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**Power Discourse in PhD Examination Reports:  
A Cross-disciplinary Analysis**

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## **Power Discourse in PhD Examination Reports: A Cross-disciplinary Analysis**

### **Abstract**

The conceptual convergence of the Habermasian paradigm for “ways of knowing” and social cognitive approaches to power relations was used to analyse PhD examination reports. Previous analyses revealed that even when PhDs were given the highest evaluations, they were frequently accompanied by negative remarks. It is argued that examiners’ epistemological beliefs obstruct the emancipation of knowledge and are representative of a conservative academic culture which protects its extant structures. Research in social psychology has demonstrated that people in positions of power are motivated to maintain their high power base. The combination of these philosophical and psychological tenets guided the analysis of the discourse used in examination reports of PhDs. The study examined 23 reports and showed that while there was evidence of the three hierarchies of power (examiner as expert, examiner as partner and examiner as learner/listener) in the discourse, it was dominated by negative comments and largely indicative of the examiner perceiving his role as that of expert. This was interpreted in light of the literature suggesting those in power are reluctant to relinquish their high power base.

### **Ways of Knowing in PhD Examination**

The Study of Research Training and Impact (SORTI) Centre at The University of Newcastle includes an ARC Discovery Grant Project which is exploring the dimensions of PhD examination in Australia. Among its various arms is one that has been concerned with appraising the quality and textual characteristics of Examiner Reports against the epistemological assumptions that examiners appear to carry into their work. The interface between the quality of a thesis, the textual characteristics of the accompanying reports and the specific but sometimes overlapping roles adopted by examiners provided fertile ground for applying the 'Ways of Knowing' epistemological thesis of Jurgen Habermas (1972; 1974).

According to the above thesis, Habermas proposes that there is a consistent pattern through which knowledge is developed, revealed and further negotiated. This pattern occurs in all areas of knowledge, even where disciplinary boundaries exist. He argues that the pattern arises from three different ‘cognitive interests’, which in turn impel three associated ‘ways of knowing’. First, there is the empirical/analytic, which is a technical knowing, knowing of ‘facts and figures’; second, there is a historical/hermeneutic form of knowing, a knowing of meanings and interpretations; third, there is critical / self-reflective knowing, a knowing that implies ongoing critique and self-knowing. It is impelled by the overarching interest in being ‘emancipated’ from oppressive and coercive knowing dictated by the interests of others whose motivation is to disempower us in order to serve their own interests.

These apparent divisions in the way knowledge is developed arise from human perception, rather than originating from any inherent partitioning within knowledge itself. For a project with the goal of identifying and defining patterns of research

higher degree examination across discipline areas, this seemed an important thesis to test against the data.

### **Ways of Knowing and Positioning the Examiner**

Each of the three ways of knowing has the effect of positioning differently the participants in any teaching/learning relationship. In the study at hand, the relationship is between the examiner and candidate. When the technical way of knowing is operative, the examiner is most likely to take on the role of an "expert" in relation to the candidate. Where historical/hermeneutic knowing is operative, a partnership between the examiner and candidate may develop, wherein there is an attempt to communicate and/or negotiate over meanings and interpretations. Finally, when dealing with knowing of the critical/self-reflective type, one might expect the traditional roles of examiner and candidate to be marked by an intellectual equability, a meeting of minds. Furthermore, the relationship may even be reversed, with the candidate acknowledged as being in control of their own knowing. Within this approach, the role of the examiner potentially transforms to that of listener and the relationship is marked by what Van Manen (1977) describes as "no asymmetry". By enabling this position, the examiner relegates the customary power given by the process, choosing to accept the role of learner.

