

# RECONTEXTUALISING “DOING A DOCTORAL DEGREE” AS A SOCIAL PRACTICE COMPLEX: EVIDENCE FROM MALAYSIA

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## Abstract

The current study is part of a longitudinal research project into the relationship between students’ ways of recontextualising their doctoral degree experience and eventual programme completion. Building on earlier findings reported in De Rycker (2014, 2022), the objective is to examine the hidden ontology of “doing a doctoral degree”. The primary data consist in structured interviews conducted with 20 doctoral students at the Universiti Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Using Van Leeuwen’s (2008) socio-semantic model for the critical study of discourse, the analysis of the interviews produced two major empirical findings. First, doctoral students’ discourse is characterised by a strong sense of personal agency but also a lack of specificity and a simplification of the overall practice complex, in which doing research seems to be reduced to mere semiotic actions. Secondly, students construe “doing a doctoral degree” as a mystifying process replete with paradoxes. Further interpretative analysis suggests that semiotic action representations play a significant role as self-enhancing metonyms for “doing research”, helping students to demystify the academic practice and resolve some of its inherent contradictions. Implications for supervisory practice as well as the larger research project will be discussed.

## Keywords

doctoral research, social practice complex, recontextualisation, discourse, Malaysia

## 1 Introduction

Early last year (11 February 2022), one of my recently assigned PhD supervisees sent me an email saying, among other things, the following: (1) “Seems that I was stuck in how I want to figure out what I want to do in my research”, (2) “I feel a bit depressed” and (3) “To complete this PhD programme, I also need to publish an article in a Scopus-indexed journal”. These three sentences poignantly illustrate some of the main concerns that led me – around a decade ago – to examine the constructive potential of the discourse typically produced by higher-degree research students. What initially started as a form of action research to improve my own supervisory practice became – over time – a more substantial longitudinal project. Its overarching aim was – and still is – to generate empirically sound generalisations about novice researchers’ own “ways of knowing some aspect of reality” (Van Leeuwen 2009: 144), i.e. their conception

of the reality of “doing a doctoral degree”, and to relate these discursive features to doctoral success. Such general insights could subsequently help to design targeted interventions and also more effective methods for guiding students.

The context within which this larger project has to be seen is not only doctoral attrition rates – usually put at around 50 per cent worldwide (e.g. Churchill et al. 2021, Cosgrove 2022) – but also PhD students’ academic or professional “enculturation” (Lee 2012, Lee & Murray 2015, Wrigley et al. 2021) and their well-being and resilience (e.g. Lee 2018, Schmidt & Hansson 2018, Bekkouchei et al. 2021). The personal and contextual risk factors that contribute to attrition have long been established (e.g. Kis et al. 2022: 4-5). What is largely missing from the literature, however, is the role played by the discourse that doctoral students employ in recontextualising “doing a doctoral degree” or “doing doctoral research” as a social practice. To cite Van Leeuwen (2009: 144), when one social practice (e.g. doing a PhD) is incorporated into another (e.g. *talking about doing a PhD*), the process of recontextualisation creates new “socially constructed ways of knowing some aspect of reality”. It is not inconceivable – as was argued in De Rycker et al. (2019) – that “[p]erceptions and construals motivate linguistic representations that may negatively affect performance”. Put differently, regardless of the accuracy, comprehensiveness or fairness of representing the aforesaid “aspect of [academic] reality”, the students’ own discourse is a distinct “way of knowing” the doctoral research practice, and as such, can be conjectured to influence their sense of agency, goal-directedness and self-efficacy. These qualities, in turn, may help or hinder their progress and ultimately affect their chances of timely programme completion.

One of the main empirical findings to emerge from the project so far is that research students construe their master’s or doctoral programme experience in terms of three separate but often conflated academic practices: (i) conducting the various research activities that uniquely make up their supervised research project, (ii) communicating their research findings in the form of a dissertation, research article or oral presentation and (iii) satisfying a particular academic or practical requirement of their programme (De Rycker 2014). I refer to these three components as respectively “doing research”, “communicating research” and “satisfying programme requirements”, using the capital letters A, B and C in curly brackets as a coding shorthand. Note that {O} is used for still other, not directly related non-academic practices (e.g. looking after the children). To illustrate, in the student email cited in the opening paragraph, Sentence (1) represents certain actions within {A}, i.e. deciding on the topic area and research design of the PhD, while Sentence (3) refers to {B} (“publish an article”) as part of {C}, the publication requirement for programme completion. Sentence (2) but also

part of (1) include affective reactions to the “doing a doctoral degree” practice (“stuck” and “depressed”). Adding emotional reactions and evaluations to the recontextualised practice is not unusual. Nutov and Hazzan’s (2011: 28) analysis of interviews with PhD students concludes that doing a doctoral degree is experienced as “an inspiring process” but also one that is “intensive, emotionally loaded [and] depleting”.

