

Cultivating African academic capital - Intersectional narratives of an African graduate and his PhD study supervisor

Eli Bitzer¹

Stellenbosch University, Stellenbosch, South Africa

Fulgence Matimbo

Tanzanian Commission for Universities, Dar es Salaam, Tanzania and Stellenbosch University, Stellenbosch, South Africa

Abstract

Three theoretical axes, namely ‘habitus’, ‘transformational learning’ and ‘doctorateness’ informed two narrative doctoral accounts. One is from a Tanzanian public official who graduated from a research-intensive South African university – mostly away from work, family and country. The other is from his study supervisor who, for the first time, supervised a candidate from another African country. Both accounts depict an unfolding mutual learning journey: Establishing contact, staying in a foreign town and studying at a foreign university, the trials and tribulations of guiding a foreign African candidate, the search for a scholarly voice, thesis writing, preparing for and taking an oral examination, being successful and final reflections. These narrated experiences are interpreted via three vantage points which provide new insights into studying and supervising across borders and cultures in Africa, pointing to implications for advancing academic capital development.

Keywords: Doctoral education; doctoral pedagogy; transformational learning; African doctorates; doctoral habitus; doctoral journeys; doctorateness; academic capital development.

Introduction

Academic capital development in Africa has been noted as of high importance to the continent’s international stature (Ngure, 2016; Olaniyan & Okemakinde, 2008; Oluwatobi & Ogunrinola, 2011). To promote doctoral studies across cultural and language differences are complex as study supervisors and candidates have to consider and act upon the differences in academic, cultural and personal backgrounds, their ways of communicating, relational issues and other challenges (Manathunga 2009; McKinley et al., 2011; Mkhabela & Frick, 2016; Winchester-Seeto et al., 2014).

To add to the conundrum, some academics point to a lack of preparedness of African doctoral candidates (Ngure, 2016:1):

More and more students are registering for doctoral studies across Africa. They’re doing so in pursuit of higher qualifications and better future career opportunities. But many are left floundering when they try to actually get working on their PhDs. Master’s programmes simply don’t equip students with the research skills they need, nor the conceptual thinking and critical analysis that’s so important for a PhD study.

Ngure continues (p.3):

... PhD students must bear a great deal of the responsibility for bringing their research to life. They ought to know that one cannot lead a pedestrian life and expect to receive the

¹ Corresponding author: emb2@sun.ac.za

highest possible academic accolade. It requires hard work, commitment and developing research skills...

Although studying abroad and supervising across cultures are not unique to Africa, this case is special in the sense that the candidate had never been to South Africa or an Afrikaans language university. The study supervisor had also not previously supervised a PhD candidate from a country outside of Southern Africa. The paper thus explores mutual research learning experiences via three theoretical perspectives, namely habitus, transformational learning and doctorateness to facilitate new insights into studying and supervising across cultures in Africa.

The authors firstly discuss the three chosen theoretical perspectives related to their narratives. Secondly, we outline the study context and then provide narrative accounts of our respective doctoral learning positions. Each author also offers an overall reflection informed by three questions that relate to our chosen theoretical positions. We end with a few conclusions related to academic capital development in an African context.

Theoretical perspectives

Habitus

Bourdieu's (1977) concept of 'habitus' suggests that one's physical and psychological demeanor, as a result of habits developed over time, influences one's attitudes towards society and the way one acts in and towards the world. Bourdieu also proposes that habitus consists of both the *hexis* (the tendency to physically express oneself in different ways) and more abstract mental habits, schemes of perception, classification, appreciation, feeling and action. These schemes are not mere habits, since they allow individuals to find new solutions to new situations without calculated deliberation, based on gut feeling and intuition, which Bourdieu believes are collective and socially shaped. Such attitudes, preferences, moral intuitions and habits influence one's life chances as the habitus is both structured by past positions in social structures and by future life paths (Bourdieu, 1977).

Habitus also embodies a number of complex personal and social issues, including gender, race and class, reproduced through personal tastes, preferences and actions (Hilgers, 2009; Maton, 2012). Habitus thus represents a counterpoint to notions of rationality as it relativises one's interest in what may be 'best' or 'appropriate' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992; Maton, 2012) within a current context.