At the heart of Habermas' thesis is the notion that the cognitive interest to be 'emancipated', or free in our knowing, impels an intensive critique of all of the assumptions and sources of our knowing up to that point in time. Among the assumptions and sources are those of both the external and internal world. Externally, one confronts one's enculturated past, one's corporate beliefs and community values, one's family, school, political and religious heritage. Internally, one confronts one's self: there is no knowing without knowing the knower. Through critical, self-reflective knowing, one is challenged to let go of much of the past and to embrace new futures. The end of critical, self-reflective knowing is *praxis*, practical action for change. One cannot remain in the same place once one has confronted one's past and one's self. The proposition of earlier work in this series (cf. Lovat, 2002; Lovat et al., 2002; Lovat & Morrison, 2003) is that this is the form of knowing one might expect to be dominant in a learning regime that revolves around a product said to be, of necessity, 'original', 'contributive to existing knowledge', 'creative', 'incorporating new understandings', 'innovative', etc. In other words, granted the over-riding and virtually universal objective of the PhD to impel change and make a difference, as conceived within particular discipline boundaries, it would seem pertinent to employ a critical/self-reflective lens when taking up the task of examination.

### **The Dominance of Expertise Text in PhD Examination**

Of great interest to the above thesis is that initial analysis of examination and re-examination reports in the works cited above has demonstrated that the primary mode of assessment employed by examiners more closely falls within the bounds of the empirical-analytic way of knowing. Furthermore, their texts are largely negative, constructed from a position of expertise. There were few texts that developed a discourse of partnership, collegiality, symmetry or the awe one might expect as the

examiner witnessed original and significant contributions to academic knowledge. Moreover, even in those theses that had been rated as 'top box' (an unqualified pass), evidence suggested that examiners still tended to function from a position of expertise and indeed to make heavily negative comments (*cf.* Holbrook, Bourke & Dally, 2003). One case study of such a thesis illustrated three highly castigatory examination reports, with comments including: "shortcomings in the way the thesis is argued," " .. analysis which is very limited in scope," " .. does not deal with the arguments," " .. without an acknowledgment of its underlying arguments," " .. understandings are so limited," " .. reading .. is very limited," "Most important are weaknesses in the structure of the thesis." In spite of such derisory assessment, all three examiners, by recommending a 'top box' pass, presumably rated the thesis as constituting a major contribution to the world of public knowledge.

The above phenomenon, being not unusual it seems, has led to the postulation that, in the PhD examination report, we may be dealing with a virtual literary genre, born of assumptions about the nature of the task and its incumbent duties, and built up over time to become a set of expectations attached to an informal yet quietly prescriptive aspect of academic culture. If this were so, it would suggest that examination reports may largely be constructed according to this genre, regardless of the quality of work under examination. The case has further been made that, were such a dominant genre in the examination script revelatory of the entire regime of the PhD, the potential was there for routine discouragement and even obstruction of the 'originality' and 'new contribution' factor that is meant to be its over-riding item of assessment. Again, this is working on the assumption, informed by the Habermasian thesis, that a PhD regime replete with boundary shaking and original contributions would be evidenced in an examination genre that was fairly well filled with positive comment, at the least, and robust self-reflective script, at the most.

### **Expertise and Power Discourse**

The above speculation leads fairly naturally to the issue of power, power relations and, specifically, power discourse. The fact that the dominant discourse found was that of 'expert', and this even in the scripts of those ultimately judged to be unqualified passes, leads to a consideration that examiners may, as a matter of course, engage in some form of power discourse as part of the cultural artifact of the PhD examination. The task now is to position this thought against the literature of power, power relations and power discourse. In this preliminary analysis, we focus firstly on the pertinent literature, and secondly on those portions of the examination scripts under investigation that are indicative of power relations and power discourse.

While power has been quite extensively addressed in the social sciences research, there has been little evidence of a systematic examination of it as a construct. Rather its impact is often acknowledged, yet not specifically defined. In general, the research suggests that people in positions of power generally work to retain their power. Most studies that document these findings are located in the area of organisational psychology. Coleman (2004) found that while the benefits of sharing power in organisations are well acknowledged, there is an unwillingness of those in power to share it. Other research has shown that power imbalances can activate stereotypes which in turn affect negotiation strategies, particularly with respect to gender (Kray, Reb, Galinsky and Thompson, 2004). In addition negotiators with high power

perceived an advantage in their ability to negotiate in comparison to those in the low power roles (Kray et al., 2004). These findings suggest that those individuals who are in perceived positions of power are susceptible to varying cognitive strategies which assist them retaining their high power role.

