Doctoral researchers as change agents of higher education: An autoethnographic account

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Abstract

Doctoral researchers are often assumed to be the academic actors with the least agency due to rigid academic hierarchies. In doctoral education scholarship, it has not been extensively discussed how doctoral researchers deploy their agency beyond their own research projects or how they might even play a pivotal role in shaping their institutions. By drawing on the concept of a tempered radical*, in these* Notes from the field, *I provide a reflexive account of actions I took as a doctoral researcher to create change within doctoral education: searching for allies, focusing on positive deviance, and accepting slow, incremental change. With this analysis and by offering some considerations for practice, I argue that doctoral researchers should be encouraged to see themselves as agentive and take opportunities—even risks—to affect the settings they work in and academia in general.*

Keywords: autoethnography; change agent; doctoral education; reflexivity

Introduction: Who can be a change agent?

If we think about individuals who are seen as activists or 'change agents,' it might be names such as Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King Jr., or Greta Thunberg that come to our minds—people who have been able to cause previously unimaginable, far-reaching change that has affected millions of people. Compared to those names, any other efforts aiming at change might, at first glance, seem less meaningful. However, they are not. There are change agents everywhere in society; people who are driven by their will to change their surroundings in one way or another, even if it is something within a small community, such as a school, a town, or even a single hobby club.

While we might typically associate such change agents with activists with some kind of political interest in mind, that is not the only way that change can be

made. In academia, for example, individual academics might become change agents within their institutions at several levels. While they might sometimes be in leadership positions and therefore have more power to intentionally shape their institutions, some individuals might get the spark for change from their own passion, curiosity, and values—gradually and unconsciously building their identity towards becoming an advocate for change. However, this is exactly how organisational change often happens—thanks to 'work behind the scenes' done by 'quiet rebels who signal the need to adapt to changing times' (Meyerson, 2008, pp. xvi–xvii).

Because of the invisibility of these quiet actors, it might be difficult to point out which specific actions lead to change. For example, there are multiple questions and choices one can make, and several ways one can go wrong (Green, 2016; Meyerson, 2008): Do we prefer conflict or cooperation? Do we consider change and progress as something that is everywhere, or as a constant struggle against power and injustice? Which of our values or principles are non-negotiable on our journey towards change? To solve these questions and challenges, I argue a plan is needed.

The plan I am thinking of, along with training, however, is what many higher education actors often lack when finding themselves involved in different change initiatives (McGrath et al., 2016). This illustrates how change is often taken for granted in higher education (Saarinen & Välimaa, 2012)—everyone sees and wants *change* but it is something that is difficult to theorise or define. This could be one of the reasons why higher education actors aiming at development, especially early-career scholars, might not be equipped with the tools they need to approach change, neither in theory nor practice.

In these *Notes from the field*, I address the latter—practice—by presenting a reflexive, autoethnographic (Ellis et al., 2011) account of how a doctoral researcher can become a change agent within higher education—shaping the conditions where they work on a daily basis. The core question I want to ask is: *What can an individual doctoral researcher with less power than most people around them do to make a difference within doctoral education or academia in general?*

To do this, I draw on the concept of a *tempered radical* (Meyerson, 2008); a person who 'constantly negotiates the path between her desire to succeed within the system and her commitment to challenge and change it'; someone who must navigate 'the tension between her desire to fit in and her commitment to act on personal values that often set her apart' (p. 4). As an empirical context, I use my dissertation project on doctoral education (see Aarnikoivu, 2020), which I completed in September 2020. Reflexively and retrospectively examining this project now, I will discuss three ways to create change, which, in my view, were major contributing factors behind the successes—and failures—that I encountered

on my journey of doing nexus analysis (Scollon & Scollon, 2004) on doctoral education. I argue that while one's actions as a change agent cannot be fully planned in advance, by following different steps and one's values, it is possible to achieve meaningful results. For doctoral researchers specifically, such bottom-up perspectives to change initiatives within academia and making one's voice heard can empower early-career researchers (ECRs) as well as the surrounding ECR communities (Beňová, 2014).

Doctoral education as social action: A dissertation project from 2015 to 2020

In my dissertation (Aarnikoivu, 2020), I studied doctoral education as a form of social action. As a mode of inquiry, I used nexus analysis (Scollon & Scollon, 2004), which is a holistic and an inductive research approach consisting of three practical stages: engaging, navigating, and changing the *nexus of practice*. The Scollons, who created the approach, did not actually define *change*. Instead, they established clearly that what they wanted to do was to tackle social injustice, which in their case was the exclusion of Alaska Native people to educational, medical, legal, and economic institutions. In their book, they illustrate how they wanted to make these institutions more accessible but also offer an *ethnography of motives* for their work—why they did it in the first place.

