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Jumping Into the Abyss: Life After the Doctorate

Partial Paper of a Multi-Phase of Phenomenological Study:

Executive Summary for Phase III

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Abstract

This multi-phase phenomenological study explored doctoral graduates' perceptions of self, identity and adjustment in the post-dissertation phase, using Neugarten's (1978) Adult Development Theory and Lachman's (2004) Midlife Development Theory to frame the findings. This third and final phase probed doctoral degree graduates' personal reflections and 'crossroad' stories to highlight the commonalities of this adjustment phase for all participants. While considerable research has been conducted on currently enrolled doctoral students, it has focused predominantly on Ph.D. graduates (Baird, 1997; D'Andrea, 2002; Di Pierro, 2007). Minimal research, however, has been conducted on Ed.D. graduates, already actively engaged as working professionals, where the issues of personal accomplishment and achievement, loss, isolation, identity, role clarity, and professional recognition were examined through the lens of the 'lived experience' of purposefully selected participants from a small Ed.D. program in the northeast. Moustakas (1994) phenomenological analysis strategies, overlapping with Neugarten's (1978) and Lachman's (2004) theoretical frames, guided the primary data analysis and interpretation. Results may further illuminate the ways in which EdD staff and faculty can support EdD graduates with customized programs and services as they assume new leadership roles as scholar-practitioners in their professional fields.

Jumping Into the Abyss: Life After the Doctorate

"It was like jumping into an abyss… this place where all the activity, and angst and energy just went silent. And I was unprepared for that feeling, that when I had gained something so significant, I also lost something?"

Introduction

Considerable research has been conducted on enrolled doctoral students in process (Baird, 1997; David, 2011; Pauley, 2004) relative to the issues of 1) overcoming obstacles to completing the dissertation, 2) managing feelings of isolation and disengagement during the dissertation research process, 3) successfully completing dissertation research and manuscript preparation, 4) negotiating relationships with advisors and committee members, and 5) searching for teaching or scholarship positions after degree completion. Research on the doctoral degree graduate has typically focused on individuals in PhD programs, where the post-graduation transition is realized in the move toward traditional academic roles, such as teaching and/or research (D'Andrea, 2002; Demb, 2012: Di Pierro, 2007; Johnson & Conyers, 2001; Varney, 2010); however, minimal research has been conducted on EdD graduates who are already actively engaged as practitioners in their fields, and who must balance considerable work-life challenges while pursuing their degrees.   The issues of personal accomplishment, anxiety, isolation, loss, hopes and aspirations, identity and role clarity, and professional recognition were examined through the lens of the 'lived experience' of purposefully selected participants, who recently graduated from a small EdD program in the Northeast.

Conceptual Framework

By integrating the theoretical perspectives of Neugarten's (1978) Adult Development Theory and Lachman's (2004) Midlife Development Theory, this study explored the experiences of doctoral degree graduates' perceptions regarding the shift from doctoral student to EdD graduate. Neugarten's Adult Development Theory (1978) formed the original basis for this exploration, based on her insights about how individuals encounter new life stages as they age. Those stages are defined by implicitly and explicitly defined roles, responsibilities, and expectations. Neugarten's work on aging focused

specifically on the period of 'middle age', when educational and professional demands intersect with an individual's personal and family expectations. Her work further suggested that there is an implied timing to each stage of life and when an individual feels that their goals are not achieved 'on time' or as expected, that individual may struggle with a sense of crisis or undesired change (2007, p. 314).

Lachman (2004), building on Neugarten's (1978) work, extended the perspective on Neugarten's adult development focus, emphasizing the challenges of mid-adult life cycles. Her theory emphasizes the central themes of midlife as balancing work and family responsibilities with the myriad psycho-social changes associated with professional development, aging, and adjustment to demographic and societal shifts. Lachman's work is particularly applicable as a lens for doctoral graduates due to her focus on 'middle age' adjustment as encompassing the contrast between a highly functioning adult who feels the need to be performing at their peak professionally and personally with the stresses of those intrinsic fears related to missed opportunities, personal crisis, failure, and inadequacy (2004). Furthermore, Lachman's concept of midlife is less focused on biological markers and more reflective of an adult's midpoint for personal and psycho-social development (2004).

