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Surviving the Doctoral Dissertation Experience: The N.W. Sisters' Study

By Patricia J. McIlveen, Monica R. George, Sharon L. Voss & Ada Laguardia

Abstract

The purpose of this year-long study was to examine and describe both the individual and shared experiences of a group of four women as they went through their Doctor of Education (Ed. D.) program. The main research question was: What do you perceive as the factors that were integral to your achieving success in the doctoral program? Data from this qualitative case study were gathered through group interview sessions. Subsequent analysis of interview transcripts revealed the following factors that were integral to achieving success: sense of humor, family values, empathy, perseverance, spirituality, accountability to the group, collaboration, good advisors, ability to rebuild after setbacks, having role models, group support, and seeing the benefits of obtaining the doctorate. The goal of this study is to encourage other women to overcome the ABD (All But Dissertation) hurdle by giving them some tools to help complete the journey.

Keywords: women's doctoral experiences, dissertation support groups, doctoral persistence

Introduction

The high attrition rate among students in U.S. doctoral programs is of serious concern. While there is no longitudinal database that could yield a national average attrition rate across all fields in doctoral programs, the most frequently cited estimate is 50 percent. That is, 50 percent of those who begin work to attain a doctoral degree in the United States do not complete their program (Denecke, 2004; Lovitts & Nelson, 2000; Smallwood, 2004).

The attrition toll is especially severe on women. Although women's rates of enrollment have grown significantly over the past decade, there is also much evidence to show that women withdraw from doctoral programs of study at higher rates than men (Kerlin, 1997; Smallwood, 2004). There are many reasons for withdrawal, including: family responsibilities, job-related pressure, financial strains, lack of information, the absence of community, and poor quality in the adviser-advisee relationship (Kerlin, 1997; Lovitts, 2001).

This attrition rate constitutes a waste of time and resources, but perhaps the most important reason to care about attrition is the effect it has on students' lives. "This is tremendously painful," says Barbara E. Lovitts (2001), who left two doctoral programs before finishing a third one, in sociology, at the University of Maryland at College Park in 1996. "These are people who have never failed before in their lives. They were Summa cum Laude, Phi Beta Kappa. And for the first time in their lives they've experienced failure. It takes people a lot of years to get over it."

The purpose of this year-long study was to examine and describe both the individual and shared experiences of a group of four women as they went through their Doctor of Education (Ed.D.) program. These women had voluntarily formed a cohort to

support each other through the dissertation experience. All of them earned their doctoral degrees prior to commencing this study. The statistically significant accomplishment that all members of this cohort completed a doctoral program of study intrigued them to examine the reasons for this success and after all four women completed the doctoral program, they spent a weekend away at the Oregon Coast to celebrate the last woman's successful defense of her dissertation. Towards the end of the weekend, after much relaxation and laughter, they decided to embark on this serious study. The main research question they asked themselves was: *What do you perceive as the factors that were integral to your achieving success in the doctoral program?* The ultimate goal of this study is to encourage other women to overcome the ABD (All But Dissertation) hurdle, and to persuade them to complete their doctoral journey.

Demographics of Subjects

All four participants were women who had successfully completed their Ed.D.s in Educational Leadership at a large, urban university in Oregon. They commenced their doctoral coursework while in their mid- to late 40s and completed same while in their 50s—taking from 6.5 years to 7.5 years to complete the doctoral program--the average time span for the working professional person. Following is a brief biographical sketch of each of the subjects, at the time of the study:

1) British-born Patricia is of working-class, Scottish ancestry--and is the youngest of eight children (five female, three male). She is married (30 + years) and has a son, a daughter and one grandson. She currently is employed as an instructor and early childhood education coordinator at a local community college in the Education & Human Services Department.

2) Monica was born into a working-class family in an industrial city in Ohio and is of European and Middle Eastern ancestry. She is the second of four children and has one older sister and one younger brother and sister. She is married (18 years) and works as a media specialist at a local elementary school.

3) Sharon also describes herself as coming from a working-class background, of Euro-based ancestry and is one of four children (all female). She is currently single, and holds a position as an associate professor at a local, liberal arts Christian college, where she teaches various education and multicultural courses and has been involved in many issues involving diversity.

4) Cuban-born Ada describes herself as the older daughter of a middle-class, well-respected M.D. She has one sister and one brother. At the time of this study, she worked as a Spanish teacher at a local high school. She has one child, a daughter of twenty one, and although married (25 years) during the doctoral process, she divorced right after.

Methodology

This type of study fits within the scope of a qualitative, case study methodology because it is an empirical inquiry that “investigates a contemporary phenomenon (e.g. women obtaining their Ed.D. degree) within its real-life context (e.g. “describing their actual experiences of the process”) (Yin, 1989: 23). The decision was made to meet at one of the participant's homes and over the next nine months (Sept. 2001 to August, 2002), the group held four data-gathering interview sessions. Another colleague, who had taken a leave from the doctoral program, agreed to facilitate the 2.5 hour meetings, which

were tape recorded. The facilitator wrapped up each session with a review of emerging themes and agreed upon starting points of discussion for the next session.

Data Analysis

Once the interviews were complete, each participant took a turn transcribing the session and sent copies of same to all the participants in order to verify the accuracy of the transcripts. During the next eighteen months of the study, each researcher engaged in simultaneous, ongoing data collection and analysis of transcripts, including coding and sampling.

