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Is getting a PhD basically ‘project management’? Rethinking qualifying strategies for early career researchers

Abstract

Project-orientation and management logics in science have fundamentally altered research and scientific careers. This article contributes to ongoing research about early career researchers’ self-definition as ‘24-hour scientists’ and deals with their involvement in processes of self-precarisation. It focuses on qualifying strategies and soft-skills training for scholars. These training programs and advice often encompass so-called key competences for scholars, such as time and self-management. I argue that it is time to redefine the criteria for successfully completing a PhD by breaking with management rhetoric.

Keywords

Qualifying strategies in academia, project management, management critique, PhD training, academic work

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1 Introduction

“In the project-based systems of justification, in order to become ‘big’, you have to sacrifice everything that restricts availability. You have to forgo having a project that takes a whole lifetime (a vocation, a trade, a marriage) and remain mobile. You must become a nomad. To meet this need for ‘fluency’, you have to forgo any stability, rooting or binding to persons and things. To be ‘fluent’ in this sense means to have no institutional obligations, to give autonomy preference over security, but also to rid yourself from the ballast of your own passions and values.”

(BOLTANSKI, 2007; translation by the author)

Boltanski criticises the project orientation which encompasses all areas of life – the project culture, as he calls it – and regards it as a great part of the capitalist system. The guiding principle of organising everything as a project is characteristic not only of the structure of work, but also extends deep into the social structures. Richard Sennett made a similar argument as early as 1998 in “The Corrosion of Character: The Personal Consequences of Work in the New Capitalism”, when he described the new flexible capitalism. People can barely escape the social imperative, which requires permanent availability, flexibility, efficiency and self-management skills, as well as the willingness to give up the centre of one’s life and also to loosen social ties rapidly in order to concentrate on more dynamic networking.

Whereas a critical philosophical position, as decidedly formulated by Jean-Paul SARTRE (1994), assumes that the subject, by exceeding the limits of the ego, focuses on the project as a “draft” of the self, the actors in the “project world” described by Boltanski appear more driven and at the same time thrown back on themselves. They are fluid and impalpable: They never remain in one place, in one department, at the side of their spouse, or even in one trade for a long time. And all those who are ‘working on a project’ shine particularly bright. The project-shape of their lives makes them both mysterious and hyper-transparent. Life is like a series of highlights that show our projects in a bright light – on Facebook or Tumblr, on the project pages of a university, documented in databases, or in the form of an art

installation – which then quickly recede back into darkness. The memories of these highlights fade away, as we move on to the next project.

The impact of this project orientation on science – in particular for research and for the “organisation of scientific careers” (ENDERS, 2003, p. 253; translation by the author) – has been discussed intensively since Bologna and the advent of new public management in higher education (e.g. SAMBALE et al., 2008; MÜNCH, 2014). Since the dependency of universities on third-party funding for research has increased drastically, we could speak of academic projects in a narrower sense: “Despite the differences between organisational forms and types of research, which differentiate universities, research institutes and companies, one can observe that in all research-driven organisations, research, at least in certain disciplines, is performed in the form of a project” (BESIO, 2009, p. 18). These projects – where they are financed by third-party funds – are evaluated at different times, checked in terms of their quality and often brought to a more or less dignified end with frantically prepared final reports. Successful project management is now essential for a scientific career – or, vice versa: a scientific career is also a sign of successful project management.

Various authors have analysed the term ‘management’, especially in the context of quality management, which has captivated companies and institutions globally. In the meantime, ‘managing’ has spread like a rhizome; it has made us ‘entrepreneurs’ of our own lives. By managing our emotions, shaping our health, and maintaining our work/life balance, we achieve the highest quality of life – or at least we hope so. Here, Foucault’s “technologies of the self” find their interim peak (cf. BRÖCKLING, 2000). Consequently, the qualification curricula within the scientific community now feature a variety of courses on project management, higher education management, education management, risk management or process management.

