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Striding up the Ladder: A Critical Reflection on Student-Staff Partnership through the lens of Ajzen's Theory of Planned Behaviour

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Abstract

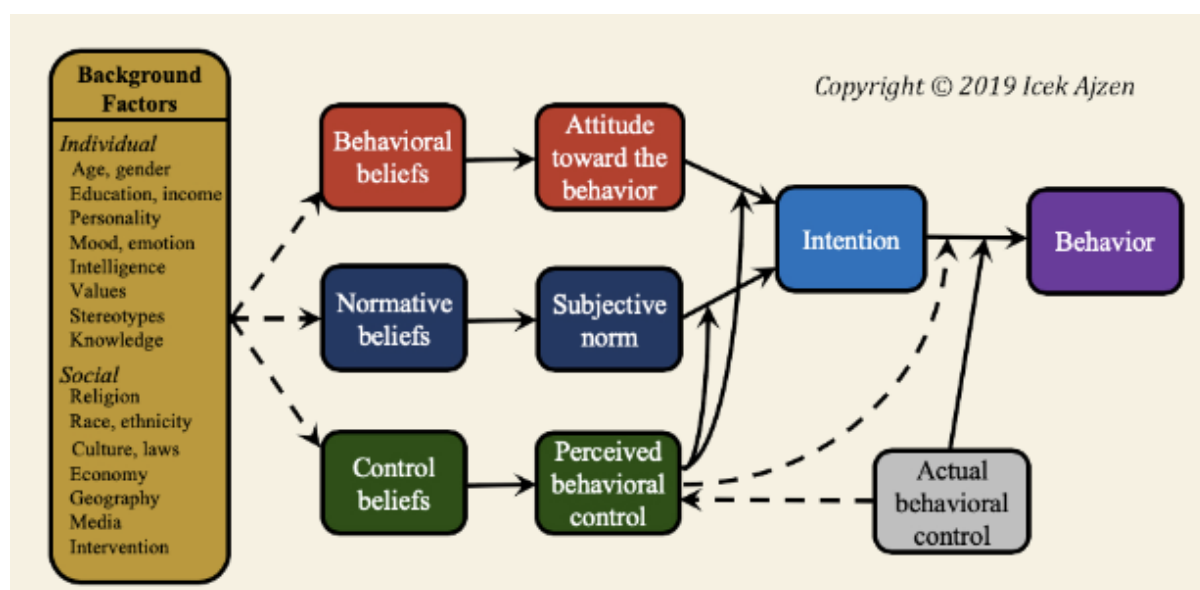
While student-staff pedagogical partnerships have the potential to reconfigure the student experience from one of a dictated curriculum to one with higher levels of control (Bovill and Bulley, 2011), such partnerships differ in the doctoral context compared to other academic levels of study. Normally, postgraduate research students rely more on their supervisor team and the graduate school for guidance, support, and research and developmental opportunities. In contrast, taught doctorate programmes offer a broader application of student-staff partnerships as they involve opportunity for greater engagement. In this essay I reflect on the changing student-staff relationship I experienced in the Doctorate of Physiotherapy (DPT) programme at Glasgow Caledonian University, a hybrid degree, divided by pre-registration physiotherapy masters level modules, in the first year, followed by doctorate level research and professional development modules. I ground my experience in the psychological theory of planned behaviour (TPB) (Ajzen, 1991), focusing on the determinants of behaviour. I identify and analyse areas of change, in connection with TPB, in my affect, agency, cognition, and values while developing the student-staff relationship and how this informs my attitudes, norms, intentions, and resulting behaviour.

The DPT programme aims to support students in developing doctoral competencies, including epistemological, ontological, and axiological awareness. In my experience, student-staff partnership acted as a scaffolding in the building of the higher-level thinking associated with 'doctorateness'. Encouraging student engagement, empowerment, agency, and personal effectiveness can be viewed as the supportive base of this structure. I link development in all of these areas to both the ladder of participation in curriculum design and TPB. I conclude with recommendations for future student-staff partnerships.

Introduction

The theory of planned behaviour (TPB) by Ajzen (1991) illuminates the necessary behaviours for a student-staff partnership. TPB (see Figure 1) explains human social behaviour as goal oriented. Our actions are seen as controlled by intentions, which are determined by a social influence, subjective norms, and a personal appraisal of, or attitude towards, performing the behaviour. Attitudes are determined by individual beliefs, with associations between the action and certain outcomes. The stronger the intention, the more likely the behaviour will follow. Building upon the reasoned action theory, TPB offers consideration of behaviours without complete volitional control. Behaviour control denotes actual and perceived control, and capability to perform the behaviour, mediating intention.

