

Identity-trajectory: A different way of understanding the movement from doctoral student to graduate (0035)

Context: Until relatively recently, academic positions were often the expected future for those doing a doctorate. However, this is no longer the case. Internationally, for social science PhD graduates in academia, contingent researcher positions are becoming the norm today – rather than lecturer posts leading to permanence (Nerad et al, 2007; Akerlind, 2005). Huisman et al (2002) have argued that such structural conditions may decrease interest in academic careers, and recent evidence suggests doctoral graduates are interested in and taking up non-academic careers (Mason et al, 2009; UK Council for Science and Technology, 2007).

Theoretical perspective: The notion of identity is often discussed in doctoral education research (e.g., Sweitzer, 2009). Yet in this literature, identity is often positioned as a concept only related to understanding student experiences during the doctorate. This contrasts with a view of identity as a biographical and growing understanding of who one wants to be and is becoming – with the doctorate just one aspect of this journey. We argue that the influence of doctoral students' pasts (prior to the doctorate), current non-doctoral experiences, and imagined futures (beyond the doctorate) have been underplayed and relatively unexamined. Studies need to address how individuals construct their identities through time – drawing on the past as they negotiate the present and imagine the future. Thus, our work is directed at understanding the ways in which individuals come with personal histories which lead them to shape their experiences in particular ways as they engage in the doctoral expectation to pursue and develop intellectual independence and imagine a future afterwards (McAlpine et al, 2010). This view of identity privileges individual agency, while recognizing the influence of structural constraints and unexpected opportunities. While we had reported on doctoral experience over time (McAlpine & Mckinnon, in press), we had not examined the movement from doctoral student to graduate.

Aim: Our goal is to examine how doctoral candidates' past intentions, current personal circumstances, and interpretation of opportunities influenced first their imagined futures and then their establishing new roles post-graduation.

Method: Our research in Canada and the UK collects accounts of experience from social sciences early career researchers longitudinally. Thus, participants were initially doctoral candidates but over time they completed their degrees and went on to other careers. In the first year, participants, doctoral candidates, provided biographic information including their imagined futures, weekly activity logs about once a month, and an interview. This pattern of data collection was repeated a second year as they graduated and moved on to academic or professional positions. This analysis draws on the accounts of five females

and one male (proportionally representative of the larger group); they were funded and came from different departments in one Canadian and two UK universities.

Researcher-constructed case narratives, short descriptive texts with minimal interpretation, were developed through successive re-reading of all data for each participant. In this way, we captured comprehensive reduced accounts of individual experience. Each narrative: a) made connections between events, b) represented the passage of time, and c) showed the intentions of individuals (Coulter & Smith, 2009). The narratives were constructed by different team members with each case verified by at least one other person. These narrative accounts preserved the participants' individual identity-trajectories (McAlpine et al, 2010). They enabled a focus on the individual while still looking for commonalities to examine in more depth (Stake, 2006), in this case patterns related to completing the doctorate and moving onto other roles.

Findings: Five of the six began job searching in the last year of the doctorate with different degrees of strategic thinking and action. All six situated these career decisions within personal circumstances, whether this meant remaining in the same city (Charles due to family illness, Hannah with husband and teenagers), returning to earlier roots (Regina and husband to their families, Ginger nearer her elderly mother, Shannon to her close-knit family and grandmothers). In Jennifer's case, the decision was driven by her and her partner finding employment in the same city wherever that might be.

All six had come to the degree for different reasons and with different imagined futures. How these intentions played out varied. In two cases, the original intentions were maintained: Shannon a professional position, Ginger a tenure-track post. In two cases, there were changes from original intentions due to increasing knowledge of post-PhD opportunity structures. Charles shifted from wanting a tenure-track post as he learned near the end of the degree of the lack of available posts; after a temporary research post, he found a professional position. Jennifer shifted from wanting a professional career as she realized near the end of the degree that a doctorate made her less employable outside of academia; she found a lecturer position after two part-time researcher posts. In two cases, original intentions were maintained in a different form: Regina turned down a post-doctoral fellowship for the security of a permanent post as a hospital research consultant; she negotiated university adjunct positions. Hannah, who had imagined an academic position that did not in reality exist, took on a new kind of position as clinical academic in a hospital trust and similar to Regina negotiated a one-day per week university secondment.

Conclusions: In further and continuing education, Hodkinson & Sparkes (1997) argue that a realistic view of career decision-making must merge individual desires and intentions with the opportunities that create possible options. They also argue that career decision-making must focus on the individual, not categories, in order not to lose the importance of individual variation. Our results support this view as regards doctoral decision-making, that decisions and actions are situated in long-term intentions, personal circumstance and what is possible within the given environment. Our analysis goes further in emphasizing the intertwining of the personal with the academic in the decision-

making process. Overall, this study contributes a more nuanced understanding of doctoral identity development. It supports the view of identity as a biographical understanding of who one wants to be and is becoming, with the doctorate just one aspect of this journey (McAlpine et al, 2010).

References

- Åkerlind, G. (2005). Postdoctoral researchers: roles, functions and career prospects. *Higher Education Research and Development*, 24 (1), pp. 21-40.
- Coulter, C., & Smith, M. (2009). The construction zone: Literary elements in narrative research. *Educational Researcher*, 38(8), 577-590.
- Elliott, J. (2005). *Using narrative in social research: Qualitative and quantitative approaches*. London, UK: Sage
- Green, 2005
- Hodkinson, P., & Sparkes, A. (1997). A sociological theory of career decision making *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 18(1), 29-44.
- Huisman, J., de Weert, E., & Bertelse, J. (2002). Academic careers from a European perspective: The declining desirability of the faculty position. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 73(1), 141-160.
- Mason, M., Goulden, M., & Frasch, K. (2009). Why graduate students reject the fast track: A study of thousands of doctoral students shows that they want balanced lives. *Academe*, 95(111-16).
- McAlpine, L., Amundsen, C., & Jazvac-Martek, M. (2010). Living and imagining academic careers. In L. McAlpine & G. Akerlind (eds.). *Becoming an academic: International Perspectives*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 125-154.
- McAlpine, L., & McKinnon, M. (in press.). Supervision – the most variable of variables: Student perspectives. *Studies in Continuing Education*.
- Nerad, M., Rudd, E., Morrison, E., & Picciano, J. (2007). *Social science PhDs - five+ years out: a national survey of PhDs in six fields (Highlights Report)*. Seattle: Centre for Innovation and Research in Graduate Education, University of Washington.
- Stake, R. (2006). *Multiple Case Study Analysis* The Guilford Press.
- Sweitzer, B. (2009). Towards a theory of doctoral student professional identity development: A developmental networks approach. *Journal of Higher Education*, 80(1), 1-33.
- UK Council for Science and Technology. (2007). *Pathways to the future: The early careers of researchers in the UK*. London: Council for Science and Technology.