

The role of family and peers in doctoral persistence and attrition

Ms Edel Cassar | Dr Sue Vella, Prof Ellen Jansen | University of Malta

Problem Statement

Rates of graduate student attrition vary across settings and personal circumstances. The attrition rate of doctoral students is reported to be between 33% and 70%. Attrition rates for distance-based doctoral programs can be even 10% to 20% higher. Doctoral students rely on support from their families and peers but literature does not delve into the type of support which families provide during key decision-making junctures.

Project Overview and Aim

This study offers a platform for a discussion about the roles which family members and close peers play in the motivation and persistence of doctoral students.

The aim of this study is to deepen our understanding of the doctoral process from the students' perspective and to shed light on how the students take into consideration intrinsic and extrinsic factors in their decision-making processes in respect of progressing – or otherwise – with their doctoral degree.

Research Question

How and at which stage do doctoral students rely on family members and close peers for support?



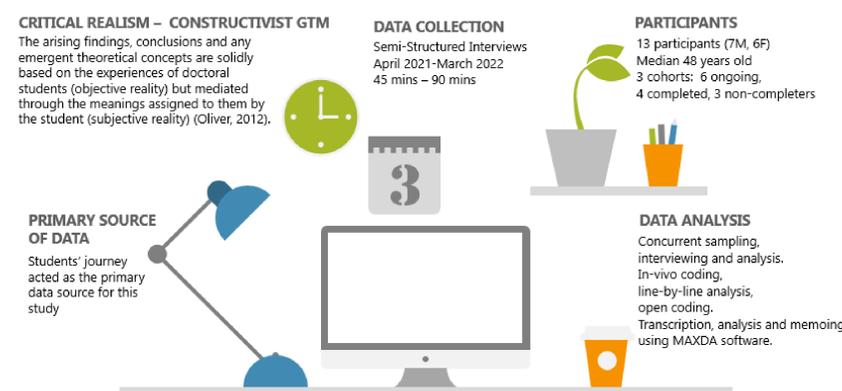
Research Approach

- Interpretivist epistemological stance
- Critical realism ontological stance
- Constructivist Grounded Theory methodology and design

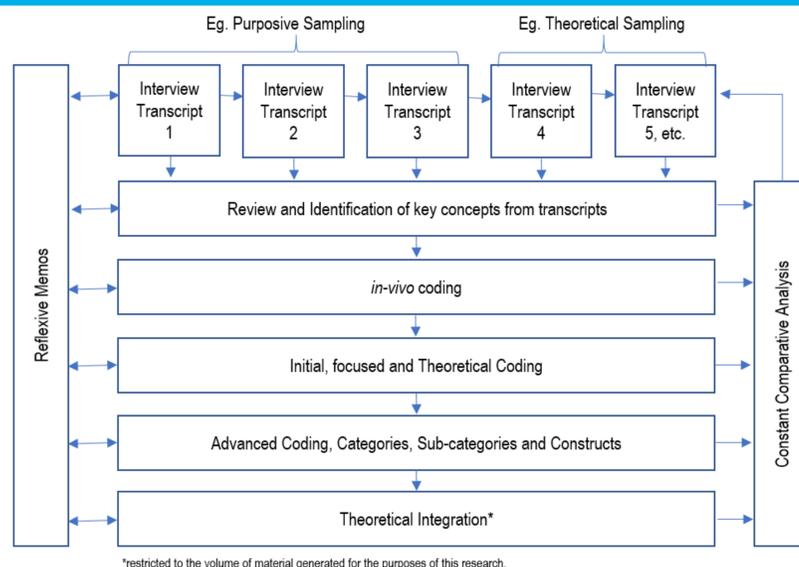
Blending critical realism with grounded theory permits the researcher to draw on the interpretation which doctoral students give to the challenges they encounter, how they process them and how they base their decisions on those interpretations.

Methodology

The choice of grounded theory methodology was deemed most suitable for this research area and the identified research question since it seeks to explain social processes in addition to describing phenomena. The development of tentative hypotheses from the viewpoints of participants was preferred over a *priori* conceptual frameworks.



Data Gathering and Analysis Process



*restricted to the volume of material generated for the purposes of this research.

