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Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences 59 (2012) 528 – 534

Procedia
Social and Behavioral Sciences

UKM Teaching and Learning Congress 2011

Academic rites of passage: reflection on a PhD journey

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Abstract

This paper discusses the experiences of academic development in the language of rites of passage. In this regard, rites of passage refer to a certain combination of stages to mark the development, directions and phases in an academic's journey. In other words, rites of passage mark a change or several social and intellectual changes that may represent the milestones of a junior academic's life in pursuing his or her matured or senior status. This paper aims to highlight and analyse PhD candidates' experiences encountered as part of their liminal stages during their doctoral odyssey. We argue that by rethinking academic development and phases as rites of passage, new insights and understanding of the nature and personal academic development of junior academics could be addressed. Although there have been extensive foci on technical aspects of doctorate survival in terms of achieving good and successful PhD theses, there is a lacuna in academic knowledge which concentrates on PhD candidates' personal experiences, particularly amongst Malaysian university scholars. Based on qualitative and reflective perspectives, this paper may shed light upon the invisible aspects of the challenges, motives and goals of PhD candidates that can be related to their career excellence, identity and survival in academia.

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Keywords: Academic identity; academic professionalism; doctoral degree; liminal stage; rites of passage

1. Introduction

This paper discusses the experiences of academic development in the language of rites of passage. In this paper, rites of passage refer to a certain combination of stages that mark the development, directions and phases in an academic's journey. Our focus is on the PhD process which we regard as a journey from a junior position towards senior status, or that of a scholar. This paper aims to highlight and analyse PhD candidates' experiences encountered as part of their liminal stages during their doctoral odyssey. The liminal stage is the middle stage in the three stages of rite of passage - the preliminary or separation stage, the liminal or transition stage, and the incorporation or re-aggregation stage (Marranci 2008; Bowie 2006).

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This paper also intends to shed light and achieve new horizons on how to view and understand the stages associated with rites of passage, in a way which is separate from the common perception of the concept as addressed by scholars in Anthropology of Religion, who often observe such rites as human biological development, theological obligations, tribal innovations and traditions that are associated with ritual behaviours. It is an attempt to view the stages through a new scholarly and contemporary outlook, by looking at academia as an arena for understanding the elements related to rites of passage. We argue that by rethinking academic developments and phases as rites of passages, new insights and understanding of the nature and personal academic development of academics could be addressed. Although there have been extensive foci on the technical aspects of doctorate survival in terms of achieving good and successful PhD theses, there is a lacuna in academic knowledge which concentrates on PhD candidates' personal experiences, particularly among Malaysian scholars. Based on qualitative and reflective perspectives, this paper may shed light upon the invisible aspects of the challenges, motives and goals of PhD candidates that can be related to their career excellence, identity and survival in academia.

2. Related Literature

2.1 *Rites of passage*

With regard to rites of passage, we refer to a certain form of rites which have been developed by individuals or societies to mark the development and different phases of their lives, both biologically and socially (Marranci, 2008). Bowie (2006) interestingly observes rites of passage as a transition from one stage to another of individuals' or groups' lives, events and seasons, which often relate to certain changes of status. Bowie notes that the original idea of rites of passage was introduced by the outstanding German scholar, Arnold van Gennep (1873-1957) who viewed them as a universal device to organise human societies through the life cycle rituals surrounding birth, marriage and death. In much broader terms, Van Gennep includes seasonal festivals, territorial rituals, sacrifices, pilgrimage and any religious or non-religious behaviour. Additionally, Marranci (2008) understands rites of passage proposed by Van Gennep as a law of regeneration that controls life.

The basic structure of rites of passage is described in terms of a threefold model - separation, transition and incorporation/re-aggregation - which clearly portray the movement from one state to another (Bowie, 2006). The separation stage is also known as the preliminal state, while the transition stage is known as the liminal state. According to Van Gennep, 'people can change and renew through this process' (Marranci, 2008, p.24) and he continues by providing an example of how elders die to make space for their successors. A metaphor of a house in which people move through levels to reach their own rooms is used by Van Gennep to explain the sequentiality of the three phases. Van Gennep argues that the rites of passage not only affect the person involved in a particular ritual, but also his own group. As an example, in the case of a marriage, the change in status of the bride or groom is accompanied by a change in the status of their families. This is the traditional and original view of rites of passage.

