

A Phenomenological Study on Understanding Doctoral Students' Spatial Experiences in the Universities

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Abstract

Doctoral students' living through the university environment and experiencing the space around them is significantly important in determining how they respond to the academic environment and how the environment shapes their spatial experiences. The present study examines doctoral students' experiences of lived space and how these experiences shaped their living, studying and responding to the university environment. A phenomenological approach was employed to explore doctoral students' lived space experience. Fourteen student participants were selected through purposive sampling, and they were interviewed with open-ended questions. The data from transcripts were analyzed by using the line-by-line coding approach for identifying the students' words and phrases that assigned meaning to their lived experiences. Working in the office, experimenting in the laboratory, and experiencing research culture were emergent study themes. It was found that most of the students experienced their workplace as 'motivating', 'secure', 'energetic' and 'productive' and they exhibited more understanding, mutual support and friendly relations with their colleagues. Nonetheless, intensive experimental work kept them restricted and reduced their mobility. The study has implications in understanding doctoral students' study experiences while living through the spatiality of the university.

Key Words: Doctoral Students, Lived Space, Phenomenology, Spatiality, Study Experience

Introduction

The life of human beings and their existence is directly influenced by the space they are living through and the meanings they assign to themselves and the world within the frame of the space they are dwelling in. In other words, examining how do we live 'corporeally' in a space can enhance our knowledge about our existence in the world where we are living and striving (Dreyfus, 1991). Our understanding of space is determined by the perceptions and feelings that we attach to the environment we are living in. For example, we feel social or unsocial, calm or anxious, unrestricted or restricted depending on how we understand and determine the nature of the situation in which we live. Similarly, other people understand how they perceive us concerning the space in which they live and share their belongingness with others. Thus, space establishes our relationship with the external environment and we deal with that based on the nature of our perception and experience while associating ourselves with the world. Thus, the way we are situated and exist in the world determines our perspective of life (Talero, 2005) and "we become the space we are in" (van Manen, 1997, p. 102).

Lived space or spatiality is concerned with how we experience our situations in our daily life from the perspective of the nature of space we live through, and it is determined when human beings interact with their immediate environment regarding their corporeal position. Simplistically, the space we live through is considered the 'felt space' in the words of van Manen (1997). It deals with how individuals narrate their experiences of the world when they uncover the fundamental nature of the reality of their lived situations. Merleau-Ponty (1962) argues, "Space is not the setting in which things are arranged, but the means whereby the position of things becomes possible" (p. 284). This existential nature of lived space or felt space is an ontological perspective of ourselves that affects the way we feel (van Manen, 1997). In other words, "We feel a special sorrow for the homeless because we sense that there is deeper tragedy involved than merely not having a roof over one's head" (p. 102).

Regarding the doctoral students studying in a foreign university, spatiality is their physical world and felt space where they tend to strive and they are continuously engaged to have an understanding of the environment and the people with whom they associate their varying experiences of certainty and uncertainty, failure and success, attachment and detachment that determines their perspective of the space and body they are living through and existing with. An educational institute, particularly a university, is comprised of different spaces like faculties, departments, libraries, laboratories, auditorium, seminar and conference rooms and recreational areas; and students experience these spaces in relation to their socio-academic activities and research endeavours. While living through these spaces, the doctoral students reflect their understanding and experiences of the space, and they describe how these spaces affect the way they live and exist in academic culture. They argue on the nature of the space and how their relationship with the university environment determines their success and belongingness.

The present study purports to explore Pakistani doctoral students' lived experiences of space in the context of Austrian universities. Thus, the study addressed the main question of doctoral students' spatial experiences when they live through the institutional space of Austrian universities. In other words: What is it like for doctoral students to exist in a specific space of a university while interacting with other scholarly communities, and what is the essence of their spatial experiences.

Material and Methods

The purpose of the study and the nature of the research questions to be addressed informed the research approach. The study focused on subjective human experiences from the perspectives of doctoral students studying in Austrian universities that led to employ qualitative research with an attempt of least effect of the researcher's understanding of the phenomenon (Polit & Hungler, 1993). Therefore, phenomenological research was considered one of the best-suited approaches to explore doctoral students' lived experiences of space in the university.

Selection of Participants and Data Collection

In view of the chosen qualitative research approach, fourteen Pakistani doctoral students were selected from different Austrian universities. The doctoral

students were accessed purposively through a group of Pakistani students in Austria. They were studying in different semesters of their doctoral program, and a student qualified to be included in the sample who was at least in the second semester in a public university. Most of the doctoral students had different demographic characteristics due to their specific field of study, doctoral program and background information.

