

## Identities of Academics Lacking Doctoral Degrees: A Narrative Inquiry

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**ABSTRACT** Academics who lack doctoral degrees are seen as peripheral participants in the academic community. The aim of the study on which this article is based, was therefore to investigate the identity formation of academics employed by the University of South Africa (UNISA), and enrolled for their doctoral degrees, and to use this insight to provide suggestions for socialising them into the academic community. Two theories were found useful as conceptual framework, namely the Role Identity Theory and the Self-efficacy Theory. In the empirical investigation, a narrative inquiry approach was used. In-depth interviews were conducted with eight participants, from whom three were selected for follow-up research. The study was significant for revealing that interventions need to target internalised identity with regard to positive values; high expectations and goals; relevant exposure; constructive supervisor support and the handling of multiple roles.

### INTRODUCTION

“Doctoral work is a long and challenging rite of passage that aims to transform students into scholars and to provide them with the skills and qualities necessary for successful and productive participation in academic communities” (Hadjoannou et al. 2007: 160). This quote illustrates that doctoral research is demanding. It requires of a candidate to be able to analyse, synthesise, judge and create novel connections and ideas. Academics who obtain their doctoral degrees demonstrate that they can make significant contributions to their disciplines and thus prove themselves at the highest level (Leonard et al. 2005; Mujtaba et al. 2008). This qualification socialises them into the academic community.

To be part of the academic community is important since this is the place where knowledge is constructed and transmitted (Lave and Wenger 1991; Wenger 1998). There is a mutual engagement of its members in the practices of the community. A defining academic community provides the language in which academics understand themselves and with which they communicate with other members in person or through published work (Dison 2004). Academic communities also transfer ideas and values that are unique to them, and which are fundamental to the development of an academic identity (Henkel 2004). Obtaining doctoral degrees and being socialised into academic communi-

ties is therefore invaluable to academic employees.

However, a number of studies in different parts of the world have indicated that the general throughput rates of doctoral students (which include academics) are low (Lovitts and Nelson 2000; Albertyn et al. 2008; Mujtaba et al. 2008). Not surprisingly, a major challenge faced by UNISA, a mega distance education institution where the study being reported here was done, was the number of academics lacking doctoral degrees. In 2011, this figure was 68% (Council for Higher Education 2012). These academics generally operate at the periphery of the academic community and are often viewed as “apprentices” in the research community (Robinson and McMillan 2006).

Considering the cost to institutions if a significant number of their staff has not yet fully acquired the skills needed to earn their rite of passage into the academic community, the question arises how this group of academics can be supported to complete their degrees. Dison (2004) and Green (2005) offer a suggestion by stating that doctoral research is as much about identity formation as it is about knowledge production.

As academics acquire research knowledge and skills, their identities as researchers develop accordingly (Wenger 1998; Bitzer and Albertyn 2010). The identities that they form depend on their views of themselves as researchers and the feedback they receive from significant oth-

ers, such as their supervisors. However, research into the relationship between doctoral students' experiences and emerging identities as academics has been neglected (Jazvac-Martek 2009).

In consideration of the above, the aim of this article is to report on an investigation of the identity formation of UNISA academics enrolled for their doctoral degrees, and to provide suggestions for socialising them into the academic community. To this end, two theories were found useful as conceptual framework, namely Role Identity Theory (RIT) and Self-efficacy Theory (SET). These theories have been explained in the next section.

### **Conceptual Framework: Role Identity Theory and Self-Efficacy Theory**

According to the RIT, with its roots in symbolic interactionism, individuals have multiple identities and roles. It is an ongoing process of social construction which relies on the interaction between actors and the social order (Jazvac-Martek 2009).

Individuals develop role identities through their knowledge of different role identities within social groups, such as the academic community, as well as their own internalised version of the identities (Dison 2004). The feedback from others in the community can indicate that the individual is a member of a particular social standing. For example, an academic lacking a doctoral degree may be seen as a legitimate peripheral participant in the academic community.

Identities can be negotiated with others or enforced on members of a community through perceptions of the value of the type of work that is being done (James n.d.). Powerful voices, for example of supervisors, could build or undermine novice researchers. Thus, academics' learning could be a "painful process of becoming a different kind of person, of reconstructing identity" (Warhurst 2006: 118). If behaviours are consistent with identities, the identities are confirmed. Identities are always in need of such legitimatisation from the socially embedded context in which the role identity is performed.

