

UNPLUGGED

Research as Reparation. Studying to Soothe

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The autobiographical accounts of researchers in the social sciences often draw connections between the focus of their research and painful events in their personal past (Bouilloud, 2009). In my experience of supervising doctoral theses in recent years, I, like many of my colleagues, have observed cases in which writing a doctoral thesis appears to serve as a form of 'reparation', in the psychoanalytical sense of the term (Klein, 1975): this may involve an attempt to correct social wrongs, or a response to questions encountered in life. In such cases, studying is a way of soothing the pain of old wounds.

In recent times, historians and epistemologists have devoted considerable effort to situating the thought of individuals within the personal, historical and social contexts from which they emerged. Furthermore, the connections between personal experience and intellectual output are striking, to the extent that some thinkers have argued that, ultimately 'researchers are the primary subject of their own research' (Barus-Michel, 1982, p. 801). In this article, I propose to explore the 'reparatory' dimensions of research work, specifically doctoral theses. For obvious reasons of confidentiality, I am not able to go into detail about the specific situations of doctoral candidates whom I have encountered personally; fortunately, there are more than enough examples, studies and autobiographical accounts upon which we can draw.

Why write a doctoral thesis?

Why do we conduct research? And for what reason, in pursuit of what goal? There are many books and guides on how to succeed in the academic field, and the keys to writing in the social sciences. Much less is written about the underlying motivations that drive individuals to embark upon this path.

The institutional response to the question 'Why write a doctoral thesis?' is, unsurprisingly, often teleological and focused on the professional prospects. Many arguments in Universities or Research Institutes for a PhD include the mastering of research methods, the ability to solve problems, the ambition

to become an academic or a researcher and contribute to scientific advancement.

Beyond the avowable: Reparation

Research on this subject has focused on the avowed, and thus avowable, motivations that compel students to embark upon doctoral studies. Existing research has focused on doctoral candidates in history (Brailsford, 2010), information technology (McCulloch et al., 2017), social sciences and the humanities (Skakni, 2018), or more globally the experience of the PhD journey (Germain, 2020). These studies have highlighted the diversity of motivations and trajectories, but they appear to agree on a certain number of points: a desire for professional advancement, a desire for autonomy, to acquire knowledge and skills, for 'personal achievement', to prove to oneself that one is capable of succeeding in such an endeavour. Undertaking doctoral studies appears to be at once a personal, intellectual and professional quest (Skakni, 2018), underpinned by tensions that can make the doctoral candidate come across like some hybrid species of 'knowledge junkie' and careerist (Mueller et al., 2015). Some of the reasons expressed above conform to social expectations, but it is very difficult to get at the deeper motivations, those that are not so easily spoken or socially accepted.

A blog popular with French-speaking doctoral candidates, 'Réussir sa thèse',¹ touches upon a more personal dimension of further studies, listing four motivations: 'to understand, out of curiosity; to highlight/condemn a situation; to prove that you are capable; to delay your entrance into the real world/during a period of existential transition'. The author also notes that in some cases 'a doctorate is a form of revenge on specific forms of injustice, or a way of raising one's self-esteem'. The idea of highlighting/condemning situations has been addressed in previous research, particularly by Salmon (1992) who highlights social justice as a potential motivation. The notion of reparation is never far away: above and beyond the objective aims of

¹ <http://reussirsathese.com/pourquoi-faire-une-these>

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the research itself, the choice of a specific instance of injustice, and the author's sensitivity to this issue, raises the question of his or her personal relationship with the subject matter.

Sublimation or reparation?

In research, as in the arts, we talk more readily of the desire for sublimation than the idea of making reparation. For Freud, both research and art offer potential routes to sublimation, which is to say a drive 'directed at a new, non-sexual goal, in pursuit of socially-desirable objectives' (Laplanche & Pontalis, 1968, p. 465). This channelling of impulses may be directed at any number of activities, and for Dejours (2014) sublimation is at the heart of all work, furnishing the individual with proof of success which makes sense within their historical and social context. This seems to be broadly true of research as a profession: it is held in high esteem socially, not least the doctoral thesis, which leads to a degree that is regularly presented as the highest possible academic qualification.

