



The PhD program: between conformity and reflexivity

The PhD
program

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper seeks to contribute to a better understanding of the impact on doctoral education attributable to performativity pressures in academia, by exploring the practices associated with the production of academic knowledge within the doctoral process.

Design/methodology/approach – An (auto)ethnographic inquiry was conducted over a period of ten months within the business school of a major Canadian university in order to examine socialisation practices and discourses from a given PhD program. Empirical observations from direct participation, local documents, and two interviews were analysed using a theoretical framework derived from Bourdieu's structural social constructivism and from Foucault's concepts of disciplinary techniques and technologies of the self.

Findings – The study shows how the doctoral program can be likened to a rite of passage, altering and shaping the cognitive structures and interpretive schemes of lay students – their subjective “selves”, their habitus. By means of a set of meticulous discourses and practices, the doctoral program changes novice researchers into disciplined and self-disciplined academic performers, over time, to comply with the performativity rules of academia, while reflexivity can only be achieved through criticism and self-criticism.

Originality/value – This paper focuses upon doctoral training *vis-à-vis* improve(ment) of economic and academic performance in a “knowledge society”. It mobilises and develops the notions of rite of passage, performativity, habitus, disciplinary techniques and technologies of the self to examine the conditions within which doctoral students somatise the ways and customs through their engagement in academia.

Keywords Academia, Rite of passage, Performativity, Habitus, Disciplinary techniques, Technologies of the self, Academic staff, Doctorates, Education

Paper type Research paper

1. Prolegomena

Little research has focused on how universities improve their economic and academic performance. Both are highly intertwined since the subsidisation of universities largely depends on perceived scientific prestige, as per national and international rankings. Primarily based on the quantity of published papers in peer-reviewed journals, including their reputation (as epitomised by the *Financial Times* 45 listing) and impact factor (cf. the journal citation reports or the social sciences citation index), these rankings purport to provide governments and funding agencies a rational tool for calculating and measuring the potential added value to public money they invest in academic research. Under peril of being “abandoned by the flow of capital and doomed to senescence”, universities and researchers have to comply with the economic criterion of performativity – the most efficient input/output ratio – imposed from outside (Lyotard, 1979, p. 47; Parker, 2002; Willmott, 2003; Gendron, 2008).

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While this matter is highly debated in academia, it is not the subject of numerous papers. Admittedly, some researchers object to the logic of productivity, arguing that social science needs to produce, with full autonomy and independence, heuristic knowledge *per se* (science for its own sake), even if it means funding research endeavours at a loss. However, in recent decades, it has been increasingly more difficult to express the social legitimization of science in such a way (Lyotard, 1979; Willmott, 2003; Taylor, 2007). Universities, academia, are accountable toward their financiers (“shareholders”, “sponsors”, donors) and their stakeholders (policy makers, taxpayers, businesses, practitioners) and society as a whole. Academic organisations, in general, and research endeavours, in particular, tend to bear more and more of a resemblance to trade and economic organisations, with cost reduction, revenue generation, return on investment and profitability imperatives (Turk, 2000; Parker, 2002; Willmott, 2003).

As the academic system does not exist in isolation, it is not indifferent to the performativity pressures of the market economy and its rule of wealth accumulation. Knowledge is exploited, it “ceases to be an end in itself” (Lyotard, 1979, p. 5). Instead, it becomes a commodity, “a force of production (source of profitability), in other words, a moment in the circulation of capital” (Lyotard, 1979, p. 74). Whether researchers are working for a research and development department within a firm (economic field), or for a laboratory within a university (academic subfield), they face quite similar issues. Indeed, in both cases, innovation and knowledge creation are subject to organisational and administrative rules, standards and norms, based on financial control, economic and strategic rivalry, productivity and efficiency, management by objective, time and budget constraints, hierarchical supervision, periodic evaluation and so forth. Although there is some resistance within academia, demands and claims for financial viability of research endeavours are commonly accepted and socially legitimised.

The purpose of this paper is not to criticise an academic system certainly losing autonomy and tending to conform to societal and economic expectations to justify its existence and ensure its sustainability over time. Rather, the intent of these observations is to provide an analysis of some of its practices. For there is little literature in administrative science focusing on the conditions under which these economic resources (i.e. academic knowledge) are produced, which is a surprising finding since the matter is precisely one of the main subjects of organisation studies. This is all the more so in a “knowledge society” where the economy is based on knowledge and cognitive capitalism (Drucker, 1968; Fiol and Lyles, 1985; Nonaka, 1994; Scharmer, 2001; Thomas *et al.*, 2001; Usher, 2002; Akgün *et al.*, 2003). Furthermore, academic knowledge exceeds the strict bounds of academia. Depending on their scientific and/or social contribution, it serves businesses and practitioners, and/or governments and policy makers (Silverman, 2010). Thus, we must not forget that knowledge creation not only brings credit (and credits) to universities, but is also likely to give companies and countries significant strategic and competitive advantages in a global market economy.

It therefore seems to be equally as valid and justified to consider how universities create heuristic knowledge as to understand the conditions under which firms generate innovations – the domain of so-called cognitive and socio-cognitive organisation studies (Morgan, 1997; Rouleau, 2007). However, when it comes to specific aspects of the knowledge creation process, that is, when it comes to epistemology, such inquiries are generally considered less legitimate or appropriate in administrative science. The matter is rather left to philosophers, science historians and sociologists, or specialists in education sciences.

It is undoubtedly difficult to write and publish research focusing on one's own milieu. Indeed, one cannot exclude a backlash from his/her own scientific community (Bourdieu, 1984), especially when the people being studied, ones peers, have a similar access to the public arena, that is, a right of reply. Such a study might also awaken or exacerbate more or less latent and anchored forms of "inter-paradigmatic tribalism" (Gulati, 2007). Nonetheless, failing to critically analyse the "objective" conditions within which academic knowledge creation takes place is risking a failure to understand the heart of research endeavours. More importantly, it equates to staying blind to the production process of one of the most essential resources not only for universities and research (knowledge creation legitimates the financial and intellectual survival of universities and research units in the long term), but for society as a whole.

