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# Relationships and agency in doctoral and early career academic experience

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Research on doctoral and early career academic experience has emphasised relationships within departmental communities, although a limited number of studies suggests the importance of interactions with a wide range of individuals. In this paper we consider new empirical evidence, and theorise experience in terms of relational agency. We show how *knowing how to know whom* to ask for help can be a significant means for individuals to influence their own experience. Given that doctoral students are in many ways undertaking academic work, and many undertake doctoral study with academic careers in mind, our discussion explores parallels between the doctoral student and early career academic experience, finding strong resonances across the two. We argue that relational agency is indeed important, but that it is often accompanied by *knowing how to know when* the locus of agency resides in oneself.

**Keywords:** agency, relationships, doctoral experience

## Introduction

Research on doctoral experience has emphasised relationships between students, supervisors and departmental communities (e.g. Delamont & Atkinson, 2001; Lovitts & Nelson, 2000). Much of the literature thus focuses on individuals situated in a relatively tight social context although some studies point to the need to conceive the doctoral student as engaging in a broader set of interactions with peers, academics, family and friends (Kapitzke, 1998; Pearson & Brew, 2002; Wright, 2003). In Cullen, Pearson, Saha, and Spear's (1994) research, students presented themselves as being at 'the centre of a constellation of others' (p. 41), assembling resources to meet their needs. Sweitzer's (forthcoming) work stands out among these as one of the few to explicitly address students' relationships and interactions theoretically (using developmental network theory).

This paper explores these issues further, theorising them in terms of *relational agency*. We complement our analysis of doctoral student experience with discussion of evidence relating to the experiences of early career academics. Although doctoral education serves a range of purposes many doctoral students aspire to become academics, and graduate school experience has a significant influence on early career academics' career trajectories and potential for success (Baruch & Hall, 2004; Fairweather, 2002; Solem & Foote, 2006). Several authors have suggested that doctoral experience is not purely a student experience, but also a working one. Hopwood (2008) frames doctoral student experience as academic working experience; Smith Bomotti (1994) argues that doctoral students are not separate from academic working

life, but central to it; and Pearson, Evans, and Macauley (2004) acknowledge the multiple work roles students may undertake and recognise the connections of work, study and learning in doctoral experience.

The conceptual framing of this paper in terms of relational agency serves a heuristic function and contributes to the theoretical understanding of issues reported more widely in the literature which have not been explored in this way previously.

## **Theorising agency**

Recently, several theorists focussing on the experience of the individual academic have written about the role of individual agency in understanding, exploiting and even changing academe. Trowler and Knight (1999) suggest that it is 'important to recognise agency, the ability of people, individual or in groups, to consciously or unconsciously change practices' (pp. 182-183). In this paper we respond to the need to recognise and explore agency and the empirical outcomes from prior research. We explore doctoral, and early career academic, experience from a standpoint that focuses on the individual as agentially engaged in creating and exploiting a wide array of relationships.

To this end, we find the concept of *relational agency* (Edwards & D'Arcy, 2004) particularly helpful as a conceptual tool. Relational agency 'involves a capacity to offer support and to ask for support from others where one's ability to engage with the world is enhanced by doing so alongside others' (Edwards & Mackenzie, 2005 p. 294). Relational agency is not the same as collaboration or teamwork, but 'involves recognising that another person may be a resource and that work needs to be done to elicit, recognise and negotiate the use of that resource' (Edwards, 2005 p. 172). The concept has been expressed as 'knowing how to know whom' to ask for help (Edwards, 2005).

In this paper we explore relational agency in the experiences of doctoral students, consider this in relation to what is known about the experiences of early career academics, and ask what characters and relationships emerge, and what roles do they play? Reframed more theoretically the question reads: How does individual relational agency find expression in and contribute to these experiences?

## **Empirical context**

This paper first presents findings from a UK-based study of doctoral student experiences, and then reflects on this in relation to outcomes of a multi-national study focused on early career academics.

