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Building individual expertise in doctoral studies the significance of everyday experiences and changing contexts

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Abstract

High expectations for skills are directed at doctors and doctoral students in the fast changing global time. Innovative solutions to the genuine problems of society are expected of the new doctors. The expectations for skills that accumulate through the everyday experiences and different contexts, and the requirements for experts in working life are experienced as partially conflicting by the doctoral students themselves. The expertise of doctoral students is individual – it forms in the long term in different everyday contexts and is built from several individual elements. The experiences and expertise of doctoral students forms differently in different contexts. The everyday experiences and contexts are significant for forming the expertise, especially for the female doctoral students with a family.

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1. Introduction

Different global and social changes are reflected in the universities, in the education offered by them and in the expectations set for the education. The extensive change requires extensive adaptation, comprehensive understanding and concrete actions. The changes are also reflected in the doctoral education of universities. An attempt is made to answer better than before to the demands for competence in working life with the doctoral education and at the same time education is being intensified and systematized (Cumming, 2010). Internationally, the doctoral education has indeed been unified and attention has been paid to the new demands for competence. Still, the constant change in the contexts forces discussion concerning the future of the doctoral education and the graduating doctors.

Previously, the doctoral education had an elitist stamp and the education was within the reach of few people. Since the doctoral studies have become common when examined internationally and in principle they are accessible to all. At present the doctoral education is understood as high-quality expert education and the expectations towards doctoral education and graduating doctors are increasing. The academic education produces general competence and skills and not the specific professional skills to the marked tasks. The skills which are acquired through doctoral education are narrow and specialized but the increasingly strong trend is that the gained skills need to have utility value (Cumming, 2010).

2. The doctors' individual skills and expertise

The skills of an individual develop in many different contexts and they form into individual capital. The nature of expertise is developing continuously, it is not made complete, for example, by completing different merits. The doctors' skills differentiate according to the contents and research of the field that is studied. At the same time different skills which are related to the project

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knowledge, analytic, communication and practical skills are attached to the doctors' expertise. The doctors' skills can vary depending on the field and the skills that are acquired through individual experiences also define the expertise. The doctors' skills increase in the experiential operation of everyday actions, partly by quietly adopting different ways of action in different contexts. It is significant that of the future doctors only a fraction continues their career in academic tasks, the majority moves to or continues in employment of other working life (Boud, & Lee, 2009; Baker, & Lattuca, 2010.) The identification and recognition of different expertise is important, as well as from the perspective of an individual, university and working life.

The everyday contexts of operation affect the doctoral student's developing and individual skills strongly. For their part the significant experiences which accumulate in everyday and changing contexts help to modify and build different skills and create the future expert career. The individual's experience of everyday life and operation in the different contexts often stay in the margin in defining doctors' skills. In practice the doctoral studies are undertaken from variable starting points, also the everyday concrete contexts and the objectives for the future are varied. It is often assumed that the doctoral students are a heterogeneous group: young people and without a family, who have only recently completed their Master of Arts degree, and who complete their doctoral thesis quickly and in paid employment in the university. Young doctors are certainly a trend which is becoming common internationally but still there are also others among the doctoral students.

In this article I examine the everyday experiences of under 40-year-old female doctoral students with a family and the changing contexts and their significance from the perspective of the developing skills and expertise. Also Pearson, Cumming, Evans, Macauley and Ryland (2011) remind us that individual doctoral students' lifecourse which is composed of individual sectors is continuously changing and the situations vary during the process of gaining a doctoral degree.

3. Methodology

The article is based on my doctoral thesis in pedagogics (Maunula 2014). The subjects of the study were 12 under 40-year-old female doctoral students with a family who were at different stages and in different fields in their doctoral studies in three different Finnish universities. The aim is to make more visible and to understand the difference in lifecourses of the doctoral students, their different starting points, their everyday life and their objectives as well as the significance of different contexts and experiences from the perspective of the forming expertise.

The research material consisted of 12 narrative theme interviews. The analysis of the material was the thematic content analysis which developed hermeneutically and narratively. The research process contains features of hermeneutic study to which I also apply phenomenological and narrative analysis.

4. Skills which are formed through the doctoral student's different contexts

4.1 Experiences before and during the doctoral studies

The backgrounds of the female doctoral students with a family in my study were diverse in practice. Generally some of the doctoral students come directly from the Master of Arts studies and are hoping for a career as a researcher, in which case the practical work experience acquired by them outside the university is often minor. Some of the doctoral students examined by me had an extensive working career outside the university before the doctoral studies and some had fairly limited work experience but in turn their study history was intensively efficient. The different doctoral students themselves appreciated all their accumulated work experience, especially international and experience of their own field was evaluated to be valuable in the future. Some had other additional education which they assessed as bringing an individual character to their skills and answer the need for multidisciplinary competence.