It was the Scollons' example that I followed in my doctoral work. I considered doctoral education a constantly evolving *nexus* where different social actors, objects, places, and discourses come together. I generated my data by doing insider ethnography in two distinct settings, in two different countries (physics/engineering at CERN [the European Organization for Nuclear Research] and applied linguistics in Finland), 18 months in both. The results of my study comprised three different dimensions, which followed the principles of nexus analysis: 1) the results of four individual sub-studies on doctoral education; 2) a set of new, critical questions regarding doctoral education; and 3) the change that I created or helped create within the contexts under study.

The focus and motivation for this text concerns what might be the most elusive, final phase of nexus analysis: change. When reviewing the previous literature on doctoral education for my dissertation, I discovered that much of it did not provide ways to *create change*—to *do* something about the issues that had been identified in previous research. In my dissertation, I conceptualised change as follows: individual-level change (e.g., mentoring prospective doctoral researchers), institutional-level change (e.g., development of writing seminars) and changes within wider communities (e.g., coordinating a global research network). In the original project, however, I could only briefly address the question of 'how these changes came to be?,' as it seemed beyond the scope of the dissertation. Moreover,

even though nexus analysis requires—and enables—the researcher to be highly reflexive throughout the research process, it might be challenging for a doctoral researcher to face some of the *uncomfortableness* related to their research process (Clayton, 2013). However, as Clayton (2013) argues, doing so is crucial, as it shows that there are elements in one's work that should be addressed. In that sense, this autoethnography complements and continues from my doctoral work by allowing me to look back on the learning that happened during and after the completion of my dissertation (see Lake, 2015).

A retrospective and reflexive autoethnography

Autoethnography can be treated as an umbrella term for different kinds of studies (e.g., personal narratives, experimental ethnography, or narrative ethnography) (Ellis, 2008). They can be described as 'ethnographic research, writing, story, and method that connect the autobiographical and personal to the cultural, social, and political. In autoethnography, the life of the researcher becomes a conscious part of what is studied' (Ellis, 2008, p. 48). With autoethnographies, it is often the written product that is also "the result" of an autoethnography (Ellis et al., 2011). In fact, the reason for the increasing attention towards autoethnography is connected to how research is perceived to be done: observations are no longer considered to be neutral or without issues, and discussions of power, praxis, and the writing process itself are now being scrutinised by qualitative researchers (Ellis, 2008; see also Spry, 2001).

As Ellis (2008) described, autoethnography can present different layers of consciousness, which again connects to nexus analytical principles of *zooming in* and *out* (Scollon & Scollon, 2004): the analyst has to examine their topic both from a wider perspective and context as well as explore the more detailed aspects of it. This process necessitates reflexivity and exploration of one's motives to make specific choices throughout the research process. In this way, the analyst is very "vulnerable" (Ellis, 2008), as they need to critically examine not just other people's actions (and emotions), but also their own. In this process, the boundaries of the insider/outsider role might also become blurred, something which is extensively discussed in ethnographic research in general (see Atkinson et al., 2003).

Furthermore, autoethnographies can vary in the level of culture (ethnos), process (graphy), and self (auto) (Ellis, 2004; Reed-Danahay, 1997). The *culture,* or context, that I discuss in these *Notes* is doctoral education—becoming a scholar.

The paper is written *by* me, a doctoral researcher[1], primarily *for* other doctoral researchers but also for all early-career researchers as well as supervisors. The focus is especially on how I navigated the culture I was studying (in) by balancing between 'fitting in' and 'deviating from' it (Meyerson, 2008, p. xi).

Looking at the *process* (graphy), in turn, I discuss research or other work in a HE context which aims at change—especially change which is subtle, incremental, and patient, rather than bold, innovative, or radical (Meyerson, 2008). However, instead of problematising or theorising it, I treat change as practical actions or initiatives, informed by both evidence and experience-based knowledge on a specific topic (Aarnikoivu et al., 2019). I discuss the successes, challenges, and failures of a project that are of great importance to me. In this way, I hope to shed light on the process, which, overall, was successful in the sense that I completed the doctorate. Furthermore, I managed to increase my agency and, as a result, to create change. However, as research projects seldom go according to the original plans, setbacks, failures, and challenges also need to be openly discussed, so that other researchers can use those experiences to improve their own projects (Aarnikoivu & Saarinen, 2021).