Drawing on Van Gennep's work, Victor Turner (1967) asserts that rites of passage are not confined to culturally defined life-crises or cycles, but may include any change from one state to another. Also, they are not sociologically restricted to movements between human statuses (birth, puberty, marriage or death). In fact, an entry into a newly achieved status, membership or grade is also included. In this paper we attempt to address the above stages and relate them to the academic journey. We argue that the various milestones that a junior academic has to go through before achieving his or her senior status can be viewed as a rite of passage involving the three stages of separation, transition and incorporation/re-aggregation. In this paper, we highlight the PhD journey as one of the milestones that changes an academic's status from that of a junior academic to that of a learned scholar.

2.2 *The PhD journey as a rite of passage*

In their study, Miller & Brimicombe (2010, pp.408-409) suggest that the PhD process can be viewed as a journey. They note that '...in the original sense, a journey is the act of moving from one place to another. The journey of life also includes both the passage of time and changes of phase in our being as we age learn and develop'. They argue that it is helpful to conceptualise the PhD process as a journey and to use travel metaphors to examine students' experiences. We agree with Miller & Brimicombe's suggestion, and further argue that the milestones in a PhD journey can also be examined as stages in a rite of passage. In this regard, the PhD process can

be considered as both the initial stage towards the making of a scholar, as well as the liminal stage where the PhD candidate is not yet a scholar, but is more than just a student (as they have a certain amount of authority with regard to the direction and completion of their PhD research). This relates to the characteristic of the liminal state as 'betwixt and between' or 'neither here nor there' (Turner, 1967). As PhD candidates are students in training, or in the process of becoming a scholar, we suggest that viewing the PhD journey through the language of rites of passage will enhance the transitional or transformational processes inherent in it. This echoes the underlying assumptions of two previous studies of training teachers that regard the process of transforming the student teacher into a professional teacher as a rite of passage (White, 1989; Head, 1992).

Before we continue the discussion of the PhD journey itself, it is pertinent to look first at some of the views concerning academic professionalism and its development. Ahmad Zamri & Johari Talib (2010) cite a study by Sunarti & Shamsuddin (2005) which found that Malaysian academics hold static views of their profession, and that they believe that in order to achieve professionalism, one has to reach specific standards set by their universities. One such standard is through obtaining a doctorate. While professional advancement is an important motive for Malaysians to pursue a PhD degree, other studies identify various other reasons. Boglea et al. (2011) find that there is a combination of factors that lead people to embark on doctorate study. Some people aim for professional advancement or due to personal interest in the topic, or a combination of both.

Universities are where the traditional demand for PhD graduates used to reside. The culture of a university's professionalism itself tailors academics' backgrounds and developments and places them in several categories. Again, Ahmad Zamri & Johari Talib (2010) highlight the pertinent categories proposed by Laudel & Graser (2008) in which academic researchers can be divided into four groups namely apprentices, colleagues, master researchers and elite researchers. A junior academic without a doctorate is understood to have a place under the category of apprentice or novice researcher - one who is in the process of learning the necessary research skills and teaching knowledge under the guidance of expert researchers (or supervisors). The way he or she learns, develops and survives throughout such an academic odyssey, depend on several internal and external factors and challenges.

This paper argues that in the Malaysian academic context and in terms of local knowledge, there is a lacuna concerning PhD candidates' personal experiences. Citing several studies, Crawford (2003) opines that:

Academic interest in the PhD journey predominately concerns the technical aspects of the doctorate. It tends to concentrate on a number of pragmatic areas, such as, deciding on and narrowing down the topic area; choosing a supervisor; the pitfalls associated with supervision; alternative methodological approaches to research; and writing up the thesis. Often within the literature is a chapter or two, or a short commentary, on what Bencich, Graber, Staben & Sohn (2002) call the emotional and intellectual experiences. These aspects of the journey tend to be examined through 'the narrative' that portrays the individual experience of one, two or a handful of students.

