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Power and the PhD:

Towards a Critical View of Postgraduate Education

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Abstract

This paper presents a qualitative analysis of some of the power dynamics of doing a PhD in the social sciences in the United Kingdom. Researchers of postgraduate education have tended to neglect issues of power, presenting descriptive and policy-oriented accounts of doctoral research, rather than theoretical or analytical studies. The present study is taken from a research project developing a critical approach to postgraduate research and training, based in the perspective of discursive psychology. It draws upon semi-structured interviews with doctoral candidates in the social sciences, paying particular attention to the ways in which power is invoked and attended to in their talk about their experiences. It is argued that when liberal power is working successfully, it is often hidden and buried within particular conversational practices in complex and subtle ways. In order to reveal the patterns of power at play in postgraduate life, then, researchers need to look in detail at discourse. However, through this process of revealing, they may also be concealing the workings of academic power.

Keywords : postgraduate education; discursive psychology; power.

[I]t is in the very nature of the phenomenology of power that those at the centre who have it experience its workings the least. In their world, opportunities open themselves up before them; to have power is to find no resistance to the realization of one's desires. The kind of power of interest to us is not power at the centre, but that at work *between* centre and margins. It is those without power who find at every turn resistances to the realization of their desires (Shotter, 1993; emphasis in original).

This paper aims to contribute to qualitative studies of higher education, especially work in the sociology of education on social science doctoral research in the United Kingdom. In *The Doctoral Experience* Delamont, Atkinson and Parry (2000) argue that there has been 'far too little qualitative research on doctoral students, their work and training. Many of these important aspects of higher education remain stubbornly invisible' (p. 134). It will be suggested in the present paper that the 'invisible' nature of doctoral education, along with the 'invisibility' of particular aspects of doctoral postgraduate life, are a result not only of doctoral students' ambivalent or marginal position within the academy, but also because of the particular characteristics of research into doctoral education, and the positions of the social researchers who have so far studied and written on the subject. There is a crucial bias in the literature on social science doctoral research which has yet to be acknowledged. This is that much of the theory and research on doing a doctorate has itself been written and carried out by doctoral supervisors and already established academic researchers. These researchers have left certain gaps in their studies, including the experiential dimensions of doctoral research, the discursive construction of doctoral identities, and also the patterns of power and ideology at play in postgraduate life. The present article seeks to address the latter of these concerns, and at the same time introduces a critical, discursive, and reflexive take on postgraduate education. The focus is upon

the ways in which power and ideology come to figure in the lives of doctoral postgraduates in the social sciences.¹

Ambivalence and the dilemmas of doing a PhD

Merton and Barber (1976) have proposed that social roles display a 'sociological ambivalence' in the sense that they are structured around incompatible normative demands. They point out, for example, that while doctors are expected to be clinical and objective in their encounters with patients, they are also expected to display a compassionate friendliness. The central argument is that social roles necessarily consist of abstractly opposed normative requirements. In order to carry out their roles acceptably, social actors must balance and negotiate these contradictory demands. From this perspective, the role of the doctoral postgraduate can be considered ambivalent, being composed of conflicting and contradictory tensions. After all, doctoral candidates are not straightforwardly students, nor are they strictly members of staff. Rather, in the academic world, they seem to occupy an 'in-between' status. According to the research evidence, the role of the full-time 'home' doctoral postgraduate is structured around a complicated mixture of both 'student' and 'staff' demands. When teaching undergraduates, attending and presenting at academic conferences, and publishing their work, for example, doctoral candidates may come across as lecturing academics or independent research scholars. However, when participating in thesis assessment activities, presenting their work at postgraduate seminars, and being supervised by established members of staff, they may appear dependent students or inexperienced novices. The role of the doctoral postgraduate in the social sciences appears decidedly ambivalent.

It is often claimed that the ambivalent role of the doctoral student, combined with the individualized nature of social science PhD cultures in the United Kingdom, results in postgraduates feeling marginalised, isolated, and alone during their course of study. It has even been suggested that marginality is an inherent feature of doctoral education, and that postgraduate research students constitute one of the most marginalised groups in British higher education (Becher, 1993; Becher, Henkel & Kogan, 1994, p. 141, p. 147). This individualization becomes especially apparent when we consider the student-supervisor relationship, commonly modelled as it is on the traditional notion of an ‘apprenticeship.’ Tony Becher (1993) has remarked upon the ‘weight placed on the student-supervisor relationship’ and the ‘heavy reliance on supervision’ in British social science doctoral programmes (p. 145). Becher, Henkel and Kogan (1994) point out that it is not difficult to see how ‘the concept of the doctorate as an individual apprenticeship and the marginalisation of graduate studies may combine to produce conditions in which students are acutely dependent on their supervisors’ (p. 148).ⁱⁱ

Supervisory relationships in the social sciences are often complicated and nuanced, involving the subtle negotiation of doctoral students’ autonomy and dependency. Successful postgraduates are expected neither to be totally reliant upon their supervisors, nor entirely self-reliant. Rather, in order for the relationship to work, a delicate ‘balancing act’ must be performed, between the contrary requirements of autonomy and dependency (Delamont, Parry & Atkinson, 1998). In relation to their supervisor, the individual doctoral postgraduate is positioned in contrary ways, from that of ‘underling’ or ‘powerless dependent’ to junior or professional ‘colleague’ (Delamont, Atkinson & Parry, 2000, pp. 153 – 154). Merton and Barber’s (1976) description of the ‘apprentice-ambivalence pattern’ (p. 5), which

conveys the student's 'devotion to his [sic] teacher pushing him to extravagant praise, his need for autonomy pushing him to excessive criticism' (p. 4) certainly seems appropriate in the case of the doctoral postgraduate (see also Johnson, Lee & Green, 2000).

