

Chapter 2

Tracking the Doctoral Student Experience over Time: Cultivating Agency in Diverse Spaces

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I have 2 days during the workweek which are dedicated to my PhD work. Right now, I'm focusing on my comps knowing I am writing them from March 16–30. I'm reading, searching for articles and books, talking with my committee members and my supervisor to narrow my focus, and asking other students about their comps process. On the weekend I spent time on my PhD work while the rest of my family did other activities. I also worked part-time on research for my supervisor (not related to my PhD); worked part-time as an instructor; contributed to a volunteer organization I'm involved in, and went out with friends. Looking back, I should have done a better inventory of the information and knowledge I was accumulating for my comps to see where the holes were and to ask some further questions of my committee.

Cathy

Context

Cathy's story, one collected during our research into doctoral education, demonstrates the day-to-day reality of the doctoral journey. Much research related to the doctorate has been fuelled by reports of attrition rates as high as 60% in some disciplines in North America (Nettles and Millet 2006), in the UK and Australia by policies to reduce times to completion (Wright and Cochrane 2000), and more generally around the goals and purposes of doctoral education (e.g. Walker et al. 2008; Leonard et al. 2006). Such research has focused primarily on global issues or finite events, often sought in a single interview or questionnaire. There exists little inquiry into the variations in daily events and routines during the doctorate; thus, a major

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recommendation common across the earlier work is a call for more research into the specific experiences of doctoral students. This chapter responds to this call and demonstrates that accessing student experiences at a deeper level can provide a better contextualization of inherent processes that support and/or hinder movement toward degree completion and student satisfaction. In documenting everyday experiences, we employed a longitudinal lens to place particular focus on the multiple and diverse activities doctoral students engage in, daily and cumulatively over time.

This chapter particularly highlights students' negotiated agency, a feature of doctoral experience emerging from a number of different studies in our program. Throughout the chapter, we describe how student agency emerges strongly in negotiating with others in order to achieve intentions, with these negotiations often accompanied by ranges of emotions, from positive to negative (Jazvac-Martek 2009a; McAlpine and Amundsen 2009). Experiences that are linked to negative emotions may be implicated in reasons for premature departure, or when positive, may act as motivators underlying perseverance and sustained efforts (Jazvac-Martek 2009b). In this chapter, we explore how negotiated agency is expressed in daily (and often mundane) activities and interactions. The cumulative experience of students negotiating their intentions in activities and interactions, and in navigating difficulties contributes to the complex process of developing an academic identity and establishing oneself as an academic.

Our studies of doctoral experience encompassed the collection of data from more than 40 doctoral students (most imagining academic careers) in the time period 2006–2009. As noted in Chap. 1, these individuals were situated in two faculties of Education, a very diverse field. Thus, participants were in programs that are quite distinct and range from those that are highly structured with required course work to others that are focused primarily on independent completion of the PhD dissertation research (Counselling Psychology, Educational Psychology, Library and Information Sciences, Curriculum Studies, Learning Sciences and subject-specific programs such as Mathematics Education). One university, Simon Fraser University, is without the professional schools (e.g. law, medicine) usually contained in traditional research-intensive universities and the other, McGill University, a research-intensive university, is a substantial contributor to the number of doctoral graduates in Canada. The results across the two universities were remarkably similar, with the few differences that surfaced noted in what follows.

Data were collected through in-situ progress logs (both open-ended and multiple-choice items) collected from doctoral students monthly over a two-and-a-half-year period, recorded conversations between students and supervisors, electronic surveys, interviews, and focus groups. For this chapter, we draw principally on our longitudinal collection of the progress logs, while also referring to some of the related interview data to support our interpretations. The logs enabled students to capture concurrently their day-to-day activities, interactions, challenges, and difficulties—practices that cumulatively influence the development of agency and academic identities. Thus, this chapter draws from the nearly 300 collected logs to generate a sense of the richness and complexity of day-to-day doctoral experience across our participants rather than focusing on variations between individuals (for this, see Jazvac-Martek 2009b).

Day-to-Day Doctoral Student Experience

We represent doctoral experience from four different perspectives each linked by the notion of student agency: who the participants were, what activities they engaged in, the range of individuals they interacted with, and everyday difficulties and responses.

Who Are They: The Academic and the Personal

We pretend that the academic work that we do is out there, and that we are in here, but it is so tied up with who we are and our personal values, right? And so when someone said “Oh yeah, [your work is] really interesting” not only did that give me value as an academic, but personally as Holly: “Oh, that’s something that is interesting and worthwhile.” (Holly)

Holly describes a feeling that was common across participants. While personal lives may rarely be referred to in research on doctoral students, and students in this research sometimes downplayed personal issues, the personal cannot be separated from the academic. This was true across the doctoral students and candidates who completed logs. The majority of students at McGill imagined seeking academic positions upon completion (at the time of writing this chapter, seven held tenure-track academic faculty positions within a university), and 80% were designated and described themselves as full-time, though a large majority engaged in varied part-time employment within the university such as teaching or research assistantships in addition to their studies. At Simon Fraser, more than half imagined academic careers, with the other half in the process of considering if academia was an appropriate route. While participants at this University were all enrolled full-time in their studies, most maintained their previous full-time employment while pursuing their doctoral studies and only came to the campus for required classes or pre-arranged meetings. On the whole, individuals at this University were earlier in their programs, so were still engaged in course work in contrast with those at McGill who had mostly completed any course requirements. Regardless of university, about half of all students referred to working full-time at different points in their logs and at least one third noted needing to work because they were not otherwise funded.

