Reflections on the status of a doctoral defence

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There is a dearth of published material exploring the PhD 'viva voce' examination as a particular social encounter where a critical relationship obtains between doctoral student and examiners, and among examiners themselves; such indeed occurs in a context of imprecise criteria and role ambiguity. The paper examines the problems of viva dynamics, arguing for a better understanding of how and why a viva is a 'lottery'.

'O one cannot avoid having to objectify the objectifying subject'


Preamble

There is today an increasing emphasis on reflexive accounts as an integral and public aspect of sociological research (e.g. Burgess 1984, p.1; Sociology, special issue on auto/biography, 27, 1, 1993). Reflecting on the very process of doing research is one of the foremost contemporary developments and admissions in the social sciences. An interesting amount of literature is increasingly being focused on a methodological critique of sociological practice, applying the sociological imagination inward and introspectively to 'make the familiar strange', to widen, democratise and liberalise the narrative about how things get done.

The Argument

My task here is to briefly but critically 'think aloud' about one such process at the very heart of sociology, both as a profession as well as an academic discipline. I am referring to one particular aspect of the doctoral process, the ultimate academic hurdle which confers the equivalent of a professional warrant to erstwhile apprentices of academe. My project stems in part from a realisation that the doctoral exercise is itself a manifestation of a social practice and is not - should not - be exempt from the scrutinising method of sociology.

In this context, I would argue that there is more to be said about the viva voce encounter, the doctoral defence which is meant to mark the "successful completion of a long, arduous but ultimately rewarding experience" (Smith 1991, p.56). The event is a problematic one because it may often fail to acknowledge and to render more explicit the tension between being examiners, peers and/or examinees; nor may the actors involved be prepared enough for what they may interpret as a merely formal occasion.

Doctoral Research as Process

One set of the ever growing amount of literature focusing on the doctoral experience tends to be evaluative, strictly in terms of output and quantitative investigation (e.g. Achor & Morales 1990; Baird 1990; Rau & Leonard 1990). Other texts are somewhat strategically cast, outlining a fairly standardised advice package on research design and thesis writing (e.g. Allan & Skinner 1991; Becker 1986; Dunleavy 1986; Murell 1990). A dearth nevertheless remains in treating the doctoral event as a process and as the context for very particular social encounters. These form hitherto invisible narratives, or 'inside stories' (Tayeb 1991); possibly perpetuating the myth that the exercise is lonely, asocial and self-sustaining.

One crucial doctoral dynamic is, of course, the student-supervisor relationship. This dyadic encounter has been evaluated as exemplary of role problems encountered in the pursuit of research, with many possible variations worth analysing, not
only for perfunctory reasons, but for the crucial importance that the relationship enjoys within the certification process. As with every other relationship intended to last and deliver, it becomes imperative to establish a correct role pattern which serves as a benchmark whereby the two parties involved enter into a mutually beneficial and productive process of management (e.g. ESRC 1992; Martindale 1979; Phillips 1980, 1987).

But what remains generally missing from the literature is any consideration of another crucial role relationship, just as much part and parcel of the doctoral process and indeed, as I hope to show, even more difficult to unpack. I am referring here to the relationship between student and examiners during the PhD defence (the viva voce). Although far leaner in terms of time and personal involvement than the student-supervisor dyad, the interrelationships in a viva are differently critical to the doctoral outcome; more so in variants of the British system where supervisors are not members of doctoral examining boards.

A Sociology of Absence

The PhD world - particularly in the British system, where the programme is still very loosely structured and 'elusive' (Rubin & Davis 1981) - has been compared to an 'ill defined limbo' (Wason 1974). My assessment of a doctoral defence per se, based on personal experience and discussions with colleagues, is not dissimilar. The crucial distinction being that, whereas books and papers which explore and conceptualise the doctoral process have been published and circulated, writings about the viva encounter have been conspicuous by their absence or else by their relative disregard in texts bearing a wider scope.

