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FIRST-GENERATION STUDENTS ASPIRING TO LIVE THE ACADEMIC DREAM

THE ROLE OF SUPERVISOR SUPPORT

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The University of Auckland Clock Tower, 2008. (This image of the University of Auckland has been made available to the public domain via the Wikimedia commons. Use for any legal purpose has been granted by the owner Richard001 via at http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:University_of_Auckland_Clock_Tower_building_from_front.JPG)

My family including me (at 3 years leaning against my dad) outside our home.

INTRODUCTION

Aspirations, our imagined possibilities for ourselves, can be powerful tools to mobilise individuals from across a range of social contexts towards educational endeavours. For those students at a distance from the university, such as students who are the first in their family to participate in higher education (referred to as first-generation students), aspirations can provide a potent impetus to bridge the gap between their everyday lives and the world of the university. Such aspirations can be focused on gaining an undergraduate university degree or can support an ongoing

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engagement with higher education through into advanced academic programmes, such as doctoral studies. First-generation students who undertake doctoral study are individuals who aspire to a version of 'the good life' through doctoral work that is, in practice at least, distinctly different from that of their parents and, perhaps, their wider social networks. I wish here to consider the role of supervision in supporting students' capacity to aspire, particularly in terms of becoming an academic. While many undertake doctoral studies with goals that extend beyond seeking the traditional role of the university academic, there are still many doctoral students who wish to take up academic positions. As a current doctoral student, reflecting on my supervision experience to date has led me to contemplate the multifaceted nature of the supervision process. It has also made me think carefully about what I want to learn from my supervisors as I imagine an academic future and, in a more general sense, the potential of supervisors to contribute to students' movement into academia. This consideration will be informed by theoretical writing about aspiration and will also incorporate some auto-ethnographic reflections from the writer as a first-generation student pursuing a doctorate within education.

JOURNEY STARTING POINTS

When I look at the old photo above of myself, as a toddler, and my family outside our modest working-class home in small-town New Zealand and the emblematic, and much used image of the University of Auckland's Clock Tower building, I am struck by the difference between these two sites. I am also aware of the space between these two worlds, a space represented in mere millimetres on a page in this book. Yet, as I reflect on my journey from my home to university as the first person in my family to participate in higher education, I recognise the considerable distance between these two places across a range of social, cultural, economic, and even physical dimensions. This reflection draws me close to my hopes and dreams and the promises of gaining a university education that were so central to my efforts to succeed despite the challenges I faced. In my case my dreams involved the desire to occupy a particular space within the university as an academic, a dream that continues to spur me on my present doctoral pathway. I also recognise, beyond my own experiences, how undertaking doctoral study is a choice deeply imbued with aspiration.

In reference to the work of Appadurai (2004), I argue that supervisors can play a key role in helping students, especially non-traditional students, to develop their capacities to aspire particularly in relation to becoming academics. In doing so, I would also like to acknowledge the uneasy space supervisors may inhabit in

encouraging students to seek academic careers in light of the political, economic and social positioning of the contemporary university and the academics within. I am also very aware of the significant demands placed on supervisors in the modern university which makes it difficult to call for supervisors to 'do or be more'. Nonetheless, it is my view that however we see the numerous roles of the academic, supervisors possess critical knowledge about how the university works, and how to be an academic, because they are insiders within the higher education institutions. If we accept Appadurai's (2004) theorisation of aspiration, supporting this cultural capacity can be highly transformative in terms of social, and individual, development. As many first-generation students may not possess traditional forms of social and cultural capital (Bourdieu 1977:2002) helpful for progression within academia, it is arguably important to focus on developing these students' capacities to aspire in order to enhance their ability to navigate the complex social setting of the university ultimately with a view to creating a more diverse and representative academy.

