

Doctoral rites and liminal spaces: academics without PhDs in South Africa and Australia

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Abstract

Academics without PhDs are common in developing countries and among lecturers from marginalised communities, yet the literature on doctoral education largely ignores them. This qualitative study aimed to address that gap by interviewing academics without PhDs in South Africa and Australia. Their narratives of betwixt and betweenness contribute to theories of liminality as well as doctoral education. Liminality is traditionally conceptualised as a linear, vertical process with clear rites of passage. However, in our study, the interviewees were not only facing a vertical trajectory between non-PhD and post-PhD status but also a lateral trajectory between staff and student identity. The research confirms the importance of distinguishing between transient and permanent liminality in an occupational context. For those who had given up studying, liminality was permanent. Liminality was also affected by dynamically interconnecting factors including age, gender, race, ethnicity, relations with supervisors, time and location.

Keywords:

Doctoral education; liminality; Indigenous academics; academic work; doctoral supervision

Introduction

Academics without PhDs have been largely ignored in theory and research on doctoral education and academic work. Yet they are a critical issue in developing countries where the proportion of staff with a PhD is often less than 50% (Jorgensen 2012), and in developed countries where there is a drive to widen university participation to include previously marginalised groups.¹

This paper explores the issue in South Africa and Australia in a research collaboration forged through the Australia–Africa Universities Network (AAUN) which provided seed funding for an internationally collaborative pilot study that would identify useful directions for further research. In South Africa, only 43.8% of academics in permanent positions had PhDs in 2015 (DHET 2017a) compared with 69.4% (excluding casual staff) in Australia in 2016 (DET 2016). In both countries, the proportions of academics with PhDs from historically marginalised groups were lower than the national average. In 2015, only 33% of black academics in South Africa had PhDs (Breier and Herman 2017). There are no publicly available official figures for the qualifications of Indigenous academics in Australia but in 2013 it was reported that only 15% had PhDs (Schofield, O'Brien, and Gilroy 2013).

Our research included interviews with 15 individuals who had managed to attain academic positions in the field of education (13 permanent, one sessional and one in a scholarship/employment scheme) without a doctoral qualification. From the narratives they presented in interviews, most appeared to be in liminal spaces that had both lateral and vertical trajectories. They were not only betwixt and between non-PhD and post-PhD status (the vertical trajectory that any doctoral

student would face), but also betwixt and between staff and student identity (a lateral trajectory). Both the vertical and horizontal liminalities were transitory if the individual eventually attained their PhD, but for those who had given up the quest, liminality of both kinds was a permanent feature of their working lives. The research challenges the traditional conceptualisation of liminality as a linear, vertical process with clear rites of passage (Van Gennep [1908] 1960; Turner 1969) by advancing the concepts of permanent and transient liminality described by Ybema, Beech, and Ellis (2011) and Bamber, Allen-Collinson, and McCormack (2017). The former's research was conducted in business organisational contexts and the latter among teaching only academics at research-intensive universities in the UK. Our research shows the importance of the concepts in another occupational field of growing concern.

There are several similarities between South Africa and Australia that are relevant to this study. In both countries, black and Indigenous peoples were historically marginalised from formal education and are underrepresented in PhD cohorts and academic workforces. Note that in South Africa, the racial categorisations constructed under apartheid persist to this day, as the country tries to redress the injustices of the past. Nomenclature varies but the current dominant categories are Black (capitalised) or African, coloured, Indian and white. The generic term for all categories other than white is 'black' (lower case). 'Indigenous' refers collectively to the diverse original peoples of Australia and is commonly used interchangeably with the designation 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples' and capitalised for its specific rather than generic use. In South Africa, blacks constitute 92% of the population yet only 50% of permanent academics (DHET 2017b). In Australia, the Indigenous population constitutes almost 3% of the total population (ABS 2018) but in 2016 only 0.7% of all academic staff (DET 2016) (latest available figures). Both countries have policies to redress these imbalances. In South Africa they are associated with a drive for 'transformation' (DHET 2017a) and in Australia with the equity principle of the international widening participation movement for proportional participation rates for underrepresented, identified 'equity groups' (Gale and Parker 2013).