Anticipatory data reduction (Miles & Huberman, 1994: 21-23) was achieved by the choice of the initial research question: *What do you perceive as the factors that were integral to your achieving success in the doctoral program?*

Preliminary data reduction occurred at the post-interview debriefing session, whereby a review of emerging themes (categories of focus) and notable points acted as preliminary coding for the study. Starting discussion points for next session were also decided upon.

The third step in data reduction for this study was the transcribing of the interviews. This was done by using the line-numbering technique of the word processing program. Each participant received a copy of the transcribed sessions. Over the course of the next four or five months, each of the four researchers independently examined the transcripts searching for various patterns and ways of thinking, which represented “coding categories” and created preliminary codes for their groupings.

Finally, the independently arrived at categories were reviewed by all four researchers jointly at the first post-interview data analysis meeting. Emergent significant themes regarding the various factors that were integral to achieving success in the doctoral program were agreed upon. Those themes were:

- Shared, personal characteristics of the group (humor, familial values, empathy & energy, perseverance, spirituality).
- Shared accountability/support (members to each other, collaboration & community of learners).
- Shared experiences (advisor issues, deconstruction & reconstruction, other losses).
- Support and Inspiration (role models, group support)
- Individual experiences (perceived benefits of obtaining a doctorate, “strange bedfellows”).

In a final wrap up of the study, the participants summarize the factors that were integral to their success in the doctoral program, and give recommendations for those embarking on “the longest journey.”

Shared, Personal Characteristics of the Group (humor, familial values, empathy, perseverance, spirituality)

Humor. Although the participants’ meetings maintained a businesslike tone, the presence of humor was an important component of the group character. According to Monica, the presence of humor “took the edge off things,” thereby making the dissertation process less stressful. Sharon concurred, saying that a sense of humor “forced you to keep things light.” Ada maintained that laughing together enabled group members to survive the process together. She also stated that every time she left one of the

meetings, “I felt more relaxed, because when I got in the meeting I had a lot of anxiety but just laughing released it, the miracle of laughing. It recharged us in a positive way.” Patricia asserted that humor was the glue that held the group together. Indeed, group members all reported a major reason they looked forward to getting together was the joviality.

Group members were even able to laugh about their setbacks. As Ada put it, “Through the whole thing we were laughing about things that could look so painful [to others]. You can either laugh or you can cry. [But if] you laugh...you feel good about it and you move on.”

Familial values.

One of the commonalities of the study participants was the absence of family members close by—meaning parents, siblings and sometimes, children. This lack of family support was one reason that the N.W. Sisters group was so important. As Patricia noted, “None of us had sisters locally—meaning, blood sisters—so I have a variety of different ‘sisters’; but any one of them would have given me support and they admired me for going through the doctoral program.”

Despite the rigors of the doctoral program, the group members nevertheless made their families a priority, even if it meant slowing down the writing process in order to fly across the country or overseas a number of times to visit a child or tend to a sick parent. As Monica put it, “They’re especially precious, because we don’t live near them.”

During the long doctoral journey, all of the group members experienced the death of one or more parents. It was important to these women that their parents share in their success. Monica: “I graduated in June, and my mother died in July. And she was aware then—she saw my video and that was the last thing she saw on TV—my graduation.” Sharon’s father attended her graduation where she was a keynote speaker, and he passed away several months later. It was more difficult for Patricia and Ada, whose parents all passed away before these women completed the dissertation process. Although the N.W. Sisters are proud of their personal accomplishments, they are also acutely aware of the self-sacrifices they have had to make.

Empathy & Energy

The dissertation process is a unique experience, unlike anything a student has done before in the educational process. It is also an individual experience whereby the student embarks on a solo journey of research. Group members found that meeting together eased the isolation of the process and created a synergy within the group. Since they shared similar issues, the members were able to offer insights and advice to each other.

Monica spoke of the importance of empathy for those going through the dissertation process: “Even though you have the support of your family, if someone hasn’t gone through the dissertation process, they just don’t know what it’s like. And there’s no substitute for people that are going through it with you, or have finished and can attest to what it takes to go through that.” Sharon concurred: “A lot of ‘down times’ for me were lessened, because I could see other people in this process who were either struggling, uncertain, or unclear in their direction and, yet, willing to take a risk and keep going.” Ada derived energy from the group. “Every time we met, we were energized in a

sense that there were ideas, because we're all in different areas doing different things. But when we got together, it was like we shared something—besides the laughter. And when we finished and we went home, it was, 'Oh yeah! Now I can do this!' So that's what I feel about energy—that it is sparked from being together and from having a common interest and a common goal and having resources coming from different areas and sharing them and bringing up some ideas, like, 'Oh yeah—we should do this! This sounds good!'"

Concerning future endeavors, Monica remarked that, "Often in our group we would talk about all the fun we were going to have when we've all been graduated. Think of the things we can do now, besides discuss dissertation things and problems. We can do anything! This was another thing that energized us, that we were going to continue to get together and we were going to deal with whatever life has in store for us. We're going to just plow through it, and we'll just get together and grow in different ways."