While not all doctoral graduates may conform to the stereotypical 'middle age' label, their collective progression from young professional/young parent/young learner to an individual with more substantial life experience provides a foundation for viewing this population of well-educated and motivated adults. This particular population, specifically the EdD doctoral graduate population, allows for deep and rich exploration of the complex process an adult encounters during periods of change.   Both Neugarten's (1978) and Lachman's (2004) theories provide a relevant lens through which adult development and midlife adjustments can be better understood when exploring the significant transitions that doctoral graduates experience.

Research Questions

All phases of this study were guided by one overarching qualitative research question and two sub-questions:

RQ1: How do graduates of an Ed.D. program ascribe meaning to their lives in the post-doctoral degree period?

RQ1a: In what ways do graduates identify and describe their educational and professional accomplishment, and identity and role clarity in the post-degree period?

RQ1b: How do graduates frame the perspective of personal and professional 'timing' and achievement relative to the completion of their doctorate?

Methods

This multi-phase qualitative phenomenological study explored doctoral degree graduates' perceptions of self, identity, purpose and adjustment in the post-dissertation phase. Three qualitative sequential phases were employed (multiple phases within a single paradigm), each intended to inform the subsequent phase for instrumentation development and data collection strategies: 1) Phase I comprised elite interviews with N=4 participants, using an interview protocol to explore perceptions of the progression from doctoral student to graduate; 2) Phase II employed N=3 focus groups with N=18 participants, using focus group moderator guides informed by the Phase I findings; questions evolved that would create synergistic conversations among participants regarding the post-dissertation and doctoral graduate experience, with particular emphasis on theoretical phenomenon; and 3) Phase III employed reflective engagement with N=15 participants using a qualitative reflexive instrument to obtain personal stories, 'crossroad' stories, and metaphors, to capture the 'lived experience' through linguistic devices. Participants for all phases were purposefully selected to represent 1) EdD graduates from a small Northeast University, where 2) participants had completed the program within the past 10 years, and 3) individuals represented a distributive balance between K-12 and higher education cohorts.

Data analysis strategies for Phases I and II employed Moustakas' (1994) phenomenological approach to synthesize significant statements and stories reflecting the essence of this post-dissertation adjustment phase, including within-case and cross-case analyses to further refine the themes. Phase III data analyses employed three approaches, one for thematic identification to interpret stories, metaphors and phrases (Moustakas, 1994), a second stage to overlay theoretical frameworks, and a third stage to apply linguistic interpretation (Whitcomb & Deshler, 1983). The final analysis from all three research phases will integrate findings to represent the 'lived experience' of doctoral graduates in this meaningful post-degree period. These findings will also be interpreted using the theoretical framework to expand findings and identify new phenomena that may emerge as a result of the 'essence' meaning of this particular 'lived experience'.

Participant Selection

As qualified in prior phases, Phase III participants were purposefully selected based on the following criteria: 1) they must have graduated from the target university's EdD program within the past ten years; 2) they must have been continuously enrolled from program matriculation through dissertation defense; and 3) there must be an equal distribution of participants from the two program strands of higher education professionals and elementary/secondary professionals. This research relied on participant words as the primary sources of data; hence, purposeful selection ensured that 'information rich' cases would be included to support the overall research objectives.

Instrumentation

Three instruments were used in this research study: 1) depth interview protocols, 2) focus group moderator guides, and 3) reflective questionnaires. Relative to Phase III data collection, a reflective questionnaire was designed to capture participants' personal experiences to elicit critical incidents and stories using linguistic interventions and free word associations. The instrument included 14 questions, using a mix of open-ended, free word association, and metaphor-creation prompts. Participants were able to self-select the words, phrases, and expressions with personal significance as they described

their adjustment in the program and in the post-dissertation phase. This type of instrumentation has been used in considerable narrative and phenomenological studies as a way to uncover personal insights in a non-threatening or non-invasive manner, thereby securing more reflective and interpretative information than if questions were posed directly and more concretely (Moustakas, 1994; Van Maanen, 1985).