While the supervisors in *The Doctoral Experience* study claimed to exercise a range of styles, the 'hands-off' style was reported to be the most common (Delamont, Atkinson & Parry, 2000, p. 162). Supervisors often experienced dilemmas, however, in allowing their students 'sufficient autonomy' while at the same time 'maintaining surveillance and control over the research' (p. 176). John Hockey (1994) has similarly proposed that social science PhD supervisors experience problems in their role management, relating to the level of 'intellectual expertise' they offer their students. While the supervisor may not wish to transgress formal canons which emphasize that the PhD thesis should be 'the student's own work' (p. 298), there is always the potential for the 'autonomous originality of the student's research to be compromised by too much intellectual and emotional involvement by the supervisor' (p. 302). Hockey recommends that supervisors erect 'boundaries' between themselves and their students as a way of managing these dilemmas. What he does not mention, however, is how these boundaries are to be erected in practice, and how the dilemmas themselves are to be managed.

It is often acknowledged in studies of doctoral education that while the supervisory relationship may not initially be a relationship of equals, it should become progressively more egalitarian as the research continues. Indeed, by the end of their doctorate, the postgraduate should ideally be in the position of a fully-fledged academic colleague. In a paradoxical sense, doctoral candidates are learning from their supervisors how to become independent researchers or scholars, who may

themselves go on to be supervisors and examiners of doctoral theses in the future. However, the main traditions of work in this area rarely go any further than making such observations.

Instead of a teacher the supervisor becomes a colleague and the relationship becomes less asymmetrical than it was. In fact, this is the central aim towards which your relationship with your supervisor should be working (Phillips & Pugh, 2000, p. 108).

The most satisfying kind of teaching is the postgraduate teaching because at the end of the process the teacher-pupil relationship, in an ideal case, is destroyed. And what you end up with is much nearer to the colleague relationship – among equals. They might not be an equal in all respects, but certainly within the area of the student's own PhD subject. The student should leave here feeling they're equal (PhD supervisor, quoted in Delamont, Atkinson & Parry, 2000, p. 45).

What is lacking is any sustained critical study of equality and inequality in the relations between doctoral students and their supervisors. What are the patterns of power at play in doctoral education, and how are they perpetuated and sustained? Given that control in the social sciences is often implicit, negotiable and covert, such analysis is unlikely to be straightforward (Delamont, Atkinson & Parry, 2000, p. 153; Delamont, 2003, p. 113). As we shall see, it will require the acknowledgement of what are often difficult to identify, irreconcilable values, such as democracy and authoritarianism, equality and expertise, and freedom and control. This is why the study of doctoral education must begin to look beyond the realm of the supervisory relationship *per se* to consider wider patterns of ideology and control that are not unique to the academy.

In 1988, Cox observed that there were no in-depth studies of the ‘critical relationships on the borders between autonomy and dependency’ in the context of social science doctoral education (p. 21). This gap in the literature has to some extent been filled, as there are now several studies of such dilemmas (Hockey, 1991, 1994; Burgess, Pole & Hockey, 1994; Delamont, Atkinson & Parry, 1997, 2000; Delamont, Parry & Atkinson, 1998). Nevertheless, there is still a sense in which Cox’s observation rings true, as detailed analyses of the dilemmas of social science PhD supervision have tended to be written from the perspective of the supervisor. Studies of doctoral dilemmas generally emphasise supervisor, rather than student, dilemmas. As a result, we do not know very much about how doctoral postgraduates themselves experience the dilemmas of autonomy and dependency inherent in the supervisory relationship.

Mapping a discursive approach to doctoral education

The present study aims to contribute to studies of power within higher education (e.g. Bartlett & Mercer, 1999, 2000; Bourdieu, 1988; Harris, 1998; Hawes, 1998; Hewson, 1999; Raddon, 2002; Lyon, 1995), as well as discourse analytic work on the power relations between teachers and their students (e.g. Benwell & Stokoe, 2002; Edwards & Mercer, 1987; Fairclough, 1993; Hepburn, 2000). It is important to stress, however, that the argument of this paper is not that supervisors ‘have power’ over their students in any straightforward sense. Although supervisors may attempt to control their students, this ‘top down’ exertion of power is not the main focus of interest. Rather, power is understood as something which works between people, productively, from the ‘bottom up’ so to speak. Thus, power is understood broadly in the sense given to it

by Foucault (1991; see also Hepburn, 2003). The supervisory relationship is considered a largely consensual power relationship, which doctoral students and supervisors both participate in, and resist.

In the present study the importance of practical language use and dialogue in the constitution of power relations between doctoral students and supervisors is emphasised. A discursive psychology of postgraduate education stresses the centrality of discourse in the constitution of doctoral student thinking, identities, and experiences. In early work in discourse analysis, discourse is established as a topic of study in its own right, rather than a transparent medium through which we can gain access to other phenomena, such as the 'mind' or the 'world' (Gilbert & Mulkey, 1984/2003; Potter & Wetherell, 1987). An open definition of discourse is adopted, which includes all forms of speaking and writing. Talk and text are understood as social practices, thus pointing to the pervasive 'action orientation' of discourse (Heritage, 1984; for more on discursive and rhetorical approaches to psychology, see Billig, 1996; Edwards & Potter, 1992; Edwards, 1997; Potter, 1996).

The present study draws upon forms of discursive psychology which combine the situated study of ordinary language use with broader social analysis, or 'critical' discursive psychologies (Billig, 1991; Edley & Wetherell, 1997; Wetherell, 1998; Wetherell & Potter, 1992). The interest is with how postgraduates negotiate particular kinds of 'ideological dilemmas' in their talk (Billig *et al.*, 1988). To say that doing a doctorate involves the negotiation of 'dilemmas' is not to claim that doctoral students have trouble knowing what font to write their thesis in, or how to make the most stimulating cup of tea. Rather, doctoral dilemmas refer to those wider, irresolvable dilemmas of common sense and ideology, which structure our thinking, and our relationships with ourselves, others, and the world. They are the dilemmas that

postgraduates inherent through culture and history, and which are bound up with the organisation of society, patterns of social equality and inequality, and the values of liberalism. The PhD degree, for example, is bound up with the dilemmas of liberal ideology, in the sense that the expertise and authority which the qualification confers upon the bearer have the potential to conflict with the values of democracy, where it is believed everyone should be considered equal. The holder of a doctorate is warranted to speak on matters on which others might be considered 'unqualified' to speak (Gergen, 1989).

