your audience was not listening to you, not taking you seriously, or made you feel as if your contributions were less-deserving than those of another, more experienced individual sharing the same intellectual space. These feelings may have occurred at a conference where you presented your ideas, receiving feedback on one of your first peer-reviewed publications, or maybe at a faculty/department social event. It is without a doubt that progress through a doctoral programme is a credentialing process where new capabilities are developed (Carlino, 2012). Ideas become refined, experience builds, and respect for ideas becomes more abundant. Nevertheless, this can be a bruising experience, and one which cannot just be rooted in the development of the doctoral scholar and the customary rites of

passage that are encountered. Rather, any negative experience is contributed to by the environments in which these feelings emerge, and the behaviours of those who cause or perpetuate such emotions of stress, anxiety, self-doubt, humiliation, or worthlessness. Levecque et al.'s (2017) analysis confirm the precariousness of the situation of PhD students' mental wellbeing. They report (p.868):

- One in two PhD students experiences psychological distress; one in three is at risk of a common psychiatric disorder.
- The prevalence of mental health problems is higher in PhD students than in the highly educated general population, highly educated employees and higher education students.
- Work and organisational context are significant predictors of PhD students' mental health

While the findings above point to a range of possible influences on wellbeing, understanding levels of confidence among doctoral students is something which has gained traction in recent years. Social media, blogs and academic journals are sites of discussion and debate of what is often referred to as 'doctoral imposter syndrome'. Broadly this definition comes to represent the emotions felt by doctoral students, not the least those who feel unwelcomed or inferior in the company of fellow students or key actors in the academy. 'Imposter syndrome' is widely used, applied, and self-diagnosed, it bears the hallmarks of a pathological condition and gets used as an explanatory tool for feelings associated with a lack of progress, lack of ability, or lack of intelligence. Situating in this way is problematic, as this does not sufficiently hold to account the environmental conditions which may bring about these feelings. While individuals need to reflect on their own expectations of self, there is a requirement for an understanding of the social forces that create, shape or exacerbate feelings and expectations too – something which we will come on to a little later.

The doctoral researcher in the social sciences

So far, we have looked at some of the less positive things that doctoral students endure as part of their journey towards completion. Our intention, like authors such as Smith (1995) encourage, in this part of the chapter is to encourage readers to continue thinking about potential issues affecting the experience of the doctoral student. For the student who is studying for a higher degree, there are numerous times that they will feel formally and informally 'tested' - in supervision meetings, at conferences and presentations, in writing for publication, in annual monitoring of progress. Feelings of unbelonging may well occur in one or more of these interactions. Such feelings could be a response to feedback received where the quality of argument or enquiry is

seen by 'experts' as underdeveloped, inaccurate, or not fitting. As Mantai (2017) illustrates, this challenge to the student can be profound.

Not all disciplines are the same. Conventions and lore differ but always require the doctoral student to adjust to formal rules and informal norms. For scholars in the social sciences, criticality is key, but this is not always regarded as positive (Marar, 2013). Understanding the dynamics of power relations, holding people or institutions to account, advancing understandings that break from convention and identifying inequalities are just some of the duties incumbent on the researcher. Inside the discipline, this approach will be accepted, and indeed be a necessity, but where such knowledge or findings move outside, hostile responses, attempts to disqualify statements, and attacks on the social scientist (and doctoral student of the social sciences) are to be expected.

Where institutional practices are critiqued, hidden issues made known through research, or allegations of impropriety are levied, on the one hand, these meet the standards of the work of the 'public intellectual' (Hammersley, 2000), but at the same time may bring about instant or sustained attacks from powerful entities directed towards the novice researcher. The aim may be to deliberately discredit the arguments posed, intimidate, or silence dissenting voices emerging from the academy. But we should be mindful of the potential impact of these. Being a social science doctoral student is therefore not easy; something which other academic communities will endure similarly. Amidst such pressures where the student's voice is challenged or publicly disqualified, how can supervisors and others help in avoiding that student from feelings of disaffection, isolation, self-doubt, exhaustion, anxiety and humiliation?