Data Collection

Data collection for all phases of the study spanned the period from February 2013 through September 2014. This final phase was conducted from May through July 2014, using an online, open-ended reflective questionnaire. This questionnaire was distributed to purposefully selected EdD graduates (N=25) in order to capture their personal experiences by eliciting self-described critical incidents and stories using linguistic interventions and free word associations. These participants were selected, in addition to the initial criteria for the study, to include individuals who had 1) requested participation in the study but could not attend focus group sessions, or 2) individuals who had verbally shared perspectives and experiences with the researcher and who seemed ideal to characterize those experiences within the confines of a reflectively guided instrument. At the conclusion of the data collection period, N=15 participants completed the online reflective questionnaire.

Piloting of the instrument occurred with the original elite interview participants, to corroborate instrumentation development based on prior findings. The initial email contact with participants was followed by two reminders in a 14 day period during the late spring-early summer of 2014. As is often the case with reflective data collection strategies, participants extended their dialogue with the researcher after completing the online questionnaire by emailing or calling to add details to their stories or comments. These supplemental findings were included with the final data set for corroboration with initial thematic interpretations.

Data Analysis. Several strategies were employed for data analysis and interpretation, applied sequentially through the phases of this study. Overall, the goal was to identify the 'essence' of what participants have experienced and extract a composite description of that essence, accounting for all participant perspectives. As

Patton (2002) notes, "essence is viewed as commonalities in the human experience" (p. 106). Moustakas' (1994) process consists of the following steps:

- Immersion: the researcher is involved in the world of the experience
- Incubation: a space for awareness, intuitive or tacit insights, and understanding
- Illumination: active knowing process to expand the understanding of the experience
- Explication: reflective actions
- Creative synthesis: bring together to show the patterns and relationships.

Phase III data analysis used Moustakas' (1994) phenomenological approach to identify themes, followed by an overlay of the two theories to uncover the ways in which those themes supported the conceptual characteristics of adjustment and transition. A third strategy was added after initial analysis to overlay linguistic devices, modeled after Whitcomb and Deshler's (1983) model for linguistic analysis but applying slightly different categories for inclusion: language of reasoning (LR), language of emotion (LE), and language of identity (LI). This modification evolved as a result of thematic coding.

The analysis matrix followed the parameters outlined below:

Thematic Analysis	+	Theoretical Tenets	>>>>>>>>>> Linguistic Devices
Motivations to pursue degree		Developmental life stages	LR
Transition into program		on-time vs. off time, midlife crisis	LR, LE, LI
Doctoral student identity		impetus for transformative learning	LI
Cohort attachment		social cohesion vs. personal growth	LI
Transition out of program		sense of detachment, loss, grief, isolation	LR, LE, LI
Recognition and achievement		meeting personal goals, aspirations, dreams	LI
Seeking new levels of identity		development triggered by major change in life	LE, LI

Trustworthiness. As Lincoln and Guba (1985) state, the rigor of any qualitative study is strengthened by the strategies employed to enhance credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. This research ensured trustworthiness through member-checking with select participants across all phases (credibility), an external audit where an outside researcher reviewed the procedures for clarity and to corroborate findings (dependability), triangulation through multiple methods and data sources (confirmability) and detailed "thick description" in all interview and focus group transcripts and reflective questionnaire narratives (transferability). Phase III trustworthiness concluded with the inclusion of a special elite informant to review reflective questionnaire findings, seeking confirmation or disconfirmation of their own experience in the EdD program and their own assessment of appropriate rigor and quality in the study. This process also included researcher-debriefing, which is another strategy for ensuring dependability for qualitative findings.

Findings

While a comprehensive analysis of Phase III findings is still in process, to be followed by a final report on all three research phases, highlights of Phase III participant quotes and linguistic devices provide a glimpse into the experience of doctoral graduates during this post-dissertation period. Themes, theoretical concept links, and linguistic analyses are summarized below:

Themes

Initial thematic categories emerging from Phase III findings include:

- Motivations to Pursue Degree: "My drive to achieve has been a lifelong quest and I wanted all the doors of opportunity to be open to me, at all times and in all ways!"