Finally, there is the *self* (auto). These *Notes* do not present an autoethnography in the sense that it would be considered a case study, which would be an autoethnography of a tempered radical from the outset. Instead, it is an autoethnographic *account* of a project which was carried out by doing insider ethnography. In this sense, this text presents a heavily reflexive, retrospective account, although it is partly based on field diary entries that I wrote during the research project itself.

The 'self': A tempered, doctoral researcher radical

To further establish the *self*, I draw on the concept of a *tempered radical* (Meyerson, 2008). Tempered radicals are people who, in one way or the other, want to change their organisations, but do it in a way which allows them to keep learning, fitting in—and perhaps rebel, but constructively (p. xviii). In other words, they 'deviate' from the majority culture, either because of their identity or values. Moreover, they want to question and challenge the current organisational values and practices that clash with their own by providing alternatives (Meyerson, 2008). In the context of these *Notes*, a tempered radical is a person who challenges existing professional

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[1] The main bulk of this text was written in summer 2020 when I was still a doctoral researcher. I defended my dissertation in August 2020 and have continued to edit this paper ever since as a postdoctoral researcher / an independent scholar.

and organisational higher education practices in a way that is non-confrontational and in accordance with their own academic values.

Considering the values, the empirical motivation for my doctoral work stemmed from the "wrongs" I was witnessing between 2012 and 2015, before starting my doctoral studies, and kept witnessing afterwards as well: young, promising researchers working on short, fixed-term contracts and yet often doing much more than what was required of them, strongly contributing to the organisation and their immediate research community. However, it did not seem to me their organisation was acknowledging their contributions. Of course, all this was only anecdotal, which alone is not enough to say much about anything (Becker, 2014). However, these anecdotes were the launching point for my doctoral work, during which I gathered both evidence and experience-based knowledge on what doing a doctorate could be like, at best. However, many of these ideas and suggestions by researchers did not seem to manifest in the current practices of doctoral education, wherever I happened to look—in Finland or elsewhere.

This discrepancy between research and practice was what led to me to be a tempered radical—although at the time unconsciously—not just within my own organisation but also within the wider European doctoral education space. Since 2015, I have had to balance between being a "good," productive early-career researcher who follows the requirements set by their organisation and academia in general, while simultaneously questioning some of the practices of that same organisation and academia as a whole. As Meyerson (2008) stated, this kind of tension can cause frustration, which it did on many occasions. However, by 'navigating the middle ground' (p. 6)—choosing one's battles, creating opportunities for learning, gaining small wins, and working *within* the system instead of *against* it—I managed to facilitate some change that was not only meaningful to me but also to others. In the following section I present three strategies, offered by Meyerson (2008), that I now, almost three years after completing my doctorate, understand were crucially important for me to undertake to create change.

Balancing between conformity and rebellion as a tempered, doctoral researcher radical

1) Finding allies
One of the most important things on our way to change is finding other people who are willing to help; people who share your values and ideas regarding how things should be (Green, 2016; Meyerson, 2008). They can be other doctoral researchers or colleagues or they can be more influential people, such as supervisors, senior colleagues, or even department heads or directors. Looking at my doctoral journey now, my most important allies, in terms of my own doctoral success and the change

I aimed to facilitate, were my two supervisors. They were the ones who encouraged me to take on such a challenging topic and mode of inquiry and who supported my choices and aims the entire five years and beyond. In fact, without their "approval," I do not think I could have done my doctoral work the way I did: in quite a holistic and "unfocused" (Aarnikoivu & Saarinen, 2021) manner, not just at the beginning but all the way up to my graduation. As Meyerson (2008) pointed out, tempered radicals usually benefit tremendously from a quality relationship with their immediate supervisors. That relationship shapes how comfortable the tempered radical feels or how willing to speak up or take risks. For me, this was definitely the case: although I have worked hard to advance my research and my agenda for change, it would have been significantly more difficult without these two powerful supervisor allies.

Meyerson (2008) also acknowledged the importance of interactions with any other people who share one's values. They can strengthen one's idea that change can be achieved and that they are not alone. Beyond the immediate supervisory dream team, I reached out to several other researchers and colleagues. Some of these attempts were successful: I found other tempered radicals in conferences, symposia, seminars, and workshops who were also concerned of different societal issues (within or beyond academia), such as early-career precarity, increasing mental health and wellbeing issues among academics, and complex mobilities, which had become important to me, as a result of my own experiences but also my ongoing research. These people were asking interesting (and sometimes also uncomfortable) questions and challenging the existing norms, values, and ways of thinking and doing. Some of these people have since become my collaborators and co-authors; some I have had highly productive and insightful conversations with; some have only remained as people whose work inspires me and whose articles I have read and cited in my own work. All of them have strengthened my ideas of what I want to study, why I am studying it, and what kind of a researcher (and person) I want to be.