Collectively, regardless of university, many had extensive work experience, were in their thirties, and one quarter had family responsibilities. In terms of family responsibilities, individuals referred to caring for sick children and dealing with elderly parents, and there were at least two participants in our research who were single parents with several children. As well, we know of four participants (two male and two female) that became parents during the PhD: Percilla in one log refers to “my son...just born [and] that implies readjustment of time for the PhD”. As well, we know of four participants who have partners or spouses that were on similar academic paths. In some cases this personal as well as “academic partnership” lead to

time-intensive sharing or collaborating with one another on academic tasks. In one log, Nancy refers to:

Spending a lot of time helping my husband write an application [for funding for a research conference from a major Canadian granting agency]...While at some point I might have felt it was a waste of time in terms of my own progress to work on my husband's application, it was a valuable experience beyond supporting my husband in his endeavours.

As Hall and Burns (2009) have noted of social science students generally, students at this highest level of education are already situated in a set of personal and professional relationships from the past as well as those of the present; each individual brings to the doctorate life circumstances, intentions, hopes, and emotions which can provide resources but can also impose constraints. As noted above, many were listed as full-time students yet the full-time jobs of a number are a reminder of how little official full and part-time status may actually represent the reality of doctoral student life. In fact, programs often require full-time status regardless of student circumstance. As Deem and Brehony (2000) have noted, this kind of variation in ability to be on-campus raises important questions about the differential access to research cultures experienced by students if they are part-time or with family responsibilities in comparison with those who are full-time or without family responsibilities.

What Are the Activities They Engaged in?

I don't see work/study/home as separate things. ...so when I go to work I love that but I don't call it going to work...I'm making contributions...[and] I work with the teachers in my research so everything is kind of interconnected and so it all starts to blend together very nicely and that is how I live my life. I don't see it very compartmentalized, but then what can happen sometimes is that one thing kind of gets a lot of my attention because it is working well, [as] I get a lot of positive feedback. You know, it is enriching. The people I am working with are enjoying it and so I start spending more time in that, whereas, the part of my life—whatever it may be even if it is repairing a car and delaying it...because it is of not an immediate concern I just can wait so some of those things get pushed back. So, with the dissertation too...there is not that immediate push that I need to get it done. (Mary)

Mary, one of the doctoral students in our research program, demonstrates the intermingling of different kinds of activities, including the personal (car repair) and the academic (collecting data in the field) and how these often emotionally laden activities may compete one with the other.

The doctoral students reported engaging in an amazing array of academic-related activities. Some were particular to doctoral work, others to more general academic work. Doctoral-related activities included:

- Submitting a dissertation or thesis (proposal, chapters, or the entire thesis document)
- Submitting funding applications, teaching as a TA, completing coursework

- Finishing comprehensive examinations (at both sites, these exams varied from program to program. In some cases, the exam was related specifically to the dissertation research and in others, the exam was intended to demonstrate a broad knowledge of the field)
- Being interviewed for a graduate position/award
- Student committee meeting
- Non-conference presentations (e.g. to other students, to fulfil a class requirement, or as part of informal within-faculty student focused research seminars/meetings)
- Attending workshops (e.g. preparing external funding applications)
- Research-related meetings (e.g. meeting committee members or other professors, working as an RA, attending research meetings)
- Attending someone else's oral defense of the PhD
- Meeting with supervisor(s) (e.g. approval of research or dissertation ideas)
- Dissertation writing
- Other doctoral-specific writing (e.g. proposal paper)
- Conversations with student peers
- Comprehensive examination-related tasks
- Reading and knowing the literature (e.g. required course reading)
- Reviewing work (e.g. dissertation)
- Supervisor
- Research-related issues (e.g. measurement in dissertation design)

Students also participated in activities that more senior academics would engage in. In some instances, these were similar to doctoral work but focused beyond the dissertation inquiry, (e.g. reading and knowing the literature) or were related to the doctoral work but encompassed a broader range, e.g. writing (and submitting) in a range of different academic genres, such as manuscript reviews, journal and conference papers, research funding applications, collaborative book editing. Other activities included, for instance:

- Acting as a consultant (and being invited to engage in other kinds of activities)
- Conference organization
- Attending meetings of different kinds to further intellectual work (e.g. meeting academics to discuss joint writing, book editing)
- Institutional tasks (e.g. teaching at the undergraduate or Masters level, participating in a departmental review) and, of course
- Job application activities (e.g. writing letters, submitting applications, preparing for interviews, responding to job offers)

In Regina's description below, we get a sense of the range of activities she engaged in during a week that were not necessarily formally incorporated into her doctoral program. Nevertheless, it could be argued that these activities are essential in coming to experience and understand the nature of academic work:

Writing, creating two posters, meetings (many!), attending our research centre knowledge fair, lab dinners, guest speakers, reading, meeting new people, attending a PhD defense dry run, also-instructed M.Ed. class and supervised students' projects.