Though their co-dependence is not absolute, the practices of {A}, {B} and {C} typically co-exist within the same time-space configuration and display a high level of integration. The three are bound tightly enough – especially for research students – to justify their categorisation as a so-called social practice complex, a term borrowed from Shove et al. (2012: 17). Social practices tend to co-exist but while some are only loosely associated as so-called “bundles”, others represent “stickier and more integrated arrangements including co-dependent forms of sequence and synchronization”; it is the latter that are referred to as “complexes”. Another useful distinction within praxeology is between social practices viewed as performances and social practices viewed as entities. Becoming a recognisable entity usually implies that there has emerged a relatively homogeneous or standardised way of integrating the various practice elements (ibid.: 38). It is through the actual performance, however, and the immediacy of doing that the constituent elements are recognisably and intelligibly integrated (ibid.: 7).

In respect of social practice and social practice theory, this study draws on Van Leeuwen’s (2008) approach to discourse as the recontextualisation of social practice. Within the broader field of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and the study of discourse more generally, his socio-cognitive framework is “a clear tool” (Van Leeuwen 2009: 277), well suited to identify, describe and interpret the socially shared cognitions that characterise PhD students’ discourse. The student perspective has, of course, been examined before. Research designs include surveys (e.g. Johnston et al. 2016, Ching et al. 2021, McCray & Joseph-Richard 2021), narrative inquiry (e.g. Brazill 2021) and ethnographic accounts (e.g. Matthews 2021, Rivera 2022). However, these studies focus on major themes and recurrent concerns – such as students’ “perceived lower satisfaction ratings across all doctoral education experiences” (Ching et al. 2021: 13 of 17). They do not examine the less obvious meanings encoded in the discursive transformations to be observed. Wrigley et al. (2021), for example, deploys interviews, focus groups and reflective journals but these textual sources support the discussion and are not analysed linguistically. The same holds for Baydarova et al.’s (2021) semi-structured interviews with doctoral students and supervisors. As with other strands within CDA, Van Leeuwen’s discourse-analytical approach goes beyond the examination of what is said, how often and what it may mean

(e.g. the number of times that PhD students talk about data collection or which negative emotions they express such as worry or guilt). Instead, it tries to identify configurations of lexico-grammatical features in the language used and what these patterns convey about the recontextualised social practice itself.

As such, the present study breaks new ground, with little prior scholarship to relate it to (e.g. Jones 2013). It is telling, for example, that a major 2022 publication entitled *Research Anthology on Doctoral Student Professional Development* mentions “discourse” once, and then only in the context of dissertation writing (Crain-Dorough & Elder 2022). Literature search strings with “discourse”, “discourse analysis”, “Van Leeuwen” and/or “doctoral students” also failed to identify any directly relevant studies. The archives of the *International Journal of Doctoral Studies* – a leading platform for sharing conceptual, theoretical and empirical research since 2006 – yields only five papers between 2016 and 2022 for the search term “discourse”. Moreover, these articles define the term differently, are interested in different phenomena (e.g. academic identity), study different stakeholders (e.g. universities, faculties or supervisors) or employ different theories and methodologies (e.g. multiracial feminism). At the other end of the spectrum, there are studies that adopt a social practice approach to, for example, academic identity and agency (e.g. Mathieson 2019) but narratives are taken at face value and not examined from within a discourse-analytical perspective. Recently, there have been attempts to reframe doctoral supervision research in terms of social practice theory (e.g. Trowler 2021) but without combining this with the critical analysis of discourse. Note that the lack of a consistent body of prior scholarship is in line with the more general observation that “[w]hile higher education studies typically use textual data [...], textual methods have been used surprisingly sparingly” (Nokkala & Saarinen 2018: 14).

Nonetheless, the significance of the current study is not purely practical or exploratory or only of interest to discourse scholars. It also contributes to prior empirical work on the macro-environment (e.g. institutional discourses about the doctoral degree), the doctoral research process (e.g. the transitional stage that novice researchers go through) and the micro-experiences of various stakeholders (e.g. supervisors). Where relevant, these studies will be referenced when presenting, discussing and interpreting the findings in Sections 3 and 4.

## **2 Materials and methods**

The data sources employed and the methods for collecting and analysing the discursive recontextualisations are the same as those described in De Rycker (2014, 2022). For the sake of completeness, however, a summary of materials and methods is provided here, also because the research questions guiding this

study are different and the new findings to be reported are based on a smaller subsample of the original dataset.

## 2.1 Research design and data collection

To collect authentic discourse about the postgraduate research experience, potential students were recruited for interview – through opportunity sampling – during a postgraduate training workshop held at the Universiti Malaya (UM), Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia (see also De Rycker 2014). Of the 44 workshop attendees who volunteered to complete the written “structured interview” questionnaire, 20 were doctoral students and thus qualified to participate in the present study. To cite Vogt et al.’s (2012: 149), “20 to 40 interviewees is a normal range” for obtaining in-depth information, identifying regularities and drawing generalisations. Considering the limited number of interview questions (see below), a sample size of 20 also offers an acceptable trade-off between breadth of representativeness and depth of analysis. The interviewees represent the humanities as well as various social, natural and applied sciences. They are on average six months into their PhD programmes; their age ranges from 24 to 57 years, with 35 as the average; the majority are women (16 out of 20, or 80%).

