'The Path of Least Resistance' as Agency grounded in Morality: Meeting Teaching and Research Expectations in an Asian Higher Education Context

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Abstract: This study presents an examination of agency grounded in morality that is enacted by university lecturers to meet teaching and research expectations at an Asian university. This form of agency is conceived as being on the path of least resistance, where there is an interest to meet various expectations in a higher education context. Through narrative inquiry, this study examined the reflections of Ritha and Esther collected through collaborative auto-ethnography. The reflections were prompted by four narrative frames, and resembled a conversation. Subsequently, the reflections were analysed through the lens of socio-cultural constructivism, where intersubjectivities were drawn together to arrive at a meaningful interpretation of agency. Findings from this study include university lecturers' reconfiguration of priorities to attend to students' needs, discovering fulfilment in doing research, and taking an ethical stance towards meeting institutional expectations. These findings point towards a cultural attribute of teacher agency in an Asian setting, which warrants further exploration.

Keywords: Morality, Narrative inquiry, Teacher agency, University teaching

1. Introduction

This study aims to examine agency within an Asian higher education institution. Agency is pivotal in assessing an educator' capabilities in responding to social, cultural, and political entities that surround them (see Tran, 2019). Agency is a dynamic process that involves reconciling beliefs and practices with variables found within and beyond the teaching environment. This includes agency grounded in morality. Morality in education, regardless of the level, is the assurance that pedagogical practices are shaped for the welfare of the students and for the greater good. According to Hansen (1998), this means "attending to students, listening to them, speaking with them in intellectually serious ways, identifying their strengths and weaknesses with an eye on supporting the former and overcoming the latter, and more" (p. 653). While

students' needs should take precedence, there are other expectations that university lecturers have to meet. One of such expectations is research productivity (Ramoso & Ortega-Dela Cruz, 2019; Sheriff & Abdullah, 2017), which has unfortunately displaced morality in the educational arena at large. Campbell (2008) argues that morality in education has been "taken for granted in both the academy and the practitioner communities, overshadowed by cognitive theories connected to teaching and learning, effective approaches to measurement and assessment, classroom management strategies, and other aspects that, while naturally important, are rarely viewed from a moral or ethical perspective." (p. 358).

Despite this, our study contends that morality in education remains prevalent, especially in the Asian higher education context where university lecturers enact a form of agency which we conceptualize as the path of least resistance. This form of agency is grounded in moral obligations towards the academic well-being of students, yet still finding ways to optimally meet the academic expectations of the institution. To explore this form of agency, this study utilises narrative inquiry to examine the reflections of university lecturers, who are also required to conduct and publish research. More than just offering contextual insights regarding agency, this study also has the propensity to advocate for an Asian perspective about teaching and doing research at the university, which remains dominated by western perspectives (Jung, 2018).

2. Agency in the Asian Higher Education Context

Teacher agency is typically viewed within the parameters of the teaching environment. Unfortunately, this only gives a partial view of what shapes agency; a more critical approach should be employed to understand how agency intersects with intrinsic and societal values (Tran, 2019). This means agency should be viewed as a personal response shaped also through local cultural perspectives towards institutional expectations. From studies in various Asian higher education contexts, we have seen how university lecturers have considered the local cultural perspectives in their enactment of agency as a response to changes or conflict. For instance, in addressing curricular reform and the local cultural perspectives, Asian university lecturers have been found to be strategic in their pedagogical practices and actions. This is to avoid creating dissonance with colleagues and to explore viable routes to arrive at an acceptable compromise. For example, Ali and Hamid's (2018) study in Malaysia showed how engineering lecturers took it upon themselves to create supportive English language learning opportunities for their students. This was to help students become better prepared to study in an English medium program. While these lecturers were not language instructors, they saw the importance of supporting their students' English language development in their engineering classrooms, given that the English language is a valuable capital in the larger field of engineering. The actions of these lecturers were driven by the lack of support given by the university to help students develop their communication skills; hence, these lecturers took it upon themselves to provide for what was perceived as lacking.