3. Methodology

'The emotional and intellectual experiences' mentioned above are at the core of our paper. Based on Van Gennep's formulation and framework, we reflect on our personal experiences, as well as those of friends and colleagues, and reflect on the various stages of our PhD journeys. At this juncture, it is important to highlight the crucial need for a reflection process as part of the learning and researching experience. Waddington & Wright (2007, p.51) cite Reid (1993) who had stressed that '...reflection is a process of reviewing an experience of practice in order to describe, analyse, evaluate and so inform learning about practice'. Additionally, reflection is part of experiential learning in which we internally investigate and explore issues of concern, triggered by an experience or by an encounter. This not only creates and clarifies meaning in terms of self and different perspectives, but also enhances the ability to see new outcomes from encounters (Goldberg, 2010).

By synthesizing respondents' encounters with transition markers in rites of passage, our purpose here is, of course, beyond simply understanding them, but connecting their experiences with those of other readers and scholars as well. We strongly anticipate that we could make at least a balanced evaluation and an understanding of their liminal stage and, at the end it, could assist in attaining and understanding 'real' university scholarship and culture critically. The highlights of this paper are the exploration of our own experiences, as well as that of informal

narratives shared by friends and colleagues pursuing their PhD studies at UK and Malaysian universities. The telling of these stories was informal, based on casual meetings we had several times over breakfasts, lunches or at other events. The perspective of the PhD journey as a liminal stage came up during one of our experience-sharing sessions; and eventually we decided to develop the idea in this paper.

4. Findings and Discussions

4.1 Pre-liminal or separation stage

PhD candidates first approached their rites of separation or pre-liminal stage, by separating themselves from their previous ways of life. In the case of the authors, we both left for the UK in order to pursue our PhD degrees. White (1989) suggests that by making changes in one's physical space, one proclaims one's change in social categories. This is exemplified by the following passage:

I have always wanted to study abroad. So, when the opportunity came up, I didn't look back. The offer came unexpectedly and I knew that I didn't have enough time to prepare. Nevertheless, I decided to accept it, and off I went. I soon realised that living in a foreign country is not easy. Becoming a student, again, was even harder. My daily routine changed, the way I dressed changed, and the things that I do during free time changed as well... And of course the challenge of financial management – money went mainly for the flat rent, gas, internet and books. No more fine dining; no more nice holidaying – just simple food and bus travel!

Following the pre-liminal stage, is the liminal stage. According to La Shure (2005), '...the group of liminal individuals is not a typical social hierarchy but a communal group in which all are equal'. Specifically, PhD candidates are part of a *communitas*, the term Turner (1967) specifically explained as having a spontaneous, immediate and concrete relatedness, typical of bonds formed between people in the middle liminal stage of a rite of passage. The relationship which grows among those who are at this stage is often spontaneous and such individuals often have a combination of shared emotions, thoughts and bonding. These PhD candidates will later reintegrate into the 'real' university environment once they have passed their viva and received their doctoral title.

Bowie (2006, p.149) describes the individual at this liminal stage as '...neither one thing nor another, but betwixt and between'. Additionally, Bowie (2006, p.155) cites Turner who observed the liminal stage or liminality as specifically likened to 'invisibility', 'darkness', 'inferiority'. In managing the peaks and troughs of research, many students battle with moments of fear, inferiority, darkness and invisibility. They not only deal with emotional challenges, stressful situations, confusion, lack of moral, theoretical and methodological support, but they also juggle with too many responsibilities, identity crises and demands, either from their families, their institutions or their sponsors. The ways in which people, both scholars and non-scholars, approach and deal with such problems implicitly and convincingly portray the separation that exists between university staff. This can be illustrated by the following notes:

I also remember the day when I had a conversation with an academic from one of the faculties at our university. She contributed her paper for our academic journal. After greeting, I asked to speak to Puan N (not her real name). I properly addressed her with 'Puan' as I did not know her exact title. Shockingly, she replied, 'this is 'Dr' N (not her real name) speaking'. I could sense that she tried to stress on her 'Dr' title through her voice's tone. Although that was an isolated case, I could not help myself from thinking of her unwelcoming reaction. Apologizing for my impoliteness, I began addressing her with 'Dr' all through our conversation.

