

# And then he threatened to kill himself: nightmare viva stories as opportunities for learning

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – In the UK and countries following similar systems of doctoral assessment, there is little research-based evidence about what goes on in vivas. However, “doctoral assessment ‘horror stories’”, abound. The purpose of this paper is to report a study focussing on difficult doctoral examining experiences and argue that sharing such stories can provide a useful basis for examiner and supervisor education.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The study took a narrative auto/biographical approach.

**Findings** – The stories participants told show that doctoral examining is relational, emotional and ethical work and that viva outcomes are strongly influenced by subjectivities. There was felt to be a need to share stories of difficulties in order to bring them into the open with a view to prompting transformational change.

**Research limitations/implications** – Participants were self-selecting and all worked at the same institution.

**Originality/value** – There are few accounts of examiners’ experiences of the viva.

**Keywords** Narrative, Auto/biographical research, Doctoral assessment, Emotional relational work, Ethical practice, Vivas

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

It does not take much to get us started. Bring a group of academics together, raise the topic of vivas, then sit back and wait for the “doctoral assessment ‘horror stories’” (Morley *et al.*, 2013, p. 5) to emerge. Most of us have tales to share, stories about our own or our students’ vivas, disturbing experiences as examiners and supervisors, or accounts of what happened to friends and colleagues. In the way of such things, each recounting accrues its own Chinese whispers embellishments, becoming ever more lurid. These are academic versions of urban myths, the anecdotes that “research examining seems to attract [...] like a magnet” (Grabbe, 2003, p. 128), and as the worldwide expansion and diversification of doctoral studies (Crossouard, 2011; Group of 8, 2013; Morley *et al.*, 2002, 2013; Tinkler and Jackson, 2004; Wisker and Kiley, 2014) leads to a concomitant increase in vivas, defences and other forms of examination[1] the genre grows daily.

Yet although the stories abound, in the UK and countries following similar systems of doctoral assessment, there is little research-based evidence about what happens in vivas. This is largely because the behind closed doors approach, involving the candidate, two or three examiners, maybe a chairperson, with the supervisor silently sitting in, has not been conducive to systematic data collection (Morley *et al.*, 2013; Murray, 2009, p. 13). The viva involves what Carter describes as “a Hogwartsian sense that it is an arcane ritual, a mystery and properly so” (2008, p. 365). Vivas can be seen, and operate, as rites of passage (cf. van Gennep, 1909/1961); and researching, let alone understanding, such life events is seldom easy. Matters are not helped either, at least within the UK, by the absence of



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transparency that seems to characterize doctoral assessment; by differences in examining procedures varying from institution to institution and discipline to discipline; and, by an apparent lack of education and advice for examiners (Bassnett, 2014; Morley *et al.*, 2002, 2013; Murray, 2009; Park, 2003; Tinkler and Jackson, 2004).

Given what can be at stake for candidates (including career, income, identity), it is unsurprising that research on doctoral assessment has tended to focus on student experiences and outcomes with any consideration of how things are for examiners being very much secondary. However, as Pearce (2005) notes, “being asked to examine a doctoral thesis is not only one of the greatest honours you can be afforded as an academic, it is also one of the greatest responsibilities” (p. 1) with examiners feeling “under pressure since so much rests on how they manage the whole examination process” (Murray, 2009, pp. 2-3). Such responsibility would seem to warrant attention.

Research focussing on examiners’ perceptions and experiences has tended to be concerned with such issues as: assessment of what constitutes “doctorateness” (e.g. Trafford and Leshem, 2009; Poole, 2014; Wellington, 2013); views on the purpose of the viva (Carter, 2008; Carter and Whittaker, 2009; Jackson and Tinkler, 2001); the sorts of questions asked in vivas (Trafford and Leshem, 2002; Trafford, 2003); how examiners approach and read theses (Carter, 2008; Golding *et al.*, 2014; Johnson, 1997; Mullins and Kiley, 2002); choice of examiners (Kiley, 2009); notions of what constitutes originality (Clarke and Lunt, 2014); and comparisons of consistency of grading (Bloxham and Price, 2015; Bourke and Holbrook, 2013). This is useful information but it can fail to communicate much sense of what it is actually like to be an examiner taking part in “a social practice [...] fraught with risks and uncertainties” (Morley, 2004, p. 91).