Perseverance

With the washout rate in the doctoral program at or about 50% nationwide, one must look at perseverance as a crucial trait for success. This was an essential common element of the NW Sisters' group. Even after major pitfalls that would prove fatal for the average student, the group members used these setbacks to regroup, revise and retry. Patricia recalled the aftermath of a particularly heavy editing session: "I thought, 'Bloody hell, I don't want to go on with this thing!' But that's when I really started to move...because I thought, 'Now is the point at which I'm going to go ahead and do it.'" Monica said this of Sharon: "She would bounce back, even seemingly when she hit the wall; she would just pull herself up and continue, so she was an inspiration. She really had perseverance."

Like humor, perseverance in overcoming obstacles was a major element that made the group cohesive. Monica used the metaphor of brothers-in-arms (read "sisters-in-arms") at war: "You feel like your friends are like your brothers. There's a bond that is never broken because of that experience. And no matter what background you're from, you're bonded from that experience." Patricia (referring to the NW Sisters' Study): "We've been through the war...and survived."

Spirituality

The members of the group discovered that spirituality played a great role in their experience and gave them the strength to accomplish their goals. All the members remarked about Sharon's great spirituality. Monica said about Sharon: "Spirituality is Sharon's bedrock for coping with life's challenges." Patricia added, "She is the most spiritual one of us. For Sharon, the glass was always half full. She was a great spiritual support." Ada added, "Despite having been an English teacher, Sharon encountered a lot of difficulty with her specialty papers. The reason she overcame everything was her belief that it was meant to be."

Sharon commented, "This whole thing about academic research continues to amaze me because it is another example for me of God's abundance. He gives us people, he gives us resources ...and this overwhelming abundance of information and creativity and more that we could ever imagine. I think that for me, if you do not know who you are spiritually when you start a doctoral program, you sure know it by the time you are

done. Regarding her dissertation Sharon said, “Only God could have created my dissertation defense because you cannot predict what is going to happen in that room when you present to these people, how they are going to take this information, how they are going to respond, or what questions they are going to ask you. I just had such an amazing sense of peace, cooperation and collegiality it was just really wonderful.” Sharon added that “God became real to me in new ways, through the people who are here (the N.W. Sisters), their diverse perspectives, and the strength that we bring to support each other.” Sharon compared public universities versus Christian universities. “From a Christian university perspective, there are strengths and weakness to every institution. One of the weaknesses, in my opinion, of public education is that there is a limit to how much you can share about your spirituality. I have talked to people who are in leadership positions at state universities and they miss that opportunity.”

Ada linked her doctoral program experience with God’s power. “This is not a traditional experience with God. You just all of a sudden have to experience something that helps you say, ‘It is God’s power.’ This is how God reveals himself to you in a new way. It is something that one cannot control.” She said, “This doctoral program can be an evolving spiritual experience with the realization that we are put here for a purpose and most of the time we do not realize what the purpose is.” She added “I tell you, where there is a doctoral program, there is prayer. There was a time when I had to say: ‘God, this is your dissertation. It is not under my control. I will do what I need to do but it is yours.’ When I said that, I survived, because before, I was trying to control it and I was going insane. I learned that when I am in tough situations I just have to say: ‘God, it is up to you.’ Then all of a sudden I will receive a wonderful surprise. And I say: ‘Thank you, God. I could see that you are leading me because I do not have complete control.’” Patricia reflected, “I think that your faith is an easy thing to gain and an easy thing to lose when you are going through something like this (the doctoral program).” She explained: “I view spirituality and faith the same way that when we were talking about the deconstruction; it almost felt that in my deconstruction time, everything felt apart and I did not have the same faith. Early on I prayed a lot—and a lot more at the end!” Monica added, “I remember the bargaining time; the few days before the dissertation when you think you are going to die, and you feel like the proverbial lamb going to the slaughter. And you feel like there is no way you can get out of it, you have to go through it and you are dreading it. And I remember saying: ‘Oh, God, do what you have to do with me. I have done all I can and I am leaving it up to you.’”

Shared Accountability / Support (members to each other, collaboration & community of learners)

Members to each other

The study participants reported that accountability to the group—however implicit—was one of the factors integral to completion of the doctoral program. The group met roughly on a monthly basis to discuss, among other things, progress of individual members in the dissertation process.

Ada reported that having scheduled meetings forced the members to produce, because “you’d look a bit silly” if you went to a meeting and said, “Well, I haven’t done anything.” Group members, among other things, “put deadlines on each other.” Having

the commitment to meet regularly, then, also brought about the members' commitment to report on their individual progress.

Another aspect of the 'accountability' theme concerned the members' attitude within the group. Monica observed that she "never saw any of these guys cry" and that "nobody gave up." The meetings were not a forum for "women complaining about everything" (Ada). Although group members reported that they all had their private moments of despair, the attitude *within* the group was consistently one of optimism. Part of the accountability to the group, as Patricia put it, was for members to maintain a "stiff upper lip" at the meetings, thereby maintaining a tone of positivism and progress.

Since meeting on a regular basis was "proven to bring out the best in each other" (Monica), all members felt that continuing to meet after graduation would aid the group in moving towards "other kinds of adventures" (Patricia). Accountability within the group has continued as the members challenge themselves further with new endeavors—such as embarking on the study outlined in this paper.

Collaboration & Community of Learners.

