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# DOCTORAL STUDENTS' EVERYDAY EXPERIENCES IN THE CHANGING CONTEXTS

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## **Abstract**

Doctoral education is a part of society's operation, which is affected by multiple factors and development. Many studies examine doctoral education from the macro level with the emphasis on financing, effectiveness or internationality, and separated from the context. Forming a comprehensive understanding also needs an examination at the micro level and making visible the doctoral students' experiences. It is valuable to pay attention to the everyday and concrete level of operation. I concentrate on the personal lifecourse experience of the women and on the stories based on them and how the macro and micro level are in constant dialogue. I examine the new everyday conventions made by women that are suitable for the changing contexts and how university could develop further in this holistic and global change process.

Keywords: Doctoral studies, doctoral student, everyday experience, changing contexts

## **1 DOCTORAL EDUCATION AND MULTIPLE CHANGES**

Multiple global and social changes become widely realized in the different contexts of life, and the change requires wide adaptation and comprehensive examination. Changes are reflected in the universities and in the doctoral education. The doctoral education is trying to answer the wide demands set for it - better relevance to the working life and systematized effectiveness are sought after for the doctoral education. The global change and new demands for doctoral education force us to discussion about the new doctoral education and the future of the prospective doctors.

The higher education has been unified in Europe, with the help of the Bologna process and Lisbon Strategy, and they both have a powerful role in the doctoral education [1]. In spite of the common aspirations, the doctoral education is still heterogeneous nationally, according to the university and the field. To form a comprehensive understanding, an examination is required at the micro and macro level. Internationally the doctoral students form a widely heterogeneous group. The graduating doctors face a very different reality and future compared to how it was in earlier decades. The change in the form of knowledge and information create the need to examine the current practices in doctoral education. The doctoral education has to answer the expectations set for it, these being set also by the future doctors.

The paper is based on my doctoral thesis research in education [2]. In the study, 12 under 40-year-old female doctoral students with a family participated from three different universities in Finland. I examined the individual experiences of the female doctoral students with a family and the significance of doctoral studies at the micro level. The doctoral studies are a multi-dimensional process in which the different starting points and contexts build different entities and everyday experiences. The diversified lifecourse and the expanded possibilities of doctoral students require matters to be examined as a whole. Individual orientation to the future by combining the different areas of life helps to perceive life in a wider perspective.

## **2 EXPERIENCES IN DOCTORAL STUDIES, LIFECOURSE AND DIFFERENT EVERYDAY CONTEXTS**

In the global change high-quality skills are a factor in the competition, the success at the level of society as well as at the individual level is based on a high level of competence. The doctoral education produces the highest expertise and for its part guarantees the renewal of knowledge. The competition in expertise is international but it is also operation of the society and at the individual level.

[3]; [4]; [5]. The European definitions of education policy follow the development of uniform doctoral education which is based on the change in the economic structure of society and on the increasingly central status of the research information, of which the increased demands for competence in the working life and the importance of innovations are as examples. The accelerating change is strongly reflected at the individual level. An attempt is made to respond to the changing expectations and to prepare for them globally, locally, socially as well as individually.

In the lifecourse of the individual the doctoral studies are in a significant position. The doctoral studies as well as an individual lifecourse are a part of society's operation and development. In the shared examination of the macro and micro levels, attention must be paid to their intersection, the everyday and concrete level of realization. In the doctoral studies an individual is ultimately the operator. The individual's experience of the doctoral studies as a part of the lifecourse consists of different starting points, everyday experiences and expectations for the future.

### ***2.1 Change also reaches the doctoral education***

Numerous different routes lead to a doctoral degree. In addition to the graduate schools, doctoral studies can be undertaken in addition to working in a university or other work, with the scholarship or in the research project. The doctoral students do not form a uniform group: life situations, motives to graduate with a doctoral degree, career backgrounds and financing channels create individual doctoral students [6]; [7]. Doctoral students can be divided according to different criteria, age and discipline being the most common ones. The young people beginning their career gain their doctoral degree in the graduate schools, with a scholarship or in a university in the research and teaching tasks. Older people and those in the working life get their doctoral degree in addition to their work. The young women with a family are working more and more often as paid researchers in the universities, as directed by the busy stage in life, otherwise there would not be room for the research in their everyday life.

