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Gender Power and PhD Examination

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Previous analyses revealed that even when PhDs were given the highest evaluations, they were frequently accompanied by negative remarks. It has been argued that examiners’ beliefs about their role may obstruct them in free acceptance of the original contributions to knowledge deemed to lie at the heart of the PhD. The resulting thought is that we may have constructed unwittingly a conservative doctoral regime that is more intent on protecting and maintaining extant structures than supporting innovation. Furthermore, 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 the examination of PhDs in the current study. A particular focus of this study was on gender differences in examiners’ comments with respect to the working of institutional and personal power. The results reinforced previous findings that both male and female examiners function predominantly in a conservative mode and so tend towards protesting and maintaining a custodial doctoral examination regime rather than encouraging innovation. There were differences, however, in the balance of expression between male and female examiners. Textual analysis seemed to imply that men were more interested in personal power than were female examiners.

INTRODUCTION

Philosophers have contributed substantially to providing the basic tenets of organizational and bureaucratic analysis. For instance Weber proposed that characteristics of bureaucracies included a hierarchy of controls, a division of labour, and detailed rules and regulations. Furthermore he and others believed that knowledge develops from the rules established from within the bureaucracy, and that the knowledge developed from the rules can be used to control the organizational environment and that those elevated to authority have the right to issue commands in order to preserve normative patterns (Parsons, 1947). In the context of the present analysis, we are focusing on how PhD examination reports exhibit the hierarchies’ of control rules and regulations and how examiners express their adherence to these rules and regulations. The examiners, of course occupy an explicit role of being in control and espousing academic rules and regulations irrespective of how “invisible” the rules might be to others (see Roszak, 1969). In this study, we are using the academic discourse provided in PhD examination reports to examine the way in which knowledge conferred, accepted and transmitted amidst the academic bureaucracy is expressed by those in a position to monitor and control the “rules and regulations” of the academic bureaucracy.
Habermas’ (1972;1974) thesis on “ways of knowing’ contends, in accordance with Weber that there is a consistent pattern for the generation of knowledge across disciplines. However Habermas proposed that there are three ways in which this knowledge can be transmitted (i.e three ways of knowing) and that the way in which the knowledge is controlled is dependent on “cognitive interest”. In our previous research (Lovat, Monfries and Morrison, 2004) we have identified that PhD examiners’ discourse resembled the empirical/ analytic way of knowing which essentially positions the examiner as expert in an asymmetrical dialogue with a learner, and that there was little or no evidence to demonstrate that examiners’ discourse was represented by the historical/hermeneutic (communicative) way of knowing and the critical or self-reflective way of knowing. We have previously interpreted the “expert” discourse of examiners as a form of power discourse that is a cultural artifact of doctoral examination and a way in which examiners can control the education process.

In our more recent investigations (Lovat and Monfries, 2005), we have examined discourse in relation to the gender of the examiner and tentatively concluded that females deliver their decisions in a much “softer” way than males do, in that they appear to want to protect the ego of the candidate more so than males. While female examiners continue to uphold the power of “gate-keeping” practices in the educational system, they are less inclined to express their judgments in ways that are designed to increase their personal power base.

Discourse differences in men’s and women’s conversations were first brought to researchers’ attention when Tannen’s (1990) work revealed that men and women communicate in vastly different ways, and there is a plethora of research attesting to power inequalities across a variety of contexts for men and women (e.g Izzard, 2006: Phillips and Imhoff, 1997). Hargreaves (1996) argues that bureaucratic discourse molds men and women within any organization and psychological research has reinforced that this discourse translates into gender specific organizational behaviours (Konrad, Ritchie, Lieb and Corrigall, 2000).

In contrast to female examiners, male examiners appear to express their evaluations in ways that more obviously uphold institutional power as well as reinforce their own personal power. This is consistent with what the research would predict as gender has been reported to be an important moderator for power and coercion processes (Schubert, 2004). In fact, research demonstrates that women’s expressions of power related comments are less assertive and dominant than males’ expressions (c.f. Feingold, 1994). Schubert argues that representing oneself as powerful results from an appraisal of situations as opportunities to have an impact on others. The dominance of comments reinforcing the asymmetrical positioning of the examiner, the supervisor and the candidate may therefore represent a perceived opportunity for examiners to have an academic impact on those people reading the reports, in turn serving to enhance their own academic power.

We wanted to explore how gender impacts on power discourse evidenced in PhD examination reports further, because to date our analyses have looked at only theses that attracted the highest evaluations. Even for exceptional theses, we noted that there seemed to be a compulsion to include some hefty criticisms of a highly praised work
(Lovat, Monfries and Morrison, 2004) and that male examiners’ tendency to do this was greater than females’ (Lovat and Monfries, 2005). Therefore in the present study we are examining for differences in power discourse that can be accounted for by gender.