Many researchers/writers have offered their own definitions of the term—"A Community of Learners", but sooner or later, one word will appear—and that is "collaboration". It was no different in this study of the dissertation process. Collaboration was needed no matter at what stage in the process we all found ourselves. Every time one of the group members got ready to present a paper to the rest of the group (core paper, specialty paper, study proposal and finally, the dissertation presentation itself), each of us had to be open and ready to listen and learn—as well as speak and teach - in our interactions with each other (cohesiveness). This helped us learn to appreciate our individual strengths and weaknesses, to gain more awareness of our diverse learning styles and of the multiple intelligences that we all possess, and finally, to have respect for the variety of individual personal and professional, career experiences that we all brought to the process (uniqueness). One of our agreements was that when a sister was presenting a "run-through" on an important paper, just before going in front of the committee - all the sisters would remain silent until the presenter had finished - then, they would offer their critiques. More than once, at the end of a sister's presentation, there would be total silence—followed by an explosive release of pent-up laughter from the others which often lasted 10-15 minutes—before the critique started in earnest. Consequently, as Patricia commented: "This will teach you not to take things *too* personally - especially in a safe environment!". There is nothing quite like wholeheartedly joining others in a good laugh at yourself! All of which led us to the awareness that we had become a Community of Learners with a group identity - The NW Sisters - with a sense of humor!

The need for this community was never more important than during the final writing stage. This is the point at which we began to realize that we truly felt isolated and that the writing process was something that one does on "one's own". The encouragement and support of the community—coupled with the encouragement and direction of a committed was advisor—was vital in helping us combat the isolation we felt. and to finally push ourselves "over the top" and on to completion!

Shared Experiences (advisor issues, deconstruction & reconstruction, other losses)

Advisor Issues

One of the issues that often dominated the group discussions—both during the doctoral process and the post-doctoral study sessions--was the topic of advisors. The group decided that having a “good” advising experience was one of the keys to successfully completing the doctorate. Each of the four study participants had changed advisors. Often this was by choice and occasionally, it was by force.

Monica’s change of advisor was by choice. She started off with Dr. N., but upon realizing that she and he were not “on common ground” just prior to starting her study, she switched to a well-respected advisor, Dr. D. who enjoyed a reputation amongst the doctoral students for being a committed, supportive doctoral chairperson.

The other three participants were forced to switch—two of them right at the end of the dissertation. Sharon found herself without an advisor because he called her up one day and told her that he had taken another position at a university several states away. Sharon did agree that her advisor had been available to her and they did meet regularly for an hour and a half every other week. However, much of the ground covered during those advising sessions involved the advisor’s personal issues, leaving very little time to devote to Sharon’s doctoral work. Finally, Sharon managed to find two professors who co-chaired the position and managed to see her through her final stage.

Patricia was the study participant who had two changes of advisors. Her first advisor was someone for whom she had a great deal of respect but who did not appear to have enthusiasm for her doctoral topic. Her first change of advisor proved to be challenging in that the professor could not spare time to meet with her on a regular basis. This person eventually took a leave of absence from the university to study abroad, and Patricia eventually asked the Dean of Education, Dr. E., to assume the chair position, to which she agreed. This was an excellent move, as the Dean spent at least two hours every other week with Patricia and within a few short months, she was able to defend her dissertation.

Ada started off with Dr. K. as her doctoral advisor, but they did not share common ground on the dissertation topic. Ada eventually switched to Dr. N. Although this second advisor was not particularly adept at helping doctoral students survive the process, Ada persevered with him and he did eventually take the chair position at her successful defense of dissertation.

One of the issues that all participants agreed upon was that no one had discussed with them the possibility of changing advisors if things were not going as planned. By the end of this study, we realized that one of the most integral factors in our success was that despite many false starts, we all did eventually find advisors who helped us to complete our studies.

Consequently, perhaps one of the first pieces of advice that should be given to a doctoral student is this: It is okay to change your advisor, but do so as soon as possible in the ABD (all but dissertation) stage, before you set up your study.

Deconstruction & Reconstruction

Monica described some of the more demoralizing events that took place during the process of obtaining our doctoral degrees, stating: "I think there is a 'deconstruction' that takes place sometimes during the doctoral program. It is the tearing down and rebuilding. Either you rebuild or you don't make it!" This opened up the door for us to rethink the dissertation process in terms of "deconstruction and reconstruction".

During the course of our year-long post-doctoral study, all of us spontaneously described at least two "deconstruction events" that we had experienced, and--perhaps more importantly--described how we had all found the courage to rebuild ourselves and come back with even more determination to finish the dissertation process.

Some of these deconstruction events occurred early on in the program. For some it was during the "comprehensive" exam stage, still others experienced it during the analysis data-gathering stage and all of us experienced it towards the end stage, when we were zeroing in on the actual writing and defense process.

Ada experienced a deconstruction event very early on--actually during the first quarter--and the first time she took a test in the doctoral program. She described the test as being "on dates" and she said that she began questioning herself and asking herself, "Maybe I do not belong in this program and maybe I should not be doing this." She cried all the way from the university to her home.

Patricia also felt herself deconstructing early in the program. She moved from Florida back to Portland, OR and she realized that she was not going to receive the same sort of academic support she had enjoyed while obtaining her master's degree. She described her cohort at FAU as being "in a tightly knit adult ed program", who got along well and shared so much. They had been primed in adult education -- "very, very interactive, very experiential and we were always presenting new research -- because that's what you do". When she came to PSU, she experienced a real sense of loss because there was "not the same sort of teacher support that there had been in Florida". Nonetheless, Patricia put forward "a stiff upper lip".