The questionnaire used in the study was developed by De Rycker (2014) to form part of a corpus of diverse semiotic sources for studying the recontextualisation of “doing research” in general. In the present context, the seven original questions are exclusively aimed, however, at capturing PhD students’ recontextualisations of the “doing a doctoral degree” practice complex.

Question 1: What are you doing right now?

Question 2: And how is it going?

Question 3: What have you already done so far?

Question 4: And how satisfied are you with what you have done already?

Question 5: What are you planning to do next?

Question 6: And what are your expectations about how it will go?

Question 7: Report one problem that has hindered work on your thesis. And how did you solve it?

As the question formulations show, the focus is on describing past, present and future “doing” (Questions 1, 3, 5 and 7) and on evaluating these (Questions 2, 4 and 6). Consider the following example, an answer to Question 4:

- (1) *Not very satisfied since I know that some of my friends have a very clear focus in their study. I need to summarize what my finding is and concentrate on choosing what my problem statement is and get on with my study. [3108MPHD]*

Note that to enhance readability, some answers have been minimally edited for grammar and spelling. Each interviewee has been assigned a unique eight-digit code – added in square brackets at the end of each example. The interview answers consist of 2,636 words, which amounts to an average of 377 words per question, 132 words per interviewee and 19 words per question per interviewee. It is this dataset that was subsequently subjected to a systematic discourse analysis.

## 2.2 Analytical framework

The 20 interviews were examined as concrete discursive events, using the same framework that underlies De Rycker (2013, 2014, 2022) and De Rycker et al. (2019), namely Van Leeuwen’s (2008, 2009) socio-semantic model. Van Leeuwen (2008: 6-12) distinguishes eight structural elements in a social practice: the principal two are (i) the actions that make up the practice and (ii) the participants (or social actors) involved; without “people doing things”, there would be no rationalised, proceduralised social (inter)action to begin with. For a more comprehensive account, due consideration should also be given, however, to the six other elements: (iii) times, (iv) locations, (v) resources like tools and materials, (vi) performance modes (“stage directions” as to how to carry out a particular action in the practice), (vii) presentation styles (the “dress and body grooming requirements” of participants) and (viii) eligibility conditions (what qualifies a person, an object, a place, etc. to play their role in the practice).

So, the central research question can be reformulated as follows: When doctoral students talk about their overall programme experience, which social practices show up in their recontextualisation, which elements of these practices are represented linguistically and in what way? To illustrate, consider the following partially coded answer to Question 2.

- (2) *I’m so worried because I haven’t started writing papers {B} to be submitted to ISI journals {C} in order to fulfil the university’s requirement {C}. There is so much work {A?, B?, C?, O?} to be done!! [2406MPHD]*

In the process of recontextualising the social practice complex of “doing a doctoral degree”, some constitutive practices – and elements of these or other, non-academic practices – are represented by means of substitution and rearrangement, while others may be deleted and still others (e.g. evaluations and legitimations) added. In Example (2) above, 2406MPHD represents several actions related to both “communicating research” ({B}) and “satisfying programme requirements” ({C}) but without rearranging them. Closer analysis reveals that the substitutions combine agentive and non-agentive constructions

(e.g. use of the passive voice in *to be submitted* and *to be done*) as well as both material and semiotic actions (*start, write, submit, fulfil, do*). Moreover, the practice representation also includes an addition in the form of a negative affective reaction (*worried*). It is also potentially significant that the two phrases *writing papers* and *to be submitted to ISI journals* involve collectivisation through pluralisation at the expense of individuation and informative detail. Finally, the nominalisation *writing papers* is also a form of objectivation, and thus, a construction that deactivates the activity. Note that Van Leeuwen is known for his intricate and highly ramified taxonomies for describing the transformations taking place when social practices are recontextualised. This is especially the case for social action and social actor representations – see the overview tables in Van Leeuwen (2008: 52 & 73).

In short, the present study contains two types of analysis: one macro at the level of social practice representation, the other micro at the level of representing separate practice elements within the social practices represented. Taken together, both give an idea of how the interviewees construe the practice of undertaking a doctoral programme. By aggregating the descriptive findings, it is possible to identify regularities and patterned meanings and to interpret these in a wider societal context. In Example (2) above, 2406MPHD does not explicitly refer to the core component of “doing research” ( $\{A\}$ ), i.e. it is deleted from the recontextualisation. Because of its centrality in the practice complex, the absence is particularly noticeable. What it means in respect of students’ understanding of their doctoral studies will depend on the prevalence of this type of deletion among the interviewees and other aspects of the practice complex recontextualisation (see Section 3.3).

### 3 Findings and discussion

#### 3.1 Key discourse features

Based on the descriptive minutiae and analytical evidence gleaned from the interviews, the distinctive nature of the doctoral students’ discourse can be characterised in terms of the following three generalisations. The discursive features have been ranked in decreasing order of salience or prominence.