However, in some cases I ignored the importance of allies or failed at gaining them. In my home department, CALS (Centre for Applied Language Studies, University of Jyväskylä), which was one of my research settings, the greatest challenge for me was that I was not physically on campus, except for three months in 2017. For this reason, I felt I could not fully access the CALS community, although I actively participated in the online events, which occasionally took place in the department in the pre-pandemic times. Even though I ultimately managed to create some good connections with important social actors in the department (as well as with some doctoral researchers), it took a great deal of time and effort. Had I been there physically from the very beginning, effecting change might have been easier and less stressful.

At the University of Jyväskylä, I also generated some data outside of CALS, looking at the way the university talked about international doctoral researchers. Here, however, I failed to establish an ongoing line of communication with the University's graduate school. In other words, I did not manage to find a way to make the representatives of the doctoral school my allies, even though I had one conversation with the Graduate School Coordinator. Except for that, to this day I have mostly remained unknown to those who are making decisions on doctoral education in my former university. I attempted to contact the doctoral school of my faculty once, asking about the online participation opportunities at the university. After not receiving any response from two different people, I became extremely discouraged to try to contact them again. I did have another chance to present some of my work to them in an informal feedback meeting between the faculty and CALS. In this meeting, they told me they would invite me to a faculty meeting to talk more about my research findings. However, for reasons unknown to me, that never happened.

The lack of allies and resulting issues manifested most clearly in the second setting where I generated my data, however. Whereas at CALS I was able to create change, at CERN (my other research setting) I realised very early on that it would be difficult for me to carry out any meaningful change beyond some minor interventions. This was because the eight doctoral researchers who participated in my study were all officially studying in seven different European universities, where I had no meaningful contacts.

2) Focusing on positive deviance as a driving force
In addition to finding allies, it is important to consider the affective way I pursued change. In her work, Meyerson (2008) addressed positive organisational scholarship (Cameron et al., 2003), where the emphasis is placed on positive actions, thoughts, and feelings. These provide the potential for the 'positive deviance' (p. xviii) of tempered radicals as they try to facilitate positive change. Eventually, small, positive changes can also lead to wider organisational changes. This idea aligns well with the approach by Scollon and Scollon (2004), who treat nexus analysis most of all as an intervention, which is not supposed to present any positivist solutions to pre-determined problems. Instead, the "results" of a nexus analysis consist of new questions and change that the analyst was able to facilitate.

In my doctoral work, I conceptualised the change as follows: individual, institutional, and wider change. Most of those changes included doctoral *support* in some way. With individual change especially, I was able to focus on positivity over negativity: to support master's students or doctoral researchers regarding different aspects of mobility or doing a doctorate. During my doctoral research, I had several (online) discussions with different people, discussing questions such as the following: Is doing a doctorate a good idea in the first place? How does one apply

for doctoral studies in Finland? What kinds of issues should one consider when choosing a supervisor? What kinds of methodologies are there? Many of these doctoral researchers became my current colleagues and peers, from whom I have learned a great deal as well.

Positivity was more challenging to maintain when it came to institutional change: I found it easy to contact and talk to prospective and current doctoral researchers but emailing someone with more power and way more experience with working at a higher education institution seemed daunting. At CALS, I wanted to improve the writing seminars, during which I generated most of my CALS data. Here, it was necessary to spotlight some of the problems that I had encountered— something that needed to be improved and could mostly be done by a rather small number of individuals. First, I sent the writing seminar survey results to those responsible for organising the writing and doctoral seminars and later presented my research results in our doctoral seminar in November 2018. Finally, I ran an online development session for the CALS supervisors and doctoral researchers in September 2020 and also talked about my suggestions in a supervisors' meeting in January 2021. In both these sessions, I provided suggestions on what could be developed at CALS to improve the doctoral seminars and—equally important— doctoral education as a whole. While many of these seminars and meetings involved "pointing out problems," I always emphasised and made sure I included positive developments that had taken place within the department. I also made sure not to blame individuals and instead tried to map out what could help so that CALS, as a community, could improve their practices.