- Transition into the Program: "I came, I saw,..I panicked!"

- Doctoral Student Identity: "Research'ese! I knew I was in deep when all I could talk about was my research topic!"

- Cohort Attachment: "The group is my world!"

- Transition Out and the Defense Process: "When you are working on that dissertation, you may be home…but you are not home! And then you walk out the door after the defense, and you feel like won the lottery"

- Recognition and Achievement: "Crown me Queen of the world!"
- New Identity: "You are not the same person" and "Now what do I do with my time?"

Theoretical Framework

Applying Neugarten's Adult Development Theory (1978) and Lachman's Midlife Development Theory (2004) generated the following synthesis, building on the themes:

- Neugarten's tenets, merged with themes:
    - Developmental life stages (motivations to pursue degree, timing for next phase of professional and personal achievement, need to pursue transformative learning based on some perceived gap in one's level of accomplishment)
    - On-Time versus Off-Time (transition into the program, assuming a new identity as a doctoral student)
    - Social cohesion and personal growth (cohort attachment, relationship adjustments at home and at work)
- Lachman's tenets, merged with themes:
    - Sense of detachment, loss, grief after major transition (transition through defense process and out of the program/graduation, disconnectedness from cohort)
    - Meeting personal goals, aspirations (recognition and achievement at work, new opportunities for professional advancement)
    - Transition as a turning point in personal maturity and viewpoint (new role as 'doctor', new identity as a knowledgeable professional, seeking new ways of interacting with others based on credentials, new confidence to seek new professional activities)

Essence of the 'Lived Experience'

Using the linguistic prompt of metaphor/simile generation, the statements below represent another view of the 'lived experience' of the study's participants:

- **Research process. "** It was like a maze; you know there is a start and end point, and sometimes you think you are heading down the right direction and have to pull back, turn around and go another way. There is a sense of excitement when progress is made and disappointment when you realize something is not going to work out. "
- **Manuscript preparation.** It was like training for a marathon (except I have run eight marathons and the dissertation required more persistence, dedication, and endurance). You have to be dedicated to staying up-to-date on the research, writing constantly, and setting mini-goals (e.g. finish chapter 1; conduct all interviews; etc.). Runners do not start the race thinking about 26.2 miles; they break it down and think, "get to the 10 K mark" and build that way). And depending on weather conditions, terrain, and personal health on a particular day, some runs are tougher or more enjoyable than others. In the same vein, some pieces of the manuscript came together so easily while others were a struggle. "
- **Dissertation Defense. "** The dissertation defense was like marathon race day. I had done the work (training) and knew the hard part was behind me. I felt ready to defend, ready to finish, and ready to celebrate. And I was completely (mentally) exhausted afterwards! "
- **Graduation ceremony.** It was the day I had been waiting for since I started the program three years prior. It was one of the proudest moments of my life. "
- **Being on the job after completing the degree.** It was like starting a new job; you are a new person and have new skills and experience to contribute "
- **Being at home with family after completing the degree.** It was like coming home after studying abroad. I felt like I had been away for so long (mentally) so it was great to reconnect, be present, and enjoy date nights. "
- **Using the credential "Doctor" for the first time. "** When I got married I changed my last name; using the term "Ed.D." in my email signature had a similar feel of being a new person, except I had EARNED this title! "
- **Having free time. "** It was liberating! It was great to see friends and family, spend time with my husband, and be ok with mindless activities without feeling guilty about not working on a dissertation."
- **Interacting with non-doctoral students or graduates. "** I was like a salesperson. I encouraged professionals (who I knew were capable) to consider pursuing their doctorate"
- **Setting new personal goals.** While it was exciting to focus on personal goals, it was slightly uncomfortable/unfamiliar. I had been so programmed to focus on and complete the next task in my doctoral program, I had forgotten what it was like to set personal goals. I have enjoyed that shift! "
- **Setting new professional goals. "** It was like the first day of school. It is a fresh start and you have more time to achieve new professional goals.

