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Chapter Fifteen: On the emotions and politics of autoethnographic supervision

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Abstract

In this chapter we collaboratively consider some doubts, tensions and anxieties around Marton's PhD research that was supervised by Sarah and Martin. Instead of a teleological journey, we begin by discussing the PhD process using the metaphors of 'the zone', 'dancing in the shadows', and 'reflections in a dark mirror' to highlight the feelings we each most vividly recall. In the second part of the chapter we respond to each other's opening metaphors. Finally, we settle on three themes that may be relevant to readers: the role of the institutional context in cultivating 'dangerous' and engaged PhD topics, the complexity of roles and identities during the supervision of such projects, and the problem with linear representations of multivocal realities.

Preface

Marton's doctoral thesis was based on autoethnographic research at the University of Leicester School of Management where all three of us worked at the time. The thesis explored practices of critique at the school in research, teaching, and organizing. It showed how the conditions of possibility for criticality emerge through various antagonisms and how its meaning is negotiated through the performative re-iteration of boundaries that organize beyond-local contexts. The research implicated us three, separately and collectively, in the politics of our school, university and wider academic community as Sarah and Martin assumed the formal roles of Director of Research, PhD Director, supervisor and colleague as well as the informal ones of informant, confidant, and excited reader anticipating scoops. Unless, of course, the latter is just a self-aggrandizing trick of Marton's imagination while writing this introduction.

To start, we each discuss the PhD process using a metaphor ('the zone', 'dancing in the shadows', and 'reflections in a dark mirror') that move us away from an understanding of the PhD as a journey with a clear starting point and a final destination. As an exercise in collective writing, we provide parallel responses to each other's opening metaphors in the second part. In the last section, we focus on three themes that may be relevant to our readers: the role of the institutional context in cultivating 'dangerous' and engaged PhD topics, the complexity of roles and identities during the supervision of such projects, and the problem with linear representations of multivocal realities.

Marton: The Zone

In Tarkovsky's 1979 film of the same name, a Stalker is hired to sneak a Writer and a Scientist into the unknown, dangerous and blockaded Zone. At the heart of the Zone is a Room where people's secret desires allegedly come true. Stalkers want to make others happy, but of course secret desires often turn out to be darker than expected. I feel the three of us somewhat unintentionally took each other into the Zone and assumed a variety of the three protagonists' roles at different times.

A critical business school, one that approaches management as a sociological phenomenon and business as a historically changing imprint of contemporary capitalism, is like the Zone. It is alien to most other business schools and often presumed to be dangerous by university managers. If I was the Scientist and Writer rolled into one, Sarah and Martin were my Stalkers. They cared for my happiness by introducing my work to people or allowing me to use their names to open doors; protecting me even when I wasn't around; letting me in on news and gossip; inspiring me to write; and pushing me to think.

At times, we switched roles. There must be such an element to most PhD supervision but I felt that Sarah and Martin were eager to learn about themselves, as if by gazing into a puddle in their personal Zone where I led them. We had agreed that I would use pseudonyms, even in the drafts I gave them to protect the respondents in my study. Rather obviously, this did not stop them from trying to guess who had said and thought what. At one point, Sarah kept checking from her office window who went to lunch with whom, while Martin yearned to be a fly on the wall during some of my interviews.

The Zone is not a happy place though. I was hoping to find out what is inside a critical business school and how it may be recreated elsewhere, to see what I can do as a critical educator. Not that the Zone is unhappy but what one finds there rarely matches what they hoped they would find. Not least because there is no Zone. Rather, the border drawn around a particular segment of everyday reality constitutes it as the miraculous place where one can find hope and satisfy desires. In writing the history of this particular Zone, something that Martin told me several times I was doing, and by shaping how the story unfolds, all three of us maintained the hope that business schools can be different.