Accordingly, the purpose of this (auto)ethnographic study resides in apprehending how administrative and management practices in place in academia influence the type of knowledge being created and disseminated. Since there is no creation without a creator and since it seemed more relevant to focus on the liminal processes by which the "academic individual" is (re)produced, the research efforts were directed toward the PhD (philosophiæ doctor) programme being offered by the business school of a major University (located in Canada). It will also examine the conditions within which doctoral students are learning the academic ways and customs. Through the consideration of all the methods structuring the emergence and the development of future knowledge – teaching, supervising and management techniques – this paper hopes to make bridges between the literature in higher education and organisation studies, while contributing to the sociology of professions and epistemology.

Building on a "foucauld-bourdiesian" approach, the ethnographic inquiry carried out over a period of ten months shows how the doctoral programme can be likened to a rite of passage (Frow, 1988; Deegan and Hill, 1991; Panozzo, 1997), altering the cognitive structures and interpretive schemes of lay students, their subjective "selves", their habitus. By means of a set of meticulous discourses and practices, micro-mechanisms of government of self and other, the doctoral programme changes novice researchers into capable professionals, disciplined and self-disciplined, over time, to accept the rules of the academic and economic game with some conformity, but not without any reflexivity.

The rest of the paper is organised as follows. In the next section, I present the theoretical framework, derived both from Bourdieu's (structural) social constructivist theory (Bourdieu, 1980, 1987) and Foucault's concepts of disciplinary techniques and technologies of the self (Foucault, 1975, 1988). Then, both methods and data analysis are explained in a comprehensive manner in order to make clear the circumstances in which the empirical inquiry was performed. Next, I present the findings based on the examination of multiple sources of information (observations, documents, interviews) before concluding with a short discussion.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1 Structural social constructivism

The Latin word *ritus* means [...] mere social habits, ways and customs (*ritus moresque*), that is, ways of acting reproducing with some constancy. [...] The human condition is at stake [...] By 'human condition', we mean here all of the determinations constraining the individual, that is, the general conditioning or the total of conditions his/her actions are subjected to, limiting the scope of his/her free will or his/her indeterminacy (Cazeneuve, 1971, p. 26 – author's translation).

At first, discussing the notion of a rite of passage (or initiation/learning ritual) corresponds to taking note of the “objective” conditions of existence, subjectively constituted, in which people are immersed. That is, customs and social habits are socially constructed and historically situated. The rite refers to a set of rules, laws and beliefs a community (both in primitive societies and in so-called civilised and complex societies) uses to communicate and signify to the individual, and his/her community, what they are and what they should be (Bourdieu, 1982; Panozzo, 1997). It is based on the acceptance of common and shared values, prescriptions, cultural and arbitrary conventions that have been naturalised and normalised by a given group over a long period. That is, they were made “natural” and “normal”, producing norms and standards so that, over time, people almost make no attempt to question them: they become taken for granted, self-evident.

In other words, as with any phenomenon of social construction (cf. Berger and Luckman, 1966; Bourdieu, 1980; Giddens, 1984), the rite is initially the product of a process of “objectification” and institutionalization of people’s beliefs and practices. Symbols, customs and recurring habits come to act on reality by acting on the representation of reality (Bourdieu, 1982). Ultimately, the community using the rite agrees to realise (literally make real), legitimate (legally establish) and consecrate (make sacred) arbitrary ways and customs. Once collective discourses and practices are harmonised (made uniform) and organised (made functional), they generally tend to structure individual interactions. Thereby, social habits impose themselves on members of the community who originally produced them, and agree to reproduce via their daily actions.

Indeed, depending on their particular (and historical) conditions of existence, individuals from the same social group are subjected to fairly homogeneous characteristics and inherent structural regularities – possibilities and impossibilities, freedoms and prohibitions. It shapes, in quite a similar and identical manner, people’s perception and action schemes, their habitus, defined as a structured cognitive structure as well as structuring cognitive structure (Bourdieu, 1980). In short, social agents incorporate their sensory experiences of the social world, in the form of mental dispositions (history and culture made “nature”), and (re)produce in return, almost unconsciously, consistent and regulated practices adjusted to their (institutional) environment. However, as was recognised by Bourdieu himself at the end of his career, people are more than just mere institutional agents unable to develop personal strategies (Bourdieu, 1982, 1984). Therefore, instead of reducing the indeterminacy of human activity to its most congruent portion, it seems more adequate to underline the reflexive aspect of individuals. They are competent social actors too, possessing tacit knowledge and capable of reflecting upon their own actions (Giddens, 1984), if not in real time, at least retrospectively (Weick, 1995).

In summary, the ritual is a spatiotemporal condensate of social construction applied to a given community or a particular microcosm. Ways and customs (*ritus moresque*) are formed and transmitted through three historical dialectical moments: “Society is a human product. Society is an objective reality. Man is a social product” (Berger and Luckman (1966, p. 61 – emphasis in original). For practical purposes and subsequent analysis, we will further focus on the third dialectical moment, that is, the actual process of transformation of the self.

2.2 The alteration of the self

Rites accompany the admission of individuals from one group to another. [...] They are to destroy an old self, [...] to access a new and superior responsibility, based on work, seriousness, wisdom (Cazeneuve, 1971, p. 28 – author’s translation).

When people compare doctoral education with a preliminary, that is, essential to move from one state to another, from that of lay student to fully qualified researcher (Hodge, 1995; Taylor, 2007; Silverman, 2010), a *sine qua non* in order to be admitted to the academic community, they do refer to a rite (even though the term is not systematically mentioned). As a liminal journey of initiation, the rite of passage/learning (Frow, 1988; Deegan and Hill, 1991) possesses two main functions. First, it institutes a boundary, a line (Bourdieu, 1982), between the academic field of knowledge creation and the common run of people. That border is of fundamental importance, since the independence and autonomy of academia tend to diminish. Indeed, universities and research are constantly looking for funds, which, by definition, are not free. This is why the rite is also a socialising test: it establishes the occasions for sharing its diligently preserved “secrecy”, that is, the hereditary social patrimony the designated heir must have inherited. The PhD, the academic degree sacred title of nobility, crowns excellence, the best (from the Greek *aristos*), and so enables the forming, in the true sense of the term, of an aristocratic community. It is now easier to understand the role the doctoral programme grants to ascetic – time and energy consuming – practices, such as lengthy intellectual efforts and periods of extended confinement. Getting raised to noble rank is not a sinecure. One must first comply with and be disciplined:

The more or less painful inculcation of lasting dispositions is an essential component (of the rite), [...] an inaugural act of constitution, foundation, even of invention, leading through education to lasting dispositions, habits, usages. [...] All groups assign to the body, treated as a memory, their most valuable deposits, and the use that initiation rites make, in every society, of the suffering inflicted on the body makes sense if we know that, like many psychological experiments show, people adhere more strongly to an institution when initiation rites that were imposed upon them were more severe and more painful (Bourdieu, 1982, p. 61 – author’s translation).

