To gain the academic capital:
The conflict and solution in the dissertation proposal defence

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[Abstract] Doctor candidates get the academic identity and academic capital in his field by the thesis writing. The dissertation proposal defence hold on the public field promotes the status of academic and legalizes the discipline of the academic community. During the dissertation proposal defence, doctor candidates may face three conflicts. the first is conflicts from the interest of academic profession and the interests of the research question. Self-character will be constructed by this conflicts. The second is the conflicts from the research paradigm of doctor candidates and the dissertation committee. This conflict will change the paradigm of academic research. The third is the conflicts from the academic and praxis group. This conflict is between the academic and politics. The adviser of doctor candidates will make use of the dissertation proposal defence to settle the conflict.

[Key words] conflict; doctor candidates; dissertation; academic capital

Introduction

The term "thesis" comes from Latin word "tithenai". It means to put in place or position. In the higher education, thesis is important for doctor candidates. And we call the thesis, which is a requirement for an academic degree, "dissertation". In 1980, the 13th meeting held by standing committee of the 5th National People's Congress passed *the People's Republic of China regulations on degree*（《中华人民共和国学位条例》）. The regulation becomes a milestone of institution of degree given in China. The regulations argued the dissertation is the most important element to gain the doctor degree. In 1981, the state department passed *the rules of implementation approaches of regulations on degree*（《中华人民共和国学位条例暂行实施办法》）. The 13th rule says: the dissertation of doctor candidate should prove that the author has the ability to do the science research on his/her own and to make the creative results in the science or technique. In order to maintain the standard and ensure the impartiality in academic field, the academic community who attend the doctor dissertation defence is instituted by the request of the 14th rule. The Beijing normal university also drafted *the rules for conferring degree in BNU* （《北京师范大学学位授予工作细则》）in 2003. Besides the moral standard, course standard, the 3rd rule says: if the main supervisor of the doctor doesn't recommend the doctor's dissertation to attend the dissertation defence, then the candidate can't organize the dissertation defence. This rules institute the close relation between the main supervisor and the candidate. And the relation between them is very complex in BNU. Some students in education department are to do the research on the relation. And I will ignore the relation here.

As we can see, the dissertation may be regarded as a major element on the way to achieving a particular qualification. In addition, it is a means by which you can gain an understanding of research methods and procedures in order to be able to follow the thesis with some original research which may lead to academic field. Through the academic **etiquette**, the doctor candidate gain the legal beliefs of the special academic field and most important, gain the academic identity of the field. The identity is the one form of the academic capital. How does the doctor candidate gain the identity? Why the candidates feel so depression after the defence? What happens in the defence? How does they solute the conflicts? The article tries to present the interpretation using the capital theory and conflict theory.

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Theoretical context

This analysis suggested some conceptual points to consider as we worked to better understand conflicts during the doctor candidate proposal conflicts. These conceptual points concern the following: field, academic capital, conflicts.

Beaulieu argue that from 19th century, the social space have been divided into different fields, which are self-organization. The fields struggle for their own discourse distinction and change their discourse capital and the power structure. The field, as defined by Beaulieu (2004，Chinese version)：

As for the analysis, a field can be defined as a network or a configuration existed in the various positions (133).

In the modern society, the institutions are formed to protect the special fields. The actors who are in the field occupy a position according to their special capital. The actor who holds more capital is closer to the pole as governor. Social capital describes the strength of community as measured by the connections and levels of trust among its members. These connections are both formal and informal. Social capital, as defined by Putnam and Feldstein (2003), refers to *social networks, norms of reciprocity, mutual assistance, and trustworthiness. The central insight of this approach is that social networks have real value both for the people in those networks...as well as for bystanders.* (p. 2) And Bourdieu holds the similar view: *social capital is defined as the aggregate of actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition-or in other words, to membership in a groupwhich provides each of its members with the backing of collectively-owned capital, a 'credential' which entitles them to credit, in the various senses of the word.* (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 248-249)

In order to gain a higher position in the network, the actors have to fight for the capital. So there are different conflicts in the special field. The aim of conflicts is for the gaining the capital.