In both countries, institutions that concentrated on undergraduate or vocational qualifications were compelled to offer postgraduate degrees and increase research output when they were merged with universities. In South Africa, after 2001, colleges (including education, nursing and technical colleges) were closed or merged into three new categories of university: traditional universities, comprehensive universities and universities of technology (UoTs) (previously technikons). The UoTs were not permitted to offer master's and doctoral degrees prior to 1993. As a result, the proportions of staff with PhDs at these institutions are exceptionally low – in 2014 they ranged from virtually non-existent to 33% (Breier and Herman 2017). These institutions lack the capacity to supervise master's and doctoral students but are incentivised by government to offer these programmes (see DHET 2017a). In Australia, the 'Dawkins revolution', which began in 1987, led to the conversion of Colleges of Advanced Education (CAE) into universities, as well as mergers between the CAEs and universities (Marginson and Marshman 2013). Many of the college lecturers did not have PhDs but were required to attain them after the mergers. Today there are staff from non-faculty units (such as Indigenous education units) that are trying to attain their PhDs after being incorporated into mainstream academic departments.

Both countries have adopted neoliberal policies which to varying extents put pressure on universities to marketise, to increase student numbers without a concomitant increase in funding and to compete for prestige in international ranking systems. Neoliberalism in Australia has led to 'education [being] defined as an industry, and educational institutions [being] forced to conduct themselves more and more like profit-seeking firms' (Connell 2013, 102). In the process, goals related to equitable participation, including Indigenous participation in research higher degree programmes, have been marginalised (Schofield, O'Brien, and Gilroy 2013).

While South African higher education policy emphasises the achievement of race and gender equity, it is not immune to neoliberal pressures. Like Australia, the South African government is underfunding higher education and relying on private sources to make up the shortfall. In both

countries public funding of higher education amounts to about 0.7% of GDP (Universities South Africa 2016; OECD 2018). This is consistent with trends in the UK and the USA but substantially less than many European countries and below the OECD average, which was 1.1% in 2014. Australia subsidises its higher education system by charging foreign students high fees; South Africa has relied on third stream income and local as well as international student fees. However, following the 'Fees Must Fall' student protests of 2015/2016, the South African government has had to increase funding for local students.

For academics in both countries, the effects are similar: there are increasing numbers of students to teach, as well as increasing pressure to publish and raise research funds. In Australia, the situation is exacerbated by the increasing casualisation of academic labour (Ryan et al. 2013), in South Africa by the underpreparedness of students (see Shay 2017, for an overview of the issues). In both countries, those who have attained an academic position without a PhD are usually obliged to attain one as quickly as possible, which may prove surprisingly difficult. Our research shows that an academic position may hamper rather than benefit a lecturer's PhD studies.

The already-academic doctoral student in the literature

In recent years a large body of literature on doctoral education has developed but we found only a few articles that address the category of staff/student that is the focus of this article. Van der Bijl (2016) draws on activity theory to describe his own journey as 'both a doctoral student and an employed academic' in South Africa. Araújo (2005), Winstone and Moore (2017) and Maistry (2017) draw on the concept of liminality to describe the experiences of doctoral students who are already in various forms of academic employment in Portugal, the United Kingdom and South Africa respectively. In our own research, we found the concept of liminality particularly illuminating and it became the focus of our analysis.

The concept (from the Latin word *limen*, meaning 'threshold') was developed by the anthropologist Arnold Van Gennep, who distinguished between different stages of rites of passage – preliminal, liminal and postliminal. The individual passing from one state to another 'wavers between two worlds', he wrote (Van Gennep [1908] 1960, 18). In the late 1960s, Victor Turner resuscitated and extended Van Gennep's work to describe individuals or groups that are 'neither here nor there' or 'betwixt or between' as they transition from one state to another (Turner 1969, 95). The concept of liminality has since been used in a range of contexts and disciplines, including higher education (Bettis and Mills 2006; Bosetti, Kawalilak, and Patterson 2008; Keefer 2015; Bamber, Allen-Collinson, and McCormack 2017; Maistry 2017).

Liminality is mainly conceptualised as temporary and transient. It can be painful and unsettling, as well as a source of creativity and excitement (Bamber, Allen-Collinson, and McCormack 2017). Recent research suggests that liminality can also be perceived as a prolonged or even permanent space, a 'perpetual form of inbetweenness' or ambiguity, where the individual is 'neither-X-nor-Y', or 'both-X-and-Y' (Ybema, Beech, and Ellis 2011, 26, 28). Bamber Allen-Collinson, and McCormack (2017, 153) extended the discussion of liminality to include the concept of 'occupational limbo' as 'never-X always-Y', where 'X' is 'hierarchically superior' to 'Y'. In this liminal space, individuals feel 'locked in', a sense of being stuck. Thus, while transitional liminality can have both positive and negative effects, being in a permanent liminal space or in occupational limbo is not desirable.