Sarah: Dancing in the shadows

I have a vivid memory of Marton's PhD entry interview – straight off a night flight from Budapest and slightly disorientated as he described how he wanted to examine and rethink the practice of Management Education. Good I thought, just the place to do this, and he has the background and passion to drive this project, so what's not to like? After Marton left the room I was surprised when the potential co-supervisor said he was withdrawing as he felt that the project was not critical enough for him to supervise. As a new member of staff, I was left feeling rather bemused – how critical do you need to be? And, slightly paranoid – does he not want to supervise with me? Is it *my* criticality in question here?

As a self-identifying critical scholar, I thought the school would be my intellectual home. In reality I spent the next three plus years dancing in the shadows of criticality trying to work out what my own critical project was and how it fitted with the dominant paradigms emerging within the School. So, my own personal journey of understanding became very much entwined with Marton's research.

Just before Marton arrived, Martin, the prodigal professor, returned from the shadows of Warwick to quite a homecoming. When I discovered that Martin was my fellow supervisor, I was both pleased and nervous – what would working with the great Martin P be like? Fortunately, the three of us gelled as a team. Our coffee bar discussions became a highlight. I could be myself and not worry about saying the wrong thing. Marton submitted his first piece of written work. It was interesting and challenging. I tried to comment carefully and constructively. Crossing Martin in the corridor, I asked if my comments were ok – he chuckled and said, 'are you asking for feedback on your feedback?' I bristled thinking this was patronising but on reflection, it drew attention to my levels of anxiety at that time.

As in a shadow play, it was not always obvious to me what roles we are playing – who was the villain, the hero, the damsel in distress. I was for much of my time dancing rather precariously, if not stumbling, in the shadows trying to work out how to become part of an institution with 20 years of history and embedded traditions. Marton sent in his presentation for the PhD conference – it was a quote from the meeting unveiling the new management structure: 'That looks xxxing complicated!' It highlighted the swearing culture in the school I disliked, I wanted to encourage Marton's creativity, and maybe problematise the quote so I put it on the timetable but then offended the PhD administrator, and 'outgroup' members were apparently surprised that 'Sarah would do something like that'.

Roles and identities figured strongly in Marton's research and I was intrigued by what the different players had to say. He conscientiously masked identities and asked us to read again and again to check we couldn't identify the participants – the more he masked them, the more I wanted to work it out. I had my own bees in bonnets about the school that I encouraged him to research and was frustrated when he did not find

anything. My own roles were conflicted, the newcomer, the outsider, the co-PhD director, experiencing a growing friendship with Marton and Martin.

Martin: Reflections in a Dark Mirror

I had just returned to the School of Management at Leicester, after a very difficult two years at Warwick Business School. Leicester was my home. I belonged there. Before leaving, I had spent seven years as Director of Research and Deputy Head, trying to help assemble somewhere that was the sort of critical school of management that I wanted to be part of. Coming back from corporate Warwick, I still wanted to believe that it was possible to do something radically different in teaching and research, and was throwing myself back into Leicester like an overenthusiastic dog at a patio door. Around that time, Marton turned up.

Supervising Marton was both a huge pleasure, but also a source of doubt and the gradual surfacing of dark worries. The pleasure of playing with ideas, with smart and reflective people like Sarah and Marton, is a visceral joy. It can be a game which energises, which left me feeling as if I was having fun and doing something worthwhile. Once a month, in the library café, with lots of other chats in corridors and doorsteps. Nice work, if you can get it.

But the PhD itself, that began to cause me doubt. A study of the School of Management at Leicester. A cool assessment as to whether we were really doing the sort of things that we claimed we were doing, and Marton was taking his work forensically seriously. At the PhD upgrade, one of the panel members commented that the PhD was 'dangerous', and he was right. This was work made to puncture balloons, to expose the cowboys who wanted to believe that they were different from the other schmucks who ran other business schools. Its target was 'us', and that included me.

I'd supervised lots of PhDs before, and with many of them I would talk about the dynamics of the relationship, about the politics of knowledge and the constraints of the PhD text. I always enjoyed the moments where such conversations seemed to edge close to some sort of edge, because they smugly made me feel that there was nothing that I could not doubt, or encourage others to doubt. That was my job and, as I said, it's nice work if you can get it. The problem with Marton's PhD was that it began to reflect my doubts about what we were actually doing at Leicester, rather than what we liked to believe we were doing. And in his mirror, I started to see a bunch of (mostly) white theory men engaged in self-congratulation and heavy drinking, while the students just wanted to get decent jobs and university management just wanted the cash to continue rolling in.