Fairly early on, while trying to complete her comprehensive exam papers, Sharon found herself experiencing "pain and physical suffering over a 4-6 months period", during which time she had to present and re-present one of her comprehensive papers three times in order to satisfy the requirements of a diverse committee. Patricia recalled a conversation she and Sharon had had on this topic and commented: "They really ripped you apart on those comps. Looking at you, that was deconstruction, and I thought, why does she want to subject herself to that?" On the "plus" side of things, this was the time when Sharon realized that she needed a support group--and the seeds for the "N.W. Sisters" group were sown.

Belonging to this group helped Ada just at the time she was about ready to give up. Sharon stepped forward and said; "Don't--you've put so much effort into this". Ada thought: "Yeah, I've put so much money and effort into this and I'm not going to give it up". Ada did admit, however, that there were a couple of times when she was really tired and she thought: "That's it! Why am I trying to do this? What is it? What is the gain?" In the end, being in the group gave her the feeling that "Yeah, I can do it". She says that there was a certain part of her inside (which she describes as her "strong" part) that she could come back to and say "Yeah, I don't give a damn--you know, like Sinatra--I don't

give a damn and I'll do it my way". She "wanted to have that accomplishment", even though "it was hard sometimes and...it was expensive!"

Perhaps some of the most intense deconstruction events came towards the end of the dissertation process. For Sharon, the most dramatic deconstruction came at the hands of her advisor—right at the point where she was getting finished. She described this particular day as "one of my most painful days with the program". She had received a call from her advisor who said that he was leaving town permanently and that she would have to find another advisor. She began to cry "like a child". She did not have the energy to do any more, but had to visit with her statistical tutor to get some data analyzed. During this visit, when they were having a discussion about Factor Analysis and Multiple Regression, she broke down and began sobbing. Her tutor remarked: "I can see, Sharon, that you are rather upset about this". She left him and went into the washroom. Then she walked all the way out of the School of Education and into her car and sat there, still crying! She snapped out of it when she pragmatically realized that she was going to have to go and get another sticker for her car and another ID card which had her picture. So that's what she did.

Patricia perceived deconstruction came at the hands of one of the group's members--after she had practiced her final dissertation presentation in front of the entire group and it had been critiqued by everyone. Monica, who had come to be known as the "slasher", took Patricia's presentation under her wing and, true to her name, "slashed & burned" it through her editing technique. This happened during one Sunday morning, when Patricia went to Monica's house, and described the following scenario: "I had all these sheets, you know, of dissertation presentation and she just knocked out three-quarters of the pages I had. Just big X's of slash! Slash! Slash! SLASH! And I thought, 'There'll only be two pages left!' I left the house thinking "...uhhh ..." and, I thought "bloody hell! I don't want to go on with this". That is when I really started to move because I thought: "Now is the point at which I'm going to go ahead and do it!" The presentation did take a lot of cleaning up – and Patricia came to respect Monica for her "red penning".

Monica's apparent deconstruction came by her own hand--through her innate fear of public speaking. As the dissertation defense loomed large in front of her, Monica's fear began to manifest itself as a feeling that she was "going to die". In her own words: "I remember the bargaining time, the few days before the dissertation when you think you're going to die and you feel like the proverbial lamb going to the slaughter. And you feel like there is no way you can get out of it ... you have to go through it and you are dreading it ... and I remember saying 'Oh God, do what you have to do with me. I've done all I can and I'm leaving it up to you.'" One of her dissertation sisters, Ada, came to her rescue with "a good idea" and told Monica not to look at the defense as having just three more days, but rather that she had "only have three more days to suffer, then only two more days to suffer, and then only four more hours to suffer--look at it that way". Monica did and claimed that that was her saving--she was able to relate her suffering to "the Agony in the Garden and the whole metaphor of the crucifixion." She awoke the day of her dissertation defense thinking, "Only four more hours to suffer like this ... only three more hours." She was relieved of the agony in the end.

As the sisters reconstructed themselves after various deconstructive events, it was apparent that the dissertation process had extracted an emotional toll on all of us. At the same time, as we delved further into some of the most wrenching tolls, we realized that

we had survived to tell the tale and Monica's words come back to us: "I think that is a deconstruction that takes place sometimes during the doctoral program. It is the tearing down and rebuilding. Either you rebuild or you don't make it!"

Through this post-dissertation narrative study, the participants came to understand empathically each other's "personal experiences and knowledge" (Hayes & Flannery, 2000) and found that there is a definite sense of being connected to each other through the shared experiences of deconstructing and reconstructing. Consequently, another integral factor to our individual success was finding a group of students who were going through the same exact processes and with whom we shared our stories and knowledge regarding the "ups and downs" of the dissertation process in a supportive, non-judgmental, collaborative fashion. If this can be done voluntarily as a natural, evolving process - rather than being placed in an artificially selected group, it is so much the better. The N.W. Sisters group all agreed that the emotional toll on us all was heavy; but, thankfully, we all shared, survived, and lived to tell the tale. However, there were permanent losses we all suffered—some closely related to the normal family life cycle and some not.

