Wellness of Recent PhD Graduates during the Dissertation Research Process

**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.
  - Emotions and feelings expressed by PhD graduates imply the dissertation process affected their health and wellness.

**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.

**Methods**

**Qualitative Research Design**

- A heuristic phenomenological research design
  - Heuristic inquiry phases
    - Initial engagement
    - Immersion
    - Incubation
    - Illumination
    - Explanation
    - 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).

**Data Collection**

- Purposeful sample of 12 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
- Data analysis and synthesis process utilized to create composition depictions
- Data verification procedures: 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

- **Identity of Perceived Stressors**
  - Source of stressors: dissertation, relationships, multi-tasking, health issues, job hunting

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

- **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, dependencies, dissertation advisor, classmates, and co-workers
  - In the form of empathy, encouragement, companionship, project assistance/feedback, and reductions in household and job duties

**Conclusion**

**Discussion**

- Wellness may be affected by multiple factors facilitating and inhibiting dissertation completion
- 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.
- 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 assured the decision to temporarily set aside my study.

**Recommendations**

- Promoting wellness during the dissertation research process:
  - Establish and nurture a support network
  - Create a balance among obligations
  - Manage time and set boundaries
  - Keep the dissertation in perspective
  - Expect the unexpected
  - Seek professional help

**PhD Students**

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

**PhD Programs**

- Develop a support system for PhD students
- Employ alternative dissertation formats
- Adopt a holistic approach to graduate education