Figure 1: Theory of planned behaviour with background factors (Ajzen, 2019)



Attitude towards the behaviour

According to Ajzen (1991), behaviour follows beliefs, originating from experience, education, media, and social interaction. Individual differences influence exposure to experience and information, interpretations, and memory. Differences in social background and personality impact formation of beliefs regarding positive and negative outcomes of performing a behaviour. Beliefs determine attitudes towards partnership participation.

As an undergraduate, I wanted to succeed academically and planned ahead for future postgraduate studies. Success in academia, I believed, demonstrated discipline, intelligence, and growth. Naively, I viewed people around me who achieved doctoral qualifications as special, fair, trustworthy, and knowledgeable. Evaluating the hard work required, I saw advantages to performing the behaviour, which outweighed disadvantages of effort, time, fatigue, and stress endured in doctoral journeys. Immediately accessible beliefs around career benefits influenced my attitude towards engaging in my studies at a higher level.

Previous experience and beliefs did not influence my attitude alone. Like Ajzen (1991), I recognise affect as a motivator of intention. My decisions have often been based on passion and instinct rather than rationality. I have come to appreciate risk in relying on affect to guide behaviour, as passion fades and instinctive feelings can prove wrong. Even as an undergraduate, I became aware of the influence of affect and tried to limit its impact on my cognition. For example, I aimed to gain research experience before devoting too much energy to the aspiration. I achieved this through volunteering as an assistant in staff-led research during my psychology degree. I sought and negotiated this opportunity, forming my first experience of a partnership. This proved to be a mutually beneficial undertaking, with staff profiting from data collection assistance while I learned from their expertise and the opportunities provided to develop my skills in research design and quantitative analysis. I experienced innovative approaches to teaching statistics, lecturing, and tutoring, which left me excited and optimistic, as though I had found my calling.

My ontological and epistemological development became defined by the experience of the partnership as I learned through staff mentorship. Although I certainly profited, I might have reaped greater benefits had I approached the partnership differently. In particular, I did not contribute to the direction of research, preferring to listen while others talked. This was not due to an insufficiency of opportunity; staff provided ample opportunity and encouragement for co-creation in research design. Instead, I wonder if my behaviour stemmed from an attitude, formed by a belief of diminished self-worth as a student in the partnership. Bovill and Bulley's (2011) 'ladder of student participation in curriculum design' uses the term 'active' to denote student engagement in learning at a level of critical questioning and discussion rather than as a passive participant. There are eight rungs in the ladder, with students becoming increasingly active with each rung, from a passive state to a student in control of decision-making. I felt any contributions I could offer to the partnership at design level might be understood as injudicious. With a lack of confidence, I could not participate in conversations necessary for growth. I was aware of my limitations in engagement but blinded to any potential rewards from behaving differently in the partnership. By the end of my degree, I only stepped one foot off the first rung of the ladder, in that I was able to participate at a greater degree, but still had no sense of control within the partnership.

After speaking with staff and PhD students, my evaluation of academia faltered. I saw cracks in supervisory support, financial strain, lack of work opportunities, and discrepancies between the number of female graduates and the gender divide of departments. Ajzen (1991) highlights background factors, such as gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and education, as predictors of intentions to perform a behaviour. A realisation dawned that I would need to sacrifice more as a woman to achieve my career aspirations. In contrast to my previous attitude at the beginning of my degree, I became uncertain and did not progress with post-graduate plans, taking a year out of my studies. I opened my massage clinic during this time, and found a passion for physiotherapy. Affect once again became a driver when enrolling on the DPT programme. However, I also noted the strategic benefits of the discipline, with clinical and research aspects offering wider career options.

Returning to university, I knew the student and staff dynamics consisted of an inherent hierarchical structure of 'them' and 'us'. Teachers dictate curriculum to share knowledge, while students act as passive participants in their learning experience. I knew previous undergraduate levels of academic handholding and passivity would likely not be possible in the DPT programme. This knowledge channelled thoughts towards fears of failure and inadequacy. However, my first doctoral class challenged some of these beliefs. DPT staff emphasised a desire to obtain a different type of relationship between students and staff, in order to develop student agency and recalibrate power dynamics, resulting in a more equal relationship. To be honest, the idea felt confusing and was at odds with my understanding of staff and student roles. I could not understand where a partnership might fit into classroom dynamics. Although I wanted to engage, I also felt sceptical. My beliefs regarding student-staff dynamics and of what staff roles changed based on interactions and experiences with peers and DPT staff during the programme. Seeing the benefits of such a partnership, how it can contribute to a reflexive state, and its importance for practice and research at doctoral level, changed my attitude.

