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Understanding the PhD as a Phase in Time

Emília Rodrigues Araújo

ABSTRACT. The purpose of this article is to offer a contribution to the analysis of the time spent on researching and preparing a PhD thesis and its conceptualization as a 'phase'. Prior research on PhD experiences used time to explain the doctorate in terms of the different lengths of time involved when comparing different disciplines and scientific areas of study (Bourdieu, 1983; Atkinson, 2000). To date, the PhD has not been considered as a genuine time experience. I intend to do so by bearing in mind the insights provided by time sociology frameworks. Thus, in this article it is assumed that respondents' understanding of their PhD time as 'a phase' translates a deep experience of liminality, in which they understand themselves on the one hand as belonging simultaneously to a 'now' and a 'then' and, on the other, as being located in a linear temporal structure. In the light of the findings, it is suggested that the phase may be viewed as a key concept for theorizing the temporality of PhD experience. **KEY WORDS** • heterotopy • future • liminality • phase • PhD experience

Introduction

Between 2001 and 2003, I interviewed Portuguese university lecturers who had been granted *dispensation* from their teaching duties to prepare their doctorate degree, which in Portuguese language is called a *dispensa* (in this article I will use the term *dispensation* whenever this special period of research leave for PhD study is referred to). This period of *dispensation* is marked by a distancing from the university, both in terms of the physical space and the institutional

rules governing the person's appointment as a lecturer. My purpose was to understand the strategies these lecturers used to manage this type of liminal time as well as the constraints they experienced during this time.

From the beginning, it emerged from the interviews that lecturers conceptualized their period of *dispensation* as a 'phase'. Within this stage of research they were recounting the most painful and anguishing experiences, both in their private and professional lives. The phase as a time representation opens up several analytical dimensions. In this article I will limit myself to just one of these: the way lecturers understand what they call the 'future' which, as a time horizon, deeply shapes their everyday lives. Bearing this in mind, I assume that the experience of the *dispensation* period as a phase translates a peculiar type of paradox: on the one hand it shows the dominance of the future, converting the present into a vacuum, a fluid. On the other hand, it expresses a certain degree of personal inability to regard the future as a *real* future, as a *project*. To follow through this contradiction in depth, I considered the effects of gender, age, and scientific field because they are variables that affect the experience of duration over the period of doctoral research. In addition, I found it necessary to draw on the sociology of time, more specifically on work which addressed explicitly the issue of time horizon experiences.

On the basis of the above, I want to put forward two key ideas:

1. The phase must be seen as a possible translation of the standard experience of time. Here, I consider that the concepts of *emergence* (Mead, 1932/1959) and *protention* (Schutz, 1962) offer a central contribution to the explanation of the inner experience of time during this interval of time of the lecturers' career path;
2. The time of *dispensation* to prepare the doctoral thesis is inescapably attached to the Portuguese academic trajectory. Thus, its senses and perceptions are experienced in a slightly different way when compared to other phases considered to be more or less common in people's lives. More specifically, I consider this phase to be a rite of passage, that is, an expected stage established within the academic path of one's career. Hence, daily and biographical experiences appear to be constantly dependent on the temporal schemes imposed by the university.

These two main propositions generate two epistemological reflections. First, one must regard this phase as a beginning, as a stepping stone to an academic career. Thus, it is almost inherently an ambivalent period, which some PhD researchers characterize as a time of suspension often accompanied by an identity crisis (Atkinson, 2000).

Second, conceptualizing this period as a phase compels one to adopt a wider outlook on time and late modernity, especially concerning two main features of modern society: a) the experience of continuous change and identity frag-

mentation in everyday life; b) short futures and collective identity breakdowns, characterizing organizational and capitalist times.

Taking into account this reflection, I have organized this text into a discussion of seven points. First, I briefly describe the study and techniques used in this ongoing research. Second, I focus on the major characteristics of the *dispensation* period granted by the university for the purpose of lecturers completing their PhD degree. Third, I explain why the 'phase' of the PhD is very specific in the context of the academic career. In the fourth point I suggest that the PhD phase may collide with other personal phases, demanding from the individual some important decisions about appropriate time strategy. The fifth point relates to information that arises from interviews. On the basis of these, it is possible to state that the *dispensation* period refers to a suspended time during which individuals live basically on the future. This experience of continuous anticipation of future is simultaneously linked to university time. That is the reason why I briefly refer to this relation in the sixth point. The seventh point relates to the sociology of time, and my intention here is to show how the phase analysis may be sustained on the basis of three main concepts: protention, emergence and rite of passage. In the last section of the article, I locate my study and argument in the wider concept of temporal experience during late modernity.

The Study

The discussion in this article is based on interviews I undertook at two Portuguese universities between the years 2000 and 2003, in accordance with the Grounded Theory Methodology (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). These interviews were conducted as an integral part of a funded research relating to the uses and representations of time during the *dispensation* time to prepare the PhD. Taking into account the need for saturation and constant comparison, I used the theoretical sampling method and interviewed 37 people, aged between 27 and 40 who were in the first year of their leave period so as to prepare the doctoral thesis (see next point). The average age for women was 33 years whereas that of men was 31. I interviewed 13 men and 24 women and used semi-structured interviews involving several questions in which I tried to obtain information regarding the main features of time use during the *dispensation* time for PhD preparation.