The usefulness and effectiveness of doctoral education precisely lie in the monopolist exercise of some legitimate psychosomatic and symbolic “violence” (that can result in students’ stress, anxiety, fatigue, etc.). A set of control techniques imposes on PhD students the need to excel through knowledge and *savoir-être*, to form one body with the social microcosm in which they operate. The academic habitus must be embodied/ incorporated (literally enter the body), and naturalised to become a second nature, a second culture, specifically to divert from the temptation and reduce the propensity of counter-culture. Indeed, human beings through their flesh impregnate the world and mellow their character. The violence people are subjected to, as euphemised as it may be, softens their mores (Elias, 1973; Elias and Dunning, 1994), alters their subjective selves and their interpretive schemes (cf. Foucault’s and Bourdieu’s writings). Far from being superficial, these transformations, at least adjustments, are simply vital. All the more so as the doctoral programme establishes rather fatal practices: either you survive, or you just disappear.

Furthermore, doctoral education is only the first rite of passage. Obtaining tenure (assistant professors are in “tenure-track” for about five years while they need to fulfil the given university’s standards, in terms of publication quantity and quality, to become associate professor and maintain their membership within academia) is a second rite of passage just as implacable (publish or perish) and just as effective in significantly influencing the habits of any individual. In total, the socialisation process takes about a decade. However, this means that candidates (and doctors) comply with the rules of the academic field in more than just a passive and unconscious way. To some extent, the individual and active learning provided within the doctoral programme can

also serve as empowerment. It can habilitate PhD students to develop reflexive and personal skills that go beyond the automatic and systematic inculcation of social dispositions and help them to negotiate the structural constraints as best as possible. In (Foucault's (1975, 1988) words, they are at the centre of two complementary processes: disciplinary techniques and technologies of the self.

Disciplinary techniques refer to all the micro-mechanisms of control, such as hierarchical observation, normalising judgement and evaluation/examination, which dissect behaviours and performances of different groups and specific individuals in order to make them calculable and predictable, and ultimately manageable and transformable (Foucault, 1975; Covaleski *et al.*, 1998). The purpose is to render people visible so that they feel constantly observed, judged and examined, not least by their hierarchy and their peers. In other words, disciplinary techniques create a sense of invisible omniscience, the social metaphor of the Panopticon (prison architecture that allows the surveillance of all prisoners at all times without the prisoners being able to assess whether or not they are observed). From this viewpoint, the disciplinary power is therefore conceived of as a set of practices and discourses contributing to homogenise people's actions, ways and outcomes, while measuring and comparing their personal differences against averages and standards from which they will be gauged, confronted and distributed (Foucault, 1975).

As for the technologies of the self, they refer to self-disciplinary methods that individuals can use to act upon and to govern themselves. They are self-produced practices and discourses inducing individuals, through self-examination, not only to get to know or to (re)discover themselves, but also to become part, capture and take possession of their individual environment (Foucault, 1988; Covaleski *et al.*, 1998). For example, technologies of the self-habilitate students and researchers to develop a critical gaze upon them and to take a reflexive distance about their objective conditions of existence. Ultimately, they facilitate the personal appropriation of norms, while jointly generating the conditions of possibility for micro-resistance, at least micro-emancipation, that is, some leeway, some capacity for actions and some empowerment against the structural constraints. Indeed, conformity and resistance are not diametrically opposed but rather dialectically intertwined (Bourdieu, 1982, 1984; Giddens, 1984; Foucault, 1988; Alvesson and Willmott, 1996; Burkitt, 2002). In brief, disciplinary and self-disciplinary processes allow people to shift between their role of institutional agents and/or rational actors depending on the relative degree of resistance and reflexivity they are willing to act upon their environment.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research context

The (auto)ethnographic inquiry took place within the business school of one of the largest and major historical universities in Canada (part of the "top ten"). At the time of the study, the business school hosted about 80 PhD students. It demonstrated a special focus on research endeavours and academic education, competing for worldwide recognition through international rankings, such as the Academic Ranking of World Universities (the so-called Shanghai ranking), and established accreditations, such as the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business and European Quality Improvement System from the European Foundation for Management Development.

Composed of six departments (accounting; finance, insurance and real estate; management; marketing; decisions and operating system; organisational information systems), the school was linked to nine research chairs, two interuniversity and three

interdisciplinary centres, three research groups and one laboratory. In other words, it is not atypical of other North American academic institutions, especially since international competition forces some institutionalisation mechanisms, that is, common and shared understandings, norms and practices. Such mimetic pressures promote successful academic management models, at least perceived to be rational, effective and efficient (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; Adler and Harzing, 2009).

3.2 Approach

In order to examine how a given doctoral programme may shape and alter the cognitive and interpretive schemes of PhD students, their habitus, an ethnographic inquiry was conducted. I studied naturally occurring events through overt participant observation, analysis of local documents and two interviews (Yin, 1989; Stake, 1995; Brewer, 2000). The focus was directed toward capturing the social meaning(s) of early socialisation practices and discourses faced by the students through ordinary activities (Maxwell, 2005; Silverman, 2010), as they referred to (research) “performativity”, that is, “the principle of optimal performance (the best possible input/output equation) [...] a game pertaining not to the true, the just, or the beautiful, etc., but to efficiency” (Lyotard, 1979, pp. 72-73). The intensification of performance measurement in academia is strongly structuring the representation of what it means to be(come) an academic. Disciplinary mechanisms centred on targets of performance are used to translate individuals’ behaviours and research endeavours into detailed and calculable performance measures (Willmott, 2003; Adler and Harzing, 2009). In return, it pressures people to adjust and adapt their actions and results in ways that are consistent with a given representation of the “academic performer” (Gendron, 2008).