There is also a critical edge to the way in which ideology is understood in the present study, in the sense that ideology is studied for its effects, and for how it is used to maintain relationships of inequality and power (Wetherell & Potter, 1992). The focus is not so much on how ideology 'distorts' social life, but rather with how ideology, as a discursive practice, works to establish and legitimate patterns of dominance and oppression (see Edwards & Mercer, 1987; for more on contemporary discourse theory and practice, see Wetherell, Taylor & Yates, 2000a, 2000b).

Materials

The forthcoming analysis is taken from a wider research project developing a critical approach to doctoral education in the social sciences. It draws upon in-depth semi-structured interviews with 16 doctoral postgraduates and young lecturers registered as PhD candidates, and in the process of either carrying out or completing their doctorates, or waiting for their viva voce examinations. Interviews took place mostly in psychology and social science departments in a variety of institutional locations, including 'new' and 'old' universities and colleges associated with universities, in the North West and East Midlands regions of the United Kingdom. Participants were asked about their experiences of doing doctorates, whether they considered themselves to be academics, their views on academia more generally, and so forth. Crucially the interviews are analysed as activities in their own right, rather than as routes through which to gain access to doctoral experiences, views, or memories which are implied to exist elsewhere. The present study follows work within social psychology which studies interviewing as a form of social practice situated within particular social contexts (for example Potter & Mulkay, 1985; Van den Berg, Wetherell & Houtkoop-Steenstra, 2003; Wetherell, 2003; Widdicombe & Wooffitt, 1995). Although researchers of doctoral education may present qualitative materials, they rarely analyse them in detail, preferring to take the discourse for granted, and as representing transparent versions of 'the world' or 'experience.' This is somewhat unusual if we consider that talk and text are central features of doing a doctorate. The present analysis aims to demonstrate the value of looking in detail at postgraduate discourse, along with the possibilities of incorporating the critical theoretical concepts of power and ideology into studies of doctoral postgraduate life.

Analysis

The analysis takes three individual case studies from the corpus of interviews in order to illustrate wider themes and patterns relating to power and ideology in higher education. Throughout the analysis there will be an interest in the autonomy-dependency relationship between doctoral postgraduates and their supervisors. We will firstly consider ‘hidden’ forms of power, then ‘proximal’ and ‘distal’ powers, and finally the potential ‘abuse’ of power. The paper will conclude with a reflection upon the revealing and concealing of power in liberal educational contexts.

Investigating hidden power

This first section of analysis concerns some of the hidden or subtle power dynamics of doing a doctorate and focuses upon the relationship between a doctoral student and her supervisor. The extract to be analysed is taken from an interview with ‘Hanako.’ Hanako is a Japanese mature student of psychology in the final year of her doctoral study. We join the interview as Steven is asking Hanako a question about publishing, which prompts her to tell a story about attempting to publish a book chapter with her supervisor. Pseudonyms have been used for the student and her supervisor, but not for the interviewer. (See the Appendix for details of the transcription notation used.)

Extract 1

1 Steven have you publishing anything from the thesis?

2 Hanako mmmmmmm no not yet

3 Steven right

4 Hanako I've written some, draft chapter, of erm, a book chapter

5 that my supervisor and I decided to do (mm) but, ahh,

6 draft came back with comments, and we need to woHHrk

7 on, a lot of things (a- riHHght) so, I decided to focus on my

8 thesis first, (yes) and then, after, the, thesis then, I can, take

9 the chapter, and then in, (mm) ahm made into a, journal

10 aHHrticle hopefully

11 Steven right, how did that draft, chapter come about?

12 Hanako *mmmmm, the draft chapter*, of the book, (mmm), aahhm,

13 *I, I did it*, with the momentum of the conference, I did in

14 Australia this this past summer, (right) and her as a way of

15 finishing the conference, (mm) paper (mm), and also I was

16 planning to do that, ahh, do a chapter, based on the conference

17 paper so (m) it wa- a- e-, *for me it's always*, related, like I use

18 something, that I did, as a small project (yes) and then, making

19 it bigger and deeper, in terms of (ye-) analysis (yes) is always,

20 practical way of getting myself motivated, (yeah) and seeing

21 the realistic, goal, (yeah) so, from that, conference paper

22 chapter (mm) and then, Pete suggested that it- we should do

23 a book chapter on somebody's ahm edit- edited, book (yes)

24 so I just use, the Australia paperHH (uhuhm yHHeah) and get

25 some more, ahm (mm), ahm, adjustment, to the orientation

26 to the book (right), and Pete put some touch ups, ahm

27 to make it, work (mm) and he said “okay you don’t have to
28 do much just do this and this and this” and then I did what
29 he suggested to do (yes) and he just submitted it and then
30 we received commen- a lot of comments, ahh saying,
31 *basically I feel hhhuh they didn’t understand this*, cognitive,
32 perspective (right), the kind of analytical take, (yes) that,
33 we had,
34 Steven so you submitted it *twice* then, is that right?
35 Hanako ahm, I- we submitted it once and then we received the comments

