

Professional Obtaining & Becoming Model – a Way to Explain Unequal Academic Career Paths

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Abstract: Academic career has visible and invisible components. The immediate perceptible part of an academic career is the status of a teacher in his university structure. What it can't be seen is what the teachers do to achieve an academic position. This research analyses the academic actors informal communication networks like an invisible mechanism involved in the construction of an academic profession.

The study uses the constructivist grounded theory research paradigm. The results revealed two main directions in the social construction of an academic career: "Professional Becoming" and "Professional Obtaining". Each direction influence the perception of personal values, self esteem, social relations, efficiency & effectiveness and individual benefits.

All these generate different results in the academic profession development in areas like teaching, researching, institutional relations, national and international recognition, teacher-student partnership and personal emotional support.

The study proposes explanations of professional paths and allows a reflexive and not intuitive assessment of personal action strategies. The effect of the model on academic career planning should be reflected in the rethinking and repositioning of teachers towards the implications of informal communication phenomenon in professional development.

Keywords: *Academic Career; Informal Communication Networks; Constructivist Grounded Theory.*

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1. Introduction

The academic environment is characterized by increased resistance to change. The advantage of autonomy allows the university institution to faithfully reproduce its internal institutional structures (Bourdieu, 1988). This is why, most of the time, attempts to change university education meet one of the strongest resistances that can be encountered in the entire social system. In such a caste system (Burris, 2004), occupying higher positions is one of the main objectives assumed and declared by those who are acceded to the university field. Bourdieu (1985, 1988, 2000) shows that holding a dominant position allows controlling the mechanisms of acceptance, selection and modelling of those who are in lower academic positions, fostering personal ascension and facilitating the reproduction of the academic status quo.

In explaining the university reproduction mechanism, the French sociologist uses the concept of habitus (Bourdieu, 1988). It refers to systems of inculcated, durable, transposable dispositions (Bourdieu, 2000). The localization of such structures in the individual mentality has the effect the construction of a subjectivity social reality and generating, at a collective level, a unifying and common vision in the manifestations of the academic personality (Stănciulescu, 1996, p. 170). The academic habit includes hypotheses, beliefs and behaviours related to what scientific and didactic activity means.

Graduate career development is dependent on the possession of resources that Pierre Bourdieu brings together under the name of "cultural capital". Increased interest in such cultural goods makes the academic world one of the competition where individuals engage in individual and group actions to gain professional reputation and gain rewards (Silva & Warde, 2010).

Focusing the academic actors on the processes of knowledge and learning makes the academic career one in which the principle of meritocracy seems to be best valued. However, academic reality reveals that even here, as in other social areas, the saying that sometimes "does not matter what you know, but who you know" is true (Di Leo, 2003; Pifer & Baker, 2013). This perspective has prompted me to focus on informal networks that can facilitate academic career developments.

Pifer & Baker (2013) and Bergeron (2007) have shown that research conducted in this direction (Clark & Corcoran 1986; Di Leo 2003, Podolny & Baron 1997; Seibert, Kraimer & Liden, Emmerik & Sanders 2004) highlights the positive contribution that informal communication networks

have in initiating and managing friendship, relationship with academic mentors and access to strong actors in the system, and career development opportunities.

The literature deals with the scale of the benefits of using informal communication networks, from an individualist perspective, which has allowed the outlining of theoretical explanations known as "theories of personal interest" (Monge & Contractor, 2003). In synthesizing these trends, I used three main dimensions: social integration and social affiliation, academic professionalization and achievement of scientific results and professional satisfaction, material benefits and social support.

Ever since entering the academic system, social actors who have chosen to pursue a university career are seeking to build people-to-people relationships in order to integrate into the new social reality. In other words, gaining a status of a holder does not mean only obtaining an institutional decision, but also accepting the newcomer by the academic department. Pifer & Baker (2013) has shown that the launch of informal communication networks is a strategic option, aiming at awareness of institutional policies, creating and managing personal image, symbolic inclusion in the departmental social structure and adopting functional behavioural models.

With the creation of a stable relational universe, multiple opportunities for professional development are opened. For Jungbauer-Gans and Gross (2013), the most important inter-human relationship that favours success in academic careers is that developed with a recognized academic mentor. Based on Zuckerman's studies (1977, 1993), which noted that "more than half of Nobel Laureates were led by a Nobel Prize laureate," German researchers demonstrated that the reputation of a mentor is directly proportional to his student's chances of achieving his own professional success.

