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Main Article:

Building Internal Strength, Sustainable Self-Esteem, and Inner Motivation as a Researcher

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Abstract

Having a "normal" professional job and doing research impose different social and personal connotations. These differences materialize at least in two clear ways. First, it is common that researchers in the making find it very difficult to communicate to their closest social network (e.g., family and old close friends) the content and the importance of their work, as they lose known sources of social comparison. Meanwhile, professional job titles (e.g., brand manager, auditor, lawyer) are self-explanatory, and they provide for the owner an immediate social contextualization and recognition. Second, students normally receive delayed and ambiguous feedback and reinforcement while doing a PhD, contrasting with the continuous flow of assessment that companies give to their employees. In this article, I analyze how young researchers may develop a feeling of social isolation as the communication bridges with family, old friends, and undergraduate colleagues become narrower than before, making it difficult to receive external reinforcement on their social position and comparative achievement. This feeling, combined with the ambiguous feedback during the early stages of a research career, challenges the self-esteem of PhD students, forcing them to develop a self-contained personal security in order to cope with those two social contexts. Some young researchers might even withdraw from PhD programs should they fail to develop such psychological strength. I approach the issue through my own experience, first as a junior consultant in a multinational firm and then as a PhD candidate in economics. Second, I explore the behavioral phenomena that occur beneath those feelings in order to understand how to build such psychological strength. My goal is, through the exploration of my personal experience of becoming a researcher, to offer young researchers a useful narrative to help face the potentially negative feelings that may emerge when learning to balance these conflicting social roles.

Keywords: doctoral student; self-esteem; feedback; social comparison; motivation

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1. Introduction

"So, you are a doctoral student in Economics? I would also like to have some graduate education to improve my position in the company," says your old friend during your summer vacation at home. You raise your eyebrow with certain discontent and reply, "Well, I am working on a doctorate, which by the way takes 4 or 5 years to complete, because I am interested in academia. If you want a professional degree what you need is an MBA or something similar." You hope the point is clear, but your friend continues. "Ah, you want to become a teacher, but you were doing well in your last job weren't you?" Feeling your temper rising a bit, you fight back: "Well, not exactly. Indeed I will teach but more importantly, I am training myself to do research." "I see, and what is your research about?" replies your friend. "Well . . ." (you know you are in trouble now, but take the risk) "I am investigating some violations of economic rationality in the way people combine cognitive and affective information when making decisions." Your friend, looking puzzled says, "I see, that sounds related to marketing right? You should talk to John, he has been promoted to sales manager." "Yes I should" you say, frowning, ending the conversation and escaping from your friend in order to get another drink and feeling certain discomfort. The days when you and your friend had a lot of fun and lived so similarly now seem so far in the past.

Becoming a researcher is to some extent a lonely path. There are new colleagues and friends with whom you slowly develop a relationship, but the nature of these relationships is significantly different than those with your closest social network. As time in graduate school passes by, your family ask less often how you are doing and what your work is about. Every time they do, it is increasingly difficult to explain. In addition, most of your friends have spent three or four years within a company, and they are starting to get promotions, money, and fancy titles. Meanwhile, feedback on how good a researcher you are takes forever to come, and when it does, it usually takes the form of ambiguous comments on your research. Evaluation is hard, and being calmly open to criticism involves a lot of effort. Researchers must develop a certain psychological strength to cope with delayed and ambiguous feedback typical of the academic world as well as to cope with the apparent lack of social recognition of achievement from old friends, former colleagues, and family.

In this article I shall first give a light, story-like, personal account of how I lived this process and in this way try to help young PhD students become aware of these pitfalls. In particular, this experience may be useful for those who have tasted the sweetness of "corporate" social recognition before joining the academic world. I shall go beyond my personal experience by taking the salient aspects of my story and exploring them with

more detail. In particular, I shall discuss issues of social recognition and comparison, delayed feedback and self-esteem development, and how they can be understood under the perspective of a PhD student. My goal is to help young researchers find ways to enjoy this process. Most importantly, I want to outline the significance of developing a self-contained personal security and confidence through inner motivation and self-assessment.