While previous definitions of power have focused on the influence one person has over another (Huston, 1983), more recent definitions have focused on actual control rather than influence as the key component of power (Fiske and Morling, 1996). However, the definition of power provided by Dacher, Gruenfeld and Anderson (2003) encapsulates both of these ideas and provides a strong theoretical base for discourse analysis. They defined power as the capacity to modify an individual's state by providing or withholding resources. This definition is consonant with the philosophy of Habermas. While Habermas does not speak in terms of withholding or providing resources, he does provide a rubric for partnerships where resources (namely knowledge and expertise) are negotiated around different bases of power (facts and figures, cognitive interests).

### **Power Discourse in PhD Examination**

Given the findings to date of the examination reports of PhD theses, the proclivity to temper evaluations of even the most outstanding theses with negative comments can be interpreted as the examiner trying to sustain his/her superior power base either consciously or unconsciously. Nevertheless these ideas are consistent with research attesting to the influence of power in evaluative contexts. In the organisational context, Georgesen and Harris (1998) found that as power levels increased, evaluations of others became increasingly negative and evaluations of the self increasingly positive. This suggests that the person in the higher power position benefits by accruing self-esteem by offering negative evaluations of individuals.

It would be of great benefit to uncover the processes related to power in the context of PhD examination reports. Evaluations, by their very nature should yield concrete measures of academic achievement in relation to the specified criteria for successful completion PhD. Corson (1995) sees language as an instrument of power and a useful tool for deconstructing power discourse. Consequently the language used in PhD examination reports provides an effective means of assessing power relations between the examiner and the PhD student. In our discourse analysis, we attempt to unify the two views in an effort to explicate the PhD examination process.

The consistency of the research that power imbalances activate cognitive processes which result in negative feedback, and the preliminary findings that PhD theses attracting the highest evaluations exhibit the expert/novice approach to assessing knowledge, led us to examine further the discourse in theses which attracted a "top box" evaluation. Our analysis was conducted on a selection of PhD examination reports written about "top box" theses.

### **Preliminary Analysis**

This analysis was conducted on a small sample (n=23) of PhD reports. These reports were selected because they attracted the highest ranking (i.e. "top box") and were representative of three academic institutions that have agreed to submit examiners'

reports to the larger project. At the time of this preliminary analysis, these were the only available reports in this category.

### **Selection of text for analysis**

Three researchers read the reports and highlighted textual excerpts that were thought to represent the three Habermasian perspectives of “expert”, “partnership” and “equability” in the examiners’ positioning of their evaluative discourse. Excerpts selected by at least two of the researchers were selected for the preliminary analysis. In the larger study, the excerpts will be submitted to n-vivo analysis.

### **Results and Discussion**

Consistent with previous findings (c.f. Lovat and Morrison, 2003), the majority of the evaluative text excerpts positioned the examiner as “expert”. While not all the examiners’ reports consistently reflected the “expert” stance not one examiner referred to the PhD student as a “researcher”. When not using their names, students were referred to as “author”, “candidate”, “applicant” and, in one instance only, as “investigator”. Therefore, the disparity in expertise is articulated in the labeling of a PhD student as someone who is *not yet* a researcher. Moreover, this categorization of a PhD student serves to reinforce the power imbalance between supervisor and candidate and, according to the social cognitive literature, would serve to enhance the supervisor’s image of the self (c.f. Georgesen and Harris, 1998) and predispose him/her to engage in negative evaluations.

The examiner as “expert” was further reinforced in the more substantive comments made by many of the examiners where there was evidence of “gate keeping”. This is contrary to Van Manen’s paradigm of reflective knowing, where the examiner can be potentially transformed by the new knowledge offered in the PhD thesis, and was evidenced in such comments such as:

*“...in some respects the thesis is almost too original”* (306901380) and

*“ a nil effect is found because an experiment lacks power”*(302000390)

These comments suggest that students should have tempered their interpretations and, furthermore, that there is a standard to which students must conform. Such comments further indicate the examiners’ resistance to relinquishing their power in the role of expert, or arbiter about knowledge.

