

Panel U 1 Beaumaris Lounge Friday 7 December 11.15-12.30

Are we haunted by the ghosts of PhDs past? (0266)

Chair: *Inger Mewburn, Australian National University, Australia*

Panellists: *P. Thomson, J Molinari, University of Nottingham, United Kingdom*

An imaginary is something that exists 'in the mind'. An imaginary is a fiction, a myth, an urban legend. Imaginaries are powerful because they underpin and steer human actions. In this discussion session we will dwell on the effect of the imaginary on doctoral education, particularly in terms of supervision, employability outcomes and the research itself.

The imaginary is understood sociologically as a deep-seated idea which steers the organisation, administration and practices of institutions, laws and symbols. Castoriadis (1987) for instance understood 'society' as an imaginary which was both constantly in formation and contested. However, Lacan (1968) understood an imaginary to be a form of consciousness with real effects; he referred, for instance, to the imaginary of a single and unified body and self which produces a lifelong quest for coherence. We are interested in imaginaries in both of these senses – as forms of consciousness and as emergent institutional and symbolic orders.

We focus here on exploring three doctoral imaginaries and the ways in which they work. We are drawn to the notion of haunting and the imaginary as a normative spectre against which the doctoral researcher and supervisor make decisions and judgments. This connection is perhaps Freudian; Freud ascribes haunting to the notion of the 'unheimlich' (literally unhomely) – an uncomfortable 'uncanny' (1919), an unease which produces ongoing anxiety because of its association with loss, lack of resolution and ambiguity. In making this connection, we follow Avery Gordon's (2008) lead: she argues that past social relations and practices haunt and control present life through shadowy manifestations and sinister whispers.

Charles Taylor suggested that a social imaginary does more than haunt. He says that a social imaginary is

the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations (Taylor, 2004:23).

Using Taylor's approach we can understand the imaginaries that surround the doctorate as concerned with norms that surround the doctorate, from dominant narratives about the ways to write the thesis to norms derived from disciplinary conventions. Common metaphors such as the doctorate as apprenticeship and doctoral process as journey are common and suggest the presence of common conceptions of the doctorate and the doctoral researcher.

Taylor argues that such hauntings become ontological and work to produce selves, relationships and actions. Particular kinds of rationalities - instrumental, measurable and explicable - take precedence over bodies, emotions and affects. This has strong resonance with the three domains that we discuss here.

Doctoral researchers often report that they are dogged by the spectre of failure and the chilling fear of failure. We do not want to trivialise or ignore these concerns. We suggest however that these are connected to the three imaginary domains that we focus on:

1. the nature of research training and methods discussions which construct idealised norms and expectations of how research actually happens. The most popular social science methods texts for example rarely question the wisdom of setting research questions at the start of a project, allow for the probability of things going awry during the research process, nor discuss the daunting task of working out how to analyse the mountain of material that has been generated. However, these are hauntings of the Cartesian conceptualisation of the scientific mind, disengaged from the natural world through procedure and stance.
2. How others imagine the doctoral subject and what effects this has in practice. There has been some investigation of doctoral imaginings from popular media work which show there are recurring characterisations of those who hold a PhD, often positioning them as socially awkward, even insane. Do these figures haunt doctoral candidates outside the spaces of academia, for instance, in employment settings?
3. the choices that academic writers have when it comes to shaping their written knowledge, despite the tendentially standardising and prescriptive narratives which haunt academic writing conventions. There are, for example, doctoral theses that reflect the diverse multimodal, multilingual, educational and political agencies of their authors and that are likely to have provoked unease and anxiety in the course of their shaping. Yet, these texts have become testimonies to the negotiations, ambiguities and risks that both researchers and their supervisors have eventually overcome and justified, possibly in light of broader or re-imagined academic aims and educational values.

Bazerman, C. (1988). *Shaping written knowledge: the genre and activity of the experimental article in science*. Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin Press.

Castoriadis, C. (1987) *The imaginary institution of society*. Cambridge: MIT Press

Gordon, A. (2008) *Ghostly matters. Haunting the the sociological imagination*. Minneapolis. University of Minnesota Press

Dewey, J. (1938) *Experience and education* Simon and Schuster, New York

Horner, B., & Lu, M.-Z. (2013). Translingual literacy, language difference, and matters of agency. *College English*, 75(6), 586-611

Lacan, J. (1968) *The language of the self. The function of language in psychoanalysis*. Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press.

Scott, M. (2013) [A chronicle of learning: Voicing the text](#). University of Tilburg: Tilburg

Taylor, C (2004) *MOdern social imaginaries*. Durham NC: Duke University Press:

Thesen, L., & Cooper, L. (Eds.). (2013). *Risk in academic writing : postgraduate students, their teachers and the making of knowledge*. Bristol: Multilingual Matters