As Lin(2005, Chinese version) describe, the institution field is: (189)
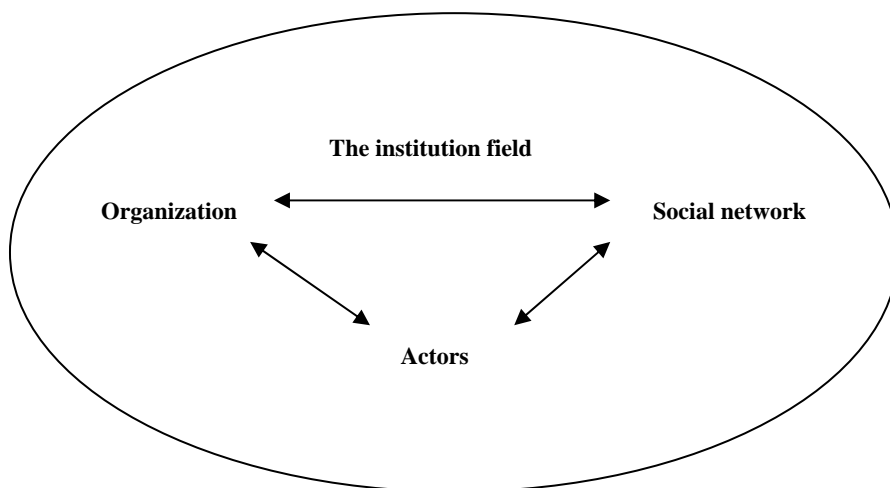

Figure1: the social network

Educational research is an active, diligent and systematic process of inquiry in order to discover, interpret or revise facts, events, behaviors, or theories, or to make practical applications with the help of such facts, laws or theories. In this article I argue for a view of academic groups as internally differentiated

epistemological communities prone to disputation over the definition of knowledge and research methodology. Different groups hold the different epistemology. So the academic group is a field. The epistemology is the game rules in the academic field. The actors in the academic field struggle for the academic capital. The academic field is also full of different groups which hold the different interest. So the doctor candidates always fight the way to the academic position. In China, most of the doctor candidates majoring in education will be the college teachers after they gain the doctor degree. So the dissertation is the most important index of the academic level. And the dissertation proposal defence and the dissertation defence is a good opportunity to show his power and improve the identity from the scholars. But they are also very difficult because the scholars in special academic field will be the gatekeeper. And in order to gain the ticket to the academic field, the candidate will obey the formal or informal rules. But as I said before, the epistemology hold by the different groups in the same academic field will

The article concentrates on the conflicts between the different communities. And it ignores the doctor candidate's limited ability on the research, such as the blur of the objective, the roughness of the design, the incompetence of the literacy review and without the research method.

Methodolgy

The small-scale study presents the conflicts between different communities in the dissertation defence and the solutions to the conflicts. It consists of 36 interviewees who attend the dissertation proposal in 2004-2006 in Beijing normal university. The reasons for choosing the Beijing normal university as the research locality of this study are twofold. First, Education College in Beijing normal university has been ranked the top in the educational study. Secondly, the researcher major in education field and it will be convincing to get the deep sight on that.

Case study is the major research method for the obvious reason that we needed to develop a holistic understanding of conflicts in academic field for the doctor candidates. Case study research, as Yin (1989) described, is a form of inquiry best suited for studying a particular phenomenon within its natural context. Through the use of interviews and observations, the article seeks to develop "thick descriptions" of the setting or phenomenon in question (Geertz, 1973).

Accordingly, the author relied on semi-structured interviews (with key informants), and observations. 24 doctor candidates of education department in BNU are chosen as the sample. They are the doctor candidate on education, curriculum and instruction, comparative education, history of education, education economic and education management. The interview protocols include two issues: (1) candidates' view on the puzzle and conflicts in preparing the doctor proposal defence; (2)ways for candidate to deal with the conflicts; (3) ways for supervisors to deal with the conflicts. The observations took place on the proposal defense scene.