Subjective norms

For Ajzen (1991) subjective norms, both injunctive and descriptive, refer to a perceived importance others prescribe to performing a behaviour. I believe a key drive behind my behaviour to be familial norms. Although I am part of the first generation in my family to complete a degree, my parents held an expectation for my sibling and I to complete undergraduate degrees. My brother exceeded expectations by completing four degrees. I do not know if my parents envisioned that I would progress to postgraduate studies like my brother. Most of my family, immediate and wider, believed I lacked the ability to perform at the doctoral level. Of course, they wished for my success, but they did not hold hope for my parents' expectations to be met. I understand this view. At fifteen, I left high school to work at a hotel, not returning to education for nearly half a decade. My life at that time revolved around typical teenage social activities. Affect rather than rational thought seemed to dictate my attitude and in turn, behaviour. I had no interest in university.

Watching my brother progress through his career provided inspiration and a role model. My brother demonstrated an aptitude for graduate study in his confident manner, assertiveness, and the language he employed. He displayed behaviours related to independence and resilience, coping with unexpected disruptions in his academic study and career. He did this with the aim of finding a fulfilling career. For me, he made possible what seemed impossible. This may have been the impetus for my return to education, entering university determined to seek extra-curricular activities to spur on professional development. However, interactions with some students challenged my perception, with some implying high dropouts and failure for college educated students. I realised entering higher education from a college background rather than the typical high school route meant I would need to work harder to prove myself worthy and competent.

When I began my DPT journey, I left behind many of the negative associations of my education background. I knew being accepted into a competitive physiotherapy programme meant others already appreciated my potential. However, unlike my brother, I did not feel I possessed the independence and resilience required for doctorate study. I felt uncertain I could live up to the hopes of the DPT staff. The idea of a partnership initially increased my anxiety, as it required a greater level of participation in my learning. Traditional student-staff dynamics provide comfort, with students relying on staff to make decisions and dictate curriculum. It requires effort, discomfort, and trust in staff and student peers to take accountability for my learning and step outside the traditional student role. Staff offered a partnership, through open and honest conversations, sharing personal experiences, ambitions, and values in a safe environment. Changing norms, my peers and I led class discussions, with the structure co-created and iterative in approach.

Group norms seemed to determine partnership engagement. When my peers behaved in a passive manner in class, I felt less comfortable being an active participant in discussions. Engaging in a partnership requires greater effort and can be unsettling for me when in the liminal learning zone. Yet having made this extra effort, I can see that the benefits of a partnership outweigh potential costs. I believe only with the right attitude can subjective norms motivate formation of an intention to become a partner in curriculum design, participating higher on the ladder.

Intention

Although I experienced uncertainty, my attitude supported an intention to engage in a student-staff partnership. Limitations in my confidence and attitude stemmed from a self-image formed by my educational background. The safe environment created by staff allowed for new subjective norms to be developed, which facilitated open conversations between myself, peers, and staff, necessary for reflection and trust. Together, subjective norms and my attitudes fostered a willingness to engage, enabling the development of an intention to enter a partnership.

However, intention does not guarantee behavioural outcomes. Competing priorities, perspective changes, and extrinsic forces can diminish performance of the intended behaviour. During the first COVID-19 lockdown, my mother suffered shortness of breath and frequent coughing fits which led to a diagnosis of pulmonary fibrosis. Her health prospects shook our family into a state of distress and panic as we came to terms with our new reality while also locked in our home, away from wider support systems. I encountered difficulty balancing my mood and emotions as well as the programme study requirements. My performance at university remained high on my priority list, but my mother's health and wellbeing took precedence. Sports massage commitments in my home clinic also competed with intentions to engage in the partnership. I sometimes feel as though my hours in the clinic leave little cognitive space or time to manage other priorities. Other times, I feel it helps maintain a balance between the amount of plates I have spinning, offering time away from screens and other stressors. Although my competing priorities are normal in life, they likely led to a diminished partnership behavioural performance.

Behavioural control

Ajzen (1991) highlights how internal and external factors can impair or facilitate performance of a behaviour. Behaviour control describes the extent to which an individual has the required information, skills, abilities, social support, and emotions, as well as any external barriers hindering performance. TPB presents two forms of behavioural control. The first, perceived behavioural control, can be defined as the extent an individual believes they have control and the capability to perform a behaviour. Actual behavioural control acts as a moderator of intention. Intention itself can be enough to allow performance of the behaviour if behavioural control is high. However, factors outside our control interact with intention to affect behaviour.

Reflecting on my perceived behavioural control at the beginning of the doctoral classes, I felt uncertain if my skills and abilities would match expectations of a doctoral student. Although I progressed through undergraduate, I felt less confident my abilities would translate to a desirable performance at this new academic level. Engagement in a partnership required complex, innovative thinking, something which I never considered to be in my cognitive toolbox. I felt underqualified to co-create curriculum with staff. My intention, supported by strong attitudes and favourable subjective norms, interacted with my perceived behavioural control, resulting in fluctuations of engagement in the partnership. I felt unable to engage at higher rungs of the participation ladder. Only with trust, built through time in a safe

environment, could I begin to perceive higher levels of control in the partnership and feel able to vocalise my insight and suggestions.