Transformational learning

Mezirow's (1995) theory of transformational learning holds that adults have tendencies to avoid or to reject ideas that do not fit their preconceptions. However, when circumstances permit or necessitate, adults develop by moving toward frames of reference that are more inclusive, discriminating, self-reflective and integrative of experience. Through adulthood, people acquire a relatively coherent body of experiences including associations, concepts, values, feelings and conditioned responses to situations (Mezirow, 1995). This accumulates into frames of reference that define one's life-world as assumption structures by which one understands lived experiences and thereby selectively shaping one's expectations, perceptions, cognition and views. Such reference frames often determine our everyday actions (Mezirow 2006; Kitchenam 2008).

Unless deeply held assumptions are revisited, perspective transformation might not occur. Similarly, if adults are forced to adopt new thinking and belief systems via top-down, power-coercive processes rather than from personal convictions, perspective transformation would also be aborted (Mezirow, 2006).

Doctorateness

Trafford and Leshem's (2011) concept of 'doctorateness' suggests sets of accepted scholarly criteria in judgement of whether a doctoral candidate is considered sufficiently academically advanced to be worthy of a doctoral degree (also see Park, 2007). Doctoral candidates are accepted as being 'doctorable' when they demonstrate raised levels of conceptual thinking about research and how they approach research in a scholarly manner - moving from the descriptive to the conceptual, thereby demonstrating more sophisticated understandings of research and scholarship.

There are thus generic features of the doctorate that transcend disciplines, universities and doctoral requirements. These include features often referred to as the 'gold standard' of the doctorate (Trafford & Leshem, 2011, 34–35) and when such standards are met at a scholarly level, they constitute 'doctorateness' and what examiners expect to see visibly displayed in theses (Cumming, 2010; Halse & Malfroy, 2010; McAlpine & Ashgar, 2010; Park, 2007; Wisker, 2012).

These three related concepts provided rich possibilities towards narrative exploration as we shall try to illustrate.

The study context

The institution

Stellenbosch University (SU) is situated in the Western Cape Province of South Africa and has about 30 000 students of whom over 30 per cent are master's and doctoral candidates. This positions SU as a research-oriented university targeting significant numbers of international students - many from other African countries. The institution is rated as the third best research university on the African continent, while its history incorporates much of the apartheid history of South Africa. Initiatives towards social and academic transformation are ongoing (Stellenbosch University, 2015).

The study

The candidate [further referred to as FJM] is a 51-year old male Tanzanian citizen, married, with two children. His PhD study investigated internal quality assurance processes of undergraduate programmes at five private universities in Tanzania. What follows is a condensed diarized account of his doctoral study experiences.

The candidate's account

First contact and study decisions

FJM: On completion of a master's programme in Oslo in 2002, I aimed at furthering my studies in an English speaking country. When permitted by my Tanzanian employer to search for PhD admission and when SU informed me that I had been provisionally considered for acceptance, I was overjoyed. When arriving at SU a few months later, I was interviewed by my allocated supervisor [further referred to as EMB] about whether I was still serious to study at SU and in which respects I was lacking preparedness for PhD studies.

Study experiences

First encounters

From day one I experienced a sense of trust as I found EMB to be caring, a good listener and a motivator. I also sought clarification as how to address him - a question that may sound strange to many, but not something to be taken for granted. In Tanzania it is improper to address senior people by their first names and most professors would prefer being addressed by titles (also see McKinley et al., 2011; Winchester-Seeto et al., 2014; Mkhabela & Frick, 2016). Surprisingly, EMB invited me to address him in a way that made me comfortable, provided that there was consistency.

Study issues

During the empirical part of my study challenges occurred. One was to obtain permission from the five participating private universities in Tanzania to generate data. Many messages were not replied to and this delayed the process of obtaining ethical clearance with several months.

In terms of methodological preparation I had to do much additional work. Apart from acquiring more confidence in methodological matters, two other important issues emerged during the course of my study journey: developing a conceptual framework and timeous thesis submission for examination.

The work of Trafford and Leshem (2011) and other related literature (Mouton, 2005; Wisker, 2012) alerted me to the importance of developing a conceptual framework for my study and how this could assist me in conducting the research. This took four months, but eventually I managed to produce a decent piece of theoretical writing.

Examination issues

About eight weeks after submitting my thesis for examination EMB informed me in January 2016 about my examination reports, but I was still in Dar es Salaam when the date for the viva was finalized. The problem was then that all civil servants in Tanzania who wished to do foreign travel had to obtain permits from the State House which had to pass through scrutiny by two ministries.

As I was struggling with securing travel permission, another challenge emerged, namely that the third examiner indicated that I had to amend the text and re-submit. This was discouraging, but after reading the first two reports, I recollected myself to read the third, which contained comments on some weaknesses in my study which I communicated to EMB. He advised me to pay special attention to the issues raised by the third examiner and prepare meticulously by considering advice from Trafford and Leshem (2011) on viva questions, which also assisted me in preparing questions to ask from the examiners.