The present study attempted to examine the phenomenological understanding of doctoral students' perspectives with reference to the existential theme of their situatedness in the university (lived space or spatiality)(Van Manen, 1997). The doctoral students were asked questions on this existential theme through an interview guide that purports to explore their experiences in a semi-structured format, i.e. broad and open-ended questions were asked to allow flexibility to the participants. The participants were asked; How did you 'find yourself' in the university while studying and working at a particular space such as your office, research laboratory or field etc.? How do you experience the university environment?

The participants were personally accessed and interviewed at their workplace. Field notes were taken while interviewing, and follow-up questions were asked for further probing the existential theme of space. The average length of the interview was found to be 59 minutes. All the interviews were audio-taped through a voice recorder with the prior permission of the participants. In addition, the interviews were recorded with prior permission and transcribed by the researchers.

Data Analysis

The study drew on the methodological approach of phenomenology proposed by van Manen (1997). His writing approaches and presenting the text thematically and existentially were employed to grasp a phenomenological understanding of participants' lived space, whereas some theoretical perspectives from the field of education and other relevant fields provided an extensive and inclusive theoretical framework to interpret the results of the study. The various theoretical perspectives enriched the understanding of the doctoral experiences in the lived space that provided a comprehensive view of the phenomenon, adding to the existing phenomenological and educational literature.

The transcripts were read many times that allowed to emerge themes through coding the interview text. In this continuous analysis process, the researcher extracted various themes that best describe the participants' experiences of lived space through selective and highlighting approaches given by van Manen(1997). Nevertheless, the emergent themes are exhaustive and dependent on the researcher's insight, experience, and understanding of the participants' descriptions. The themes are given in Figure 1 below:

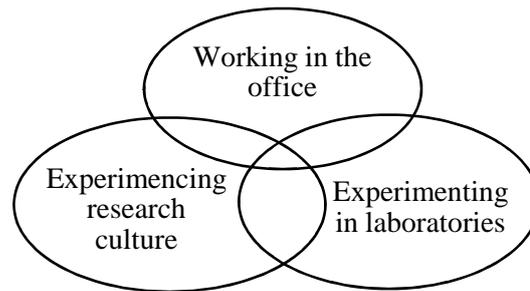


Figure 1 Themes of the Study

Results and Discussion

Doctoral students experienced lived space in their ‘bodily’ existence. They were studying and living through various spaces of different universities of Austria and experienced these spaces through their ‘bodily’ existence that determined the nature and essence of the experience of space and corporeality. The emergent themes are described in the following lines.

Working in the Office

It was noticed that most of the doctoral students were working in their office within the department, particularly the students from the field of physical and computer science spent most of the time in the offices or working station. They were inquired how was this experience like for them while working and experimenting in the offices and laboratories. Maryam was one of the doctoral students from social sciences who used to spend the whole day in her office as she could not work at home in the presence of her children. She had done her master studies from another European country and reflected on her experiences of space in both countries.

The people do not frequently interact with each other compared to the ‘social space’ in a university in the UK where teachers and students used to spend their free time. The ‘social space’ that I have here is a small kitchen on my floor, and I usually interact with other people by chance in the kitchen.

Therefore, as she had been deeply engaged in her research project, it was a sort of ‘social space’ for her where she met her doctoral colleagues *“while making tea, drinking coffee, going towards the printing machine and passing down the corridor”*.

The social environment and meeting with people from diverse cultures were significantly important for some doctoral students. For example, another doctoral student Yasmin was very popular among her colleagues due to her social life and frequent interaction with her local and foreign fellows. She worked at her office and that was a sort of ‘social center’ for her where she interacted with the scientific and professional persons and this office had a *“special meaning”* for her. She reflected:

This office provides me with the energy to live and work. It motivates me to pursue my research projects when I observe other researchers working very hard in their offices and make a resolution to publish my research paper. This office, in a

sense, protects me, and I feel secured while being with my colleagues. I own this office, and it owns me.

Similarly, most doctoral students believed that their offices were “productive” for them, particularly when they spent time on research activity with their colleagues. Salman also had a master's degree from another country in Europe, and he spent his time working in her office all alone and found that having a social life was very important for him. He explained, *“You can become distracted if you are sitting alone and focus more on your work in the company of others... You become more productive.”* In addition, he stated that *“it was always motivating for him to help others when someone comes to his office.”* This increased his productivity.

The doctoral students sharing the space also developed an understanding of their work, and they were supported by each other. For example, Yousuf was one of the doctoral students who was doing PhD in a veterinary university and worked most of the time in his office, described, *“The nature of our research topic is similar, so we understand and guide each other's work in a better way. We are more than colleagues... we are friends.”*

Some doctoral students spent most of their time in the research laboratory as they had to do experiments and take readings. Such students either had an office in the laboratory, or they made an office there. For example, Ismaeel was working on a research problem related to disaster management and had a small office in the laboratory. He perceived it as *“an ordinary place, where everywhere there is equipment”*. I asked, *“What is it like for you being and working in this place”*? He was sitting in his laboratory and remarked that:

I am sitting in this small corner of my office, which is not ideal for work. I feel like an isolated person here. I don't think there is something that can stimulate me. Nevertheless, this is a worthwhile place for me because I would not be so active and fall asleep if I worked at home. Although, I am not in contact with most of the colleagues working here.