##### 3.1.1 Agentiveness

The notion of agentiveness refers to representations of social actions that are activated and agentialised. As Van Leeuwen (2008: 66) puts it, “[a]ctions and reactions can be [...] represented as brought about by human agency [...] or as brought about in other ways, impervious to agency”. Consider the following answers, illustrating a sliding scale of human agency representation:

- (3)
1. *I am recruiting respondents.* [3611MPHD]
  2. *About 80 per cent of the respondents have been recruited by me for the first interview.* [hypothetical example based on Example (3.3) below]
  3. *About 80 per cent of the respondents have been recruited for the first interview.* [3611MPHD]
  4. *The next stage is doing recruitment.* [hypothetical example based on Example (3.5) below]
  5. *The next stage is recruitment.* [0702MPHD]

Grammatically, these five utterances range from active-voice and tensed verb constructions to their passive-voice equivalents to nominalisations (or so-called process nouns) involving “do” and next, to nominalisations without “do” (Van Leeuwen 2008: 63-66). All five of them refer to certain aspects of the broader academic research stage of sampling, selection and recruitment but arguably, not all of them position the doctoral student as a pro-active, agentive and self-efficacious individual. Within a typical CDA perspective, the five utterances are not regarded as interchangeable or randomly distributed but as encoding different conceptions of the practice or one of its elements. While Example (3.1), for example, is dynamic, agentive, personal and relatively specific, Example (3.5) – at the other pole – is static, non-agentive, impersonal and general. In other words, the scale moves from representing the same action as part of a practice-as-performance involving agents and patients (*recruiting*) to representing it as part of a practice-as-entity (*recruitment*), while suppressing or backgrounding the social actors involved.

Systematic analysis of agentialisation, agentive constructions and, more generally, agency shows that obtaining a research qualification is construed as an individual and active process – a solo endeavour. In respect of the doctoral students, nearly all their social action representations display agentiveness – with 190 agentive constructions versus 43 non-agentive ones – or 81.55 per cent of the total of 233. A typical case frequently attested in the interviews is “searching for (the) literature” rather than “doing a literature search” or the compound nominalisation “literature search” on its own. A strong sense of agentiveness is to be expected as a doctoral degree involves a unique research project to be conducted autonomously. Originality and independence are also emphasised in Malaysia’s MQF Level 8 description: a doctoral degree or PhD “involves substantial, advanced, *independent* and *original* research and scholarship in a most advanced area of knowledge and emerging issues of a specific area of study in a discipline or multidiscipline, assessed against international standards [*italics mine*]” (Malaysian Qualifications Agency 2017: 26).



A second factor contributing to agentiveness is the lexico-grammatical representation of social actors. Van Leeuwen’s (2008: 52) social actor network distinguishes two major categories: (i) inclusion (with more than 25 substitution options such as individualisation, nomination or functionalisation) and (ii) exclusion (i.e. suppression or backgrounding). To illustrate, consider the following answers – “self” representations only – with their broad top-level coding:

- (4) *Question 1: What are you doing right now?*
1. *Sample collection* {A} [exclusion: nominalisation] [2707MPHD]
  2. *I am at the stage of collecting data and doing fieldwork at hospitals and shelters* {A}. [inclusion: pronominalisation] [3611MPHD]
  3. – *I am doing my literature review* {A}. [inclusion: pronominalisation]  
– *Planning learning and understanding the new theories that are related to my study/research* {A} [exclusion: ellipsis] *that I’ve never come across before.* [inclusion: pronominalisation]  
– *Planning the contents of my study/research* {A}. [exclusion: ellipsis]  
– *I have to alter the previous contents* {A? B?}. [inclusion: pronominalisation]  
– *Preparing my proposal defence* {C}. [exclusion: ellipsis] [2406MPHD]

Given the nature of the interview questions, it is not surprising that the interviewees themselves make up the majority of social actor representations. Taking all interviews together, there are 242 “self” representations compared to 31 for “others” (88.64% and 11.36% respectively). Note that these “others” are (i) the supervisor, the ethics committee or the university, (ii) respondents, participants [in the research] and interviewees, and to a far lesser extent, (iii) social actors in non-research-related activities such as colleagues, friends, family and the household help. Note that “friends” usually refers to other doctoral students in the programme – see Example (1). Interestingly, 65 per cent of these “self” references are left implicit through ellipsis and nominalisation (159 out of the total of 242). As they talk about their research activities and progress, it should be self-evident that it is the students themselves whose actions make up the practice-as-performance.

### 3.1.2 Lack of specificity

A second dominant feature of the doctoral students’ “way of knowing/speaking” is a lack of specificity throughout all interview answers. Despite the dynamic representation of most actions and the emphasis placed on personal agency in performing them, a paucity of descriptive detail is provided as to the “what” and “how”. Practice elements are implied or represented indirectly, and there is a marked preference for such transformations as collectivisation,

aggregation, functional categorisation and objectivation. Research activities especially are described in abstract or generic terms, with no concrete information or actionable detail about the many steps that comprise the “doing research” process. See, among many others, Examples (5.1), (6.2), (7.1) and (7.2) below.