ANALYSIS

(i) Reports

Examination reports for 31 PhD candidates were selected from a large pool of examination reports collected at SORTI, University of Newcastle. Each candidate had a male and female examiner, Fourteen theses attracted a low rank (i.e. marginal quality thesis) and 17 attracted a high rank (i.e. high quality thesis). Of the marginal theses, 8 candidates were male and 6 were female. Of the high quality theses 8 were male and 9 were female. In instances where the examiners differed in their rankings, the committee decision determined the quality of the thesis for the purpose of this analysis. A total of 62 reports were used to analyze examiner discourse.

Each report had a ranking from each examiner that attracted a score of 1-5, where 1 indicated the lowest rank (marginal quality) possible for the PhD and 5 indicated the highest rank (high quality) possible.

Table 1.1 shows the sum of the rankings given to candidates, and the frequency of the highest rank based on candidate gender and examiner gender.

Table 1.1 Assessments of Examiners: total rankings and frequency of the highest ranking.

| CANDIDATE | EXAMINER | Male | | | Female |
|-----------|---------|------|---|---|
|           |         | Total| Highest | Total| Highest |
| Male      | 55      | 5    | | 59  | 9     |
| Female    | 57      | 8    | | 59  | 9     |

Table 1.1 shows that there is virtually no difference in rankings of PhD theses, or the frequency of the highest rank based on either the gender of the examiner or the gender of the candidate. This is consistent with our previous findings where it was found that examiners’ rating of PhD quality was not affected by the gender of the examiner (Lovat and Monfries, 2005). Ultimately this indicates that candidates did not receive penalty or favour in relation to gender.
(ii) Discourse Analysis

Marginal assessments
In general PhD theses that have been assessed as marginal in their quality attracted more comments from examiners (as indicated by line length) than those that were evaluated as high quality theses and this did not differ for male or female examiners. Clearly there is more to comment on when a thesis is less favourably evaluated.

In addition both male and female examiners devoted a substantial amount of the report on objectively restating the substance of the thesis. As the thesis’ quality is ranked as marginal, perhaps examiners feel the need to demonstrate a comprehensive re-iteration of the thesis to justify critical comment.

Male examiners tended, however to be more objective and succinct in their criticisms (e.g.”My recommendations are set out…”; the grounds for my recommendations ….are set out”; “Notable omissions which are relevant to the candidate’s project include:”; “Unfortunately I do not feel that this thesis contributes anything original …”).

On the other hand female examiners attempted to ameliorate the severity of their criticisms by balancing negative comments with positive comments (e.g. “The thesis demonstrates that X is capable of independent research but needs more guidance in analysis and interpretation of his results.”; “While the candidate shows a strong degree of familiarity with research literature on xx, she does not show the appropriate level of critical appraisal.”; “An enormous amount of hard work goes into the preparation of a doctor’s thesis and therefore no one should lightly reject such effort.” “The author has done a lot of reading in XX…..My main problem with the thesis..”).

One interesting comment by a female examiner demonstrated that in the absence of trying to say something positive, the type of feedback she was giving was spurious “The thesis is very large without any question large enough in size for a PhD thesis. One could even argue that the thesis is too large”.

In addition, female examiners tended to offer assistance when the thesis is marginally evaluated (e.g. “Some suggestions for originality..” “I am also returning , under separate cover, the examination copy of this thesis, heavily annotated, in the hope that the marginal comments might prove useful to the candidate”)

(iii) High Quality Assessments

Gender differences were again evident in the examiners’ discourse associated with high evaluations of the PhD theses. Male examiners tended to provide understated praise (e.g. “solid, dependable piece of work”), felt compelled to make criticisms (e.g. “much more could be made of”; “Undoubtedly the thesis is far too long” ) and were egocentric (e.g “I have thoroughly enjoyed the intellectual challenge”; “There is certainly much here that challenges my own work..”; “I have thoroughly enjoyed the intellectual challenge of examining this thesis. It gave me much to ponder on during a self-imposed exile to an isolated cottage by a remote beach….., where my sole
purpose was to focus my energies and intellect on this dauntingly substantial document”) in the way they imparted advice.