2. The Corporate World

I obtained a bachelor's degree in business and started working in a multinational financial firm during the last year of my undergraduate education. My internship was one of the best among my undergraduate peers. I had a generous salary and a corporate credit card. In addition, I traveled frequently. My bosses rapidly communicated to me how pleased they were with my work and transformed my internship into a permanent position. During that time my self-confidence was steadily growing as my friends were amazed with my working conditions; their parents started to look at me as a young, promising professional. Something was not right though; I got bored with the financial sector and felt my intellectual capacity was wasted. After a few months of working, there was no challenge to my work anymore--I knew exactly what I had to do everyday. Academia was always on my mind as a possibility, but I decided to give the corporate world another chance. I soon got a job with a consulting firm recognized worldwide. My professional life again looked promising. Analyzing companies was far more challenging than my prior work. Job tasks were not so repetitive. This impression was mainly caused by the constant change of environment each client brought with their different problems and circumstances. I had the opportunity to interact with the CEOs and high-level managers of the companies we worked for. I was doing very well in that firm. Senior consultants competed to have me in their engagement teams, and I felt that with moderate effort I was able to outperform my peers at the junior level. Notwithstanding, from an intellectual point of view, the analyses performed on companies were framed and bounded by the firm's organizational knowledge, practices, and commercial considerations, leaving very little room for creativity and the pursuit of interesting questions. All this left me still intellectually unfulfilled.

For some time I managed to cope with the intellectual problems by focusing unconsciously on two external forces that made me feel special and successful. First, the atmosphere within the company and the frequent feedback I received (twice per month) usually contained praise and support. Second, my social circle and family understood perfectly how I was doing and what my position was in the corporate world, which is highly valued in the western society. This happens because corporate positions are usually self-explanatory. People outside the corporate world generally understand the value and meaning of titles such as "senior consultant," "brand manager," and so forth. I used this external recognition as my main source of confidence and self-esteem, something very common in the corporate world. The constant flow of positive feedback and the feeling of belonging and control over my social network created this reliance on external evaluations.

3. Transition to Academia

Despite the apparent success I was enjoying, the lack of intellectual fulfillment at work became increasingly disturbing. My academic dreams kept calling me with insistence and I often found myself fantasizing about life at a university. I imagined myself teaching, holding discussions about scientific issues, writing articles, and above all, I imagined how it would be to experience the freedom to explore and expand my ideas everyday instead of following some corporate guidelines. I spent time every week checking PhD programs on the web and thinking about how and when I was going to start an academic career. Finally I made up my mind, quit my job, and started studying for the graduate admission exams. I have to admit that my high self-confidence allowed me, to a great extent, to throw away a promising career in consulting to pursue a career in research. I had the support of my family, but I know that some eyebrows were raised among my friends regarding my decision.

I started my graduate education with all the enthusiasm and faith that my confidence allowed me. I took some math classes before leaving my job and was sure of my capacities, significantly based on the third-party recognition I explained before. However, at that time I did not have a clue about the true source of those feelings. I just felt confident. In my graduate program, an master's degree (with honors) is a necessary condition to enter the PhD program; so that was the first step. This prerequisite added a lot of stress to the courses because an honors requires high average marks. Those were difficult to get, particularly because after a few years in the corporate world, a lot of knowledge is forgotten. After 3 or 4 months I was pushing myself above any limits I had reached before, and I was surprised at how much I was able to work everyday. My classmates were the brightest people I had ever known and I found myself struggling to perform better than the rest, unlike my situation at work. Some professors I admired gave me barely average evaluations, which was devastating considering the effort I was putting. There were no pats on the back, no amazed looks, no supporting environment--only grades. Allowing my confidence to be based on external recognition led me to give in to the power professors and grades had on my motivation. This way, my habit of relying on external forces of recognition that previously provided satisfaction and encouragement backfired on me. My craving for this kind of reinforcement started to erode my self-confidence instead of strengthening it. I began to look at myself as regular guy, nothing special, with average capacities . While all this was happening, communication with old friends became less frequent, and my experiences and interests started to look strange and difficult to assess for them. A feeling of isolation started to grow inside me.

I finally finished the master's degree and was admitted to the PhD program. Even though that was a boost for my confidence, I was hoping for a big change in the way external recognition would be provided. After all, at the master's level, there were almost a hundred students competing for a place in the PhD program; now we were going to be a just a few. That should provide a more friendly recognition atmosphere. Instead, work became more difficult. Harder courses and term papers on too many subjects made my life complicated as I pushed myself to meet all the requirements. Evaluations were too

plain and indirect, and my expectations of recognition remained largely unfulfilled. At the end of the second year my mood had become more negative, but I managed to produce my first research article.

