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(2024)

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International Journal for Academic Development.

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<https://doi.org/10.1080/1360144X.2024.2324792>

Holistic academic development and academic identity in the liminal postdoctoral zone

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Holistic academic development and academic identity in the liminal postdoctoral zone

Postdoctoral experiences in the academic development literature have been under-explored, particularly within the themes of *being* and *becoming*. These are closely aligned to liminality as a transformative state that engages existing certainties, rendering them problematic and fluid. In this duo-autoethnographic account, we reflect on the experiences of the first author's transition from PhD candidate to postdoctoral researcher, and the mentoring role of the second author exploring how academic developers could better support postdocs in shaping their academic identities.

Keywords: academic identity, holistic development, liminal postdoctoral zone

Challenges in transitioning from doctoral studies to an academic career are increasingly being explored in the literature; however, the liminal space (Little & Green, 2012) of a postdoctoral position, involving negotiation between not being a student anymore and not yet an early career researcher, is under-explored. The postdoctoral experience can be seen as existing in a liminal zone, or a “transformative state that engages existing certainties and renders them problematic and fluid” (Land, Rattray, & Vivian, 2014, p. 201), and those engaging in boundary-crossing partnerships may find themselves in a ‘betwixt and between’ state (Little & Green, 2012). This comes with moving from one role to another: in our case, from PhD student to postdoctoral researcher, and from PhD supervisor to academic developer.

Adopting Sutherland's (2018) conception of ‘holistic’ academic development allows us to consider academic development in this liminal space and potentially fill a

gap, as it would “take more account of the other aspects of academic careers (research, service, administration, and leadership)” (p. 261). Similarly, Fyffe (2018) has questioned the boundary of academic development by noting that the “academic ‘developee’ is not always academic, raising questions about whether it is the ‘person’ being developed or the nature of the work being developed in an “academic”, “scholarly”, or “educational way or both” (p. 358). The latter is particularly relevant here, as the development of a postdoc involves the development of a person, and the professional identity of that person as an early career academic, who often struggles to develop identity, agency and a sense of community (Smart & Loads, 2017), which may be exacerbated in the postdoc liminal zone.

Ålund et al. (2020) have identified goals to enhance postdoctoral professional development, which relate to the areas of career development: work-life balance, enhanced mentorship, better administrative support, and broader academic support. We focus here on three key areas of academic development for postdoctoral researchers: academic research, communication and teamwork, and career development and planning. While there are some important crossovers with the literature on PhD supervision, for example concerning building trust (Huijser et al., 2022), and the interplay between formal and informal learning through PhD students’ conversations (Soomere & Karm, 2021), the postdoctoral experience is different (e.g., expected level of autonomy) and therefore requires a distinct type of academic development. Academic developers are potentially in a unique position because many have discipline-based academic backgrounds, but some are at the same time highly familiar with transitions between both disciplines and academic roles. Some academic developers are thus in a strong position to provide empathetic support in the transitional liminal zone, both professionally but importantly also on an emotional level.

We reflect here on the experiences of the first author's transition from PhD candidate to postdoctoral researcher and the mentoring role of the second author, engaging in a duo-autoethnographic account (Ellis, 2004).

Embarking on a postdoctoral fellowship

I had successfully completed a 3-year full-time PhD in the Social Sciences in the UK, which was one of the most transformational experiences of my life, personally and academically. I had navigated from the Natural Sciences to the Social Sciences through research and, as an aspiring scholar, a postdoctoral fellowship sounded like a perfect opportunity to 'become' an academic and develop a publication portfolio. With a transnational identity (De Fina et al., 2016), i.e., multicultural and multilingual, I believed I was sufficiently equipped to face the new challenges of the next step of my career, and negotiate agency and identity in a postdoctoral space.

Employed as a member of a 6-people multicultural and multilingual European research team, I was invited to design my own research sub-project, which started amidst the Covid-19 pandemic, with its associated uncertainties. Moreover, the complexity of my transition included new linguistic, cultural, and academic practices at play, where I found myself in a liminal space. Driven by research productivity, I was challenged by different group dynamics, power relations, divergent methodological approaches, and contradictions on what constitutes contribution when it came to teamwork.

Ultimately, I was able to adjust my methodological approach, and successfully complete the research, but much of this was because I am a self-starter, used to multicultural settings, rather than a strong support structure in place.

The academic developer's role

My academic developer's mentoring consisted of continuous communication, which was both holistic in nature, in that it related to specific academic skills development, and humanistic in terms of supporting the whole person. For example, I provided academic feedback in an iterative way, both in response to requests for feedback, but importantly also proactively in anticipation of issues that may arise before they actually did, and in the process I supported the development of sub-projects of the larger project that the postdoc took the lead on, including writing support and publication plans, thus guiding the development of increasing independence. The academic development occurred in the context of Covid-19, which created a number of significant challenges for the postdoctoral researcher, in terms of social isolation in a new environment (including moving countries). Through a range of digital tools, I provided a constant sounding board, both synchronously and asynchronously, as well as professional advice, which supported the postdoctoral researcher's level of resilience. Finally, the third part of my role was related to career planning and academic job applications, including mock interviews. Given the relatively short duration of postdoctoral appointments, securing an academic position post-postdoc is constantly on the radar. To be effective, establishing a relationship of trust is crucial, which takes considerable time. In this case, it was an extension of an existing PhD supervision relationship, but otherwise a time investment is crucial to establish that trust, in much the same way as academic developers do with faculty.

Final thoughts

The specific role academic developers can play in negotiating postdoctoral liminality is related to a careful scaffolding process, enabled by their identities beyond disciplines, with a focus on a holistic approach to 'development', addressing emotional, social, ethical

and academic needs to varying degrees. Given the transitional nature of the postdoc experience, from a supervised PhD candidate to an expectation of a self-directed academic with increased responsibilities, the scaffolding of the academic developer involves being available and providing critical feedback on decision making, both within specific post-doc projects and with regards to future career development. The iterative nature of such support simultaneously helps to regulate anxieties and plays a key role in developing the emotional strength and resilience to cope with the demands of an academic. This is urgent since postdocs provide considerable promise as the next generation of scholars, while being vulnerable to failing to live up to their potential if the right supports are not in place and they are left isolated.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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