The above encounter acknowledges that having a doctorate, expertise and/or senior status is vital in order to achieve a respectable position in academia.

4.2 Liminal stage

4.2.1 Lost

The middle stage of a rite of passage has a combination of characteristics which obviously indicate its marginality (Bowie, 2006). This liminal or marginal stage naturally marks one with a sense of ambiguity. The following excerpt attempts to portray how one of us was lost in ambiguity, especially in the first phase of her PhD research. In relating the characteristic of ambiguity with the liminal stage in terms of rites of passage, she acknowledges her experiences of loneliness, isolation, difficulty and confusion during her doctoral study.

Retrospectively, it was a mixture of emotions when I enrolled my PhD study at the University. I was extremely ambitious but also uncertain. I was happy but at the same time nervous. At the beginning, I thought that I knew where my PhD path was heading to. But then, I began to lose my focus. There were so many junctions along the long meandering road that pushed me to slow down and stop to read the signposting. At most of the time I felt that I was lost in the middle of my road. It was like when you are driving your new car but then you need to make many emergency stops. I faced many critical times when I need to re-think of my research proposal. At the beginning of my research I was thinking of conducting a research on Muslims' primary sources and Orientalism; which obviously employed library research method. Yet, I was doubtful especially when my supervisor suggested me to look at a new area on how contemporary Muslims deal with their sources of religion. Although he attempted to guide me with a new way of thinking, he had left me in ambiguity as I am the one who had to decide what was the best way to grasp for my PhD journey?

In order to understand the above situation, Crawford (2003) cites Bench et al. (2002) who studied doctoral students' research process, and who noted that '...at the beginning of the dissertation research process, doctoral students cannot see the end, nor can they imagine how they will get there'. In expounding the journey taken by PhD researchers, Miller & Brimicombe (2010, pp.408-409) have similarly noted that:

The PhD journey, like foreign travel, involves the exploration of unknown territories and encounters with unfamiliar cultures. The experience is as much emotional as cognitive, and aspects of the journey may be exhilarating, frightening, puzzling, stimulating, exhausting or tedious. For many PhD travellers the journey is aided (and sometimes hampered) by the guidebooks they consult and by those fellow travellers and people they meet along the way. As we have already noted, most of the doctoral students we encounter are juggling a variety of demanding personal and professional roles and responsibilities at the same time as developing their skills and identities as researchers.

4.2.2 Lonely

Reflectively, we also discover that there are a number of encounters likened to some of the liminal characteristics underlined by Van Gennep and Turner, as noted by La Shure (2005), individuals in the liminal stage are in between (liminality), on the edges (marginality), and beneath (inferiority). The following excerpt highlights how one liminal individual attempted to overcome her invisibility and inferiority by making adjustments, and taking several steps such as through her participation in school events. Also, in order to build her networking and to mark her presence, she changed her mindset by motivating herself to get to know her colleagues, or other members of the *communitas*. Her new attitude and outlook can be related to another description of the middle stage of a rite of passage in which, to some degree, the individual could positively bring about a certain degree of self autonomy.

I was the only PhD candidate at my school who studied Islam and Muslims. Being a headscarf female Muslim student, I occasionally felt that I had been marginalised by people around me just because of my physical attire. Although I met many Muslim students at the university prayer room

everyday, I did not find any at my school. Most of the postgraduate students there focused their studies on Christianity and Judaism. Although I encountered a lot of people from different fields and countries, I felt extremely lonely. I wanted to speak with other PhD students who came from the same field of research. Yet I had not found any. To overcome my loneliness and inferiority I attended seminars at school, which obviously not related at all to my area. I went there and spent my time with other postgraduate students and listened to their discussions. I used to attend a seminar on ethnography and church pastoral service! Then, I learnt about generic courses conducted by the University's Student Support Service. Since then I had been attending the courses provided by them, until my final year in the UK.