Other Losses

Most of us were in our mid- to late forties when we began the process of obtaining the Ed.D., so it perhaps was not surprising that during the 6.5 to 7.5 years that the dissertations took to complete, several of our parents died. In fact, all of us-- Ada, Monica, Patricia and Sharon – shared this particular family life experience.

While Monica, Sharon and Patricia were still going through the dissertation process, their mothers passed away. Patricia was teaching at her college the night before she was to present her dissertation proposal. When she got home from teaching, there were several phone calls from her sister in England—and she got the news of her mother's death when she returned the calls. Despite the fact that she had received devastating news, Patricia still felt that she wanted to carry on with the dissertation proposal presentation. She did because her mother's own words from many years ago kept coming back to her: "Never, ever give up – just try, try again". Patricia successfully defended her proposal at 9 a.m. the following morning.

Monica had many losses befall her the same year as she defended her dissertation. As she was going through the last throes of her dissertation, her mother became very ill. At the same time, her younger stepson was killed in an automobile accident—his older brother had been killed in the same manner just a few years earlier. Monica felt very conflicted about wanting to go back East to be with her mother; and, at the same time, trying to comfort her husband during his grief; and finally, preparing for her oral defense. In her own words: "It was hard because I expected at any time I would have to run to Ohio. It's hard when you're apart, as you know ... getting information from your sisters ... thinking maybe I should take a leave from this, or should I keep on working? I guess I just lived day by day. It worked out." She did eventually get to look after her mother during the last couple of weeks of her mother's life: "I graduated in June and she died in July. And, she was aware then—she saw my video and that was the last thing she saw on TV—my graduation!"

Shortly after completing their doctorates, Sharon and Ada lost their fathers. Right after graduation, in fact, Ada found herself in the middle of many losses: her daughter had left

for college and she and her husband went through a divorce. Ada explained that she was likely depressed at that time. She says she felt “disjointed” and expressed regret at having been separated for a long time from her father--he lived in Florida, while she lived in Oregon. Although she was relieved to be finished with the dissertation process, she claims that sometimes she felt “very lonely...not having any real reason to live” and she lived for herself as she explained: “My daughter is twenty-one, my parents are gone, my husband is doing whatever he’s doing--my ex-husband, you know...so I feel that lack of connection.”

Sharon’s father came out to the Northwest for her doctoral graduation and stayed with her for a few months afterwards. During this time, Sharon was able to spend time with him and take care of him as his health waned. He eventually passed on, which Sharon stated was a relief for him, as he was suffering towards the end. In terms of the losses encountered above--many of which were due to the evolutionary nature of the family life cycle--some of us were left with feelings of guilt or self-doubt because of the amount of time we were expending on the dissertation process and the lack of time we were devoting to family issues. Having a support group of women who would simply allow us to talk and who actively listened helped us to overcome these feelings of guilt and self-doubt.

Our advice for those embarking on the doctoral journey would be to remember that the doctoral process is a long one and much that constitutes “normal” life events happens at the same time. When voluntarily forming a group, discuss the fact that life events will happen and establish a process for listening when someone is thrown off balance by these normal and not-so-normal life events. On the other hand, be there for each other as you celebrate life’s happy occurrences—these are all part of obtaining the doctorate. To quote a colleague who once shared this with us: “Blessed are the flexible, for they shall not get bent out of shape.”

Support and Inspiration (role models & group support)

The study participants outlined the kinds of support that were integral to obtaining the doctorate. These included role model inspiration and group support.

Role Models

For this study, “role models” referred to individuals from whom the study participants drew inspiration. Monica had no specific role model during the doctorate. She said, “No one in my extended family had gone beyond a master’s and there were few of those. I did not have anyone in the position that I am in now, that I could look at and say I want to emulate that person”. She was inspired in other ways. “My brother is a practicing physician and I always admired his perseverance and dedication.”

Sharon sees Atsuko as a role model for finishing her degree in nine months. “Atsuko, who finished in nine months, could be a role model for us all.” Sharon also did not have specific role model in the doctoral process but viewed family members as inspiration. She also sees herself as a role model in her family. Sharon said: “I have pioneers in my background--both my grandmother and my oldest sisters in professional and family (personal) ways, but nobody in my family has earned a doctorate besides me. I am kind of the motivator for other women in our family to stretch academically.”

In Patricia's case, her sister was her inspiration "I have a role model in my sister who was very education oriented. She has lots and lots of education, both as a teacher and as a counselor." Patricia now sees herself as a role model for her son, daughter and nieces (and she hopes that they pay attention to this!).

Unlike Monica, Sharon and Patricia, Ada had role models who had earned terminal degrees. Ada's father was a medical doctor, and her brother obtained a doctorate in education few years before her. Ada remembers the support she received from her father although he did not know all the details of the Ed.D. process. She said, "I always looked up to my father and I grew up in a professional environment. My father was 100% supportive of me but it was not like having somebody that knew what the whole process was like." She went on to explain her brother's support: "My brother and I are a little bit competitive. He is a good role model. He could always do things and I thought if he could get a doctorate then I could do it also." She clarified the different kind of support she received from her brother, saying that if she went to him, he would answer her questions and help her where she needed help. "But the difference was nurturing the N.W. Sisters provided for me."