Furthermore, when the technical way of knowing is operative, the examiner is most likely to take on the role of ‘expert’ in relation to the candidate, so vesting all power in him/herself. Examples of such statements in the present study include:

*“This is a strong claim for which little evidence exists so far”* (302000390)

*“I might add that while I have offered no theory....I in fact borrowed from ideas developed by..”* (30200400)

*“I have long considered (names of two theorists) to be avenues by which discussions of the most serious issues could again be considered for academia”* (301400270)

Nevertheless there were comments reflective of the examiner adopting a “partnership” role and they attempted to negotiate meanings and interpretations rather than prescribe them. Comments reflective of the historical/hermeneutic way of knowing and which

represent an examiner/candidate partnership were seen in evaluative comments such as:

*"I was particularly impressed with x's alert attention to often obscure references"*  
(301400270)

*"This was important and allowed for the first time measurement of..."* (308701760)

In the most emancipatory of the "ways of knowing" (Habermas, 1972:1974), the critical/self reflective form, the perception that there is "a meeting of minds" is likely not only to result in equal distribution of power between the examiner and the candidate, but result in the supervisor's abrogation of his/her power role in favour

of the student. This relationship becomes one of "no asymmetry" (Van Manen, 1977). Such examples include:

*"... this is such a well-written and absolutely convincing thesis that I am at a loss for words"* (309001810)

*"I found this thesis most enjoyable reading and am sure that many of these fundamental observations will become primary references to the field of [discipline]"*  
(309201860)

The preceding examples of examiner discourse reinforce previous findings (Lovat and Morrison, 2003) and are consistent with Corson's (1995) notion that power is an all encompassing attachment at all levels of education. His assessment is that educational settings and the formal processes that legitimize them provide one of the more natural contexts for power to be wielded. There is, after all, an inherent asymmetry connoted by the very notion of 'being educated'.

The examiners in the current study evidenced their attachment to the formalities of academia by their constant reference to publishability and/or extant publications of the PhD students' work (e.g. *"Some aspects of the work have already been published and others presented at conferences"* (303100620); standard statistical practices (*"Thanks to appropriate statistical analysis and the application of most modern methods."* (302900590) and reliance on well-known literature/research (e.g. *"in contrast to what is often reported in the literature"* (302900580)). Here, the examiner indicates that part of his/her own source of power lies in adherence to and knowledge of these formalities.

Whether the power inherent in education is turned ultimately to the good of individuals and to the overwhelming goal of generating new knowledge for a new generation or whether it is utilized primarily to preserve the self-interests of those doing the 'educating' and their institutions, is one of the issues that Corson strives to uncover. The other issue is the more direct one about the extent to which formal educational processes empower or disempower those who subject themselves to them.

The majority of examiners in the present study (n=21), while acknowledging the thesis was of high quality on the one hand, offered tempered criticisms of the way the study was conducted or presented. Is it that examiners feel the need to reinforce their status (power) by demonstrating their own extensive knowledge of the area? The current preliminary analysis merely searched for the patterns that emerged in relation to the discourse of power. The examiner /student relationship clearly reinforced the

asymmetrical nature of this relationship. However, within this asymmetry, there are instances where the examiner allows for symmetry and acknowledges superior or equable knowledge, particularly where the thesis has been assessed to be of the highest quality.

## **Conclusion**

It is worrying that there has been, to date, so little evidence of the kind of examination regime that would clearly separate the PhD process from other educational processes. This fact has to raise questions about the extent to which the PhD is truly working for individuals and society as the agency of new knowledge and creativity that is supposed to be its signature. Just how is the power that is implicit within any educational process being played out in the PhD, and to what extent may the examination process be symptomatic of this playing, are issues that this study hopes to address in its more detailed future analysis?

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