The doctoral researcher with a disability and/or chronic illness

Postgraduate research student enrolments in the United Kingdom have remained at around 112000 for the past five years. Those with 'known disabilities' however, have increased from 7,935 in 2014-15 to 11,300 in 2018-19 (Higher Education Statistics Agency [HESA], 2020). When a student discloses and their disability is therefore known, this is recorded by HESA under different types of disabilities, such as a specific learning difficulty, mental health conditions and social communication/Autistic spectrum disorder

A comprehensive review of mental health challenges faced by students at all levels by the charity, Student Minds, throws up some important insights for our debate here. In a ranking of challenges that students face based on analysis of research data, 'Fear of being judged' is ranked first. Of further interest is how 'Mental health problems are seen as a weakness' is ranked 4th in this

research's '10 Grand Challenges'. Student mental health agendas in UK universities have snowballed, not the least since ONS figures recorded 95 university student suicides in the year to July 2017 (England and Wales).

For the doctoral student specifically, studies have indicated high levels of mental distress, anxiety and depression among this group of advanced-level students. Triggers and sources have amounted to issues such as work-home life balance, relationships with the supervisory team, financial issues, perception of career progressions and life after study, and difficulty in accessing support. Further, Hannam-Swain (2017) makes incisive comments concerning the 'additional labour' of doctoral students with a disability such as the navigation and delays associated with welfare payments and assessments, through to the exhaustion and cognitive fatigue.

What the above highlights are the risk that the environment of learning and scholarship further extends and problematises a disability or chronic illness. University structures, physical environment, and the potential stigma are all important potential impediments for supervisors to reflect upon when supervising. The academy is not immune from the infiltration of cultural prejudices filling its corridors and inaction in responding to the diverse needs of the student body (Mynhardt, 1980; Jayakumar, 2009; Woodford, Levy & Walls, 2013). Observing broader social, but also local barriers, understanding individual experience, reflecting on possible interventions, and shaping supervision and pastoral support in a way that is appreciative to the ongoing confrontation some students may endure with challenges beyond those associated with the disability or illness itself is all too important.

Building awareness of factors that affect the listening ability

We have presented three 'identities' here – the doctoral student, the doctoral student of the social sciences, and the disabled or chronically ill doctoral student. Let us contemplate how, in situations of the convergence of these three identities, experience may be felt. Specifically, our attention turns to how a manifold identity such as this can stymie voice and the ability to be heard. Deliberately we turn our attention towards the audience (taken broadly here), and the inherent issues at work in effective, attentive and respectful listening. To do this, we mobilise a lens of analysis drawing from the work of Fricker (2007) and her work on epistemic injustice.

Students undertaking doctoral study are involved in the process of knowledge production; a systematic scrutiny of a given area, identification of a 'gap', and the building of an original

contribution to the discipline. But while this may be some of the driving aims of study, the reception of findings and their communication is not without its politics. Aside from debates over the 'quality' of knowledge, knowledge production can be tainted by assumptions and prejudices which markedly or subtly aim to discredit the voice of the speaker. This is an issue of how power is exercised in public and academic forums. Its' purpose, of disputing the worth of the 'knower' by the 'hearer', is what we come to mean by the event of epistemic injustice.

Biography is closely tied to the communication of testimonies. The student embarking upon doctoral study can lack confidence, a sense of belonging, and these are not necessarily feelings that dissipate as the journey progresses. Some can often see the label of 'student' as lacking agency or influence (also see, McAlpine & Amundsen, 2009). The professional status of the 'knower', 'teller', or 'speaker' will inevitably form part of how judgements are formed by the listener(s). Claims of proof or truth by the doctoral researcher are fettered by hierarchies, and much more than the quality of the knowledge in its own right.

For the doctoral student of the social sciences, how well does the audience receive their testimonies? The social sciences (and humanities) have been the target of rationalisation in UK universities, with science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) subjects and professional training taking centre stage. Liberal subjects in universities have experienced reductions in government funding, and student admissions as a consequence of market-driven higher education reforms. Further, governments in the UK seem unwilling to utilise concrete findings from social science research to inform policy reforms (see Shaw, 2015). As Shah (2020, p.295) reports "Dominic Cummings, a senior adviser to the UK government, posted an unusual advert on his blog, calling for data scientists, mathematicians and physicists to join him at the heart of government." The social sciences are right to feel that they are sidelined. Reductions in funding available for research via funding councils and the routine pre-eminence positioning of STEM subjects in rhetoric and practice is worrying.