Some people come to PhD programs with research experience, but others, like me, face the challenge of producing something original for the very first time at the end of the PhD course work.Writing corporate consulting reports is totally different from writing academic research articles. Interestingly, they are both an account of findings, but documents are clearly different in nature. Consulting reports are thicker than academic articles and are usually done in two or three days. It is surprising the amount of pages a junior consultant can write in a very short period of time. The typical report is a collection of observations supported by interviews conducted with clients and field visits, as well as some analyses and recommendations performed through basic models developed within the consulting firm. Research articles need a theoretical background to which research questions should be elegantly related. Then, the documentation of findings (sometimes also interviews and field visits) must be developed within the framework provided by the theory, emphasizing the originality of its contribution to relevant knowledge. No originality is required in consulting, only insightfulness. The driver is also different because consulting reports are commercially rooted whereas research articles are supposed to be motivated by scientific curiosity. The major impact of these differences on the writer is that after producing 100 pages for a corporate consulting report in 1 week, a 30-page research article takes months to complete. Every sentence must be written for a reason and the shorter, the better.

I achieved two important insights while writing that first academic article: first, my corporate experience became useful as I found it relatively easy to find an interesting decision-making phenomenon to study. Second, detailed assessment of that article was issued by a tribunal as a requirement to allow students to move on to the proposal of a doctoral dissertation. I believe that writing that article was a turning point for me. Externally, I received for the first time an overall assessment of me as a researcher, and such evaluation turned out to be extremely positive. In addition, I got one of the top professors in the field as an advisor, who gave me great support during that process. However, such external recognition was not as important to me as I had expected. The positive evaluation did not come as a surprise. Somehow I knew the outcome in advance. I realized that I had enjoyed my first academic article, producing and developing the idea, working for myself, savoring the awe of discovery. Those days I felt for the first time an inner source of motivation that I had never experienced before, and I did not know where that came from. Logically, that article needed a lot of improvements and in the end it was only the seed of a far better developed research project. The important fact was that the highly competitive academic community I found in graduate school was treating me as a researcher, and I felt like one for the first time. What mattered at that point was not the content of the article, but the attitude behind it. I remember one professor telling me that he could feel my passion for research, and that was precisely what I found: an inner motivation that was able to make me work truthfully and with a sense of self-consistency that I had never felt before.

Some months later I presented my PhD proposal, and I received hard criticism. This time, however, I digested it constructively. It was not my personal worth that was under discussion, just a piece of research that needed scientific scrutiny; it is exciting to be a part of such a process. After that, the real academic life began (conferences, submissions, the job market, etc.). At conferences, I met other graduate students and compared my work to theirs. I started to realize that I was becoming part of a different, new and exciting community. Slowly, my sense of personal value started to improve, but this time, it was not dependent on the external assessment and recognition of others. Instead, it was the inner strength and passion I was developing that motivated me further.

4. Building Self-Esteem and Inner Motivation

To understand the process of constructing self-esteem within the environment of a graduate program, it is useful to explore the particularities of that environment as compared to the corporate world as well as the psychological phenomena that occur under such circumstances. First is the type of feedback that graduate students receive from professors and peers. Feedback can be exact or ambiguous and can be immediate or delayed. Grades may provide timely and exact feedback regarding what students are learning, but they offer limited information about research capabilities. Not surprisingly, in every PhD program some students with very good grades fail to continue into the research stage due to poor research skills and limited creativity, in part because feedback on these two characteristics is ambiguous and delayed. It is ambiguous because the nature of a healthy academic environment promotes the discussion of ideas and not people's skills. Graduate students must learn to infer their personal skills from a comparison of their work with that of their peers and professors.

Feedback is also delayed because a specific research work is usually assessed by others after several months (in the best case). Supervisors provide guidance, but the profundity of their comments is not too insightful at the beginning stages of students' work. This is therefore the first pitfall that graduate students must learn to face. Psychologists have documented that people make inferences about themselves partially as a function of the type of feedback the environment provides. In particular, such self-assessments, or meta-perceptions, are based on the self-concept when the feedback is unambiguous and based on the content of the feedback when it is ambiguous (Langer & Wurf, 1999). Thus, if the content of ambiguous feedback on research is unfavorable (as it usually is), students may tend to produce self-concepts in the same direction, negatively affecting their self-esteem. The advice is then to avoid making judgments of one's self-concept after discussing research with peers and professors, considering that the scientific debate is, as I said, about ideas and methods, not about personal skills. The corporate world offers the opposite setting. It provides timely and unambiguous feedback about the personal skills that go easily with the psychological trend of producing meta-perceptions based on the self-concept. Therefore, moving from the corporate world into academia may have a negative impact on students' self-esteem if they fail to adjust their mechanisms of self-evaluation to the new type of feedback.