The doctoral viva

My preparations for the viva in February 2016 were intense as all three examiners participated via teleconferencing in the event. EMB had invested much time in assistance and encouraged me to stay focused, but relaxed. During the viva the second examiner in particular challenged me on methodological issues and tried to force me to consider new quality criteria in my theoretical model, but I managed to defend my position.

Study support

Due to my personality type (I take time to make friends), I sought information during my study regarding postgraduate Tanzanian students at SU. That was the beginning of interactions with fellow Tanzanians who invited me to join their association where I was also introduced to a South African tradition called ‘braai’ (barbecue), which in Swahili is called ‘nyama choma’. This made me start feeling at home and, in a way, reduced feelings of loneliness.

Another kind of support was self-initiated. Having noticed the treasure in self-motivational books, I started buying copies of works by authors such as Bryan Hubbard (*The untrue story of you - how to let go of the past that creates you and become fully alive in the present*), Paul Dolan (*Happiness by design – mixing pleasure with purpose*), Nick Vujicic (*Unstoppable – the incredible power of faith in action*) and others, which marked a new chapter in my PhD journey. I embarked on a process of self-discovery and reflected more frequently on my past and its influence on the present, as well as how the present influences the future. In the process I learnt much about overcoming fear, living courageously and developing self-esteem.

Finances

I went to South Africa under a World Bank project which ended halfway through my PhD journey. Thereafter, my employer had to take charge of sponsorship, but unfortunately, the chief executive who permitted my study was promoted and the new chief executive introduced cost reduction strategies. This included reducing my stipend by 60 percent, which was a huge blow financially and emotionally.

The supervisor's account

Background

EMB is a 65-year old South African male. At the beginning of FJM's study he had more than 20 years' experience in successfully guiding and co-guiding a total of 21 doctoral students. FJM was thus his 22nd candidate, but different in the sense that it was a first in advising a Swahili-speaking student from another African country.

First encounters

When I learnt that FJM had completed a master's degree in Norway, I became interested in the potential of the candidate and arranged a personal meeting early in 2012. I was struck by FJM's mature attitude and his focus towards accomplishment. At first he seemed unsure as to what to expect of doctoral studies, but became more assertive once we mutually explored realistic study options.

Supervision support

In addition to the typical doctoral support offered by SU to African foreign students, I introduced FJM with to Trafford and Leshem's (2011) book as a first compulsory reading. This provides concrete expectations regarding 'doctorateness', but also contains guidelines on what examiners look for in doctoral theses. The book formed the basis for our first two discussions, followed by providing advice on developing a decent research proposal, a study plan and how to handle ethical issues.

The academic project

FJM's project proceeded well as he explored widely and deeply into literature. At study meetings he was always well-prepared, asked relevant questions and although his study progress was initially slow, he consistently pushed forward. One major challenge was to assist FJM in developing a conceptual framework – a research challenge he rarely encountered before. After several discussions on the nature and use of an appropriate framework he eventually bought into the idea. This was a major breakthrough as it provided substantially more direction to the study as FJM's ability to analyse and synthesise empirical findings based on solid theoretical perspectives increased.

Supervisory experiences

Cultural and language differences between us were minimized by a focus on the academic project. As the study and its execution took prime position, all other issues were considered secondary, but still important in terms of FJM's transition towards doctorateness. These issues included how power in the supervisory relationship plays out when a collegial relationship develops between student and supervisor (also see Mkhabela and Frick, 2016; Winchester-Seeto et al., 2014). Moreover, as I acknowledged FJM as a quality assurance professional in his own right, he respected my academic background and supervisory experience. Trust was thus established relatively soon, but became somewhat unsettled as FJM returned to Tanzania to conduct empirical work. A period of silence followed when he failed to respond to my enquiries into his data collection efforts. It was only afterwards I learnt of the financial dilemma he had faced, which he was apparently too ashamed of communicating to me.

Examination time

By the time FJM's thesis was ready for examination, I was confident that a sound academic piece of work had emerged. The three external examiners were all experienced academics in the field of quality assurance in private higher education, except for one examiner from another African country who was more versed in general education and produced a less favourable report. I subsequently shared the narrative reports with FJM and when FJM eventually arrived back from Tanzania for his viva he was nervous, but well prepared. What was encouraging to observe during the viva was the level of confidence displayed in defending his views, quoting from his thesis and asking clarifying questions from examiners.

