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# **Considerations for discontinuing the doctoral studies: towards personal, comprehensive and meaningful solutions**

## **Abstract**

Doctoral studies have become more popular and commonplace globally. Great expectations and effectiveness pressures are directed at doctoral education and the doctors, at the same time the doctoral students' multi-dimensional individuality is easily lost. Also, the doctoral students' motives to begin their studies and their future outlook have diversified. The reasons to begin a thesis project are not necessarily the burning enthusiasm for research and the desire for knowledge but are instead more ordinary. The diminishing of the internal motivation as the reason to begin the doctoral studies is also reflected in the attitudes of the participants towards the process.

In the article, I examine the considerations for discontinuing the doctoral studies. The material consists of the lifecourse theme interview of 12 female doctoral students. The considerations concerning discontinuing the studies are multi-dimensional and long-term deliberation. Both the discontinuation and continuing of the doctoral process after critical personal consideration are significant events in many respects. For their part, the critical considerations directed towards thinking about the personal, meaningful future comprehensively, in the long run and as a part of the bigger wholeness. In the article, I present different situations in life when discontinuing is considered and the significant factors which affect a decision-making process.

Keywords: doctoral studies, doctoral student, discontinuing the studies, consideration, challenge, lifecourse

## **Introduction**

The graduating doctors will meet a different reality and future in comparison to earlier decades. The increase in the number of doctors, the change in the form of information and knowledge and in general the change in doctoral education create the need to examine the current practices and foundation of gaining a doctoral degree. The change forces discussion about the future of doctoral education and of the prospective doctors. The doctoral education has to answer the demands and the expectations, which are being set also by the future doctors. (Boud & Lee 2009). In the examination of the doctoral education attention must be paid simultaneously to the different levels of operation: the international cooperation and the uniform objectives create a large framework for the development, the national operation combines longer term major definitions of policy and the levels of everyday operation. At the individual level carrying out the major lines eventually becomes everyday actions. The questions regarding studies connect to the global and social phenomena of the macro level as well as the phenomena of the micro level that touches the individuals in the everyday life contexts.

A more comprehensive and wider approach is justifiably sought after for doctoral education. Doctoral education is between the new and the old in many ways: the society, working life and the universities' visions have expectations for the doctors' expertise. (Cumming 2010.) The traditional academic doctoral education is becoming knowledge-based and strengthening the new models of thought and operation. The thesis work is both the individual's personal struggle and communal operation. Exact external control or binding it to the time and place is not suitable for the development process to become an academic expert. The flexible individual orientation of doctoral studies underlines the importance of the continuous learning, not just the undertaking of the degree (Pearson 2011 etc.) which for its part challenges the tightening effectiveness objectives.

The doctoral student, an individual, is the dialogical expressor of the major lines of the macro level in the everyday life of the micro level (Mayer 2009). The doctoral studies are a significant factor in the everyday life and lifecourse of the individual. The temporal continuity which is coloured by the individual choices is structured in the lifecourse of the individual. The individuality and the continuity appear in the doctoral student's everyday life in many ways: what kind of matters are meaningful and desirable and what matters are linked to the wholeness and how, and what follows from the different wholenesses. The choices that have been made are not always clear or prove to be meaningful which compels one to evaluate the wholeness again. Macmillan (2005) emphasizes the highlighting of the cyclical nature of the lifecourse, the constant possibility to choose again and the individual timing, and the diminishing of linearity.

Competition and success are a part of the everyday life of an individual to an increasing extent in the academic contexts. The competition appears in the doctoral student's everyday life in many ways (Ylijoki & Ursin, 2013) and the different individuals react to it and try to manage it differently. Competitiveness, the increasing expectations and uncertainty do not suit everyone, in which case the challenging situations compel them to consider different solutions, such as giving up an academic career and discontinuing the doctoral studies. Leonard (2001, 71) emphasizes that the students discontinuing their doctoral studies are not failures. The common reasons for discontinuing are the doctoral studies not corresponding with one's own preconceptions, insufficient dedication for the study, limited time resources for the research work, study conditions that have been poorly organized or different life conditions which require concentration at the expense of the study. One's own attitude towards the doctoral process and the perseverance at difficult stages are central according to Stubb (2012). The considerations concerning the discontinuation of doctoral studies are multi-dimensional and comprehensive individual analysis of the lifecourse.