2.1 The Path of Least Resistance: Asianising Agency

The study of Ali and Hamid (2018) illustrates university lecturers' inclusion of morality in their enactment of agency, instead of merely deploying or focusing on agentic actions that contribute to individualistic academic productivity. This may be a distinct Asian value, as argued by Jung (2018), which is the prioritisation of students' achievements. At this juncture, this study would like to expound further on agency that is grounded in morality (Campbell, 2008), where lecturers prioritise educational ethics, yet are still willing to meet an extent of productivity expected of academia (Sutton, 2015). This study refers to this form of agency as being on the path of least resistance. Broadly speaking, the path of least resistance may be conceptualised as one's strategic movement through paths that pose a minimal amount of opposition or tension. For instance, in the area of resource management, the path of least resistance may be employed by selecting resources that are conveniently accessible, or by adapting existing resources for new functions. In such a case, available resources are not disregarded as they have utility. This reduces the risk of conflict when some resources are prioritised over others (Minchew & Slutskaya, 2016). Another route for one to be on the path of least resistance is the conscious decision to remain with the same cultural group. This is to

ensure familiarity through homogeneity to minimise or eliminate surprises or uncertainties (Lemmons, 2015). The path of least resistance may also be defined as a path where there are the least barriers. This may result in the avoidance of certain paths, and the selection of alternate paths, even if those paths are known to pose challenges, or may not be perceived as the best choice (Hopkins, 2011). What we may glean from these studies regarding the path of least resistance is how it is conceptualised as an alternate route or discourse that yields minimal conflict. It also considers beliefs and priorities of the community, instead of just an individual. Lastly, it recognises power dynamics and works towards arriving at a point that accounts for the interests of both the individual and the larger collective.

3.   The Study

This study aims to examine the path of least resistance as a form of agency enacted by Asian university lecturers in their teaching and research. Narrative inquiry is employed to facilitate this examination. This approach is suitable as it examines discursive spaces where lecturers' lived experiences may be recounted and imagined futures may be considered. The discursive space also allows reflections of how a lecturer lives through ideologies and structures affecting them and their teaching. Furthermore, examining agency through discourse will contribute to distinct characteristics of agency found within the context of an Asian university (Jung, 2018), as well as contribute to insights useful in the efforts to Asianise higher education (Kassim, Damio, & Omar, 2021).

3.1   Participants and Context

This study involved two English language lecturers (co-authors of this study), Ritha and Esther, at the Faculty of Arts and Humanities, Asia-Pacific International University – a private international university in Thailand. At the time when this study was conducted, Ritha was the faculty dean while Esther was a lecturer. Both Ritha and Esther had to be engaged in teaching and research, as well as other administrative duties and community outreach programs. The expectation to publish research, especially research that brings benefits to society, coincides with the quality assurance requirements for tertiary institutions in Thailand. This expectation stems from Thailand seeking to elevate itself as a nation that contributes and produces knowledge for the betterment of the nation and the region. This has led to the acknowledgement of research as a necessity for university lecturers, regardless of the type of institution they work for (Dhirathiti, 2018).

3.2   Data Collection and Analysis

The theoretical underpinning for data collection and analysis is socio-cultural constructivism, which recognizes the intersection of subjectivities and actions in and through discourse (Ferguson, 2021; Loo, Trakulkasemsuk, & Jimarkon, 2017; Tran, 2019). In particular, this study examined the possibility of agency in the form of being on the path of least resistance, through a narrative inquiry approach. Narrative data was collected through collaborative autoethnographic reflections of Ritha and Esther from June 2017 until January 2018. Collaborative autoethnography was deemed suitable as it allows individual narratives to be enhanced through the collaborative re-narration by other co-autoethnographers, who were acting in the capacity of critical friends (see Loo & Sairattanain, 2021). The reflections were prompted by four narrative frames that aim to explore the intersection of teaching and doing research. These frames were decided by the researchers: (1) Research and Time; (2) Research and Motivation; (3) A Question on Identity; and (4) Research – Supported or Restrained? These frames were broad to allow other related issues to be brought into the reflections (see Barkhuizen & Wette, 2008).

The reflections narrated by Ritha and Esther were analysed through narrative inquiry, as guided by the study of Loo, Trakulkasemsuk and Jimarkon (2017). First, a reiterative reading of the reflections sought to identify general themes apparent through the choice of words or the emergence of meanings through the reflections. Next, the researchers brought together their intersubjectivities to explore and negotiate

meanings from the co-autoethnographic reflections with relevant meanings found within the work parameters, as well as from other pertinent studies regarding agency. The process of bringing together intersubjectivities assures that a non-essentialist stance is maintained through varied perspectives and avoids arguing for a singular truth (see Ferguson, 2021).

4. Findings and Discussion

The aim of this study is to examine the path of least resistance as a form of agency enacted by Asian university lecturers. There were four frames used to prompt co-autoethnographic reflections. In this section, under each frame, reflections (excerpts) are presented in a chronological order. This resembles a conversation, where an autoethnographic reflection led to a subsequent response, which was also in the form of reflection. The subsequent responses addressed salient points from prior reflections, which were further expounded through personal experiences (see Loo & Sairattanain, 2021). From the analysis of the reflections, emergent meanings that shed light on the path of least resistance were the negotiation or reconfiguration of priorities, the identification of accessible resources, and ensuring familiarity to maximise security and to avoid conflict.