THE CAPACITY TO ASPIRE

Aspirations, or the desire for a particular goal or ambition to be achieved, are often seen as being powerful as they can contribute to individuals taking action, "to achieve or become something" (Pearsall 1999:76). According to Appadurai (2004:76), the capacity to aspire can be understood as the ability to read "a map of a journey into the future". As such, he characterises this capacity as being navigational in nature, linking intentions, understandings and outcomes. He also maintains that the capacity to aspire is socially constructed. Critically, Appadurai (2004:67) argues that this map is informed by understandings and experiences. As such aspirations cannot be understood in purely individual terms as he says "aspirations are never simply individual (as the language of wants and choices inclines us to think). They are always formed in the interaction and thick of social life". In this way, the capacity to aspire needs to be recognised as a cultural construct and a navigational ability. It is also something that is not evenly distributed:

... because the better off by definition have a more complex experience of the relation between a wide range of ends and means, because they have a bigger stock of available experiences and outcomes ... [and] are more able to produce justifications, narratives, metaphors, and pathways through which bundles of goods and services are actually tied to wider social scenes and contexts (Appadurai 2004:68).

Appadurai (2004:69) also describes the disadvantaged in any society as "having more brittle horizons of aspiration" because of their limited opportunities to employ this navigational capacity. Drawing Appadurai's ideas into the context of higher

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education, Bok (2010:164) argues that “for students to develop their capacity to aspire, other people within their local communities and those that they encounter in their daily lives must have experience navigating particular fields and pathways” and she suggests that “students can access these pathways if they are provided with the knowledge and experiences that enable them to make powerful choices”.

The importance of the idea of aspiration is reflected in its use within higher education discourses. As Sellar and Gale (2012:91) observe, it is also a concept that has “figured strongly in recent policies around the globe”. Certainly, the term ‘aspiration’ appears regularly within higher education rhetoric and policy within the Aotearoa/New Zealand context. Analysis of the New Zealand Tertiary Education Commission (TEC) website highlights numerous examples of the use of the term ‘aspiration’, often linked to discussions of equity. For example, it is used when talking about the importance of “meeting the diverse needs and aspirations of students of all ethnicities, genders, ages and socio-economic backgrounds” (Tertiary Education Commission 2013: para. 1) or in reference to supporting the “development aspirations of Maori” in the Tertiary Education Strategy 2010, although in these cases no definition was provided to address what was meant through employing this term. In many ways aspiration can be seen as a feel-good word and it is often employed with little explanation of its use. This loose usage means the word is vulnerable to co-option into neo-liberal conceptions of studenthood and arguably the potentially corrosive effects of the individualisation it promotes. Certainly, the notion of aspiration has gained prominence in ‘third way politics’ (Sellar & Gale 2012) with its meaning conflated to economic aspirations which are tightly focused on consumer desire and financial rewards (Sellar & Gale 2012). In contrast, Appadurai’s work can be seen as highly valuable because of his desire to repatriate the concept from the world of the rational individual embedded within a frame of economics, to the cultural domain.

Moreover, there are compelling reasons to consider new ways of thinking about students’ experiences within doctoral studies given some of the significant challenges faced by students and educators. Doctoral education in recent times has undergone significant expansion which has included a proliferation of different types of doctoral programmes and major increases in numbers of students undertaking doctoral study. For example, in New Zealand between 1999 and 2009 the total numbers of enrolled doctoral students more than doubled, rising from 3 447 to 7 409 students (Ministry of Education 2011). However, it is a cause for concern that there appears to be a consistently high proportion of students who fail to complete their doctorates. New Zealand Ministry of Education (2010) figures show that 62% of doctoral students enrolled in 2001 had completed their PhDs by the end of 2008, revealing that after

eight years, more than one in three candidates had not yet completed their doctoral studies. Studies of attrition rates around the world consistently suggest the number of students who do not complete are considerable, with figures estimated to range from an average of 30-50% of all students (Golde & Walker 2006; Green 2009; Lovitts 2001; Martin, Maclachlan & Karmel 1999).¹ With the number of students involved in doctoral education expanding globally (Boud & Lee 2009), it is clear that the number of students failing to complete in actual terms is also increasing significantly. This situation, as a number of writers have suggested, supports the view that doctoral study can be a high-risk undertaking (See Golde 2005; Lovitts 2001). Further, there are questions about which types or groups of students 'succeed', in terms of access to doctoral education and doctoral completions. These questions persist in relation to the kinds of students who move into academic roles. As such it may particularly valuable to seek new ways to engage with students as may be offered by a consideration of aspiration, in its Appadurain sense, to help more students to achieve their doctoral degrees and reach their postdoctoral goals.