I have worked not only as a scholar and in the field of *higher education management*, but also as a freelance consultant for master’s and PhD students for almost 10 years. I help them to plan, prepare and conduct (mainly, but not exclusively,

qualitative social) research. Among other things (e.g., studies about the working conditions and career planning of early career scientists), this article is based on the reflection of this wide range of experience, which can be exemplified by one concrete incident: Together with a colleague², I held a course entitled “Managing a PhD as a project” in 2015. Although the title was implicitly marked with a question mark, it turned out that some participants of this course – doctoral candidates at various stages of their ‘project’ coming mainly from the social sciences and humanities – were hoping for panaceas for their own time management and suggestions for the best project management software. In short, they were looking for the smoothest way to complete a PhD. The workshop, however, was instead designed to view a PhD literally as a project, that is as a draft. It was about reflecting on their own and others’ claims about the ‘PhD project’ and to become aware of the struggles within the area of tension resulting from these claims. Planning a career in science is not only a challenge for the PhD student; there are many others involved. The course addressed the complex field of meaning and knowledge practices which the PhD students have to navigate. Since the aim was to present and discuss another form of knowledge about ‘scientific projects’, the course ultimately did not meet every expectation. Some of the PhD students concluded that we were clearly not ‘experts’ in project management. The knowledge offered in the course about the logics and challenges of academic structures seemed less useful to them, since they *just* wanted to *manage* their PhD, which became evident in the subsequent evaluation of the workshop. One person wrote, for example, that he or she would have wanted less “self-reflection” during the workshop.

The aim of this article is to analyse the consequences of the understanding of scientific work as project work that is implied in the attitudes of these early career researchers. In contrast to this, an alternative concept of qualification strategies is developed here. First, I clarify why MECHERIL’s (2008) notion of “competencelessness” (translation by the author), that he originally introduced in the context of

² The workshop was designed and carried out together with Wolfgang Halbeis, University of Education Karlsruhe. The title of the workshop was predetermined.

intercultural trainings, should be applied in education courses for early career researchers. I argue that in the context of qualifying strategies, existing criteria for a ‘successful PhD’ should be reconsidered, rather than being blindly reproduced in seminars or recommended literature. Clearly, systematic empirical research about training programs and counselling for PhD students has to be conducted in the future. I would like to stimulate qualitative social research in this field by establishing a theoretical frame as an impulse.

The second part of the article shows that the larger social context, in which the next generation of academics will teach and conduct research and other activities, must not be excluded during training. In a third step, recommendations are made as to which aspects could be discussed in training in the early academic socialisation phase, in order to counter the risk of getting lost in management rhetoric. This leads to the conclusion that we cannot avoid the compulsion of a project-shaped life, as described by Boltanski. Nevertheless, the scientific socialisation should be considered as an act of self-design in the pursuit of knowledge – as an exercise in joint autonomy, as it is defined here: an autonomy continually unfolding in a future self which is not detached from community. Autonomy is not considered as irresponsible „fluency“, as criticised by Boltanski. On the contrary, it is redefined as emancipation from the compulsion to manage the PhD phase in the sense described above.

2 A plea for competenceless competence, or “how do you successfully complete a PhD?”

“[...] I therefore still risk thinking raw thoughts, which would otherwise be given up by most people very early due to a superior control mechanism, which is called university, especially during the time when they are – as they are called – assistants. It is clear now that science itself is neutered and sterilised through these control mechanisms in the different areas to such an extent that it then needs what it itself frowns upon to be able to

keep up at all.”

(ADORNO, 2013/1969, p. 135; translation by the author)

“*Advice for successful research: A guide for Bachelor’s, Master’s and doctoral students*”; “*Successfully doing a PhD: Advice for PhD students from those who have obtained a PhD*”; “*The basics of doing a PhD: The PhD primer*”; “*Writing your dissertation in fifteen minutes a day*”: These are just a few of the books which doctoral candidates use to prepare themselves for the difficult period of writing their thesis. In “*The road to the doctorate. Strategies for the successful thesis*”, KNIGGE-ILLNER (2009) notes that PhD students enter the labour market late and therefore are also integrated into society at a late stage. These two major factors in their “identity and self-esteem” are therefore lacking (ibid., p. 32). Knigge-Illner refers to newer theories on the construction of identity: “Identity is, in this sense, considered to be a ‘project design of one’s own life’, which is valid for a period of time. This approach seems better suited to be transferred to the situation facing doctoral students than the conventional approach.” (ibid.) Here, even *identity* is treated as a project, as a special task for psychosocially burdened doctoral students to stay balanced. BOLTANSKI (2007) has also noted: “[T]he individual finds a minimum of identity in his projects, which he can always bring to bear when in danger of fragmenting.” (translation by the author)

Herein lies the danger of such an approach to ‘helping’ early career researchers³ managing their so-called identity crises by promoting clear-cut recipes for successfully completing a PhD. In his plea for “competenceless competence”, MECHERIL (2008) gives the example of intercultural training, in which the knowledge conveyed in the training by speakers and presenters can cement hierarchical and/or stereotypical ideas rather than breaking them by most notably transporting ‘man-