The doctoral degree project shapes the individual in many ways (Barnacle & Mewburn 2010). One's own identity is in part recreated, the professional identity also changes with the different contexts and interaction networks. Usually doctoral students pay little attention to the development process of their expertise during the doctoral studies. Comprehensive perception of the process of gaining a doctoral degree was regarded as challenging on the basis also of this material. During the doctoral studies, varying degrees of awareness were used in different social contexts in adopting the future doctoral roles to be pursued and to be avoided. According to Leonard (2001), women would benefit from more specific guidance or mentoring in their doctoral studies in addition to the general supervision of studies. According to the female doctoral students, there would indeed be the need for more comprehensive guidance and mentoring at the first stages of the process of gaining a doctoral degree, and that would have increased the effectiveness of the first stage. The women with a family need versatile and extensive information for the comprehensive development of a doctoral career.

4.2 Significance of the method of undertaking the doctoral studies

The ones who undertook their doctoral studies as paid work at the university, usually in doctoral education, adopted the practices of an academic world and were socialized in them. The academic culture was experienced as both encouraging and competitive. The closest research fellows functioned as peer support, especially other women with a family shared a similar situation and everyday life. The significance of the experienced peer support was emphasized in the busy everyday life, coloured

by demands, of the female doctoral student with a family. The significance of the similar backgrounds and experiences was important and mutual envy was not mentioned in my material. According to the women, every one earned their status due to their own knowledge and skills and on the basis of their achievements relating to research.

In everyday contexts, skills of general usefulness also accumulated. In the everyday life of a family especially time management skills of the female doctoral students increased. The ones who undertook their doctoral studies in addition to other work developed especially strong organizational skills. Their everyday life was intensive and scheduled, in which the clear systematic model of operation was an absolute. The organizational skills and effectiveness would also be central skills in the future, as the career proceeds. Also coping with uncertainty and constant prioritization were skills which became refined in the women's everyday contexts. According to my study, it is more challenging for a woman than for a man (also Moen, & Sweet, 2004) to combine academic research work and family, especially, when both are at an intensive stage.

5 The doctors' skills and expectations of the working life

5.1 Do the skills and the expectations meet?

According to female doctoral students, employment as a doctor seemed challenging, especially when examined during the process of graduating with a doctoral degree. According to them, in the working life the awareness of the skills of graduating doctors was inadequate and too much emphasis was on research, casting a shadow on other skills. On the other hand, according to them the real reality of the working life and requirements for skills were not fully realized even in the doctoral education. The situation caused uncertainty at the individual level regarding the usability of acquired education and skills.

According to the women, the doctoral education was rewarding and meaningful but getting employment after graduating still seemed a major challenge while the studies were unfinished. Nowadays the work careers are individual and reflect constant self-development in the entrepreneurial spirit. The doctors' employment and the working life benefitting from the doctors are current causes for consideration (among others, Leonard, & Becker, 2009). Competition for academic work opportunities has hardened with the doctoral degrees becoming more common, yet simultaneously the structural change of the economic life anticipates better possibilities for the doctors to be employed in the business world (Neumann, & Tan, 2011).

The views on accomplishing the doctoral thesis vary from the product to the process of developing expertise (Stubb, Pyhältö & Lonka, 2012a). A more comprehensive approach is striven for in developing the supervision of doctoral studies, in which attention is paid both to the starting points and the career expectations of the future (Bitusikova 2009). According to my interpretation, the doctoral student's own stronger orientation to the future work assignments would help to perceive the process in the longer term and it would motivate them to sketch different self-imposed visions for the future.

5.2 Continuous learning and utilising of experiences

The women in my study had adopted the ethos of lifelong learning profoundly and deeply personally. According to them, the expertise includes constantly adopting the new, learning and developing. It would be natural and also an essential part of the desired work of the future. The doctoral education is a multi-dimensional process which should be examined comprehensively and from different perspectives. It is a process which expands general capability, capability for special expertise and the identity (Kogan, 2000). Billett (2001) points out justifiably that the expert does not manage with schematic thinking in the working life of today; nobody gives clear instructions, there are no ready solutions, performance is not measured with simple indicators and mistakes are not a taboo.