In the doctoral education literature, liminality is closely associated with the concept of identity and the view that a major purpose of doctoral education is the development of an academic identity (Jazvak-Martek 2009; Keefer 2015). The experiences of the student in the liminal, in-between stage, including the conceptual and other thresholds they need to cross, are crucial considerations for doctoral supervisors. Studies of conceptual thresholds in doctoral education identify periods of liminality where the individual can become 'stuck' (Wisker and Robinson 2009, 317) or feel 'isolation and loneliness', 'lack of confidence and the impostor syndrome' (a feeling of not being good enough), and 'research misalignment' (mainly between supervisor and student) (Keefer 2015, 24–25). A structured

doctoral programme might seek to support the student through this period but can stifle creativity. Raineri (2015, 100) participated in a structured doctoral programme in business that he described as a 'technicist path to professional writing'. He found it stifling and argues that the liminal space should be a creative and stimulating space that empowers and emancipates students.

Manathunga (2011) suggests that doctoral students are in a liminal space between novice researcher and independent researcher. For culturally diverse students there is an additional layer of liminality in the process of intercultural doctoral supervision. Drawing on Bhabha's concept of 'unhomeliness' (Bhabha 1994, 9), Manathunga describes the sense of relocation and 'the ambivalence people may feel about their identities in a new cultural context as they blur, change and re-form' (Manathunga 2011, 92).

Manathunga's focus on culture, power and identity in cross-cultural supervisory relationships resonates with a growing number of Indigenous-led studies on the 'unhomeliness' facing Indigenous PhD students in Australia that may heighten their liminality. Trudgett, Page, and Harrison's (2016) study of 52 Indigenous PhD students found that not one had an Indigenous supervisor. Grant (2010, 103–5), writing of 'post-colonial' Aotearoa/New Zealand, describes the 'ongoing struggles over identity and belonging' that are 'infused by the uncertain and demanding condition of settler-indigene (or coloniser-colonised) relations' when a Maori (indigenous) student is supervised by a non-Maori academic.

Araújo (2005) writes about early career academics in Portugal who may be employed without a PhD and then granted a period of *dispensation* in which they are freed from teaching duties to focus on their studies. Araújo argues that these academics perceive the time dedicated to their PhD as a temporal 'phase' which suspends the 'now' for the future, affecting the academics' decisions and plans (2005, 201).

Winstone and Moore (2017, 494) discuss the liminal state of doctoral students working as graduate teaching assistants at a UK university. They argue that students in this transitional stage 'operate with identity malleability' which allows them to shift strategically between their two roles. They identify a number of factors that can have an impact on the liminal space such as students' age, the nature of the work, experience, how others treat them, as well as the students' choice of salient identity.

Maistry (2017) has noted the liminality of academics without PhDs who participated in supervision training programmes that he facilitated. In South Africa, because of low supervisory capacity, many academics are urged to complete their PhDs while simultaneously supervising master's students. Maistry maintains that this places these academics in a liminal state, an in-between space which creates anxiety, a kind of dissonance that comes from being marginally situated in two spaces, one of learner (of research) and one of teacher (of research).

Maistry suggests that the low proportion of academics with PhDs in South Africa means that the liminal has become a crucial nexus that will influence the future strength of the system, and therefore it is important to explore how academics survive and negotiate liminality and dissonance.

Exploring lives and narratives

Our empirical research focused on academics in education at three research universities – two in South Africa and one in Australia. To protect the anonymity of the interviewees, we will call the South African universities 'SA Uni A' and 'SA Uni B' and the Australian university 'AU Uni'. All the interviewees' names are pseudonyms. Both the South African universities were designated for the white population group only under apartheid and are referred to as previously advantaged institutions. SA Uni A used to be Afrikaans-medium only but is now officially English. SA Uni B was and remains English.

Eight of the interviewees were conducted at the SA Uni's (four from each) and seven at the AU Uni. Three (all men) did not have PhDs and had either given up the idea of getting one or were unlikely to attain one before retirement age. Eight women and one man were working towards PhDs and one woman was considering doing one. Two women had attained their PhDs within the past two years.

One man and one woman were senior lecturers; the rest were lecturers. They ranged in age from 38 to 67 with the average age being 53. See [Table 1](#) for an overview.