Similarly, there is also a lack of descriptive detail regarding how these research-specific actions interrelate with social actors other than the students themselves or with the performance modes (“stage directions”), locations and resources required. Only a handful of instances could be attested for each of these three. Note that presentation styles are completely absent from the interviews. Consider the following instances, one set for each of the three additional practice elements represented (bolding mine):

- (5) 1. *I have to read books **from chapter to chapter** since I am not very familiar with the field of my study.* [3108MPHD]  
 2. *Need some improvement especially on completing a **comprehensive** literature study.* [4412MPHD]
- (6) 1. *I am at the stage of collecting data and doing fieldwork **at hospitals and shelters**.* [3611MPHD]  
 2. *The first four months of my study was hectic but with constant visits to **the library** and consulting one of my professors, I was able to overcome some aspects.* [3008MPHD]  
 3. *Prepared for my study attachment in **Waseda University, Japan**.* [4412MPHD]
- (7) 1. *Collect **articles and books** regarding the study.* [1904MPHD]  
 2. ***Reading all kinds of materials** which are relevant to my study.* [0802MPHD]  
 3. *Buy **e-kamus** [digital dictionary] to help.* [1904MPHD]

Note that performance modes can be represented either directly or indirectly. In the former case, the focus is on representing the way in which the action is performed, i.e. the dynamic process, as in reading *from chapter to chapter* in Example (5.1). In the latter case, the representational focus is on a particular outcome of one of the actions in the practice and on one of its essential qualities – see Example (5.2).

It can be concluded from the lack of representational specificity that the interviewees’ “way of speaking” and their underlying “way of knowing” constitute what Van Leeuwen (2008: 35) calls “a conception of reality” and do not represent “the flux of experience”. If it had been the latter, the language would have been one of nomination and unique identities – instead of, for example, functional categorisation – and would have captured the uniqueness of the practice elements for each PhD student in expressive detail. The discourse analysis of the interviews, however, shows that “doing research” is largely

represented as a social practice that assimilates, a practice that is done the way it is through aggregation and collectivisation (Van Leeuwen 2008: 37), i.e. with a focus on groups rather than isolated or individuated cases. Arguably, this is one of the primordial objectives of academic research and how research findings are communicated within the community. Yet, there is no obvious reason why a similar discursive requirement should be in evidence in the recontextualising practice under analysis.

### **3.1.3 Ontological reductionism**

As shown by the examples given so far, the doctoral students mention a range of actions across all three constituent practices in the complex. Closer examination, however, reveals the following three major tendencies. First, the range of social action representations is relatively narrow, with most students drawing from the same limited subset. Secondly, that subset is made up of predominantly semiotic actions, especially verbal processes like reading and writing, while mental processes – except for planning – are rare. In fact, there are only two occurrences of thinking in the sense of the interactive cognitive skills employed in solving problems, acquiring expertise, creativity, making decisions and the like (e.g. Reed 2012). Thirdly, material actions occur infrequently, with only four cases attested: travelling (for data collection or study attachment purposes), buying (a translation dictionary) and downloading (research articles). On the distinction between material and semiotic actions, see Van Leeuwen (2008: 59-63).

Apparently, students’ “doing a doctoral degree” discourse is permeated by a form of ontological reductionism: judging from the interviews, the practice complex is discursively reduced to a sequence of predominantly semiotic actions, especially verbal processes such as reading and writing and, to a lesser extent, the mental process of planning. Out of a total of 102 social action representations in the interviews, the top five most frequently represented actions – each with more than 10 mentions – are reading (e.g. articles), reviewing (e.g. literature, articles), collecting (e.g. data, samples, articles, books), planning (e.g. contents, workload) and reviewing (e.g. literature).

To get an idea of the sorts of actions represented, consider the answers in (8) below: summarising, reading, collecting data, writing up a chapter, meeting the supervisor, etc.; the unrelated practices include activities such as sleeping or taking care of children.

- (8) *Question 5: What are you planning to do next?*
1. *I am planning to summarize {A? B?} all that I have read {A}. Then specify my problem and adjust my objective of the study {A}. Then after that, I will feel relieved [affective reaction] with what I am doing {A? B? C?} and can go further to write up my literature findings {B} and the introduction chapter {B}. And after that, I plan to continue to collect my data {A}. [3108MPHD]*
  2. *– Speeding up my reading {A} and writing process {B}.  
– Less sleep {O} and rest {O} equals progress {A? B? C?}!  
– Adjust my study life {A} – focus more on study {A} and family {O}. [2406MPHD]*
  3. *– After the exam {C}, meet my supervisor {C}, to determine the method and scope {A}.  
– Write up Chapter 1 {B}. [1904MPHD]*

The detailed breakdown of all social practice recontextualisations – a total of 231 – shows that almost half of all actions that are being represented refer to “doing research” (107 out of 231, or 46.32%), followed by “others” (29.44%), and again at a great distance, “satisfying requirements” (13.42%) and “communicating research” (10.82%). Given the average time into their doctoral programme, it is perhaps to be expected that most actions not only belong to the constituent practice {A} but are also characteristic of what Vogt et al. (2012: 12) call the “expanded [research] design process”, the early stages in the overall research process.