In spite of the doctoral degree becoming more common, for an individual it is a significant achievement and a stage in the lifecourse. A doctoral degree is strong proof of the ability to set and to reach goals. Entering into the challenge of gaining a doctoral degree is a risk investment in spite of all the developed doctoral schools and paid research assignments. The own lifecourse and its wholeness are drafted from alternative perspectives, what factors one wants to connect to their own lifecourse and to everyday life, on what schedule and in which order. [8]; [9] Often life is perceived through the projects, there are a family projects, doctoral thesis projects, work projects, building projects and fitness projects.

Social and academic changes and the emphasis on individuality form an interesting overall equation in which the public and individual are in close interaction. From the point of view of the future development it is significant how social and individual objectives meet one another.

### ***2.2 Doctoral studies in an individual lifecourse***

In an individual lifecourse the doctoral studies are a significant part of the whole, but also other significant factors overlap with the lifecourse. The pedagogical-sociological concept of lifecourse represents the process of both the micro and the macro level: social relations of the individual in a changing society. In the examination, the comprehensiveness and development during the whole lifecourse are emphasized instead of one sector of lifecourse. The significant events of the lifecourse form a continuum and a dynamic wholeness. The lifecourse can be described in a simplified manner as a life in the time which encompasses chronologic, biological, social and historical time. [10] In the conceptions of the lifecourse, the modernisation and individualizing development are reflected: the individual lifecourses contain fewer processes and stages that are uniform to everybody, the linearity decreases and cyclical nature increases. [9] Also the doctoral studies signify different matters individually and colour the lifecourse in a diverse manner. The traditional norms of doctoral studies have broken up, in which case the individual processing and the conscious choices are emphasized. In the risk society [11] the individual meets new possibilities continuously and also at the same time the risks without knowing the consequences of the choices. With the individualizing development of lifecourse, what is examined are rather different lifecourses; reflected and narrative biographies. [8]

The diversified lifecourse appears as a personal project which consists of sectors that are experienced as significant individually, for example, family, doctoral education and different employment. The

diversified lifecourse and the expanded possibilities require matters to be examined as a whole [10] and individually timing the different factors to the lifecourse [9]. Doctoral studies mean more than expert education, gaining a doctoral degree is reflected in the everyday life and the future of the lifecourse in many ways. Orientation to the future by combining the different areas of life opens a wider perspective on life. Different life choices are the everyday combining of the different sectors of life. [9]; [10]

When speaking of the doctoral education, the individuality, systemic nature and comprehensiveness of the construction of lifecourses are often dismissed. The different sectors overlap temporally with each other and the best possible comprehensive solution is individually perceived from them. Fitting the doctoral studies in to everyday life as a functional equation is an interesting skill. The female doctoral students experience enthusiasm and commitment towards their doctoral studies even though the future is open and full of new challenges [11]. The doctoral degree does not guarantee automatic success but instead the competition increases [6].

### ***2.3 Women in doctoral studies***

The pace of society and demands for skills are high which is manifested at the individual level. The individuals meet the demands of society and strive for their self-imposed objectives. Competition, success and lifelong learning are part of the society and everyday life of the individual. The development appears as the hectic nature of the lifecourse, where the projects of the lifecourse are large, overlapping and target-oriented. This becomes concrete in the women's everyday life, their studies, work and family. The women balance in the pressure of their own and external expectations. It has been considered easier for men to combine the different areas of life, for example, work and family are not in competitive position but exist naturally side by side. [12]; [13]. Still the changes are also reflected in the man's status in society and family, for example, as choices and restrictions to do with time management [14]; [15].

The number of women of the doctoral students and of the graduating doctors has increased during the last few decades in Finland as it has internationally. According to Official Statistics of Finland [16], in Finland already more than half of the 1600 graduating doctors every year are women. Simultaneously, the international phenomena are the increased demands for skills in working life and the increasing pressures for effectiveness at a general level as well as in private life. Diverse global and social changes are reflected in many ways in the individuals' lifecourses, both in women's and men's and in everyday life experiences. The changes become concrete when an individual lifecourse is examined, in the demarcation of individual and public lifecourse the development of major lines and the everyday realization become public and intelligible operation. Especially the under 40-year-old female doctoral students living the busy years of their lives fit many factors, such as work and family together in their everyday lives. It is especially important because of the new information and understanding to examine the doctoral students that have been researched less often. Such are the female doctoral students with a family, who undertake the doctoral studies as their employment or as part-time and their experiences regarding the doctoral studies as a part of everyday life, lifecourse and future.