I have chosen to use the term 'reparation' because it seems clear to me that the mechanism at work in the desire to pursue research is stronger than sublimation. It represents a genuine desire to rebalance the world, to make amends for a past situation, or to achieve rehabilitation and lasting recovery for the subject. The notion of reparation refers to psychoanalysis (Klein, 1975), or to the legalistic understanding of reparation as compensation for a victim's suffering. In Klein's view, reparation is 'a mechanism by which subjects attempt to make up for the consequences of their destructive fantasies on the objects of their affection' (Laplanche & Pontalis, 1968, p. 409). The different terms used in Klein's original German texts rendered variously in the English translations as *restitution*, *restoration* and *reparation*. For Klein, children thus attempt to make reparation for the maliciousness of their actions, which they themselves perceive to be unjustified. In psychoanalysis as in law, the starting point is always an initial situation which needs to be corrected or rebalanced, stemming from an original suffering or injustice. That which is unjust, and unjustly endured, is also *ipso facto*, *unjustified*. It is here that the process of reparation begins, in the breach opened up by suffering and the unjustified.

The notion of reparation, as I employ it, is somewhat different from that offered by Melanie Klein (1975). In the field of academic research, the underlying force at work appears to be not so much a form of guilt but rather a sense of shame or injustice: the painful memory of past failures, traumatic experiences and shame derived from past actions. From psychoanalysis I retain the focus on action as a means of compensating for negative situations and feelings of injustice. But the source of this injustice is not to be found in the actions of those who seek to atone for it, as Klein's analysis of children suggests: on the contrary, those who seek to make reparation often

perceive themselves as the victims, in a sense not far removed from the legal definition of that term.

Figures of reparation

In the literary and artistic sphere, the link between traumatic experience and artistic creation is a common theme. Schauder analyses the different reactions of Paul and Camille Claudel to the respective romantic dramas they experienced in 1905, when Paul split with Rosalie Vetch and Camille with Rodin. While both 'transposed their heartbreak into their work – the *Partage de Midi* was to Paul what *l'Age mûr* was to his sister' (Schauder, 2010, p. 446), they nonetheless met with wildly different fates: institutional (diplomatic) and intellectual success for the writer; madness and internment for his sister. Pursuing sublimation in the interests of reparation is thus an uncertain endeavour, whose outcome is always unknown or incomplete.

Soothing the pain

In a remarkable autobiographical text, historian Pierre Chaunu declares that 'I am a historian because I am the son of a dead woman, and the mystery of time has haunted me since childhood' (Chaunu, 1987, p. 61). A little further on, he reflects that 'it was the fact that I, at a young age, encountered what can only be described as death, (...) that inspired in me this need which, for want of a better option, made me into a historian' (Chaunu, 1987, p. 61). Chaunu's personal experience created a 'need', an attraction to research whereby, 'for want of a better option', he would attempt to make reparation for this original tragedy. Similar connections between initial suffering and reparation through research can be found in numerous autobiographical works by researchers, invoking various forms of suffering: childhood hardships, the suffering of women in a male-dominated world and the suffering of survivors (Bouilloud, 2009). There are thus different degrees of reparation, connected to the diverse forms and varying intensity of the problems inspired by initial experiences.

Settling a question which was formerly misunderstood, perhaps painful, or at any rate meaningful, is a way of turning the page: incomprehension often leads to an impasse or else to exhausting repetition, and can become an obstacle to happiness, or even sow the seeds of failure. Research, on the other hand, offers a route to comprehension, an understanding of oneself as a subject of research. Grappling with these subjects on an intellectual level is also a manner of preventing history from repeating itself, of keeping the past at a safe distance in order to break free from it. Research offers a path out of personal difficulties, complete with a sense of pride and a certain narcissistic satisfaction which is

embodied in the stage-managed and celebratory exercise of defending one's thesis.