In order to structure this text, and being aware of its artificiality, I took into consideration the conventional division between 'private' and 'public' times. On a few occasions, I allude to data provided by a survey I conducted in 2003 at the same two Portuguese universities (Araújo, 2003, 2004) involving 1800 lecturers. Despite the low percentage of replies ($n=273$), I have mentioned the

findings because they reinforced the major patterns provided by the analysis of the interviews.

The Period of *Dispensation* for PhD Preparation and the Academic Career in Portugal

In Portugal, the stage of '*assistente estagiário*' (trainee assistant) is the first step in an academic career. At this level, lecturers perform administrative tasks and handle practical classes. In terms of a career plan, lecturers must undertake research and follow a lesson plan so that they will be in a position to present a master thesis in order to enter the next stage of their career, as 'assistant'. As 'assistants', lecturers are granted a six-year contract during which they must complete a doctoral thesis, which will allow them to reach the position of 'auxiliary professors'. This six-year contract may be extended by another two years if the progress of the thesis warrants it. If lecturers are unable to complete the PhD thesis in the specified time, their contract of work becomes more vulnerable and the university is at liberty to dismiss them.

It is important to note that only after an initial two years of working may assistant lecturers apply for the period of *dispensation*, which is normally allocated a three-year period of study and writing up. Not everyone, however, remains in the category of assistant for those two years before they embark on their period of *dispensation*. There are lecturers who begin their *dispensation* period as soon as they enter the 'assistant' phase and others who only begin their *dispensation* period after three years working as assistants. Despite the time allocated, the lecturer and his/her supervisor are required to ask for an extension period on an annual basis. In more recent times, due to an increasing scarcity of resources (time, human and financial) not all departments grant permission for the entire three years and, in many cases, lecturers need to interrupt their *dispensation* leave in order to lecture and fulfil other administrative functions. Despite these changes, which structure academic time in a more rationalized manner, the normal procedure is to be granted three years of *dispensation* time in order to prepare the doctorate. During this time, lecturers continue to be paid their normal salary (around 1500 euros). Generally they are required neither to teach nor to participate in meetings or perform other administrative duties.

When someone begins a *dispensation* period, she/he expects an uninterrupted three-year period but provision is also made to suspend it for a period. Depending on the reason (pregnancy, maternity or paternity leave) this period can be later added on as required. In general, lecturers only ask for this suspension or interruption for periods lasting more than four months. However, suspension does not mean that the work contract is automatically extended as well. Rather, this is a matter for negotiation with each department. Usually,

lecturers confronted with ‘accidents’,¹ such as the death of a relative, depression, a sick child or a long-term illness, try to manage on their own, asking for those two years after the formal end of the working contract (six years) or asking for interruptions of one or two years. Their department is responsible for dealing with these ‘special’ case requests.

The resolution of such issues, generally considered to be private, was to a certain extent protected because a time extension (and especially research time, as is the PhD case) was not considered to be an obstacle or a problem. Therefore, in fact, not only could researchers know in advance when they should start a *dispensation* leave but they could also make (professional and personal) plans based on that socially expected duration. The flexibility in the *dispensation* time for doctoral research made it possible for lecturers to manage different and unpredicted events in a more or less informal manner.

Today, provision is changing and even if the law continues to regulate this phase, lecturers have to deal with much more uncertainty regarding their daily and biographical times. Thus, changes have been introduced in order to modify the academic career and to make it more like other European countries, where the doctorate degree is the first step in gaining access to an academic career. Furthermore, Portuguese universities have begun to regulate the PhD period and work contracts more strictly. Consequently, not completing one’s PhD during the work time contract may increasingly be considered a reason for dismissal. To conceive of the period of *dispensation* as a phase may provide a better understanding of the influence these more recent changes have in the experience.

The Specificity of the PhD Phase

As proposed by the philosopher Henri Bergson² (1931) time makes us face a reality made up of a diversity of durations, all distinct from one another regarding tension, celerity and rhythm. The *dispensation* period includes the PhD completion and may only be understood on this basis: as very different from any other type of life phase. There are many phases in people’s lives and most of them are regulated by events, which the individual controls and predicts in order to maintain the stability of daily life. Pregnancy, for instance, is a type of phase but one which tends to be more predictable than the PhD phase in terms of its end point. We can mention many other phases that occur along the biographical path. Periods of illness, for example, have a limited duration in time and are sometimes expected. Calendar time is the main means of measuring this kind of time period. There are other kinds of phases, which individuals designate as ‘phases’, essentially because they are taught to do so by comparing their experiences to someone else’s, according to general social time norms. One can

