

# Wellness of Recent PhD Graduates during the Dissertation Research Process

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## Introduction

### Background

#### Autobiographical Connection

As a Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) candidate, I experienced events and emotions influencing my dissertation research and my health and wellness.

#### Problem Statement

- PhD completion and attrition rates estimated at 57% and 30%, respectively, over a 10-year span.<sup>1</sup>
- Emotions and feelings expressed by PhD graduates imply the dissertation process affected their health and wellness.<sup>2</sup>

#### Significance

- Paucity of literature on wellness and PhD students
- Understanding the lived experiences of PhD graduates could be helpful to PhD students and PhD programs

#### Conceptual Frameworks of Wellness



#### Purpose

The purpose of the study was to describe the experience of wellness during the dissertation process of twelve recent PhD graduates.

### Research Question

*What is the experience of wellness during the dissertation process as described by recent PhD graduates?*

### Limitations

- Memory recall
- Researcher bias
- Regional bias (11 of 12 participants from ID and UT)
- Few ethnic minorities
- Only PhDs from education, social sciences, humanities
- Transferability

### Acknowledgements

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## Methods

### Qualitative Research Design

- A **heuristic** phenomenological research design<sup>5</sup>
  - Heuristic inquiry phases
    - *Initial engagement*
    - *Immersion*
    - *Incubation*
    - *Illumination*
    - *Explication*
    - *Creative synthesis*
- Heuristic inquiry is "a way of self-inquiry and dialogue with others aimed at finding the underlying meanings of important human experiences" (p. 15).<sup>5</sup>

### Data Collection

- **Purposeful sample of 12 2008-09 PhD graduates**
  - 39.5 – mean age (range of 29 - 66 years old)
  - 8 – married
  - 5 – with at least one dependent at home
- **Dissertations by study design**
  - 5 – quantitative
  - 3 – qualitative
  - 4 – mixed method
  - 17 – mean duration of dissertation process (in months)

### Data Interpretation and Verification

Face-to-face interviews were digitally audio-recorded and professionally transcribed verbatim for thematic analyses.

- Data analysis and synthesis process utilized to create individual depictions<sup>5-7</sup>



- Data analysis and synthesis process utilized to create composition depiction<sup>5-7</sup>



- Data verification procedures<sup>8</sup>: *Peer debriefing, member checking, reflexive journaling; rich, thick description*

## Findings

### 9 Core Themes

#### Balance and Priorities

- Balance responsibilities and establish priorities to maintain wellness and progress toward dissertation completion

#### Becoming a Scholar

- Transformation in learning, reading, writing, and thinking

#### Identity of Perceived Stressors

- Source of stressors: dissertation, relationships, multi-tasking, health issues, job hunting

#### Making Sacrifices

- Job status and performance, relationships, and health

#### Motivation to Finish

- External and internal motivators: condition for employment, career advancement, and social relationship; self-motivation and personal achievement of earning a PhD

#### Perspective

- Dissertation is an important *part of life*, but not the *focal point of life*

#### Physical Activity and Health

- Physical activity as a coping mechanism, fitness, mental break from research, social connectedness

- Hypertension, hyperlipidemia, hair loss, sleep deprivation and irregular sleep patterns, weight gain, and irregular eating patterns

#### Social Support

- From spouse/partner, dependents, dissertation advisor, classmates, and co-workers

- In the form of empathy, encouragement, companionship, project assistance/feedback, and reductions in household and job duties

#### Spiritual Practices

- Inner strength and peacefulness through prayer/meditation, attendance at religious services, involvement with church communities, and reading biblical scriptures

## Conclusion

### Discussion

- Wellness may be affected by multiple factors facilitating and inhibiting dissertation completion.<sup>9-13</sup>
- The themes, particularly *Balance and Priorities* and *Social Support*, derived from this study were similar to factors affecting wellness and the dissertation process as reported in the literature.<sup>9-16</sup>
- My wellness ebbed and flowed at various stages of my dissertation. I retreated from my research because of an imbalance in family and work obligations. Support from spouse, family, friends, and dissertation advisor to maintain my health and wellness assuaged the decision to temporarily set aside my study.

### Recommendations

#### Promoting wellness during the dissertation research process:

#### PhD Students

- Establish and nurture a support network
- Create a balance among obligations
- Manage time and set boundaries
- Keep the dissertation in perspective
- Expect the unexpected
- Understand self
- Seek professional help

#### PhD Programs

- Create and support social integration
- Explore alternative dissertation formats
- Evaluate and assess the major advisor's role and advisement
- Clarify the role of the dissertation committee
- Orientation for PhD students and their families

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