Individuals can simultaneously be involved in more than one community. If academics are also doctoral students, Jazvac-Martek (2009: 253) refers to their "oscillating role identities". When there is conflict between the roles that individuals occupy within different communities, this

causes tension. For example, some women's academic identities are influenced by their personal values as mothers and as professionals (James n.d.).

Role identities are frames of reference to appraise behaviour, and to assess the goals that individuals set for themselves and for others. Individuals thus have expectations of themselves and of others in their internal schemata that influence their interactions. For example, a supervisor can expect of a student to initiate contact, while a student may expect clear feedback from a supervisor. In this way, role identities influence how individuals respond to life occurrences (Vignoles et al. 2006).

Role-based identities are motivated by self-efficacy. An individual's main concern is to maintain idealised conceptions of the roles he or she occupies. Doctoral students would want to validate their role identities through role accomplishment. This need for verification by others and by the self is continuous since incongruities can occur between an idealised version of the self and the feedback that is received (Jazvac-Martek 2009).

RIT is related to SET, which is an aspect of social cognitive theory. This latter theory states that most behaviour is goal-directed, that students are self-reflective, capable of self-regulation and that they learn through observation. Environmental events, inner factors (cognition, emotion, and biological events), and behaviour are mutually interacting influences. This is the principle of triadic reciprocity (Maddux 1995).

Self-efficacy judgments are context-specific in nature (Zimmerman 1995). According to Maddux (1995: 4), the crux of SET is that "the initiation of and persistence at behaviours and courses of action are determined primarily by judgments and expectations concerning behavioural skills and capabilities and the likelihood of being able to successfully cope with environmental demands and challenges".

There are six primary sources of self-efficacy beliefs:

- (i) performance experiences: clear success or failure is the most powerful source of self-efficacy;
- (ii) vicarious experiences: observation and noting the consequences of behaviour influence own expectancies;
- (iii) imagined experiences: people can generate beliefs about personal efficacy/

- inefficacy by imagining themselves behaving effectively or ineffectively in situations;
- (iv) social persuasion: this relates to feedback from others;
  - (v) physiological states: these influence self-efficacy when people associate aversive physiological arousal with poor behavioural performance; and
  - (vi) emotional states: emotions can be an additional source of information about self-efficacy (Maddux 1995).

Against the above background, the remainder of the article explains the research methodology and the findings. The article ends with a conclusion.

### METHODOLOGY

Considering the focus on identity, a narrative inquiry approach was selected for the study, since narratives *are* people's identities (Lieblich et al. 1998: 7). Narrative inquiry rests on the epistemological assumption that human beings make sense of their experiences by means of the construction of stories (Duff 2002; Webster and Mertova 2007). Narrative inquiry requires going beyond the "story" to identify underlying issues that the story illustrates (Duff 2002). It differs from *life stories* since it does not focus mainly on past events in a person's life (Bold 2012: 26). In contrast to *narrative research* which presents the researcher with the studied phenomena as timeless (as they are when they are studied), temporality is ever present in narrative inquiry (Webster and Mertova 2007: 32-33).

The participants in the study being reported here were purposively selected from a list of academics registered for their doctoral degrees in one college at UNISA. To collect the data, eight interviews were conducted which lasted between 60 and 90 minutes each. The interviews were structured in three phases. In line with Rosenthal's (2003) technique, participants were requested to relate the experiences that have been important to them in their journeys up to being academics enrolled for their doctorates. This approach enabled participants to foreground what *they* believed were important in their academic development. During this time the researcher took down notes. In the second phase, the researcher asked questions to enhance the narrative content. In phase three the

researcher specifically asked them about the pleasures and difficulties of their doctoral studies. All interviews were recorded. Thereafter, three narratives were selected for their richness. Follow-up interviews and e-mail conversations were conducted with the participants to clarify issues and obtain further information as needed.