In the former (conducted by Hopwood), 32 doctoral students participated from three research-intensive UK institutions, representing a range of (inter)disciplinary settings (Table 1). The sample incorporates variation in gender (19fm, 12m), age (24-65), nationality (16 UK, 5 EU, 11 other), and progression (from first to fifth year of study). Once a month for at least six months, participants complete a written log comprising questions about what students worked on, what else they did that week, who helped them with their work (prompting students to think broadly about who they engaged with), interactions with their supervisor, difficulties they experienced, and how they were overcome. At the time of writing, 105 logs had been received representing 105 different weeks of doctoral student experience. For the purposes of this paper we focus on data which inform our understanding of relationships, social

interaction and relational agency in the doctoral student experience. Where relevant we also draw on data from interviews conducted with the majority of participants. Table 2 provides further information about the students specifically mentioned later in the paper.

Table 1: Details of sample in UK study

<i>Age*</i>	<i>Count</i>	<i>Disciplinary setting</i>	<i>Count</i>	<i>Disciplinary setting</i>	<i>Count</i>
21-25	7	Anthropology	3	Sociology	1
26-30	15	Environmental studies	2	Social policy / social work	6
31-35	5	Economics	3	Interdisciplinary (education/	2
36-40	1	Education	8	economics)	
41-45	4	Geography	4	Interdisciplinary	1
46-50	0	Management	1	(health/social policy)	
>50	1	Nursing	1		

Table 2: Details of selected participants mentioned in this paper

<i>Alias</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Age*</i>	<i>Discipline</i>	<i>Nationality</i>	<i>Full/Part time</i>	<i>Year of PhD*</i>
Acme	F	29	Environmental studies	USA	Full	2
Atmor	F	32	Interdisciplinary (education/economics)	Greece	Full	5
Lucy	F	25	Economics	UK	Full	3
Poppy	M	43	Education	UK	Full	5

In our discussion we will draw on findings from a second study (conducted by Sutherland). Here, 34 ‘successful’ early career academics at six institutions in Sweden and New Zealand were interviewed about their experiences (within the first five years in an academic position; 22fm, 12m; aged 25-55). Success was defined in various ways, from winning a research or teaching award, to receiving early promotion, or bringing in considerable external research funding. The purpose is not to report the primary outcomes of this second study, but to highlight key themes which resonate with what we have learned about doctoral experience and with the wider literature on early academic careers.

## Findings

The log data immediately show that as a group, our participants accessed help from a wide range of people. These were grouped into clusters (types of people), as shown in Table 3.

Table 3 shows us that the people who help doctoral students are not confined to academic or student roles, nor to higher education institutions. As a group, these doctoral students accessed support not only from their immediate peers but from students across their institutions and from other countries. These findings suggest the need to think beyond local departmental surroundings if one wants to understand the doctoral student experience and the role of interaction and relationships within it. Thinking about relational agency prompts us to consider why doctoral students engage such a wide range of people. We provide one example, discussed in interview, which elucidates how this diversity of interactions may reflect relational agency – students thinking about what help they needed from whom and then getting that help.

Table 3: Illustrating the range of people who doctoral students say help them

<i>Type of person</i>	<i>Sub-groups</i>
Students	In my research group; from my department; from my institution; from other institutions (UK/non-UK); students I teach
Academics	Postdocs or research staff; from my department; from my institution; from other institutions (UK/non-UK)
Other university staff	Administrators, support services, librarians, ICT, pastoral carers
Family or partner	Spouse, children, parents, boy/girlfriend
Other	Conference attendees, industry, policymakers, practitioners, participants or gatekeepers, job interview panels
Supervisor	Single / co-supervisors
Friends	Within/beyond university, geographically close/distant

Lucy had a ‘crap’ day having problems with data that were ‘driving her mad’, and asked a chemist, physicist and computer scientist (all doctoral students) to join her for drinks in the pub. She felt comfortable to ‘have a real moan’ and ‘whinge’ about her work. She also drew on their experiences as students in other disciplines, knowing that they were used to failure, and things not working, believing they could offer the best support and advice. Here Lucy knew whom she needed to interact with – friends who wouldn’t mind her moaning, and peers who knew what it was like to fail and could empathise and advise her.

However, in 23 percent of weeks students said no-one helped them. An important question arises concerning whether the instances of ‘no-one’ reflect a problematic isolation (or lack of relational agency), or a lack of need for help.