Female examiners used emotive superlatives (“exceptionally fine”, “breathtaking”, “remarkable breadth of reading”, “delighted”, “enjoyed”; “this is an ambitious, careful, passionate and wide ranging study…”; “beautifully discussed”), and were more self reflective (indicative of critical knowing) (“It is rare for me to feel that I would like to meet and discuss issues with a student that I know through assessment. Yet, this is my reaction and I hope that I might in due course meet and discuss XXX with him.”; “I was particularly interested in X’s careful but not rigid theoretical positioning”) in their comments

(iv) General Gender Differences

Females are less authoritative and less confident in the way they express their evaluations irrespective of the quality of the thesis (e.g. “This may have been done and I missed it”; “I should also add that to my knowledge.”; “If I may, although it is not one of the options supplied for markers, I would recommend that this dissertation be considered for an MA award rather than a PhD”); At times they offer excuses for the candidate (e.g. “It is possible that the candidate is trying to be over-ambitious”)

Male examiners express their view with unequivocal confidence (e.g. “Without any doubt, the most admirable aspect of this dissertation…” “I am sure future studies will build on the observations described.” “It would appear that the author is not up to date.”; “However in its present form the thesis has a number of blemishes calling for further work before it can be approved as satisfactory”)

(v) The Positioning of Power

While there were clear differences in the way that male and female examiners communicate their evaluations of PhDs, they did not differ in their rankings and nor did they differ in their deference to the rules associated with academe and its assessment procedures. Both male and female markers overwhelmingly took the stance of “expert “in the asymmetrical positioning that Van Manen (1977) suggested existed for participants’ evaluative experience in the education process.

There were frequent references to what constitutes a “standard” for a PhD (E.g. “I consider the dissertation as it stands not to be of doctoral standard”; “I cannot automatically take publication as evidence that the work is of PhD standard, and I have to say that the standards required by the journals in which the work was published are lower than what I consider necessary for the award of the degree”. While the actualities of specific standards for marking a PhD remain elusive (c.f. Lawson, Marsh and Tansley, 2003), examiners clearly value certain academic traditions and rely on them to evaluate theses’ quality. In particular, reference to whether the work has been published or is suitable for publication clearly are criteria that examiners use to assess the quality of the work (e.g “However the author does not have enough publications “; “I am confident that several papers will be produced from the study”; ) as is the perceived contribution the work makes to the field. (e.g. “important contribution”; “However, this thesis in most part fails in advancing the
state of our knowledge beyond and above what is known and already investigated”;
“the candidate has made an important contribution to the scholarship by developing a
model”). Originality (e.g. “extraordinarily original—even audacious”; “powerfully
original”; “...this thesis represents work of a very high standard in terms of quality,
originality and usefulness”) and ability to critically analyze also figured largely in
examiners’ comments (e.g. “good level of knowledge and capacity for critical
analysis”; “ and what I can only call brilliant close readings of literary texts.”)

DISCUSSION
Male and female examiners of PhD dissertations do not differ in the way that they
grade/rank male or female PhD candidates. Therefore gender is not a factor in the
ultimate result of a submitted PhD thesis. However, the manner in which the result is
conveyed does differ according to the gender of the examiner. Our analyses of the
discourse of the examination report indicates that female examiners are much less
interested, on the whole of expressing their power in the bureaucratic hierarchy than
are males. This is consistent with Rudman and Heppen (2003) who suggested that
despite socio-cultural and legislative changes designed to encourage women to be as
confident as men, women are less inclined to pursue an interest in exerting
organizational power than are men. They use more superlatives in their positive
evaluations and temper their criticisms with suggestions for improvements while
highlighting positives of the theses. They also tend to be less assertive in their
evaluations and are unreserved in their praise. Male examiners, on the other hand, are
succinct and undiluted in their criticisms, are more authoritative, and more self–
foocussed (in that they relate comments directly to their expertise and interest). They
express an assuredness about their judgments whereas females tend to be circumspect
and less confident in their evaluations.

While it appears that there are definite gender differences in the way the merit of a
PhD is conveyed, there still appears to be a conservative adherence to the traditional
academic ideals that is conveyed at different levels of vehemence irrespective of the
gender of the examiner. In other words there is still an asymmetrical relationship
between the examiner and the PhD candidate that is consistent with Habermas’
(1972:1974) empiric/analytic way of knowing. These findings reinforce our previous
research and endorse Corson’s (1995) idea that power is an all encompassing
attachment at all levels of education and that the formal processes of education, in
particular assessment, legitimize asymmetry in the educational process.

Our results echoed those of our previous pilot study, in that examiners adhered to
traditional academic standards and in Weberian terms exerted a level of control in
seeing to it that bureaucratic rules are upheld to sustain a level of alleged scientific
legitimacy. It is interesting that though there is no articulated standard, examiners
tend to concentrate on conservative ideals when assessing theses.

References

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