There were landmarks in her PhD journey that brought changes in her liminal stage and mindset. These occasions occurred along the way, and invoked her to reflect on her past and on her on-going journey, as well as to re-navigate and prepare for her future route.

'I heard that your supervisor is moving'. Steven broke the ice when she joined him at a colleague's wedding event in April 2008. Puzzled and surprised with his remark, she told him that her supervisor had not yet informed her of anything. 'I heard that he got an offer from an 'overseas' university and he is considering that offer', he continued. Not until the end of August 2008, did my supervisor reveal to me the offer he had received. Actually, it was a month before his departure for a nine-month sabbatical leave. I had already been informed about his sabbatical leave and the supervision arrangement during his absence. His new professorship position, of course had several impacts on my research process as he was the only supervisor I had had since my enrolment at the university. Unpredictably, he kindly suggested that I follow him and move to that university!

4.2.3 Liberation

She continued her PhD journey at the original university despite the fact that her supervisor was absent. Her passion with regard to her study was tested several times when she had to deal with difficulties. She had virtual Skype conferences with him occasionally. As time passed, she realised that her supervisor rarely responded to her like he used to. One day, she successfully had a conversation with him through Skype, and again he suggested that she should move to Australia! As a final year student who just began her writing up, moving from the UK to Australia was the last thing she had in mind. Besides, she had already paid all the third year fees. She voiced her concerns to her school and, as the result, the school appointed a new supervisor to assist her first supervisor and who she could refer to at the school. However, after a few months, an unforeseen new event occurred. The first supervisor unexpectedly decided to end his contract with the university, and the second supervisor got an offer from a university abroad. At the same time, there was a tragic domestic loss. She was 32 weeks pregnant and she lost the baby.

The pitfalls associated with supervision, as well as the emotional inevitable battle she experienced, forced her to become more liberated, patient and mature, in the sense that she needed to solve her problems quickly and calmly. Emotional as well as motivational support from family, friends and the school proved advantageous. She realised that problems, challenges or shocks are not diseases, nor should they be seen as enemies or evidence of a failure to adapt. This new way of looking at things felt very liberating. Indeed, this liberating experience fits in with the potentiality inherent in the liminal stage, as noted by Turner (1967).

4.3 Re-aggregation or incorporation stage

The final stage of the three stages of rites of passage is re-aggregation or incorporation. In the case of the PhD journey, the incorporation occurs when the candidate is awarded his/her degree. He or she is now incorporated into the scholarly community of academia, as illustrated in the notes below:

Retrieving my e-group's messages, I read an e-mail congratulating a colleague who had just successfully defended his PhD thesis. The sender wrote, '*tahniah Dr. B* (not his real name), *bertambah seorang lagi cendekiawan di tempat kita ini*' (congratulations, Dr. B, now we have a new scholar here).

The above excerpt clearly shows the association of the 'Dr.' title with the *cendekiawan* or scholars' community. This marks a transition from the 'betwixt and between' status to that of a real member of the scholarly society. This relates to what one of our friend's statement:

PhD and the 'Dr.' title serve as a licence for us to be recognised and be seen at the university. However, that is just the beginning, and not the ending of this long winding academic journey. At the end of the day, it's up to us to decide whether we want the PhD for the licence it confers or to develop ourselves as a scholar.

5. Conclusion

This paper discloses a potential area for further research that is the understanding of the PhD journey through the lens of the rite of passage. We argue that by using the language of rites of passage, we can better comprehend the experiences of PhD candidates through the various stages that mark transitions and changes in status. Knowledge of these transition stages can serve as important signposts for future PhD candidates and can serve as a guide towards the successful completion of their degrees.

Acknowledgement

We would like to thank Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia for providing the research grant (UKM-GPP-PPKK-7-2010).

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