### ***2.4 The growing role of the future perspective***

Graduating with a doctoral degree is attached to the chronological continuum, past, present and future of the lifecourse. [17] emphasizes the centrality of the future in a time continuum – the preparations for the future are made in the present. The things that are done earlier, now and in the future have a close relation to one another. The stages and contexts of the lifecourse intertwine to become a part of the process of gaining a doctoral degree and vice versa. The cyclical nature of the process of gaining a doctoral degree and the continuity and comprehensiveness of lifecourse form individual and different experiences and stories. In the everyday life of this process, the research is active, it is wanting and pursuing a certain matter in the existing contexts.

The culture of planning has expanded comprehensively to the family, studies and career. However, the lifecourse does not proceed as a straight line but as a sum of the numerous stages, fragments and chances. In a society which is fast paced and appreciates effectiveness, the systematic operation looking to the future and process-like methods are expected values. The doctoral studies and graduating as a doctor is a significant stage in the continuity of the lifecourse, after which the subsequent stages of the lifecourse are orientated and prepared for. [1] The attachment to a certain position is not in accordance with the purpose, the individuality indeed needs to be striven for and a

person's own flexible objectives need to be internalized. [9]; [10]

In my article I examine what kind of everyday experiences and visions the female doctoral students with a family have in connection to their doctoral studies in their everyday life and in the constant development and change of the future. In the attached figure (Fig 1) I present the central starting points and concepts in brief. The objective is to make the generalized process of graduating with a doctoral degree more visible as experienced by the individuals, and also to bring out the individual variety and dialogue of the macro and micro levels of the process. The examination is fixed on the individual experiences of the lifecourse and the different starting points, the everyday struggles and the hopes for the future.

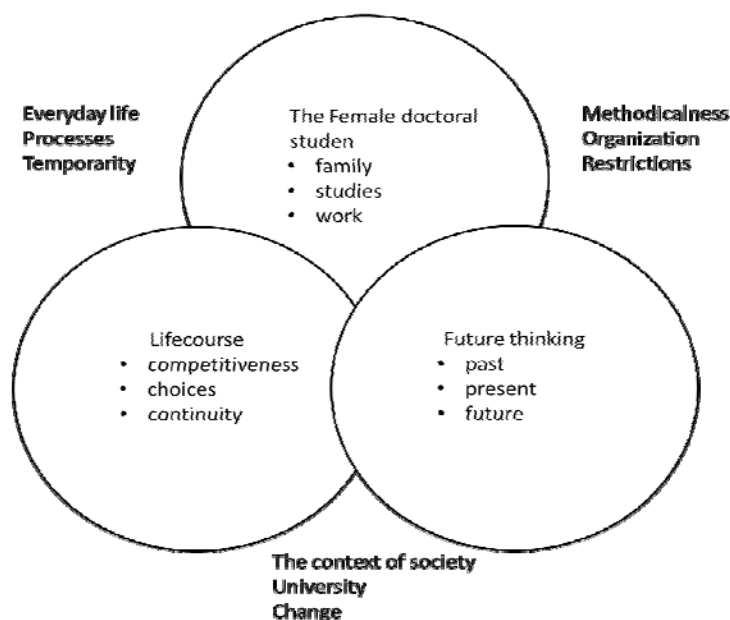


Figure 1. Central starting points and concepts

### 3 METHODOLOGY

The research material consisted of 12 narrative theme interviews. The female doctoral students in the research carried out their studies in three different Finnish universities and were at different stages in their studies in different fields. All the ones participating in the research had begun their doctoral studies in the 2000s. The doctoral studies had lasted under five years at the time of the interview. The doctoral dissertations were at different stages, at both the beginning stage and at a final stage. All had undertaken their doctoral studies full time at some stage with the help of different financing. The number of children the female doctoral students had varied from one to three, the children's average age was 5 years.

The study represents theoretically and methodologically the pedagogical-sociological lifecourse research examined in a hermeneutical manner as well as applying a phenomenological and narrative approach. The analysis of the material was the content analysis of themes which develop hermeneutically as well as narrative classification stemming from the themes. The theme interview was well suited for connecting the chronological continuity, the experiential nature and narrative perspective of the lifecourse. The wholeness of the lifecourse is not simple and clear but through the thematic processing the interaction, tension and contradiction of different sectors was individually brought out [see 18]; [19].

The examination combines the changes that are met by the society, scientific field and individuals and which connect the macro and micro level. The starting point is an individual experience from which the phenomenological research tradition proceeds. The individual experience has a context where it takes

place, it is interpreted and understood in the spirit of the hermeneutical dialogue. Of the lifecourse experiences a logical, complete and comprehensive intelligible story is interpreted, a form in which the experiences are structured and shared. The lifecourse research and narrative are linked in their nature. The narrative construction conveys significant lifecourse experiences, interactively and communally forming idea about oneself. [18] In order to reach understanding, one needs to know the past and the present and to predict the future the [17].