This engagement in a range of activities was consistent across doctoral students at both universities, and involvement in them was often described as motivating and fulfilling. For instance, Barbara described an important event in one week:

I was invited to a meeting in the department to discuss the undergraduate courses in the program I teach. The professors and the Director didn't need to invite me as I was only a course lecturer, but inviting me shows me that they value my input.

And Ginger noted the value of “my work assisting in editing an academic book, and corresponding with authors. I felt connected with a research community”.

Overall, we would characterize the work that students reported as principally focused around two activities—writing and reading. In fact, both writing and reading were reported in 1/3 of all logs (reports of writing were somewhat lower at Simon Fraser University likely since students there were earlier in their programs). And reading and writing were often conceived as intimately intertwined as Corinne explains:

In writing—working on the comprehensive questions... I was using material that I had been reading over the last three years. I was practically writing about it every day either in doing discovery writing, maybe trying to, you know, build a concept map of what I was reading and then, of course, I was doing the writing and then I have several people that I talk with about what I'm learning and just like we are now on the telephone, just phone and have a conversation about it. So I felt that all of those things in combination I was adding to my own expertise in the topic area.

In characterizing the activities that students reported in the logs, we found 75% of recorded activities represented informal learning, learning as a by-product of experiences that are not designed as educational (Eraut 2007). Not surprisingly, in looking across the logs, reviewing and reflecting on experience represented 14% of the descriptions of what students did that could be characterized as informal. Here are two examples of this type of informal reflection:

I have to take risks and find my way in this process in order to learn from it...nobody is going to tell you what to do, which is what is really appealing about it, but is what's really hard about it. (Beatrice)

Take things that you kind of took for granted about yourself and re-order and re-learn and, you know, re-shape them. (Corinne)

These individuals were doing many things beyond the doctorate often intentionally that were essential to establishing an understanding of the nature of academic work and to developing and extending the intellectual and networking strands of their identity-trajectories (McAlpine et al. 2010; see Chap. 10 for more about identity-trajectory). The minutiae of varied daily activities and the role of diverse interactions are integral to students' cumulative experience and developing understanding of the doctorate and academic life. It is the repetitive and cumulative nature of these activities that contributes to learning, and thus, personal development of academic identity. In other words, our identities are experienced and socially constructed through action and interaction. As active agents, we contribute and respond to the dynamics of social life; agency is an evocation of identity as it represents our desire and capacity to engage in and also influence the activities and individuals with whom we interact.

Who Are the Individuals They Interact With?

Part of what I see being a professional and an academic...is networking, knowing what people are doing, collaborating, sharing resources and it's that stimulating conversation that you get once in a while—that really is why I'm here...The nature of the interaction is engaging—I don't know if it is high level questions, or questions that are unique, it's being open and sharing ideas that really have a basis in something and with people who know things that you don't know about. (Regina)

Regina captures here the exhilaration that doctoral students sometimes experienced in their interactions with others; of course, more negative interactions also occurred. In the logs, we asked individuals to identify those individuals they had drawn upon for support in the particular time period. Interestingly, the supervisor was identified in only 20% of all logs with family members and friends referred to with equal frequency. In addition, peers were cited in 15% of all logs, followed by other professors and student teams/groups at about 10% each. In other words, on a day-to-day basis, students drew on a range of individuals in a relatively distributed fashion. This information enabled us to capture the range of types of individuals that formed the constellation of networks that were ongoing parts of students' lives—individuals that could provide resources and support, but could also place demands and constraints.

In addition, an open-ended item asked students to identify the most important person influencing a sense of progress in the time period reflected in the log form. Here, the supervisor was named in 32% of all instances. While this is an increase in the frequency cited above, it did not reduce the range of types of individuals students viewed as most important in any one week or month. The others identified as most important were again distributed among peers (17%), other faculty members (13%), family and friends (22%), or others (5%). Strikingly, students named themselves as most important in 10% of all logs and we return to this point later. These combined findings overall represent the plenitude of interactions occurring with individuals beyond what is often viewed as the primary relationship with the supervisor. As such, it raises the issue that a focus on the student-supervisor relationship alone is not sufficient to encompass and do justice to either the complexity of networks that doctoral students establish or the range of academic work undertaken.

A further analysis of why the individuals named were important demonstrates that different types of individuals provided different kinds of support. It appears the supervisor is important as an institutional gatekeeper. Many of the interactions with supervisors documented in the logs and interviews (Jazvac-Martek 2009b) and the analysis of student-supervisor conversations (Pare et al. 2009) suggest the supervisor interactions are often directive; in other words, they were important in providing information related to successful completion of the dissertation or institutional requirements. For instance, one student commented that in a meeting her supervisor “gave constructive feedback on my proposal (+) but tried to convince me to delay my internship [a program requirement], thus delaying my graduation (–)”. In the following excerpt, a supervisor explains to a student the strategy behind choosing the external dissertation examiners:

You've got to be careful about who you choose to be external examiners. Someone like [Prof. X], for example, might fail this [dissertation] because...she'd have huge problems with this, okay? There are other people who wouldn't. ...And I think that's who we'll send it to. We'll put them down as the examiners. There's, if you like, a politics to it, right?