As with established academics and undergraduate students, PhD students are under various institutional pressures relating to their professional conduct. Delamont, Atkinson and Parry (2000) suggest that, in higher education, the ‘[p]ressure to complete work to meet externally imposed deadlines is ever present. This applies from the everyday work of the undergraduate onwards, and it is especially acute for the research student’ (p. 15). Tony Becher (1993) has written of the ‘ever-present sense of time pressure’ for doctoral students to complete their theses (p. 136). As well as there being pressures to complete their doctoral theses, there are also pressures on doctoral postgraduates to publish, especially if they are wanting to pursue academic careers in the future (Becher, Henkel & Kogan, 1994, p. 119; Brewer *et al.*, 1999; Gaston, Lantz & Snyder, 1975; for a critique, see Fox, 1983, 1984). While the tension between completing the the sis and working on publications is not in itself ideological, it becomes ideological within the context of the supervisory relationship, for it directly relates to issues of power, and to the demands of the wider institutional and economic context. In the act of publishing, doctoral postgraduates may appear to be

established academics or researchers, rather than inexperienced students. But the contrary requirements of postgraduates being both autonomous scholars and dependent students means that the activity of publishing from a thesis is not likely to be straightforward. After all, in the social sciences, 'taking personal responsibility for one's work readily implies an almost competitive relationship with one's supervisor and other more senior academics' (Delamont, Atkinson & Parry, 2000, p. 155), and this might especially be the case in publishing from a doctoral thesis in collaboration with one's supervisor.

At the beginning of extract one, Steven establishes a subtle frame of accountability with regards publishing (line 1). He implies that Hanako might have, or should have, published something from her thesis. While she might not have published anything from it 'yet' Hanako implies that she expects to do so at some point in the future (line 2). When Hanako begins to tell the story of the draft book chapter, she defends or justifies her 'no not yet' answer to the question (Buttny, 1993). By starting her story by saying 'I've written some, draft chapter ... of a book chapter' Hanako prioritises her own agency and takes sole credit for the writing of the chapter. At this moment, Hanako is presenting herself as an independent researcher or scholar. By going on to say that it was a book chapter that 'my supervisor and I decided to do' (line 5), however, Hanako gives the impression that the decision to do the book chapter was made jointly. The contradiction is that while the decision to write the book chapter might have been made mutually, Hanako is also claiming to have written the chapter all by herself.

The pushing and pulling alternation between autonomy and dependency with regard to the supervisor can be appreciated when Hanako goes on to describe the work that went into the draft book chapter, later in the extract. Here, she negotiates a

balance between crediting herself and crediting her supervisor for the work done on the chapter. There appear to be variations in the positionings that are made in the story of the draft book chapter (Davies & Harré, 1990; Mühlhäusler & Harré, 1990; Harré & Van Langenhove, 1999). At the beginning of the extract, Hanako says that she and her supervisor decided to do the book chapter. When she is asked at line 11 how the book chapter came about, however, Hanako says that she did it with the momentum of the conference she did in Australia during the previous summer. It could be suggested that variation in this story is to be expected, because any co-authorship is going to involve an element of negotiation (Fox & Faver, 1982). However, collaborative publications of doctoral postgraduates and their supervisors are ideological because the negotiation itself is not egalitarian (Heffner, 1979). The variation in this particular story is therefore argued to reflect the contrary themes of ideology (Billig *et al.*, 1988).

By giving the impression that she has done most of the work on the chapter, Hanako presents herself as independent of her supervisor, and as someone who is working autonomously. This semblance of autonomy is contradicted, however, when Hanako introduces 'Pete' into the storyline (line 22). Earlier in the extract, when she used the institutional identity category 'supervisor,' Hanako gave the impression that this relationship was not a relationship of equals. By positioning her supervisor, Hanako implicitly positioned herself as a student, as someone who is supervised. When she comes to tell the story again, Hanako uses the first name of her supervisor – which is a shortened 'Pete' rather than 'Peter' – to position him in the storyline. By saying 'Pete' Hanako implies that she is on equal terms with her supervisor. She gives the impression that she and her supervisor are friends or colleagues, rather than student and supervisor.

The claim 'Pete suggested that it- we should do a book chapter on somebody's ahm edit- edited, book' (lines 22 to 23) comes across as a proposal for an egalitarian collaboration between equals. Pete is reported as using the pronoun 'we' which implies that the authorship will be a mutual, collaborative affair. Within the context of the PhD supervisory relationship, however, a suggestion such as this is rarely a mere suggestion. Rather, a 'suggestion' can actually work as a piece of 'advice,' a 'recommendation,' or even a 'command' (Li, 2000). Pete's reported suggestion that 'we' should do a book chapter should therefore not be taken at face value. The ambivalent or dilemmatic character of the proposed co-authorship becomes apparent when Hanako goes on to say 'so I just use, the Australia paperHH' (line 24) and when she uses the first person pronoun 'I' to position herself as personally using the Australia paper. Hanako does not say that 'we' used the Australia paper, as might have been expected, based on what Pete is claimed to have said to her previously.

Hanako goes on to describe the 'adjustments' that were made to the conference paper, in order for it to fit the orientation of the book. She claims that 'Pete put some touch ups, ahm to make it, work' (lines 26 to 27). Hanako implies that while Pete's alterations were minimal or superficial, they were also essential or vital. Hanako minimises Pete's contribution to the chapter ('some touch ups') and suggests that the chapter consists mostly of her own work. At the same time, she praises her supervisor for making the paper 'work' through his expert 'touch ups.' When Hanako claims that Pete then said 'okay you don't have to do much just do this and this and this' (lines 27 to 28) she is again crediting her supervisor for making specific and appropriate suggestions about what the draft needs. After all, Hanako goes on to claim that the draft chapter was then submitted (line 29). However, reliance on expertise often comes at a price (Billig *et al.*, 1988). Hanako does not report Pete as saying that 'he'

doesn't have to do much, or even that 'we' don't have to do much. His actual advice, that 'you' don't have to do much,' gives the impression that it is obvious that Hanako is to do the work on the draft. The inequality of the co-authorship, and of the supervisory relationship itself, is thereby presented as something self-evident and natural. After reporting Pete's suggestion, Hanako goes on to say 'and then I did what he suggested to do.'