Supportive (auto)ethnographic data came from both self-observational – “data of what is happening at the time of research” – and self-reflective data – “introspective data representing [the researcher] present perspective” (Chang, 2008, pp. 89-90). One may then ask how to make a distinction between experience – lived “reality” – and thought – (re)constructed “reality”? However, as an actor in the field, I was enabled to direct my reflexive gaze on my own experience and to theorise about the logic of the social system I was a part of (Becker and Geer, 1957; Ahrens and Chapman, 2006; Gendron, 2008). Furthermore, a predefined theoretical research strategy for analysing observed data (i.e. “What dominant message was conveyed by doctoral education about research endeavours as it pertains to performativity?”; “Was the observed phenomenon involving disciplinary techniques or technologies of the self?”; “Through which processes were PhD students gradually turned into academic performers?”) guided the interpretation of findings (Thomas *et al.*, 2001; Silverman, 2010).

With a privileged access to the field, I directly observed faculty – PhD students, professors and administrators – in a variety of settings within academia (classroom, supervisor-student working relationship, doctoral programme board meeting, students association, public thesis defense presentation, academic award ceremony and corridor discussions) over a period of ten months (from September 2010 to June 2011). Rich descriptive notes bringing out the details of the empirical site were not taken. However, data on socialisation practices and related contexts as they referred to performativity were collected in a systematic manner (Brewer, 2000), including dominant discourses from actors with hierarchical and/or social influence over PhD students: thesis supervisors, full professors teaching mandatory classes, head of the doctoral programme, heads of departments, deans and students representatives. In addition, local documents intended for faculty – administrative policies and guidelines, class

syllabuses, policy/structural changes in progress, public academic speeches, etc. – were analysed, focusing on both normative (and justification/legitimation) “mechanisms” fostering research performativity and possible resistance phenomenon.

3.3 Interviews

In addition to direct participation and analysis of documentation, two semi-structured interviews, lasting about an hour each, were conducted using 25 open-ended questions. Both interviews (recorded and fully transcribed) happened at the end of the ethnographic ten-month period. It was conducted in this way not only to refine the focus of the questions, but especially to minimise researcher-provoked way of gathering data (Hamel *et al.*, 1993). Since the interviewer and the interview situation influence the respondents (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995), it was decided to select no more than two participants (two PhD students) acquainted with the researcher, as a way to mitigate “suspicion” reactivity (Skeggs, 1994). Because both respondents knew the scope of the research but not the research question, social desirability bias was also minimised (Maxwell, 2005; Silverman, 2010). Although the number of participants is undoubtedly low, it was thought, along with autoethnography, participant observation and local documents, to allow sufficient (complementary and supplementary) data to be collected.

The selected respondents (two male PhD students between 25 and 35 years old) were at the end of their preparatory coursework. During this structured and structuring period, both individuals’ behaviours and results are controlled (as opposed to the thesis period, where results only are tracked), through constant monitoring – observation, judgement and examination. It triggers the socialisation processes through which students are gradually immersed within academia and invited, sooner or later, to conform or leave (the attrition rate of PhD students in North America is as high as 50 per cent: Council of Graduate Schools, 2004; Bair and Haworth, 2005; Nettles and Millett, 2006).

The semi-structured interviews allowed both respondents to be asked the same questions within a flexible framework. Semi-structured interviews are regulated as to their question guidelines but not as to the sequencing of questions, which is determined by the participant’s responses (Silverman, 2010). However, compared to unstructured interviews, they are more subjected to researcher bias (i.e. the researcher’s existing theory or preconceptions). Although there was the underlying thread of performativity throughout the interview, broad and open questions aimed to limit the imposition of my own categories on respondents, not least by encouraging depth and by leaving the possibility of unforeseen concepts emerging (Maxwell, 2005). Examples of the questions asked are: “what do you think about the PhD course offerings?; what do you think about the content of the learning?; why?”; “according to you, what set of values is conveyed in academia?; what do you think of these values?”; “according to you, what skills does it take to be a researcher?”; “in what sense is the doctoral education successful in developing such skills?”; etc.

4. Analysis

The data were subjected to a template analysis (King, 2004) which involved the extraction of categories that accurately summarise the data. According to King (2004, p. 257), “template analysis may also be preferred by those who are not inimical to the assumptions of grounded theory, but find it too prescriptive in that it specifies procedures for data gathering and analysis that must be followed (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). In contrast, template analysis is, on the whole, a more flexible technique with fewer specified procedures, permitting researchers to tailor it to match their own requirements”. In other

words, it is not restricted to an inductive process of categorising and analysing qualitative data from the field to infer concepts, theories and conclusions. On the contrary, it allows the use of existing theory as an organising lens to develop categories. Although considered less rigorous and transparent than grounded theory, it is as legitimate and as valuable in qualitative research (King, 2004; Maxwell, 2005).

Only one coder worked on the categorisation process. To overcome the absence of inter-coder reliability (i.e. double categorisation process), which is increasingly used in qualitative studies, both interviewees were asked to provide feedback to confirm the present findings (Maxwell, 2005; Silverman, 2010). Using “member checks” ruled out the possibility of any misinterpretation, reduced researcher bias and increased the reliability of the conclusions reached (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Bryman, 1988). In addition, long-term theory-driven participant observation enhanced the credibility of accounts: as a reflexive actor in the field, I was enabled to gain a deep understanding of the processes of the social system under study (Becker and Geer, 1957; Ahrens and Chapman, 2006; Chang, 2008). Fourteen preliminary categories were developed, representing aspects of the rite of passage and processes through which PhD students are socialised into academia as “performers” (Gendron, 2008). Eight final categories were retained for the present study. They were then classified into two higher theoretical categories, that is, disciplinary techniques (Foucault, 1975) and technologies of the self (Foucault, 1988). The summary of results is presented in the conclusion section (cf. Figure 1).

