Doctoral Liminality and Responsible Conduct Practices in Doctoral Research

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Abstract: The complexities of doctoral experiences in many postgraduate schools have become insurmountable. Many doctoral students are facing numerous challenges in crossing the concept thresholds along the path towards achieving doctorate degree. With the experience of doctoral studies compared to rite of passage, many doctoral students face periods of confusion and disorientation hence the liminal period in pursuit of doctoral degree. Many doctoral students may find themselves engrained in ethical doctoral research challenges, issues, and dilemmas on a regular basis This paper looks at how doctoral liminality influences responsible conduct practices in doctoral research at Kibabii University, Kenya. The research engaged 13 doctoral candidates and 7 faculty members to evaluate the influence of doctoral liminality on responsible conduct practices in doctoral research. Data collection tools were validated at a content validity index of 0.83 while reliability index was 0.896. Descriptive (mean, frequency percentage and standard deviation) and inferential (in particular, regression) analyses were used. Findings indicate that doctoral liminality has statistically significant influence on responsible conduct practices in doctoral research. This should help higher education stakeholders to reassess the existing ethical research policies and execution frameworks. University managements are advised to pursue exemptional awareness and scrutiny on implementation of ethical practice in doctoral studies.

Keywords: Doctoral Liminality, Conceptual Threshold, Responsible Conduct Practices

1. Introduction

1.1. Background

Ethical challenges, issues, and dilemmas occur for most doctoral students on a regular basis [3]. The complexities of doctoral experiences in many postgraduate schools have become insurmountable. Many doctoral students are facing numerous challenges in crossing the concept thresholds. With the experience likened to a rite of passage, many doctoral students face periods of confusion and disorientation along the path towards achieving a doctorate. It is presumed that many doctoral candidates fall by the wayside and do not complete their studies [6-8]. According to [6, 7, 12], it is believed that most doctoral supervisors currently have inept supervisory capabilities thus overlooking their critical role as student mentors and advisors. The advisory relationship is believed to be a major factor of student satisfaction or disappointment in a doctoral program [15]. Protivnak and Foss insist that collaboration between doctoral students and faculty members should be an important factor for successful completion of doctoral studies [22]. This appears not to have picked well and many students are either dropping midway or presumed to be engaging in irresponsible conduct practices in order to complete their doctoral studies. According to Sandra & Janice, "Research integrity has been grossly damaged by research misconduct, but it is also diminished when scientists do not follow research standards and instead engage in questionable research practices" [23]. Sandra & Janice, further point that, "it is quite possible and plausible that one third of PhD students are exposed to faculty who use flawed and deficient research standards

during the time students are earning their PhD" [23]. Proper doctoral supervision is therefore important to student progress [6, 7, 12]; and, "to address the inexperience of new doctoral supervisors and ascertain how well they are equipped for the role, how they learn to supervise, and how their development can be effectively supported" [28]. Both doctoral students and doctoral supervisors especially new ones usually find themselves in a mix where things don't move [6-8, 12]. In fact, "inexperience supervisors often find themselves 'shocked' and 'frustrated' at the initial slow progress where nothing appears to be happening," [28].

Over and above, the pressure to publish is a global phenomenon that poses significant challenges to academic research and has an impact on authorship practices. De Vries, Anderson &, Martinson [9], as cited in Sandra & Janice [23], indicated that, "over 27% of scientists' self-report that they have inadequate record keeping, 13% report using inappropriate research design, and that 10% inappropriately assign authorship and withhold details of their research records [9]." Elliott, [10] believes that many doctoral research publications done are a culmination of salami slicing, which is the practice of dividing up research results to generate more publications. Not only is research integrity damaged by research misconduct, but it is also diminished when scientists do not follow research standards and instead engage in questionable research practices [9]. Pressure to publish is related to undesirable practices such as excessive publication and uncitedness, monodisciplinary bias in research, and noncompliance with authorship criteria [31]. Fanelli in Sandra & Janice, alluded to the fact that "2% of scientists' self-report fabricating or falsifying their research (95% CI 0.86–4.45) and that 13% 12.34% of scientists (95% CI 8.43–17.71) allege that others have fabricated or falsified research [11]" [11, 23]. Botha & Mouton questions the integrity of such scholars, faculty and doctoral students [6-8]. This study therefore sought to establish the influence of doctoral liminality on responsible conduct practices in doctoral research.