mention adolescence, divorce, depression and identity crises as phases related to the sexual and professional identification of children growing up. Common-sense language identifies them with adaptation periods during which individuals must acquire and manage new social roles, new routines, and new responsibilities *in order to* restore their lives' initial balance (*giving time to time*). This means that time is embedded in individual experience and that people understand its passage as a way of resolving the shocks brought about by more abrupt feelings, such as loss and rupture (for example divorce, death, adolescence, drug abuse). In fact, since its passage is continuous, change becomes almost imperceptible and individuals feel they are gradually returning to equilibrium. These phases do not have deadlines and, in many of the cases, individuals experience profound periods of identity crisis where resolutions often require external intervention, such as that of a therapist, a psychologist or a psychiatrist. When I refer to phases like divorce or death of a relative, I am suggesting that they are constantly permeated by uncertainty. People suffering from or dealing with someone who has an incurable disease experience ambiguity and understand duration as a waiting period characterized by anguish and agony, which cause a deep sensation of vacuum, of a 'catastrophic' future (Game, 1997). Unlike other phases, whose duration is known beforehand, these unexpected phases tend to be characterized by the focus on an extended present (*now*).

Each phase contains events that may be more or less positive or satisfying, for example pregnancy includes a type of experience, which is completely different from AIDS or cancer because the latter encompass a higher level of uncertainty and distress. Each one of these phases may occur during a person's lifetime and, normally, they do not follow a linear sequential path. On the contrary, they often occur simultaneously. However, this juxtaposition of phases is neither always conflicting, nor does it imply prioritizing actions. Nevertheless, it usually generates stress, especially when the juxtaposed phases are, at the same time, emotionally demanding.³ It is crucial to bear in mind that the meanings of the phase depend on the individual's response to each one of the period's end points.⁴ For the PhD researcher it is important that the time limit of the *dispensation* phase (PhD) is known in advance. Lecturers know the interval's duration and they themselves are responsible for managing and controlling time in order to finish their thesis within that interval. Still, the PhD period is a waiting time⁵ that is characterized by doubts, uncertainties, ambiguities and hesitations. Based on my research findings I identify some sources of ambiguities as being: lack of equipment, unsuccessful experiment tests, loss of data, supervision difficulties, and the inescapable social and scientific isolation.

PhD time is delimited by a research project defining timings and activities. However, during the *dispensation* period the PhD candidate has no certainty about whether the project is going to reach the desired result. In a slightly different way from all the other phases mentioned earlier, the doctorate period

demands psychological and emotional investments strictly associated with career requirements.

Competing Phases and the Fear of Collision between Them

Based on my conceptualization of the phase, I want to propose that it does not refer to a time interval, whose duration may be quantified between time T and time $T-1$, enabling us to compare doctorate courses on the basis of their length of time. The concept of 'phase' enables us to consider the inner experience of the interval referring to its contents, that is, to its action motives, to the symbolic and sentimental value of its timings, which cannot be measured by clocks or calendars.

Indeed, the PhD, seen as *circular* rather than *linear* time, needs reading, reformulation, repetition, concentration and mental openness.⁶ These needs are very similar to those involved in the other types of previously mentioned phases and may produce a very demanding and challenging collision. This collision of phases between different temporal demands is sometimes anticipated as fearful or extenuating. Thus, lecturers try to define the best ways of dealing with possible unexpected events by orientating their action according to a plan, which implies an ascetic way of managing time. In fact, this ascetic conduct regarding the 'sacrifice of the present in the service of the future' (Coser and Coser, 1963) often consists of programming time in order to eliminate probable confrontations between events that may threaten time availability. We cannot overlook the fact that the dispensation period, as well as the PhD, is permeated by plans mixed with wishful thinking concerning individual and family life *after* completion of the doctorate. Those plans often involve the sequencing and prioritizing of events according to their importance regarding the completion of the PhD. Moreover, they often imply austerity due to the future focus, that is, living ahead of time.

The lecturers I interviewed at the beginning of their dispensation period confirmed that working for the PhD was their main project. Consequently, any other project was subjected to postponement, anticipation or suspension. When I interviewed them again two years later, it was clear that they no longer firmly believed in their initial plans. As they saw it, a series of unpredictable events invalidated their plans and demanded attention, which diverted them from the expected. Research results confirm that defining, sequencing and prioritizing actions, aspirations and events are complex and ambivalent actions, which usually appeal to emotions, morals and sentiments. In this case, the ambivalence in sequencing, which is memorized and narrated in a subsequent moment (the moment of the interview), seems to strictly depend on the way family and personal interests (phases) have been conditioned from the start by the PhD

work. In fact, not everyone recognized actions associated with previous management plans as actually existing (in the past). Both men and women tended to reinforce the idea that the doctorate was not a reason for postponement or anticipation. Yet this fact should be interpreted more as a necessity for revealing narrative and identity coherence. In fact, throughout the interviews, respondents spoke of time advancement and deferral. Postponement is mentioned most particularly when considering events such as maternity, paternity, marriage and, less frequently, for cultural or sporting activities. All these competing pressures are configured as 'absences' during the dispensation period but the first three take on greater significance because they are strictly connected to gender differences managing biographical time. Regarding this, four aspects must be noted:

