Exploring humour within the PhD experience: a first-hand reflection

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Abstract

This opinion piece presents a reflective analysis that employs three theories in humour research, namely the benign violation theory, the theory of superiority and the ontic-epistemic theory of the comic, in order to delve into the doctoral experience. Using three vignettes, I elucidate the potential role of higher education faculty in facilitating transformative shifts in the perspectives of postgraduate students, enabling them to navigate cognitive dissonance and surmount obstacles in their academic development. This contribution holds practical value for both PhD students and faculty members, fostering opportunities for introspection and critical contemplation.

Keywords: humour research, PhD experience, higher education, cognitive dissonance

As van Rooij *et al.* (2021, p.48) demonstrated, the "*doctoral journey is known to be challenging*". The pursuit of a PhD is commonly understood to progress through distinct phases of academic and research activities. In the United Kingdom, a doctorate usually takes three or four years full time or six to eight years part time to complete. The final years of the programme tend to be particularly intense and active, characterised by a sense of accomplishment as well as anxiety about looming deadlines, thesis submission and future prospects (Clohessy, 2021; Scoones, 2021). Drawing on my own personal experience as a doctoral candidate and supplementing that with three illustrative vignettes, this opinion piece explores theories of humour and their potential for reframing the perspectives and cognitive dissonance experienced by doctoral students. This examination is underpinned by references to relevant scholarly literature on humour. Furthermore, this piece offers implications for PhD students and university staff.

Given the burgeoning need for mental health support at all tiers of higher education (HE) (Mackie and Bates, 2019; van Rooij *et al.*, 2021), I should like at first to contemplate the fundamental questions: 'What aspects of the doctoral environment contribute to increased stress levels?' and 'What changes can be made within this context to improve the mental wellbeing of PhD students?' In my experience, doctoral students suffer particular stress from equivocal expectations relating to both their research and their professional growth. Such ambiguity may be attributable to the inherent uncertainty surrounding research advancement and to the shifting (and, at times, opaque) benchmarks in academic standards. It makes the PhD unlike any educational experience that the doctoral student is likely to have experienced before. This confounding of expectation, albeit not accompanied by an imminent threat or danger, may trigger anxiety and stress. My first vignette provides an example:

"As I navigate my PhD journey, it's not my entire doctoral programme that's weighing on my mind, but rather one particular publication. I find myself amid the third round of reviews for my manuscript, grappling with stress and uncertainty about whether to persist with the revisions or withdraw the manuscript. This predicament has constantly haunted me, as I'm well aware of the importance of having publications as a PhD candidate aspiring to enter academia. Yet, I also recognise the need to concentrate on my PhD writing."

I suggest that the benign violation theory (BVT) (Kant and Norman, 2019; McGraw and Warren, 2010) provides a valuable tool for reflecting on this source of stress. BVT proposes that humour manifests from a perception that constituents of a situation are improper, atypical or unforeseen, yet lack the potential to inflict authentic danger or harm upon individuals or society at large. From a BVT perspective, managing the publication process while working on a PhD may be likened to solving a Rubik's cube blindfolded. This metaphor happily conjures the inherent challenges, unpredictability and sense of going in circles that are often experienced. Paradoxically, it is plausible to argue that the ability to manage this complexity and circularity may be the key to achieving success in academia. Finding humour in the absurdity of the endeavour may enable individuals to maintain a positive outlook and avoid excessive seriousness. I am therefore determined to proceed with my manuscript revisions, approaching this publication journey with optimism and recognising that it represents yet another intricate twist encountered within the labyrinth of academia.

To remedy such concerns, I recommend the establishing of clear expectations which set realistic benchmarks within the PhD curriculum. This would alleviate the stress and anxiety the current ambiguity causes. University faculty supervising graduate research students can really help them with decision-making by offering them clear guidance on how to prioritise, manage time and balance publication pressures and the completion of their doctorates.

That many doctoral candidates also feel isolated or disconnected from their peers and faculty (Obradović-Ratković, 2023; Rutledge-Prior and Casey, 2023) conflicts with expectations relating to social support and community. By acknowledging and validating their experiences, cultivating an optimistic mindset, making expectations clear, building a sense of community and offering comprehensive guidance, staff can establish a supportive milieu that not only enhances students' wellbeing but also promotes their academic achievements.