Despite my difficulties within the university, described in the previous sub-section, there were some changes that took place at the university-level. In 2017, I was asked to take part in a peer-mentoring pilot study and project, which was completed a year later. Although I did not plan to participate in that project at the start of my doctoral work, the peer-mentoring project was heavily connected to the topics I was already focused on studying at the time, which is why I could bring my research-based knowledge into it. The pilot was extremely successful, and finally, during the academic year 2020-21, the university launched it as a voluntary practice for all doctoral researchers[2]. Moreover, this project led me to become part of the Researcher Mental Health Observatory (ReMO) COST Action[3], which I joined at the end of 2021. In summer 2022, I was invited to speak about peer-mentoring at a ReMO Ambassador Training school, which was targeted at individuals who wanted to become change agents in their own institutions regarding researcher mental health and wellbeing. This shows strong evidence that the topics I had found

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[2] After the academic year 20-21, the peer-mentoring groups unfortunately did not happen again due to lack of mentors.
[3] https://projects.tib.eu/remo/

important already back in 2015 were, in fact, relevant to a far wider and far-reaching set of communities years later.

The most substantial change I have been involved in creating, however, is being part of the early-career higher education researchers' (ECHER) network[4], which was originally established in 2011. At the end of 2018, the network was "revived" by one of the founding members, who then asked me to join her as the co-lead editor of the ECHER blog, which we launched in December 2018. Since then, we have published around 90 blog posts, authored by 33 higher education scholars (mainly early-career) from around the world. In June 2019, we also established a free, formal membership for ECHER. By April 2023, there were over 400 members based in approximately 50 countries around the world.

In addition to the blog, ECHER has organised an academic writing workshop in Kassel, Germany in 2019; facilitated a range of webinars since the beginning of COVID-19 pandemic; and has been invited to take part in conferences and summer schools. All these events have aimed to help and support others—to focus on the positive rather than the negative. The long-term goal is to have ECHER become a worldwide network of early-career higher education researchers, where its members support each other in a way that has so far not been seen beyond individual institutions or countries.

Throughout the existence of the revived network, I have felt extremely proud and lucky to be part of this community, as I have been able to not just learn and develop my professional skills but also to connect with people from several countries and form plans for future collaboration. In the future, I would like to see ECHER and its members challenge the perceptions of what a 'doctoral researcher' or 'early-career community' can be, at its best, and find novel and experimental ways of collaborating (Brankovic & Aarnikoivu, 2021).

3) Accepting slow, incremental change

While finding allies and focusing on positive deviance are important aspects of change, they do not answer the key question: what exactly do I need to do then, in practice? For this, Meyerson (2008) offered several options: turning personal threats into opportunities, leveraging small wins, organising collective action, resisting quietly, and staying true to one's 'self.' Particularly, it is important to observe potential opportunities for change in everyday situations, even if they might at first seem uncomfortable or difficult (Meyerson, 2008). In this way, change might happen incrementally, although slowly.

Examining these options retrospectively, one of the 'turning points' that affected my doctoral journey to a great extent was an event that took place during the 1st year of my doctoral studies. At the time, I had a part-time job with which I

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[4] https://www.echer.org/

was funding my doctoral research. However, after over a year of doing distance work from abroad, where I was also generating my research data, my employer-at-the-time was no longer willing to continue the distance work agreement and asked me to return to Finland. This was not possible for me personally or professionally, which is why I chose to resign instead. This was a massive risk in terms of funding, led to temporary unemployment, and made me incredibly stressed at the time. However, this incident gave me further motivation to study complex doctoral mobilities and online doctoral practices, which both became sub-topics of my doctoral dissertation. Quite soon, I also managed to obtain full-time funding for my doctorate, which made it possible for me to focus on my doctoral work 100%. I consider this one of the most important 'threatening situations' that I was able to turn into a personal victory.

In terms of 'leveraging small wins,' I consider all small feelings of success within the past six years as 'small wins': whenever I have received positive feedback on my supportive actions, such as mentoring or reading research plans of my peers; whenever someone has used the term 'doctoral researcher' instead of 'doctoral student' (see Aarnikoivu, 2020, pp. 46–48); whenever I have presented my research results and, in that way, caused some visible changes in my home department; whenever I managed to organise or contribute to some collective action, such as ECHER, or, more recently, being part of a group that has brought Finnish-based early-career higher education researchers together. I believe that all these 'small wins,' no matter how modest, have paved the way for change in doctoral education in the settings where I have been working in since 2015, not just in Finland but globally.