1. Women are increasingly involved in academia and science. The female doctorate degree constitutes 46 per cent of all doctorates undertaken in Portugal, and women represent almost 37 per cent of the total number of academic staff. It is clear that an academic career is no longer a male prerogative and that women are bringing new concerns and interests to the university. Yet, as I mentioned at the beginning of this text, Portuguese universities are undergoing a difficult change regarding both the social and political devaluation of the PhD phase. Universities are themselves increasingly determined by ever-shorter cycles of innovation and increasing economic uncertainty both of which are closely linked to the process of rationalization.
2. Time rationalization intensifies the sense of 'conflicting time perspectives' (Ylijoki and Mäntylä, 2003; Adam, 2004) regarding the collision between linear and circular times, that is, between the time of calendars and clocks and the lived time of everyday life (where we shall include PhD research).
3. Regarding time experience, those 'conflicting time perspectives' increasingly affect daily and biographical plans and often collide with them. Regarding individuals' time experience, the PhD time becomes 'linear' due to the increasing legal control and restriction over its duration.
4. Consequently, individuals must fit their personal plans into that linearity, a complex task, especially for women, whose body time is at a crucial phase regarding decisions about having children. That is, due to biological time, women experience more ambivalence during their dispensation period when compared to men. The dispensation period generally starts when women are between 29 and 33 years of age. Taking into consideration that a PhD normally lasts four to six years, this phase becomes particularly sensitive, given that it may indeed collide with other intervals, such as procreation time. Regarding this, some female respondents explained their decision not to have children of their own on the basis that they had begun their dispensation period 'too late'. They were considering the relationship between their biological time and their PhD work very carefully. Some even explained that

their decision to forgo motherhood was due to delays in their doctorate work. The suspension of motherhood may be considered to be a solution to avoid collision between phases of incompatible temporality. Nevertheless, there are situations when female PhD candidates must effectively deal with a phase collision. In general, this causes ambivalence because some discontinuity in managing times emerges. Pregnancy, motherhood and marriage are three types of events and phases that appear to be both possible as well as undesirable. This is why they are strictly planned. This way of managing contingency, using several forms of anticipation and postponement, constitutes some of the primary concerns regarding women's biographical times in the studies of Rampazi and Leccardi (1993). Regarding this point, I wish to mention that despite the often unpredictable nature of these events and despite the seemingly irreconcilable predictions, women rapidly adjust to their changed biographical conditions saying: 'in spite of all, that was the best thing'.

Due to the four points I have identified above, the *dispensation* period produces inequalities regarding gender, mostly because women are still the ones primarily responsible for interaction times, such as those of the family. This study reveals that for woman the PhD phase tends to present a higher level of time fragmentation and time intensification than it does for men.⁷ Moreover, women often tend to feel guilty for not having as much time as they would like to work on their PhD, and simultaneously for not having enough time for other activities, family life and sports.

Their PhD work takes place during the day and is rather monochrome.⁸ Slightly contrary to this, men follow more flexible time schemes (like working during the night at home or at the university) and their time, as they explain in the interviews, is not so much subjected to social controls. These tendencies, though enlightening, are not enough to argue that time uses during the PhD are fundamentally different between women and men. As was argued by some authors (Adam, 1988; Davies, 1990; Leccardi, 1996a, 1996b), we need to admit that masculine and feminine time and linear and circular time are no longer at opposite poles. They are better conceived as a continuum with each time experience encompassing different levels of linearity and circularity. If individual narratives reveal some differences, sometimes perceived by individuals as inequalities, it is true that they depend largely on socialization processes through which they are internalized, according to a specific model of norms and values associated with patterns of time use.

The Phase Always Between ‘Now’ and ‘Then’

The dispensation phase may be seen as a ‘now’ that aggregates ruptures and their resolution. It is indeed a time defined by an uncertain outcome, and so a phase is a *time span* during which individuals wait and defer academic gratification, projecting the present into the future. At the same time, this phase, which suspends the *now* in favour of the *then*, focuses on a particular kind of future – that which is lived *through* the present. Indeed, with hindsight the projects and plans of the of PhD dispensation period seem to lose their ruling nature reminding individuals that life is necessarily uncertain and unpredictable. Still, individuals keep planning their actions in the short horizon of everyday life and, despite the uncertainty, they continue to ‘designate’ the ‘future’ as somewhat external, a reality where they make life happen. This paradox may be especially noticed in the following excerpt from one of my interviews:

I know I spend too much time here at the university. I know that when I am with her (daughter) I am not enjoying the moment and I often make her listen to my ideas and papers. I know that I am not with her as long as I should. It’s terrible when I arrive and she doesn’t recognize me, doesn’t call my name, but I have to finish this PhD as soon as possible because if I do so, I can make it up to her later on, maybe giving her a brother. She will understand that it was only a phase . . .
(‘Beatriz’, Sciences)

In this passage ‘Beatriz’ uses the word ‘phase’ to justify and legitimize her way of understanding (and judging) her relationship with her daughter. This reflexivity is rooted in the past (i.e. the fact of not having the ideal amount of time to give to her child, considering what could be expected from her ‘as’ as mother). However, it is, simultaneously, a projection into a time somewhere in the future ‘when’ she expects to recover her normal life, which has been disrupted because of PhD time. When this ‘return’ to the temporal line has been achieved, she feels that she will be able to compensate her child for the time she had to deny her due to the necessary investment in the PhD. According to this, for ‘Beatriz’, having another child is understood as a way of paying for the time that she considers to have lost with her daughter.