The suggestion that Pete is said to have made to Hanako, that 'we' should do a book chapter for an edited book, came across as a proposal for an egalitarian collaboration between colleagues of equal status. This implied equality was contradicted by the details of the book chapter narration, however, in which a taken-for-granted inequality was articulated. The attempted publication came across not so much as a collaboration between colleagues, but as a decidedly unequal affair (on ideological naturalisation, see Eagleton, 1991; for more on the ideological aspects of pronoun use, see Billig, 1995; Maitland & Wilson, 1987). One of the functions ideology is to soften or conceal the operation of power. Thus, Hanako does not talk directly of power – her supervisor appears as a friend, a colleague, or an advisor – but not directly as a figure with power. The analysis implicitly points to the possible operation and hiding of power within the liberal relations between a doctoral student and her supervisor.

Different forms of power

In the following analysis we will continue to look at how the themes of autonomy and dependency are played out in postgraduate student life, but go further than the power dynamics which can be said to exist between doctoral students and their supervisors.

We will consider a case in which the notion of ‘pushing’ is introduced into a description of doctoral student publishing. While the student in question denies that his supervisor has ‘pushed’ him into publishing his thesis work in a particular journal, he nevertheless suggests that he has been pushed towards publishing, but by wider forces that are not explicitly named. The extract to be analysed is taken from a pilot interview with David, who was a third year doctoral student of social psychology, and about to submit his thesis. We are sitting in Linford’s Restaurant at Loughborough University during lunch time, and join the interview as Steven is asking a question about publishing.ⁱⁱⁱ

Extract 2

- 1 Steven do you have like a-, what- what’s your view on publishing
2 at the moment with respect to that work that you’re doin’ now?
3 David erm, well- ((eating)), hopefully, I’m not really thinking about
4 publishing at all, at the moment (mmm) but as soon as I’ve
5 submitted by the end of this year, (mmm), then, I hopefully
6 will be, publishing, various bits of it pulli- pulling various bits
7 of it together and publishing something in, Discourse & Society
8 will be the first choice
9 Steven right right
10 David but *that’s* the immediate thing, aaahhm, yeh
11 Steven where has that choice to, go for Discourse & Society, come from
12 David it *seems*- because my PhD is basically, ahhm, taking a
13 discursive approach, to, looking at, ideol- ideology and

14 (mmmm mm) aahhm, current politics, it seems the obvious
15 choice cos it's, a critical journal, (mmm) er it's interested
16 in s-s-s-s- systematic discourse analysis, (yeah yeah) aaaaannd,
17 aaaahhm my supervisor happens to be a co-editor? (mmm) ahh
18 (mm) you know all those things which push you, (yeeaaah)
19 towards it
20 Steven riight, y'use this idea of *pushing towards* it, is-is-, is that
21 something that you, *welcome* that, that opportunity, say
22 o- offered through Mick?
23 David erm, ((eating quickly)) we- no-, Mick hasn't pushed
24 me towards it that's wrong I mean-, (mmm) what I'm saying
25 is that, the basic context *is*, that it's a sort've very familiar,
26 you know it's close it's, (yeah) it's what we're sort've-
27 you know we read regularly, (absolutely) it's not like
28 *pushing towards* it it's an *obvious* choice in that sense (yeah)
29 aahhm, thee, what's being pushed towards is just the idea
30 that I have to publish, aannd (mm mm) after all that *work*
31 I should really publish something from the PhD (yeah)
32 okay? (yeah) that's what, I mean, (mm) aahhm, the
33 *journal itself* I don't-, that- that just seems an *obvious*
34 choice the *most*, (yeah) *appropriate* stuff because there's
35 very similar analysis to what *I'm* doing (absolutely) like people
36 like Salskov-Iverson and Condor recently have do-, which is
37 such a similar approach that- (mmm) you know it's the place
38 to do it really

At the beginning of this extract, we can detect the same tension found in the previous extract between publishing during the thesis, or waiting until after the thesis is completed to publish. Steven asks David what his view on publishing is ‘at the moment’ with respect to the work he is doing ‘now’ (lines 1 to 2). When he replies, David says that he is not thinking about publishing ‘at all at the moment’ but that as soon as he has submitted, he hopes to publish something in the journal *Discourse & Society* (for the editor’s opening remarks in the first issue of this journal, see Van Dijk, 1990). For both David and Hanako, then, thesis publishing must wait until after their doctoral theses are completed.

David does not immediately offer a justification for why *Discourse & Society* will be his ‘first choice.’ As such, he implies that this state of affairs is something straightforward and taken-for-granted. It is only when Steven picks up on what David has said, when he asks ‘where has that choice to, go for Discourse & Society, come from’ (line 11) that David is held accountable for choosing to publish there. Even though David identifies this journal as being ‘the obvious choice’ he nevertheless goes on to give a justification for his choice. He explains or defends his choice by offering three justifications, including the ‘critical’ status of the journal, its interest in ‘systematic discourse analysis’ and finally that his supervisor ‘happens’ to be a co-editor (lines 15 to 17). This third and final part of the list is conspicuous for two reasons. Firstly, David and Steven shared the same supervisor, so it is interesting that David refers to his ‘supervisor’ in the way that he does. Secondly, David is suggesting that it is a mere coincidence that his supervisor is a co-editor of a journal he is hoping to publish his thesis work in. What is implicit is that this state of affairs might be a bit

too much of a coincidence, and it is this kind of possibility that Steven picks up on in his subsequent question.

After justifying why he has chosen to publish in *Discourse & Society*, David says ‘you know all those things which push you ... towards it’ (lines 18 to 19). This statement has a normative character to it; David is suggesting that this is a general phenomenon which is something ordinary and taken-for-granted. Steven gives an emphatic ‘yeeaaah’ agreement in response to his comment. Although David does not say that he himself is being pushed, he does indirectly suggest that something like this might be happening. And although David does not say that there is anyone in particular who is doing the pushing, he does suggest that there might be situational or contextual factors which may push people towards publishing. There are ‘things’ which push you.