Data were analysed on a student-by-student basis in order to explore this variation and provide insight into the relational agency demonstrated by students or the experience of social isolation. For each log, the number of different types of people mentioned by the responding student as helping them in a particular week was noted, and a mean over all the logs provided by that individual calculated. These ranged from 0.3 to 6.0 indicating strong variation in the diversity of sources of help accessed by different students. Different means were evident within the same departmental settings, indicating that interactions are indeed a property of individual agency and not simply a reflection of institutional features. Some students consistently reported engaging several types of people each week (mean of 4.0 or above); others described a very different experience – typically drawing on a much smaller range of people.

We can gain fuller understanding of how these varied experiences might represent varying agency among students by tracking individuals longitudinally. Figure 1 illustrates the number of different types of people that selected individuals said helped them, moving chronologically from the first to the last log received (log numbers do not necessarily represent the same week in time).

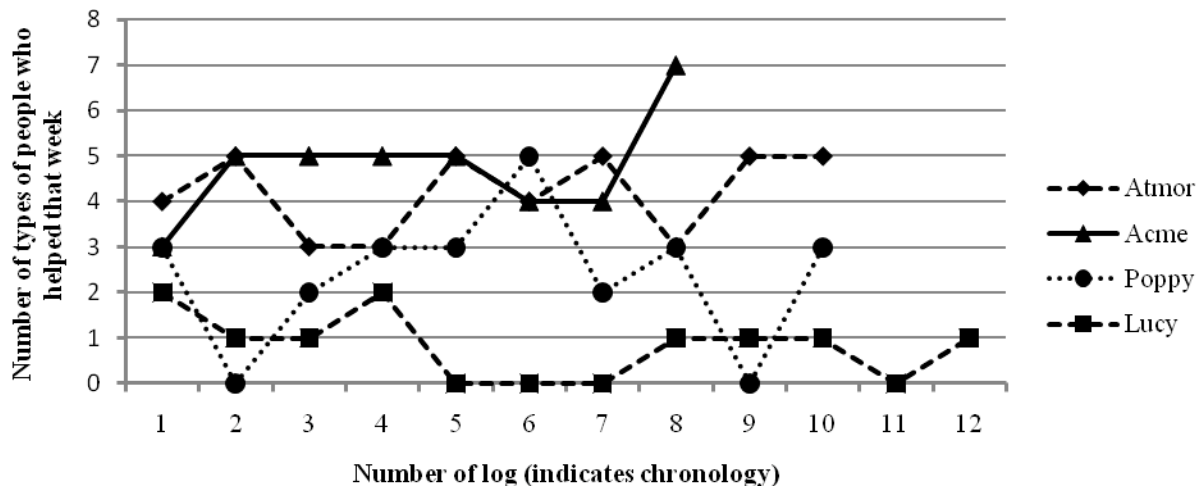


Figure 1: Who helped Atmor, Acme, Lucy and Poppy over time

From Figure 1 we can confirm some of the trends suggested by calculating the mean for each student: there is a persistent difference between students. The lines for Atmor and Acme, although variable, are both consistently higher on the graph than that for Lucy. However, none of the lines is horizontal, indicating that the way particular students engage others in helping them in their doctoral work varies over time. This is particularly apparent in the case of Poppy, who twice reported receiving no help from others, but frequently engaged two or three types of people, rising to five in one week.

While there may indeed be individual differences in the ways students engage and access others in helping them in their doctoral work (varying degrees of relational agency), this does not result in uniform experiences over time. We must call on other data to help us understand the extent to which reports of few people helping over the course of a week reflect unwanted isolation, or the lack of need for help.

In his second and ninth logs, Poppy reported that no-one helped him. In these weeks he felt he made progress and did not want help from his supervisor. Lucy consistently reported being happy with her work and making good progress each week and only reported wanting help from her supervisor on three occasions. This suggests she did not feel the need for wide-ranging interactions to support her work. She drew on help when she felt in need, but this was targeted, as with the evening drinks with friends discussed above. These examples illustrate that relational agency does not imply more is better, but that awareness of one's abilities and needs underlines the capacity to elicit help from other people.