In terms of actual control, staff seemed flexible and happy to provide opportunities for professional development. Over time, I engaged in the partnership at the highest rung on the ladder of student participation. One opportunity included leading doctoral classes. I designed and led multiple two-hour workshops with facilitated discussions of topics such as ontology, epistemology, and axiology. In partnership, I influenced curriculum design and co-created content, experiencing a greater sense of autonomy and freedom to decide DPT content. I felt the benefits of engaging in the partnership, with my confidence increasing and feedback from peers indicated a mutual benefit from the experience. Further reinforcing my development, feedback from staff evidenced observation of my leadership skills and ability to not only perform at doctoral level, but also to lead DPT classes.

My development continued when I worked on an institutional scholarship project. I attended project-planning meetings, helped complete a project funding application, and became a co-author of a paper with staff. I learned that, depending on the context and individuals involved, my confidence either drained or flourished. However, my attitude towards engaging in the partnership did not differ between contexts. I always arrived at meetings prepared to contribute ideas, ask critical questions, and add to the discussion. Partnerships where my confidence flourished tended to be those with higher levels of trust and safety. In other partnerships, I became withdrawn and silent. It felt as if I moved back and forth on a sliding scale, often reverting to the traditional passive student in times of uncertainty with staff and students I knew less well.

My differences in engagement between contexts seem rooted in my perceived behavioural control, rather than actual behavioural control. Power dynamics, even with equalising measures, will likely never be truly equal between staff and students. I find partner responses to my contribution weigh heavily as a moderator of my intention. As I remember, an adjunct staff member once responded negatively to my attempts to engage, referring to me as a '*know-it-all*.' This interaction hindered my educational experience and increased my self-doubt over my choice to become a physiotherapist. The value I place upon other people's perceptions and attitudes towards my person can greatly impact my self-image. As long as I am a student, with formal learning unfinished, I expect to always be impacted by staff views. I realise; however, it depends on the staff whether this impact is positive or negative.

Therefore, based on my reflection, I believe there to be an inconsistency in student engagement in student–staff partnerships, depending on the context, attitudes, and perceptions of all partners involved. Students may move up the ladder of participation in one context and down in another (Holen *et al.*, 2021). It seems aspirational to achieve partnerships in all contexts, with students having control of decision-making and influence across the HE boards. However, relationships are not static and fluctuations in participation is, for me, part of the uncertainty involved in partnerships and is a natural phase of the liminal zone and of personal growth.

Conclusion

Moving upward on the ladder of participation has not been a simple or easy process. Through class discussions, I began to see value in a partnership between students and staff, enhancing opportunities to develop professionally, and that the effort required to perform the necessary behaviours outweighed the costs. However, affective responses influenced my ability to trust and engage with partners. As a result, my behavioural performance seemed reduced in a context where low trust existed between partners.

TPB proved a useful tool in supporting my reflection on student-staff partnerships. With participation fluctuations on the ladder, I require professional and personal development to maintain agency in wider HE contexts. I hope to overcome anxieties related to other partners' perceptions, which previously created a barrier to my progress up the ladder, through further reflection and experimentation. Although TPB aided my reflection, the theory left gaps in relation to affect. Emotions influence our evaluation of experiences and the meaning we attach to the memory, and reflection allows emotions to be unpacked for learning and behaviour change. Hence, combining this model with another, focusing on affect, could be helpful for future reflectors. I therefore offer three recommendations for student-staff partnerships:

Recommendation 1:

Develop a learning environment underpinned by an attitude of trust between students and staff. Opportunities need to be provided to build trust, and this may differ for each HE programme and for each cohort. Developing trust between partners can be crucial to student engagement in the partnership, changing the social norms, enabling students and staff to translate intentions to behaviours for higher levels of control.

Recommendation 2:

Methods of supporting student-staff partnerships require an attitude of flexibility and adaptability. Students may move up and down the ladder of participation in various HE contexts. Students and staff need an awareness of how partnerships change, with differing social norms depending on context, and how this impacts the dynamic. Methods for this may require some exploration and experimentation to discover what works for each cohort of students and for the staff involved.

Recommendation 3:

Strategies are required to enhance student motivation to progress on the participation ladder, especially for the students preferring to stay at the lower rung of the ladder. As not all students possess this motivation, some may require a greater explanation of the benefits of a partnership. In other words, they need support in developing positive attitudes toward partnership.

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