Humorous situations or jokes commonly spring from an emphasis on the deficiencies or imperfections of a given individual, collective or entity (Gruner, 2000; Meyer, 2000). The theory of superiority (ToS) also has the capacity to restructure students' perception of their difficulties and sources of stress. ToS posits that humour serves as a means for individuals to experience a sense of superiority over others or at a former version of themselves. ToS is illustrated by situations in which an individual undergoes a transformation in personal perception of a situation. Here, I exemplify this transition with a vignette in which I moved from feeling daunted, overwhelmed and in need of help to a sense of empowerment.

> *"I encountered research challenges that surpassed my supervisor and adviser's expertise. In need of assistance, I reached out to the graduate office, where the administrative staff provided valuable advice on securing research grants, funding opportunities and 32ecognize32g workshops. They consistently praised my ambition and innovative ideas, reinforcing my potential for excellence. The support and guidance I received from them profoundly influenced my academic and personal development. Their belief in my abilities empowered me to overcome complex challenges, foster collaborations and explore uncharted research paths."*

In this example, the HE administrative staff instilled in me a sense of confidence and highlighted the strengths and resources I had. This change in perspective boosted my confidence; for example, when presenting research and interacting with fellow scholars.

ToS describes a kind of "*comedic amusement*" (Lintott, 2016, p.348). I recommend the 32ecognize32g32g of ToS into one's cognitive processes as a tool for resilience and self-motivation.

Juggling academic work with personal and professional obligations is a further important challenge for postgraduate students as they navigate the dissertation process (Bal *et al.*, 2020; Yusuf *et al.*, 2020). This can be confounded by a mismatch between the student's lived experience and the expectations communicated by others. In my third vignette, I share an experience of such a conflict:

> *"While scrolling through Twitter, I came across a tweet by Dr Lies Lanckman, the founder of NoRMMA Network. Dr Lanckman tweeted: 'PhD students: PLEASE WATCH TV IN THE EVENINGS. Play video games! Write fanfiction! See friends!' It was a reminder that we don't have to be constantly dedicated to our academic growth. However, the reality is quite different for us as PhD students. Apart from our research, we have various responsibilities within our research groups, such as teaching and administrative tasks. We also have daily tasks to handle, external appointments for counselling or dyslexia support, and the need, especially for those who are international students, to stay connected with our families. Given these demands, it becomes nearly impossible for us to avoid multi-tasking or working in the evenings."*

The ontic-epistemic theory of the comic (OETC) posits that humour arises from a disruption to one's understanding of the world, a contradiction or cognitive impasse. From the perspective of the student, the reality of doctoral study, with its multiple responsibilities and daily tasks in addition to research and thesis development, contradicts the idea of taking time for leisure activities. The vignette highlights the tension between the students' view that constant dedication is required and the faculty recommendation that they take a break. The OETC suggests that a comic effect arises from perceiving the contradiction between these elements of social reality (Marteinson, 2005).

By 32ecognize32g and understanding the conflicting messages, as doctoral students perceive them, HE staff can help to create a supportive environment. They can promote a healthy work-life balance by encouraging activities outside academic responsibilities and by 32ecognize32g

their importance for overall wellbeing and, in due course, for academic success. Open communication channels can be established to provide a space for students to discuss their challenges, while resources and support, such as time management workshops and stress management training, can be provided. Additionally, HE staff can foster a positive and lighthearted atmosphere, encouraging appropriate humour and laughter to alleviate stress and strengthen social connections. By applying the insights of OETC, university staff can help PhD students effectively manage academic demands while balancing other responsibilities and personal connections.

In this concise piece, I have reflected on the PhD experience by means of three theories of humour, drawing on concepts from BVT, ToS, and OETC. I argue that these perspectives may help us to re-frame some of the stressful experiences that doctoral candidates encounter. In the same way that "*failure to 33ecognize humorous intent leads to confusion*" (Attardo and Raskin, 2020, p.100), I suggest that, without humour, doctoral students are ill-equipped. If they adopt a humorous view of their circumstances, they are likely to be more resilient and university staff will consequently be better able to help them to overcome what might otherwise be formidable challenges as they progress to fulfilment of doctoral requirements.

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