Although the findings derived from the phenomenological observation of a given spatiotemporal microcosm (which implies some inherent degree of idiosyncrasy), the context is not to be considered atypical of other North American (business) research institutions. I argue that the results answer analytical/structural generalisability because the theory used for empirical examination can be extended, albeit with care, to other similar and comparable cases (Ragin, 1987; Yin, 1989; Becker, 1991; Latour, 1999). Moreover, the doctoral programme is a subfield of the academic field – the former

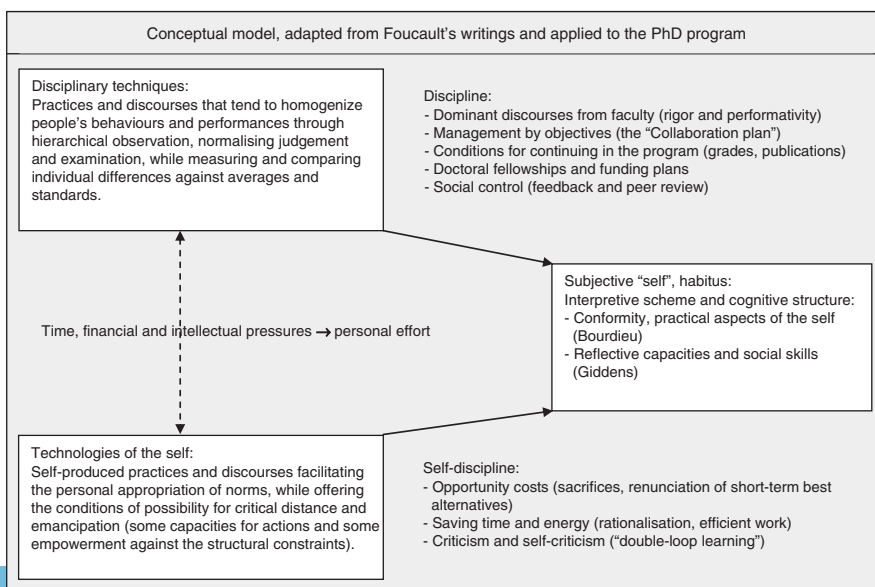


Figure 1.
Summary of results

absorbs the substance of the latter. Dominant practices and discourses come to purposefully circulate, and not wander, in the right places. In some ways, PhD students are subjected (literally become subjects) to the same disciplinary techniques and technologies of the self that their elders have to deal with. Whether one is a student or a fully qualified researcher, that is, whether one aspires to become a member, or strives to maintain membership within academia, he/she faces a whole edifice of quite homogeneous and similar rules, standards and norms. Therefore, the findings should imply some learning beyond the restricted universe of the given doctoral programme.

5. Findings

Education possesses a dual purpose, that is, the joint acquisition of knowledge/know-how, and life-skills (*savoir-être*). This applied to the studied doctoral education. It shaped and sanctioned, for students, not only a methodological and intellectual level, but also a social ethos – an academic habitus consistent with ways and customs (Panozzo, 1997). Hence, the role of the structured and structuring preliminary coursework period, during which students' progress were highly monitored, controlled and supervised. It initiated the academic rite of passage and immediately prepared the lay students for their personal and spiritual journey. The doctoral programme used a variety of disciplinary methods and processes, some more purposefully than others, in order to put students under time, financial and intellectual pressures. Whether driven by professional, educational, budgetary and/or reputation and prestige needs, this whole set of articulated control techniques ultimately transformed PhD students into objects, through standardisation of actions over time. However, normalisation and rationalisation of behaviours was not a mere passive and constrained phenomenon. It also proceeded from a "subjectification of the object" (Foucault, 1983), that is, self-formation processes in which students aimed to govern their own thoughts and conduct. They equipped themselves with attitudes adjusted to the context while playing the game. In other words, they conformed to doctoral education demands, although it required some painstaking efforts and passion (what both interviewees, respectively, referred to as "the stations of the cross" or "sacrifices"). Auto-regulation, albeit active, operates equally on the body: it is a guarantee of the effective somatisation of ways and customs.

In order to access the academic world, prospective entrants had to walk a liminal path full of obstacles and challenges costing time and energy, such as lengthy intellectual efforts, periods of extended confinement, comprehensive exams, endless (esoteric) readings and writings (papers and thesis), restrictive *viva voce*, and so on (this list is not exhaustive). It was usually accompanied by sleep deprivation, fatigue, stress, anxiety and the set of attitudes that may be associated with them, such as fear of failure, isolation and/or marginality (Frow, 1988). Furthermore, it generated opportunity costs, that is, financial and social losses, because of the short-term renunciation of some material and relational comforts. Those "restrictions" were skilfully managed and institutionalised within the given doctoral programme. They resulted from disciplinary and self-disciplinary technologies, which exerted symbolic and psychosomatic "violence" on the body and, through the latter, the mind and the character – a *sine qua non* for the inculcation of the socially recognised and shared academic habitus. While extrinsically vs intrinsically driven normalisation mechanisms can be distinguished at the analytical level, in actual practice their influence in objectifying people and in forging subjectivities is intertwined. In short, power is diffused and "capillary" (Foucault, 1975, 1983, 1988).

5.1 Disciplinary techniques

The disciplinary power conveyed via dominant discourses in their surrounding environment has been proven to act upon individual selves (Foucault, 1975). The more prevailing, homogeneous and repeated the discourses, the more they “imprison” the listeners in their specific logic. Rhetoric acts as a form of bureaucratic control; it constitutes in some way an inherent structural regularity imposing its underlying rationale on people’s perception and action schemes (i.e. their habitus). Certainly, dominant discourses are not that consistent and unquestioned, not least in the field of business research. They are the stake of legitimation struggle (Bourdieu, 1984, 2000; Latour, 1987; Gulati, 2007). However, for the last decades, the legitimacy criterion increasingly relies upon performativity within academia (Lyotard, 1979, Willmott, 2003; Gendron, 2008; Adler and Harzing, 2009), including doctoral education.

The study of the given PhD programme showed that the fabric of the social/business researcher appeared to be less oriented toward substance and relevance (quality) than rigor and superficiality (quantity). Discourses conveyed by faculty consisted of a dispersed network of disincentives to innovate and conduct research which strays from mainstreams. Quantitative methods were generally promoted to students at the expense of qualitative studies. The epistemology course had been downgraded from mandatory to optional ten years ago (in 2002). Nowadays, within the methodology classroom, you could hear career advice full of wisdom such as: “If you want to publish in top journals – A*, A – that’s what you must do (i.e. quantitative research, the only legitimate science)”. Even one so-called qualitative researcher let out, albeit with regrets, that “some methods of investigation, such as participant observation or ethnography, go against the logic of the doctorate: it’s time and money consuming”. The rationale of the field was mainly about obtaining the best possible input/output equation (what Lyotard defined as “performativity”), that is, to say, producing prolific publishers as fast as possible (usually within a three- to four-year period). Long-term qualitative research, if not officially discouraged *per se*, were singled out as less rigorous, and less relevant for business practitioners. Also, there was almost no room for idealist and humanist discourses of legitimation in order to justify research. Critical accounts and interpretive understanding (*verstehen*) of social and organisational processes were generally deemed irrelevant. Even professors with backgrounds (PhDs) in sociology and anthropology, disciplines that are more often than not interested in capturing the meanings and processes of a given social context, were relaying legitimation discourses based upon the explanatory and predictive power of quantitative methods. Allegedly, they were to provide results of higher relevance for the people of interest, that is, the monopolistic figure of the business practitioner!