In the autobiographical account shared at a conference held at the University of Paris VII, Pierre Bourdieu discussed the thesis which he started, but never finished, under the supervision of G. Canguilhem, on the 'Phenomenology of affective life'. Later on, in response to a question on his reading and his preoccupations as a young man, he replied that: 'A lot of the subjects which preoccupy me even now were present from an early age, particularly the relationship between the psyche and the body. (...) It was an interest connected to personal issues, from my own affective life, experiences which had really shaken me. It was perhaps a way for me to sublimate those things' (Bourdieu, 2001, p. 23, in Bouilloud, 2009, p. 255). Bourdieu's use of the term 'sublimation' is clearly a reference to the Freudian concept, the idea of channelling impulses. Bourdieu returns to this subject at length in his subsequent *Sketch for a self-analysis*, having first dismissed the various rationalisations he had formerly offered for his desire to become a sociologist: 'But I cannot not say it here – all these reasons are in part only the relay and rationalization of a deeper reason or cause: a very cruel unhappiness which brought the irremediable into the childhood paradise of my life and which, since the 1950s, has weighed on every moment of my existence, (...) All my behaviours (...) were overdetermined (or subtended) by the inner desolation of solitary grief: frenetic work was also a way of filling an immense void and pulling myself out of despair by interesting myself in others; abandoning the heights of philosophy for the wretchedness of the *bidonville* was also a kind of sacrificial expiation of my adolescent avoidances of reality; (...)' (Bourdieu, 2008, pp. 93–94; tr. Nice, 2007, pp. 71–72).

This appears to be a practically perfect example of reparation through research, combining all of the ingredients discussed above: shame and guilt associated with an initial experience, leading to a desire for rehabilitation through work and the purification of a 'new birth'. In the text, Bourdieu offers no further details of the personal sorrow – probably a bereavement – which befell him in the early 1950s. In research on social sciences and management, such formative events are often misunderstood, or even unconsciously hidden by researchers themselves. In fact, the connection between life experience and research interests may only become abundantly clear once the thesis has been submitted and defended.

Soothing social shame

Among colleagues, we often remark that the research topics chosen by some students seem to echo negative or traumatising family experiences, situations which they regard as sources of social shame: stigmatisation on the basis of social or racial

origins, or sexual orientation; painful childhood experiences, parental unemployment, or humiliation suffered by parents in situations in their everyday or professional lives. More broadly, we often encounter feelings of injustice inspired by lived social phenomena (inequality, violence, etc.).

Richard Hoggart's autobiography is interesting in this respect. An English historian with working class roots, his good results at school saw him unconsciously invested with a mission by the family that raised him (his grandmother and aunts, since he was orphaned at an early age): 'I was the one who could break out on all their behalfs, who could help erase the memory of those years of swollen feet and tired backs, doing routine jobs' (Hoggart, 1988, p. 58). The young Hoggart must 'get away' in order to escape this shame and humiliation, and he must instead pursue a social ascension which will reflect positively on the family, erasing past struggles and humiliations. Indeed, later on in the book, he describes how proud his aunts were of him and his success. This chimes with Michelet's description of his own parents' faith in him, trusting him to 'make up for it all, save it all' (Michelet, quoted in Jaquet & Bras, 2018, p. 48), through academic success and upward social mobility. The challenge is to transform 'shame that kills into shame that saves' (Tisseron, 2006). From his childhood experiences, Hoggart retained 'a sort of stubborn pride (...), hardiness, motivation and tenacity' (Hoggart, 1988, p. 91), which would serve him well in his successful university career: He felt 'the need to gain respect and by my own. Which seems above all to be by writing, not by professional positions gained or by making money' (Hoggart, 1988). Research is a way of carving out, by oneself and for oneself, a respectable position in a manner that differs from the quest for money, power or accolades, which are presented as other potential avenues for reparation.