The important statements of the participants exploring the theme of “working in the office” is given in Table 1.

Table 1
Statements of Participants on Working in the Office

Theme: Working in the Office
<i>“The ‘social space’ that I have here is a small kitchen on my floor, and normally I interact with other people by chance in the kitchen.”</i>
<i>“This office provides me with the energy to live and work... This office, in a sense, protects me, and I feel secured while being with my colleagues. I own this office and it owns me.”</i>
<i>“I am sitting in this small corner that is my office, and it is not an ideal place to work. I feel like an isolated person here. I don't think there is something that can stimulate me. Nevertheless, this is a worthwhile place for me because if I would work at home, I would not be so active and would fall asleep”.</i>

Experimenting in Laboratory

The study participants working in laboratories conducted experiments that affected their “*bodily experiences and feelings*”. Most of the students in life sciences and engineering had to work in the laboratories and a few of them had offices at the same place. For example, Ibrahim, a doctoral student in pharmacy, was conducting experiments in other departments, and he experienced:

We have many laboratories. We are free to do experiments in any laboratory after taking permission and observing the schedule. Nevertheless, sometimes you feel restricted and don't feel convenient while working in other laboratories.

Nevertheless, working in other laboratories is a positive experience for some of the students. A student named Waseem elaborated on his experiences, “*People don't mind if I go there to work in their laboratories. They help if you face a problem and accommodate you... they would stop for a while and ask how it is going on.*” It was noted that working in a laboratory was very tedious, and it required hard work particularly for the students of chemical engineering and physics. One such participant, Yaqoob reflected, “*the nature of the experiment doesn't allow the researcher to move away for more than two or three minutes... to become fresh, listen to music or watch a video.*” The situation of working in the laboratories was very tough for him. He explained:

It is hard to spare a few moments to drink water and going to a washroom. I have to remain there continuously and take care of the experiment like a baby who can cry at any time and ask for milk. Sometimes, I had to offer prayer in the laboratory and could hardly escape for lunch.

The participants of the study felt the space of laboratories and responded in various ways. Working in the laboratories affected their bodily feelings and spatial experiences. It was tough, tedious, and exhaustive to work day and night and expecting “*positive results*” from the experimentation. The participants assigned meanings to their workplace that determined their relationship with space and with their bodily existence.

The important statements of the participants exploring the theme of “*experimenting in the laboratory*” is given in Table 2.

Table 2
Statements of Participants on Experimenting in Laboratory

Theme: Experimenting in Laboratory
“People don't mind if I go there to work in their laboratories. They help if you face a problem and accommodate you... they would stop for a while and ask how it is going on.”
“The nature of the experiment doesn't allow the researcher to move away for more than two or three minutes... to become fresh, listen to music or watch a video.”
“It is hard to spare a few moments to drink water and going for a washroom. I have to remain there continuously and take care of the experiment like a baby who can cry at any time and ask for milk”.

Experiencing Research Culture

The theme “*experiencing research culture*” describes participants’ experiences of the prevailing research culture and its effect on their bodily existence. For example, a study participant named Ismaeel came to Austria with high hopes and ambitions to do something remarkable, but contrary to what he had idealized, he was “*relatively less satisfied with what he had achieved and how much he had achieved.*” He experienced that there were “*not enough relevant people and limited work was going on in the department, you can say that it was dying*” because the head of the department was not interested in boosting the department's reputation. Also, some of the professors were at the edge of their retirement and new recruitments were banned. He reflected:

My professor was not interested in my PhD research as I was not part of the funded projects. Nevertheless, the most important thing for us is to have exposure to work and learn from others that you cannot have while studying in Pakistani universities. This is what makes a difference.

Some of the doctoral students felt a difficult situation of being isolated due to lack or absence of research support from the supervisor. One such student, Younus was academically so isolated that he felt as if he was sitting in his house at home country even physically being in Austria. He could not find someone other than “*paper formatting, making grammatical corrections, and presenting a paper... there is no technical guidance as such; write, send, and reviews will tell you if you are thinking right or not?*” He was an extraordinary case from the study participants who experienced that “*I feel exactly as if I am sitting in my room in Pakistan thinking or writing something and somebody is giving me money from here, these are my feelings... telling you frankly.*”

Certain doctoral students had to remain seated continuously, and resultantly they experienced tiredness, physical fatigue, demotivation, and stress. Daud was such a student who had to work all the time on his computer. Therefore, he had to use various “*tactics and methods*” to keep himself “*alive and active*” and get energy for the tasks to be done in a day. For example, he preferred to have a meeting while walking with his students on the university's lawn instead of sitting in a long formal meeting in a closed office. Nevertheless, Daud added that usually, such meetings were not “*formal meetings*” on serious issues.