As someone who at the time of writing has sat mutely in the vivas of most of the 45 doctoral students I have supervised to completion, been external examiner for 91 doctorates, internal for around 40 more, and had my own viva, I know what it has been like for me. Obviously each time is different but I do not think I have ever been in a viva when anyone in the room has treated the situation lightly. I have been fortunate that in the majority of cases when I have been involved, as examiner or supervisor, events have proceeded relatively smoothly from appointment of examiners to the final outcome. There have, however, been a number of occasions, when issues and difficulties of various kinds – “horrors” even – have arisen and it was after one particularly disturbing viva that I felt the need to exploit the researcher’s privilege to investigate other’s experiences. I wanted to do this partly in order to put what happened into context (Golding *et al.*, 2014) but more especially, to take the opportunity to follow Mills’ (1970) exhortation to use the sociological imagination in such a way that “the personal uneasiness of individuals is focussed upon explicit troubles and the indifference of publics is transformed into involvement with public issues” (pp. 11-12). I thought there could be something to learn from consideration and sharing of difficult stories that could make a contribution to the awareness of examiners and might help inform examining development and practice. This would seem to be a worthwhile enterprise since with notable exceptions such as Wakeford’s (UK based) PhD Diaries[2], there appears to be little available to guide new examiners (Gibney, 2013), other than the raw, unanalysed horror stories, instructive as these can undoubtedly be.

Examiners do, of course, draw on their own vivas for guidance and, in the same way that personal experience of being taught is a major influence on how teachers teach (Day *et al.*, 2007; Golding *et al.*, 2014), it seems that one’s own experience of being examined is likely to influence one’s assessment practices (Colley and Silver, 2005; Crossouard, 2011, p. 324; Wisker and Kiley, 2014, p. 127). Anecdotal evidence suggests that examiners often reproduce, adapt or avoid what happened to them as doctoral candidates. Only as they gain experience of examining, through a “sitting next to Nellie”[3] process can they begin to

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adopt a critical perspective, see other possibilities and develop other ways of doing it. A study might help some shortcut this process and consequently I decided to undertake an exploratory investigation of doctoral examiners' experiences of examining.

### **An exploratory investigation of experiences of doctoral examining**

Having obtained ethical clearance I sent out an e-mail to all academics working in a Russell Group[4] university inviting them to share their experiences of "difficulties or problems of whatever kind (e.g. practical, ethical, procedural) arising at any stage of the examination process, from the initial approach to be an examiner, through reading the thesis and taking part in the viva, to signing off and beyond".

In total, 21 people at all career stages, from across the range of disciplines, responded, and between them, told 61 stories. In total, 20 people took part in audio-recorded interviews and one person contributed a written account.

As noted, I was motivated to undertake this investigation following an extremely nasty examining experience. My view, shared with Stanley (1992, 1993), is that any study that involves making sense of and writing lives inevitably auto/biographically implicates the researcher. In this case, I treated my own examining experiences as "data", thereby incorporating an unambiguously autoethnographic approach (see Ellis and Bochner, 2000; Golding *et al.*, 2014).

### **Seeking and studying stories**

Obviously those who replied to the e-mail were self-selecting individuals who felt sufficiently motivated to take the time necessary to be involved. The reasons they wanted to be heard, as well as the ways in which they told their stories, the storylines, tropes, discourses, constructions, etc. they used, could all form the focus of different types of narrative research (see, e.g. Bochner and Riggs, 2014; Clandinin, 2013; Frank, 1995, 2010; Goodson, 2013; Reissmann, 2008). My aim here, however, is to re-present and consider what Goodson, borrowing from Stenhouse (1975), describes as "stories of action within theories of context" (Goodson, 1992, p. 6). My interest is in the events and interpretations depicted in the stories, and in the connections, coherence, sense and meanings (cf. Polkinghorne, 1988, p. 6) that academics make, impute or leave unsaid when constructing narratives to describe examining situations experienced as problematic. In seeking stories I have aspired to practice the sort of ethical, respectful and careful listening that Davies (2014) describes as expressing "openness to emergent difference in the other and in oneself, and openness to the not-yet-known [...] [and] for that which cannot yet be said" (p. xii). Thus, I see the stories, their telling in a research context and my co-productive involvement in that process as potentially offering insights into and contributing to, the complex and ever evolving relationships and differences between social, structural and cultural locations and the identities and agency that tellers and hearers accord themselves.