Doctoral liminality is defined by Dictionary.com as "the transitional period or phase of a rite of passage, during which the participant lacks social status or rank, remains anonymous, shows obedience and humility, and follows prescribed forms of conduct, dress, etc." The concept of Liminality is described as "a reflection phase in which the individuals are introduced in a transition state from separation to incorporation [4, 11, 14] According to Beech, Shortt, and Turner as cited in Oscah & Ola [21], liminality refers to "identities, sites and positions that exhibit 'in-betweenness', bordering, or passages that draw together different institutional conditions" [4, 27, 29]. Turner [29] in Oscah & Ola [21], believes that, "its ambiguous and 'detached' nature, liminality can be expected to contain a multiplicity of cultural properties, overlaps of formalized and informal dimensions of practice and detachment from social structural restraints."

In liminality, an individual finds himself or herself in an ambiguous state of mind named by Arnold van Gennep and

Victor Turner as the "threshold stage." Turner described the "threshold stage" as, "the stage in which an individual is disclaiming his own self where he is dispossessed by what he had" [28]. In the liminal space, Gennep, and Turner agree that a person faces three stages at this point, "the uncertainty or the ambiguous state, the possibility to adapt to new norms, rules and values and the third stage is the pre-integration." [13, 28]. Whereas during liminal stage the ambiguity of an individual's state of mind is outrightly demonstrated in his own actions, the mix seen in-between the liminal space demands that an individual reinvents self [30, 16]. However, the level of uncertainty during the liminal space keeps one on an unknown state, where the person's old self vanishes [28]. Apparently, with the individual knowing what is happening there, one is likely to be extra careful and keen on his/her own expressions [30]. This gives an opportunity for one to relinquish previous behaviour so as to cross the threshold stage [28]. Once an individual cross the threshold stage, one is seen to be equal to other society members, but, surrenders individual rights [28]. Stage two is described as when a person starts adapting to the new rules, norms and values surrounding the new state [28]. As soon as a person is separated from his old self, it is believed he/she would want to acclimatize faster to the new state. Consequently, the individual integrates to the community to collect information identified by the group knowledge as generating the group's values, norms and rules while the old self is being transformed in the new group. Should one not observe the rules, he/she is punished by the group. The person caught in the threshold stage will be conducted by a series of values after he/she passes the liminal space [24]. Gennep and Turner identify the last stage as pre-integration where a person is almost prepared to exit liminal space [13, 28]. At this point, one is presumed changed; has navigated from ambiguity and acclimatized to the group norms, rules and values. However, Bianca & Răzvan, advises that before an individual exits' liminality, one must have acceptable behavior in the society [5].

Doctoral threshold concept refers to when a doctoral student often goes through many encounters with conceptual difficulty or troublesome knowledge for which the student is obliged to revise his/her prevailing conceptions, consider matters differently, think otherwise and see new directions [26]. Possibly, this can be exhilarating, and liberating, but is just as often, or perhaps more likely, to prove unsettling and uncomfortable [26]. Doctoral threshold concept is seen as an alternative to the 'doctoral student experience' culture permeating many systems of doctoral education [18]. The doctoral threshold framework requires some analytic framework. This analytic framework in thresholds concepts research assumes that there are particular concepts in a given discipline which cannot easily be assimilated or accommodated within one's existing meaning frame [19, 17].

Responsible conduct practice in research is meant to promote objectivity, since ethical transgressions, such as data fabrication or falsification, and ethical concerns, such as conflicts of interest, can lead to biased or erroneous research.