Still, a narrow focus on semiotic or rhetorical actions is remarkable in view of what doctoral research is meant to be. The description of MQF Level 8, for example, emphasises the importance of originality, innovation, expertise, critical reflection, ethical awareness and so forth; it is about generating original research ideas and turning these into research projects; it does not mention either reading or writing (Malaysian Qualifications Agency 2017: 26). Of course, reading and writing are indispensable, but it is not clear from the interviews how the students relate both to the many higher-order thinking skills associated with their research-intensive programme. The only exception to this is 3108MPHD:

- (9) *Until now, I still haven't written any chapter for my thesis. I know that I have to write something even though it is not my intention now. But from the ideas that I have written down, it might be that I will get some new ideas. [3108MPHD]*

The above student hints not only at the importance of what can be referred to as “writing for thinking”– writing as an ideational technique, writing to generate “some new ideas” and thus part of {A} – but also shows awareness that this type of writing is distinct from {B} “writing to communicate” (crafting a “chapter for my thesis”).

Note that these social action findings lend support to Starke-Meyerring et al.’s (2014: A24) conclusion that institutional discourse about academic practice {B} envisions the doctoral thesis as “a knowledge product”, while reducing “the production of that knowledge” to “the writing of the thesis”, a purely rhetorical practice “located outside the disciplinary knowledge-making practices *that shape and are shaped by research writing* [italics mine]”; it ignores “the intellectual work of actively working out findings and arguing for their interpretation *through writing* [italics mine]” (ibid.: A18). Supervisory practice often overlooks the integrated nature of both, focussing on thesis and degree completion at the expense of supervisees’ academic or professional development (Bastalich 2017).

As a final point, in keeping with the practice elements discussed so far, the social action representations do not display a great deal of specificity – see also Section 3.1.2. Example (10) below illustrates how the lack of specificity (i.e. “all kinds of materials which are relevant to my study”) tends to combine with the other prominent discourse feature, namely the focus on verbal actions (i.e. “reading”):

- (10) *Question 1: What are you doing right now?*  
*Reading all kinds of materials which are relevant to my study.* [0802MPHD]

This combination produces a kind of language that is vague, sketchy and – in flouting Grice’s (1975) Maxim of Quantity – even uncooperative. In fact, and with reference to Lemke’s (1998: 87) work on the semiotics of science, students’ preoccupation with reading and writing merely offers an analytical abstraction of “doing research” as if it were a disembodied social practice instead of a concrete, material process of making meaning of the physical world. More on this in Section 3.3.

### **3.2 Under-representation**

The conclusion seems warranted that in the interviews, “doing doctoral research” is not so much represented as “under-represented”. Such under-representation, however, runs the risk of imbuing the key participants with only “a vague and woolly knowledge” of what the practice entails; leaving activities out or not disclosing certain elements in detail creates a “mystique of expertise” (Van Leeuwen 2008: 18). This mystique typically occurs when experts, i.e. elite institutional or individual actors (e.g. a corporation or a lawyer) interact with non-experts (e.g. their clients), while it is rare among experts themselves. In a community of professional practitioners, inclusion (e.g. being complete and comprehensive) and specificity (e.g. attention to detail) as well as evaluations

(e.g. quality assurance) and legitimations (e.g. argumentation) are defining properties of the elite, expert discourse.

The question then is who is doing the under-representing in the case of the interviews. De Rycker (2014) conjectured that it is not the research degree students themselves but that it is coming from the officially sanctioned university discourse, including the language typical of the written research genres to which the students are exposed. The analyses reported in the current study now seem to confirm this conjecture. The “recruitment” examples given in Section 3.1.1 show that many of the PhD interviewees’ utterances sound as if taken from another source, as if coming from somewhere outside the student: Example (3.3) may have been pragmatically more appropriate in a progress report, while Example (3.5) seems to be cited verbatim from a research methodology text or doctoral programme brochure. Another example is 2607MPHD’s Likert-scale-type reply to Question 4 about past performance: “On a scale of 1 to 10 with 1 being poor and 10 being excellent, I rate myself as 6” or student 4312MPHD, who says “20 per cent – feeling my progress too slow” as if in both cases the participant in the practice somehow becomes the practice. Research students’ near-constant exposure to institutional and research methodological discourses about what it is they are supposed to be doing could explain the high frequency of abstract, deactivated nominalisations when talking about their activities or progress in the interviews (e.g. “proposal presentation”) compared to agentialisations that emphasise their ability to get things done and a more personal engagement (Van Leeuwen 2008: 73). For example, there are twice as many instances of the definite article – e.g. “doing *the* proposal presentation” or “presenting *the* proposal” (italics mine) – as first-person singular possessive pronouns – e.g. “doing *my* proposal presentation” or “presenting *my* proposal” (italics mine). It is a kind of generic, distancing language that students are likely to encounter all the time, perhaps also during supervisory consultations. Fulgence’s (2019: 724) review of the literature found that knowledge and use of the “discourse conventions” in the discipline is one of the main doctoral supervision skills; however, these conventions seem to be limited to institutional “ways of speaking”.

