Untold doctoral stories: Cultural narratives of neglect (0082)

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Outline

Conceptual framing

There is a growing body of literature on doctoral education in which the starting point is students who do not match the expectation of completing in a "timely fashion." These studies collectively point to a multiplicity of factors influencing student completion: student personal issues, supervisory relations and research/institutional culture (Green & Powell, 2005; Maher et al, 2004). Other studies report that a good match in student-supervisor pairs in terms of expectations is found to be helpful (Murphy et al, 2007; Schlosser & Kahn, 2007). And, some studies document what more experienced supervisors believe to be sources of low completion (Manathunga, 2005; Gardner, 2009); their perceptions point to supervisors perceiving the student as the source of the difficulty rather then the supervisor or the departmental/research culture.

Context

In a larger study we followed 26 social science doctoral students in three UK universities over a year and noted that while they reported difficulties, these were not sustained, as individuals found ways to resolve them on their own (McAlpine et al, 2009). Given anecdotal evidence that some students experienced challenging journeys, we recognized a gap that we had not captured, and sought individuals who while 'successful' on paper (still moving forward with their doctorates), perceived extreme challenges or conditions that are emotionally invasive and draining.

Purpose

We wished to see the extent to which the experiences of this group might parallel as well as be distinct from the experiences of those in the original study. The usefulness of personal and academic networks in that study influenced our interest in seeing the extent and nature of the networks that those reporting more challenging experiences had and drew on.

Participants, data collection and analysis

Through snowballing, we recruited 14 social sciences doctoral students in the same universities as the larger study. These individuals were interviewed at a time and location in which they felt comfortable. The recorded interviews were transcribed and a thematic analysis carried out; while being attentive to the results of previous studies, we were also open to themes emerging from the data, or linked to the larger study.

Emerging patterns[1]:

Complexity of experienced difficulties: The participants had experienced various combinations of health issues (e.g. broken bones, stress, illness), family issues (e.g., motherhood, relationship breakdown, death) and financial strains (taking on multiple jobs, working full-time, needing to finish quickly), and while all had personal networks, these were sometimes geographically distant, and sometimes included responsibilities (e.g., childcare).

In fact, many appeared to have disrupted or minimal networks (due to distance from them, working full-time elsewhere, family responsibilities). Several also struggled to

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[1] Given the lack of space, we only report here the main themes without examples to enrich the account.

make meaningful connections with other students studying in their cohorts and Departments or found themselves in competitive, unpleasant environments where relationships with other students were strained. Students' limited personal and professional networks and their reported unease and uncertainty in their departments may have reduced their sense of agency and their ability to negotiate support.

Supervisory change: Further, many students changed supervisors. While conflict led to some of these changes, a number of supervisory changes were precipitated by: supervisor moves, sabbaticals, and maternity leaves. These experiences of supervisory change (for whatever reason) were often perceived as traumatic and unusual and were uprooting. Many students felt they had done something wrong, or had made the wrong decision (e.g., in remaining when their supervisor moved), or had been abandoned (e.g., when they were not kept informed about institutional decisions). It was evident that students did not realize that supervisory change was, in fact, a relatively regular feature of academic life, though not necessarily dealt with in a consistent and transparent manner.

Lacking a supportive intellectual supervisory relationship: Supervisory change was only one feature of their experiences. Supervisors were also reported as physically absent, not intellectually supportive, not providing guidance, and occasionally inappropriate or exploitative. The supervisor and the committee were not always perceived as intellectual colleagues, part of the developing networks the student might maintain. In fact, these individuals sometimes appeared to constrain student's intellectual development.

Seeking help: Students did not consistently seek help institutionally. For those that did, there appeared to be a gendered pattern: females seeking help before the complexity of issues became magnified whereas males seeking help at a time of crisis. When institutional help was sought, the responses were not perceived as consistently supportive, but rather ad hoc, dependent on the individual approached. Nor did responses appear to be based on well-established policies and practices.

Disenchantment with academia: Finally, a few reported being either disenchanted with academia as a possible future or described an inability to see the kind of life they would want, either because of work-life balance or because they wanted non-traditional types of jobs (e.g., teaching in schools and doing research). Thus, while still in their programs, they were ambivalent about their investment in the degree.

Significance

While each story was distinct in the issues and contexts the individuals were dealing with, the lack of support networks whether institutional, collegial or among friends emerged in the interview data. This contrasted with the students in the larger study who on the whole reported extensive networks which provided different kinds of support. We believe this difference may be important and are supported in that view by Wright (2003). At the same time, the source of the difficulties was much more than a lack of calling on personal networks. What is striking is that students' own coping mechanisms (not seeking institutional support) and the uneven institutional response they received (when they sought help) left undisturbed the cultural narrative of student weakness or blaming the student that is evident in supervisors' views (Manathunga, 2005); (Gardner, 2009). Unless departments and those responsible for doctoral programs demonstrate their commitment to student wellbeing, for instance, in the creation of a departmental ombudsperson, students are unlikely to make their experiences public, and the cultural narrative to explain extended time to completion will still be the student. Unless we commit to structural change, students will continue to experience the same cultural practices of neglect.

References

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