## **4 RESULTS**

### ***4.1 The women's everyday commitments as obstacles and incentives***

Seven of the women studied in the research had started a family during the master's degree studies and the remaining five during the doctoral studies. According to the women, the solution was good even though the present international model of doctoral education directs for a fast pace in studies and for the fast graduation after which it would still be possible to start a family as a young doctor [20]. The women regarded the roles of mother and doctoral student as the most important to themselves, they were not opposite but supporting one another. In different everyday situations the significance of the family was twofold: the family gave a welcome counterbalance to the intensive research work but at times the family took time away from concentrating on the research work.

The everyday life of the female doctoral student with a family was bound by the everyday commitments and those at the level of feelings. In the families different decisions were made but still several women of my study took the main responsibility for the everyday life of the family and the man concentrated on his own work career. However, equality was aimed for in the families and, for example, the use of time and the family's best interest were discussed. Both the family and their own academic career were important for the female doctoral students and they were fitted to one another as well as possible. In addition to a busy family life, the academic career required input and the competitive culture forced into the effectiveness. The choices about the usage of time, the constant lack of time and the organising of time between important matters are everyday life for the female doctoral students [also 14]. Even though the women are flexible and experienced and they were able to make individual decisions, their choices were fairly limited. The starting point for the women in my study was the combining of important matters and the effect where they support one another.

The individual choices are possible and common especially in the families but several gender-related restrictions and practices are still present when examined in a wider perspective. Gender-related features which are individually coloured can be identified in the individual lifecourses and everyday life. In the long term and in everyday operation the change in the woman's status is clear and the individual solutions have become possible, on the other hand, everyday life still has its difficulties.

### ***4.2 Time management– developing and central skill***

The female doctoral students' considerations concerning the use of time were partly conflicting. The family was the most important but at times the research work pulled them in so strongly that the family was regarded as a disturbance and a drawback. The limited time resources had to be planned and anticipated for continuously [also 21]. Within the families, shared schedules and concrete plans were made, in the planning of which the women had the main responsibility. According to the women, it was essential to make realistic plans but also to leave some flexibility in them. Life can not just be planned out and the plans then just carried out but one must also dare to live in a moment. The women were skilled or developing virtuosos in time management which was important also from the point of view of combining the separate factors of life. According to them, it was essential to distinguish the important matters and to do them well and effectively.

In the future, the women intended to arrange their time both for the family and for their own career but they still saw the unsolved equations of the everyday life in the future, such as the time demands of a career and family. In the future, the family would still remain most important and even more time was planned to be spent with the family. They did not want to surrender to their work career at the expense of other aspects of life. The female doctoral students with a family emphasized their possibilities to arrange their life by themselves and their time according to their own wishes and their objectives. According to them, by working they could reach an academically successful career even with a family

and with the commitments of everyday life. They mentioned independent organization and meaningfulness as essential [also 14].

### ***4.3 Gender-related experiences in the doctoral studies***

According to the women in my study, there is no special disadvantage associated with gender in the academic life or career - the estimates of the gender reflecting on the doctoral studies were mainly neutral unlike in the studies of [22]; [23]. However, the female doctoral students in my study did not want to define themselves or to become defined through being women, especially in the academic context. They emphasized the skills and the acquired status to be more significant than gender. On the other hand, the women talked about their gender-related everyday observations, according to which the men proceeded more purposefully in an academic career and the women bore also more of the everyday responsibilities in an academic context. According to the women, the women's mutual support and the sharing of the similar situation in life rather encouraged [also 24]. The women with a family did not experience special pressure or competition due to their gender or to their situation in life but accepted the situation and proceeded in the way that they saw best for themselves and for their family.

The experienced challenges were not directly connected to being a woman but to motherhood and were manifested in an academic context as everyday practices. According to the women, the outsiders interpreted motherhood as challenge to an academic career. The challenges experienced by the women themselves were connected to the commitments which had scattered to different sectors: to motherhood, to use of time, to possibilities to immerse into interesting research matters with a sufficient intensity and to the possibilities of creating the future career. Even if many of the women in my study told about their general gender-related observations, they did not want to emphasize them. They rather emphasized the women's and men's equality and importance of the competence of the individual in determining the academic status.