Together with the three discourse features identified in this study, under-representation thus construes the “doing a doctoral degree” practice as an entity rather than a performance. Given the highly regulated and prescribed way of “doing research” – largely owing to the primacy of the scientific method – and the other two related practices “communicating research” and “satisfying programme requirements”, it is perhaps inevitable that research degree students’ discourses become as homogeneous and standardised as the practice-as-entity itself, with little room for a distinct personal perspective or interpretation.

Though further research is required, the interviews suggest that a personal perspective or interpretation is only provided when a practice element requires legitimation. The following two examples may serve to clarify this conjecture.

- (11) *Attrition due to maturation (my subjects are cancer patients), so I need to oversample. [1804MPHD]*
- (12) *I have three kids – need to balance between my study and [incomplete sentence]. For the first three months of my study, I had to make a huge adjustment to my family life. To solve the problem, I got a maid to help me manage my housework. [2406MPHD]*

The first example is about oversampling, which in the case of 1804MPHD is a justified decision as “my subjects are cancer patients”. While research participants – as social actors – are mostly represented generically, the further specification of “subjects as cancer patients” signals that something is out of the ordinary, exceptional or problematic, prompting the interviewees to add a form of justification even when they were not explicitly asked to do so. Similarly, in Example (12), 2406MPHD is the only PhD candidate to share the exact number of children in the household (“three kids”) and the exact number of months that she had to adjust to the new challenges (“first three months of my study”). Having to go through a period of huge adjustment seems to be socially marked, requiring some form of legitimation. It is at junctures like these that “doing research” and “obtaining a PhD qualification” become more of a personal, individual experience – involving real people, real concerns, even real interest. When reporting problems, obstacles or setbacks, the students can no longer “hide” behind abstract construals and the fiction of an immutable “script of the ideal” (Bieber & Worley 2006) for completing their research degrees; instead, they must be their sincere selves.

### **3.3 The search for a voice**

The findings reported and discussed so far reveal certain paradoxes between the defining features of the academic practice complex and its discursive transformations and lexico-grammatical representations. A dominant paradox is the tension between, on the one hand, *self-directed* learning, creativity, exploration, initiative and self-efficacy, and on the other, *other-directed* compliance, performance mode requirements and stepwise management. It seems that doctoral students – at least those who are relatively early into the process – are caught between the dual demands of distinctiveness (“standing out”) and conformity (“fitting in”). Note that these discursive dualities come on top of other

tensions that have been documented in the literature (e.g. McCormack 2004, Ross et al. 2017, Lee 2018). Judging from their “way of speaking”, many of the students also give the impression of being somewhat mystified by the academic practice of doing research, witness the under-representation and lack of specificity referred to above. When recontextualised, the “doing doctoral research” practice remains something of a mystery, “a vague and woolly knowledge”, hard to articulate or explain and perhaps – though more speculatively – also hard to understand and perform. Note that these discourse-analytical findings tie in with personal narratives of new PhD students such as Rivera’s (2022: 332-333). In her search for meaning amidst the “high stress and uncertainty”, she encountered a “multiplicity of mixed messages” and “paradoxical statements”.

From a CDA perspective, it might be concluded that as entry-level researchers, many of the doctoral students have yet to develop their own unique “way of knowing” and, related to it, their own “way of speaking” – their own “voice”. As evidenced by the extracts and examples given above, the doctoral students all refer to virtually the same practice elements, using an homogeneous language; when examining the dataset question by question and answer by answer, there is very little to distinguish one interviewee from the next. The students appear not so much as “victims” within an academic context of “deception” and “disempowerment” – my original interpretation (De Rycker 2013, 2014) – but rather as research novices, as newcomers to a practice: they are “no longer students” but they are “not yet experts”, not only in praxeological terms but also discursively.

Though these findings support, therefore, Tinto’s (1994) much-cited three-stage model, they do not construe socialisation into the academic community as exclusively epistemic or socio-psychological but also as inherently and potently discursive, within the broader context of social practice performance. The analysis suggests that PhD candidates may *first* have to construct “doing a doctoral degree” as practice-as-entity *before* internalising it as practice-as-performance – gradually “making it their own”. This process requires an idiosyncratic re-conceptualisation of the practice and the development of a personal vocabulary and phraseology, not only to make sense of the research process at a deeper level but ultimately also to improve its efficiency and effectiveness. If so, the discursive re-construal of “doing research” would also contribute to Cosgrove’s (2022: 1) critical strategy of doctoral degree completion: the “identity shift from dependent student to independent scholar”. Note that this conjecture about discursive re-construal is fundamentally different from prior scholarship that understands the identity shift as a form of socialisation into *existing* discourses (e.g. Anderson 2017).



The uncertainty and the search for a “voice” – and perhaps a confident academic identity – may also explain why so many interviewees refer to reading or writing: both are concrete, measurable and familiar activities that help bridge “doing a doctoral degree”-as-entity and “doing a doctoral degree”-as-performance; in other words, both may smooth the transition between “a conception of reality” and “the flux of experience”. A focus on writing, chapters and words can help reduce the tensions inherent at this transitional stage; it helps overcome the initial cognitive complexity and conceptual fluidity by creating an early – if only temporary – sense of simplicity and solidity. Semiotic actions like reading and writing may also afford a relatively straightforward way to (i) make progress and achievement visible and (ii) plan out the next steps in the process, with both tactics likely to affect a doctoral student’s sense of control and motivation positively. Even if it contains no actual descriptive or instructional detail, a phrase such as “write up Chapter 1” – see (8.3) above – has an immediate clarity to it and may also facilitate supervisor-supervisee communication.

