

Impact of doctoral studies on student family and personal needs



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Qualitative Capstone

Few studies have specifically addressed how students' family or personal needs are affected by their doctoral studies (Kurtz-Costes, Helmke, & Ulku-Steiner, 2006). Currie, Harris, and Thiele (2005) noted that the demands of Ph. D studies may be destructive for the personal lives of doctoral students. Researchers have asserted that women may be at increased risk for experiencing the high stress of balancing personal and professional development, particularly when they are enrolled in predominantly male programs (Kurtz-Costes, Helmke, & Ulku-Steiner, 2006; Raddon, 2002). According to Kurtz-Costes, Helmke, and Ulke-Steiner (2006) women were more likely to report intentionally postponing investment in personal relationships in order to pursue educational advancement, which potentially contributes to a lack of emotional and financial support. The results of the current study indicate that doctoral students face unique stressors that impact their personal needs. Specifically, most respondents identified social isolation as a stressor.

Literature Review

Doctoral student stress and the various factors that contribute to that stress have been documented in numerous research studies (Kurtz-Costes, Helmke, & Ulku-Steiner, 2006; Williams, Gallas, & Quiriconi, 1984; Hudson & O'Regan, 1994; Toews et al., 1997). Common stressors experienced by doctoral students include time management, family, and sexual relationships, self-expectations, frequent evaluations, and volume of work (Kurtz-Costes, Helmke, & Ulku-Steiner, 2006; Williams, Gallas, & Quiriconi, 1984; Toews,

Lockyer, Dobson, Brownell, 1993; Brauer et al., 2003). Additionally, limited resources for financial assistance may present challenges to student collegiality (Kurtz-Costes, Helmke, & Ulku-Steiner, 2006). It takes many years to imbue researchers with the necessary skills to become an expert in their subject; the length of time a particular doctorate degree is seen as useful to the prospective graduate can be short, to the extent that it represents an ability to conduct current research, and the disciplinary knowledge developed through the course of a Ph. D quickly becomes outdated (Group of Eight, 2013).

The stressors are further mediated by gender. Many authors have concluded that female doctoral students report higher levels of stress than men (Kurtz-Costes, Helmke, & Ulku-Steiner, 2006; Toews, Lockyer, Dobson, Brownell, 1993; Hudson & O'Regan, 1994; Toews et al., 1997). Possible causes of the gender differences include the presence of gendered values and curricula and lower self-confidence of women in doctoral programs with few women faculty members (Bagilhole & Goode, 1998; Ülkü-Steiner, Kurtz-Costes, Kinclaw, 2000).

The gender match between advisor and advisees may be significant (Pezzoni, Mariresse, Stephan, & Lane, 2016). Authors have examined how gender pairing at the graduate level relates to the productivity of the advisor, and have found the productivity of male advisors to be “ an increasing function of the number of male students” (Fox & Mohaptra, 2007). Finally, though many Ph. D graduates are unable to find academic positions post-graduation (Group of Eight, 2013), even women who do receive high-level appointments in their field often face differential treatment, including <https://assignbuster.com/impact-of-doctoral-studies-on-student-family-and-personal-needs/>

less favorable evaluation of their expertise and lower evaluative ratings than their male counterparts (Pezzoni, Mairesse, Stephan, & Lane, 2016).

Goals of the Current Research Study

The goals of this study were to examine the difference in reported stress between male and female Ph. D students in Australian doctoral programs. Specifically, the researcher aimed to explore whether or not there were differences in the responses of men and women in relation to how the stressors related to being in a Ph. D. program impact their family and/or personal lives.

Theoretical Framework

The constructivist paradigm posits that one's experience of reality is mediated by one's subjective experiences. This paradigm is consistent with the phenomenological research approach, a qualitative method that is used to describe how human beings experience a certain phenomenon (Lester, 1999). In the current study, the phenomenological approach is used to examine how women and men describe their experiences of the stressors of engagement in a doctoral program and the effect of the stress on their personal and/or family lives. The constructivist paradigm is employed as recognition that the lived experiences of men and women will be shaped by their subjective realities, which are moderated by gender.

Methods

Research Design

The researcher chose to utilize a semi-structured focus group interview to collect data. Although some researchers assert that phenomenology and focus groups are methodologically incompatible (Webb & Kevern, 2001), others posit that the phenomenological focus group is not an oxymoron; rather, the use of focus groups can provide deeper understanding of the phenomenon under study (Bradbury-Jones, Sambrook, & Irvine, 2009). The main arguments against using focus groups in phenomenological research is that phenomenology requires individuals to describe their experiences in an “uncontaminated” way (Bradbury-Jones, Sambrook, & Irvine, 2009). However, group interviews can open up new perspectives and stimulate discussion, offering a unique advantage to a phenomenological study (Bradbury-Jones, Sambrook, & Irvine, 2009).