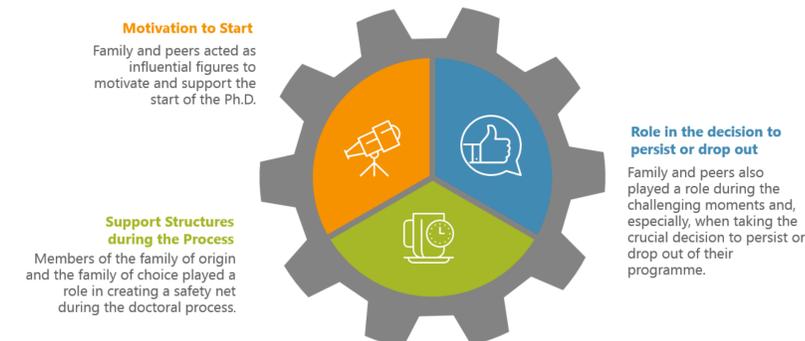
Definitions

Family of origin: refers to the family, or parents an individual was either raised or born into, this may not be the same family as those who have been adopted or where their parents have separated and live with new parents.

Family of choice: refers to the family created through marriage or long term relationships with other adults, which might include children, where biologically related or not. For the purpose of this study, close friends and colleagues, with whom a PhD student shares a more influential relationship, are included in the definition of family of choice.

Key Findings

The results of this research indicate that family members and peers generally play three fundamental roles at key decision junctures:



Proposed Matrix outlining the Motivational and Persistence roles by different relations:

Motivational and Persistence Roles by different relations
Scale: Non-existent - Hardly - Possible - Substantial - Major

Type of Family	Relations	Roles		
		Motivate and support the start	Support structures during the process	Decisive role to persist or drop out
Family of origin	Parents	Possible	Possible	Hardly
	Siblings	Possible	Hardly	Hardly
	Spouses/Partners	Substantial	Major	Major
Family of choice	Children	Non-existent	Non-existent	Possible
	Peers / Colleagues	Substantial	Substantial	Substantial
		MOTIVATION	PERSISTENCE	PERSISTENCE

References

Bar, C. R. (1999). *Doctoral student attrition and persistence: A meta-synthesis*. (Doctoral dissertation, Loyola University, Chicago, 1999). Dissertation Abstracts International.

Birks, M. and Mills, J. (2015). *Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide*. Sage Publications.

Charmaz, K. (2014). *Grounded Theory in Global Perspective: Reviews by International Researchers*. *Qualitative Inquiry*, Vol 20(9) 1074-1084. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077220014545235>

Gold, C.M. (2005). *Should I Stay or Should I Go? Student Descriptions of the Doctoral Process*. *The Review of Higher Education*, Vol 23, No 2 pp199-227. <https://doi.org/10.1353/rhe.2000.0004>

Lynch, M., Salkhova, N., & Salkhova, A. (2018). *Internal Motivation among Doctoral Students: Contributions from the Student and from the Student's Environment*. *International Journal of Doctoral Studies*, 13, 255-272. <https://doi.org/10.28945/4091>

Gold, C. (2005). *The Role of the Department and Discipline in Doctoral Student Attrition: Lessons from Four Departments*. *The Journal of Higher Education (Columbus)*, 76(6), 669-700. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0022156.2005.11772304>

Lovitts, B. E. (2001). *Leaving the Ivory Tower: The Causes and Consequences of Departure from Doctoral Study*. Rowman & Littlefield.

Lovitts, B. E. (2006). *The Transition to Independent Researcher: Who Makes It, Who Doesn't, and Why*. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 79 (3), 296. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jhe.0.0026>

Stewart, R.B., Kozak, A.L., Tingley, L.M., Goddard, J.M., Blake, E.M. & Cassel, W.A. (2001). *Adult sibling relationships: Validation of a typology*. *Personality Relationships*, 8, 299-324. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-8811.2001.800045.x>

Tinto, V. (2017a). *Reflections on Student Persistence*. *Student Success*, 8(2), 1-8. <https://doi.org/10.5204/ss.v8i2.278>

Tinto, V. (2017b). *Through the Eyes of Students*. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice*, 19 (3), 254-269. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1521026116621977>

Wollast, R., Boudrenghien, G., Linden, N., Galand, B., Roland, N., Devos, C., Clercq, M., Klein, O., Azzi, A. & Frenay, M. (2018).

Wills, B., & Carmichael, K. (2011). *The lived experience of late-stage doctoral student attrition in counselor education*. *Qualitative Report*, 16(1), 192-207. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2011.1046>

Who Are the Doctoral Students Who Drop Out? Factors Associated with the Rate of Doctoral Degree Completion in Universities. *International Journal of Higher Education*, 7, 143. <https://doi.org/10.5430/ijhe.v7n04.143>

Sam M.S., "FAMILY OF ORIGIN," in *PsychologyDictionary.org*, May 11, 2013. <http://www.psychologydictionary.org/family-of-origin/> (accessed October 16, 2022).