First-generation students and doctoral education

For first-generation students, "researchers have noted and lamented inequities in educational experiences and outcomes" (Lohfink & Paulsen 2005:409). However, analysis of the research undertaken on first-generation students shows that most studies have been focused on students' initial engagements with tertiary education or on the bachelor level of study. The research picture remains less than clear in terms of first-generation students' doctoral completions and progression into the academy as compared with continuing-generation students;² there have been few studies in this area. A survey of the literature about first-generation students' access to the professoriate in the US by Kniffin (2007) raises questions about these students' progression into the academy, especially in regard to roles at prestigious academic institutions. In his discussion, Kniffin (2007) refers to data from US National Studies of Post-Secondary Faculty (1999) which, when analysed, revealed that more highly ranked research-focused universities tended to disproportionately employ academics with parents whose formal education included advanced degrees. Kniffin also highlights

1 Lovitts's (2001) major study of doctoral attrition in the US and Canada identified an overall doctoral non-completion rate of 30-50%. In New Zealand, recent Ministry of Education (2010) statistics identify an overall non-completion rate of approximately 38%. In Australia, a study by Martin *et al.* (1999) indicated that 47% of doctoral students did not complete their programme of studies across a seven-year time period.

2 Continuing-generation students are those students whose parent or parents studied at university. They can be seen as continuing the family practice of participating in higher education.

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the work of Shott (2006) who found in his research on American archaeologists that individual background traits (such as the level of parental education) appeared to be a more reliable measure than scholarly quality in predicting the type of institution an academic will be employed at. There is also significant writing from working-class scholars about the difficulties they have faced within academia that identifies some of the challenges encountered by non-traditional students' movement into academic positions. Examples of this work can be found in journal publications (see Wyatt-Nichol 2012) or in edited volumes of essays such as Muzzati and Samarco's (2006) *Reflections from the wrong side of the tracks: Identity, class and the working class experience in academe*, Dews and Leste Law's (1995) *This fine place so far from home: Voices of academics from the working class* and Tokarczyk and Fay's (1993) *Working-class women in the academy: Laborers in the knowledge factory*. Welsch (2005), in her introduction to a collection of 15 accounts of American working-class and first-generation women, for instance, highlights the sense of distance and difference experienced by these scholars on their journeys into the academy, "where hope and promise are the expected prizes"(xv). She (2005:xv) says:

When I think of our journeys, I am reminded of many of our forebears who came to this country as immigrants in peculiar clothing carrying treasured possessions in satchels. Although we didn't travel here from foreign lands or have to surrender names, extended families, traditional dress, customs or foods, we too have left home and crossed boundaries into foreign territory.

The research picture provides some indications of differentiated outcomes for first-generation students moving into the faculty roles and broader writings within this area suggest the need to consider more carefully how students from diverse backgrounds can make successful progressions into the academy.

The role of supervision

Supervision, and the roles that supervisors play in supporting students' postgraduate learning is of interest to researchers, many of whom argue that it is a critical part of the doctoral process (see for example Engebretson *et al.* 2008; Grant & Graham 1999; Li & Seale 2007; Salmon 1992). As Amundsen and McAlpine (2009:331) also suggest, for the majority of academics, supervision is a central part of their roles and it "involves intense work with a student". This intense work is focused on supporting the production of a quality thesis along with the goal of transforming the student into an independent researcher (Grant 2003). There exists a variety of supervisory approaches, styles and ways of working shaped by a number of different contextual factors such as institution, discipline and the focus of a research

project. Within these varied contexts, there is broad agreement that supervision is multifaceted and far from straightforward. As Li and Seale (2007:512) suggest in their discussion on criticism within doctoral supervision, supervision is “lengthy and complicated” and something that therefore “demands competence, commitment, time, energy and emotion from both parties”. Similarly, Wisker, Exley, Antoniou and Ridley (2008) point out that good supervision involves negotiation and dialogue to ensure there are shared understandings which can then support the learning process within this pivotal scholarly relationship.