Now, let’s say you refrained from engaging in active resistance for survival purposes in the field, it did not necessarily mean that you could not play both legitimation and performativity games using qualitative methods. The sophistication of rhetoric and research design, along with the leverage of public subsidies (research chairs), allowed qualitative researchers (students and professors) to compete with their counterparts. However, it was not so much a matter of rivalry between two paradigmatic “tribes” (cf. Gulati, 2007), but rather a tendency to reward conformity and, ultimately (despite legitimation narratives based on substance), publication quantity over quality. From the student standpoint, the main question was a quantitative and temporal one, not a substantive one: was he/she able to meet the doctoral programme criteria, in terms of deadlines and productive work (i.e. good grades, fast and numerous publications)?

In that context, the studied programme institutionalised a normative way of organising doctoral education (officially formalised within the so-called “Collaboration Plan”) which was quite close, if not identical, to the management by objectives used in private firms (cf. Covaleski *et al.*, 1998). As such, studying part-time (as opposed to full-time) was strongly discouraged, as it was considered counterproductive. It could explain, to some extent, why the first respondent (Participant No. 1) seemed to compare the PhD programme with a simple job: “It’s like any other job. I just take it [the PhD program] as a job that I’m doing”. The statement helps apprehending the main spirit of the “Collaboration Plan” which set the milestones for the students:

The Collaboration Plan provides a map for organizing the *productive work* in order to help students achieve the *objectives of the program* and take maximum advantage of available *financial resources*. [...] It includes a detailed description of activities to achieve. It is much more than a valuable source of information; it lists all the items that must continually be assessed. [...] The student must prepare a curriculum that contains a list of all educational activities as well as a schedule to be submitted for approval to the Doctoral program board (Collaboration Plan – my emphasis).

In other words, the Collaboration Plan aimed to discipline students not only by making their behaviour and performance visible and therefore analysable, but also quite pre-visible, homogenous and calculable. Through hierarchical observation, normalising judgements and examinations, the professors, the thesis supervisor and the doctoral programme board accumulated the necessary information to compare and rank PhD students based on their performance – grades and publications (if any) – and make a distinction between those who met the objectives and those who did not. The disciplinary power of normalisation targeted the students and specified how to perform and behave so that they could live up to the required standards (cf. Foucault, 1975).

Furthermore, the Collaboration Plan was “working together with” the business school “study rules” and “Funding Plan” to monitor, manage and take control of the smallest and slightest parcels of life of doctoral students. The conditions for continuing on the programme and for being eligible for the Funding Plan and other doctoral fellowships subjected them to fairly homogeneous and normative social characteristics. Known by all students, Article 299 of the study rules stated that “with regards to the doctoral programme in business administration, the doctoral programme board may exclude any student whose cumulative grade point average (GPA) is less than 3.50 out of 4.33”. Grades were acknowledged as being part of the rite of passage by playing a double role: on the one hand, they gave official recognition to the students and sanctioned the move to the next stage; on the other hand, they “punished” (from an academic standpoint) those not possessing the calibre. Such an illustration could also be found in the remarks of one Full professor from the business school about his own rating system: “A + : I feel we are lucky to have this student within the PhD program; A: The student is with no doubt an asset; A- : Maybe he is; B + : Maybe not; and B: Probably not”. In short, scores were both “vital” and “lethal”, for it is the academic survival of the students which is at stake. Hence the relatively high normalising power of grades:

I tend to follow the professor’s ideas. I see what he likes, what he dislikes, and I’m mindful about it, even if it doesn’t represent my values, or my own beliefs. I somewhat do consider such things in order to meet the criteria, because at the end of the day, he’s the one evaluating and making a judgment on me. So, I direct my ideas towards what he likes; I don’t give voice to some of my own convictions. But, it doesn’t mean I’m completely giving up; I just make temporary compromises here and there (Participant No. 2).

Although the student seemed to have some reflexive distance about his capacity to conform in appearance, he could not ignore the normative pressures coming from the conditions for continuing in the programme if he also wanted to financially survive. It provided a standard against which students were measured, compared, gauged, confronted and distributed. It was not only meant to be effective, but efficient by imposing normalisation through subjectification, that is, self-regulation. The Funding Plan specified that “the student shall: [...] maintain a cumulative GPA of 3.50 out of 4.33 throughout and until completion of his/her PhD, [and] meet the criteria and requirements of each step of the program” for eligibility. That is, to say, PhD students were clearly under time, financial and intellectual pressures driven by performativity. It was a virtuous, or a vicious circle. Financial help was only provided to those mastering their preliminary coursework within a year, and graduating within three or four years. Doctoral fellowships and other additional monetary incentives were mainly rewarding publications within listed academic journals. On the one hand, students were identified and valued as productive workers; on the other hand, they were targeted and pressured to share a common representation of the successful hard-working academic performer (Gendron, 2008), and to behave like one:

The Funding Plan is there to help students, but it's surrounded by so many conditions that there is no guarantee of actually receiving any money at the end of the day. It's kind of a dilemma, and PhD students are kind of stuck. It pressures you, there is a Funding Plan for sure, but it's all about your grades. [...] It's the first and most important source of money we count on to survive, so you better be successful, you better meet the requirement, you better fulfil them. As a result, it pushes you to do more to succeed and meet the threshold (Participant No. 2).

It [the Funding Plan] requires you to meet deadlines, and that's great in my opinion, because at least it pushes you, it's a facilitating factor helping in the self-discipline. You know you do have to meet such criteria if you want the money, therefore you work a little harder (Participant No. 1).