### Analysis

In analysing the narratives, the researcher considered the academics' historical journeys, the meaning they attached to their feelings and views (inner focus), their interpretation of the social interactions they had (outer focus), and the contexts in which the interactions occurred (Clandinin and Connelly 2000). The researcher also compared the narratives to identify recurring themes. This is in line with Polkinghorne's (in Webster and Mertova 2007: 31) statement that the goal of narrative analysis is to "uncover the common themes or plots in the data ... for noting underlying patterns across examples of stories". To this end, the researcher asked questions of meaning and social significance (Clandinin and Connelly 2000: 130), and *narratively* coded field texts.

### Trustworthiness

Regarding trustworthiness, Webster and Mertova (2007) point out that narrative research does not strive for conclusions of certainty but aims for findings that are supportable. Accordingly, Connelly and Clandinin (1999) stress the fact that the way that experiences are portrayed over time, their authenticity, adequacy and plausibility are important principles of trustworthiness.

In the next section, the identity portraits of the three participants are presented and then further analysed in the light of the conceptual framework.

## FINDINGS

### Identity Portrait: Tshiamo

Tshiamo was a 54-year old Black male who completed his school education in Lesotho. Thereafter he completed a Bachelors of Arts degree in Education, followed by a stint as a teacher. He completed a master's degree in Edu-

cation at a university in Johannesburg before returning to Lesotho. He worked as headmaster, taught at a college of education and then accepted a lectureship at a South African university. During this time, he was afforded the opportunity to enrol for a doctorate at the University of London. He was recalled to the position of head of department at a South African university before being recruited by UNISA. At the time of writing, he had been registered for his doctorate for 11 years, with a two-year interruption.

In his narrative, Tshiamo revealed a robust academic identity. This identity was crafted through the successes he had experienced in his socially embedded contexts throughout his life. Early influences that bolstered his self-efficacy included the high expectations of his father. In the educational landscape of school and university, he won bursaries. A senior academic at a Johannesburg university, where he completed his master's degree, affirmed his worth and motivated him for the academe. When he was employed by another university, his scholarly identity was furthered bolstered by being told that he was "prolific" and "brilliant" and by being involved in team research, which he experienced as an "eye-opener". This culminated in his enrolment for a PhD at the University of London.

However, Tshiamo recalled two experiences that challenged his scholarly identity. First, although he upgraded from an MPhil to a PhD "with flying colours" at the University of London, the requirement of publications to complete his thesis forced him to rethink his position as a scholar. He stated:

*I thought I would easily walk through the PhD experience. ... You think you are the best but there are better people out there. It is only when you open your ideas to be evaluated that you realise that it's part of growth. Our work is subjected to very deep, deep, deep scrutiny. I like the fact that it is a challenge. It's not nice ... it's taxing.*

Second, Tshiamo recounted an episode when he received harsh criticism on an article that he had submitted. He responded by personally attacking the reviewers. When this was pointed out, he scrutinised the article, realised that he had become very personal and reworked the content. Thus, his striving to maintain his scholarly identity influenced his reactions to what others brought to the encounters.

As an academic employee, Tshiamo was editor of an academic journal and thus in a powerful position. However, this role identity contrasted with his identity as a student, a role in which he had much less authority. For this reason, the personal relationship between Tshiamo and his London-based supervisor is revealing for the ways in which it empowered the student. For example, the supervisor expected Tshiamo to publish parts of his thesis before graduating. He forged a personal relationship of respect with his student, he did not try to clone Tshiamo in his own image, he re-assured him when other students completed their theses, and he allowed Tshiamo to assert his own position on condition that he could justify this with evidence. For example,

*"I leave it to you, Tshiamo. If I were you, I would do this and this. But I know you are you and you would do that and that. Just package that and let me see." And when I send it, he would say: "Yes, now I get a sense of how you are seeing things as a South African."*

Regarding the expectation that Tshiamo should publish from his thesis before graduating, he was committed to verify his scholarship. He persevered and published one article. Consequently, he believed that his final doctorate would be evidence of his scholarship. He stated: "I will stand firmly and say: I've contributed B and C and D and here is evidence."

Tshiamo's internalised role identity as an excellent scholar influenced his aspirations. For example, he aimed to publish mainly in *international* journals. He also believed that wherever he was, he could argue a point and other academics would respect his views.