Doctoral students need to pay special attention to responsible conduct practice in their own research work and in teaching students about how to conduct research for several reasons [25]. According to Sandra & Janice in their attempt to establish who's responsible for responsible conduct of behaviors, there are major gaps in doctoral student and faculty access to formal guidelines and written policies articulating individual responsibilities for responsible conduct practices [23]. This would be expected to provide the position of institutional directives in so far as such policies and guidelines are concerned and in effect their perceived relevance [6, 7]. Responsible conduct calls for the execution of quality and acceptable standards in the event of collecting data, managing data for analysis, and authorship for doctoral students must be executed [6, 7]. Doctoral supervisors seeing themselves as mentors are the ones likely to build appropriate relationships with doctoral students thus likely to provide the diverse doctoral experiences needed to develop responsible conduct. Sandra & Janice summed it up that, "learning to make ethical choices in doctoral life is as complex as ongoing learning process thus fundamentally relies on doctoral supervisors' awareness and efforts to ensure the development of responsible doctorate research" [22]. This study therefore uses the trainer of trainers' framework as the foundation upon which doctoral supervisors should envisage since the doctoral candidates will soon become doctoral supervisors [6, 7].

1.2. Statement of the Problem

Doctoral research supervision is known to be a complex task that requires an understanding of multiple skills. Doctoral supervisors are expected to professionally articulate tasks and guide a Doctoral student towards adequate and quality research outputs so that the award of Doctoral degree can be validated. The task of Doctoral supervision is expected to be systematic, logical and incremental in approach. This however does not seem to be the case in many Doctoral supervisory experiences. Many Doctoral candidates have become frustrated and insecure regarding the direction to take right from the initial stages of choice of topic, concept development and visualization of concepts. The analytic framework in Doctoral thresholds concepts have collapsed and the internalization of specific concepts in most Doctoral research cannot easily be accommodated or assimilated within the existing meaning frames [17, 20]. Nathalie sums it up that doctoral students face a myriad of conceptual threshold challenges due to such things like lack of communication; absentee supervisors; overbearing supervisors; supervisors who retire, go on sabbatical and other leave periods; first and second supervisors don't get along; changing doctoral supervisors' mid-way; being overworked through subsidiary tasks of teaching and/or other commitments; loss of motivation; second year blues; and calling it a day [20]. The relevance of responsible conduct in doctoral research cannot be ignored yet in the USA, 30% of doctoral students do not have the guidelines or could not recall if they ever had them. Equally for those who had the

institutional and graduate program responsible conduct guidelines, (45.7%), fifteen percent (15%), believed that only the graduate program provided the expected guidelines while 5% sided with the institutional guide. One Kenyan University, Kenyatta University cancelled a PhD degree that was awarded to one of its staff in 2018 following plagiarism issues. The lecturer was subsequently dismissed after he admitted to having circumvented the internal Kenyatta University mechanism through collusion with a staffer where all doctoral theses are subjected to anti-plagiarism software check. In 2019, about 118 PhDs awarded by Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture & Technology were recalled following a government agency report that there were glaring irregularities violating the guidelines and standards set by the Universities effective 2014. Of critical concerns were evidential gaps on the requirement for two articles publications by doctoral student in refereed journals as well as the quality of doctoral supervision by virtue of number of doctoral students per supervisor.

1.3. Objective of the Study

This study sought to establish the influence of doctoral liminality on responsible conduct practices in Kibabii University, Kenya.

2. Methodology

Cross sectional survey was conducted among 13 doctoral candidates and 7 faculty members across 4 schools/faculties in Kibabii University. The design serves to facilitate collection of dependable data that would give a true picture of the current ethical problems in doctoral studies. Structured questionnaires were used on a google based platform in addition to personalized interviews. Descriptive statistics like frequency percentage, mean and standard deviation was used besides regression analysis.