Phillips & Pugh (1989) is a typical text, staple and recommended reading to those starting on their doctoral adventure in a British University. It dedicates two full chapters (38 pages) to student-supervisor issues; but the oral examination gets less than a page of consideration. Smith (1991) carries a more promising title; but what examiners look for is understood by the author to refer exclusively to the thesis manuscript. The viva figures only as a cursory appendage in a concluding paragraph. Burnham (1994) perspicaciously acknowledges the need to dispel some of the mythology surrounding the viva; he also quotes Becker (1986, p.167) in suggesting that doctoral candidates bring their sociological craft to bear on their own situation. Still, viva dynamics are not among the issues considered by this author in detail.

Explanations for this 'black box bias' are not difficult to propose. The doctoral oral examination is, in itself, a brief, temporal encounter. A description is pithily provided by Burnham (1994, p.31):

"The candidate is ushered into the internal's office to shake hands with the external he/she may have cited (even revered) but in all probability never met. This is followed by approximately two/three hours of fitful conversation in which the candidate makes numerous nervous gaffes and the examiners mechanically take turns probing areas that are often peripheral to the thesis but reflect their area specialisms".

Nonetheless, the event is the crux of the initiation ceremony, an important 'rit de passage' and therefore remains least assailable to critique; perhaps because of the magic and mystery that it may be meant to infuse. This is a process of mystification readily cultivated by professors (the high priests of the sociological cadres) to increase the legitimacy of their standing and reduce critical interference into the discretion which they invariably must exercise during the episode. From an organisational perspective, the silence can be read as the closing of ranks by a bureaucracy which considers that viva data is classified, perhaps because it is potentially embarrassing - are not examiners, after all, only human? The examination may therefore also be evaluated as a holy cow; a paradigm. Scrutinizing its inner operations can be construed as an act of sabotage, a disreputable enterprise. It can therefore lead to reprisals which can seriously damage one’s standing, career prospects and respect among peers and eminent colleagues in the somewhat incestuous world of academe.

There is already sketchy acknowledgement that the doctoral defence encounter is problematic. Interestingly, Francis (1976), a non-sociologist, comments on the nuances of the definition of a doctoral thesis as "an original contribution to knowledge", a nebulous phrase which constitutes a potential ambiguity. Furthermore, concerns which have become ascendant in more recent years, and often reflected in amended official guidelines to doctoral thesis writing and presentation, speak also in terms of a sufficient awareness and grasp of
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methodological issues. The relationship and relative status of the ‘what’ and the ‘how’ can blur further the definition of the viva situation.

Viva Dynamics

But these deliberations avoid coming to grips with another important dynamic. The examiners are essentially gatekeepers to the profession. They stand to appraise and judge the work as satisfactory and therefore its author as worthy of joining the select club. The erstwhile student can therefore supervise and examine in turn the theses of other aspirants. Such a statement harbours a camouflaged situation of conflict of roles, a status problem which may prove to be irreconcilable. What indeed is the relationship between examination and peer acknowledgement? To what extent is the viva a celebration of professional endorsement? What is the respective authority of the parties involved?

The resolution of these and similar questions is, at least to me, difficult yet fraught with implications as to the actual procedure of a viva and on its all-important ruling to the students. Typically, students have embarked on an area of specialised research which should place them at the top of the field. Out of the persons present at the examination, the students ought therefore to be best placed in terms of knowledge and substantive expertise on the specific subject matter of their thesis. The examiners, for their part, would typically have some exposure/competence in the field under scrutiny; they would also be at least as familiar as the students with the general framework, theoretical underpinnings and/or research method(s) utilised. Nonetheless, their privilege is meant to be based not on these criteria but on their role as representatives of the academic peer group to which the students are hoping to gain access (Phillips & Pugh 1989, p.124). Hence situations can arise in the viva where examiners mistake or misinterpret their privilege, extending this to, say, the interpretation of data where, realistically, the student may prove the stronger party. Professional authority may be easily confused and replaced by the authority of knowledge or technique (Freire 1972, p.59). The viva is not meant to catch a person out but to explore the capacity for original and in-depth thought (Parsloe 1993, p.59). But is there any guarantee that it will indeed end up doing so?