Bringing aspiration into supervision spaces

If we apply Appadurai’s conception of aspiration to doctoral education, then it is necessary to recognise that students who may possess less knowledge about the social context of the university, or perhaps have narrower experiences of it, may therefore have less ability to navigate their way through the doctorate and into academic positions. As such, it is therefore important to think about how these students can be assisted in constructing their navigational maps (Appadurai 2004) of the university. For me, this means bringing students’ aspirations into dialogue within the supervision space. This may involve supervisors and students discussing some of the following questions:

- What are the pathways into academic jobs?
- What are possible postdoctoral opportunities for the student(s)?
- How did I navigate into an academic position? How could this be relevant, or not, to my students?
- What assumptions am I making about the students’ interests or knowledge about academia?
- What do students need to know about academic roles?
- How would I describe a typical working day or week to a student?
- What are the ways that students can be helped to navigate the complex social world that is the university?

Exploring questions like these may be one useful way to promote conversations with students about their goals for their doctoral studies which may lead to shared ideas and greater understandings of how to navigate the university. In my experience of supervision there have been times when I have felt unsure about the place of questions similar to these within supervision discussions. Despite the highly positive relationships I have with my supervisors, I have wondered if it was acceptable to broach these topics so tied to the future, as a student only approaching the mid-point of her doctoral studies. Would my supervisors think I was not focused on the work at

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hand? Or, was there really time for these kinds of conversations in our already heavily loaded supervision meetings? Sometimes, my uncertainty grew out a concern for my supervisors because I feared talking about academic jobs might be too burdensome a topic for them given the somewhat limited nature of job opportunities within the university. This resulted in my feeling unsure about whether I knew the things I should, and anxious about whether I was making good choices in my studies because of the gaps in my knowledge about what comes next. Through these reflections, I realised that my lack of knowledge about the steps to take post-doctorate, though related to some distanced time in the future, actually operated in the present to destabilise my sense of agency, and even my sense of belonging within the academy. And, through the subsequent discussions about doctoral student aspirations with my supervisory team I began to expand my thinking, not only about my postdoctoral future but about the direct connections between academic aspirations, navigating within the university and the development of academic identity.

Aspiration and academic 'becomings'

I see the project of academic 'becoming' or academic identity formation as being deeply bound up with students' hopes for, and imaginings of, their future selves. Supervisors' efforts to foster students' academic identities can also function to provide valuable support for the development of students' navigational maps of the university. This is especially true when supervisors make explicit links to how participation in different kinds of academic activities or work can help students extend their understandings about their academic setting. An example of this may be found in supervisors assisting students to operate within a variety of academic settings such as helping students to step into and 'read' the academic space of a conference, and then to understand the myriad ways conference participation can contribute to their learning about academic practices. It may also arise, for example, through supervisors facilitating opportunities for students to speak, and be recognised as legitimate speakers, by other academics within seminar spaces and the like which can develop a student's academic voice. In Appadurain terms, (2004:68) this support can be seen as helping students to archive experience which may also allow them to produce "justifications, narratives, metaphors" which can contribute to a "more complex experience of the relation between ends and means" within the academy. As I have experienced, the links between navigations of the university in terms of gaining an academic position and the engagements with different kinds of academic experiences may not always be clear to the student. Admittedly, some supervisors may feel reluctant to assume what may be perceived

as a broader responsibility for a student's academic identity and their academic aspirations beyond the direct focus on thesis work alone.