The South African interviewees were asked to state the population group into which they were or might have been classified under apartheid. Of the eight South Africans, five identified as black (three African, two coloured) and the remainder as white. The Australian interviewees were asked whether they identified as an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander (Indigenous) and/or other ancestry/ethnicity. Three of the Australians identified as Indigenous; the remainder said they were Australian with some European or British ancestry. All the Australian participants were either Indigenous academics or involved in Indigenous education.

Interviewees were asked about their qualifications and employment history and then asked to describe their experiences of PhD study, including their experiences of supervision, mentoring, funding and institutional support. They were also asked whether there were any advantages or disadvantages associated with being a PhD student while employed as an academic and about the challenges associated with being an academic without a PhD.

The interviews were semi-structured and ranged in length from 40 minutes and two hours. Although they were not structured as life history interviews, some interviewees (all women) gave a broad picture of their everyday lives, showing how their education and educational choices were embedded in issues relating to family, finances and health. The interviews were transcribed verbatim.

We did not attempt to verify the interviewees' accounts, as we were not attempting to pursue 'forensic' truth but rather to listen for 'personal and narrative truth[s]' (TRC 1998, 111–2). As Coetzee and Kurtz (2015, 76) put it: 'The past ... is always messier and more complicated than any account we can give of it.'

We conducted a thematic analysis of the interview transcripts to identify patterns (Bazeley 2013). Liminality emerged as an important theme. Three broad categories were identified that typify the

Table 1. Interviewee profiles.

	Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Ethnicity/race & nationality	State of PhD studies at time of interview	Position (L = lecturer)
AU Uni	Deidre	67	F	Non-Indigenous Australian	Recently graduated	L
	Gregory	58	M	Non-Indigenous Australian	Given up after 3 attempts	L
	Pauline	50	F	Non-Indigenous Australian	Working on it	L
	Harold	63	M	Non-Indigenous Australian	Given up after 1 attempt	L (sessional)
	Carol	49	F	Indigenous Australian	About to submit (subsequently awarded)	L
	Trevor	38	M	Indigenous Australian	In fourth year of PhD study	Five-year PhD scholarship/ employment programme Senior L
	Loreta	61	F	Indigenous Australian	Recently graduated	
SA Uni A	Andrew	54	M	White South African	Working on it	L
	Peter	48	M	White South African	Graduated in 2016	L
	Nosipho	53	M	Black (African) South African	Began in 2016	L
	Nene	42	F	Black (African) South African	Began in 2016	L
SA Uni B	Laetitia	59	F	Coloured South African	Considering doing one	L
	Faiza	56	F	Coloured South African	Near to completion	L
	Brian	64	M	White South African	Might embark on 3rd attempt	Senior L
	Ayanda	41	F	Black (African) South African	Started recently	L

recruitment, motivation and career trajectories of those interviewed as well as their experiences of liminality. The categories should be seen as ideal types or abstractions designed to capture the most salient common characteristics but 'no type is ever an exact reproduction of all the characteristics of the individuals concerned' (Mouton 1996).

The traditional/old school academic: lost in transition

For this group, the state of 'doctoral liminality' (Keefer 2015) is long-lasting, if not permanent. These academics had attained their academic positions at a time when the PhD was not common, and the master's degree could be a very substantial piece of work. Where they embarked on PhD study, they received little direction, they said. Their PHD supervisors had little or no training or experience in supervision and the supervision process was not institutionally regulated or monitored, as it commonly is today.

Brian, 64, at SA Uni B, and Harold, 63, at AU Uni (both white/non-Indigenous males) had tried unsuccessfully to attain a PhD. Brian said he abandoned the two first attempts owing to supervision issues, logistical problems (moving cities and universities) and the competing demands of political involvement at the time. At the time of the interview, Brian was making a third attempt by registering for a PhD by publication with an overseas university, despite being only one year from retirement. Harold studied in England when 'the model was that you just went off and read everything you could think of and you didn't see your supervisor very often'. He also did extensive ethnographic research and wrote a 100,000-word draft but never finalised it. He said his supervisor had no experience of supervising a PhD and did not know how to help a student bring their dissertation to completion.

Not having a PhD had a decisive impact on their academic careers. Brian had managed to attain a senior lectureship in South Africa in the 1990s but never progressed beyond this level. Harold, in the Australian system, had not been able to get a permanent position and was doing 'casual' teaching at a number of different universities.