### **Identity Portrait: Jean**

Jean was a 37-year-old White, Afrikaans-speaking wife and mother. She excelled at school academically. After matriculation, she first embarked on a music career before enrolling as UNISA student and then at a residential university. Here she was also appointed a lecturer after completing an honours degree. When Jean married they moved and she was appointed at UNISA. She completed her master's degree as an academic. At the time of writing, she had been registered for her doctorate for five years.

Jean's narrative revealed multiple and sometimes conflicting role identities. In her educa-

tional landscape, the seeds for a solid academic identity were sown early in life by parents who believed in “hard work”. This enabled Jean to excel academically at primary school. Her identity as *outstanding student* was tested at secondary school but further strengthened at university when she obtained numerous prizes as best student during her undergraduate studies. She was also motivated for an academic career by one of her lecturers.

However, as stated, this positive identity was tested at secondary school and during her master’s studies. At secondary school, she was humiliated more than once for having her own views on learning content, for example, with regard to the meaning of a poem. For this reason, she changed two courses within a year of graduating from high school. During her master’s studies at UNISA, she had already been appointed a lecturer. Her supervisor was a colleague with whom she was ill-matched. She recalled how, after having completed several chapters, she was told that the study could not work. She also experienced the supervisor’s feedback as destructive. “I wonder if it was because of an own lack of know-how of the topic and of how to supervise.” Being appointed with a new supervisor with whom she was better suited helped her regain her robust scholarly identity and this enabled her to start anew and complete her dissertation in a few months’ time. She recalled her own learning and transformation stating:

*It was just as if something clicked. I expected quick but thorough and constructive feedback. My supervisor exceeded my expectations. She always provided clear and constructive feedback in a very short time period. She was approachable and directed my thoughts and ideas into workable solutions to problems. Not only did my supervisor contribute hugely in terms of her theoretical and research knowledge, she also motivated and led.*

Jean’s internalised role identity as scholar motivated her personal expectations for self-regulation. To this end, she set goals for her studies and strived to reach them within selected time periods. She also expressed the belief that students should take responsibility for finding their own solutions to problems. She saw the role of a supervisor as similar to that of a psychologist: ... “to give feedback so that you get yourself where you should be”. Her expectations of herself included heeding the feedback she

received to enable her to generate high-quality work. This earned her positive feedback and strengthened her self-efficacy.

In the UNISA landscape Jean’s identity “oscillated” (Jazvac-Martek 2009) between that of lecturer, student, mother and wife of a husband who was often away from home. She stated:

*So, all the responsibility is mine and I rush around. I don’t have family or really good friends where we stay that I can ask for help. If my child is sick, if this or that happens, then there is only me. This is a huge challenge to my studies. Sometimes I write a section of a chapter and then have a two-month interruption. Then I first have to try and recap what I previously wrote.*

Added to the above, Jean was often “overwhelmed” by how her academic responsibilities impacted on her studies. She said:

*At this stage I do not know what to take and what to leave. One has a high workload. Then one has an administrative load that is even worse. And then one has the sword over one’s head of one’s studies that need to be completed.*

### Identity Portrait: Joseph

Joseph was a 44-year-old Black male. He completed his school education at a missionary school in Zambia. He enrolled at the University of Zambia and completed a four-year Bachelor of Arts degree with Education in English language. He taught English at secondary school for 10 years, and then completed a certificate in English language teaching in the UK. He joined a college in Zambia but was recruited by UNISA. He completed his master’s degree and then enrolled for his doctorate. At the time of writing, Joseph had been registered for this degree for four years.

Joseph’s multiple identities as a student and as an academic at UNISA were well illuminated by his narrative. Similar to the other two participants, his positive self-efficacy was sometimes bolstered and at other times challenged.

Before being employed at UNISA, Joseph’s experiences developed his academic identity. In the educational landscape of a catholic school in Zambia, the values that were instilled included strict discipline and responsibility. Added to that, were the expectations of his parents (for example, a mother who expected good-quality work), and of a high-achieving brother who act-



ed as a role model. He obtained numerous academic prizes and a place at the only university in Zambia. Thus, the seeds of an identity as a fine scholar were sown. This was strengthened during his career. After qualifying as a teacher, he was employed at an elite school in Zambia and thereafter as department head at a young age. Strengthened by his self-efficacy, Joseph rose to this challenge.