By this line of thought, I suggest that the ‘phase’, previously understood as merely *short* or *long*, may indicate more or less conscious investments made by the individual in the academic field in order to enter it with legitimacy on the completion of the PhD. Both anticipation and postponement (which is also a form of anticipation) illustrate how far lecturers are familiar with the informal rules, which regulate the entire doctorate process. The experience of time as a ‘phase’ implies the actions of anticipation and postponement, in a way that projects everything into a *time ahead*.

As I noted, the experience of time as a ‘phase’ enables us to recognize the

importance that the future has in people's present. As their experience is suspended between a 'before' and an 'after' the doctorate, it can be stated that their time experiences are located in a *liminal* time and space. In fact, being 'in between' a past and an already present future, lecturers look at their time as if it were merely a space where they situate action and themselves, even though they do not actually know whether they are *now* or *then*: PhD candidates live in a suspended 'now'. They hope to finish their PhD thesis and 'go to the other side'. The other side is the moment and space when and where they do not need to 'think about the thesis' any longer and when they will be 'very happy'. The present is permanently invaded by the idea of being on the other side, which 'is going to be so good'.

These experiences are reflected, mostly, in the type of general representations of the PhD. My interviewees tended to look at the PhD as the main proof in the academic career, which enables the lecturer to become independent and autonomous. More than representations, the expectations regarding the value of the PhD and the assessment of the completed PhD must be mentioned. In fact, the moment of assessment refers to the most important critical date of this process, which is the formal evaluation of the thesis.⁹ It is rather important to note that this *critical date*, happening *in the future*, permeates the entire experience of 'now', affecting ordinary decisions and investments in such a way that, paradoxically, time seems to be 'frozen'. Therefore, the future is highly determined by the inherent uncertainty of the process where other worries are interrelated.

The Role of Organizational Time in the Determination of Phases

PhD candidates' experience of the present is deeply dependent on academic perspectives and representations of the PhD and on the organizational time politics involved. Regarding the first idea, each academic discipline tends to produce a set of representations specifically related to 'what candidates must prove'. Thus, it can be stated that each discipline has its major representations and symbolic requisites (Duarte and Gago, 1994). Normally, we divide them into social sciences and humanities, on the one hand, and technologies and natural sciences, on the other. The basic assumption is that the PhD process in the first groups requires methodological and intellectual abilities, which are generally more stressful than the mere technical requirements. As far as my study is concerned, social sciences and humanities are associated with the longest PhD duration, as opposed to the 'hard' sciences, which, in general, are associated with the shortest duration. The results provided by my survey, referred to in the methodology section, show that originality appears to be the most important requisite mentioned by lecturers in humanities and social

sciences. Technology and engineering lecturers, in contrast, mention research skills, while autonomy and independence are particularly evident in the case of natural sciences. These expectations are the result of a *long durée* process, which has produced specific rules of acting and working in each of the disciplines. Those rules have been reproduced across generations and normally are acknowledged as 'tradition'. As such, they are highly constitutive of the experience of the period of dispensation signalling from the very beginning what is expected from a PhD candidate.

Regarding the second idea, that the PhD phase is inescapably dependent also on the specific organizational time politics involved, I argue that it seems too narrow to argue that the permanent invasion of the present by the 'future' is due only to the different imaginaries and representations across disciplines. Instead, more than tradition which provides rules on 'how to do science' in each of the disciplines, what constitutes this tendency of the future to invade the present is the nature of the politics that characterize each one of the departments and schools within which specific doctorates are allocated. This future in the present is particularly prevalent in departments and schools (across all the disciplines) which try to develop strategies to reduce the time spent in PhD preparation in order to obtain 'critical mass' of lecturing staff quickly.¹⁰ Some of these time compression strategies consist of advising lecturers to write their thesis in a foreign language (English, first) or doing the entire PhD abroad. These more proactive postures are particularly noted in the technological and natural sciences fields.

Considerations about the 'Phase' in the Light of the Sociology of Time

Generally, we use the word 'phase' to denote positive and negative periods that demarcate life between a before and an after. Regarding negative phases, these may represent periods of unhappiness, disgust or disinterest, such as physical or mental debility, the break-up of relationships or other stages, which are understood as overwhelming periods, since they refer to 'a temporarily difficult or unhappy period or stage of development'.¹¹ Despite the fact that psychology has used the phase in the sense of 'stage', especially regarding adolescence, in sociology the phase has not been considered a legitimate object for investigation.