I began by talking about "doctoral assessment horror stories", suggesting they were not dissimilar to urban myths, prone to exaggeration and distortion, yet here I was, seeking stories of difficulties and problems that I was going to treat as "data". Is there a difference in stories told amongst friends and those invited by a "researcher"? Possibly, much depends on how the various parties come to, and make sense of, research encounters and relationships.

Being social constructions, narratives cannot be independent of their contexts. Storylines and genres arise out of, are associated with, and locate narratives within, specific cultural and social milieu. The stories told in the course of this study conducted with academics working in a leading research university and focussed on a social event that almost exclusively happens in universities are contextualised in a set of broadly similar interpretations and understandings about research/data collecting conversations. These interpretations and understandings may make the narratives different, with respect to the

language and constructions used in the telling, from the horror stories the same academics might tell each other, might even tell me as a fellow academic, in the pub. Indeed, all who volunteered their narratives said they did so because they felt there was value in formally recording and critically scrutinising subjective accounts of examining experience in order to give the examiners' perspective:

When I saw your email I really wanted to speak to you cus we're so often cast as the villains in the piece, the demon examiners. There are demon examiners but there are demon candidates and demon supervisors and dreadful situations as well and that needs documenting (Sara[5]).

I understood people to be saying that giving the stories the status of data was to imbue them with more significance than they would have as anecdote and this meant that they could thereby contribute to a useful resource for examiner education:

How do you learn to do it? On the job by and large but I do think we should be looking to educate examiners better and collecting and examining stories as you're doing might provide materials that could be used in staff development work (Simon).

Each story is, of course, singular and personal, although it would seem that we all use the shared, culturally located storylines and scripts available to us (cf. Booker, 2006; Downs, 2013; Frank, 1995). Consequently any sort of categorisation inevitably does violence to the unique nature of the perceptions and experiences a narrator re-presents (cf. Bergin and Westwood, 2003; Bochner, 2014; Henry, 1965; Lather, 1991; Redwood, 2008). However, to provide a framework for comprehension and re-presentation, I am going to make use of some very broad headings that I considered were grounded in those stories. Thus, this is unequivocally my narrative account/analysis which undoubtedly reflects my own (auto/biographical) preoccupations and experiences.

When people tell their stories they make choices about what to include and omit, what emphases to make and words to use in order to create a particular impression. When we retell those stories as writer/researchers, we also make the same sort of decisions which can implicate us in what Medford (2006) describes as "mindful slippage [...] between Truth (or our experience of reality) and truthfulness [*in this case 'Truth' and 'reality' standing for what people told me*] [...]" and what we write" (p. 853). I would, ideally, reproduce the stories I was told verbatim and in full in order to minimise slippage and allow others to make their own interpretations but space constraints demand aggregated rendition. Readers have to trust me to be ethical, curbing temptations to over-indulge in what has been described "as the Cinderella's slipper syndrome – where researchers cut and slice data (standing for Cinderella's sisters' feet) to fit the story (shoe) (see Golding *et al.*, 2014)" (Golding *et al.*, 2014). Bearing in mind these caveats the headings I have used are (in no particular order):

- examiners behaving badly;
- supervisory issues;
- thesis issues;
- problems at home – issues around internal examining; and
- student issues.

I will now address each in turn, using illustrative quotations.

#### *Examiners behaving badly*

Stories of examiners behaving badly included accounts of animosity and disagreements, sometimes stretching back years, between the various parties involved in, or even

tangentially connected with, a viva. In these cases, grievances were taken out on candidates and it was only later that others learned what had possibly been going on.

Then there are the cases where examiners are full of their own importance:

I've encountered examiners who are incredibly pompous and who ramble on and on about their work and opinions without really asking the student any questions or giving the other examiner a chance to speak either (John).

And those who feel that more use should be made of their work:

So she's going 'why haven't you cited my 2001 papers and my 2009 book? I don't see how you thought you could avoid mentioning what I say there'. Sometimes work is so important that it has to appear but that wasn't the case here [...] but she insisted that there be amendments that included copious references to her stuff (Karla).