It was noticed that many students felt at home while being engaged with the students of another socio-academic culture, and it helped them experience the academic environment positively. For example, one of the doctoral students Haris was an employee in an institute of technology, and at the same time, he was doing PhD from a technology university. He reflected on the overall society that we have three types of environment that we experience while staying in Austria; our working environment within the institute and the university, the larger society where we spent the minimum time and our family. He elaborated that:

Working at the university and researching on my project is one of the most favourite experience for me. The most encouraging element is that we have a

culturally diverse group of very cooperative people who do not discriminate among us; that is a great strength of this environment.

Similarly, another participant who was a PhD student in the discipline of pharmacy reflected, *"There is a diversity of people in the university environment that is why we don't have any problems. For example, if we are 'fasting', usually our supervisor avoids eating in front of us. So, they take care of other people's values."* As a result, the students felt safety and security in such a type of space.

The important statements of the participants exploring the theme of "experiencing research culture" is given in Table 3.

Table 3
Statements of Participants on Experiencing Research Culture

Theme: Experiencing Research Culture
"There were not enough relevant people and limited work was going on in the department, you can say that it was dying."
"There is a diversity of people in the university environment, that is why we don't have any problems. For example, if we are 'fasting', usually our supervisor avoids eating in front of us. So, they take care of other people's values."
"Working at the university and researching my project is one of the most favourite experience for me. The most encouraging element is that we have a culturally diverse group of very cooperative people, and they do not discriminate among us; that is a great strength of this environment."

Discussion

The spatial experiences significantly affect doctoral students' working, studying and living in the university. Space provides specific feelings to the students associated with the way they respond to everyday activities. Sometimes, the individuals become the space themselves where they live and work. This deep association and affiliation become very meaningful for the success or failure of the students. This is consistent with the arguments of van Manen (1997) that spatiality is characterized in the perspective of "the world or landscape in which human beings move and find themselves at home" (p. 102).

From the participants' experiences, their everyday activities in the universities were directly affected by their spatial experiences and the meanings they assigned to them in relation to the space they inhabit in. It can be found in the literature that examining how human beings live in society can enhance our understanding of how they exist in the world they are living through (Dreyfus, 1991). For instance, the individuals feel living exclusively or communally; they are relaxed or distressed, restricted or unrestricted depending on the type of working environment they live through and work. The doctoral students working in the laboratories were kept engaged and could not attend to their family and sometimes could not have lunch properly. They were "*less socialized*" as compared to the doctoral students from social science. Gardner (2007) argued that science students performing experiments in laboratories have significantly different social lives than students of humanities who work independently. Moreover, Vekkaila, Pyhältö, Hakkarainen, Keskinen, and

Lonka (2012) found that “natural sciences doctoral students’ participation in the research community’s various activities triggered experiences of belonging that enhanced their doctoral processes” (p.113).

On the other hand, it was examined that few of the doctoral students were academically isolated as they could not find a supervisor in their field of interest, neither there was any relevant research group nor doctoral or post-doctoral students in the university. Therefore, they had to vet their ideas through participating in conferences and submitting research papers in journals. This led to the feelings that they were disadvantaged and they were in the wrong place. Consistent with these results, Pyhältö, Toom, Stubb, and Lonka (2012) argued that “doctoral students’ feelings that they are not in the right place may have a devastating effect on their motivation” (p. 6). Moreover, space where we live and work associates us with the environment, and we have the feelings of belongingness in a particular situation that determines our understanding of our attitude toward life (Talero, 2005) and “we become the space we are in” (van Manen, 1997, p. 102).

Conclusion

Academic environment or space is a significant existential theme in the life of doctoral students. They described how they exist and their experiences of the space they live through while staying and studying at Austrian universities. The doctoral students had different spatial experiences who had studied earlier in another foreign country. Nevertheless, most of the students experienced their office space as stimulating, energetic, protective and productive while working in the company of their professional colleagues. They also experienced a state of belongingness, mutual understanding and collegial relationships with their peers. The doctoral students who performed experiments in the laboratories felt a “*restricted space*” that limited their physical and social mobility to that particular space, and they had unique experiences of spatiality. They had a feeling of pain after working for long hours. It influenced the position of the students who worked on the computers being seated all day. The study has implications for the improvement in the educational environment of the universities and creating conducive opportunities for the doctoral students to exist in this environment successfully.

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