Considering the information emerging from my research about individuals' temporal experience during the period of dispensation, the 'phase' must be considered as materialization of two time representations: that of linearity and that of circularity. The linearity is encompassed in the rational way of dealing with time, mainly through the use of plans. In that sense, understanding the PhD as a 'phase' means to comprehend it as a period located in a wider order of succes-

sion, which extends into both past and future.¹² Understanding the period of dispensation as a ‘phase’, far from being a synonym for the absence of planning, makes PhD candidates act in a more reflexive and circular way, absorbing the project and reminding the individual that those projects are not always made completely real.

To understand the experience of the period of dispensation we must think about life as something that neither exists in a past tense, nor in a future tense. This point is made by George Herbert Mead (1932/1959) and applied to social life more generally. Mead argues that time as present is created in between past, present and future and results from individuals’ ability to reflect on their acts. Mead states that:

past, present and future belong to a passage which attains temporal structure through the event, and thus may be considered long or short as they are compared with other such passages. But as existing in nature, so far as such a statement has significance, the past and the future are the boundaries of what we term the present, and are determined by the conditioning relationships of the event to its situation. (p. 24)

In this sense, emergence is the process that creates time relating things, events, expectations and memories. Besides, time derives from the need to structure the way rational beings normally live in the world, calling the future into their present and turning time into a *protention*.

In fact, *protention* designates, in the Schutzian sense, the time structure of a common individual attitude: ‘living in our acts, being directed towards the objects of our acts, that is live in our present but focusing the attention on an immediate future, through expectations’ (Schutz, 1962: 172). As Alfred Schutz argues: ‘expectations are actually those ‘elements’ which pull the future into the present’ (p. 172). This interpretation, which is closely followed by Niklas Luhmann (1990), enables us to look at the ‘phase’ as a continuous dialectic between the three temporal horizons, that is, the past, the present and the future. The PhD phase represents a peculiar time in the academic career where the role of expectations and aspirations is decisive. In fact, dispensation time is a period of proof during which the candidates’ time depends on several other organizational actors. This means it is a time that encompasses the way institutions and traditions constrain and affect people’s desires and aspirations, enclosing them in a bounded set of opportunities. In addition, the concept of *protention* needs to be appreciated in the sense presented in the work of Pierre Bourdieu (1983, 1998), an author who identified *protention* with the concept of preoccupation in order to rehearse how individuals orienting their action towards the future manage their cultural and social capital according to the degree of interest they have in the *social game*. Furthermore, for Pierre Bourdieu (1998: 204–19), the centrality of the concept, *protention*, is rooted in the way all life is, in some sense, a search for something that has not yet come (but that may come). The

second key idea, which is in a certain way connected to the above explanation, consists in arguing that the period of dispensation is a rite of passage.

As Isac Chiva (1986: 229) argues, the rite of passage designates an extraordinary phase delimited by a time *before* and a time *after*. Thus, the rite accentuates the effervescent times transforming the historical moment into a symbolic moment, producing another kind of social reality. Our everyday life is full of rites and rituals which have a special function, both structuring our interactions with the other and introducing the *extraordinary* in our quotidian life. Regarding time, Edith Campi (1986: 131) argues that the rite of passage gives meaning to time and social life. In a way, she emphasizes that societies necessitate rituals because they need to control time. Indeed, the concept of *rite of passage*, along with the concept of *rites of initiation*, designates the transition periods through which individuals have to pass in order to prove they deserve being recognized as legitimate members of a group or a society.¹³ Harold Van Gennep (1915/1960) developed a conceptualization of the rite of passage, defining it according to three general levels:

1. The *separation*, which designates the time when individuals are separated from the community or from the group they live in so they can gain autonomy and strength.
2. The experience of *liminality* which corresponds to the experience of the rite itself which often implies the segregation of the 'candidates' to another physical space where they are on their own.¹⁴
3. The *incorporation*, which is the moment when, through a ritual or a ceremony, those who have been candidates, prove they have achieved enough autonomy and maturity and deserve their integration into another stage of life.

The studies which have been focused on organizations, most precisely on professional careers, use the same assumptions concerning the passage of time between the different hierarchical levels. Regarding this, authors such as Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss (1971) and John Roth (1963) emphasize the linear dimension of professional careers. They consider that the movement between the levels is characterized by periods during which individuals have to accomplish proof of competence in order to enter the higher levels and assume new roles. Pierre Bourdieu (1986: 206–35) follows the same line of thought, although he speaks more frequently of rite as an *acte d'institution*. Pierre Bourdieu argues that within the organization this moment of proof is highly personal and so, more than assuring the integration of the new member, the rite consecrates the division between those who become members and those who will not be able to do so because they possess less cultural and social capitals. In this sense, Pierre Bourdieu (1998: 219) explains that the rite assures the reproduction of social order.