Because of these benefits, it would perhaps be more accurate – and more charitable – to see reading and writing as inadequate but helpful and self-enhancing metonyms for the whole process of “doing research”, a conflation of practices {A} and {B} that is further promoted by much institutional discourse – see Section 3.1.3. A preoccupation with reading and writing may even be regarded as a form of self-scaffolding aimed at simplifying the task and making progress measurable (Wood et al. 1976). It cannot be determined from the dataset, however, whether this kind of self-scaffolding – or the additional scaffolding provided by supervisors and academic language practitioners – also enables the doctoral students “to make leaps forward in their ability to think critically”, as envisaged by Wilson and Devereux (2014: A91). On the other hand, it can be speculated that this focus on reading and writing may give them a greater sense of control and a more positive appreciation of their progress, a critical factor in doctoral degree completion (Devos et al. 2017), especially in view of the “projectification of research” (Grant-Smith & Winter 2022: 238).

#### **4 Conclusions**

Building on De Rycker (2014, 2022), the present study conducted a systematic analysis of doctoral students’ recontextualisations of their research activities, progress and expectations half a year into their respective programmes. Its theoretical contribution lies in the deployment of “discourse as the recontextualization of social practice” (Van Leeuwen 2009) as an alternative analytical lens through which to reveal students’ understanding of “doing a doctoral degree” as a complex of academic practices. The interview answers

allowed a characterisation of that understanding in terms of agentiveness, lack of specificity and ontological reductionism, within an overall context of under-representation, paradoxes and mystification. The findings also suggested an alternative way of interpreting the role of semiotic action representations as self-enhancing metonyms for “doing research”.

One limitation of the study concerns the use of Van Leeuwen’s (2008) *Discourse and Practice*. It is well-known that the critical study of discourse has its shortcomings (e.g. Breeze 2011), and that it has been rightfully criticised – to cite, for example, Bartesaghi and Pantelides (2018: 158) – for “its slippage into an unaccountable ontology of intentionality, hiddenness, and hegemony”. In fact, though perhaps all recontextualisations come with some degree of ideological loading, this study has shown that they do not necessarily encode oppressive power structures and epistemic imbalances in society or in societal domains such as higher education; they can also be usefully related to more observable micro-level outcomes in the somewhat smaller world of an individual social actor performing a particular practice. A second limitation inherent in all discourse analysis is that the recontextualising practice itself – in this case, the interview-as-genre – may in part have influenced the discursive regularities in the recontextualisation of the practice under analysis – see, for example, Section 3.1.2.

Despite these limitations, the current study provides an original evidence-based understanding of PhD students’ “way of knowing” the doctoral programme process. As such, findings can be of practical relevance to students and their supervisors, other newcomers to research, the academic language community and even the universities where this academic practice complex takes place. Assuming that a more personal “voice” affects self-efficacy positively and may even contribute to overall student well-being, further research could investigate the kinds of interventions necessary to help students develop a deeper engagement with the research process, also when recontextualising it. It is in this area that interaction with supervisees may benefit from the findings reported in this study. There is general agreement that the supervisor-student relationship is a key factor in effective supervision and doctoral success (e.g. Orellana et al. 2016, Spronken-Smith et al. 2018, Terentev et al. 2021, Cosgrove 2022). However, as noted in the introduction, the discursive aspects of this relationship have so far been largely ignored. The current findings strongly suggest that in addition to all other types of support that they provide, supervisors should also help doctoral students achieve higher levels of discursive specificity, accuracy and completeness so that feedback can be more targeted instead of the “vague advice” usually offered (Starke-Meyerring et al. 2014: A24). At the same time,

doctoral supervisors could encourage students to provide more descriptive and self-enhancing information about the under-represented elements in the practice complex with a view to improving objective reporting skills but also self-efficacy through identifying and addressing more accurately potentially inhibiting factors.

The central question would no longer be what certain recontextualisations – whether or not they are descriptively, factually or historically “accurate”, “complete” and “fair” – reveal about a particular social practice and its ideological context – as is typical of CDA – but rather what their contribution is to the successful performance of that practice at the level of social action. The focus would then shift to exploring “emancipatory discourses or positive changes in social language use” as advocated by Breeze (2011: 521) and others. The assumption then is that while certain discourse features may hinder the students in their performance of the practice, others are likely to help them conduct their unique research project ({A}), communicate their work in the form of a dissertation or thesis ({B}), meet the other requirements for the doctorate ({C}) and complete the process on time. It has to be borne in mind that the practice-as-performance itself also influences its discursive representation, given that both are linked in a “causal” loop. It is to this more ambitious line of research – work in progress within the larger project – that the present study has hopefully made a valuable contribution.

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