To supplement the metaphor and free word association devices on the reflective questionnaire, a few comments by participants enhance the rich detailed data generated by the reflective questionnaires. :

> I mostly was kicking myself for not doing it 15 years sooner….But other than that, I think my identity changed …in that I felt my own self confidence now had the letters to back it up. I always felt I didn't have to prove my intelligence with a degree, but now that I have it, I appreciate it more than I thought I would. It is almost like a security blanket, in that in you ever doubt yourself or your ability, you know that you can do it because you were able to get your doctorate..

The moment after successfully completing the dissertation defense prompted one participant to note the following:

> My whole life I had felt the need to become a doctor. It had been stated to me that wanting to be a doctor is more of a "calling" in life. When my defense was finished and the doors opened, that is when I was first called Dr....The weight of the world was lifted from my shoulders and although I did not show it, I felt as I do now writing this response. I wanted to cry with joy!!!!!!

Some months later, however, the realization that the program was over and the 'high' had dissipated left two participants with the following sentiments:

> After I finished the program, I felt let down even though I was expecting to feel great, I was expecting to feel something major……. I wanted to feel something but didn't. I had to fake feelings of satisfaction to my friends, family and peers. It made me very tired and lonely.

> It was a little like that "post-partum feeling." I had labored over this every waking moment for three years and now the work was over. I should have been elated and on a constant high but I wasn't and couldn't figure out why.

Concerning cohort and relationship transitions, one participant commented on the 'detachment' process':

> I think one of the biggest surprises was the changes to my cohort. I had spent so much time with the members of my cohort, we were like a family. I spoke with some of them on a daily basis and on the class weekends we were constantly providing support, guidance, positive energy, and feedback to one another - not just on graduate student matters either. This was a letdown for me to lose this group of people so suddenly. We all finished at different times and tried to get to each other's defenses, but that wasn't always possible. I was surprised to have to mourn the loss of the friendship and source of support. I know I can reach out to these individuals and will hear back from time to time, but the relationships are different now....it was a sad surprise really for me.

Summing up the experience, with all the relative high and low points, a participant indicated the following:

> For me the doctorate was never really about advancing in my career although I did hope that doors to different and interesting experiences might be opened as a result. I did feel a great sense of accomplishment and the freedom to think about the future in new ways.

Implications

The implications of this research suggest that EdD graduates yearn for a continued connection with their academic communities and seek ways to extend their activity as scholars, researchers, and leaders. Instead of releasing these graduates into the academic community-at-large, EdD programs can create structures, programs, and services to address many of these concerns and frustrations their students feel as they leave their programs. These findings may benefit doctoral faculty and program administrators as they develop advising support, program support, and institutional strategies to ease the transition for doctoral graduates, optimizing their shift into new levels of professional and scholarly activity after graduation. Phase III findings were supported by descriptors emerging from the elite interviews (Phase I), and focus group discussions (Phase II). Ed.D. program administrators and faculty may find value in these findings as they assist doctoral graduates with the transition from student to graduate by implementing the following strategies: 1) create mentoring and partnering programs for professional networking and career support, 2) establish career counseling and placement programs; 3) offer workshops, conferences, and meetings to support continued professional development and provide regular communications about relevant conference and workshop opportunities; 4) develop reunion and alumni engagement opportunities that help graduates remain connected and valued; and 5) provide research and scholarship support for graduates who wish to continue to develop as educational researchers in order to inform their professional practice.

Summary

These results are expected to contribute a fresh perspective on relatively untapped phenomenon: the adjustment EdD doctoral graduates experience when they transition from the intensity and focus of the doctoral coursework and dissertation research to program completion and graduation. Subsequent phases of this study will likely evolve into a grounded theory exploration, whereby data will be used to support theory development regarding how doctoral graduates accommodate this significant shift to the post-dissertation phase of their lives, supplementing the theoretical frameworks used in this exploration.

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