Of course, if an examiner has been invited because of their eminence in a field, citations would be expected but for some only positive ones are acceptable:

I had this experience where a student had, legitimately, critiqued the work of the external and I could see him getting redder and redder until he was practically incandescent with rage (Mick).

Some examiners seem to want the student to have written quite a different thesis and appear not to be prepared to acknowledge the one in front of them. When this happens the viva can become extremely frustrating with lines of questioning unconnected to the work that has been done.

According to what academics from all disciplines reported, on the whole, in the UK and over the last 30 or so years, vivas have come to be seen more as scholarly conversations than confrontational encounters. Thus, when examiners do take an aggressively challenging and hostile approach, as opposed to a rigorous but respectful one, it can come as a shock. People told stories of students being reduced to tears by aggressive questioning:

He was really nasty. I think he was showing off, and when she cried he seemed to realise he'd gone too far and he didn't know what to do so he sort of carried on but in a muted sort of fashion. He did send a letter of apology later that day – as if that was gonna make things better (Kate).

He wiped the floor with him. I kept trying to intervene but he was like a Rottweiler, wouldn't let up and was getting louder and more agitated. There wasn't space for the student to get a word in edgeways even if he'd not been rendered speechless by this onslaught (Brian).

John, Mark and Kate speculated whether aggressive examiners they had encountered were influenced by gendered approaches to doctoral assessment in particular and academic culture in general, linking bad behaviour to macho, confrontational styles of questioning (cf. Crossouard, 2011; Leonard, 2001). It certainly was the case that the badly behaved examiners I was told about were men, with the exception of the woman Karla referred to who could be seen to be self-promoting in a way that is usually associated with masculinity. Here, however, is not the place for further discussion of these issues.

### *Supervisory issues*

It's not unusual to get theses where you wonder what the supervisor has been up to. Why haven't they intervened or why did they let the student submit. To be fair, you sometimes find out that the student has gone against advice but it can make for a very uncomfortable experience (Conrad).

Supervisory issues were often at the root of difficult examining experiences. There were stories of what seemed to be dereliction of duty where supervisors did not appear to have appropriately advised students or had not read their work, thereby allowing submission of seriously flawed pieces. Then there were cases where students had taken approaches which

examiners critiqued before learning that the supervisor was responsible. Finding this out in a viva can, as Conrad noted, make for a very uncomfortable experience, especially when the examiner is a friend of the supervisor and they have been asked to examine as a favour.

Examiners are usually experienced supervisors and know that it is not always possible to predict how a thesis will be received or, therefore, the outcome of a viva. Selecting the best examiner can be a fraught business (Kiley, 2009) and even matches that seem to be ideal can “go wrong”. Perhaps inevitably, the examiners who spoke with me did not consider themselves to have been the inappropriate choice for a specific candidate, although I have heard stories of abstracts being so inaccurate that having agreed to examine, people have withdrawn when they actually saw the thesis. Nor did anyone mention having markedly divergent views from their fellow examiner – although this can happen. Here the concerns were that supervisors had not done their job properly. Of course, what is believed to constitute a “job well done” varies. There are those who believe supervisors should read every word as many times as necessary, and those who do not. Some take the view that supervisors should correct spelling and grammar, which can become especially significant when students are not writing in their first language, whilst others think such matters are not their responsibility:

This thesis was appallingly presented. There were grammatical and punctuation errors on every page and I may be a bit anal but I always have to correct everything so I was at it for ever. The student was Libyan but that cuts no mustard with me: you do a doctorate in a foreign language, you should have no concessions to your ability to express yourself in that language otherwise it raises issues with equality and fairness in relation to home students. I also think it's disrespectful of my time to expect me to read such crap. The supervisor however, breezily said she didn't think it was her job – the student should have employed a proof reader (Karen).

Failing to correct linguistic mistakes is one thing: what happened to Sylvia is of quite a different order:

This was an absolutely dreadful experience which I don't much like talking about because I'm not sure I did the right thing. And I can't understand the supervisor's role in it at all. This was an autoethnography which contained libellous comments about identifiable people and reported an extremely serious crime which apparently the police didn't know about. There'd been no ethical review because the institution didn't require it for auto/biographical work. The internal examiner and I were utterly appalled: I felt sorry for him because he had to deal with the departmental flak that followed, and we discussed going to the police and not going ahead with the viva but we did and it was a nightmare because there, from what the student said, it became crystal clear that this was a revenge text. I actually thought the student was psychopathic because they didn't acknowledge anything was unacceptable, said they no longer had any relationship with the people written about and dismissed the crime as having happened a long time ago. I have to say it was extremely well written and a compelling read. We debated for ages and eventually decided we couldn't pass it on ethical grounds and referred it to the head of department. The supervisor was out of the country when the viva happened – but they hadn't raised any concerns with the student and had let them go ahead and submit: that much we ascertained (Sylvia).