Overall reflection

Doctoral and supervisory experiences can typically be interrogated by asking multiple questions and employing applicable images and metaphors (Bitzer & Vandenbergh, 2014; McCulloch, 2013). In this study, three multi-pronged self-generated questions featured for candidate and supervisor:

- How did you experience 'habitus' within the field of new scholarly and social demands of studying in another African country (FJM) and supervising a candidate from another African country (EMB)?
- Were there any instances of transformational learning and thus caused a change in your frame of mind (FJM and EMB)?
- How did you experience the demands of becoming doctorate (FJM) and supervising the candidate towards doctorateness (EMB)?

Overall reflection by FJM

I should remind the reader that this was not the first time for me to study away from country and family as I had spent two years in Oslo to pursue a master's programme. This made life at SU somewhat easier as I had already learnt to mix with people of various backgrounds. However, to feel at home I always wished to find a Swahili speaker to interact with and thanks to the advancement of technology I could communicate with my family daily. From a scholarly perspective my personal habitus changed substantially as academic spaces and horizons opened up towards new developmental opportunities.

Somewhere between 2014 and 2015 I purposefully decided to forget about my relatively bad past and focus on the future, which included abandoning feelings of not being able to live up to academic expectations. I took several arguments and suggestions from Bryan Hubbard's book (referred to earlier) on board. This, together with meaningful doctoral development opportunities at SU, became my guiding light and the way I approached my studies changed drastically. To have gained clarity about a conceptual framework for my study was a stepping stone in changing my perspective on the academic project and in becoming academically more assertive. I would say these experiences contributed elements of true transformational learning, linking into Mezirow's (2006) position that adult learners readily adopt new thinking and belief systems via personal convictions and experiences if these make sense.

The doctoral process in a foreign context forced me to better live up to the demands of becoming doctorate when I was continuously reminded to own my study in order to be able to defend it (Park, 2007; Trafford & Leshem, 2011). It was thus up to myself to work hard and become academically more independent.

Overall reflection by EMB

As habitus is seen as a structure embodying various complex personal and social issues it is difficult to derive from guiding a single doctoral candidate as to whether my habitus as supervisor had changed substantially. However, as the supervision experience with FJM was a first and unique one with a

candidate from another African country, it might well be that deeper attitudinal and other changes took place than meet the eye. My knowledge of the South African higher education context and past experience in guiding more than 20 PhD candidates to success have led to several assumptions. One includes that power in supervision is a sensitive issue to be treated with care (Bourdieu, 1977; Halse & Malfroy, 2010).

Moreover, the Tanzanian academic tradition of students being submissive and overtly respectful of professors took me by surprise as I needed to remind myself that I was dealing with a mature professional and it was his scholarly standing that needed to improve. Also, the issue of racial difference, which is often prevalent in most South African encounters with black candidates, was in this (Tanzanian) case completely low key. To me this was a first and new experience which unsettled my own traditional habitus of being particularly sensitive to racial and ethnic prejudice (Bitzer & Vandenberghe, 2014).

In terms of ‘transformational moments’, the issue of obtaining institutional permission for generating data and how the Tanzanian context presented with a different way of seeking such permission was revealing. In South Africa a candidate would often need a simple letter of request to access data, but in Tanzania, I was assured by FJM, a candidate has no chance of obtaining institutional permission for research at a personal level. In FJM’s case extensive letters from me to the respective institutions had to be personally delivered by him and to wait physically at the venue for a response. This caused for a most cumbersome process, indicating a lack of delegated authority in private universities in Tanzania on the one hand and the nuisance of over-bureaucratization on the other.

The second instance of transformational learning was when FJM disappeared without (to me at the time) any obvious reason. It was only after about 12 months that he surfaced, informing me that he was in Stellenbosch, had collected his data and that was ready to proceed with data analysis. I was completely taken by surprise and only learnt afterwards what had transpired. FJM admitted that he was ‘too ashamed’ to inform me about his financial dilemma while he was in Tanzania. This was a first and interesting learning experience for me in the sense that factors beyond FJM’s control caused him to cease all communication with me until the problem was resolved. I also learnt afterwards that such behaviour is not uncommon in African cultures and that one would rather ‘disappear’ than being exposed to the embarrassment of admitting failure or difficulties. This ties into Mezirow’s (2006) views that the assumption structures by which adults understand their lived experiences selectively shape their expectations, perceptions, cognition and views (also see Kitchenam 2008). Such reference frames often determine the everyday actions of adults’ cultural beliefs and associations.