Both had participated in most aspects of academic work (except for supervising a PhD), were experienced teachers and researchers and had published quite extensively. Among students and outside academics their lack of a PhD was not a hindrance, they said. However, in their respective departments, the lack of a PhD was being held against them. For Brian, this had only started in the latter part of his career, for Harold it had been the case for decades. Harold described the stigma:

It's like a weight tied to your leg which starts off very light and then slowly grows into a boulder and ... you are going to drag it along forever ... the sense of the unfinished ... is really quite painful and difficult, both psychologically and enormously impactful in career terms.

These individuals presented themselves as scholarly in their identities and practices and appeared to have much to contribute to the academic life of their departments. (Harold was sought out by junior colleagues for theoretical advice, for example.) However, the changing nature of academic life – particularly the increasing emphasis on performance and credentials – had left them in occupational limbo.

The practitioner-academic: betwixt and between practice and academia

Most of our interviewees fell into this category. They were practitioners in the field of education who had found or been recruited to academic positions on the strength of their practical experience and, in some cases, activism or advocacy work. They were not required to have a PhD at the time of employment but were now being encouraged or required to do a PhD in terms of new institutional policy or practice. This category included individuals of all racial/ethnic groups.

Their stage of liminality, betwixt and between practice and academia, expressed itself in resentment at the unexpected demands placed on them to attain a PhD, lack of academic support

through historical non-recognition of their field, feelings of unhomeliness, and identity conflicts. The Indigenous scholars were concerned about the multiple demands placed on them by their institutions. Some had similar experiences of poor supervision and stigmatisation to the 'old schoolers'.

Gregory, 58, is a non-Indigenous academic who was appointed to a lecturing position at AU Uni on the strength of his work in Indigenous education in remote areas. Like Harold and Brian, he had attempted a PhD but, according to him, a combination of neglectful supervision and tempting work opportunities had resulted in him not completing the degree. He was now being required to attain one. He bemoaned the changing attitude to academics' qualifications:

People are brought in because of their very particular kind of skills and experience, but it's not certificated ... and then ... they retrospectively say that you need a level of qualification to be doing what it is that they employed you to do ...

Carol (49) and Loreta (61) – both Indigenous female academics at AU Uni – were introduced to the idea of PhD study through their employment at a university over time. Carol said that for years she was pressured to play developmental roles in the university that were linked to her identity as an Indigenous woman. Now there was pressure on her to get a PhD. She resented the fact that she was studying for a PhD at this late stage of her career, not out of academic interest but because the university required her to do so.

Loreta obtained her first job at a university in 1986 when

... the only other Aboriginal people employed in the university at that stage were cooks, cleaners and grounds-men and so them employing an Aboriginal person as an academic was like ground breaking ... and I thought I was in a really high position.

Though she was employed to increase Indigenous enrolments, her own scholarship was not valued, she said, and she was not encouraged to further her qualifications or progress academically. It was not until her much later second appointment to an Indigenous support enclave at another university that the idea of postgraduate study was suggested and became a reality. However, even then and despite the support of the Indigenous woman director of the centre, her own scholarship remained in the background as her primary role was to develop Indigenous participation and programmes, particularly at the undergraduate level.

Ayanda, 41, an African female academic at SA Uni B, told an intersectional life story that illustrated the effects of personal demographics as well as changing institutional demands and practitioner–academic identity conflict. Ayanda is a well-known and respected figure in extramural education. For many years she was employed in an institute with an ambiguous academic status, concentrating mainly on education outreach and advocacy and the development of teaching materials. She said she had been reluctant to become an academic because she saw herself as a practitioner and was used to 'teaching in the field and helping people do things rather than sitting and observing in research'. She was also a single parent and had children to support and care for. Her position and attitude changed when she found a supervisor who understood her challenges as a single parent and a head of department who supported her to obtain a PhD scholarship which, with some additional external work, enabled her to embark on doctoral study while also supporting her family. She was subsequently recruited by a government-funded academic capacity development programme which supported her university to provide her with a full-time permanent position in which she would have ample time to complete her PhD. Finally, she resolved her practitioner–academic dilemma when she settled for a PhD research topic that combined her activist/practitioner/academic roles and identities.