Female doctoral students appreciated all their experiential and contextual skills capital which they had acquired during their lifecourse. Their awareness of their own skills varied. The acquired work experience and skills were perceived as valuable capital and it was seen to have a connection also to the work opportunities of the future. According to the women, the work and education career which had formed would also be reflected in some way in the future expert career. An interesting observation in the material was that the women who had the most extensive work careers were most worried about their future career and the ones with quite a minor career did not worry about it. Perhaps the worry of the first mentioned is empirical: they knew that with a higher level of education the competition and the demands for the expert work assignments would tighten.

There is no exact information about the whole process of graduating with a doctoral degree, the skills formed during that process or future visions which are related to it (Lee, & Boud, 2009). In any case the women in my study were conscious about the significance of the experiences and the different contexts even though earlier they had not reacted to them with particular awareness or target-orientation. One development idea for the doctoral studies could indeed be the higher awareness of the different components of one's own individual expertise.

5.3 Meaningfulness and everyday challenges

Women studying for a doctoral degree were still convinced of the meaningfulness of their field in spite of the competitiveness, uncertainty and demands and wanted to develop themselves and their field in the future. The female doctoral students emphasized that the meaningful study subject was promoting their commitment to the research work (also Leonard, Becker & Coate, 2005).

According to them, finding a meaningful field and study subject defeated the everyday adversities and challenges that belonged to the work, such as financing worries, slow progress and constant lack of time. The pleasure that was received from working with a meaningful study subject, publications, financing and the insights into contents were significant everyday experiences which encouraged them to continue.

At the same time, it was important to pay attention to the changing world according to the women— both large and smaller contexts are changing constantly. The globalization and the different network based solutions make it possible to get to the core of the own discipline, also from the middle of the commitments of everyday family life. According to the women, the research was not separate from everyday life, something that takes place in the researcher's chamber or is mystical. It was ordinary everyday work and it would be possible to be in the core of scientific research, even if one was geographically far away and caught in the contexts of everyday life. According to the women's experiences, new skills such as online communication and networking, as well as efficient time management skills, increased alongside the core skills in science. The scientific and the ordinary can indeed be interpreted as closer to each other still – science reaches everyday life more strongly and scientific work is interwoven with everyday life, in everyday and changing contexts.

6 Conclusion

The skills that are acquired in the doctoral studies are formed over a long period. They are built as lifelong and lifewide learning in the different everyday contexts during the whole lifecourse. Not all skills can be documented. The core of the process of gaining a doctoral degree is an active individual, pursuing the expertise, their own study and the scientific community which link with real contexts. Barnacle and Mewburn (2010) emphasize this process being comprehensive and reflected in the identity and in which one becomes the expert of their own field, a scholarly person. The process of gaining a doctoral degree changes the human being and different people change differently. The change in one matter is unavoidably reflected in the whole.

A more comprehensive and wider approach is supported for the doctoral education (Cumming 2010). The doctoral education is in between the new and the old time. The traditional academic doctoral education is becoming competence based and strengthening the new models of thinking and operation. At the same time the creative component of working on the thesis is emphasized, rigorous external control or tying it to a time and place is not suitable for it. The flexible individual orientation of doctoral studies points to the importance of continuous learning, not only completing the degree (also Pearson etc. 2011). Halse & Mowbray (2011) emphasize that the clearly shown benefits and advantages of doctoral studies are multi-dimensional, they cannot be unambiguously proven, measured or evaluated. Globally the doctoral studies are expected to yield a profit for the investment which on the other hand demonstrates restricted understanding of the doctoral studies and at the same time restricts the different dimensions of the process of gaining a doctoral degree.

The graduating doctors face a very different society, reality and future compared to how it was in earlier decades. The increase in the number of doctors, the change in the form of knowledge and information and overall change in the doctoral education create the need to examine the current practices and foundations in doctoral education. The doctoral degree qualifies graduates better than before for the demanding expert tasks of the working life (Dill, Mitra, Jensen, Lehtinen, Mäkelä, Parpala, Pohjola, Ritter, & Saari, 2006) and the doctors' employment outside a traditional academic context has become common (Neumann, & Tan, 2011). The change forces discussion about the future of the doctoral education and of prospective doctors. The doctoral education is expected to answer the demands and expectations set for it, these are being set also by the future doctors (Boud, & Lee, 2009). Within the contents and practices of the doctoral education it would be of high quality to pay attention to the needs of working life and of prospective doctors looking to different careers. It would be positive to clarify also the significance of the transfer effect of previously gathered knowledge and in a way that can be adopted personally (Dill etc., 2006). The doctoral student's contexts contribute in many ways in the learning process (Stubb, Pyhältö, & Lonka, 2012b) and thus the future doctors' rakentuva developing skills are quite individual – one cannot talk about the doctors by generalizing but about the individually skilled experts who are equipped to operate in the changing contexts.

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