In contrast with supervisory relationships representing more directive interactions, interactions with other academics (often sought out) demonstrated collaboration, belonging, and affirmation. Such interactions potentially established networks for students' academic futures. Beatrice describes a research meeting she had with professors she was working with:

We had a very productive meeting and were all able to help each other clarify our ideas about the project we are working on. We are still in the exploratory stages of this project, but at this meeting, the project's future began to take shape.

And, Nancy describes the effect of interacting with more senior academics at a conference:

The fact that I had confirmation from well-known experts in my field that the literature I had identified so far for my topics was pretty complete...gave me confidence in my research skills and knowledge that I've acquired so far.

In addition, these interactions with senior academics, in Wendy's case at a conference, could provide contrastive and positive responses to that apparently received from the supervisor or committee she was working with:

While I have been ever so slightly considering the idea of dropping out, I very much enjoyed the interactions with the other profs at the conference. Also, I received very good feedback on my presentation skills (something I am not very confident about). This feedback has made me think that maybe I can handle (and excel at) teaching. (Wendy)

Peers offered another kind of relationship; they seemed important in being motivating and giving and receiving feedback in dialogic exchanges. Here, Regina talks about why her lab mates are important: "They are friends and a source of stress relief during the day, and also because we give each other feedback and remind each other about deadlines etc. that are coming up."

While these exchanges were often reciprocal and sometimes involved collective effort to achieve goals (e.g. organizing a support group), students also expressed pleasure in offering expertise to peers:

[I had] a meeting with a prof and another student about figuring out how to analyze a data set and helping the student use the program and interpret the results. (Regina)

Family and friends offered a different kind of relationship again; this could be facilitative, for instance, Jane comments: "My sisters took care of my sick parents so I could continue to work on my PhD", and also emotionally supportive, as with Regina receiving support from her fiancé:

I have been anxious about finishing this part of my literature review and I find it challenging. He is emotional support for me, and gives me pep talks. He also helps me manage my time between work and my lit review (I often work for my RA position far more than I am supposed to).

While supervisors were reported by students as being important, students were also particularly respectful of supervisors; they recognized that supervisors were busy people as Donna comments: “My supervisor is very busy and I don’t have the same contact with her [but] there isn’t much I can do about the load she is expected to take on.” Further, they might not be willing to reveal the extent of any difficulties, as students were concerned that they might be perceived as not being able to do what seemed to be expected of them. Mary commented: “I respect [my supervisors]...I only will go to them if I feel I’ve got something valid or...if we’ve got meetings, I will prepare for them...so I hope I don’t over-familiarise.” While others were explicitly dismayed when their expectations of how much time their supervisor would spend with them were not adequately satisfied:

[I wanted help with] deciding on how to deal with some of the requested changes from my committee...For some of these issues I feel [my supervisor] has the final say, for others I don’t think she would know what the best answer would be...but I didn’t get that help because I have the impression that she is too busy to help me this week and I mainly plan to just make the decisions on my own and leave it at that. (Wendy)

Lastly, the fact that 10% of progress logs named the student, him- or herself, as the most important individual in the time period in advancing doctoral work demonstrates an awareness by the individual of his/her own resourcefulness and agency. Here, Regina describes being quite strategic in establishing a relationship with an academic elsewhere:

I read a few papers written by [xx] to learn about his work and set up a meeting to meet when I am in [a particular city] in June. This is very important because my ultimate goal is to work (as a professor preferably) in that city [my home town].

In the North American model of doctoral education, the supervisor is the main point of contact for the student and is often conceived in the literature as the most important person in a students’ experience, and critical to progress and completion of the degree (Wright 2003). Yet, the findings above point to a plenitude of supportive and critical interactions occurring beyond the primary relationship with the supervisor. Students in our research were on the whole well networked and depended on these relationships for different kinds of support. But at the same time they needed to negotiate their intentions and reciprocate in different ways with different individuals.

What Were the Kinds of Difficulties They Experienced and Their Responses to Them?

Getting a grasp on time management, there are only so many hours in a day, and that the number of activities that are part of a doctoral degree are almost impossible to do given time constraints. (Charles, time difficulty: overwhelming number of tasks/activities)

Not enough social opportunities with peers in the Department, so feeling a little isolated. (Barbara, isolation difficulty: general negative affect)

Brain drain, exhaustion, frustration—all mental challenges associated with being overwhelmed and anxious. (Holly, fatigue & anxiety difficulties: general negative affect)

I did feel at an intellectual dead-end. I knew I had to write more for my paper, but I had no more energy or ideas. (Helga, no energy, fatigue related to writing)

Usual writing block, actually managed to write past that, so that was encouraging. (Aileen, success in overcoming expected difficulty with writing)

An important book I had at the library was recalled and I had to return it. (Barbara, loss of resource)

Practically no written information provided by my program about [...] internship sites. (Diane, difficulty getting resources)

In the logs, students were asked to identify any difficulties experienced. A wide range of difficulties was reported. In order of frequency of occurrence these included:

- Lack of time to complete the tasks that the student hoped to complete
- Negative affect that were permeated experience (e.g. lack of motivation, intellectually lonely or not belonging, discouraged, fearful)
- Intellectual or writing block (e.g. inability to write, having too many ideas, needing to refine or make work more focused)
- Resource constraints (e.g. lack of office space, difficulty accessing research population, not being able to obtain a needed book or data analysis software)
- An unclassified cluster related to either personal life issues, or logistical issues that were delaying further actions

A very small number of logs responses reported a lack of support by the supervisor or committee members, and this is taken up in the next section. Importantly, in about 40% of the logs, students either cited having no difficulty, or did not complete the item. In other words, students were not necessarily experiencing difficulties on an ongoing basis but rather different kinds of difficulties came and went, or students may not have felt comfortable or able to name any difficulties they may have encountered. How did students respond to the difficulties reported?

