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Crisis, Catharsis, and Creation: A Gothic Approach to Doctoral Supervision (0165)

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From pathologic concerns to powerful dialogues

In doctoral schools and programmes today we see a strong concern for the well-being of doctoral students. In the research literature too, there is a strong focus on how doctoral students have to deal and cope with stress, anxiety, and depression, and we learn that many doctoral students fight to maintain a healthy work-life balance, while at the same time having to be excellent researchers, work part or full time on the side to support their studies, take care of their own family, and sometimes caring for elderly or disabled parents (Hopwood et al, 2011). We fully acknowledge this pressure doctoral students experience, and at the same time we challenge the *pathological discourse* that is clouding doctoral education and supervision. Redefining researcher education into health issues and diverting the challenges of research supervision to a matter of care for the well-being of students is not the only way forward. We know from the research into doctoral supervision that well-being and research excellence are closely connected to intellectual and epistemic breakthroughs (Brodin, 2016; 2017; Wisker et al, 2011; Bengtsen 2011; 2016), the so-called ‘depth supervision’ (Skagen, 2017), and the experience of identity transformation and professional growth (Halse & Malfroy, 2010; Barnacle & Dall’Alba, 2017; Frick, 2011). There is a need to explore and understand supervisor interactions, engagements and duties in terms of where they can *actually* help and support students through relational epistemologies and empathic intellectual activities.

Methodological approach

In this study we draw from qualitative semi-structured interviews with doctoral students and supervisors from UK, South African, and Danish universities. In the period 2015-2018, both authors have worked in tandem and aligned and critically discussed and adjusted their interview approaches in their different national contexts. We build our presentation around key passages and quotations from these interviews, to bring into the room the actual voices of the doctoral students themselves. In our data analysis and our discussion of the data, we draw from what we have come to call a ‘gothic approach’. An essential trajectory of the Gothic in literature and its criticism (Botting, 2013; Punter 2001; Punter & Byron, 2004) is first a revelation of discomfort, dismay, contradictions, and

the upsetting of complacencies. However, defamiliarisation renders the familiar strange, unsettling and should this unsettling darkness be worked through, it can lead to new insights and understandings, new ways of seeing, behaving, and creating. Our gothic approach draws from the concept of ‘darkness’ in higher and doctoral education research (Bengtson & Barnett, 2017; Elliot et al, 2016; Wisker, Robinson, and Bengtson, 2017). The concept of darkness goes beneath the pathological discourses and point to deeper existential concerns and troubles. Also, the gothic approach draws from research into the crossing of conceptual thresholds in doctoral education and supervision (Wisker & Kiley, 2009; Wisker & Robinson, 2009). Powerful and effective supervision is a critical-creative dialogical effort that goes to the heart of the disciplinary (epistemological) *and* personal (ontological) meaning creation. It raises the doctoral student’s thinking out of darkness and ineffability, into light and shape.

Findings – Dark matter and intellectual leaps

In the presentation, we shall focus on our two main findings:

Taking a look into the dark

Our qualitative data makes visible how the deep anxieties and frustrations experienced by doctoral students are about vanishing of identity, loss of meaning, loss of self, and displacement and disconnection with the surrounding social and societal contexts. Interestingly, the pathological issues can be seen to be a *derived consequence* of deeper challenges and troubles in their intellectual struggles. The depression experienced by some doctoral students is interwoven with the depression of being at the conceptual threshold of learning without being able to cross it. The following fatigue is related to an apathy of the mind and the intellectual powers. The existential crisis is a loss of familiar markers for interpreting new experiences. Here, doctoral supervisors are not powerless and peripheral in the changing Graduate School landscape, but on the contrary have a vital part to play on the deep intellectual-existential level of doctoral learning.

Tales from those who have crossed over

In our data doctoral students retell their experience of crossing over to the other side of the threshold and regaining their faith in their academic work and selves. These intellectual leaps are primarily linked to gaining new insights, understanding knowledge in new ways, and obtaining new views on their research challenges. The stories told are about feeling at home in their academic and

intellectual culture and activities, and they are linked to self-mastery and self-efficacy due to being and becoming a researcher. Again, the emotional and pathological issues are being addressed as *implications* of the intellectual-existential transformation and development. Also, the crossing over is a crossing over between worlds, and not states of mind (or emotional states). Some of the deepest concerns doctoral students have are ontological in nature – being about concerns and joys in understanding *the world* and only in a derived sense about understanding themselves as persons.

Conclusion – Crossing over with Charon the ferryman

Based on our findings we argue that in order to enhance the efficiency and quality of doctoral supervision, we should not transfer unto them discourses, and hereby educational demands, about personal well-being, health, and social welfare. Instead, our data suggests that supervisors should be revitalized as central ‘ferryman’ (like Charon in Greek mythology), going into the dark half-worlds and in-between zones, where students get lost, and where their thoughts and ideas becomes broken and crippled. This is an intellectually haunted land, where ghosts pray on the students with their nightmarish callings and cries of failed careers, broken families, and loss of sanity. Supervisors actually *do* have the powers to go into that spot of intellectual crisis, to dwell there with the students in order to understand the fibres of that darkness, and then to help students towards a new version of the world, and the self, through knowledge creation efforts.

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