My naivety, my desire to believe, my investment in this institution, was gradually leaking away. By the middle of the PhD, changes within the university and the school meant hard times. A new VC who just wanted a proper b-school, endless arguments with a Deputy VC and a new Dean of Social Sciences. Institutional politics that seemed to always blow against us, and my optimism began to be replaced with weary anger. Sarah left, seemingly disappointed with what we were turning in to. And then, as Marton was coming to submission, a shiny new Dean arrived to reconfigure the Business School and it seemed like it was over. He submitted, and a year later, I left. And now the three of us are history, reflecting on what we were, and what Leicester has become.

Marton:

Writing this chapter brings back memories and anxieties of writing during the PhD. I am late to send

Sarah:

Umm, a challenging and provocative metaphor here, as per normal Marton. I don't think

Martin:

The problem with (auto)biography is what to leave out. Even one PhD at a particular

bits around and the weight of the possibility of losing face before my beloved supervisors is pulling me down. There is also the anxiety of proving myself. The PhD loneliness provided limited opportunities for comparing my thinking to others – I only knew that I was not as good as the handful of authors I considered exemplary. So compared to the unassuming ingenuity in the parts written by Sarah and Martin, my text feels theatrical. It radiates with the intention to appear clever, like when I wrote for days about how David Harvey's analysis of Parisian architecture compared to mainstream thinkers building inroads into critical management studies. Martin's comment: 'this is nice but a bit too... laboured'. Well, it's too late now. It would be unfair to go back and rewrite that first part of the chapter while Sarah and Martin are writing their responses to it.

I am struck by how we all remember those years in terms of finding our place. I immediately felt at home as Leicester seemed like a grown-up version of a self-organizing student community of burgeoning social scientists during my university years in Hungary. But was it a home? Like the naughty offspring putting their parents in trouble, my research seems to have caused all sorts of anxieties to Sarah and Martin, killing their desires and frustrating them when I 'didn't find anything'. (Ouch, that hurt! It rings true in too many ways.) Was I being a bad supervisee for tearing through a mirage, confirming fears, holding up the mirror? We had a great time together but did my work have a role to play in Sarah and Martin leaving? At my viva, I was told

I've been referred to as a stalker before. Perhaps the ethnographer is also the stalker? Did you stalk the corridors? I remember you 'stalking' at the back of meeting notebook and pen in hand, stalking in the pub, on the picket lines – at what point did you stop stalking? Looking back at what I've just written makes me smile – and there were another half a dozen questions I've just deleted – I've responded to your piece by going straight back into supervisor mode as if we were in the coffee shop again!

In terms of the Zone both you and I were outsiders looking in, especially at the beginning. Martin, you were the embedded one – the one who understood how things operated – what the rules of the game were – perhaps you felt stalked by us/me?

I also feel your pain. It must have been hard starting to see the writing on the wall of somewhere you felt was home (partly) through Marton's research. Personally, I think the zone was always a bit of an uncomfortable place perhaps because I felt some of the tensions from the start. I came looking for something – a critical spiritual home and perhaps like you Marton with your initial PhD questions, it didn't quite turn out that way. But for all its faults, the zone attracted the brightest and most creative PhD students I've ever met and, I'm not exactly sure how, created the conditions for them to shine. It was the experience of working with them which was the most challenging and most rewarding experience of my time there, and helped me to reflect on what critical research is, how it questions roles, why it is uncomfortable but

university in England at the start of the 21st century can germinate so many stories. It depends which character you start with, which accidental meeting in a corridor, which decision in a VCs committee, or which book presented itself to the hand in a library. Too many starting points, and consequently, too many ways to write history.