Group Support

Sharon was inspired by another doctoral support group called the "Sisters of Success" who supported and empowered its members. This support is especially needed during the dissertation writing process. Sharon added, "I thought that having that model was the inspiration. The process does not have to be a totally male model (go it alone, be independent, tough it out alone, do your own thinking) but there could be some shared experiences. I thought that if I could do what C. had done (replicate that model), I knew that would help me with my own success." Sharon said, "I valued forming this group because, from my own experience, when people collaborate, more gets done and supportive females empower each other to do what has to be done." Sharon explained another benefit of having the support group: "The other part that was valuable for me was that the whole dissertation writing process is extremely internal and really isolating. It was just a pleasure to be able to get together with people and be outside of myself and look at the different experiences each person was having. You may not all be on the same page, but at least we were walking through this experience together."

The rest of the participants shared their experiences as part of the N.W. Sisters' group. Highlighting the factors that were integral to her success, Patricia said, "There isn't a question in my mind that it was having people actually pushing you to a certain extent."

Monica said, "I think that the dissertation process is a very lonely process. It is unlike anything you have ever done in your life. It is unstructured. You must be a self-starter. You must have endurance, and even though you have the support of your family, if someone hasn't gone through the process firsthand, they just don't know what it's like. And there is no substitute for people sharing the same experience with you in real time." Ada said that the support group was important especially in moments when she was discouraged, but regular meetings kept her on track. She stated: "The fact that we met regularly was invigorating. It was a pleasant experience, and also a task-oriented experience, because we laughed and we enjoyed each others' company."

Individual Experiences (perceived benefits of obtaining a doctoral degree, “strange bedfellows” and differentiation.

Perceived Benefits of Obtaining a Doctoral Degree

Despite the losses enumerated earlier, there was a lot that we decided we had gained during the dissertation process--and those gains were varied. According to Sharon, some of her colleagues at her university said that obtaining the doctorate was akin to obtaining a “union card”--you belong to The Academy. “And, if you don’t have it you don’t belong. Once you got it, you got your card—that’s it!” Sharon went on further: “This is like frosting. It is interesting—this is like frosting in a unique way to open up, opportunities to write, respect for personal and individual collaborative research, respect for the community of learners, good support in the learning process. Also, respect for the creation of knowledge and we can all contribute to that and we are obligated by the union card to continue to do that and not just vegetate.”

Monica gained satisfaction by contributing to the knowledge base: “It is satisfying to me to make even a small contribution to the knowledge base. I think I contributed to it something that nobody else has.” Patricia also gained by helping others. Her findings were published locally in Oregon in a newsletter that reaches members of PRO (Provider Resource Organization), who are family-based child care practitioners. As she put it: “I feel like I am advancing them by letting them see what can be achieved by them getting the CDA credential...”

Sharon spoke about feeling more empowered to do some of the things she now does; and she has become a contributor to the knowledge base as well as a recipient of knowledge. She goes on further to state: “Although I think I have the same level of expertise in a lot of areas, I would not feel as empowered to be a leader, international program developer, to do faculty exchange, program assessment and evaluation--I would not have been perceived as such.”

Patricia also felt that more respect came with having a doctorate. In fact, she had been back and forth to Washington, DC to a Department of Education – PT3 (Preparing Tomorrow’s Teachers in Technology) conference planning committee. As she stated: “That is the kind of thing where I think the ‘doctor’ in front of your name does make a difference”.

Ada learned through her own research that she could substantiate her own experiences. In her own words: “Rendon (1988) talks about the fact that as minorities we feel like our own experiences are not validated. That fact that having the degree, one more degree, means that some of the things I said before, I could say now, and they have a different type of recognition—and the validation that I know these things.” In fact, at a retreat, she challenged a well-known speaker’s facts on “multicultural sensitivity at the church level—and she felt very comfortable doing so. Ada was putting her union card to work.

Ada also claims that having greater knowledge about applied theory helped her analyze her own work setting and it became like a game to her: “To be able to apply the knowledge and see how it all works together. I was living in it then -- looking from different perspectives. It was really fascinating. It was like a little game.”

Finally, in terms of doctoral benefits, Monica stated that “the people” were her gains. She was talking about the bonding of the group: “Meeting you guys and continuing a long view”.

Strange “Bedfellows”

Politics often makes “strange bedfellows”, but so do dissertation fellows. This was evident from the beginning when we formed our N.W. Sisters group. We all agreed that it is probably highly unlikely that we would have “chosen” each other as friends under normal circumstances; however, after going through the “torture” of the dissertation process, one is stripped of any vestiges of maintaining a public persona – one’s eccentricities are stripped away and the common denominators outlined in this post-doctoral study came through “loud and clear”. It doesn’t matter what your current employment position is, marital status, number of children, socio-economic level, birth place, etc. – when you form a “community of learners” and embark on what we came to know as “the longest journey” together and have seen each other’s anguish, angst, despair and finally, “joy comes in the morning” and you are able to celebrate with each other your great accomplishments – you realize that the statement “sisters in arms” has real validity in terms of your academic/personal survival.

Conclusion

The research question started out as: What do you perceive as the factors that were integral to your achieving success in the doctoral program? And, we were able to identify those factors – each of which is listed below. However, as we end this study, two other questions are worth exploring: What did we learn from this experience and perhaps more importantly, what advice would we offer to those of you who are just embarking on this longest journey? Each of the factors we uncovered is listed – along with our recommendations:

Humor. The presence of laughter was an important component in making the dissertation process less stressful.