No matter what people may say about “the system” being unsupportive, or plagued with biases and power differentials, I...believe each student needs to acknowledge these barriers and move ahead...as best as possible. This means focusing energy and getting things done, which is ultimately an individual effort. (Charles)

Charles articulates a sense of personal responsibility that others also demonstrated for advancing progress despite any difficulties faced. Corrine echoes this sentiment:

I do not like to work from the deficit model and complain that I do not have enough time, which like everyone else is the case. From the asset model I consider myself lucky to have a living work experience that adds value to me personally and to my research and practices. [For example], this week I woke up every morning at 4 and wrote till 5:30 then walked with a friend where we talked about education. She is at the level of the inquirers I will research. Talking with her about issues she faces helps me clarify my thinking and adds motivation to continuing my studies.

Students also reported how they reacted to or acted upon the difficulties that were named. In 69% of the instances of difficulty, students were able to articulate some

type of action that they personally took to address the difficulty; in the remainder of the instances they did not take any action or reported that it was not possible to take any actions.

In the vast majority of actions taken to address difficulties, students overwhelmingly placed the sole responsibility for addressing the difficulty on their own shoulders. In their elaborations each considered outsider aid unwarranted, such as, for example, in experiences of anxiety or writer's block, the view was that they were the only ones who could change the situation. Responses to how time issues and experiences of negative affect were dealt with included items such as: better planning, better prioritizing, getting more sleep, and reviewing other previous work. Other interesting, yet elusive responses included:

Be more proactive and organized, and more relaxed, mindful; just learn to live with this reality; staying up late and getting up extremely early; the fear of writing a mediocre essay I overcame by postponing the writing of that essay; compartmentalize!

Interestingly, in the very few instances when students approached other individuals to help manage a particular difficulty, those whom each approached was equally distributed across supervisor, other professors, peers, family, and others (e.g. librarian, a counsellor). Hence, students were actively trying to address perceived difficulties, each focusing foremost on resolving the difficulty by changing something within themselves, and only secondarily demonstrating a willingness to address difficulties by using networks they had cultivated within and outside of the formal academic environment.

Overall, what is apparent in the students' responses is that experiencing difficulties is a common experience though not necessarily constant, nor debilitating. In fact, we were struck by how all participants in our program remained in their programs despite the difficulties they reported both academic and personal. Wright (2003) reported that two thirds of those who completed in four years—what would be institutionally considered a timely fashion—experienced difficulties. Interestingly, they also reported more extensive networks of relationships than those taking considerably longer. In two other studies (Rennie and Brewer 1987; Maher et al. 2004), students who reported fewer difficulties consistently reported drawing on networks of relationships, in some cases strategically, in other cases emotionally. In other words, it appears that difficulties can contribute to delaying completion but not necessarily. Further, being able to draw on a range of relationships for support may be critical in progressing.

Ongoing Cumulative Difficulties: Those Less Heard

Well to be honest, I have no support/pressure/encouragement from my committee to actually do anything on my thesis. I am not sure they would notice before the end of the semester, or even the academic year, if I made no progress on my thesis at all. No one really checks in on me (the meeting with my advisor today was about her research not mine—we just happened to chat about mine—because I brought it up). (Wendy)

Wendy was unusual among the participants in describing quite bumpy experiences during her doctoral studies—primarily because of an ongoing sense of isolation within the department. Overall, we were struck that participants continued to feel they were making progress despite naming varied difficulties and multiple demands on their time. We wondered if we were missing important stories and decided to seek out those who characterized themselves as experiencing sustained difficulty. We interviewed individuals who were “successful” on paper because they were all going to finish their PhDs (and some have since the interviews), but who perceived their road to completion to be particularly bumpy, with extreme challenges or conditions that were emotionally invasive and draining. In the following, we draw on interviews with eight of these students who were in the same faculty at McGill University as those described earlier.

As noted in the previous section, generally students were actively developing networks, a set of personal supports, which were largely not programmatic and institutional. Further, when difficulties did arise the vast majority took on responsibility for the difficulty instead of seeing it as a structural difficulty or an issue within the system of their program. When they did seek help, they each engaged many kinds of individuals (peers, friends, supervisor, other professors, support staff, etc.) but rarely reported contacting the Chair of the department or the Program Director, individuals who might conceivably bring about structural changes. These earlier findings influenced our interest in seeing the extent and nature of the networks that this smaller group of individuals had and drew upon.