The research was conducted by several means. The first step is to do the field work on the dissertation proposal defense, the author wrote down all the useful information in the defence. And the second step is to interview with some doctor candidates whose defense is being obvious conflicts. The third step is to find the cause behind the conflicts.

Findings and discussion

Conflicts between different community

1. The conflicts between the different roles of the candidate: for the career or the interest?

In the modern society, the scholar becomes a career. So does the education field. Some scholars argue that most of the persons make it a profession to be scholar and this is the origin of the education research crisis in China (Education theory commission in China, 2006). So most of the candidate has to gain a whole vision on his field and form a point of view on some classical problems in his field in the 3 years. He will be the teachers in the field just after he graduates. And the dissertation is the main representation of his academic accumulation.

So the question of the dissertation is vital to the candidates. How to choose a question for research? Wu Kangning(2002), the sociologist of education in Nanjing normal university, argues for four types questions:

	Required from the education theory or practice	No required
Need from the author	Real question	Selfish question
No need	Question from outside	Make-up question

The candidate has to make a choice on these four types. In order to be a profession in education, most of candidates choose the question required from the academic field whether they are interested in it. But if the one who researches the question from outside without his own will, he will fall into a conflict between different roles.

Candidate A, who majors in education theory, said:

I have no choice but to obey the supervisor. But the question is not my interesting.

Candidate A concerned on the questions about the education theory development. And he wanted to acquire the knowledge on the history of the education theory through the dissertation. It is not for the academic field because there are so many other scholars major in these questions and he can hardly achieve any thing in these questions. But the question is his pent-up in the development of his career.

As candidate A, Candidate B concerns on the question which is not required from the academic field. But he insists on the selfish question. So in the proposal defence, the academic commission attack on the question he chose.

In these cases, we can recognize that the academic field protects the sacred boundaries of the core knowledge. Some person who wants to enter the field is not allowed to doing the research about the core knowledge. It is not the freshmen's business.

2. The conflicts between the different groups: which epistemology?

The candidate comes from different academic groups which hold the different epistemology. The different beliefs can be conflicts sometimes. In China, the research methods of education face a change now. The trend in research methods is from the top-down methods to the bottom-up methods, from the didactic research to the empirical research. The academic field has to reply for the questions arising in the practice. The empirical research is the priority of the academic field in education now. But no all the academic field agrees with it.

But the candidate is applying for this degree in this university. So the candidate has to obey the methods which are admissive in the field.

Candidate C majors in higher education. And the question he chose is the hot topic in the field. But as for the methods, the conflicts arose. The supervisor advised him to use the empirical methods to find what the matter is which cause the problems in China are. But candidate C wanted to find a ideal model to construct the higher education institution. As candidate C said:

I want to satisfy the supervisor but I can't do that. I am not adept in empirical methods.

The conflicts between research methods are not just the different beliefs about research. This conflict also comes from the limitation of the candidate's ability. Some candidates didn't receive the strict academic training before. And in China, most of the doctor candidates have to finish the dissertation in 3 years. There is no time for the candidate to supply a gap in research method. And there are not required course in Beijing normal university.

Besides the research methods, the view point of the dissertation proposal is also the conflicts origin. And these reflect the beliefs hold by the different academic groups.

3. The conflicts from the academic field and the political field: different field?

With the transformation of the research methods, the questions from education practice are in favor of the doctor candidates. But the education practice is another field which regulations are different from the academic. And the questions in the education involve a lot of interest in society. Sometimes the data of the questions is difficult to get. The different fields hold different ration and carrying-on rules.