Two facilitators moderated the focus group. The group session was recorded to preserve the integrity of participant responses. The moderators served only to ask questions and to reflect comments back to the group participants in order to allow participants to stimulate discussion. The researchers employed the approach of Spiegelberg (Nijohff, 1975) and Sorrell and Redmond (1995) in which each participant is given time to provide their own, individualized description at the beginning of the focus group interview in order to preserve the individual perspective in the group context (Bradbury-Jones, Sambrook, & Irvine, 2009).

Philosophical Stance

Individual experiences are central to phenomenological research, with emphasis placed on the subjective perceptions of the individual respondents

(Bradbury-Jones, Sambrook, & Irvine, 2009; Stewart, Shamdasani, Rook, 2007). While the early ideals of phenomenology are directly opposed to any kind of relativism, recent researchers have argued that there is a place between cultural universalism - which presupposes an objective reality, often from a Eurocentric perspective - and cultural relativism, which is considered by many to be incommensurable with phenomenology (Noe, 1995). While phenomenological research is concerned with uncovering the essence of a phenomena, the researcher recognizes the potential that the lived experiences of the respondents will be mediated by the gender of the participant. Thus, the philosophical stance of this study is reflective of Noe's (1995) spectrum of relativity, which is founded in Husserl's quest for universality in a " subjective-relative" life-world.

Source of Data

The researcher utilized purposive sampling to ensure representation from males and females, as well as to limit participants to individuals who were academically active doctoral students at the time of the interview.

Once 20 students of each gender were identified, the researcher utilized random sampling to identify five participants of each gender to participate in the study, to increase credibility.

The researcher and facilitators submitted an electronic application to the Internal Review Board of the researcher's university and completed all necessary tasks, trainings and paperwork to be considered for IRB approval. All recruitment materials were submitted to the IRB prior to use.

Procedures

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Participants were recruited via email sent to all of the graduate departments at an Australian University, to be disseminated to the students and faculty, therein. Information contained in the email was limited to the basic descriptors individuals would need to determine their interest and eligibility. Potential participants were given the email address of the researcher and asked to request additional information regarding the study and to indicate the level of interest of the respondent.

At the start of the focus group session, the facilitators introduced themselves as the moderators and observer of the session. The facilitators acknowledged the presence of the audio recording equipment. Facilitators ensured each participant understood anonymity and detailed the measures that would be taken to ensure anonymity. Participants were assigned pseudonyms and were informed that the audio recording would be used for data transcription only. Participants were given the opportunity to withdraw if they were uncomfortable with being taped. This helped “ ensure honesty in informants”, a method of increasing a study’s credibility (Shenton, 2004). Throughout the session, facilitators engaged in “ member checks” (Shenton, 2004) to ensure the accuracy of the data, thus increasing the credibility of the data collected.

Method of Data Analysis

Rigorous methods were employed to ensure the systematic analysis of the focus group transcripts. The researchers transcribed the data according to the methods described by Oliver, Serovich, and Mason (2005) to further ensure proper analysis. Participants were assigned pseudonyms and were

referred to as such in order to clearly indicate the difference between participant and facilitator response. Additionally, observation notes were included by the researcher who served as observer to the focus group in order to add context for sections of the transcript that were unclear. During the transcription process, participants were given pseudonyms that correlated with their self-identified gender and a number that was assigned randomly. That is, male participants were identified as MParticipant# and female participants were identified as FParticipant#.

Analysis and Discussion

Findings and Relation to Goals

The researcher read the transcript in its entirety three times before beginning the coding process. The researcher wrote memos and initial observations and developed themes in the margin of a hard copy of the transcript prior to data analysis. The researcher noted that there were a few dominant voices in the transcript and considered the impact those participants might have had on the interview and other participants. The researcher noted that there were four participants whose responses dominated the interview (F1, F2, M1, M2). It is unclear whether or not these participants created enough of a group consensus to skew data results, because the participants continued to share their experiences as individuals. This is evidenced by the fact that participants shared experiences that differed from one another and did not challenge the perspectives of other participants.

Following the initial review of the transcript, the researcher identified three major groups of data: participants' description of stressors, the effect of doctoral study on personal life, and benefits of engaging in research. Each category was analyzed and data were coded in relation to layers of organization that further emerged from the data set. Data organized into these categories were further analyzed and separated into comments by female and male participants.

Participants Description of Stressors

Responses in this category were sorted into the following groups: stress related to others, stress related to completion of the program, in which themes of isolation and a lack of understanding by others emerged. Though male and female participants indicated similar stressors, the perception and response to these stressors appeared to vary according to participant gender.