Complexity of Experienced Difficulties

A number had experienced health and family issues, such as broken bones, stress, and financial strains (taking on multiple jobs, working full-time, needing to finish quickly). All had personal networks of family and friends (sometimes geographically distant, e.g. elsewhere because student moved to do the doctorate), and often with related responsibilities (e.g. child care). We present three profiles so it is possible to get a sense of the intertwining and cumulative complexity of the challenges these individuals reported experiencing.

Theresa is in the third year of her doctorate. She works several additional jobs despite being relatively well funded (she has an SSHRC) since she is carrying a debt of about \$90,000. She began her PhD because she had difficulty finding work with an MA in Education and realized that unless she were to teach in schools, she needed to go back to graduate school to make her MA worthwhile. She has two sons who until quite recently were financially dependent on her, and she finds the workload (4–5 part-time jobs) a challenge. She also has had some difficulty finding support networks that are established in the Department, so started one in her first year but no longer has time to attend. She describes her program to be not as theoretically rigorous as she had hoped.

Sylvia, in her fourth year, is part of a visible minority and came to McGill at the beginning of the second year of her PhD, transferring from another university to maintain her supervisory relationship. This decision meant she and her partner were separated by distance. During the second year of her doctoral studies, her supervisory relationship broke down and she switched to a different supervisor. At the end of her second year, her new supervisor left the university, and she switched again to a different supervisor, who she was working with at the time of our research. She has moved back to live with her partner, a far distance from the University, and she is currently finishing up her analysis and writing her dissertation!

Arnold, in his third year, has just completed his comprehensive exams. He is commuting to the University from the United States (about a six-hour drive, and is also undergoing a significant change in his family structure, grappling with the emotional and logistical effects of divorce and custody issues). He changed his supervisor because he felt he had not been receiving feedback on his writing or other support from his supervisor in a timely manner, and had also experienced a conflict with his supervisor when attempting to collaborate on a paper with a committee member.

Changing Supervisor

Sylvia and Arnold, like others in the group who had changed supervisors, reported these experiences as traumatic.

During my second year, my supervisor's partner [who is also an academic] and I completely went off track. I have no idea what happened...but [it]...poisoned the relationship with my supervisor. I also felt that I was not in charge of my PhD. [After I e-mailed potential committee members for advice,] I got an email from the supervisor...It was the nastiest email I've ever gotten in my life. [So,] I changed in February and then by summer I realized that the current supervisor was probably going to leave [the University], and so switched to the third supervisor I am currently with. (Sylvia)

Sometimes, concern about not "hurting" others overrode looking after personal needs.

[In changing supervisors] I was really caught up with not wanting to...hurt anybody's feelings...in many ways that was more of a concern to me than what I needed for my PhD...so I was really scared and so that was more my focus—I'll move to this person and then try to do it in such a way as not to hurt the other person. So whether or not it was a fit, it was almost a sense of "I have to get away from this other person." And it seemed like a fit but I don't think that I looked into it as closely as I should have even though people might have said I should have. (Clare)

It was evident that students did not realize that supervisory change was a relatively regular feature of academic life.

Leading up to the switch, it is so opaque that process, that I felt that trauma that this is the most horrible thing that I could possibly decide to do and I'm so nervous about the retribution that I might feel after doing this and nobody has told me what a normal process it is, right. So if I knew that it was normal then I would have probably switched a lot sooner and saved myself maybe a year. (Arnold)

Supervisory “Absence”

However, supervisor change was only one feature of their experiences; supervisors were also reported as absent, not intellectually supportive, and not providing guidance.

He is a very good person but as far as any kind of [direction]—like that just doesn’t happen at all. ...Like all of that has been completely self-directed I would say. ...I had written a paper for a journal...I told him that I had written a paper, but he hadn’t read it or anything like that—but they sent it to him for review because they didn’t know that he was my supervisor. (Theresa; on experiencing a lack of direction)

The recognition of my supervisor is that her students are brilliant because they don’t need help, and we don’t need help. (Sandra; on feeling unsupported)

As well, the supervisor and the committee were not always perceived as intellectual colleagues, part of the developing networks the students might maintain. In fact, they sometimes appeared to constrain a student’s intellectual development:

I feel that I’m working with a committee that comes from very different research traditions and very different theoretical backgrounds and I kind of feel in some ways caught between trying to write a thesis that is emerging out of my experience in the field, my personal experience of the teacher, you know, the theories that I’m working with, and then there are all these [committee] people. (Ann)

Avoiding Retribution

Fear of becoming known and of retribution emerged early in this study. A number of students who had agreed to participate ultimately withdrew because of such concerns. And, many participating did not want to fully describe the events and requested details to be substantially changed to preserve their anonymity. Arnold articulated the impact of having raised the issue of changing supervisors on his relationship to his department, given the hierarchy of power:

It felt like I set in motion a group of people not liking me and therefore I didn’t know how far those dominos fell...I walked in this building for about four or five months like this [motions here] worried about who I might see in the hall, worried about what somebody might say about me, worried about how sort of my self was being reflected in conversations.

Disillusionment

A number reported having come to the degree with what they now characterized as idealistic expectations of the PhD and academia. They now reported being either disenchanted with academia as a possible future (Arnold below) or rethinking the kind of life they would want, for instance, because of work–life balance (Clare below).