Furthermore, feedback and peer review institutionalised a form of social control through constant criticism – observation, judgement and examination – from others (thesis supervisor, members of the doctoral programme board and thesis committee, anonymous reviewers, etc.). It imposed upon students (and professors) norms and canons from which they were not advised to depart. Therefore, in order to be seen as successful, doctoral students preferably had to self-regulate their thoughts and conduct to comply with academic standards, that is, to alter/normalise their behaviour so as to produce performances that satisfied the requirements, the ways and customs. As their peers and elders did before them, students had to form one body with their microcosm, to reflect and carry the given social heritage by enacting the do's and don'ts, and by distinguishing the right from the wrong, the licit from the illicit and the legitimate from the illegitimate. In other words, they had to accept the system of rules which was persistently staring at them, assessing and measuring, judging and misjudging, encoding and decoding, appreciating and depreciating, classifying and categorising, supervising, ordering and restricting, in one word, disciplining (and punishing):

As a PhD student, I take the academic world into consideration when I talk: ‘what's going to be the academic world reaction to what I say?’ This world is ultimately shaping my thoughts, my actions. Because I know now that people assess each other, and people can attack you based on your words; you better think first before you say something. It wasn't the case before; I was giving my opinion without having all the stress (Participant No. 2).

However, the observed PhD students did not necessarily incorporate the norms and standards of the academic field in a passive and unreflective way. Although they were

strongly encouraged to comply with and accept the performativity game, the active learning of ways and customs through intellectual efforts, constructive criticisms, methodological rigor, onto-epistemological and paradigmatic positioning, immersion in a research community (within a project, a group, a centre, a network, a laboratory), appeared to provide students with the conditions of possibility for micro-emancipation and resistance (cf. Foucault, 1988; Alvesson and Willmott, 1996; Burkitt, 2002). In brief, they were also able to develop reflexive and social skills, through technologies of the self that went beyond the mere unconscious and automatic somatisation of social dispositions.

5.2 Technologies of the self

The consequences of performativity were also reflected within the arbitration people willingly made to pursue goals they reflexively and gradually learned to adhere to, except that the disciplinary power was not directly (albeit indirectly) coming from outside oneself. The doctoral survivors (half did not go through the first year) did not want to lose their future option. This entailed a “particular mobilisation of the self and the use of techniques of self-management” (cf. Grey, 2005, p. 97). Through self-examination of their own situation, they acknowledged *a posteriori* short-term trade-offs for long-term gains:

There are sacrifices to be made in order to succeed, but it will hopefully pass over time, [...] even though sometimes I think I've chosen a path of solitude: I find myself quite alone, [...] as if I was a little detached from society (Participant No. 2).

Opportunity costs which resulted from asceticism and isolation, that is, the renunciation of immediate material and social benefits (e.g. creature comforts, financial income, spare-time, recreational life, etc.), appeared to be knowingly rationalised by students as a self-disciplinary technique. The (prospective) academic career, as part of the project of the self, operated as an organising and regulating principle (Grey, 2005). Students practiced self-governance and, in some ways, self-surveillance mechanisms, focusing most of their present lives on their doctoral education (short-term sacrifices) with the ultimate prospect of becoming, and lasting as, successful academic performers (long-term gains). Meanwhile, they were somatising and reproducing the *doxa* (i.e. the dominant belief of their microcosm) through their social dispositions progressively shaped to know and recognise the valid conditions of the doctoral rite of passage (Bourdieu, 1982). While they conformed to the performance challenge imposed upon them from a temporal and quantitative standpoint (i.e. good grades; fast and numerous publications), most students self-disciplined and delivered the efficiency criteria – the best possible input/output equation – not least in saving time and energy:

I'm trying to do my PhD as compact and fast as possible. [...] My 'game plan' is to come in, to do it as quickly as possible, and to get out with the paper in hand. [...] I'm not going to loaf around because I actually intend to finish the PhD, [...] and not muck around. I'm not wasting any assessment; I recycle and reuse all my deliverables (Participant No. 1).

The self is both a passive and an active entity. The somatisation process involved through social and self-control can sometimes enter into tension with (pre)existing dispositions – the habitus. Although it is not immutable, the habitus is a cognitive structure that needs to make room, more or less consciously, for the new interpretive schemes – the new frames of references. Homogeneous conditions of existence and structural regularities produce, more often than not, both partisans and opponents (Bourdieu, 1982, 1984; Giddens, 1984; Foucault, 1988; Alvesson and Willmott, 1996; Burkitt, 2002). Students' reflection upon their situation could either follow, or contradict the performativity logic of academia. Some resisted because they lacked the will or the

capabilities, and fell back on teaching positions (what Bourdieu (1984), called “strategic social positioning” based upon one’s possession, or lack, of abilities), some others because it went against their personal beliefs. Reliance on performance measurement strengthened conformity and superficiality while threatening substance and intellectual diversity. As such, you could observe some resistant students “partnering up” with some resistant professors to have their voice heard, not least within the doctoral programme board, trying to (re)habilitate and promote critical and interpretive research, to influence the profile of recruited students or to contest the rationale of both Collaboration and Funding Plans. However, the main effective lever to act upon and against performativity appeared to be the content of Master’s and PhD programmes and syllabuses (i.e. a little looseness was found there). Demands were made for more mandatory theoretical and ethical classes (e.g. organisation theory, epistemology and research ethics) in order to foster higher levels of analysis and more (self) reflexive efforts from students. Although not all requests were granted, the stake was to create within the students more reflection upon the social world (including academia) and the inner self (i.e. introspection) through criticism and self-criticism (i.e. a higher level of cognitive learning called “double loop learning”: Fiol and Lyles, 1985; Nonaka, 1994). Indeed, such processes generally enable students to acquire deep understanding of their own human condition via detachment and (re)discovery of themselves:

It’s more than just analysing what’s been done, but to criticize it, dissect it, rebuild it, to think differently, create new “things”. This ‘philosophy’ has immense implications. [...] It impacts the self a lot. [...] It’s very intrinsic (Participant No. 1).

I feel many things have been awakened in me, such as independence of mind; it’s something quite important, it allows you to somehow detach yourself from the world, to see things from outside. [...] When you think about it, nothing is fixed and unshakable. At the end of the day, everything can be questioned and challenged (Participant No. 2).