For example, three participants indicated that individuals outside of the research community had limited understanding of the purpose and process of conducting research, a central function of engagement in a doctoral program.

F1: For those outside the uni, they don't understand 'researcher', or 'PhD', so I say "I write books" and that's what my children tell their friends.

M3: I say I am writing. I think writing is very close to research work.

F2: Because my research is about the area I live in (a public housing estate),

I tell people about what my research is doing. If they ask what happens at <https://assignbuster.com/impact-of-doctoral-studies-on-student-family-and-personal-needs/>

the end I really play that down. I tell them you have to write something like a book and then they give you a degree and you get a bit of paper.

However, male and female respondents described differing attitudes regarding how they were perceived by others in relation to conducting research.

F1: In this culture you have to play it down, they won't tolerate it — people attach it to snobbery. It makes you abnormal in your community.

M3: The community regards a PhD highly...I will be very proud to do research and for someone to call me a researcher.

The differences noted by the participants above could be attributed to such factors as the specific “ culture” and “ community” the participants were referring to. The participants may or may not have been referring to the same community or cultural group. The differences could also be attributed to gender roles and gendered expectations of behavior.

Upon continuous review, the category “ effects of research on personal life” was absorbed by the category “ participants description of stressors”, as the main effect appeared to be loneliness and isolation. Participants identified isolation as a function of the stress of the research process and a lack of understanding by others regarding research and doctoral studies.

M2: It is hard being away from my family, working for two or three years under pressure on your own.

F2: I think my project would be done by now if I had done it with someone — you need someone to bounce ideas off, and to keep you spurred on.

F3: I'm quite isolated at the moment — there's no meetings with other students in my department to discuss ideas. I think back to the “ fights and arguments and fantastic ideas” occurring in a group project we did in an undergraduate course, and how it all fell into place at the end, because we had worked through the issues so thoroughly.

M5: [When you are a researcher, you have] No social life.

There were no significant differences between male and female participants in regard to the experience of loneliness and isolation, with both groups reporting isolation equally.

Benefits of Engaging in Research

Respondents reported varying motivations for engaging in research, some intrinsic, and some extrinsic. One male respondent emphasized the role of academic teaching and research as a motivating factor.

M1: Perhaps to become a good researcher, there has to be a reward?

M1: As a graduate and a researcher we can go ahead and will be rewarded by becoming associate professor — otherwise we don't do research.

Female researchers often reported intrinsic motivation for completing research.

F1: I would do it anyway - paid or not...I feel immensely privileged to be one of the few people in the world who are getting paid to do what they love.

F2: I've been really interested in the whole process of doing a PhD because it seems you start as one person and you finish as another person entirely...I call myself a researcher now but I wouldn't have at the beginning. I'm not sure I know anything more, but I must.

Participants discussed the idea that pursuing a career in research (and engaging in a doctoral program) may not be as advantageous as many may believe.

F2: You can be an academic and do research, but a research career — like a project officer or something — is very insecure. I suppose if a kid wanted to be a researcher I'd say that's fine but this is what you have to do. You have to go to uni, you have to do this, you have to do that, and at the end of it you might not have a job and if you do it won't last very long and there's lots of writing involved."

Participants discussed stressors that relate to the engagement in and completion of a doctoral program. Although there are some differences noted in the data set regarding male and female respondent perceptions and experience, there is not enough data to argue a significant difference between the experiences of male and female doctoral students. There is, however, enough data to suggest that the primary of which appears to be social isolation.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

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Future studies could be undertaken to further examine the stressors experienced by doctoral students and to examine whether gender emerges as a mediating factor in the perception and experience of stress. More research would need to be conducted to further identify stressors, including difficulties presented to individuals' personal and family lives. Coping strategies and the perception of the value of engagement in doctoral studies could also be further examined.

One suggestion for future research would be to conduct separate focus groups for males and females. The homogeneity of participant gender in each focus group could further encourage respondent participation and would minimize the effect of gender norms and social conditioning regarding male/female interaction on the data. This may also provide more opportunity for all participants to have an opportunity to speak, and would minimize the impact of dominant voice on the group discussion.

Another limitation is that the research question I have chosen to examine for the purposes of this assignment was not the original focus of the research. As such, the question of how gender impacted the lived experiences of researchers was never directly asked, nor were respondents asked how their personal lives were impacted by their studies. One recommendation for future studies would be to ask the question directly, rather than letting the answer emerge from the data spontaneously.

Another suggestion is to utilize a mixed-methods approach to triangulate the data and increase the credibility of the data collection process. The researcher suggests a combination of focus groups with individual interviews

would compensate for the individual limitations inherent to both methods and exploit the benefits (Shenton, 2004; Guba, 1981; Brewer and Hunter, 1989).

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