After what I have experienced these last few years—I'm completely jaded and sickened by what I saw and experienced and still see and I don't want to be a part of that. (Arnold)

I'm maybe a little disenchanted by the whole academic scene...I don't see having an academic job right now as being such a glorious end point. When you are working more closely with faculty...you see a lot of the games that go on in the background and...that it is kind of a cutthroat business in a lot of ways, which is not what I was looking for...[so] I'm very comfortable with my position of not being willing to sacrifice my family to get a PhD...that would be stupid...I don't want to make [the degree] sound like it is not important...I do want to have an academic job and I want to do good work—but I see it as just a part of the rest of my life now. (Clare)

The cumulative result of these experiences sometimes challenged their sense of agency and ability to negotiate support within the academic arena, even if temporarily. Insofar as agency was being exerted, it was often done through distal and informal channels comprised of networks of family, friends, or previous colleagues. Many did not know how to, or were uncomfortable, exerting agency within their immediate academic networks of supervisor, other professors, department leaders, etc. Sylvia noted: "I was in a position of no power here. No allies. Not even in the graduate school at the student level."

Overall, we would characterize what students described as a combination of the following: they often brought with them strong earlier networks that they wished to maintain (family support and responsibilities) and possibly disrupted earlier networks (through having moved). They were also experiencing disrupted present networks (through illness or maintaining past networks) and finally sometimes a lack of new and growing networks (heavy external workload to handle financial difficulties resulting in a lack of presence in department, changes in committee members and supervisors followed by a perceived alienation). This contrasted somewhat with the larger group of students who had not reported the complexity of difficulties these students did—the reader may recall that the other students reported an extensive network of relationships both within and outside of their immediate academic environments.

In the case of this smaller group of students, while supervisory relations were sometimes the source of difficulty, it was much more than this. Departments and academics generally were seen to be lacking in awareness of the complexity of students' past and present lives beyond the academy. To the students, there appeared to be no institutional oversight of practices and structures to support them, leaving them feeling relatively without power in the department. Yet, despite the problems these individuals experienced, these students were still persisting, just as the larger group of students who reported relatively fewer tensions and challenges. In doing so, they were mindful of not revealing their difficulties to those in the institution (and sometimes even to their peers), and instead presumably called on those beyond the institution (i.e. family members and friends) to support them emotionally, academically, and socially. They were thus unfortunately leaving undisturbed the cultural narrative in which supervisors often characterize difficulties faced by doctoral students as a result of student weakness, or they blame students themselves for difficulties they may encounter (Manathunga 2005; Gardner 2009).

Sylvia is very aware of this: “If I leave [the university] and don’t say anything and don’t do anything, then it just keeps going to inertia...supervisors, the departmental program itself.” Unless students such as these feel able to make their experiences public (and are supported in this), it is likely that student deficiencies will continue to be the cultural narrative to explain slow progress, and programmatic and institutional responsibility to review departmental or research practices will not be undertaken. While we are mindful that these few stories were not common, the stories nevertheless highlight the fact that without an impetus for structural change, students such as these will continue to experience the same cultural practices of neglect.

Negotiated Agency

In examining how students engaged in interactions with others, we saw emerging what we have termed negotiated agency. Students in our research were negotiating their intentions as they called on different kinds of individuals for different kinds of support with more directive roles linked to the supervisor and other academics and more supportive roles to other students and family/friends. Recall the three ways in which Regina acted, i.e., helping and being helped in the study group, facilitating someone else’s agency when helping the student and professor, being helped by her fiancé. We also saw Wendy initiating an activity (i.e. preparing for and contacting a professor) and responding to an emerging experience (i.e. positive response to interaction with professors at a conference). Sometimes, individuals had to modify or balance their own intentions to achieve a larger outcome. Here, Holly describes changing her thesis structure to comply with institutional demands in order to complete her degree:

I had started writing my dissertation with a...more narrative...focus and [in] the department...you get a lot of support for doing things that are...creative...but...when it came down to it, that kind of...creativity was not matched with...the institutional demands of...a dissertation. ...there was...inherent conflict [so]...I ended up changing the way I was writing.

Sometimes they sought help but this was not perceived as appropriate, so they had to fall back on their own resources. Mike, for instance, tried to advance his proposal writing (a goal set by his supervisor) by asking his supervisor if he could join the supervisor’s research team, but the supervisor felt this inappropriate:

Right now the onus is on me to do the legwork. To figure out—like you can’t tell me what I’m going to research. I tried to get him to [let me join the research team] but...his belief is [it’s for me to decide]...which is true. Like, I agree with him but I just think it would have been really easy to get into the research team.

And, individuals sometimes challenged their own intentions. Here, Holly questions her teaching:

[My] research...has really...made the way that I teach much more difficult and challenging because basically...I’ve reached this point where I don’t really think you can teach writ-

ing...yet I'm still...expected to teach writing and so...I had my students yesterday writing an essay and there was this huge conflict within myself...I tried to create...some meaningful reason for writing an essay about African elephants which...there's not! But that's in the curriculum...so I really struggled...with bringing what I've learned in my research into my classroom and meeting the demands of the institution.