Recommendation. Don’t be afraid to laugh—even at your setbacks! Although at times it may seem that it has “Gone with the Wind”, a healthy sense of humor can provide the extra impetus to move forward.

Familial Values. All of the study participants had family members who lived far away. Despite the rigors of the doctoral program, we nevertheless made families a priority, even if it meant putting the dissertation process “on hold” for awhile.

Recommendation. Realize that there are self-sacrifices that will have to be made during the doctoral process. If you lack the support of your family—for whatever reason—the importance of a doctoral support group may be critical to your success in the program.

Empathy & Energy. Group members found that meeting together eased the isolation of the dissertation process and created a synergy within the group. Since they shared similar issues, the women were able to offer insights and advice to each other.

Recommendation. Realize that the dissertation process is a unique experience, unlike anything you’ve ever done before in your schooling experience. Bonding with others who “understand what you’re going through” can offer needed fellowship, ideas and direction.

Perseverance. The study participants reported that perseverance was a crucial trait for success in achieving the doctoral degree. Overcoming obstacles was a major element that made the NW Sisters' group cohesive.

Recommendation. Every doctoral student encounters pitfalls, even major ones. Instead of becoming discouraged and giving up, use these setbacks to regroup, revise, and retry.

Spirituality. The participants discovered that spirituality was an integral factor that gave them strength during difficult times.

Recommendation: Let your spiritual beliefs strengthen you. Putting your trust in a higher power can get you through the darkest hours of the doctoral process.

Accountability of] members to each other. The study participants reported that accountability to the group—however implicit—was one of the factors integral to completion of the doctoral program.

Recommendation. Not only will membership in a support group keep you 'on task' during the research and writing process, but accountability within a group can continue after graduation as members challenge themselves further with new endeavors.

Collaboration & community of learners. We came to see ourselves as a community of learners with a sense of purpose – to finish the doctoral process. This purpose was never more evident than when we collaborated and critiqued our way through each other's presentations--learning more about each, laughing at each other – and forgetting any feelings of isolation in the process.

Recommendation: Make sure that you share your various presentations within your doctoral support group, before you even show them to your advisor. You will quickly learn not to "take things too personally" and a lot more about yourself and others in the process.

Advisor Issues. Integral to each of our successes was having an advisor who was both knowledgeable about our dissertation topic and who understood the roles of doctoral advisor and committee chair.

Recommendation. Don't be afraid to change advisors if you do not feel that the study is progressing as smoothly or going in the direction you think it should. However, and this is important, make your change as close to the start of your project as possible.

Deconstruction & Reconstruction: The participants came to understand empathically each other's personal experiences and found that there is a definite sense of being connected to each other through the shared experiences of 'deconstructing' and 'reconstructing.'

Recommendation. The tearing down and rebuilding process that takes place throughout the doctoral program can have debilitating effects and cause one to consider giving up entirely. Locate or establish a support group to help you through the "ups and downs" of the dissertation process in a supportive, non-judgmental, collaborative fashion.

Other Losses: Integral to our success was having a support group comprised of women, who would allow us to talk when we needed to and who just listened – especially when feelings of self-doubt and guilt would enter into the familial losses we encountered.

Recommendation: Our advice in this area for those embarking on the doctoral process resulting from this would be to remember that the doctoral process is a lengthy one, and much that constitutes "normal" life events happens during this time. When voluntarily forming a group, discuss the fact that life events will happen and establish a

process for listening when someone is thrown off balance by these normal, and not-so-normal, life events. On the other hand, be there for each other as you celebrate life's happy occurrences ... all part of obtaining the doctorate!

Role models: The participants of the study found that one of the sources of inspiration for their academic pursuits came from role models. These were found in family members and in colleagues. Some of the participants also viewed themselves as role models for others.

Recommendation: In everyone's life, there are outstanding individuals who have made contributions in every aspect of life. By examining the qualities of these people, you can help strengthen your values and live up to your full potential. You can subsequently be a role model for young people.

Group support: Although they valued the inspiration they got from role models, study participants reported that the most important support of all came from the N.W. Sisters during the dissertation process.

Recommendation: Look around and utilize all the support available to you. Whenever possible, bond with people in your program who have similar needs. Create a support group that will encourage you in your academic pursuits.

Perceived benefits of obtaining a doctorate: Participants reported many of the gains associated with earning the Ed.D., including: increased confidence, respect from peers, leadership opportunities, satisfaction from the contribution of knowledge, and forming lasting relationships.

Recommendation: Keep reminding yourself that all this hard work is worth it! Besides the benefits outlined by the study participants, other advantages of obtaining the doctorate include: increased compensation, flexibility and freedom, and greater choice of careers.

"Strange bedfellows": Despite the great diversity of the members of the NW Sisters group, the common denominator that stood out was the struggle to complete the dissertation process. All other differences were swept away as we forged a solid bond of support, accomplishment and lasting friendship.

Recommendation: When you are joining or forming a support group, you may have an initial perception that the group is too diverse or that the members have little in common. Don't be misled. When you get together and form a community of scholars, all that really matters is reaching out to each other, keeping your spirits up and your *eye on the prize!*

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