Jungbauer-Gans and Gross (2013) have shown that the mentor-apprentice relationship is able to bring the emotional and material satisfaction to the latter, along with scientific productivity (Forret & Dougherty, 2004; Melicher 2000), academic degrees and high academic positions in a short period of time (Podolny & Baron, 1997; Sabatier, Carrere & Mangematin, 2006).

In these conditions, the research question of this approach is: How do informal communication networks influence the academic career development?

2. Method

To identify the role of informal communication networks in university careers, I have selected a university offering study programs in several fields. In collecting data process I used the Grounded Theory theoretical sampling approach.

Unlike traditional quantitative and qualitative studies, in Grounded Theory, researchers allocate different meanings to the concept of theoretical sampling. In this case, the purpose of sampling is to develop concepts and categories that later lead to the development of a theory. Therefore, data are collected only to explain the different conceptual categories that occur in the processing process, and not to ensure statistical representativeness of the population surveyed (Charmaz, 2006, p. 101).

Following initial sampling, a total of nine teaching staff, with a distribution of three people per study area, with the following academic profiles:

1. University teacher, PhD supervisor, who has or has held a senior management position (rector, pro-rector, dean, vice-dean);
2. University teacher, PhD supervisor supervisor who did not hold senior management positions;
3. University teacher who is not a PhD supervisor and has not held senior management positions.

This approach has led to the acquisition of new information on the role of informal communication networks in university careers. The phenomenon of using informal communication networks in academic evolution has become much more specific and has reached consistency at the level of significance, overcoming the generality of the initial question: "What role do you think of informal communication networks in the evolution of a university career?"

Because the constructivist research model starts from the premise of a created and negotiated knowledge and not a given one, the research participants are encouraged to talk about their careers without using pre-set questions that direct the study to anticipated answers (Cook, 2008, p. 422). The analytical incursion resembles a journey without a known destination in advance. The researcher travels to the subject's world by asking questions through which he/she enters his personal life. To overcome this "traveller's metaphor" (Kvale, 1996), this "continuing wandering" for understanding the role of informal communication networks in academic career, the method of

collecting the data was the intensive interview (in-depth, comprehensive, semi-structured).

3. Professional Obtaining & Becoming Model

The collected data reveal that the informal communication networks influences the academic evolution conducting the teachers on a dual way: Professional Becoming and Professional Obtaining. Since entering the academic system, the teachers will be looking for similar people like in saying „birds of a feather flock together”. But these informal communication networks will guide them through academic career tilting the balance to one of the Becoming or Obtaining directions generating three main academic routes: Becoming → Obtaining, Obtaining → Becoming and Becoming & Obtaining (Figure 1).

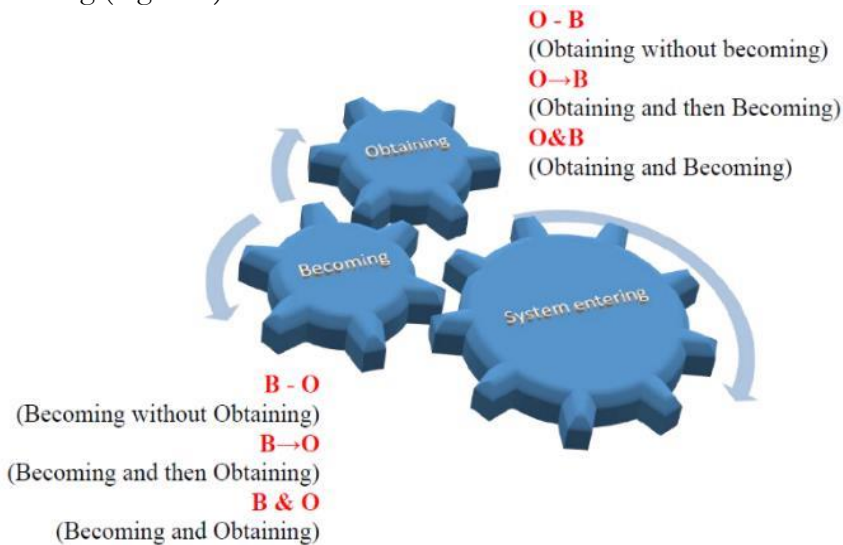


Figure 1. Professional Becoming and Professional Obtaining Model

3.1. Becoming → Obtaining. Those who are on Becoming → Obtaining route are teachers who structure their academic career with emphasis on professional development. They are people who believe that, in order to be a teacher in higher education, you have to do firstly teaching:

... No one can convince me that you have to do research at university ... I think that before all you have to teach and then do researches. (19)

... The main problem with the education system is that it is not quantified how much I give to the student through teaching. What it counts is the amount of indexed articles. I think that has absolutely no value in a normal society (I5)

Focusing on teaching is usually described in terms of professional dedication and in terms of moral duty to those to whom science must be transmitted further. This point of view seems to be an activity taken from the models offered by own teachers that marked the period of academic training:

My teachers, our great teachers, have never did not promote or have not been interested in a score... They worked, they wrote, they gave what they had to their students, that is, they gave us ... (I8)

The course is for them. It is not a scientific work (...) it is simply a didactic work, yes? (I8)

In most cases, focusing on teaching, in a system where the acquisition of academic degrees is primarily based on research, leads to frustrations:

... I do not know whether I will live to see this situation in which this activity (teaching) will be quantified by the number of students attending the course (it measures mastery in teaching). (I3)

Careers outlined on this route have a slow evolution (Figure 2), in terms of the didactic degrees obtained. The representation of the evolution of the two processes indicates an appreciable distance between two promotions.



Figure 2. Becoming → Obtaining Evolution

Cantoning these people into the permanent process of Professional Becoming (Table 1) has the effect of adopting increasingly high standards. These makes the academic evolution difficult because work to achieve performance is perceived harder and harder.

Table 1. Examples of codes focused on education/teaching

Coding name	Code frequency
Lists the skills of a teacher focused on teaching	11
She/He is pleased with own supported courses	4
She/He likes to teach	7
She/He expresses frustrations about the non-valorization of teaching	13
She/He improves his/her course permanently	6

The rigidity of the principles used in the other evaluation and in self-evaluation have a demoralizing effect on the Becoming focused teachers, generating feelings of dissatisfaction and lack of confidence in their own forces:

I always have to be with my professional documents... how to say ... very well to avoid any interpretations. For example, I'm preparing my promotion dossier... I know that I could put it in this form, but I try to be everything perfect and set up ... that's why I said OK ... I'm waiting for a few months to be sure it's all right!
(I7)

Often, people who are concerned about their professional becoming procrastinate and become ineffective in the process of obtaining degrees or faculty positions:

The relationship with the doctoral coordinator ... was so ... a quite normal relationship, pretty natural enough ... I do not know if we had ... it's not about tensions ... I don't talk about tensions ... if there were things... they came from delays, my delays (...) were some delays ... which the coordinating professor said: "Na, what do I say? It's your business what do you do?" (I9)

3.2. Obtaining → Becoming. Teachers focused on Obtaining are valuing research, because:

This is very important. It often gives you the support and the impetus and the motivation to go up. (I1)

For these people, professional becoming is a secondary process of obtaining. They are people who are strategically active and make sustained efforts to achieve their goals:

As a rule, the entire career strategy meant a projection that ran up to seven, even five or seven years. (I4)

In this sense, focus on research becomes part of the career development plan (Table 2), because in academic evolution the articles and studies published are decisive.

Table 2. Examples of codes focused on research

Coding name	Code frequency
Team publishing	17
She/He considers teaching useless in academic career	4
She/He appreciates that research is important in academic evolution	7
Research supports collaboration and informal communication	4

Adopts of pragmatism, teachers focused on obtaining publish with others and see the requirements of academic life (PhD thesis, scientific

articles, books, etc.) not as ways of professional excellency, but as "must be done" which, once ticked, offers opportunities for career development:

I do not even remember having made any one article single in my life. All my articles are published in team. (I3)

PhD ... was just a step (for my academic career). (I9)

When you finish ... a certain specialization, let's also say with the PhD... You are able to teach very, very many disciplines. (I3)

The professional development on the Obtaining → Becoming axis is a rapid one (Figure 3). This time, the person in question risks not going up to the academic degree or academic rank obtained, being perceived by those around him as belonging to the so-called category of "academic grantees".