Candidate D majors in the educational economy. And he wants to research the gap of investment in the different schools. In China, in order to encourage the competency, more recourse is invested in some schools which are named the demonstration school. And the schools struggle to do the best in the student achievement, especially in examination scores. But it is a very difficult question. If the citizen whose children in the normal school learn the gap of the different school, they will make a roar for school choice. And government's official will face a difficult problem. So the persons who know the insight story are unwilling to tell the truth. Some of them will keep silence on that.

As candidate D worried:

I cannot find the persons who agree to interview with me.

Candidate E majors in the educational history. And the question is the transdiscipline question. He needs the help from the history field. And some historical material is very difficult to find. The library and the archives don't save the materials he needs. And he has to find some persons who collect the cultural relic to do the research. But it is a difficult ways.

Candidate E worried too:

How I can contact the persons? They don't receive my request.

The supervisor may be not concern on the question the candidate hold so he has not more suggestions on that. Thus the conflict become more serious.

The different field also competes for the recourses. So it needs a bridge that spans the gorge. The witty supervisor will make use of the proposal defence to solute the conflicts. During the proposal defence, the supervisors will make use of the social network to help the candidate to academic field.

The solutions scene to the conflicts：The proposal defence

For the doctor candidates of education in China, the defences held in the public academic space is a formal approach to get the academic rules. And the academic rules will get the moral interpretation and value identity. Through this, the scholars will transfer the academic beliefs which are held by themselves to the followers. The followers will become the propagator to the same beliefs of the whole community. Especially in Beijing normal university, 3rd rule in *the rules for conferring degree in BNU* provides an institutional demand on the relation between supervisor and candidate. An effective relationship between supervisor and student, works to the mutual benefit of both. But most relationships between students and supervisors have their high and low points.

The proposal defence is a field which provides the interaction of the social network. Like other forms of capital, social capital is premised upon the notion that an investment (in social relations) will result in a return (some benefit or profit) to the individual or social unit (Lin, 2001). Being imitated to the proposal defence means an honor to the scholar himself. So the scholar will also contribute to the supervisor and the candidate if they need. By drawing on the social capital in their relationships, individuals can further their own goals (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988, 1990; Lin, 2001) and the goals of their networks or social structures (Putnam, 2000; Putnam & Feldstein, 2003). So the public proposal defence provides an opportunity to constitute useful resources for actors to establish obligations, expectations and trustworthiness, to create channels for information, and to set norms backed by efficient sanctions, just like Coleman said (1988). Thus, as shown in the figure 2, the proposal defence make it a possible to solute the conflicts before and to achieve the resources that can't be achieved by individuals alone (Putnam, 2000).
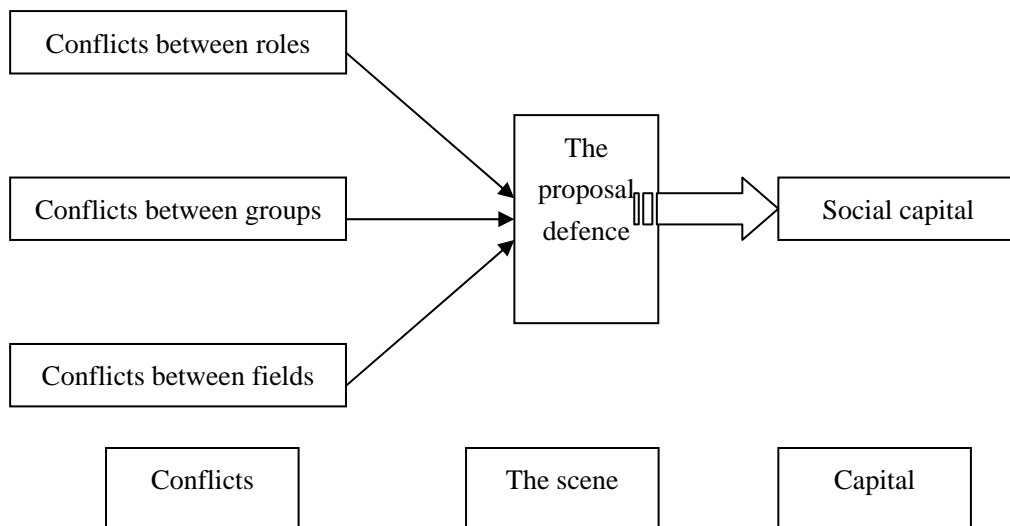