However, we saw hardly any instances of students challenging others about a perceived situation. This lack of challenge may emerge from a sense that they alone are responsible for handling the difficulty (maintaining the culture of blame). It may be partly due to an unwillingness to challenge more powerful others (as noted in the previous section). It may also result from an inability to see the ways in which structural constraints are influencing behaviour, or a lack of knowledge about where to go to challenge the problem. We believe it is helpful for students to value being responsive to the expectations and demands of others given the peer-review culture of academia (Enders 2007); to attend to the opinions of others is necessary to advance thinking and contribution to the discipline. However, it is also important for students to recognize and value that it is possible to find ways to create new social practices as well as ignore old ones (Billett 2009).

A Different View of Doctoral Experience

The varied contexts in which similar results were obtained across the two universities and the different time frames of the log questionnaires support the robustness of these findings. First of all, the analyses underlying this chapter remind us of the diversity in the past and present experiences, emotions, relationships, and resources of doctoral students. Many of these individuals were undertaking their doctorates in the midst of busy lives and many responsibilities. A focus on their academic experience alone will overlook both the resources and demands that they each bring with them to the endeavour. In addition, what we documented provides a distinct view of the ways in which students spend their time. Many are taking the opportunity to engage in the range of activities and tasks that represent academic work; this is fortunate for those who want academic careers. We noted particularly the importance of reading and writing as fundamental features of day-to-day life.

Collectively, the patterns related to positive interactions with others highlight student engagement with a number of individuals in diverse ways that move beyond the primary relationship with the supervisor. These “other” interactions are often hidden from the view of the supervisor, likely unacknowledged, and are not designed or necessarily perceived as activities that aid progress. However, as our findings indicate, these interactions can have an impact on the sense of forward movement and of learning as a probable by-product. The students reported engaging with family and friends, peers and supervisors as resources on a regular basis and cited these groups as “most important” for varied reasons. This finding raises questions about the assumed centrality and singularity of the supervisory relationship. While the supervisory relationship is important, our results suggest that students

are actively cultivating many other important relationships beyond the supervisor. Nevertheless, neglect by the supervisor can have detrimental effects.

In terms of difficulties, the findings reported here are again distinct when compared to previous research work on student experiences. Previous work has tended to focus on singular events, or data collected in retrospect. In reviewing the ongoing nature of the doctoral journey reported here, we can see that some of the common issues named in the literature such as funding or problematic relationships with supervisors or committees were not named with any large or recognizable frequency—one of the reasons for our further study of the few individuals where both these emerged more strongly. Overall, the difficulties named represented smaller difficulties that reflect the daily stumbling blocks on the path to completion. Students cycled between positive interactions with others and trying to get a better grasp on planning, creating reasonable expectations on their time and quality of work, finding the appropriate resources and dealing with the negative affect that arose when goals could not be met.

In terms of agency in dealing with difficulties, when a possible resolution was entertained, it was conceived of as involving the individual alone, through, for example, engaging in better planning or preparation or undergoing some abstract internal changes. One might interpret this finding as suggestive of students being unable to see the connection between the importance of interactions with others to help motivate a sense of progress (which they reported doing) and using these same interactions to begin to address or work through difficulties. An alternate explanation could be that their reliance on the self in addressing the difficulties was possibly a form of self-isolation, one built around a cultural narrative of academic individualism (Deem and Brehony 2000) picked up through interactions with academics in their departments, in conjunction with the cultural narrative of student deficiencies as the core of lack of progress (Gardner 2009). It is possible that this same internal personal focus on bearing responsibility may help explain the more extended difficulties of those who identified themselves as experiencing a particularly bumpy doctoral journey as well as contribute to the widely cited “imposter syndrome” experienced by doctoral students.

It is also important to address the ongoing diminished presence of the supervisor in these log reports with respect to reported difficulties. The supervisor was rarely sought out for help with these difficulties, and was not frequently named as an important person influencing progress. As noted, in the previous section and similar to earlier reports (Manathunga 2005), students do not want to share certain types of difficulties with supervisors viewing such difficulties as evidence of lack of ability. Expressing these concerns to those to whom they may already feel inferior (through the unequal student–teacher power relationship) may expose their own vulnerabilities to other.

All these findings require us to re-examine the overwhelming importance that is placed on ameliorating the student–supervisor relationship. A large number of “how-to” books, institutional workshops, and advice articles in the journals of scholarly societies are aimed at either the student or supervisor around the theme of improving aspects of this relationship. We argue that it is equally important to begin

to focus on cultivating student-negotiated agency in addition to these. Our findings show students as demonstrating agency in seeking out interactions that positively influence a sense of progress, but also restrict their agency in response to difficulties and tensions that may hinder a sense of progress. More work needs to be done to explore this variation in agency as well as how this negotiated agency can be better fostered.

Overall, we would argue that while the doctoral journey is often characterized as one from dependence to independence (e.g. Sweitzer 2009), we are not sure this is the most appropriate characterization. In the academic world today, there are increasing calls for knowledge creation to be collaborative (Henkel 2000) and reports demonstrating a growing international pattern of co-publication in nearly all fields (Gingras 2002). Thus, we believe supporting doctoral students in developing their ability to negotiate intentions and extend and maintain a network of relationships may serve them better in their academic futures.

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