4.1 Research and Time

Ritha, June 8, 2017
...the study found that when experienced researchers were compared with inexperienced researchers, the experienced researchers did not rate time as big a problem as did the inexperienced researchers…I asked for feedback and advice from whomever I knew could help….I discovered that I was making all kinds of mistakes. In fact, I had to redo the questionnaire and recollect data. It took me several years. Reflecting back on this experience, I think one thing kept me going – perseverance… One more important thing I did – I asked for help by asking others to collaborate with me.

Esther, June 17, 2017
I tend to waste a great deal of time in the preliminaries. For instance, I would begin looking for a topic and as I am about to write I would lose my focus and become sidetracked on the different aspects of the topic and waste valuable time trying to organize my thoughts. Moreover, the demand of a teacher's time by students and class planning make it very difficult if not impossible to spend the extra time needed to do a research. Many of my students constantly seek help outside the class. Most of them stop by my office to engage in social and academic conversations. I like the fact that my students visit me in my office which helps to build trust and relationships, but honestly, this takes up a lot of my non-teaching hours.

Ritha, August 1, 2017
As important as it is to excel in teaching at higher education, it is simply not adequate anymore. We have to research and write after teaching hours. Several years ago, the Office of Higher Education Commission (OHEC) scrutinized teachers' academic credentials in determining if a teacher was qualified to be a responsible lecturer. Research publication was encouraged, but not considered mandatory. Teachers with the right academic credentials didn't have to worry about their publication record. Now, OHEC does not allow a teacher without a research publication to be a responsible lecturer for a curriculum. Not only that, OHEC does not approve a curriculum if one of its responsible lecturers does not have a research publication. The well-known phrase, publish or perish, is not merely a scary joke for teachers in higher education now. It is a reality.

The first narrative frame was about the effect of time on research. In the reflections, Ritha distinguished experienced and inexperienced researchers, where she also brought up the example of looking for help from others based on her earlier experience as a novice researcher. This may point towards Ritha's use of resources accessible to her in her social network, from where help may be derived. Furthermore, even though doing research may be a challenging process, Ritha pressed on, especially since research engagement was becoming more important in higher education. The experience that Ritha recounted on June 8 was actually an incident that happened years ago, when research was not yet mandatory for curriculum approval of a university program. Nonetheless, in recent years, research in Thailand has become a condition for the approval of a curriculum, aside from being crucial factor for hiring both local and international teaching faculty. What may be perceived here is lecturers' accountability towards top-down expectations, even if these expectations have seemingly been 'dumped' upon lecturers without sufficient support (see Tran, 2019). Esther, on the other hand, talked about taking time when initiating research and getting side-tracked to meet the needs of her students. Her experience is also indicative of a professional reconfiguration other lecturers might experience, that is, how a lecturer needs to reprioritise aspects of his or her work life at different junctures. In Esther's case, we could see that her students' needs were put first, signifying pedagogy that is grounded in morality (Campbell, 2008; Hansen, 1998). This, however, does not reflect a rejection of institutional expectations; instead, it highlights how university lecturers need to regularly oscillate between different professional identities to meet various needs in the university environment (Sutton, 2015). Such dynamism reflects Minchew and Slutskaya's (2016) discussion of being on the path of least resistance, that is, through the strategic deployment of resources to fulfill different needs arising within the wider parameters of higher education, perhaps to mitigate the risks of 'perishing' in the competition to publish (e.g., Kung, 2018).

4.2 Research and Motivation

Esther, July 17, 2017
To be honest, I am engaged in research not so much out of motivation, but rather due to an obligation. Having said that, it does not mean I dislike research. There are big dividends to be reaped when one engages in research in order to obtain knowledge or to advance one's career.

Ritha, October 5, 2017
I enjoy learning and discovering. When I was younger, a lot of my discovery and learning was done through books. That might be the reason why I enjoy certain aspect of researching – the discovery part – as long as I am researching on something I find interesting and relevant. However, the expectation of the research community is burdensome. It can literally kill any spark of enthusiasm. One has to be stubbornly persistent if one wants to aim for publication… the academic community is brutally demanding towards both amateur and experienced researchers. It neither distinguishes between the two, nor does it tolerate amateurism… I am mostly instrumentally motivated to engage in research. And I am perfectly fine with this kind of motivation. Recently, AIU started giving publication awards. This past year, it allocated 100,000 Baht into the awards.

