THE INVISIBLE SUPPORT NETWORKS OF DOCTORAL CANDIDATES: WHAT ACKNOWLEDGEMENT SECTIONS OF DOCTORAL THESES REVEAL

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ABSTRACT

Although some argue that acknowledgement sections should not form part of doctoral theses, others welcome such sections and are of the opinion that they reflect original and personal contributions, constituting a neglected genre. Previous research on acknowledgement texts have focused more on their linguistic characteristics as related to the academic writing of theses. The present study, however, inquired into acknowledgement sections from a social support perspective. The aim of the study was to bring to light the dimension of the social milieu and its importance in supporting doctoral students in successfully achieving their doctorate. More specifically, the study sought to investigate the role of "significant others" in the academic success of doctoral students as reflected in the genres of acknowledgement in doctoral theses by analysing such texts from 30 completed doctoral theses in South Africa and Israel. Follow-up interviews with graduates assisted to probe deeper into the meaning of the texts. Although limited in nature, the study found that, based on who doctoral graduates acknowledge, several role-players and supporters seem to contribute to doctoral success. This includes family members, friends, colleagues, study supervisors, funders and university administrators. What also became clear was that doctoral candidates rely mainly on psycho-social forms of support and that particular kinds of such support are crucial at different stages of the doctoral journey. Acknowledgement studies confirm the doctoral research process as an activity stream that integrates the personal, the interpersonal and the institutional to reveal the mostly hidden, but very important, influences on the doctorate.

Keywords: Doctoral acknowledgements; doctoral studies; social support; doctoral success

INTRODUCTION

Acknowledgement sections in doctoral theses represent a global phenomenon as well as a special genre (Bazerman 1988; Caesar 1992; Cronin 1995; Giannoni 2002). As meta-textual sections of PhD theses, acknowledgements offer a rhetorical space to convey appreciation and recognition to those who have contributed to doctoral students' study success. They reflect the moral, instrumental, financial, technical support received from different bodies such as institutions, family members peer, mentors and more (Cronin, McKenzie and Rubio 1993). However, acknowledgments are not merely a catalogue of idiosyncratic gratitude, but possess rhetorical sophistication that reveal academic preferences of interest to discourse and impact analysists (Hyland 2011). In addition, they provide insights into contingencies of the research process, sources of influences and graduates' understandings of their own agency (Hyland 2003; 2004a). Thus, they have social functions and cognitive significance (Cheng 2012).

In spite of their importance, they are considered a neglected genre in applied linguistic studies where the focus is on discourse analysis and also in the investigation of academic writing of theses and dissertations (Hyland 2003). Hyland refers to acknowledgements as a "Cinderella" genre representing a "taken for granted" text which is usually regarded as unacademic and not necessarily an important part of the thesis (Hyland 2003, 246).

In fact, very little is known about acknowledgment development (Giannoni 2002). Caesar (1992) observes that initially acknowledgements were requirements for publication, and authors had to pay recognition and gratitude to those in authority. Later, they appeared in different informal forms, until they received their own space at the openings of books and manuscripts which are not Prefaces or Forewords. Caeser claims that "The moment when acknowledgments were accorded separate pagination from Prefaces or Forewords may prove to be as decisive for the history of Acknowledgements as the moment when Epistles Dedicatories ceased to be commonly printed" (Caesar 1992, 87). Acknowledgment sections emerged in the 1940's and became more common or a "standard feature" (Giannoni 2002) closer to 1960's.

Since then, acknowledgements have been investigated through different lenses. Ben Ari (1995) has looked at acknowledgments from an ethnographic perspective and notes that the dominant mode of presentation in ethnographic texts was that of a detached third person observer. However, he believes that material found in acknowledgement texts are different and bring out webs of relationships. The role of acknowledgments is to mediate between the internal contents of the ethnography and the people outside it. It is "an introduction to an intellectual product and a reconstruction of the external contribution that have gone toward its realization ... this dual quality determines much of the potentials and limits of these devices" (Ben Ari 1995, 135)**.**

Hyland (2003) has pointed out that acknowledgments represent a bridge between the personal and the social, the academic and the lay. They are windows to the human side of the writer "enmeshed in network of personal and academic relationships" (Hyland 2003, 266). Acknowledgments portray the process of doing research as a "stream of activity which weaves together the personal, the interpersonal, and the institutional". Cronin (1995, 305) refers to them as texts "revealing the hidden influences behind papers".