Andrew, a white male academic at SA Uni A, aged 54, was a school principal before being recruited into academia after showing promise during his master's studies. With only 11 years before retiring, Andrew tried to make up time by jumping from one role and identity to another, rather like the doctoral students with 'oscillating role identities' described by Jazvak-Martek (2009) or the graduate assistants with 'malleable' identities described by Winstone and Moore (2017). In the short time,

he had been an academic he had been a lecturer, researcher, author of articles and third stream income generator, as well as a PhD student.

The new academic: wavering between two worlds (student and staff)

This category included academics recently appointed on a career academic track. In both countries, it included appointees in academic capacity-building programmes in which scholars from particular groups – usually black, female or Indigenous – are appointed to positions that afford them the opportunity to attain their PhD while earning a salary. The category also included scholars who have been recruited to academic positions or been successful in selection processes even though they did not have a PhD. Sometimes their appointment was on condition they attain a PhD, at other times it was not a requirement but strongly encouraged. The essential feature of this category is the intention of the individual to become an academic and to attain a PhD. This liminal space presents a number of issues: tensions around choice of topic, ambivalent status within the academic department, identity conflicts and strain of workload.

Nene, an African female academic aged 42 at SA Uni A, began her PhD at another university. When she accepted a position at SA Uni A she was advised to change her topic to one that was in line with the department's focus on leadership and her supervisor's interest. However, Nene did not really understand the topic and could not relate to it. She changed her topic several more times until she found one that she was comfortable with, as well as a new supervisor who was a better match for her. Peter, a white male aged 48 at SA Uni A, was previously a school teacher who attained a temporary full-time position based on his master's degree, subsequently embarking on a PhD to secure a permanent position. Following the advice of a supervisor, he chose his topic strategically as a career plan although it was of little interest to him. In these two cases, the choice of topic put the academics in a liminal state, trying to find a balance between their interests, career options and the departments' or supervisors' priorities.

Liminality was experienced most forcefully as status issues within departments. Nosipho (53), an African female academic at SA Uni A, said she had become a 'jack of all trades, doing everything at the same time' – teaching, publishing and working on her PhD. Like the students in Winstone and Moore's study, she had to choose between identities (student or staff) and prioritise one over the other at times. Although her supervisor was not happy with this, she was having to put her studies aside and concentrate on marking because 'my job has to come first'. Peter (SA Uni A) found it difficult to 'work with someone as an academic and then, in a space of five minutes, put on a completely different hat, and become student and supervisor'.

Both Peter and Trevor, from Au Uni, believed that their supervisors gave them less attention because they were staff members. Peter thought his supervisor rated his abilities highly and therefore 'scaled down the supervision'. Sometimes he appreciated that, sometimes it frustrated him. Trevor, 38, in his fourth year of study through a university programme offering employment to Indigenous PhD students, said his supervisor 'thinks of me as a colleague and ... perhaps doesn't nag me as much as I could be nagged'.

Some of the interviewees noted situations where they felt betwixt and between student and academic identities and sometimes neither one nor the other. Peter said that when other PhD students presented their research proposals he was expected to attend the presentations and provide feedback as an academic, but he had to leave the room with the rest of the students when the faculty evaluated the presentations. Nene spoke of a support session in which she was supposed to present as a lecturer and at the same time attend as a student. She was confused but eventually decided to put her identity as student first and refused to present.

These academics also complained about their workloads. While capacity development schemes set limitations on the amount of teaching which academics would be required to do while pursuing their PhD, this often did not materialise. Trevor seemed to be experiencing the multiple demands placed on Indigenous academics by their universities (Page and Asmar 2008; Behrendt et al. 2012)

and described the 'reduced workload' requirement as 'a fantasy'. He was expected to develop Indigenous curricula and found himself positioned as generally 'representative' of diverse Indigenous peoples and interests, in addition to regular teaching, research and faculty responsibilities.

Peter said his supervisor was ambivalent in his demands, on the one hand telling him not to take on extra responsibilities and 'take time away from your PhD' and on the other asking him to get involved in an additional programme and third stream income generation. The other interviewees in this category also felt that their workloads were too great. Their experiences echo the 'complementary antagonism' described by Van der Bijl (2016, 85), His university (a newly established university of technology) demanded increased staff qualifications and provided funding for graduate studies while also increasing workloads.

Peter at SA Uni A was the only interviewee who saw his position as an academic as a clear advantage when studying for a PhD. In addition to the financial advantage, his head of department had given him a reduced teaching load (but only when he was in the fifth year of his studies) and a deadline extension when he needed it. Peter also valued the support and encouragement from some people in his department, who regularly asked him how he was progressing. While Nosipho saw the advantage of being at a university in that it ensured she kept up to date, she also felt the teaching load was too heavy and she interpreted the concern of the departmental staff as pressure, rather than support.