3. Results

3.1. Descriptive Statistics on Doctoral Liminality and Responsible Conduct in Research

The influence of doctoral liminality and responsible conduct in doctoral research was analysed descriptively. 61.5% of the respondents were doctoral students while 38.5% were from the faculty. 70.8% were males while 29.2% were females. 76.9% contend that Kibabii University do have an operational research ethics policy applicable in guiding doctoral research, 15.4% of the respondents had no idea whether that Kibabii University do have an operational research ethics policy applicable in guiding doctoral research, while 7.7% said it does not have any operational research ethics policy. Comparatively on whether Kibabii University has an existing research ethics committee to operationalize and supervise responsible conduct practice in doctoral research, 38.5% agreed it has just as an equivalent percentage on the other hand had no idea, while 23.1% said it does not

have. This show the level of ignorance that exist in graduate students and possibly faculty if this magnitude of a total 61.6% negated their response on this issue. The concept of doctoral liminality appears to be very new to the respondents as a whopping 84.6% honestly confessed having not heard about it in as much as their experiences in doctoral research clearly show instances of doctoral liminality. It is only 15.4% who knew about the doctoral liminality experiences in doctoral research. This was further confirmed by the responses on their experiences during the development of their doctorate thesis concepts where 61.5% affirmed that it was not easy going through the same. Similarly, the time periods taken by the respondents in developing their concepts to set the direction of their research were pointing to doctoral liminality as 61.5% took between 1-6 months, 30.8% took 7-12 months, while 7.7% spent between 13-18 months. Shockingly, 76.9% admitted that they were helped to develop their thesis concepts. What is probably not clear is whether they were helped by their supervisors or paid/unpaid consultants. Only 23.1% developed their thesis concepts themselves. Interestingly, 7.7% admitted that they outsourced the services of their friends to help them develop their thesis concepts, while 69.2% contend that it is their supervisors who helped them develop their concepts. Indeed, it is the responsibility of the supervisors to guide their doctoral candidates to develop viable research concepts but not to develop for them. It was however not clear whether the supervisors did develop for them their doctoral research concepts or guided them into developing the same. Surprisingly, 84.6% confessed that they know a number of their colleagues and friends whose theses were written by third parties thus aggravating the level if irresponsible conduct in doctoral research. On individual basis, all the respondents point that they did not pay for the services in as much as they knew those who did the same. In fact, all of them further allude to the fact that this payment is not part of the programme cost. However, it is only 25% of the respondents who agree that it is not right to be written for a thesis while 75% said it is not wrong to be written for a doctoral thesis so long as one is taken through the document for internalization. This is quite shocking if this proportion of the respondents can hold such a view implying there is actually a big disconnect in so far as dissemination of the research ethics policy guides are concerned. Finally, the respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which a number of statements represent responsible conduct in research and the results were as summarized in Figure 1.
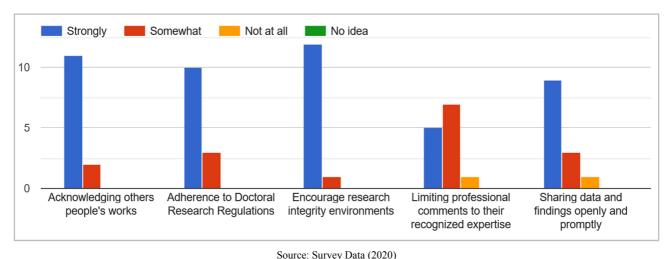

Source: Survey Data (2020)

Figure 1. *Level of Responsible Conduct Practices in Doctoral Research.*

From Figure 1, it can be demonstrated that majority of the respondents strongly point to the fact that acknowledging other people's works when using part of their works is critical. They further indicate that doctoral students should abide by the doctoral research regulations while pursuing the doctoral studies. The faculty should set an encouraging research integrity environment for doctoral research. Besides, the respondents strongly indicated that it is important to share doctoral research data and findings openly and promptly for future validation and reference whenever there is need. However, majority of the respondents underscored the essence of limiting professional comments to their recognized experts indicating that they prefer that this issue is left open to wide and conducive consultation.