The aim of the present study was to bring to light the dimension of the social milieu and its importance in supporting the doctoral students in achieving their doctorate. More specifically, the study sought to investigate the role of "significant others" in the academic success of doctoral students as reflected in the genres of acknowledgement in doctoral theses. We chose to investigate the acknowledgement sections of theses as this constitutes a formal rhetorical space where candidates can take a step back and reflect upon the choices, people, feelings experiences that took part in their doctoral endeavour. In this section they can use a more personal and authentic discourse, which is often counter to academic conventions. Acknowledgments "reveal the writer as someone with a life beyond the page" (Hyland 2003, 246). The pivotal role of the "significant others" in the process of doing a doctorate is further discussed in the next section.

Significant others in doctoral support

In a study on the hidden realities of life as a doctoral student, Hopwood et al. (2011) have indicated the gap between doctoral students' lives and their doctoral studies. The authors claim that we should take a more holistic view of doctoral candidates and consider a range of personal and nonacademic aspects that are most often implicit and cannot be isolated from the process of gaining a PhD. Other studies have reported that among the variables associated with the progress of doctoral studies, the supervisory relationship is a key issue (Zhao, Golde and McCormick 2007). However, attributing supervisory relationship as a keystone to good or bad learning experiences has underestimated the contribution of "significant others" to doctoral success (Wisker, Robinson, and Bengtsen 2017). Students sometimes depend more on peers, friends and family, as they do on the supervisor (McAlpine and McKinnon 2013). Wisker et al. conclude that "doctoral education cannot be reduced to the individual endeavor of the doctoral student nor the dyadic relational work between a supervisor and a student ... The PhD is a world of extended drama, where other significant actors are involved" (Wisker et al. 2017, 534).

The role of significant others and social support

Social support is closely related to individual efforts to complete important life tasks. This

theoretical lens is often applied in considering support functions performed by primary and secondary group members. Literature indicates that support functions are mostly associated with an individual's survival, "getting back on track", rehabilitation, acquiring new knowledge, and learning new skills and behaviours related to well-being (Turner 1981; Moos and Mitchell 1982; Lakey, Hain, and Van Vleet 2010; Thoits 2011; Jairam and Kahl 2012; Rad et al. 2013).

Studies that investigated wellbeing of graduate students have indicated that learning environments exert a critical role in students' wellbeing and academic persistence (Hunter and Devine 2016). For instance, Schmidt and Hansson (2018) note that maintaining a healthy work-life balance is a challenge for doctoral students, due to multiple stressors and many other external and internal personally related variables (also see Ivankova and Stick 2007). The process of doing research can be a positive experience leading to intellectual and personal growth, and at the same time it can be a negative experience resulting in depression and feeling of isolation and even withdrawal (Lovitts 2001; Azad and Kohun 2007; Pyhältö et al. 2012; Hunter and Devine 2016). However, several studies suggest that social support can function as a mediator of stress and alleviate highly emotional events that doctoral students might encounter during their journey to obtain the doctoral degree (Dirks and Metts 2010; Jairam and Kahl 2012). Also, Lovitts (2001) claims that doctoral programmes provide frameworks for studying, but often ignore candidates' social life, which can be detrimental to both studies and students.

Forms of social support

Studies in recent years have drawn attention to the challenges doctoral candidates encounter in the different phases of doing a doctorate and the support that can facilitate the hurdles. To mention just a few: Azad and Kohun (2007), for example, investigated social isolation in doctoral programmes and suggest that developing meaningful social relationships and social support can be a solution. Some suggestions relate to higher involvement between advisers and advisee. Three types of support are mentioned: instrumental (coaching, exposure to academic life, challenging assignments), psychological (role model, empathising counselling) and networking assistance (Tenenbaum, Crosby and Gliner 2001). This notion is reinforced by another study (Wao and Onwuegbuzie 2011) which found that students who experience regular social support by their advisers tend to complete their studies faster than those who do not get such feedback. Another study (Lee 2009) focused on factors that boosted and weakened doctoral students' experiences. Factors that boosted experience were family support and relationships with other doctoral candidates, while weakening factors were financial issues and difficulties with advisers.