Esther, October 8, 2017
The first benefit is the knowledge I gain from reading different research papers and articles for my research paper. It has broadened my perspective and given me new ideas and approaches in my teaching experience. Another benefit is the feeling of satisfaction of accomplishment.

The second reflection frame was on research motivation. In the narratives under this frame, there is a recognition that doing research is beneficial, and it is something that is rewarded by the institution, as

well as something that reaps intrinsic rewards for the lecturers' professional identity. For Esther, research was acknowledged as an institutional requirement, yet it was also deemed professionally fulfilling. This was also echoed by Ritha, who mentioned that while doing research may be burdensome, the discovery of information was satisfying. The professional fulfillment seen in Ritha and Esther's reflection illustrates agency grounded in morality, where there is personal motivation to be further engaged in research. Moreover, this also demonstrates an ethical approach to teaching, where the aim is for research to optimise or improve teaching practices (Campbell, 2008). Another interesting point emergent from the second frame is the prevalence of paradox. Besides the paradox of research being intrinsically satisfying yet an external requirement, another paradox observed is the lack of support offered to university lecturers, especially when they endeavour to leave an impact in their broader community. Ritha had mentioned that the "academic community is brutally demanding towards both amateur and experienced researchers" (October 5, 2017). This concern had been raised by Sutton (2015), where many university lecturers had been left on their own to manoeuvre the challenging landscape of academia. Similarly, Ritha and Esther had to figure out for themselves the best routes for their academic endeavours. Their actions may be viewed as an acceptance of top-down mandates regarding research, without overt resistance to avoid jeopardising their career trajectories, which may be perceived as being on a path of least resistance (see Hopkins, 2011).

4.3   A Question on Identity

Esther, September 6, 2017
I got involved in research not because I was interested in doing research, but rather out of compulsion. The Quality Assurance (QA) makes it a requirement for all the Instructors at the university level to produce research papers. It has become a part of a job description. Recently, the research article [a colleague] and I worked on has been accepted to be published... The article was being reviewed by four reviewers who are experts in research. I know I have gained invaluable research experience from this research; and I hope this experience will enable me to do more research in the future.

Ritha, October 5, 2017
Nowadays, [research] is everyone's concern. This evolution necessitates a reconstruction of identity of English teachers in tertiary education.

Esther, November 14, 2017
There are many teachers who have not done a single research since the day they graduated; they do not see the benefits of a research in their teaching job, as long as they are teaching, they are doing their work.

Ritha, January 20, 2018
Here at AIU, research publication is considered a requirement to get curriculum approvals and to maintain the status of "being a responsible lecturer". In short, being a researcher is not part of the identity of many university lecturers. They see research mostly as a way to fill the expectation of the Office of Higher Education Commission.

In the third narrative frame, Esther reiterated the benefits of doing research, on top of it being mandatory for university lecturers. Ritha affirmed this through the recognition that research is part of an English lecturers' identity in higher education. Both Ritha and Esther seemed to have come to terms with this expectation, despite the challenges that were reflected upon in previous narratives. What we may observe here is Ritha and Esther taking the path of least resistance by avoiding uncertainties through the recognition of, and doing what is certainly expected of them, that is, to have research output (Lemmons, 2015). Ritha also stated that publishing is the act of being a responsible lecturer for a university curriculum. The value placed upon the positive experience of research, and the sense of accountability towards their

workplace reflect a moral obligation that Ritha and Esther have, which is not necessarily comparable to morality grounded in lecturers' sense of accountability towards institutional expectations. What is shown here, instead, is comparable to Campbell's (2008) discussion of ethics in teaching, which consists of identifying and using optimal classroom practices to improve their students' learning experiences. The focus on providing well-planned lessons, some of which may be achieved through research, is in itself a moral act. In other words, research is grounded in morality because it guarantees government support for the institution to continue operating.

4.4 Research – Supported or Restrained?

Ritha, October 24, 2017
I personally believe that a satisfied/happy teacher is one who will perform better in teaching in comparison to someone who is unsatisfied/unhappy. One of the many things that contribute to teacher satisfaction is when one has the freedom to pursue both personal and professional interests… Unfortunately, institutions don't generally think of teachers at a personal level... Often times, personal interest is subordinated to institutional interests. In other words, the interest of the institution is more important than the interest of the individual teachers.   It is wonderful when a teacher can find a way to pursue both personal and professional interests that are aligned with the institutional needs. When the two conflict with each other, the institution normally insists on the institutional priority…Many teachers in the University have been "pushed" to engage in research. The reluctant ones are now "motivated" by terms of employment contract. Hiring decision now seriously considers research publication.