Supervision – a 'pedagogy under pressure'

As Grant (2005:ii) argues, "supervision is a pedagogy under pressure". Increasing postgraduate student numbers, expanding academic staff workloads, the imperative to meet student learning needs along with the institutional and governmental demands to improve rates of degree completions mean there are numerous and sometimes contradictory forces that have an impact on the doctoral supervision relationship. Given these demands, engaging with student aspirations may be considered to be another imposition on the already weighty responsibilities of the contemporary supervisor. Moreover, there may be significant reluctance from supervisors to focus on student aspirations, particularly in terms of gaining academic roles, because such discussion have the potential to open up some highly challenging issues about the nature of academic work and the apparently limited opportunities in the modern university that seem to stand in opposition to the continued governmental efforts, and the efforts of the universities themselves, to expand numbers of doctoral students. Many from within the academy have written about how the effects of neoliberal policy reforms on universities across the world have "academics, whether in junior or senior positions ... feeling stressed, frustrated and demoralised" (Bendix Petersen 2009:409). In this setting it is easy to see how supervisors may find themselves in uneasy spaces somewhere between the hopes and dreams of their students, institutional policies to encourage the training of more scholars and their own assessments of the chances for their students to navigate into university positions.

A 'community of scholars' approach

In my call for supervisors to think about student aspirations within their supervisory practice, I wish to make clear that I do not see the individual supervisor as having the sole responsibility for engaging with student aspirations. In conjunction with renewed attention to aspiration in the context of the traditional supervision relationship, I would like to advocate for a 'community of scholars' approach. This could take the format of forum facilitated by a combination of staff and students where there is space for students to discuss their aspirations for academic roles, to explore ways to develop their academic identities and learn about academic pathways alongside their supervisors. Such a forum could be organised in different ways, and may offer access to presentations, workshops and shared discussions on a range of areas such as 'a day in the life of an academic', 'postdoctoral progressions', or 'developing

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voice'. While some of these topics may be commonly offered to doctoral students within different learning contexts, a key aspect of this approach is that these offerings are brought together in a way that is community-based and explicitly focused on helping students navigate the academy.

This strategy would mean that thinking about doctoral student aspirations is shared and subject to the collective creativity of the academics and students within the school or department. It also means that supervisors with their varied experiences of the university and positioning within it can share the different kinds of knowledge they have, which may mean that students with less established or less well-connected supervisors will benefit from access to a range of insights about academic pathways. I maintain there may also be direct benefits to the supervisors themselves as a focus on aspiration and building students navigational maps may have a positive impact on their students' engagement with their studies and, perhaps, help in fostering a stronger relationship between students, their supervisors and their departments or schools. Importantly, while my attention is on student aspirations for academic roles, I am not arguing for an approach which constructs students as entrepreneurial employment seekers continually involved in presenting their 'CV selves', or indeed, one that supplants the importance of thesis work within a supervision relationship through an all-encompassing focus on the doctoral student job search. Although I recognise some tensions here that require careful attention, my focus on aspiration is targeted towards thinking about how diverse or non-traditional doctoral students can develop their academic identities and their knowledge of the university to enable them to move more easily into academic roles through their relationships with their academic supervisors and community.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter I have sought to push the boundaries of supervision practice by suggesting that there is value in extending the thinking about the supervision relationship beyond the primary focus of thesis production to include greater attention to helping students construct their navigational maps of the university through utilising Appadurai's conceptualisation of aspiration. Supervisors, as university 'insiders', possess important knowledge that can contribute to students' scholarly experiences and academic navigations and this kind of knowledge may be of particular value to students from diverse backgrounds who may not possess detailed social and cultural maps of the university. My call for greater attention to doctoral student aspiration is made with recognition of the potential unease supervisors may face in focusing on student aspirations for the academy in a context of rapid change to academic work and conditions. However, a focus on aspiration, through a 'community of

scholars' approach, may be particularly useful in engaging with students' aspirations without placing significant burdens on individual teaching staff, and ultimately may be valuable in helping doctoral students, especially non-traditional students such as those who are first-generation, to achieve their imagined academic futures.

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