Achieving mastery of written expression, language and different levels of discourse is often a crucial step on the path to emancipation. Hoggart took a keen interest in popular culture and the linguistic specificities of the British class system, and this was to become one of the principal themes of his research. In the USA, Howard Becker recounts the story of a student who adopted a complex vocabulary because she felt that it was 'classier' – she admitted that she had always been impressed by recondite discourse and abstruse vocabulary, which she felt conferred a form of authority and superiority: 'if I don't know immediately what it means... I always assume that it is my inability to understand' (Becker, 2004, p. 36). On a more general level, mastering language opens up the prospect of academic, and thus social, advancement: it may be possible to 'write your way out of the woods' (Sonnet, quoted in Jaquet & Bras, 2018, p. 123). This requires a mastery of different registers of communication, as well as familiarity with the concepts and theories by which one can signal one's affiliation with the various sub-systems of the world of research.

Finding one's feet in public: The viva examination as an instance of official reparation/integration

Allow me to make a somewhat audacious comparison. The public ceremony of defending a doctoral thesis in some respects mirrors the procedural canons of the courtroom. It is often said that, for victims of crime, the trial process offers a form of *reparation*: the courtroom is a microcosm of society, an agora where debate is governed by a precise ritual framework. Victims thus hear their own stories told and pleaded by others, with the possibility that this process will result in a punishment being imposed upon the guilty party and damages awarded by the judicial authorities. In the courtroom, the actors societally mandated to represent the victim present a dramatized narrative of events, with designated roles and predefined discourses: lawyer, prosecutor, expert witnesses, judge, jury, etc. During this *performance*, they assess the damage incurred and are responsible for determining the appropriate reparations for the damages suffered. The process of reparation encompasses both the damages obtained and the ruling of the court, rendered officially binding by its carefully presented public announcement.

The exercise of defending one's thesis in a *viva voce* examination, a tradition which descends from the medieval *disputatio*, also involves a cast of recurring characters: the thesis supervisor, the referees and the examiners all have specific roles to play, much like the actors in the courtroom. This too is an exercise in evaluation, with the difference that its outcome is positive, since there is no punishment meted out at the end of the session – if the referees have given the go-ahead for the defence, it is because they consider the thesis to be acceptable. In this context, reparation comes from the opinions expressed by the members of the examining panel. They may praise the quality of the candidate's analysis, or offer criticism which also contributes to the overall effect of recognition, since it is counterbalanced by positive feedback and serves to place the candidate on an even footing in a debate with institutionally established professors. If there is a strong connection between the research work and the candidate's lived experience, then we can assume that the answers found in the research, approved by the examiners, also serve to validate the researcher's own interpretation of their research question. The examiners take up this analysis and offer comments, extensions and amendments. In doing so they offer *ipso facto* validation. We might even pinpoint this as the precise moment at which the researcher overcomes the original they suffered – this is reparation in action.

Conclusion: Repairing oneself and the world

Repairing oneself is also a manner of repairing the world. But there is nothing self-evident about this quest for reparation, and we must accept that it is possible for reparation to fail. This

reparation may also become an endless process, as infinite as research or artistic creation itself, with theses or works serving as milestones. In this sense, research and artistic creation can never be entirely therapeutic, a recipe for well-being with a reliable rate of success. It is only after the fact that one can say, in a certain manner, that 'reparation' has been made.

Research supervisors therefore often find themselves unwittingly immersed in a story which they do not understand, of which they may pick up snippets along the way, so closely that it is connected with the intimate, unspeakable inner lives of candidates. The situation is rendered more complex still by the fact that, in the field of research, reparation may well coexist with other more traditional, familiar and avowable motivations, such as the genuine desire to learn. Called upon to act as mediators, facilitators, coach or mentors (Germain & Taskin, 2017) for this process of reparation, all the while avoiding the risk of tipping over into unregulated psychotherapy, supervisors may find themselves playing a role which far surpasses their educational status. They must proceed with caution in such circumstances, knowing only that a powerful force is at work beneath the surface. But the experience of watching a young researcher achieve self-realization, and the feeling of emancipation it brings, may bring back memories of supervisors' own formative experiences, in those far-off times when they were hard at work on their theses. This sense of perspective allows for another form of transmission in the research process, one which is not directly cognitive in nature: the transmission of a process of emancipation, and in this respect, reparation is profoundly liberating.

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