The second aspect that must be explored is that corporate and academic activities provide different learning environments. Trautwein, Lütke, Köller, and Baumert (2006) define two types of environment relevant for the comparison of corporate and academic worlds. On one hand is the meritocratic environment found in academics and on the other hand the ego protective corporate environment. To transition from the corporate to the academic environment is particularly challenging for PhD students in terms of their self-concept. Graduate students tend to focus excessively on the development of an "academic" self-concept. Trautwein et al. show that self-esteem is directly influenced by this type of concept in meritocratic learning environments. PhD students therefore, should try to keep the ego protective mechanisms of self-concept construction working in conjunction with the academic mechanisms. That is, students might benefit from feeding the self-concept with information from other contexts and environments where they also participate (or participated), rather than the graduate school context. Human beings are multifaceted and balance among those facets should be maintained, regardless of how demanding a PhD program is.

Self-esteem is normally affected in a negative way when entering a PhD program. That creates a kind of ego threat for the individual which can lead to an alteration of the self-concept (Vohs & Heatherton, 2001). Self-esteem is challenged, relevant goals are usually at stake, and the social environment is new and highly competitive. All those elements lead to changes in the way students make social comparisons. That is the biggest challenge. Individuals with high self-esteem are usually better than those with low self-esteem at making use of social comparison (up or down) in order to generate concepts of self (Buunk, Collins, Taylor, VanYpers, & Dakof, 1990). Graduate students have their self-esteem threatened, and under such circumstances, combined with the uncertainty about the self-evaluation, Buunk et al. show that people increase their need to seek comparison information. This is the source of the social isolation perception. Such forced comparisons generate negative affect. In particular, low self-esteem and threat lead people to make downward comparisons in order to produce a more favorable self-evaluation (Aspinwall & Taylor, 1993). In contrast to these downward comparisons, the sources of affiliation are sought in upward contacts (Taylor & Lobel, 1989). In this way, new researchers can find themselves struggling to build or maintain a self-conception, looking downward for social comparison but hoping to be part of an exclusive academic community. The negative mood that such situations may create often leads to unfavorable self-evaluation and psychological distress (Brown & Mankowski, 1993).

The way students must cope with such negative feelings is to break the vicious circle. First of all, social comparison should be avoided. Old colleagues are no longer a valid reference, for they are in a different environment--an ego protective one. In addition, looking downwards will only diminish the self-concept and as a consequence, other people, who also have low self-esteem, may appear as more likeable or friendly (Vohs & Heatherton, 2001). What I found during the elaboration of my second year research article, the attitude that kept me away from the spiral of self-depreciation was precisely the avoidance of those two thoughts and actions.

Summarizing, the major lesson I learned from my experience during the PhD is that a new researcher should focus on the rewards of learning and intellectual progress. Making social comparisons, seeking recognition, and diminishing the uncertainty about one's capabilities are behavioral habits that must be controlled and contextualized to the academic world. Research should be enjoyable, not painful, and its joy resides in the process rather than the outcome.

5. Conclusion

I wanted to share my personal experience of becoming a researcher because it has been like a rebirth for me. The message I want to convey is that becoming a researcher has changed my view of life. Detaching my sense of personal worth from external sources has provided a sense of honesty and freedom that really illuminate my life in different ways. I now base my social and family relationships on sharing simple things and moments, and the feeling of loneliness has slowly disappeared. There is no need for me to make people understand the importance of what I do. I hope, after reading my experiences, young researchers find this kind of inner motivation and psychological strength. I have observed that the established researchers that I admire the most (starting with my advisors) possess this kind of inner drive. I do not know whether building this strength will help me publish more, but it does help me enjoy the process of becoming and being a researcher. In addition, I believe that research conducted with this mindset is possibly the best one can do as a researcher, with the necessary rigor, based on one's honest sense of open inquiry. This is my commitment to society as a researcher.

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