In a study investigating the role of social support in successful degree completion (Jairam

and Kahl 2012), participants indicated three important social support groups: academic friends (fellow graduate students), family (spouses, children, siblings, parents) and advisers (committee members and professors). It is also noted that peer support is one of the most important factors mentioned by students (Boud and Lee 2005; Lizzio and Wilson 2006). Sweitzer (2009) investigated the role of networks and why they matter for doctoral students. She concluded that most people rely on relationships to provide support, advice, guidance, and nurturing and the personal and professional lives merge. She adds that exploring doctoral student's networks and social support is necessary to understand the development of doctoral students' professional identity and to advance the study of doctoral education.

METHODOLOGY

Our methodology for the present study drew on previous work related to social support theory as applied in different human and social contexts (Turner 1981; Moos and Mitchell 1982; Lakey, Hain and Van Vleet 2010; Thoits 2011; Jairam and Kahl 2012; Rad et al. 2013). This lens also applied to considering important functions primarily performed by "significant others" and "secondary group members" (Thoits 2011). Significant others are those with close personal ties with an individual, while secondary group members represent relatively distant ties with the individual, but are still important and instrumental in providing different forms of support.

Our study focused on doctoral graduates and we analysed 30 acknowledgement texts that were randomly selected from completed theses in the field of educational research from different universities. These theses were completed in two countries (Israel and South Africa) between 2010 and 2016. The analysis of acknowledgement sections was followed by personal and e-mail interviews with graduates to better understand the academic and social contexts within which their studies were completed. Texts were analysed by asking the following three primary questions: *Who were acknowledged? What were the acknowledgements for? What was the recognised impact on the study or candidate and what long-term impact was indicated?*

During interviews we probed issues such as *graduates' views on the importance of acknowledgements in theses, why particular persons or entities were included or excluded, whether acknowledgement texts from other graduates were consulted and any other interesting issues that could be of importance*. Finally, we were also interested to see whether there were any differences between the two national contexts.

The two main forms of data analysis used were text analysis (in the case of the acknowledgement sections of completed theses) and content analysis (from the transcribed interview data). In the acknowledgment texts we first identified the beneficiaries of acknowledgement which were further divided into main groups. We also made note of the

hierarchical order of the acknowledged. The texts of the acknowledgment were analysed using the repeated process of coding to capture the main aspects of gratitude expressed by the authors. These aspects were further analysed to identify recurrent emergent themes for each group of beneficiaries. The data were organized in a table containing five columns: Thesis number (to avoid names), beneficiaries, content of gratitude, extant of beneficiaries' impact on the candidate and their future impact. The two authors analysed the texts separately in order to arrive at final agreed categories.

The topics and themes from interview data were related to the acknowledgement sections of particular theses and for which graduates' permission was obtained. Graduates' confidentiality and anonymity in reporting findings were ensured. All acknowledgement texts were retrieved from completed theses that were available on the respective universities' library repositories.

FINDINGS

Beneficiaries and gratitude

The analysis revealed four main groups of beneficiaries:

1. Academic beneficiaries who had a direct academic involvement with the writing of the thesis: supervisors, research groups, academic colleagues, course instructors, editors.
2. Administrative beneficiaries: employers, government institutions, technicians.
3. Spiritual beneficiaries: God, Jesus.
4. Nuclear Family and other members of the family.

There were also other beneficiaries who were categorized as "other individuals" which included mainly friends and "significant others" who had some impact on the author.

Regarding *academic support,* students acknowledged supervisors on common aspects which were more general, such as: thorough feedback, help with statistical analysis, organization of thoughts, giving sound advice, guidance in academic writing. However, students emphasised support which went beyond the common assistance and entailed high order thinking. These acknowledgments were usually more detailed and described the nature of support. Words used in such acknowledgements were: novel, original, innovative, critical:

"... for introduction to novel and not always mainstream ideas"
"... for assistance to make vague ideas more concrete"

> "... for crude and critical comments"
>
> "... for introduction to a world of research and journey which took me beyond imaginable borders"
>
> "... for allowing me to grow as a researcher".