³ This article defines early career researchers mainly as PhD students who do their own research in order to achieve a PhD. In this context, I exclude post-doc researchers, moreover, it seems to be difficult to define the „postdoctoral phase“ (see KAUHAUS, 2013, pp. 58-62).

agement' knowledge about the so-called problem groups.⁴ This clearly calls into question the whole setting of a training when the context of the training itself is excluded. For Mecheril, this would include the racism found in everyday encounters or in institutions, for academic socialisation (e.g., soft skills training), it would mean not mentioning the inherent logics of the academic system, particularly the logics which lead to self-precarisation or to social barriers in academic settings. In an interview, the philosopher BYUNG-CHUL HAN (2014) refers to a similar aspect in connection with academic knowledge production:

“Scientists do not reflect the social context of science today. They do positive research. All science takes place in a power relationship. In a power relationship, a new capability generates new knowledge, a new discourse. Knowledge is always embedded in a power structure. Positive research can easily be conducted without realizing that it is subject to this power, and without reflecting on the context-based nature of knowledge.” (translation by the author)

Many different questions that arise from these considerations have already been partially converted into concrete research issues in different studies over the past years: What does it mean to be ‘competent’ in the academic system? What are the hidden factors of an academic career? Is it possible to reflect on these aspects in training for PhDs if these factors are an important key to a very exclusive field (e.g., women, persons of colour and persons with a working-class background are still underrepresented in many higher education contexts)?

One alternative could be to include one’s own knowledge limitations in such training in the academic system, as well as to reflect on the context of knowledge production (e.g., what it means to complete a PhD within institutional conditions) as part of the context of our academic practices.

⁴ For the general criticism of the concept of competence, see GELHARD, 2012.

The **first consequence** of these considerations is that the definition of ‘successfully completing a PhD’ in terms of qualification measures needs to be reconsidered. Currently, the measurement of scientific success refers clearly to the logic of New Public Management and therefore applies technocratic terms and standardized criteria based on efficiency: finishing your PhD quickly, top grades, awards for your work, a renowned publishing house or a high citation rate sometimes convey a false sense of (self-)security that aspiring researchers have ‘managed’ the ‘project’ successfully. However, a successful or high-quality PhD does not necessarily have to be understood as a brilliant, self-contained, and ‘all-round’ solo work. It could be understood in the sense of the American anthropologist George Marcus, who noted in an interview with Paul Rabinow: “Based on my experience supervising dissertations, I think they should be governed by a theorem of reasonable and responsible incompleteness.” (RABINOW et al., 2008, p. 82) Although he was referring to field work in particular, his insights can also be applied to other kinds of research, such as non-empirical research. Rabinow and Marcus agree that the brilliance of a piece of work is in the process and discussion with others within a scientific network and not in a self-satisfied ‘lone wolf’ who can only think and live from one assessment to the next, in a system where raw thoughts are not particularly popular – and for which no space is given in exams.

On the other hand, the concentration on networking could lead to a new form of immaturity because aspiring researchers must always be thankful to those who have held their hands, who have given them a place in the institution, for the supposedly critical opinion of the appointments committee or for any assistance that has ‘facilitated’ the project. Rebellion and opposition rarely thrive here because one relies on the sustainability of the network and on the ability to establish interdisciplinary cooperation. GANNON (2011) notes that “the end of the individual researcher” may have come because now the ability to work in a team is needed in research projects. This creates pressure “to have project management, personal interaction, communication and finance management skills”. Critically, he asks, “Can all of this be included in the training of a PhD?” (ibid., p. 25) One additional problem of focussing too hard on one’s networks could be that many early career

researchers are convinced that they can only make the next career move with the help of *others*, not through their own efforts or skills. In this context, KLINKHAMMER & SAUL-SOPRUN (2009) speak of the so-called “Impostor syndrome”, which is widespread in science.

3 Working in academia as self-realisation?

“Looking more closely at the group of those who fall under the term of excellent ‘young scientists’, those are affected primarily who, while they have to fight for their existence in science departments, are also ensuring the normal functioning of the university – as a cheap (to varying degrees), committed group, often working on the edge of self-exploitation. In the pool of potential or even actual precariat, postdocs find themselves in the service of so-called ‘reputable’ professors or project sites, postdocs without long-term career perspectives in projects or institutions, senior lecturers in the hope that they will obtain permanent service contracts after several trial years, as well as hundreds of teachers who have to eke out their existence with one or two teaching assignments per semester or year.”