These new academics' narratives suggest that they were in a transitional liminal space. This space could be creative and liberating, allowing them to experience the benefits of being a student when they chose to present a student identity and those of staff member when they shifted to their academic identity. The space could also be constraining, however, when their identity choice was not congruent with the way in which colleagues were seeing them at the time.

Rethinking the theory

In the literature on doctoral education, liminality has a linear and vertical trajectory starting with the preliminal state when the candidate has not yet embarked on doctoral study. A liminal period of confusion and uncertainty follows as the candidate tries to grasp the threshold concepts associated with PhD level of study, develop an appropriate identity through exposure to and involvement in academic activities – conferences, teaching and grant proposal writing, for example – and produce a doctoral dissertation. At the final, post-liminal stage the candidate graduates. Then, it is presumed, the experiences of liminality will come to an end. The candidate will have completed the rite of passage into the academic world. The overall picture fits the 'equilibrium paradigms' which Wolhuter (2011, 134) finds so prevalent in the international literature on doctoral education but provides no critical questioning of society and its 'structures, features and power relations'. A more critical view of doctoral education would note the grave imbalances between higher education in the countries from which the literature mainly emanates and higher education in those countries and territories where colonisation has left a legacy of educational disadvantage. In the latter contexts, PhDs are not in abundance and many academics might not have them.

When these academics become doctoral students their experiences of liminality are very different from those of the doctoral student per se. For, in some ways, they have already arrived. In their employment status, they are already at the post-liminal stage. They already have an academic identity which they often have to suppress in order to take up their position as doctoral student. For those who have given up hope of attaining a PhD, their state of liminality is permanent. There is no positive vertical trajectory leading them to the heights of academia, for which the inconveniences of a liminal period can be suffered bravely. The occupational limbo they experience is to be with them always, the positions they have attained are those they are likely to retire with, the academic identity they may have attained may be a fragile one, negated in some contexts, affirmed in others. For those who are studying towards a PhD, there are still experiences of liminality – vertically between their

status as doctoral student and eventual status as graduate, and laterally between their status as student and status as staff member.

Although we did not set out to do an intersectional study, our research has revealed some of the 'dynamics of difference and sameness' (Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall 2013, 787) that affected the lives and educational prospects of the academics we interviewed but are not addressed in the theories of liminality.

Our research suggests that the trajectory and permanence or otherwise of the liminality experienced by an academic without a PhD depend on a number of factors, such as age, gender, race, ethnicity, relations with supervisors, as well as time and location, all interconnecting in a dynamic process.

Women spoke of the family responsibilities which hampered their studies. Ayanda said she had been reluctant to do a PhD because of the difficulties she experienced when trying to study for her master's as a single parent with two young children. Nosipho finished her master's in 2006, but couldn't continue with her studies then, 'I had to see my children through school ... it was only in 2015 when I came back to register for a PhD'. Deidre, at AU Uni, who completed her PhD shortly before the interview at the age of 67, said she was free to put in the long hours necessary to complete her work because she had no dependants.

Pauline, 50, from AU Uni, was concerned about the impact of her work and studies on her personal life.

I work on the PhD ... on weekends ... Christmas Day and Boxing Day ... my home life suffers terribly, my relations suffer terribly, so how often do I see my family, you know, how often do I argue with my partner, a lot ... I've put on a lot of weight, I don't exercise too much ... it's terrible.

All our South African participants appeared to have been affected by the white male patriarchy that dominated academia in the past and has left a long-lasting footprint. Brian benefited from the system when he became a senior lecturer at a time when white males could rise to the rank of professor without a PhD (Soudien 2011). On the other hand, Ayanda was not given a job despite showing promise. Laetitia, 59, from SA Uni B, classified coloured under apartheid, was inhibited by her sense of not being at home in the university – 'not knowing where to touch'. She said she was not advised to do a PhD in the first 10 years of her job and only considered doing one after she attended a course at another university. The liminality of Ayanda's and Laetitia's worlds was not transient and merely a feature of their doctoral study but also a feature of their categorisation as black South Africans. With increased opportunities for black staff, the existence or extent of their feelings of limitation might change.

