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THE DOCTORATE AS AN EMOTIONAL JOURNEY: Navigating through perspectives of PhD students and supervisors (0210)

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Research Domain: Student Experience

1. Introduction: About emotions and the doctorate

It is interesting to note that there is little literature regarding the role of emotions in the processes of doctoral research and supervision. Nevertheless, there are some relevant studies that must be pointed out, since they demonstrate consensual perspectives (Cotterall, 2013; Herman, 2010; McLaughlin, 2003; Widdowfield, 2000). These scholars consider that emotional and cognitive processes are deeply embedded in the learning and research processes, which inevitably overlap each other. Thus “(...) more attention needs to be given to the importance of the role of emotion in understanding and developing the capacities for reflection which facilitate personal, professional and ultimately systems change” (McLaughlin, 2003, p.66). Following a similar idea, a particular study from Morrison-Saunders and colleagues (2010) emphasise that, from doctoral students’ perspective, the entire PhD process is an authentic ‘rollercoaster’.

Additionally, there are studies that demonstrate that emotional and motivational issues are factors that may determine doctoral students’ retention and completion of the PhD degree, on the one hand, and their failure or dropout, on the other (Cotterall, 2013; Jairam & Kahl, 2012). Jairam and Kahl (2012) reinforce that doctoral students expect emotional and professional support from their supervisors – not only the ‘narrow’ academic/scientific support only related to research. This goes in line with the responsibilities and the role doctoral supervisors should engage in and assume when necessary: the role of a mentor (Manathunga, 2007; Pearson & Kayrooz, 2004). However, as Herman (2010) stresses: “doctoral studies still tend to emphasise the rational and technical competencies of producing research and neglect the emotional aspects of doctoral learning” (p.283).

2. Description of the research project and methodological scope

Due to a lack of theoretical and empirical investigations within the Portuguese research context on doctoral research supervision, it was designed a study with the goal of shedding light on that phenomenon from an integrated and in-depth perspective. Specifically, the main objective was to design a framework on the quality of doctoral research supervision, particularly concerning the quality profiles of supervisors and students in terms of the transferable and supra-disciplinary competences they should possess and further enhance.

This case study was carried out at a Portuguese Higher Education institution. The study started with a qualitative approach: it was conducted focus groups firstly with doctoral supervisors (n=25) and, thereafter, with doctoral students (n=26). Several heterogeneous mini-focus groups were run to better capture their conceptions on diverse topics. From this first moment of data

collection, it has emerged the most important competences, from the participants' perspective, that characterise the quality profiles of each element of the supervisory dyad. These competences were then critically analysed and chosen to integrate questionnaires, directed to doctoral students and supervisors of the same institution - respectively, we had the sample of 197 students and 122 supervisors. In this quantitative approach, the participants had to attribute their level of agreement regarding each competence.

With this study in particular, we aim to focus on the results of focus groups' content analysis and of the questionnaires, by addressing the competences of emotional nature that should integrate doctoral students and supervisors' quality profiles. This will allow us to analyse similarities and differences in the conceptions of each group of participants over this subject, and to better understand how this topic, emerged in many silences, is conceived and experienced.

3. Results

From focus groups arose consensual perspectives in relation to the most important competences (of emotional nature) that should integrate the quality profile of each member of the supervisory dyad. We may underline the following conclusions:

(i) Though doctoral students and supervisors agree with the fact that the supervisor should motivate the student, namely at an emotional level, it is the former group that gives a higher value to this competence. Supervisors see the specific task of managing students' emotional problems and of motivating them the most difficult competence for them to actually demonstrate. They consider that is a difficult task and, in most of the cases, do not know how to deal with students' emotional issues and/or breakdowns. Students also mention this as a difficulty that the majority of supervisors show.

(ii) The doctoral student should demonstrate several inter-related competences that put the emphasis on his/her own responsibility when dealing with emotional aspects throughout the doctorate. Thus, students should be intrinsically motivated, demonstrate resilience (what participants call "emotional resistance"), and manage unpredictable things, pressures and/or obstacles. These emerge as the most important competences from both groups: students and supervisors. At the same time students see those competences as essential, those may also be considered important learning gains: they have to learn and develop those competences, "even when it hurts". Additionally, both groups mentioned that it is quite difficult, for some students, to deal with moments of anxiety, great stress and sometimes frustration. Finally, students pointed out the difficulty to manage some solitude or isolation in some phases of doctoral research, particularly during the thesis' writing.

Since the competences mentioned in the previous topics were considered highly important to integrate students and supervisors' quality profiles, they have integrated the questionnaires, where the participants have demonstrated their level of agreement (considering a 7-points likert scale). Hence, concerning questionnaires' results, it may be highlighted some aspects which have emerged as statistically significant:

(iii) Supervisors' quality profile should integrate the competences described as "motivate the student" and "give emotional support to the student". Regarding the former, students' scores achieve a slightly higher mean than supervisors'. Also, from the group of supervisors, those with more doctoral students scored it higher. Further, students consensually agree that it should integrate supervisors' quality profile. Regarding the latter competence, the mean is in

the 5-points of the scale from both perspectives. From the students and supervisors' groups, it seems permeable to the influence of several factors. On the one hand, it is scored higher by the eldest supervisors, by those supervisors with more doctoral student and by those from the domain of Social Sciences and Humanities. On the other hand, the eldest students, and the students who do not have any grant are the ones who score it higher.

(iv) Finally, students should possess competences such as: "have intrinsic motivation", "have emotional resistance to fulfill doctoral research", and "be able to manage unpredictable things, pressures and/or obstacles". The first is highly scored by supervisors and students, who consensually agree that it should integrate the quality profile. The second one achieved a higher score from students (comparing with the supervisors' scores) who consensually agree that it should also integrate their quality profile. Finally, the third competence achieved a similar mean by both groups. Nevertheless, in the case of supervisors, those who were younger scored higher. Additionally, students and supervisors consensually agree that latter competence should integrate students' quality profile.

4. Final reflections and further questions

It is undeniable that learning and research are intense processes that ask from an intense personal involvement and transformation from which emotions cannot be disaggregated. However, from the results, it seems that supervisors understand research and learning through research mostly as a professional task isolated from emotions. Therefore, we could ask: Are not emotions part of our professional path? Or do emotions only reveal the weaker facet of a professional? How can we change this sort of conceptions? What kind of implications may such conceptions have on early career researchers' training?

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