Finally, 'staying true to one's self' meant that I did not give in to what most other people were doing and telling me to do: to create a set of research questions for my dissertation as a whole, and sub-questions for each article. Instead, I wanted to commit to the unconventional approach developed by the Scollons' example in doing nexus analysis—to focus on the process as a whole, rather than trying to make my work fit into 'more traditional' dissertation moulds. With the support from my supervisors, I managed to stick to what I felt was the best, and resist the demand for a linear, overly hygienic idea of doing research: to first form the research questions, followed by choice of theory and methods, then generating 'appropriate' data, and finally providing answers (Aarnikoivu & Saarinen, 2021). This kind of approach has also stayed with me, as I have gone on to do postdoctoral research, writing about doing research, and recently establishing a small R&D business of my own.

Conclusion

As probably all doctoral research projects, mine was also fairly messy in the early stages. Balancing between a full-time (non-PhD-related) job, finding different ways to acquire research funding, starting to read about doctoral education research, generating data, and writing my first journal article did not leave much room for long-term planning. Although I had a research plan and a solid idea of what kind of data I wanted to generate, I did not have a plan for the final stage of nexus analysis: changing the nexus of practice. After all, it was always the *final* stage, somewhere in the distant future.

In addition to being caught in the reality of being a novice researcher, in the early days of my doctoral work, I did not fully understand how important the third part of nexus analysis, *change,* was going to be. I prioritised data generation and planning the four sub-studies and their "results" over my actions as a nexus analyst. I did not plan how I would establish relationships with different social actors or what other types of change would be possible for an individual doctoral researcher to achieve. However, as Scollon and Scollon (2004) describe doing nexus analysis and the resulting change, the change can also be accidental, as it was for them in many ways, when they were working in Alaska. In their study on change agents' experiences within higher education, McGrath et al. (2016) also pointed out the role of serendipity in relation to facilitating change, as well as the lack of long-term, systematic planning. I also acknowledged the fact that this was my first attempt at nexus analysis—an incredibly complex mode of inquiry, even for senior scholars. Therefore, even though I would do many things differently, it should be kept in mind that analysing one's actions is very difficult before the actions have taken place.

Because of these potential pitfalls that are involved in any kind of change initiative, discussing and addressing change and change agency early on in one's doctoral studies is important, even if the doctoral researcher is not utilising activist research approaches. This is because many research topics in higher education are related to the settings where doctoral researchers themselves work. Thus, it is likely that change and impact are part of their work by default, even if not primarily or deliberately.

In these *Notes from the field*, I have provided a reflexive, retrospective account on my own doctoral journey from the perspective of a tempered radical aiming to create change within doctoral education, which was my research topic. First, I discussed the importance of finding allies: those who share one's views and values, whether they are supervisors, doctoral researcher peers, or other colleagues. I also addressed what might happen if one does not manage to find 'friends with power'—those making decisions on the topic one is studying. Second, I touched upon the notion of 'positive deviance,' focusing on positive actions over negativity and criticism. In my work, this meant engaging in supportive initiatives on an individual, institutional, as well as international level, such as mentoring and

helping to create a network of early-career higher education scholars. Finally, I discussed different practical ways an individual can engage in incremental change, as well as the frustration that might accompany the slowness of the process.

As Li (2018) argued, challenging one's previous understanding and being reflective is important for international doctoral researchers studying education, to break the isolation and connect with others aiming at educational change. While I certainly agree, with these *Notes* and the analysis I have provided, I hope to extend this argument to all doctoral researchers. This is because for change in higher education to happen, it is not enough for educational researchers alone to be change agents. Instead, we need to empower all doctoral and other early-career researchers to make sense of their own educational journeys and how those journeys link to the current working conditions in academia. Otherwise, we risk creating echo chambers where reflexivity, criticality, and change is an option for some but not others. In other words, even those who do not study higher education should have some tools to be able to counter the inequities involved in research and teaching work, regardless of the field.

Although it might be challenging for a doctoral researcher—especially outside of the humanities or social sciences—to envision themselves as an activist or a change agent, by following one's researcher identity and staying true to oneself, it is possible to see positive outcomes. Although this requires criticality, asking uncomfortable questions, and steering one's actions towards a specific direction early on during doctoral studies, in the end, more doctoral researchers can 'leverage small wins' and also set an example for the wider academic community when it comes to navigating similar situations. While it might not always be easy to make sense of one's past experiences, in the end, the difficulties encountered can be rewarding: to see the meaningful change happening in the settings that mean the most to us.

Author biography

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