Figure 2: The relation between social capital, conflicts and proposal defence

1. The solution to the conflicts between different roles

The public proposal defence provides a opportunity for the candidate to get the identity of the academic scholar. What does defend mean? The word *defend* comes from Latin word *dēfendere*, means to ward off. The

candidate can defend his own idea and interest before the academic scholars. And this shows the candidate's research ability. There are some witty things to do before the defence. The supervisor will tell the candidate to ask for the examiners' advice and to modify the proposal before the defence. As in the Chinese culture, the candidate should contact in advance with the examiners who will be initiated to defence in order to show the respect to the scholar. For example, the candidate should hand in the proposal face to face to the scholars and show thanks to scholar. This ritual means respectful and submissive.

The meaning behind that is: I will resign to the way the scholars have to live and listen to your suggestions. I am your junior on the education field and please help me. Most of the scholars will get the information and give the candidate a hand. So the examiner will listen to the candidate and try to understand the candidate's interest. And examiners will try to find the conjunction of the candidate's interest and interest of the academic field. The dissertation will get a higher position in the academic field by the meaning-finding.

2. The solution to conflicts between the different groups

In the conflicts between the different groups, your supervisor will have had a central role in ensuring that the examiners have been appointed in accordance with the regulations and procedures of the university. But sometimes the conflicts are from the candidate and the supervisor. No one will give in. Once this happens, the supervisor will make use of the dissertation proposal to solute the conflicts between them. Some scholars of the education field will be invited to the public dissertation defence and they form a authority commission.

Before the defence, some supervisors said with helplessness:

Since he didn't listen to me, I have to let the other authority to give the advice.

Or

I talked with him before for so many times, but he didn't listen to me.

It is the same to the candidates. The candidate will give the pressure to the supervisor. But the supervisor will choose the examiners cautiously in order to protect his beliefs.

The solution to the conflicts between different groups is the identity from academic community. The academic community will arbitrate the differences of the different groups. After the proposal defence, the candidate and supervisor will discuss the suggestions of the examiners and integrate them.

3. The solution to conflicts from the different field

The supervisor will pick the persons who can provide useful suggestions and social network to the dissertation proposal. If the some scholar is invited to the attend the defence, he is not only a examiner, but in a sense another supervisor of the candidate. The supervisor will let the scholar know that we are both the teacher of the student. He is also your student. In ancient China, teacher is equal to father. This traditional culture holds the different fields together. So the scholar will contribute to the education of the student. And the candidate will get more social support and find the solution to the question.

As supervisor A said:

Would you like to give some suggestions to the candidate? Not just to criticize but to give some suggestions.

Supervisor B and C always invite the scholars in the high position. And they will provide some information easily. And this will save the time to get to the useful resource.

The public defences provide a good scene for the different actors to play. Through the interaction, the

candidate gain the academic capital and the social capital to solute the conflicts between them.

Conclusion

Emergent from the research has been what Chinese may call 'guanxi' in the dissertation proposal defence. The guanxi is the local discourse of the capital. While these conflicts and solutions may seem amusing, they also provide a reflection of the difficulties of the doctor candidate in doing research.

For the doctor candidate, the conflict comes from the different roles, the different academic fields, and the different interest groups. The experienced supervisor will make use of the proposal defence to solute the conflicts. For the Beijing normal university, the relation between supervisor and the candidate is determined by the 3rd rule. The supervisor has the professional reward of seeing a student develop academically and, hopefully, complete their qualification. And the student draws upon the experience of the supervisor to receive the social capital. However, at the heart of a good working relationship of this type is openness and honesty in communication, each person being clear about their expectations of the other. Well begun is half done. The dissertation proposal defence is important step to the peak of hill of academic field.

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