Regarding this theorization, the *dispensation* period may be conceived as a long time of retreat (three years). During this time, all organizational actors (academic and administrative staff) consider that PhD candidates should distance themselves and not participate actively in university life. According to the language used, they are understood to be 'out' and when the dispensation time ends, they will be considered as someone who is 'back'. Thus, when lecturers are granted dispensation time, *every* organizational participant expects that they devote themselves entirely to their research and the PhD thesis and that they try to do that outside the university and away from the routines of academic life. As it is expected in any rite of passage, the 'candidate' is relegated to space/time of reflection, solitude and research. As soon as they 'enter' the dispensation time, they leave behind normal daily interactions with colleagues. In this article I wanted to highlight that being a rite of passage, the dispensation time favours a reflexivity upon organizational structures and norms. Indeed, as a period of 'rupture' from daily routine it may reveal how far the norms are internalized and what types of implicit processes people use to produce acceptable behaviour in organizational spheres. Moreover, it allows us to appreciate the extent to which lecturers are carrying out their PhD to reflect upon their academic position, gender and age and to consider whether they are willing not only to criticize but also to effectively change their everyday lives (at family and professional level).

The 'Phase' and Late Modernity

The 'phase' may be problematized as a designation for late modern society because it suggests the existence of a social time that is lacking certainty concerning, most specifically, the forms of social relations between organizations and individuals.

Focus on the 'phase' obliges us to think about the influence of late modernity with regard to living and experiencing the future. The division of time into small sections of phases which leave individuals uncertain about temporal boundaries and ends creates experiences of fragile and fragmented biographical times. Despite this pervasive ambiguity and uncertainty, ordinary life is acknowledged and performed on the basis of a 'life politics'. This, as Anthony Giddens (1992) points out, includes 'strategies' to manage uncertainty and to offer coherence for every biographical path, contributing to the maintenance of a given sense of duration (Rampazi and Leccardi, 1993) in which apparently contradictory biographical time points and phases appear to be related to one another.

It seems reasonable to suggest that the 'phase' reflects the core of late modernity politics regarding dimensions such as narrative rupture, uncertainty, short temporalities, and a lack of faith in the future as a project, that is, directed

by the proactiveness of plans (Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1992; Bauman, 1998; Fevre, 2003). Still, it is rather difficult to assume that the paradoxes that characterize the PhD phase experiences might be specific to late modernity and its social time. Indeed, regarding the PhD experience, there are many epistemological and ontological questions to consider before attributing the term exclusively to our era. A deeper deconstruction of its sense enables us to look at it in a more fluid manner, rehearsing its instability of meaning.

Conclusion

The experience of the dispensation time as a phase emphasizes the idea that PhD candidates live in a time ahead of themselves, in the sense that the future is deeply constitutive of their present, leading them to postpone and suspend (possible) actions *in* the present.

This text started from the idea that PhD candidates locate the period of dispensation to prepare the doctoral thesis 'in' a temporal line which progresses along a series of multiple other phases. PhD candidates consider periods of 'crisis' as a deviation from that line. Because time is strongly understood as a linear process, the designation of the period of dispensation for the PhD preparation as a 'phase' signals the extent to which individuals believe their lives may return to a point of equilibrium after finishing their PhD. In fact, during dispensation period their lives are deferred because they are concentrated on the PhD work and they need to avoid other phases, which may conflict with the PhD demands. Hence, individuals understand the dispensation period as a time completely occupied by the PhD. Therefore, when they feel they will not probably finish it, they tend to classify the dispensation period as an empty agenda. With this last term they mean they were not aware of the fact that time had effectively passed because, somehow, they didn't succeed in having something tangible to show. This is especially noticed if, at the end of the three years, the PhD has not been completed. Indeed, if it occurs, the 'phase' turns out to be understood as an 'absence', a vacuum.

Time is a 'fact of life' (Adam, 1990) and individuals do not only exist *in* time but they *are* time, in the sense they *are* embodied processes and rhythms and, simultaneously they are aware of the finitude of life.¹⁵ Therefore, despite its linear meaning, the phase 'is' inherently a time experience, insofar as it reveals time in its emergence, as a present, which is lived according to memories retained from the past and expectations based on the future. Within the Schutzian theoretical framework, the phase encloses a typical experience of time because, as stated by Alfred Schutz (1962), humans are rational beings, whose conduct (*action*) is determined by time boundaries which are not externally imposed but subjectively defined as *time horizons*. In fact, the whole life

of PhD candidates, being practically suspended during that interval of time, which is defined within chronological dates of beginnings and endings, seems to be managed in a permanent state of transition as if there were not a bounded time at all but only subjective fences imposed and directed by individuals themselves. Because the PhD phase implies a time without external constraints framing everyday life, the period of dispensation is often measured by PhD candidates in terms of the height of a known child, a colleague's white hair or the wrinkles of a friend whom they have not seen for a period of time. Regarding this, it could be concluded that the term 'phase' signals three major characteristics.

First, it locates candidates' lives in a temporal line because it defines an interval of time. In this sense, the 'phase' is a designation that 'freezes' time, insofar as it refers to a linear representation of time in which time itself may be controlled, managed and allocated according to a personal attitude that tends to postpone everything which is regarded as possibly disturbing.