(BABKA, 2015; translation by the author)

So, early career researchers and young academics seem to be in a phase of “self-precarisation”, which is not to be underestimated. In this respect, I agree here with Knigge-Illner’s argument that the identities of doctoral students are vulnerable – but I would draw a different conclusion from it. The doctoral candidates are at risk both materially and socially. At the same time, they tend to idealize science and think of it as a process of “self-fulfilment” (cf e.g. ARCHER, 2008) to create a counterweight to the endangerment of the self. Thus, they normalize their living and working conditions as a desirable state for themselves and others. “Perhaps those who work creatively [...] are subjects that can be exploited so easily because they seem to put up with their resident and working conditions eternally due to the belief in their own freedom and autonomy, due to self-realisation fantasies. In a neoliberal context, they are exploitable to such an extreme that the state even pre-

sents them as role models”, notes the political theorist Isabell LOREY (2006). Being successful in academia, as ARCHER (2008, p. 400) shows in her qualitative study about ‘younger’ academic workers, means to constantly (re)produce and present “evidence of your worth as a scholar” – as one of the respondents states. This constitutes the particular ambivalence of scientific work, which is perceived as “social privilege” (BEAUFAYŚ, 2015, p. 40). Therefore, a career in this field appears particularly attractive: precisely because access to this field of work is so exclusive, science becomes stylized as one’s life’s work, to which, from the point of view of scholars, there can be no current nor future alternatives, as the sociologist Beaufaÿs shows in her study. The empirical basis of her study consists of interviews with scholars and persons at the management levels of centres of excellence in Germany. Her findings show that the concept of oneself as a “24-hour scientist” (ibid., p. 54) affects academic socialisation in a way that compels individuals to set clear priorities for science as a life plan. They must continuously think about the next career step and have to be eager to reach it as soon as possible: “The ticket to a scientific field is not a thesis, but the inner attitude that is recognised by the others.” (ibid., p. 55) Courses and workshops which teach researchers and lecturers how to ‘manage’ the balance between life and work actually conceal the fact that living and working – a common narrative amongst BEAUFAYŚ’ respondents – must be inextricably linked in higher education contexts to have any chance of a career in the higher education system.

What could the **second consequence** of this critical analysis be if the goal for young scholars and early career researchers is to be ‘fit to do a PhD’? I would not suggest rejecting further training or ‘reading advice’, but these elements should not simply support the practitioners in their self-management. Instead, it is necessary to use critical dialogue to discuss not only the success of projects but also the *dialectics* of project work: the complex relationship between institutional control on the one hand, and one’s own commitment to a research topic on the other.

‘Institutional control’ in the science system is based on implicit rules which should be assimilated by early career scientists in order to ensure that they behave in the proper way to have a career in their discipline. It is nearly impossible to escape

these implicit rules, which is evident, for example, as soon as one climbs the first rung of the scientific career ladder to attain the position of a „mentor“. As a mentor in academia, you teach, as Jo REICHERTZ (2003, p. 363) notes, „novices“

“which questions work ‘best’ with which procedure, which are topics for third-party funds, which are not really ‘scientific’ methods, how to deal with one’s own group, but also with opponents and the particularly unpleasant renegades, who, when and where you can praise or criticise, in which institution you are engaged and how to behave there, how you raise third-party funding and how you can achieve your own goals within your institution.” (ibid: p. 363; translation by the author)

Instead of repeating such advice, why not focus on new forms of solidarity, possibilities for participation and spaces for self-reflection within the science system (cf. BABKA, 2015), for example in higher education research? Conducting research on these practices may help to understand which contexts encourage scientists to identify with universities and research institutions and which do not. The economist and organisational developer AHLERS-NIEMANN (2008, p. 132) warns that “universities have lost any playful traits” (translation by the author) and are no longer spaces for critical questioning. In order to be places that provide opportunities for young scientists – and one should include students here – it is necessary to reform the project shape of science insofar as doctoral students, and researchers in general, must have space to be autonomous, to decide for themselves when a research project begins and when and if it ever ends – in Marcus’ “sense of reasonable and responsible incompleteness”. This may sound cynical in times of fixed-term contracts in higher education and research. Above all, however, scientists must not be subjected to the dictates of project culture. The logics of the system should no longer be hidden in recommendations for a ‘successful’ PhD or reduced to the vocabulary of ‘identity crises’ or ‘stress management’.