Ultimately, the underlying struggle was not a matter of emancipation or resistance against structural constraints whose operating principles were ignored or misinterpreted. It was rather about developing in the students the necessary capacity to stand back, especially in order to understand and grasp some of the rules of the social world that were not disclosed spontaneously, but not irreducible either.

6. Conclusion

This paper seeks to contribute to a better understanding of the impact on doctoral education attributable to performativity pressures in academia, by exploring the practices associated with the production of academic knowledge within the doctoral process. While focusing upon an under-researched area – doctoral training *vis-à-vis* (improvement) of economic and academic performance in a “knowledge society” (cf. Drucker, 1968; Fiol and Lyles, 1985; Nonaka, 1994; Scharmer, 2001; Thomas *et al.*, 2001; Usher, 2002; Akgün *et al.*, 2003), it tries to make an original theoretical contribution using connections between Foucault’s and Bourdieu’s literatures within the context of an academic setting. It mobilises and develops the notions of rite of passage (Cazeneuve, 1971; Bourdieu, 1982; Frow, 1988; Deegan and Hill, 1991; Panozzo, 1997), performativity (Lyotard, 1979; Willmott, 2003; Gendron, 2008; Adler and Harzing, 2009), habitus (cf. Bourdieu’s writings), disciplinary techniques (Foucault, 1975) and technologies of the self (Foucault, 1988) to examine the conditions within which PhD students somatise the ways and customs through their engagement in academia. This paper also apprehends what it means to be a PhD student striving to find a place within the professoriate/faculty and seeks to bridge

the literature in higher education and organisation studies, while contributing to the sociology of professions and epistemology.

Because they are based on (auto)ethnography, local documentation and two interviews only, the results cannot simply be generalised to other academic contexts. However, the normative way of organising the studied PhD programme is not atypical of other North American institutions, nor are the findings limited to student researchers. Efficiency, competitiveness and legitimation principles tend to institutionalise common and homogeneous administrative rules, standards and practices (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983), not least in academia (Gendron, 2008; Adler and Harzing, 2009). Therefore, the findings imply some learning beyond the restricted universe of the given doctoral programme, especially since the theory used for empirical examination has the potential to be extended, albeit with care, to other similar and comparable cases (even though it goes against the logic of grounded theory).

Conducted over a ten-month period within the business school of a major Canadian university, the study shows how the given PhD programme institutionalised a normative way of organising doctoral education. Despite legitimation narratives based on substance, reliance on performance measurement fostered conformity and publication quantity while threatening intellectual diversity. Performativity – “the principle of optimal performance” (Lyotard, 1979, p. 72) – was reflected in a dispersed network of disincentives to innovate and conduct research which strays from mainstreams. Disciplinary mechanisms centred on targets of performance were used to translate students’ (and professors’) behaviours and research endeavours into detailed and calculable performance measures. In return, new entrants generally adjusted their actions and results in ways that were consistent with the given representation of the “academic performer” (Gendron, 2008). As such, doctoral education can be likened to a rite of passage, altering the cognitive structures and interpretive schemes of neophyte students (i.e. their subjective “selves”, their habitus) in selected directions, not least through time, financial and intellectual pressures (cf. Figure 1).

Meticulous sets of disciplinary techniques, such as dominant discourses from faculty (i.e. rigor and performativity as opposed to substance and diversity), management by objectives and conditions for continuing in the programme (good grades; fast and numerous publications), doctoral fellowships and Funding Plans, or constant social control (extensive feedback and peer reviews), contribute to the (re)production of self-disciplined professionals, willing to make self-rationalised short-term sacrifices for long-term gains. However, or also, conformity and reflexivity are not diametrically opposed but rather dialectically intertwined. More often than not, deterministic structural regularities induce social tensions/struggles and some behaviours of (micro-)resistance (Bourdieu, 1982, 1984; Giddens, 1984; Foucault, 1988; Alvesson and Willmott, 1996; Burkitt, 2002). Besides, the criticism and self-criticism processes embodied within doctoral education provide the self with the conditions of possibility to reason at the highest possible level. As such, PhD students can reflexively decide to engage in (micro-)resistance and to strategically act upon the social world, that is, their own human condition.

In a knowledge economy, major universities and academic research appear to be among the most important assets of our societies (Adler and Harzing, 2009). Therefore, the social and economic contributions of organisation studies do not have to be shortsighted and limited to the mainstream and the superficial. Neither do they have to satisfy the dominant figure of the business practitioner. Similarly, more judgement is required when rewarding individual performativity based on publication quantity over

quality. It diminishes students' (and researchers') motivations to innovate in pursuing novel but riskier lines of thought (Gendron, 2008). The fabric of non-reflexive super-technicians and interchangeable professionals, cast in the same mould, is seen as a threat to intellectual creativity and multivocality. It is not only miles away from the ideal type of the socially responsible and wise citizen that the university prides itself in making, but also counterproductive in the long run. Doctoral education and business research need not forget that governments and policy makers are also legitimate outlets, hopefully more inclined to listen to diversity and to carry critical, humanistic and societal purposes.

The practical implication is that PhD programmes should bring about ways of encouraging students to engage "in a process of critical enquiry, generating ideas, with knowledge shared and generated so that principle and practice, individuals and groups, and contexts can change" (Taylor, 2007, p. 162). It is incumbent on those responsible for doctoral education and administration not to penalise innovation, unorthodoxy and marginality. The performativity drift in academia presses us to (re)think the alleged purpose of doctoral education (the production of "intellectuals" vs "professionals"), the audience and target of research, and what an original contribution to knowledge is. It suggests the need to review academic expectations for doctoral students in terms of deeper reflection and development of the self, rather than conformity (auto-regulation) driven by organisational, managerial and reputational imperatives. Although necessary, the (sole) focus on the end products cannot lead doctoral education. More attention should be paid to the processes that are necessary to produce higher levels of criticism within the students. In that sense, further research is needed, theoretically and empirically, on both the process (the governance of PhD programmes and students) and the result of higher education (the function of research in society as a whole). Competing and dialectic logics in the field, with respect to performativity, need to be investigated and developed, together with educational content analysis, as well as examination of the shape and trajectory of business/organisation research. For, between conformity and reflexivity, it is ultimately the type of knowledge being created and disseminated which is at stake.

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