Ritha, January 20, 2018
This is a continuation of my thought in the last entry in which I described how institutions in general hardly think of teachers' interests. That's really unfortunate because teachers are human beings who have feelings. If teachers do not find satisfaction (from the lack of support to pursue their personal interest), the likelihood of leaving goes up even when remuneration and benefits are attractive. There are those who are happy with less income as long as they are able to pursue their interests.

In the fourth narrative frame, Ritha reflected that institutional needs will most likely take precedence; nonetheless, Ritha was aware of the consequences of marginalising lecturers' personal feelings, as seen in her reflection on January 20. Ritha recognized the importance to prioritize institutional interest over personal preferences. In such a situation, the path of least resistance is to adopt the university's priorities. Esther, on the other hand, did not contribute any reflections for the fourth frame. Her non-participation may reflect the path of least resistance (see Hopkins, 2011), by not questioning what is expected of her especially since she was subordinate to Ritha, who was her dean. Furthermore, perhaps due to the clear mandate by the government of Thailand, and Ritha's responsibility as dean to ensure that the teaching staff met this mandate, Esther did not feel compelled to reflect whether it was necessary for her to do research, especially since it has been clearly established in her previous reflections that research was something she needs to do as a university lecturer. Esther's commitment to what is expected of her demonstrates a form of moral obligation to her occupation, that is, to strive towards achieving performance standards expected of her (Campbell, 2008).

5. Conclusion

In this qualitative study, we examined the path of least resistance as a form of agency enacted by Asian university lecturers. Through this examination, we were able to discern university lecturers' negotiation or reconfiguration of priorities, their identification of accessible resources, and their compliance

towards top-down mandates to ensure security of their career trajectories. Enacting agency through the path of least resistance also illustrated university lecturers' sense of morality. In particular, agency grounded in morality may be enacted to meet students' learning needs (e.g., Hansen, 1998), as well as working through institutional expectations for the academic staff (e.g., Tran, 2019). Furthermore, teacher agency attributed to morality can also be reflected by taking an ethical stance on research, that is, to discover new knowledge that will have a positive impact on students' learning experience. What emerges from these instances of agency enacted through morality is the practice of care, which is useful to disrupt neoliberal goals found in higher education (Sutton, 2015). This may be a pivotal attribute of agency found in the Asian higher education context. Specifically, in the Asian setting, an overt resistance may not be the form of agency chosen; instead, university lecturers may opt to gradually transition through changes expected of them, but at the same time question the relevance and reasons for these changes. Throughout the transition process, these lecturers may also find spaces where they have the "capacity to manoeuvre or be flexible, in addition to their industriousness and resilience in accommodating the change." (Tran, 2019, p. 555). Hence, the examination of agency in our study is distinct from others, in that it moves beyond the dichotomous relationships that university lecturers are typically shown to have with institutions. What can be observed is that agency arises as a result of the dynamic tension between an individual university lecturer, the institution and its larger cultural context, as well as the lecturer's students. Accepting that agency is more than a linear relationship will also rightfully acknowledge that there are many instances when university lecturers find themselves in situations of vulnerability.

6.   Suggestions for Future Research

This study's aim was to unmask the dominant view of what agency may look like in the Asian higher education setting contributes to 'fresh perspectives', especially in the broader field of social science. Similar to the study of Tarrayo, Hernandez, and Claustro (2020), our study found that English university lecturers have a positive disposition towards research. Furthermore, they are willing to independently embark on a research journey to fulfill institutional requirements. At this juncture, it may be useful to further examine and unpack the professional and discursive position or attribute of a university English language lecturer (e.g., Loo, Trakulkasemsuk, & Jimarkon, 2019). In our study, it may be observed that both Ritha and Esther referred to themselves multiple times as an English 'teacher', instead of an English 'lecturer'. While the use of these terms may appear insignificant, further problematization of this self-attribute may reveal institutional structures that are not necessarily supportive towards certain academic fields or disciplines. On this note, it may be viable to involve university lecturers from different types of institutions to determine variables that may further contextualise agency. Future research may also consider the relevance of agency grounded in morality across university lecturers with different teaching experiences and academic backgrounds. In doing so, studies may contribute to our understanding of morality in education, but it may also provide authentic insights about the uniqueness of Asian higher education institutions.

7.   Co-Author Contribution

The authors affirmed that there is no conflict of interest in this article. Daron Benjamin Loo conceptualised the paper, contributed to the literature review and managed the writing of the article. Ritha Maidom contributed narrative data and subsequently analysed and interpreted it, as well as prepared the paper for submission. Esther Varah also contributed narrative data and analysed and interpreted it, as well as prepared the paper for submission.

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