Self-efficacy influences the goals that individuals set as mentioned. Joseph consciously planned towards achieving his doctorate because “school starts in grade one and the journey is only completed with your doctorate”. He recalled how he was motivated by the satisfaction of acquiring new knowledge. The chosen topic of his thesis (reading) was stimulated by his experiences at secondary school where students competed with regard to the number of books they had read within a short time period. Joseph related:

*Through reading I wanted to expose my mind to different things... different societies. So, when I got this opportunity for a doctoral study, I wanted to return to those roots. To go back ... but to also see and to be able to ask certain questions about what made me do things ... what made me do my studies. I feel sorry that I started teaching English without the kind of knowledge that I have now. This particular [doctoral] degree was an opportunity for me to see that take place.*

As an academic responsible for the teaching of large classes, Joseph could confirm his scholarly identity. However, as a doctoral student he met with challenges. First, his supervisor had specific requirements of the thesis. Second, she expressed her view of a doctoral study as a lengthy endeavour of several years to enable a student to grow.

*I think here is a particular belief that the longer it takes to complete the PhD, the better the quality. And it's not true. So that has kind of meant that certain supervisors keep on asking students to revise ... and there are so many drafts, and [the belief] that the fourth draft is better than the first.*

Third, the supervisor expected Joseph to acquire the skill to use a computer software program for analysing quantitative data. Meeting the challenge, he viewed this as a “worthwhile” experience.

In his own expectations of the supervisor, Joseph wanted quick and clear feedback. However, there were times when he submitted chapters and his supervisor took two to three months to respond.

*That is very frustrating. Sometimes I am told she is busy and she has so many other students to attend to ... and the degree takes four or five years and I shouldn't expect to hear from her soon. So, it has been very challenging to a point where I see it as negligence on the part of the supervisor.*

Although he regarded his supervisor's feedback as “always very helpful”, they needed to meet personally because he struggled to read her feedback. He related,

*Her handwriting is so small, I can hardly read what she writes. And there are times when we are discussing her comments that she is not able to read what she wrote. So, that is very frustrating. So, when she talks to me, I can understand the comments.*

In contrast to the above, Joseph's role identity as an academic was influenced positively by rewarding experiences in the international educational landscape. For example, he completed a certificate in teaching English in the UK successfully. During his doctoral studies he was also motivated by the exchange of ideas with other scholars in his field by attending a conference in the UK, which led to him being co-author of a book. Another conference of African countries that he attended resulted in assistance with the collection of data from 10 primary schools in Zambia for his doctorate.

In the institutional context, Joseph was tested in trying to balance his role identities as doctoral student and as lecturer, similar to Jean. He stated:

*The challenges for me, first, combining work with studies. At the moment I have big courses. I handle 5 000 students. In another course, I handle 10 000 students. And ... there is the challenge to respond to student queries promptly in terms of phone calls and in terms of e-mails. So there is a lot of pressure from my work.*

## DISCUSSION

Within the institutional context, the participants, both as academics and as doctoral students, were challenged to complete their stud-

ies and become full members of the academic community. An analysis of the narratives revealed how the intricate personal and social influences in their various contexts impacted on their academic identities over time. When these influences are reduced to a set of understandings it gives direction to how internalised identity could be targeted to support the participants to complete their degrees and be socialised into the academic community.

The set of understandings involves five themes that are inter-related, namely positive values; high expectations and goals; relevant exposure; constructive supervisor support and the handling of multiple roles. This is comparable to the categories that Dison (2004) identified (commitment, vision and goals, autonomy and intellectual development).

In their article, Trevitt and Perera (2009) refer to the importance of nurturing relevant values and listed truthfulness, respect and authenticity. In this research, all the participants recalled how certain values influenced them. These values point to professional ethics and include respect, hard work, discipline, and assuming responsibility. For example, Tshiamo's supervisor revealed his respect for his student by nurturing his individuality, and by allowing him to air and justify his own views. Jean's supervisor illustrated her respect for her student through a quick turnaround time, quality feedback and the freedom to assume responsibility for her own studies and to solve her own problems in a supportive environment.