This was an extreme and unique case. More common were instances where supervisors sat in and intervened when the requirement is they remain silent. Myles told of examining an overseas student:

[...] who took a long time to ask questions. The supervisor kept butting in and saying “what she means to say is [...]” we threw him out after 5 mins (Myles).

Petra's story was more graphic:

The supervisor was pissed. He came into the room reeking of Listerine and I and the external who knew him of old, looked at each other. We both had a notion there might be trouble and it was only about 10 minutes into the viva that he intervened with a pompous comment about a question

I'd asked. The external, who was a very senior academic, told him if he spoke again he'd have to go. He lasted about 5 minutes before he did it again so the external apologised to the student and told the supervisor to leave. After the viva we found out he'd left the building. Probably gone to the pub (Petra).

### *Theses issues*

Suspecting use of unfair means and deciding how to deal with it was the main difficulty reported around theses. Nowadays, the use of anti-plagiarism software at the point of submission has helped screen out many instances of plagiarism but it does not address cases where theses have been purchased. One of the purposes of vivas is to help to ascertain whether or not someone actually has written the words they claim are theirs, but even there:

I had the experience of examining a thesis which substantially plagiarised me! And that was a home student, in the days before Google. I did go to the viva, although maybe I shouldn't have, and when I challenged them they denied it – so I pulled my book out my bag and they still denied it and tried to argue it was a case of synchronicity (Paul).

Institutional requirements and criteria for theses vary and whilst some specify such things as presentational requirements, and word limits, others use the rubric of “will normally”. This can lead to difficult experiences, particularly when compounded by other challenges and/or complicated circumstances as in the following account:

I'd been asked to examine this thesis as a favour to a friend who'd taken on the student when the original supervisor had suddenly died. He told me it was complicated but didn't want to go into detail for fear of influencing me – or putting me off as I now realise. The thesis came in two volumes with around 250,000 words. I checked and the regs said “doctoral theses will normally be of 80,000 words”. I contacted the internal and he said a special case had been made because the first examiners had said it could go over. First examiners? Didn't I know this was a resubmission and that the student had demanded new examiners? No I didn't – so could I see the original report? No I couldn't because someone in the office had erroneously granted the student's request that the new examiners didn't see the first feedback because they felt it was prejudicial but now all this was on paper and apparently couldn't be rescinded. The thesis made claims to use unique approaches to re-presentation. I've no problem with this sort of thing if it works but when my 22 year old son picked it up and said “what the f\*\*\* is this?” I couldn't answer. It was a total mess: incoherent, unethical, bloody nonsense actually. I phoned the internal and said I didn't want to go to viva because it was going to be embarrassing and he enquired as to whether we could fail it outright and the answer came back, no. There'd been so much trouble already and procedures hadn't been properly followed so the very prestigious university was afraid of litigation and there had to be a viva. I felt like a sacrificial victim and debated not turning up but decided that was cowardly. The viva was every bit as dreadful as I'd imagined: the student – a mature candidate – was utterly bonkers. The only redeeming thing was the brilliant chair from another school who'd got a real grasp of the regs. Apparently we couldn't fail it outright here either. Our discussion went on for ages and we were getting into hysterical laughter. Eventually we went for major amendments. It's not come back yet (Annie).

### *Problems at home – issues around internal examining*

Internal examining raises its own particular issues due to the expectation that the internal will “be on the side” of the student, their supervisor colleague, and the reputation of the institution. People spoke of difficulties when examining students of senior colleagues and the outcome was not what was hoped for. For some the experience led to on-going relationship and workplace problems, as for Sara:

It was major amendments. No question. But the supervisor was fuming. Immediately the external left she came to my room and gave me a bollocking, questioning my academic judgement and accusing me of letting the university down. This was 3 years ago and I'm still not forgiven.