The social emotional aspect of support was also strongly emphasised in regard to academic beneficiaries. The expressions most used were: for being patient, for believing in my abilities, for acceptance, for being calm and collected, for encouragement to press on, for kindness, for being a role model, for making me see the light at challenging moments, for being a catalyst for personal and educational growth, for your sense of humour.

The administrative beneficiaries, which comprised of employers, library staff, government officials, international associations, were part of the academic support, but more on the technical and financial issues which supported the research. They were mainly acknowledged:

> "... for financial support and allowing time off"
>
> "... for 'toleration' and having responded to endless emails, providing important information and facilitating access to participants"
>
> "... for granting a generous scholarship during all the years of study".

The spiritual support was accredited to God Almighty and Jesus Christ, mainly in the South African theses. Following are some examples:

> "For grace and love, Almighty God for guidance in reaching an academic milestone which would have been impossible without His grace, power wisdom, perseverance and strength. If it wasn't God's wish, the project would have remained a dream."
>
> "The Lord Jesus Christ, for keeping me aware of endless miracles during the course of my studies. God Almighty, for strength and grace to work on the study."

Family members were extensively acknowledged in all theses "telling" the stories behind the screens and highlighting turning points in their "doctoral life".

> "Wife and sons: For patience during the time of compiling the thesis, treasuring the precious time I stole ...."
>
> "Husband: for keeping things intact as I studied abroad."
>
> "Husband: For constant and unconditional love of which I am proud; for teaching me to love in ways I could never have dreamed."
>
> "Wife: For pointing out to me the correct view of things with common sense and sober outlook. Complementing me in what I lack, enabling in me all that I am."
>
> "Wife: Helping me give deep meaning to life by starting a family, focusing me on giving attention

to my own non-academic needs. Filled me with meaningful life."

"Mother: for spending endless hours supporting me. For praying for me for wisdom, insight and courage to continue."

"Husband: For going through some difficult times during an 8-month absence."

"To a 94-year old mother: For always encouraging me to do my best and my maxim of being true unto oneself and to live by this tenet."

Responses from interviews

The interviews revealed some elaborated "stories" which threw light on the trajectory of doing a doctorate and the influential networks. As a response to our question regarding the choice of beneficiaries and the reasons for including or excluding beneficiaries, we received responses which reflect cultural and spiritual values:

> "I first acknowledged God for his guidance and direction throughout my study. I am a Christian and I strongly believe in the power of God to direct affairs successfully. Next, I acknowledged my father because he sold his property (land) to fund my PhD study and I must state that when I told a few elderly people of what my father had done, they were frank to tell me that they would never sell their property to fund a PhD study. I thought that with the sacrifice my father made, he needed a place in my thesis work because if he was an external funding body, I will be obliged to appreciate his effort."

As a response to our question regarding the importance of the acknowledgment section in a thesis, some students indicated how the acknowledgments made them reflect upon the "fellow travellers" and the development they went through. For others, the process of reflection had a strong impact on their future activities.

> "I would say acknowledgments are important. The PhD is a journey and there are many fellow travellers. Some fellow travellers are there for a season while others are there for the whole journey. Including all these fellow travellers in the acknowledgements section is a small way of thanking and acknowledging them for supporting and walking the road with you."
>
> "Beyond the religious and moral obligation there is also the social element of 'joint ownership' of what we claim to be solely ours."
>
> "An important space to show the human side of the writer of this tiring journey ... but fruitful at the end."
>
> "Writing this section was very interesting because it reminded me of the gradual development that took place; intellectually, emotionally etc. In the course of writing the acknowledgement section an idea of writing a book to narrate my PhD journey emerged. I thought about many people at home who would like to pursue PhD studies but were facing several challenges. I wanted to encourage them to learn that despite the many challenges encountered in the journey, IT CAN BE DONE!"
>
> "Acknowledgements in theses are important because completion of PhD thesis is a challenging undertaking which calls for support from others. Therefore, it will be unfair to ignore the support

that one received from others. Further, it is important to provide a true picture to other people who aspire to path through a similar journey, telling them that they should not expect to do it without seeking the support of other people. Support comes in many forms. Even a word of encouragement contributes a lot to the journey. Support also comes from people that one had never expected. Candidly, the section provided an opportunity for me to reflect what happened from the first day of the journey up to the viva."