As a consequence of revisited qualifying strategies, „mentors” or lecturers in further education could adapt their advice such that they do not coach doctoral candidates to success by teaching them to manage their time and themselves, only to

establish themselves in the system of exploitation so aptly described by Babka. Instead, they could provide impulses when it comes to discussing conditions for success as well as obstacles, such as the violent or humiliating communication in daily scientific operations (cf. e.g. KRAUSS et al., 2015), sometimes based on a “culture of devaluation” (KLINKHAMMER & SAUL-SOPRUN, 2009, p. 171; translation by the author). This culture hits scholars at an early stage in their career particularly hard. The pressure to optimise one’s self and to complete projects both successfully and as rapidly as possible is steadily growing (see, for example, the empirical findings of SCHÜTZ et al., 2016, pp. 75-79). At the same time, the German Council of Science and Humanities sees the danger of scientific misconduct as a side-effect of this development (WISSENSCHAFTSRAT, 2011, pp. 30-31). A concept of scientific autonomy is needed to counteract some of this pressure.

4 Conclusion

Wolfgang Rohe, Managing Director of the Mercator Foundation⁵, advocates the specific qualification of doctoral candidates and postdocs focusing “on the one hand, on reflection on science itself, on its methods and limits, and on the other hand, on their social role and performance” (2013, p. 79). He suggests that training programs for early career researchers should be adapted to the different life situation of the respective stage of qualification. Rohe leads various academies, such as the “House for Young Scientists” in Jena, Germany, which offer a positive example for the kind of seminars he has in mind. However, a closer look reveals that the training seminars offered there do not entirely exclude “key competences”, such as conflict resolution strategies or “time and self-management for scientists”. This shows that many coaches and trainers stick to management terms and logics, thereby meeting the demands of early career researchers who are planning their academic careers.

⁵ The Mercator Foundation is an important German research funding organisation.

However, Rohe highlights an important challenge: The view of science as a frame of reference creates new possibilities for research, such as new forms of scientific autonomy. Autonomy upon completion of a PhD does not mean becoming entirely independent of the judgement of the scientific community or openly rebelling against the scientific work of one's supervisor. Here, autonomy means breaking down the illusion that we can manage everything and everyone in our lives. This could mean – in line with the introductory quotation by Boltanski – that one maintains the “ballast” of one's own passions. We need a kind of *joint autonomy*: an understanding of what it means to be an early career researcher who is subject to a particular institutional control, for example, and therefore shares certain experiences with other early career researchers in similar situations. If we agree with Boltanski, PhD students should constantly re-evaluate their own values and ideas in view of the institutional settings in which they conduct their research. Thus, rather than freeing oneself from these passions and values, it could be more fruitful to become *autonomous* together with other early career researchers and thereby to redefine the network idea in science. I am not arguing for a return to the concept of the individual researcher, nor am I simply assigning magical power to teamwork; rather, I am convinced that it is time to completely rethink the socialisation of academics.

How can the core ideas elaborated above be taken up and implemented in training programs for PhD students? Which contents should be further investigated and worked out together? For trainers and coaches, it could mean promoting one's own “competenceless competence” in order to make clear that there is no perfect or simple way to manage the PhD as a project. Within courses, concepts from project management may be discussed at a practical level, as tools from project management could be deployed to structure the research process and answer important procedural questions (e.g., which stakeholders need to be considered in my work? Which claims do they impose on me and my project? How will I deal with that? How can I find methods which fit the object of my study?). For PhD students, it could mean asking difficult and complex questions, such as: How should I deal with structures, access opportunities and obstacles in the science system? It may help individuals in the early phase of academic socialisation to find a position not

only within a topic area or within their own disciplines, but also to determine the social position. Alternating phases of joint discussion, team exercises and self-reflection in training courses for early career researchers could help to develop a concept of “reasonable and responsible incompleteness” that is appropriate for the different life situations of the course participants.

Thus, one aim of training programs for early career researchers must be to make it clear that having success in academia requires knowledge about the social practices and political strategies that can provide access to a field of work that increasingly builds on management logic. However, the consequence of these considerations cannot be that project competence is taught in further education programs for scientists. This would simply further encourage the tendency of early career researchers towards self-precarisation. Instead, the various claims that are placed on early career researchers should be discussed with them openly and reflected upon in order to gain ideas about where new opportunities for joint autonomy and questioning-spaces could arise. And at the end of the day, we could perhaps redefine projects as drafts.

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