It is then that Steven comes in with his challenging question (lines 20 to 22). His question is delicately formulated; he pauses several times and does several false starts, thereby giving the impression that he is negotiating a difficult or sensitive topic. What Steven assumes is something like the idea that ‘Mick,’ as a consequence of his position as a co-editor of *Discourse & Society*, has offered David the opportunity to publish there, and that David has accepted this offer. Steven asks whether David ‘welcomes’ that opportunity, say ‘offered through Mick?’ This is a somewhat unfavourable version of events, because it strongly suggests that David will not be publishing in this journal because of the standard of his work, but because of his relationship with his supervisor. Steven implies that David is using his academic connections to get published, rather than his own abilities as a scholar.

David is quick to take issue with what he thinks Steven has assumed in his question. He swallows his food quickly and says ‘we- no-, Mick hasn’t pushed me

towards it that's wrong' (lines 23 to 24). David disagrees with the assumption which he suggests Steven has made in his question: that Mick has pushed him towards publishing in *Discourse & Society*, contrary to normative liberal practice.

What kinds of power are being invoked at this moment in the exchange? In his work on distress and psychotherapy, David Smail (2001) outlines the difference between what he calls 'proximal' and 'distal' powers.

In fact, of course, our lives are most powerfully controlled by forces that are completely out of site. It is in many ways a truism that those things which you 'can do nothing about' are the ones which tend to affect your life the most profoundly. Our world is structured, then, by powers at varying degrees of distance from us. Those closest to us – proximal powers – are the most salient, the ones which preoccupy us the most, the ones focused on by psychology, the most amenable to our personal intervention, and the weakest. Those furthest from us – distal powers – are the least salient, the ones we tend to spend least time thinking about, the ones focused on by sociology and politics, almost entirely impervious to merely personal influence, and the strongest (Smail, 2001, p. 37).

The pushing and pulling which might go on between doctoral students and their supervisors can be understood as the exertion of 'proximal powers.' That is, they are the local, immediate and most visible dynamics of power, taking place within the interpersonal context of the supervisory relationship. It was something like 'proximal powers' that were invoked in the Hanako analysis, and it is also invoked by David when he says that Mick hasn't 'pushed' him towards 'it.' In both cases, the power in question is the kind that exists interpersonally, between supervisor and student.

In argumentative defence against Steven's interpretation of the situation, David goes on to implicitly construct himself as an interested researcher or scholar, rather than as a supervised student. He suggests that his supervisory relationship is a

relationship of mutuality, rather than of pushing and pulling (lines 24 to 28). While David is quick to deny that Mick has pushed him towards publishing in *Discourse & Society*, however, David does not ‘push’ the notion of pushing completely out of his account. When he concedes or clarifies that ‘what’s being pushed towards is just the idea that I have to publish’ (lines 29 to 30) David retains the notion of pushing, but alters what is being pushed towards, along with the nature of the pushing itself. Instead of being pushed towards publishing in the journal, he suggests that he is being pushed towards just the ‘idea’ of having to publish. And while earlier there were ‘things’ pushing you towards it, now there are no ‘things’ doing the pushing. David makes a grammatical shift from what was earlier the active voice to the passive voice. Basically, it becomes even less clear who is being pushed towards, and crucially who, or what, is doing the pushing.

This kind of pushing seems different to the ‘proximal powers’ kind of pushing which was identified earlier and instead seems closer to ‘distal powers.’ David does not say that there is anyone or anything pushing him towards publishing, such as his supervisor for example. Instead, he gives the impression that the context of the situation is pushing him towards the idea that he has to publish. As Smail argues, distal powers are the kinds of powers that are difficult to identify, often not thought about, and therefore difficult to speak of. The vagueness and lack of specificity about ‘who’ or ‘what’ is doing the pushing are suggestive of such ‘distal’ forces.

David goes on to mitigate the importance of this ‘distal’ pushing, saying that what is being pushed towards is ‘just the idea’ that he has to publish. The word ‘just’ works to depreciate the significance of the pushing towards, and functions in a similar way to the word ‘only,’ such that any other things which might be being ‘pushed towards’ are excluded (for more on the word ‘just’ see Weltman, 2003; on the rhetoric

of the word ‘only’ see Billig, 1999a). David then provides a justification for the pushing, saying ‘and ... after all that *work* I should really publish something from the PhD’ (lines 30 to 31; emphasis his own). According to this reasonable form of justification, it is the amount of work that David has done on his thesis which is compelling him to publish, rather than any influence from his supervisor, or any wider institutional pressures. The justification instead comes from himself and all the work that he has done.

In summary, while David suggests that he is free to publish in *Discourse & Society*, he also suggests that he is not free to not publish at all. He may choose which particular journal to publish in, but he cannot choose not to publish anything (for more on the pressures to publish doctoral work, see Fox, 1983, 1984). It is in this sense that David’s autonomy is limited, but not only as a result of the supervisory relationship. While David denies that his supervisor has ‘pushed’ him towards publishing, he acknowledges that the ‘idea’ that he has to publish is being ‘pushed towards.’ But by whom or what, and how so, is left unsaid.

Power, trauma, and becoming disillusioned

In this final section of analysis we will follow up this theme of what is ‘not said’ in postgraduate life, turning to a case in which a doctoral student claims to have had ‘a few problems’ with her PhD. This is a story in which the student in question – ‘Anna’ – claims to have come close to leaving her course of study, for reasons which we will explore presently. It is suggested that the necessity for detailed discursive-ideological analysis lessens as the workings of power become more obvious and blatant. One of the central aims of an ideology critique is to expose the workings of power (Simons

and Billig, 1994). It therefore seems unnecessary to go into the detail of a case in which power is so clearly present (although see the recent debate in the pages of *Discourse & Society*: Schegloff, 1997; Wetherell, 1998; Schegloff, 1998; Billig, 1999b; Schegloff, 1999a; Billig, 1999c; Schegloff, 1999b).