Throughout the lives of the three participants, the high expectations of others were internalised and motivated them to set goals and actively strive to reach these goals. For example, Tshiamo's supervisor expected his student to publish articles from his thesis before he would allow him to submit his thesis for examination; and Joseph's supervisor expected him to acquire the necessary skills to be able to analyse his quantitative data statistically. This confirms the influential role of goal-setting to develop academic identity (Dison 2004).

Similar to Dison's (2004) participants, all three academics in the current study revealed that they had relevant exposure to develop academically. Examples included the fact that Tshiamo was mentored in research by experienced colleagues who involved him in team projects; and he was given the opportunity to study abroad. Joseph also had exposure in the international academic

arena when he presented papers at international conferences.

In all three instances, quality supervision was a major influence on academic identity development, as also found by others (Chireshe 2012), in particular with regard to feedback. Jean described her supervisor's feedback as quick, constructive, thorough and clear. In contrast, Joseph was frustrated by feedback in an indecipherable handwriting and after a long turnaround time.

Finally, within the UNISA context, all participants spoke about the strain caused by the multiple roles they had to fulfil. Joseph and Jean in particular, referred to the fact that they were not only students but also lecturers with significant workloads. In addition, Jean revealed how her role as mother impacted on her available time. Wenger (1998: 163) recognises this issue when he refers to identity as "a nexus of multi-membership". This matter points to time management as a key skill to develop, in confirmation of findings by previous authors (Dison 2004; Trevitt and Perera 2009).

A central concept that emerged from the five themes was that of self-efficacy. This is in line with studies that have confirmed the significant influence of professional confidence (Bitzer and Albertyn 2010; Afari et al. 2012). The participants lived their stories as superior students. Their positive self-efficacies influenced their expectations and the goals they set. They strived to complete their doctoral degrees and persevered when challenged. The participants strived to keep their adopted positive scholarly identities consistent and to validate them through role accomplishment when incongruities occurred between their idealised versions of themselves, and the feedback that they received from others.

The findings have implications for the kind of support needed by academics without doctoral degrees to socialise them into the academic community. This issue is addressed next.

## CONCLUSION

The aim of the study was not to generalise with regard to an objective reality, but to understand the identity development of three academics who were employed at UNISA while also being registered for their doctoral degrees. As

such, they were seen as legitimate, peripheral participants in the academic community. Insight into their academic identity development may guide the institution in how to socialise such academics into the academic community. To this end, the method of narrative inquiry was particularly informative to reveal the academics' identities and the areas that needed to be targeted.

In identifying the above-mentioned areas, Self-efficacy Theory (SET) and Role Identity Theory (RIT) were useful lenses. SET confirms that individuals' persistence at behaviours such as doctoral studies, are determined essentially by beliefs about capability. Added to that, RIT has indicated the importance of interventions, such as supervision, to target internalised identity. In the current research, self-efficacy has emerged as a key concept that impacts on other target areas for identity development.

From the findings it can be concluded that developing ethical professional values, setting high expectations and goals, facilitating relevant exposure, providing quality supervision and handling multiple roles are major areas to target to build self-efficacies and thus scholarly identities of this group of academics. The study therefore recommends that awareness be raised among supervisors that they function as role models for the values they portray and which they need to facilitate in their students. These values include commitment and perseverance, assuming responsibility and autonomy, and treating others with respect. The students also need to be supported to set high expectations and they need a nurturing environment to reach set goals. In addition, institutions need to create opportunities for academics/students to interact with other academics in their disciplinary communities in the international arena. The current research has indicated the value of such interactions for developing scholarly identities. The findings also confirmed the key role of the supervisor, in particular with regard to the feedback provided. Finally, greater consideration of the multiple roles of academics who are also students is needed to generate a nurturing environment for this group of academics.

Although the study was limited, the findings are useful for stimulating reflection and debate on how academics working under pressure and enrolled for their doctoral degrees can be supported to become fully integrated into the academe. The study also revealed areas for further

investigation. These topics include the role of values in postgraduate supervision and the way a nurturing environment can be created within the higher education landscape. Creative ways are needed to support academics on their "long and challenging rite of passage ... to become productive participants in academic communities".

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