Given how frequently isolation and loneliness are reported in the literature, when students report no-one helping them in a particular week, it is easy to bring to mind a helplessly isolated student. These data do *not* suggest that this does not happen, but they do show that students are by no means always in need of help, and that they often site themselves as the locus of agency in overcoming challenges they face.

Relational agency requires someone to know who might help them and what they might help with. To explore this further we focused on a series of questions relating to interactions with supervisors (reported in 46 percent of weeks), examining what students wanted help with and why they felt their supervisor was the best person to get this help from. Respondents drew on their supervisors for help with: feedback on written work, assistance with bureaucracy and

form filling, future planning, specific technical advice (eg. about statistics), as well as asking their supervisors for help in accessing other people. Students conceived their supervisors as able to offer help of a variety of kinds, but why, in these instances did they ask their supervisors as opposed to other people? Students said they asked their supervisor because of his or her intimate knowledge of their PhD – in some cases remarking that the supervisor is the only person who knows their work so well. Elsewhere students cited their supervisor's expertise (substantive and methodological), while his or her past experience featured as a further reason for seeking supervisory help. Students' relied on their knowledge of their supervisors to judge their ability to provide help with what they needed – displaying key aspects of relational agency. In other cases, students sought their supervisor's help for more functional reasons – because their approval or signing-off was formally required, or because 'it is his/her job'. In a small number of cases students experienced a lack of choice and agency – 'I had no-one else to turn to'.

These data suggest that participating students did not seek help from their supervisors by default. In many of the weeks when they did not seek help from supervisors, students reported receiving support from other people. The decision to ask a supervisor was explicit, and appears to be grounded in understanding of what a supervisor can offer – both in terms of the breadth of kinds of support that might be negotiated, and in terms of what a supervisor offers that other people may not.

Each week students were asked if they experienced a difficulty and what, if anything, they did to overcome it. In 78 percent of logs where difficulties were reported, the difficulty was overcome by the student him- or herself. This clearly demonstrates that we should not automatically interpret no-one or few people helping a student as meaning that students are left alone, struggling.

There remained many instances of difficulties overcome by engaging other people. Supervisors helped most in these instances, followed by other academics, families or partners, and peers and friends. More isolated instances also included seeking help from research participants, gatekeepers, university administration, support services, and healthcare professionals. These data further suggest that when students encounter challenges there is not necessarily a default response to seek help from the supervisor. In many cases knowing how to know whom means knowing that I can at least attempt to deal with this. Relational agency seems to be as much about knowing when one doesn't need help as much as when one does. The range of people that were nominated as helping students overcome difficulties indicates that other people are important, and that students would be well advised to conceive the pool of potential social resources widely – as many in this study appeared to do. Relational agency then rests on understanding who within this broad network, including the self, is best placed to help in a particular circumstance and negotiating that assistance.

### **Discussion: doctoral experience and early career academic experience**

As we argued in the introduction, many have suggested that doctoral experience is an academic working experience as well as a student one. In this discussion we reflect on findings from the doctoral-focused study in light of the second study and what is known from the wider literature about the experiences of early career academics: people in the first five years of employment in academic posts.

Baruch and Hall (2004) cite several studies that ‘associate career success (at least in terms of publications) with the right connection and networks’ (p. 248). They refer particularly to Arthur, Claman and DeFillippi’s (1995) idea of the ‘Intelligent Career... based on three dimensions – knowing why, knowing how and knowing whom’ (cited in Baruch & Hall, 2004 p. 248). Warhurst (2008) agrees that knowing why, how and whom is crucial to the experience of survival and eventual success in academe. Early career academics must balance competing demands from within their department, from students and family, and from disciplinary colleagues within their professional or scientific community/ies. Relational agency, in the sense of knowing which person to call upon or respond to at which point in time and for what purposes, is thus crucial.

Laudel and Glaser (2008) argue that previous research has neglected the centrality of the wider academic community to the success and development of early career academics. Furthermore, Solem and Foote’s (2006) work on early career geography academics has shown that relationships with one’s disciplinary and/or professional associations (often fostered through conferences) have a significant bearing on one’s success as an academic. Encouraging doctoral students to extend their networks beyond their departmental boundaries, as some of the students in the UK study are doing, will help prepare them for the realities of full participation in academic life (if that is what they intend).