Students, in turn, may be hopelessly forced to resolve a conflict of reaction: Should they, on the strength of their data, specialist knowledge and familiarity with the topic, go for a thorough and robust defence of their content and method, which may be rewarded but may also be interpreted as a bout of exhibitionistic arrogance and excessive verve? Or else should they opt for an accommodation to examiners’ remarks and judgements - unfair and unfounded though these may be - which may therefore appease the examiners who thus credit the students with not being conceited and presumptuous but open to constructive criticism? But then, may not such behaviour be alternatively interpreted as cowed servility and even as a non-defence? Are students obliged to concoct there and then a skilful combination of assertiveness and assent, a recipe which must ‘learn the culture’ (Bourdieu 1977), taking into consideration the temperament of examiners as well as the expectations of the university or faculty tradition?

Either way, it may cost the students the award of a PhD, or influence the nature of that award. The power relationship hovers hesitatingly between one of equality and of inequality; with the students probably obliged, to clinch a positive outcome, to satisfy their examiners/peers that they are both examiners and peers. The transactional self of students must be cast as that of an adult as well as that of a child; that one is open and sympathetic to criticism but that one can defend one’s point of view.

These are important considerations which go beyond the discussion about the cramming and anxiety beleaguering students in the run-up to their comprehensive oral examination (Wolensky et al. 1980).

Viva examiners are bound to enrich this discussion by articulating their own strategies and constraints as they are brought to bear in the viva encounter. Examiners may be more intent to impress, not to contradict or to positively complement each other in their studied remarks, rather than (or in preference to) listening to and engaging with the student. Examiners may feel that their reputation is at stake, unless they somehow prove to be more knowledgeable or to be capable of prising open an argument; hence, an element of critique may be indulged in perfunctorily. On the other hand, being nominated as doctoral thesis examiners is not an everyday occurrence and may
be a valuable addition to one's curriculum vitae. This bonus notwithstanding, examiners may owe other favours to the supervisors who suggested them as examiners in the first place. Hence, they may prove reluctant to offend and may even feel obliged not to rock the boat, now that it is in sight of harbour. Probably, most examiners do not enjoy being unpleasant, if anything because those who acquire a reputation for being disagreeable or unpredictable, simply don't get proposed as examiners in the first place or the next time round. Hence, they lose out in a process of semi-natural selection. This may sound scandalous all the more because it is meant to be treated as esoteric knowledge.

Doing the Viva

How therefore does one do a viva? Doctoral students approaching their oral examination are often advised to remember that the viva is a defence, and meant to be one. This is precious advice to counterbalance the often positive and encouraging remarks made with all good intentions by supervisors, fellow students and other academics who know the student’s work and who gauge that encouragement and positive feedback are best in the going circumstance. This is, after all, meant to be “the student’s day” (Parsloe 1993, p.59) and “a chance to parade ... hard earned expertise” (Burnham 1994, p.33).

But the counsel against complacency masks further, dubious considerations. To what extent is a viva meant to be a lottery? To what extent is the notion of a defence to be taken literally? Is the Roman dictum, that attack is the best means of defence, applicable to a doctoral oral examination encounter? Is the management of one’s examiners - not to mention the management of the examiners' own inter-relationship and relative assessment of each other’s discretion and privilege - as, or more, important than the substance of one’s thesis when it comes to the final crunch?1

I distinctly remember asking my own examiners during my viva whether I should pursue a protracted qualification of a point with which there was a disagreement of interpretation. I felt obliged to manage the viva as two overlapping but distinct texts. One was the more academic script, where the discipline of a grounded and interpretative critique would hold sway and where its pursuit was encouraged, expected and would be ultimately rewarded. The second was more intuitive, and required a sensibility to a confluence of power which prescribed whether to push forwards or bend backwards, whether a position was debatable or final. My defence was ultimately successful but the experience was not pleasant. And the post viva ‘celebration’ was an odd, anomic after effect: I kept asking myself: What should I be saying to my erstwhile examiners?