At the time of interview, Anna was a 27 year old doctoral student, studying psychology at a 'new' university. Anna was in the second year of her doctorate, and on the day I visited her, she was in the middle of writing an abstract for a poster presentation, which she hoped to present at a conference taking place later in the year. Anna told me that she was not entirely sure whether her supervisors would be 'particularly amenable' to her attending this conference, however, and that it was 'fifty fifty' as to whether they were going to be supportive of her going or not. She had 'just gotten on and done it really.' Soon after, Anna said that this issue was the 'main thing' for her at the moment; for today, it was pretty much 'at the forefront' of her mind. The abstract was sent off to them now though, she said, and they can 'talk amongst themselves' and decide what they want to do. ('Them' being Anna's supervisors).

It appeared I had met with Anna at a particular sensitive moment. She seemed to be struggling with a live issue relating to her academic autonomy, which in turn reflected broader, more troubling issues relating to her overall experience as a PhD student. From the beginning of our interview until the very end, I found Anna attempting to describe and make sense of a variety of 'doctoral dilemmas,' many of which related to the 'crisis of confidence' which she said she experienced towards the end of the first year of her PhD. Although Anna implied that this crisis had been central to her recent life as a doctoral student, however, there nevertheless seemed to

be a lack of clarity or coherence about how she described it. Indeed, Anna did not, or could not, seem to articulate precisely what this crisis was about.

At the beginning of the interview, Anna said that about six months ago she had a 'bit of a crisis' in terms of the confidence she had in the methodology she was employing for her PhD. While she started off doing qualitative analysis, says she enjoyed doing the interviews, enjoyed doing the analysis, there was 'no agreement' between her and her supervisors over the themes. There was quite a lot of 'discrepancy,' she said, and 'arguments I spose' over what she was finding. Anna suggested that this might have arisen as a result of her being supervised by more than one person. Anna said that she had three supervisors: two supervisors and a Director of Studies. While she has to meet with them formally about three times a year, her Director of Studies prefers them to meet together 'all the time,' or 'as much as possible.' Anna said that it was an 'absolute nightmare' trying to get four people (herself and her supervisors) to agree on anything. She said that she doesn't feel comfortable with this; she would much prefer to meet with one person, or at the most two other people (on the dilemmas of having more than one supervisor, see Phillips & Pugh, 2000, pp. 116 – 118).

Anna went on to say that, in the end, she switched emphasis. Well, she had a 'huge paradigm shift I spose' from doing qualitative work to refocusing the emphasis of her PhD onto quantitative methods. She started using vignettes and questionnaire surveys, which she said she was making more progress with, and which her supervisors feel more comfortable with. So everything has gotten 'back on track,' but it has meant that she is 'a little behind.' Or her supervisors 'see' that she's behind; Anna doesn't necessarily agree with this. In any case, as a result, they're 'quite cagy' of Anna going to conferences and presenting her work, because they think that she

should be starting to think about writing her thesis up, considering that she is over eighteen months in now.

Later in the interview, Anna said that she doesn't know whether the crisis of confidence was mainly with herself, with the supervisors, or with the methodology; 'but whatever it wasn't working.' When she had her crisis, Anna said, her Director of Studies 'hit the roof.' She 'absolutely hit the roof.' Anna says that they had this one meeting where her Director of Studies was 'very angry very emotional' and told Anna that if she didn't understand her point of view, there was 'no way' that she was going to consider being her Director of Studies anymore. Basically, if she didn't agree with, or 'shut up and listen to what I'm saying,' then Anna was not going to be doing the PhD. Part of her Director of Studies' rationale for this, according to Anna, was that time was passing, and Anna wasn't going to finish within the three years. Anna said that in her annual report it mentions that although she has done 'a lot of work.' she still has an 'uphill struggle' to face before completion. Anna remarked that this is a 'horrible thing' to say to someone, especially when you're facing the remainder of your data collection, analysis, and writing up.

According to Anna's first version of the crisis, which she gave at the start of the interview, it was the lack of agreement, discrepancies and arguments over her qualitative themes which resulted in her having her crisis of confidence. When she comes to tell her second version of the crisis later in the interview, however, Anna claims not to know what her crisis was about; she says she does not know whether the crisis of confidence was with herself, her supervisors, or with the methodology. It could be that the variability and confusion in Anna's descriptions of her crisis is bound up with the potentially 'traumatic' nature of her crisis. There is a sense in which Anna has experienced trauma and distress similar to the kind Alison Lee and

Carolyn Williams (1999) discuss in their paper 'Forged in Fire.' Lee and Williams argue that the process of attaining an academic identity through the doing of a doctorate is often characterised by trauma, contradiction, and ambivalence. One form of doctoral trauma is the 'trauma of supervisory abandonment' which comes as a result of relinquishing student dependency in favour of academic autonomy. Anna's trauma in the present episode is not associated with supervisory abandonment, however, but rather with what she describes as her 'crisis of confidence' and the implied abuse of power on the part of her Director of Studies.

When she started her thesis, Anna says that she was very passionate about pursuing ideas and expressing them freely. She expected to have three years and 'everyday I'd be able to do research that I love.' However, she found that this was not to be the case; Anna said that it was very much that you're doing what somebody else wants you to do. And if you don't do that, you get effectively punished, or brought into line. Nevertheless, Anna said that she hopes to go on and do some kind of research-based job. Preferably not in a university, but if it has to be in a university environment, she would rather work as a Research Associate or Research Assistant. This is because she doesn't want to get involved in 'the politics.' She envisages something tied to a pre-defined project, because the 'more responsibility you get the more involved with the politics you get.' She had thought of maybe working for the women's section at the cabinet office, as she has a friend who works there.