### ***4.4 How does a female doctor with a family build a career or become internationalized?***

The work careers of the studied female doctoral students varied. Some had had time to build an extensive and varied international career, some had a career that was based on academic practices and on the fixed-term employments of the doctoral student in the university. None of the women had permanent employment at the time of the interview and they were pursuing longer term, meaningful work that would correspond to their education. They wanted to utilise in a variety of ways the skills they had acquired but regarded finding employment as a challenge. The ones who had created the most extensive careers compared to others were most worried about their future employment. This may have been due to the fact that they know the brutality of working life. Furthermore, the vicinity of graduating with a doctoral degree made finding employment more often a worrisome prospect [also 11].

Although the women appreciated their doctoral studies and the expertise which forms in them, they experienced the demands of working life and the skills demands directed at the doctors as high. According to them, the career planning would be useful and it would have been welcome already at early stages in studies. The doctors gain the individual skills through operating in the different operational contexts, also [6]; [13]. According to the women, the working life does not identify and acknowledge the doctors' skills very well. Indeed they hoped that university and the external working life could form a closer dialogue, so that they could benefit one another. The doctoral degree is not only an educational title but knowledge to be utilised. Only a fraction of the future doctors will continue their career in academic assignments, the majority move to or continue in the employment of other areas of working life [25]; [26]. The scholarship inside the discipline is not enough, skills needed in the working life are widely necessary [4], whether working with a doctoral degree in academic circles or in other parts of working life. However, at the same time the women emphasized the individual's responsibility in the conscious building of their own skills and expertise. It is expected that the graduating doctors participate with a more comprehensive approach in the consideration of wide and significant themes as a world economy, information society and the sustainable development. [3] The status of the scientific information in the information intensive society has strengthened [4]; [25]; [26].

The female doctoral students told about their will, even a burning desire to work abroad and in international assignment but there were practical obstacles for its realization. The female doctoral

students understood that they were bound to their native country more tightly than their colleagues who didn't have a family. The shorter work assignments abroad or taking the family along were regarded as possible. Some anticipated that they would have to give up the assignments abroad. The discussion about the creation of possibilities for academic internationalization is important and topical [1]; [27], better attention would have to be paid than at present, especially to the needs of those with a family. It is presented that internationalization could take place at home, which could be a good alternative especially for the ones with a family. Advanced technology also makes the forming of close international network and cooperation possible.

## CONCLUSIONS

International, social and academic changes, the development of women's status and the emphasis on the individuality in the lifecourse form an interesting overall equation for the doctoral studies. It is evident that the public and the individual of the lifecourse are in the close interaction and they are accommodated to one another in everyday life. The direction of the change is similar internationally: globalization is reflected in the societies and individuals in many ways. Nevertheless the comprehensive international comparison is challenging because social and academic systems and practices vary. In any case, the education is a valuable investment for both the society and the individuals and for the status of women in this significant change. The change is active and continuous, operation of the individual level which becomes concrete in everyday life in the changing contexts.

In the doctoral studies the time, values and activity become concrete – the choices, organising and lack of time extend increasingly to different aspects of the lifecourse, to work, to family and to leisure, especially for the academic mothers who are bound by their responsibilities. The diversified lifecourse appears as a personal project which consists of sectors that are experienced as significant individually. The diversified lifecourse and the expanded possibilities require an examination of matters as a whole [10] as well as individual timing of different factors in the lifecourse [9]. In my study it is manifested that in many areas of life socialization had taken place through long and even partly unnoticeable processes. It was essential for the female doctoral students with a family to connect the central life aspects fluently and meaningfully. In the future the family represented the continuity, the doctoral studies and work a change. The family leveled the uncertainty of other life.

On the basis of this study, it would be an advantage for a female doctoral student with a family to understand the everyday demands of the process of graduating with a doctoral degree and the existing boundary conditions as well as the consequences of gaining a doctoral degree in both both a wider and an individual context. If the doctoral students do not perceive the prevailing trends or know their own direction, they may be faced by conflicting demands and lack of clarity about the future possibilities. [25] The unsolved equations of the everyday life of the women in my study were multi-dimensional and they reflected well the complex wholeness, overlap and duplication of the lifecourse. The experienced conflicts were different, some could be solved by themselves, some they could affect indirectly and in some the only possibility for change was to change their own attitude. It is also an advantage for the individual doctoral student to realize wider lines of development, to perceive oneself realistically as a part of the wholeness, to draw up the reactive objectives and the plans for the future.

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