Recently, a U.K. doctoral student spoke in public about what was referred to as a conspiracy of silence. This constitutes a form of professional exclusion which bestows unchecked power on two academics to make or break, as viva examiners, a candidate’s career (British Sociological Association Network Newsletter, May 1993, p.7). Apart from the merits of this special, but possibly not unique, case, I cannot help agreeing with the unnamed author that it would be at least interesting to hear of the experiences of other academics (and sociologists in particular) about the final PhD viva encounter2. Students and examiners alike are still shirking from publicly espousing the narrative of their defence experience(s) and have so far failed to bring to bear the tools of their trade on this very special case of participant observation.

Sociologists often declare with pride that it is the mission and destiny of their craft to pose questions where none seem to exist; to propose a critical perspective to what otherwise might appear as scientifically intact; a given, a statement of fact. Admittedly, however, the process is as illuminating as it is subversive (e.g. Giddens 1982, p.2). Difficulties may and do emerge when the custodians and curators of the ‘truth’ take

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1 A comparative backdrop with the practice in the USA/Canada is pertinent here. The resort to a dissertation committee approach may complicate certain issues (such as inter-examiner tensions), leaving the doctoral examinee with a major negotiation exercise at hand. The event, however, becomes less liable to individual idiosyncrasies as well as less privatised.

2 A CD-ROM search has identified only two items in the public domain on such a topic. Neither is in English and, with no abstracts available, it is not possible to tell whether they raise arguments relevant or similar to the ones found in this paper. See Hernadi (1982) and Zaks (1989).
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objection to pursuits which erode their authority and legitimacy, expose their hidden interests and agendas, reveal decisions as political, deconstruct the aura and mystique into more of the same human endeavours. But what happens when the truth-makers are themselves members of the subverting profession?

To sum up, it appears that the viva voce encounter needs to be recognised explicitly as harbouring a key problem, that of a combination of silence, imprecise criteria and role ambiguity. In sociological terms, there is a clear lack of structure. This condition is not liable to improve since the viva event is intended as a on-off interaction of the participants. There is no way of establishing mutual expectations and understandings; no prior insights afforded regarding the choice of examining style - such organisation only develops during the viva (Fineman 1993, p.11). Hence it is a shaky platform which gives rise to personal idiosyncrasies and latitudes, all the more when the parties are unprepared for such an experience. One must note here that most doctoral supervisors and examiners, in Britain and elsewhere, have not had the opportunity to undergo training in, or evaluation of, supervisory practice or examination procedure.

The sociological mission, being interpretative, reflective and grounded, would be hard put to justify its credibility were it to refuse to turn on itself the full weight of its techniques, even on this most esoteric of its ceremonies.

This, then, is 'an article for burning'3: Its gist is that one cannot fail to leave unquestioned and unexamined this very significant milestone in the academic discipline. Published literature and commentary on the viva event is still - apart from scant - very much a domain of the bland. Indeed, published accounts of an auto-interrogative character should join the staple diet of reading lists, better preparing doctoral students for what is, in more senses than one, their defence. Role playing scenarios of the viva encounter within doctoral programmes may further assist students to come to better terms with the possibilities of procedure and negotiation and to both appreciate and cultivate a sense of strategic flexibility.

Of course, the task is by no means an easy one. There is evidently not enough on the actual practices of PhD vivas. Even this very paper is based on a very select corpus of data, this being mainly my own anecdotal and jaundiced recollection of a one-off event. It includes no interviews, no sad tales from those whose thesis has been deferred or awarded a lower degree. Such a wider base of viva ethnography and narrative would have provided the framework to a much more substantive piece.

Nevertheless, the viva, like any other peculiar social encounter, conditions and limits the uses and depth of research methodology.

Sad viva tales are best forgotten or glossed over; those who have re-examination ordeals prefer to privatise their experience; only a successful viva is good enough to boost one's academic capital. There is strong pressure within the academic body corporate to recollect the viva event as nothing but a personal triumph. After all, there are few social worlds where power depends so strongly on belief (Bourdieu 1988, p.91).

Note

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References


3 With apologies to Bourdieu 1988: Chapter 2 which adopts the title 'A Book for Burning'. This is inspired by a renegade mandarin who so titled a work in which he revealed the rules of the mandarins' game.


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