Concluding remarks

According to the analysis presented in this paper, it appears that when liberal power is working successfully, it is often hidden, and buried within particular conversational

and discursive practices in quite complex and subtle ways. For example, through the use of pronouns and informal terms of address, the student-supervisor relationship can be presented as an egalitarian collaboration between colleagues of equal status. The pressures to publish doctoral work can appear to be the result of ‘distal forces’ that are difficult to speak of and hard to identify. And even when an implied abuse of power on the part of a supervisor appears to take place – when the workings of power become more obvious and blatant – a student’s crisis may still in a sense be ‘unknowable.’

It is ironic that these findings about the concealment and obfuscation of academic power can be applied just as easily to the research literature on doctoral study as they can to the phenomena of doctoral study itself. This is because in academic studies of doctoral education there is a tendency for authors to deny, hide, or push aside the inequality of the supervisory relationship, such that it appears as though power is literally ‘not present’ in liberal educational settings. Such studies seem to work in the interests of power, for they make it more difficult to identify and challenge the structures of power inherent in the PhD process. As Daphne Hewson (1999) explains,

[S]ince the supervisory relationship is not structurally egalitarian, an overtly egalitarian relationship simply submerges the structural power as a covert force. When power is not permitted to be recognized or named, it cannot be negotiated or challenged (p. 406).

Hiding of power might be especially necessary in the liberal university, where values of democracy and egalitarianism prevail, against a backcloth of institutional hierarchies and differences of power. There might be a need to disavow power structures and ideological values, especially in formal research reports and written

documents, because they threaten the egalitarian ethos of the liberal academy. In the *Colloquium* studies in the United States, Karen Tracy (1997) has found interesting differences between doctoral students and established academics in their accounts of the importance and mutability of rank and power. Tracy highlights how those of higher rank ‘thought the advantages of rank could be minimized more easily than those of lower rank’ (p. 81) and how ‘[f]aculty members underestimate the role of their power; graduate students overestimate the contribution of power differences’ (p. 146; see also Billig *et al.*, 1988 on the ‘hunched-shouldered authority’). Given that researchers of doctoral education tend to be supervisors, there is a sense in which the ‘absence’ of power in research studies might more accurately be labelled an ‘avoidance’ or a ‘willed forgetting’ of the structures of power that perpetuate supervisors’ domination over their students (Billig, 1999a). From this perspective, it is not surprising that doctoral researchers tend not to study their own power or the power at play in the relationships they are analysing, because in doing so they risk weakening their own supervisory power. In making power more visible, it becomes easier to identify and challenge; supervisors become ‘accountable.’

It appears to be doubly difficult to bring to the foreground patterns of inequality in higher education, then, because the hiding of power occurs not only at the level of the ‘phenomena,’ but also at the level of the ‘research’ that attempts to elucidate the ‘phenomena.’ Indeed, there might even be a triple hiding taking place in the present context, for research which claims to expose power cannot claim to be completely without power. In purporting to identify and ‘reveal’ patterns of power, social researchers often imply that their own words and the positions they occupy are lacking in power. But a certain degree of power is necessary if one is to point to power elsewhere; personal and social resources must be drawn upon in order to ‘see

into' power relationships and show their workings. As such, in revealing power, one may also be concealing power, whether it is one's own power, the relationships of power one is working within, or even the power that one is seeking to reveal.

Indeed, the present paper cannot claim to be separated off from the power relations it has sought to expose. After all, this is a study which has been taken from work done as part of the author's own doctoral thesis project. The processes of my own supervision as a doctoral student are completely absent from the surface of the present text, however, only coming through in subtle and implicit ways: in patterns of argument, theorising and analysis, and in certain stylistic features of the writing. The shadowy figure of my supervisor, though appearing alongside other academic authors in the written text of this article, is never explicitly identified as a co-author. What is missing are his supervisory contributions – the comments, the suggestions, and the touch ups – which helped to construct the doctoral thesis from which the present work has been taken. The supervisor has disappeared from this text, then, but not from the practices that produced the text.

In attempting to address forms of power that previous studies of doctoral education have neglected, the present study has also participated in the disguising of that power. Just as no argument or practice is inherently ideological, so no research approach is inherently emancipatory. The workings of power are never completely revealed. Thus, the present study has participated in both revealing and concealing the workings of academic power.

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Appendix: Transcription Notation

The transcription notation used in this study is a simplified and modified version of the system developed by Jefferson (1984) for conversation analysis.

Notation	Definition
,	A pause is indicated with a comma.
(yes)	Minimal acknowledgement tokens by speaker (usually the interviewer) during an interlocutor's turn appear in rounded brackets.
((eating))	Commentary appears in double rounded brackets.
I- we	The abrupt cutting off of a word is marked with a dash.
<i>twice</i>	Speaker emphasis is indicated with italics.
ERM	An increased in volume is indicated with capitals.
woHHrk	Within-speech or interpolated laughter is marked with capital aitches (see Jefferson, 1985).
?	Questioning intonation is indicated by a question mark.

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ⁱ This paper is taken from a research project on social science doctoral education in the United Kingdom (Stanley, 2004; Stanley & Billig, 2004a, 2004b). There are important disciplinary differences in the ways in which doctoral postgraduates are trained in the humanities and social sciences as compared with the natural sciences and engineering (see Delamont, Atkinson & Parry, 2000). As such, the arguments and findings of the present study are only intended to apply to doctoral education and training in the social sciences.

ⁱⁱ British doctoral students in the social sciences are generally supervised by one or more academic members of staff. They do not have a thesis ‘committee’ as do doctoral candidates in the United States. Also, in the United Kingdom, the Doctor of Philosophy degree is thesis only, and does not consist of a coursework element. Nevertheless, the theory, method, and findings of the present study are considered to be applicable to any doctoral candidates at the thesis stage, irrespective of their locale (see Clark, 1993).

ⁱⁱⁱ The student and supervisor in this extract have not been anonymised, and the details of their story have not been altered or disguised. Both participants gave permission for their identities to be revealed.