Second, the use of the term 'phase' and its internalization help PhD candidates to keep going with their lives, despite the conscience and awareness of the extent to which the external time boundaries are accomplished due to the inevitable appearance of several events that affect the development of PhD work. Here, the word 'phase' signals the permanent experience of transition experienced by PhD candidates with their lives marked by a process of changing and *becoming*. Thus, both time representation and experience are structured on the basis of reflexivity towards past and future from the position of an 'extended present' (Nowotny, 1989).

Third, it can be stated that the experience of future, as an extended present, is not, however, exclusively a characteristic of the personal and phenomenological experience of time. It is also integral to the modern capitalist system which brings about the need for speed and innovation. This, in turn, accelerates the rhythm of organizational times, forcing the future to be continuously 'in' the present as anticipation.

Notes

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1. *Accident* is a word used by Gaston Bachelard (1972: 84) to designate all kind of events which are not expected and which affect the experience of duration.
2. Bergson (1931) distinguishes chronological time from duration (*durée*). The author believes that the former is an instrument of rationality, since it allows individuals to

situate their action. Duration refers to the experience and complexity of life in itself. Thus, duration means the experience of the interpenetration between past, present and future, which do not exist as independent of each other.

3. Some examples of these conflicting phases are a pregnant adolescent, an unemployed person divorcing or two recently married people without a home or, in this case, a pregnant PhD student.
4. Fraisse (1963) argues that 'the future perspectives of an individual depend, then, on his capacity for anticipating what is to come' (p. 177).
5. It is a waiting time in the sense that it refers to an interval of time with a beginning and ending located within a linear path, the academic career. Besides, it is also a waiting period because progress is also largely dependent on other actors, such as supervisors and other professors who have a high control over time management, since they have the ability to judge the work done.
6. Looking at the temporal scheme of the university, we could state that it is basically rational, bureaucratic and linear, in a sense that it is directed by plans and programmes that locate events and actions in a temporal sequence as if time were actually a line. Even though, PhD refers mainly to the activity of investigation and, in this sense, it refers to a deep immersion of subject into the object of the study that is continuously questioned and subjected to alterations. Because investigation implies a specific time often confronted with the unexpected and subjected to several delays due to the inner rhythms of the activity performed, it can be conceived as circular time (Adam, 1995).
7. Intensification means that several duties have to be accomplished in a short time. Fragmentation means that time is more vulnerable to interruptions in the case of female lecturers especially due to their social roles as mothers and wives. Oliver Sullivan (1997) uses this terminology.
8. *Monochonie* is the word used by Edward T. Hall (1996) to define a system of time, which is basically linear, so that each activity is planned to occur in a settled time.
9. In Portugal, the presentation and assessment of the PhD lasts three hours, during which candidates have to answer questions posed by five professors including their supervisor.
10. By 'critical mass' I mean the amount of doctors a department has.
11. This definition was given in the *Oxford Dictionary* (<http://dictionary.oed.com>).
12. Individuals feel difficulties in managing their lives as if they were a result of a linear sequence of actions already previewed. Besides, a PhD requires a lot of time investment. So, the understanding of time as a 'phase' helps candidates to manage the potential time conflicts, which emerge from the social roles they perform.
13. Rites of passage have been studied in archaic societies, and their problematization is inspired in the works of Emile Durkheim (1912/1995) and Marcel Mauss (1906/1979). A theoretical framework about the experience of the liminal time encompassed by the experience of the rite of passage and its correlative rituals has emerged from seminal studies conducted by authors such as Margaret Mead (1947/2001). Mead studied the life cycle in Samoan society and concluded that each phase was determined by the accomplishment of rites of passage, which, implying a public ceremony, contributed to the adjustment of individuals to other roles. Harold Van Gennep (1915/1960) takes into account this idea and considers rite of passage as a time period, which performs an important function in society because, through it, individuals may prove they deserve to obtain a higher level of status. The majority

of studies, which highlight periods of rite of passage, are centred on life cycles (and individuals' social age). Thus, in sociology, the moments of birth (integration), marriage and death (separation) are most commonly studied. Their theorization follows closely anthropology's theoretical framework, which views the rite of passage as an extraordinary time, which imprints the rhythm in the annual cycle of societies (for example, the popular festivities and the change of seasons).

14. Michel Foucault (1967/2004) designates this liminal time and space as heterotopy. The author says that the heterotopia begins to function at full capacity when men arrive at a sort of absolute break with their traditional time. Liminality is a concept also treated by Harold Van Gennep (1915/1960) regarding the experience of the rite of passage but is specially pointed out by Victor Turner (1995). This last author considers that the experience of liminality refers to the experience of 'crisis' which may characterize a period of individual or collective life. The author states that liminality do not refer only to the passage between hierarchical levels (from lower to upper one). Liminality may be also revealed in moments when social orders, like those which define gender roles, are inverted.
15. This idea is closely linked to Martin Heidegger's (1989) concept of time.

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