3.2. Inferential Statistics

The influence of doctoral liminality and responsible conduct in research was interrogated by linear regression analysis adopting the following model in equation (1):

$$Y = \beta_0 + \beta_1 L_1 + \varepsilon_1 \qquad (1)$$

Where: R = Responsible Conduct Practices; L_1 = Doctoral Liminality; *e*- Error Term; β_0 -represents the Model Constant; and β_1, = Regression Coefficients.

The regression model assumed independent, identical and normally distributed random variables with a zero mean and a constant variance at 5% significance level. The results were captured as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Regression Coefficients of Doctoral Liminality and Responsible Conduct in Research.

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Stand. Coef.	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Er.	Beta		
1 (Constant)	1.199	.722		1.660	.000
Doctoral Liminality	.326	.096	.284	3.432	.000
R	0.284				
R-squared	0.081				
Adjusted R-squared	0.078				
F-statistics	0.701				
Durbin-Watson statistic	2.152				
Prob. (F-statistics)	0.001				

Source: Survey Data (2020)

Table 1 gives the R2 (0.007) and Adjusted R2 (0.092) indicating that, doctoral liminality predicts 1% of the variance in responsible conduct practice in doctoral research. This points that there are other aspects of doctoral supervision process that would account for responsible conduct practice apart from doctoral liminality. Botha & Mouton gives the critical areas to include an understanding of among other things the following: nature, purpose, standard and format of the doctoral degree; roles and responsibilities of doctoral supervisor and doctoral student; supervisory models and styles; the entire process of selection, supervisor allocation, and supervising the doctoral proposal; responsible conduct of research (RCR) and ethics itself; literature review; supervision project management; and doctoral examination [6, 7, 12]. The model's goodness of fit, shown by the coefficient of determination-(R2), was 0.007 adjusted to 0.092. The computed F-statistic of 0.701 (p = 0.001) was less than p<0. 05. This points that the significance can be extended to 99.99% confidence interval [1]. The Durbin-Watson statistic of 2.152, it was deduced that there was no serial correlation of the residuals as the values were within the accepted threshold of between 1.5 to 2.5 [2]. The findings indicate that there was a significant statistical influence of doctoral liminality on Responsible conduct practice in research (β=.326; p<.05). The regression model thus indicates that a one-unit increase in doctoral liminality would increase responsible conduct practice in research by 0.326 units in doctoral research. The null hypothesis that there is no significant statistical influence of doctoral liminality on responsible conduct practice in doctoral research was therefore rejected and the alternative hypothesis that there is a statistically significant influence of doctoral liminality on responsible conduct practice in doctoral research was instead accepted. The linkage of responsible conduct of research to doctoral liminality point to inappropriate doctoral supervision. Inappropriate doctoral supervision further points the problems experienced by inexperienced or too busy supervisors as demonstrated by [20].

4. Summary of Findings

The study sought to establish the influence of doctoral liminality on responsible conduct practice in doctoral research. 83% (Mean 1.308: SD=.227) of the respondents believe that doctoral liminality influences the level of responsible conduct practice in doctoral research. Hypothesis stated that there is no significant statistical influence of doctoral liminality on Responsible conduct practice in doctoral research. This was rejected based on the findings which showed that doctoral liminality has statistically significant effect on responsible conduct practice in doctoral research.

4.1. Conclusion

Objective one sought to establish the influence of doctoral liminality on responsible conduct practice in doctoral research. The study finding indicated that doctoral liminality has statistically significant effect on responsible conduct practice in doctoral research. From the findings obtained herein, it was concluded that the efforts towards solving doctoral liminality experiences would rightly be helpful in escalating responsible conduct in research to acceptable levels.

4.2. Recommendation

Objective one sought to establish the influence of doctoral liminality on Responsible conduct practice in doctoral research. The study thus recommends that University managers should always raise new doctorial supervisors' professional development by equipping them with the right tools before setting of the doctoral supervision path.

Acknowledgements

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