This is not a new idea, but it does not seem to have been taken up in the literature on the doctoral experience in ways that have had a bearing on the support, training, mentoring and induction of doctoral students into academic life. In a comprehensive literature review Hitchcock, Bland, Hekelman and Blumenthal (1995) found that:

- Successful academics frequently consult colleagues
- Mentor-protégé relationships influence junior academics
- Professional associations offer the most important and influential networks, and
- Frequency of contact, and number of contacts, are greater for successful academics.

Their convincing conclusion is that:

There is clear and substantial evidence that faculty who communicate more with colleagues produce more and better research... [and] that the faculty member with an able network is also at an advantage so far as teaching is concerned (p. 1112).

The literature thus tells us that identifying, understanding, and exploiting key relationships is crucial to survival and success in academe. We suggest that this knowledge be extended to inform thinking about what doctoral students learn through and how they manage their experiences.

Initial analysis of data from the second (Sutherland’s) study reveals that, like doctoral students, early career academics engage in multiple and varied relationships, both within and beyond the university, to help them to survive and succeed. All of the interviewees mention supportive networks that include, variously, colleagues in and out of the department or university, department chairs and/or mentors, friends, supervisors (current and former), spouse, and family. Common to the majority of interviewees across both countries is an ongoing relationship with at least one collaborator outside their institution – often someone they have met at a professional conference. Another common factor is that where support is not immediately available or offered to them, they proactively seek it themselves, often using

words such as “stubborn” “tenacious” “determined” and “strategic” to describe their pursuit of help, relationships, structures or support: ‘I’m a bit of a believer in going to get the information you need’ and ‘I think I’m probably pretty dogged and resilient’. These characteristics carried them through their doctoral experiences (graduate experiences were often referred to as a “training ground” for their current roles) and have seen them succeed in academe. Our challenge is to identify how to harness the lessons of their success to share with doctoral students who aspire to become academics.

## Conclusions

We framed our analysis and discussion in terms of relational agency. Displaying and realising relational agency requires knowing how to know whom to ask for help, and being able to engage the right people in expending effort that meets one’s needs. Findings from this study suggest that relational agency is a key part of the doctoral student and early career academic experience. Significantly, it appears that both students and early career academics can use relational agency to build and exploit constellations of relationships through social interaction. Furthermore it seems that for doctoral students ‘knowing whom’ often equates to ‘knowing *I* can do it’ (or at least give it a try). Thus we might propose adding an adjunct to the concept of relational agency which centres on *knowing how to know when* (...when to ask for help, when I can do it alone).

Our findings on the doctoral experience expand on the studies (empirically and theoretically) cited in the introduction which pointed to doctoral students at the centre of constellations of others. However, we are aware that the experiences documented in this study do not necessarily reflect the nature of experiences in other disciplines, institutions or countries. Much of the literature on doctoral experience focuses on supervision or the absence of provisions and structures, documenting lonely, fraught experiences. It is not our purpose to diminish the role of the supervisor (the data clearly point to the supervisor as important), nor to efface the hardships experienced by many students. Our argument is that doctoral experience can usefully be viewed from a perspective which explores relational agency (including our newly proposed adjunct). From this starting point one can begin to understand the complexity of doctoral experience – how supervision is one piece of a larger jigsaw, how isolation is not necessarily passively experienced, and how the experience and expression of agency may vary across individuals and over time.

In our discussion we reflected on how much of what was found in the study of doctoral experience is mirrored in findings from research on early career academics. In many ways the ‘student experience’ at the doctoral level does indeed appear to be entwined with the ‘working experience’ of those early in their academic employment. This resonance is notable given that many students envisage or at least consider academic careers. We offer no quick solutions or simplistic implications for policy or practice. However we offer offering the following questions as a final reflection: How might supervisors, programme leaders, and academic developers work to help doctoral students enhance their own experiences by understanding and exercising their own agency? How might the possibilities of relationships and supportive social interactions, within and beyond the students’ departments, be communicated to doctoral students? How can interactions between early career academics and doctoral students (who potentially share much in their experiences) be facilitated?

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