In terms of supervising towards doctorateness, Trafford and Leshem’s (2011) work became a basis for my discussions with FJM early on. We agreed that becoming doctorate required a developmental process substantially different from acquiring research skills at the master’s level. To have departed from a mutual understanding of doctorateness proved to be most beneficial as FJM adopted the concept of doctorateness and frequently enquiring as to whether he was on track.

Conclusion

For us, academic capital development refers to the ability of people to contribute to economic and societal life by transforming ideas and facts into productive knowledge which can be learnt and achieved through doctoral education. That said, academic capital development also seems important as a goal in its own right, not only because of its instrumental value, but because of its potential to transform thinking and acting at the individual and societal level (Olaniyan & Okemakinde, 2009; Oluwatobi & Ogunrinola, 2011).

Reflecting on what had emerged from this study by considering its relation to three chosen theoretical positions as they related to academic capital development, at least three conclusions emerged.

Firstly, it became clear how the candidate (now graduate) started inhabiting new territories and insights regarding his doctorateness by becoming more confident and independent as a researcher. His academic confidence was transformed from initially seeing himself as an incompetent and underprepared researcher to a diametrically opposite position in experiencing doctoral success. Displacement from family, country and social life created new and challenging learning spaces as well as new insights into a foreign African context. These experiences contrasted with his earlier Scandinavian postgraduate study experience where he was mostly alienated from social and cultural inhabitance. In a different way, FJM breathed some different African air which highlighted the potential and possibilities to contribute and cultivate human and academic capital on African soil.

At the same time, the supervisor's habitus changed from being insecure due to a first-time supervision experience with a candidate from a distant African country, a foreign language and a different ethnic background to a position of trusting and improved professional judgement. However, his supervisory habitus was impacted upon by learning that indigenous African communication is different than expected, especially in the presence of obstacles caused by extrinsic factors such as financial challenges and shying away from openly sharing problems. The latter position changed the supervisor's views of how to address possible similar future situations within foreign African human capital development contexts (Mezirow 2006; Mkhabela & Frick, 2016).

Secondly, it was obvious how the candidate's inhabitation of new thinking positions (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Maton, 2012) emerged when his attitude and inclination towards academic scholarship started to change. His initial position of satisfying his supervisor's doctoral expectations was transformed into exploring and meeting new criteria and standards of scholarship, fueled by his readings on doctorateness (Trafford & Leshem, 2011), discussions with doctoral peers and learning from SU interventions on personal and research skills. At the same time, the supervisor's initial limited expectations of the candidate as an emerging scholar were largely exceeded. This became evident in the process of finalising the candidate's doctoral thesis, his preparation for and handling of the doctoral viva and, finally, by his ability to both handle critique and challenge examiners' views. If doctorateness is accepted to be demonstrated by synergising the different elements of a doctoral study, the candidate excelled in academic capital development through new scholarly perspectives and starting to inhabit the novel world of research (Mouton 2005).

Finally, and in retrospect, both authors agreed that their joint research journey caused transformational changes on a number of academic, social and personal issues (Mezirow, 2006). Without necessarily elevating the study to the status of a life-changing experience, both experienced that status, language, ethnic background, religion and other concerns were effectively bridged and accommodated by clarifying expectations, being open to new learning experiences and by good institutional and other forms of support (also see Mkhabela & Frick, 2016). Assumptions on both sides were continuously revisited, changes in mindsets were shared and changes in behaviour were for the most part understood. The mutuality of the research quest (McCulloch, 2013), the constantly changing position from research dependence to research independence (Trafford and Leshem, 2011) and some flexibility in handling the research management process (Cumming, 2010; McAlpine and Asghar, 2010; McKinley et al., 2011) contributed in major ways to fresh perspectives on human and capital development.

Based on experiences from this dyadic doctoral learning account it seems clear that making such narratives known (also see Mkhabela & Frick, 2016) can be valuable in furthering knowledge on study and supervisory practices. Thus, as in other international contexts, promoting doctoral success across national, cultural, language and other differences, especially in Africa, is important – not only in building regional and continental academic and human capacity, but also to promote research and scholarly excellence on the continent.

By exploring how doctoral candidates and their supervisors can adopt new habits of research learning towards doctorateness and how such learning can be promoted, the relationship between academic capital development and different forms of growth in Africa might become more prominent. Doctoral education across African borders may also lead to improving the quality of the academic project in general and, at the same time, the use of appropriate theoretical vantage points to interpret and better understand doctoral studies and supervisory experiences may increasingly provide new insights into studying and supervising in Africa.

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