Indigenous academics Carol and Loreta felt they performed the same academic work as PhD qualified academics but their position was entirely different. They not only struggled as PhD students but also carried the burden of university transformation to improve opportunities and outcomes for other Indigenous students. In the process, they became increasingly marginalised in status and career development. The inauguration of academic scholarships specifically targeted at Indigenous people benefitted Trevor but pressures to represent the Indigenous community and develop new curricula complicated his situation and resulted in an ambivalent relationship with his supervisor.

Questions for further research

Our research has identified a critical category of academics that has not been the focus of research and theorisation despite its prevalence and importance in various tertiary education contexts. Our work contributes to the increasing body of theory on liminality by focusing on the peculiar forms of limbo experienced by individuals who have attained an academic job and identity but have not yet completed the qualification that is increasingly the minimum requirement for an academic position. In the words of Arnold van Gennep ([1908] 1960), they have reached the post-liminal stage without progressing fully through the liminal. Whether they have given up the struggle to attain a

PhD or are still on their way, they experience dual liminalities – a vertical liminality in relation to the qualification they have not yet or never will attain and a horizontal verticality in relation to their colleagues and students. This betwixt and between state is transitory for those who will ultimately achieve the qualification but permanent for those who will not.

This study was small scale and preliminary, designed to make suggestions for further investigation. It should not be seen as a conclusive study on the topic. There is a need for further research in non-research-intensive institutions and in fields and disciplines other than Education. Interviews with supervisors might verify or otherwise the student-academics' accounts but would be difficult to arrange on an anonymous basis. The narratives often suggested a lack of agency on the part of the academic – supervisors were blamed for being inexperienced, neglectful or lacking understanding. We did not challenge these perceptions, nor did we challenge the accounts of those whose narratives suggested considerable agency. Ayanda was one of those, having sought out a supervisor who understood her situation as a single mother and having negotiated the terms of her scholarship so she was able to earn enough to support her family. One might also argue that her life course was affected by structural changes in government and university policy that created opportunities for black junior scholars.

Questions about the relationship between the PhD degree and scholarship arise. Some interviewees spoke passionately about the topics of their research and teaching, about the theories or methodologies they worked with. Others appeared to have been cajoled into researching whatever topic would get them their PhD as quickly as possible. They echo the concerns of Waghid (2015) who has discussed the fragility of the PhD in South Africa and warned against compromised quality. Maistry (2017) has also asserted that fast-tracked PhDs with their emphasis on thesis completion may be at the expense of deep, rich, independent, high-level conceptual development. Soudien (2011) has noted that some of the academics who did not have PhDs at the time when the PhD was the pinnacle of a career rather than a ticket to academia, did quality work. There is accordingly a need for research that goes beyond numbers and percentages of PhD graduates and explores the quality of their scholarship.

Our research also raises the question: Is the PhD truly necessary for all staff in all fields? Is there not a role to be had for staff who are widely read, competent researchers and well published but have not managed to produce the contained product that is regarded as the PhD? They might not be able to be sole supervisors but they could be co-supervisors (as allowed at some South African universities). They could teach at all other levels and also mentor younger academics in relation to theory and research. Instead, according to their views, they are treated as second-rate academics, lost in transition, stuck in an eternally liminal space.

Finally, one must ask why academia is not the ideal employer for a person trying to get a PhD. This is a particularly pertinent question in diverse societies that aim to support equity of participation and outcomes. It is also important because PhD students are often the workhorses of the academic enterprise, doing the research on which many senior academics come to rely. In an ideal situation, anyone accepted to do a PhD would be required – and funded – to study full time for at least three years. Instead they must fit their research into jobs that are increasingly demanding thanks to neoliberal pressures which have led to the extension and intensification of academic work: more students to teach, more research and publications and external grants to achieve, more administration, as well as stricter 'line management' and performance measures. Indigenous academics in Australia face further pressures associated with the support and developmental roles they are required to play, similar to those described by Griffin, Bennett and Harris (2011, 46) in their article on 'black tax' or 'cultural taxation' experienced by black academics in the United States. In South Africa there are additional pressures associated with transformation including large classes, underprepared learners and the 'black tax' that is a legacy of apartheid and not only requires black academics to be role models and drivers of change in the academy. They are also expected to support their often impoverished extended families, including relatives who helped to finance their own studies (Ratlebjane 2015).

Note

1. Note that the term 'PhD' is used interchangeably with 'doctoral degree' or 'doctorate' throughout this paper.

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