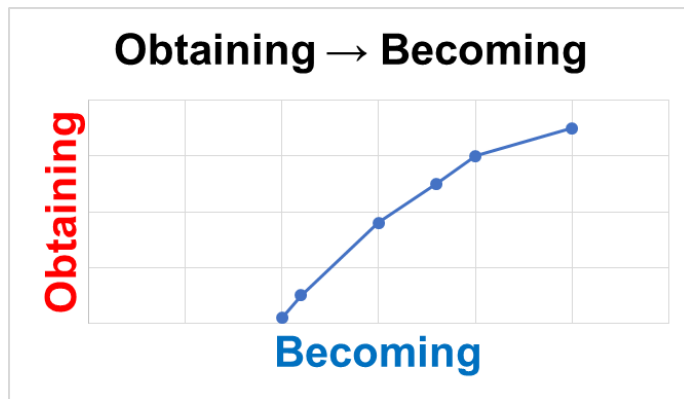


Figure 3. Obtaining → Becoming

So, I have nothing with the people who got there on competence ... about which I have a good opinion. I see them there very well, that is, I do not have anything with them ... but there are simply those who don't deserve to be there. The schema has expanded ... there are positions created for people which have nothing to do with academic meritocracy. (I1)

Who did it faster, did it but in science and academia there is a drop of ... of thruster / careerism. There is everywhere ... basically, we have learned from ... the communist ideology that careerism is a thing that is punishable and ... no, sir, but nothing it can't be done without a touch of careerism! (I9)

3.3. Becoming & Obtaining. The Direction of Becoming & Obtaining is followed by those for whom teaching and research are equally important (with a slight aspirant for research):

My researches must be in courses ... A student who finishes now should feed on this information for at least 4-5 years from now on. Otherwise what can you do with obsolete information? (I1)

They are focused both on becoming and obtaining and they can do this:

... by passion, by responsibility, by devotion! (I5)

Even if these teachers consider, like those who focus on becoming, that obtaining is a natural consequence of becoming, for the first time, the process of becoming is not an end in itself. For them, the professional models to which they refer are only benchmarks in the process of defining their own personality, being aware of the fact that:

A copy will never have the value and the search like the original... (I0)

The first meeting with my PhD coordinator was quite complicated ... in the sense that I just knew what I wanted to do. I was walking with a plan. That probably surprised him, because... perhaps the meetings with other possible PhD students before... did not go down like this ... so he was surprised rather unpleasant. Because he was a man ... a personality a man who was getting pretty hard ... to his soul, to say. It was hard to convince him that ... you can do something. (...) Then he was very pleased with what I did and ... though he had initial reservations with the thesis I proposed related to the problem ... because he considered that a doctoral thesis could not be made about what I wrote, was very pleased. And he wrote a preface to one of my books somehow related to the thesis and... he was delighted! (I7)

For this reason, in this strategy, becoming and obtaining is in harmony, generating inner satisfaction and external recognition (Figure 10).



Figure 4. Becoming & Obtaining Direction

Conclusions

The university informal communication networks investigation has revealed the existence of a complex social reality that can only be understood by addressing it from multiple theoretical perspectives and using different levels of analysis.

This perspective is in line with that illustrated by Manuel Castells (2011) in *The Promise of Network Theory*. He believes that such a vision is against unifying theories that have become anachronistic in the contemporary scientific context in which we are moving towards diversity rather than unity. For the Spanish sociologist, such a paradigm shift is seen as a chance to engage in beneficial conversations between disciplines to find the best ways to understand social phenomena.

The Becoming – Obtaining Model is another way to formulate complex explanations that capture different facets of the implications that informal communication networks have on academic careers. The study aimed to develop an explanatory model on the role played by informal communication networks in academic careers. To overcome this idea, research has taken place in a university whose particularity is the mixed character of scientific areas represented at the level of the academic community. Thus, the resulting model can only be considered representative for higher education institutions with similar characteristics. In the future, this limit can be overcome by testing the resulting model and other types of university structures. The approach could be both quantitative (to identify the rate of reliability of the model in the Romanian university system) and

qualitative (to identify the differences between different types of academic institutions).

Taking into account that research results have been based on discussions with teachers who have typically reached professional maturity during the old law of education, I believe that the following studies should also investigate generations that have to evolve in the current legislative context. Such an approach would extend the explanatory model at different times, and would provide an important premise for generalizing explanations in other areas of social life.

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