She treats me like shit now and as soon as I can I will leave. What I didn't know at the time was that there were further complications in that the student was in a relationship with a friend of the supervisor and that she'd told her that all would be well (Sara).

The potential ramifications are even greater when one is the internal for a staff candidate. Tom's story describes a particularly unpleasant situation:

This was the examination of the thesis of a female staff member so there were 2 externals and me. All men. We all agreed that the work was extremely poor in content and presentation. One external wanted an outright fail but because I was internal and because this was a colleague, I argued for major amendments and another viva. The supervisor wasn't happy and nor was the candidate and unpleasant and libellous claims were made about the conduct of the viva. When we were giving the feedback the supervisor intervened in an inappropriate fashion and had to be told to shut up basically. The candidate said the questioning was aggressive and she also asked for an examining team which was not all male or misogynistic which is what she claimed we were. I don't consider that was an appropriate claim but it was her perception and so for the next viva I had to get a female chair and I had to replace an examiner which was quite embarrassing. Came the resubmission and the work wasn't much better and there were still egregious presentational problems. The decision was taken, nonetheless, to award an MPhil rather than the doctorate. Again the supervisor intervened and there was another major complaint – this time too there were complaints that the required changes were not sufficiently detailed. Eventually they agreed to allow another resubmission and the case is still in abeyance. Because this was an internal candidate and because the supervisor took the line they did, relationships within the school are seriously damaged. I actually feel particularly distressed because in my eyes I've been vilified and some appalling things have been said about me. The whole business has been entirely upsetting and stressful (Tom).

### *Student issues*

Students can give examiners a very rough time:

I was asked to examine this thesis because the student had made a lot of use of my work. I read it and was astounded. There were no more than 30 references and the most recent one was 8 years old. Not only that, I was credited with having researched something I've never, ever looked at. I met the internal for lunch and she was unhappy too and she knew the student was difficult. The supervisor had left under a cloud a couple of years previously but had continued to supervise. Anyway the internal suggested we got a chair, it wasn't normal practice there, and luckily there was a professor prepared to step in at short notice. Thank God we did because it was a viva from hell. The student, a relatively young woman, was the most aggressive candidate I've ever encountered. From the get go she was challenging and she made it clear she thought we were ivory tower idiots who knew f all about the real world of schools. When I asked her why she said I'd researched something I've never looked at she got even more aggressive and started quoting made up references to the extent that I began to wonder if I had. It was bizarre and it was nasty. We gave her major revisions. A couple of weeks later I got a demand to send up all my correspondence about the thesis with the internal. Freedom of information. There hadn't been anything compromising but that's what they were looking for, something like us saying something disrespectful or something. The internal said she thought the supervisor was behind it. Anyway, we were both sacked as examiners. Ignominious or what? (Ian).

Vivas can be very difficult when students become distressed, especially when the examiner feels some responsibility for the unhappiness:

It was awful. The supervisor knew the thesis was dreadful but the student had insisted on submitting. I don't think he'd properly prepared her for major amendments or even possibly fail. And we recommended the former to be kind really. When she was told it was major she didn't understand and she looked at her supervisor and asked if she'd passed. I said she had the opportunity to resubmit. It took a while for that to sink in and then she started crying, calling on God and saying she was going to die (Vena).



Examiners have been told they will be to blame for heart attacks, strokes or suicides when students have not liked the outcome of their viva:

He was very upset there was a lot of shouting and then he threatened to kill himself (Valerie).

They have been threatened with litigation and attempts have been made to bribe them:

It was the first time I'd examined about 25 plus years ago. It was the Friday before the viva on the Monday. I was working late and the only person in the building. There was a knock at the door and there was this big bloke who told me I was to be his examiner on Monday. He came straight into the room and sat down and told me he had to pass because he was very senior in his country's ministry of education, he'd been away from his family for 3 years and he needed to go home. He told me that it would be to my advantage to make things easy for him and that money and all expenses paid trips as a guest of his government could be mine. He asked me what I thought of his thesis and I said I wouldn't talk about it outside the viva and would he leave now please. He went but as he left he told me to remember what he'd said. I was frightened. When I told my hod, who was also his supervisor, what had happened he didn't treat it at all seriously and I just let it go. I wouldn't now and if a young female colleague told me that that had happened to her I'd make a serious complaint (Yvonne).