WHAT DO ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS IN THESES TELL US?

The study set out to look into the role of social networks in the academic success of doctoral students through the discourse of acknowledgment texts in theses. As supervisors, the texts of acknowledgments intrigued us, as they have a social and cognitive significance for candidates (Cheng 2012; Hyland 2004b) and yet these are usually parts of the theses which are mostly read with non-academic eyes, if at all. Students rely on a myriad of relationships within and beyond the academic context, and these relationships play a critical role in the development of doctoral students' professional identity (Sweitzer 2009). In order to understand the experiences of graduate students and improve higher education, a variety of voices should be included in studying doctoral students' experiences (Wulff, Austin, Nyquist, and Sprague 2004). It is claimed that doctoral programmes fail to acknowledge this aspect (Sweitzer 2009). The discourse of acknowledgements in our study and the stories that they reveal prove that students' personal and professional lives merge and can have a critical impact on the success of their doctoral journey (Sweitzer 2009).

Although supervisors received substantial credit for their academic and emotional support, our findings also provide evidence to support the notion that the PhD is indeed a "world of drama" and it cannot be reduced to the relational work between the supervisor and the student (Wisker et al. 2017, 534). This has received more credence in the SA theses where "other significant" actors came first in the order of acknowledgments, including spiritual beliefs and values.

The findings from our study cannot be generalized due to its small scale and qualitative nature; however, they provide useful evidence to support existing research and can assist programme designers and managers to institutionalize policies where social networks (academic and non-academic) receive more recognition in assisting doctoral students with their doctoral challenges.

So, while the role of acknowledgments is primarily to recognize the contributions of others to the doctoral journey, it also "offers insights" into the persona of the writer and actually tells us "who the writer is" (Hyland 2011). This notion provides some food for thought for further investigation. As supervisors and external readers of theses, we wondered about the impact that

the "stories", which are sometimes quite emotive, and the "persona" as reflected in the texts, have on our reading and assessment of the thesis. Can we remain unbiased? This would require more research from examiners' perspectives. Due to the diversity and richness of the texts we encountered, we also questioned the "open" and informal style of writing of the acknowledgment sections. Should there be any academic formal guidelines for acknowledgment sections?

CONCLUSION

From our limited inquiry into doctoral acknowledgement sections at least three conclusions seem possible. Firstly, it is clear that based on who and what doctoral graduates acknowledge, several role-players and supporters do indeed contribute to their doctoral success. This include, among others, family members, friends, colleagues, study supervisors, funders and university administrators. Although some authors typify the "doctoral journey" as a lonely one, there appears to be significant evidence that, apart from individual efforts, doctoral candidates rely much on different forms of support in order to successfully complete their studies. Such support would of course be different for different candidates, but the data provide us with clues who the more prominent or "significant" actors are.

Secondly, the kind of support candidates appreciate and acknowledge seem to be mainly psycho-social in nature. Our enquiry provided ample evidence that particular kinds of social support are crucial at different stages of doctoral studies. In essence, it might be the difference between continuing and discontinuing a study or between a candidate's hope and despair.

Thirdly, acknowledgement studies confirm the doctoral research process as, what Hyland (2004a; 2011) calls an activity stream that integrates the personal, the interpersonal and the institutional, or what Cronin (1995) refers to as texts that reveal the hidden influences on the doctorate.

Currently there are talks in several countries and institutions about disallowing or discouraging doctoral candidates to include acknowledgements in their theses (Postgraduate Supervision Conference 2019) – the argument being that doctoral theses are academic documents that do not allow for any personalised texts. This would be sad indeed as it might inhibit supervisors, institutions and researchers into doctoral education alike to understand the complexities and challenges that accompany the doctoral study journey and how different social support actors could potentially alleviate them.

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