This backdrop is important to recognise for both the doctoral student and their supervisors. Status as 'student', and as a 'student of the social sciences' potentially situates the voice of the student as less eligible. Voices can quickly be subordinated by listeners, not because of what is being said, but because of the credentials of the person. The agency of the 'teller' is potentially diminished because of the opinions of an audience being shaped by manifest influences and influencers.

We are seeing potential impediments here, but let us continue by building our awareness further. What for the social science doctoral student who embraces disability as part of their identity? Even within universities, disabled students report considerable stigma. Challenges also exist for early career and established academic too. So why is this important to recognise in this context? Continuing with our discussion of testimony and biography, the disability aspect of identity for the doctoral student is important.

The debates over labelling of those with disabilities are well rehearsed across social science literature. Stigma applied based on the presence of a disability is common, and its effects profound. Identities become tainted or discounted because of prejudices held by onlookers, and indeed voices are suppressed as a consequence. Persistent myths and social misconceptions are applied which render student victim of epistemic injustice. Testimonies can be discounted not the least due to the language that surrounds disability being regularly used without it being problematised. This is not a new phenomenon, rather the persistent scapegoating, marginalisation and prejudices levelled at those with disabilities has pervaded society, and infiltrates institutions such as education.

To get heard, feel more confident, and build capital, the disabled doctoral student of the social sciences needs to potentially work harder than their fellow students in other areas. So what strategies can be designed by supervisors to assist their students in navigating structural impediments to their voice being heard and acculturation into a learning environment? The first is for supervisors to understand the lived experience of their student more competently. The impact of a disability on daily life is important, but so too is a deep appreciation for the barriers encountered and caused/exacerbated by systems, processes, institutions, policies and exclusionary practices. Ask students to consider what strategies they have in place to manage already and consider how these could be further operationalised in the context of doctoral study. Importantly though, supervisors must make sure that their approach is not over-bearing, over protective, or suffocating. Indeed approached wrongly, the doctoral student can potentially experience feelings contrary to the aim, and perpetrated by those who are there to support.

Supervisors should look critically at how their own university approaches inclusionary agendas for those with disabilities.

- What support is available, does this naturally extend beyond the large undergraduate provision of most universities to research degrees?
- What experience does the academic department or school have in supporting students with disabilities, and has it previously been effective?
- What is the visible or more opaque agenda of social sciences in the institution where supervision takes place?
- How does it stand alongside STEM subjects, for example?
- What is the level of visibility of social sciences in terms of events, activity and opportunity for research student involvement – just how accessible are these if they exist at all?
- What does the doctoral student community look like at the university? Some institutions have huge swathes of students studying, while others have more modest numbers.
- Given that doctoral study can potentially be quite isolating, are there communities of peer support available, and if not, could there be?
- How are doctoral students taught and educated on the importance of the social scientist as a ‘public intellectual’?
- Is there a clear sense of purpose for the discipline's reach into social issues?
- Are students made aware of the peaks and troughs of the desirability of social and political critique?

With regard to the final question, training students in techniques of managing vehemently opposing voices can be done, for example, media training can be assistive for this type of ‘thinking on your feet’. Safe spaces of discussion, presentation of knowledge and critical debate builds confidence. Organisers can control audience access to these, and supervisors may seek to vary how these spaces occur with an expressed consideration of the individual needs of presenters or discussants. However, confrontation and assaults on the voice of the student do not just occur face-to-face. How might social media comments, peer-review feedback or other mediums have an impact, and how can measures be taken to best support the student when these arise (see Campbell, 2017; Mewburn & Thompson, 2013).

Conclusions

Above all, strategies for supporting a doctoral student should be adapted for individual need. However, where the voice of the student risks being diminished, how can this then be thwarted or mitigated against? Understanding how the student's voice *could be* the subject of testimonial injustice could be a good starting point. As has been seen, we have deliberately discussed these concerns in respect of the ‘listener’. Assumptions, prejudices and discrediting occur more often

than not because of the worldview of the 'listener' – not because of something done on the part of the 'teller'. Taking this forward, supervisors should consider the audiences that the student will confront. Preparedness seems critical, and the more informed this can be, the better.

There should also be caution exercised on the part of supervisors. A supervisory relationship which adopts a protectionist stance may be counter-productive also. We finish with a question to supervisors – in your discipline, what factors and impediments might your supervisees encounter in their voice being heard? Once you have found them, what can you do to shape the experience of your student, so when they become a supervisor themselves, they can pass on these strategies for success and accomplishment.

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