So here's mine. The School of Management at the University of Leicester was, from 2003 until 2016, an extraordinarily noisy place which was very self-consciously attempting to collect people who engaged in critical work across the business disciplines. There were articles in the press, high profile appointments, and even mention of the 'Leicester model'. But when its history was written by someone or other in 2017 (it probably does not matter who, in this story), for the new website of the breathless new Business School, there was no mention of this story (University of Leicester 2019). A new Dean had been told to mainstream the school and make some money, and history is written by the winners. But even this account, of power and resistance, is too simple, because that Dean has gone after two years of kicking over the deckchairs, and is now a character who will also be erased. Since then, another temporary Dean has come and gone, and at the time of writing a new person has just begun. The story never stays still, it rewrites itself as it goes.

Marton's PhD is a flash-bulb of a particular moment, a moment in the history of an institution, and in the lives of the people who worked there. It is not the only story, because even Marton,

that one needs to step (dance?) out of the shadows of their supervisors – but did I strip you of your shadows in some visceral way?

It does seem then that my PhD was dangerous. I didn't feel much of the danger because I only heard your interpretation of how you were called out because of my rebellious title or not following university policy to the letter. A senior professor at another university told me that such a research would not have been allowed at their institution. The higher-ups can be wary of self-reflection. But I wonder if the PhD had any lasting effects on how you do what you do now, at your new academic homes. Because myself, I'm still very much trying to figure that out.

also why it is important. Although sadly, the critical hub has gone, it is through our former PhD students far dispersed, that the hope for the future of critical research and critical education lives on.

Sarah and I have different versions of it too, but it reminds us that lived experience and history make a complex shadow-play.

Stops on a journey

Three parts, three parallel responses, three themes rolled into one. A PhD is always a relational endeavour and we tried in this chapter to play with different forms of expressing its multivocality. We each have our own history of the events and it would always feel forced to align these and stretch them back to the beginning of an imaginary journey to create a 'natural' endpoint. The history of both Leicester and the three of us in a way wrote itself, and our representations of it can only ever be partial. If Marton's PhD were indeed a bulb, it would flash with the energy produced by the carefully architected condensation of historical moments past and future and overlapping contexts near and far. The light would be stronger here and there and leave some readers dazzled but it is precisely the uniqueness of this vision that highlights a certain politics and exhibits a care towards others.

Our histories lie beyond ourselves. The PhD thesis bears Marton's name on the cover but inside it bears the hallmark of three-way conversations and ideas, many from that coffee shop, that stretch beyond and into the lives and heads of Sarah and Martin as well as Marton's interviewees and the context in which he did 'his' research. Because any PhD is also a hidden history of the institutional arrangements that made it possible. In Marton's case, this was explicit, though anonymised, as he tried to understand the practices and powers that made this particular world take the shape that it did. Other PhDs don't wear their context quite so blatantly, but it is always there in the configuration of disciplines, supervisors, bursaries, conference funding and fashionable concepts – a kind of social epistemology that shapes what can be said and how. Though we can rarely see it at the time, a PhD assumes a world, so perhaps it is appropriate that now, years after the PhD has been granted, we can begin to see it more clearly.

We often tell students the PhD journey is a lonely one. What perhaps, we are less overt about is that the journey involves fellow travellers, sometimes lurking in the shadows and sometimes very much in the spotlight. There is a tension between the image of the lone PhD student setting out on their intellectual pilgrimage and the final oeuvre which contains a complex mix of snatched conversations, workings out and sensemaking with others along the way. Supervisors are fellow travellers whose paths converge and

become long term companions. They are however on their own journeys and as such can have different effects on the course of the PhD journey. They can entertain by telling their stories, share intellectual food, provide safety and guidance on potentially perilous paths. But they may also cause pain and not be so great at map reading, they may overstay their welcome when the pilgrim wants to walk alone, and they may disappear down a fork in the road leaving a dust cloud of random thoughts and unfinished sentences behind them.

As travelling companions, we have learnt, laughed, thought together and, as is the way with long journeys, we have shared something of ourselves and taken away new perspectives and inspiration. Our journeys have led us to different places from each other, and from where we thought we were going. Now as our blisters have healed, this walkers' (stalkers') reunion has helped us to contemplate the complexities and joys of journeying.

References

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