### Discussion

Discussing her study of students' perceptions of doctoral vivas, Barbara Crossouard commented that the accounts she collected provided powerful testimony to the affective dimensions of (doctoral) learning and assessment. Far from being an objective, neutral technology, the viva process emerges as saturated with affect and often passionate emotions, a scene of emergence of subjects with "passionate attachments" (Butler 1997, p. 7, pp. 325-326).

The stories I was told lead to a similar conclusion. Doctoral examining is relational, emotional and ethical work and as such, despite academic cultural and institutional expectations and criteria as to what constitutes "doctorateness" (Trafford and Leshem, 2009; Poole, 2014; Wellington, 2013), outcomes are influenced by subjectivities. This would seem to be the case regardless of academic discipline, raising questions (I shall not address here, see, rather Dobson, 2008; Jackson and Tinkler, 2001) about the viva's fitness for purpose.

Research (e.g. Bloxham and Price, 2015; Wisker and Kiley, 2014) suggests that doctoral examiners set out wanting students to succeed. Although some of the stories I was told concerned negatively confrontational individuals, many of the experiences reported as being difficult and unpleasant concerned instances where success was, for whatever reason, made difficult. There were shock horror stories, certainly, but more of the problematic situations focussed on: having to disappoint candidates; apparently poor supervision; unreasonable fellow examiners; institutional relationships impacted by assessment decisions; students with unrealistic expectations or mistaken understandings of what doctoral study involved; and inappropriate uses of power.

Reflecting on their experiences a number of people talked about how they felt the nature of a PhD (leaving aside professional doctorates) had changed. Nigel put it like this: "Up until end of the 1970s there was an expectation that a thesis should be a scholarly, original, life work. From the 80s onwards it's tended to be seen more as a craft piece". This change is, at least partly, likely to do with the expansion in numbers undertaking doctorates. Other potentially associated factors are the perceived pressures: coming from university administrators and students themselves, to ensure that students, paying high fees, succeed; and the push from HEFCE[6] to meet submission deadlines which can lead to theses being submitted before they are "ready". Such changes and pressures have implications for the assessment process and for examiners' experiences of it.

So how can stories emphasising that doctoral examining is a relational, emotional, ethical and subjective business help examiners make sense of the process, especially when it is problematic? Davies (2014) suggests:

[...] it suits our current neoliberal governments, in particular, to think of everyone having measureable and manipulative characteristics, and to this end, to think of any community and its members as entities, or objects, that can be pinned down, categorised and made predictable (p. xii).

Such characteristics, categorisation and predictability do not reflect the real world. Earlier I referred to Mills' (1970) injunction to use the sociological imagination as a first step to ethical transformational change. Coming clean about the messiness and subjectivity of examining, sharing stories of personal uneasiness, making them public and discussing what might have been done to avoid difficult situations in an open and trusting CPD[7] context could help inform and develop ethical practices and can provide support and reassurance. In addition, the stories can be used to provide pointers for formulating institutional and departmental policies and codes of conduct concerning, for instance: expectations of supervisors; appointment of internal and external examiners; conduct of, and in, vivas; and alerting students as to what to expect. Such measures in themselves, like this paper, are a start and could make a contribution to the development of greater transparency and, thereby, more ethical doctoral examining.

## Notes

1. Doctoral assessment takes different forms in different countries. This paper focuses on British vivas which essentially involve an internal examiner from the institution where the candidate has studied and an external from elsewhere meeting in private with the candidate.
2. John Wakeford's PhD diaries (see [www.ucl.ac.uk/teaching-learning/training-development/phd-supervisor-development/phd\\_diaries](http://www.ucl.ac.uk/teaching-learning/training-development/phd-supervisor-development/phd_diaries) and [www.missendencentre.co.uk/phdiaries.html](http://www.missendencentre.co.uk/phdiaries.html)) offer "real" scenarios of challenges faced by doctoral supervisors and students which could also be useful to examiners.
3. "Sitting next to Nellie" refers to a type of apprenticeship model whereby the neophyte observes first and practices later (see Hargreaves, 1994).
4. Russell Group universities are prestigious UK research-oriented institutions.
5. Names are pseudonymous. External examiners usually receive around £150. Internal examiners are seldom paid.
6. Higher Education Funding Council.
7. Continuing Professional Development.

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