## **Methodology**

The objective in this research was to understand the experiential stages of the doctoral students through their stories. In this study, the thoughts and experiences of the female doctoral students with a family considering discontinuing the doctoral studies are examined. In the examination the comprehensiveness of the lifecourse is emphasized as well as the constant demarcation and negotiation of private and public aspects in doctoral studies.

The research material consisted of 12 narrative theme interviews. The female doctoral students in the research carried out their doctoral studies in three different Finnish universities and were at different stages in their studies in different fields. The analysis of the material was the content analysis of themes which develop hermeneutically. The study is placed in the area of the higher education and represents theoretically and methodologically the pedagogical-sociological lifecourse research examined in a hermeneutical manner as well as applying a phenomenological and narrative approach.

## Results

### EVERYDAY CHALLENGES AND SERIOUS DIFFICULTIES

On the basis of my study, the experience of a female doctoral student with a family of the doctoral studies with its challenges and its difficulties was **individual**. The earlier experiences of studying and carrying out research, the form of undertaking the doctoral studies, one's own expectations and visions as well as the overall lifecourse situation had an effect on the experience. The exact individualizing or naming of the numerous factors is not easy. (also Leonard 2001, 69-70.) It is shown in my study that socializing in many walks of life had taken place with a long and even partly unnoticeable process. The matters had been adopted as a fixed part of one's own person, habitus (Bourdieu & Passeron 1990) and philosophy.

The female doctoral students in my study talked more about their everyday challenges than about the supporting factors of everyday life even though everybody had experiences of both. The doctoral students' research work progressed in a process-like fashion and cyclically. All the individuals in my study experienced different problems during their doctoral studies. The experienced difficulties were ordinary and varying in size. The daily self-doubts and frustrations are common in the work relating to research (Hakala 2009b).

**At the initial stage of doctoral studies** the slow start-up generated conflicting thoughts in the women of my study (also Leonard 2001, 152). There would have been the enthusiasm but it was difficult to perceive the wholeness and the direction of one's own study. The initial challenges were partly dependent on the discipline and on its practices. It was easier to attach oneself to an established research group and study subject compared to working alone and to self-directed digestion. Stubb, Pyhältö & Lonka (2012a, b) describe both the advantages and the disadvantages of working in a research group. The most significant advantages are the opportunity for scientific discussions, the cooperation, support and the effectiveness. Some of the disadvantages are having to pay attention to the other members of the group, managing the time, the conflicts, extra bureaucracy and the uneven division of the workload.

The female doctoral students of my study assessed themselves to be **skillful organizers**, combining the different areas of life was natural and practiced for them. Merging to the new environments and situations succeeded well according to them. Flexibility and adaptability also in a wider sense were seen as typical of themselves. They were involved in many things and did not experience guilt because of it. It must be noted that the female doctoral students' involvement was in the areas from which it is not easy to withdraw, such as a family, studies and work. The organization also required discipline and

purposefulness. The participation and the organization of the different areas of life renewed resources (also Cooke 2011) and it improved the quality of everyday life. On the other hand, the women in the study talked about their high morale, possibly even too high. The pace of accomplishment in life was high and they did not always know how to slow down in spite of the desire to do so. The matters were carried out at a passionate pace but at times contentually and qualitatively weakened and with stress.

*I get frustrated that I can't move forward. My research is going in circles. I have a desire to continue the research quickly but on the other hand I am satisfied that I have a break. Yes, I will carry out my research, on the side, in peace, I don't have any pressure.*

The women in the study mainly experienced that they were managing their busy everyday lives and getting through its obligations. Still, the occasional chaos and the numerous demands consumed resources and made them doubt their own operation. It is worrying if the accomplishments of the operation still don't bring satisfaction. The female doctoral students appreciated and pursued the opportunity to control their own lives and the general independence, even though their own everyday lives lacked those qualities.

## **ACCUMULATING DIFFICULTIES**

The doctoral students experienced the multi-disciplinary subject of the doctoral thesis both as a strength and a burden at times. The multi-disciplinary subject was seen in a different light in different connections, for example, the subject was understood in different ways in the different faculties in the university or there could be lack of understanding in the conferences towards a multi-disciplinary subject. The doctoral student herself experienced the multi-disciplinary approach mainly as richness, according to the women in the study it increased the experienced meaningfulness, widened the scope and added enthusiasm but brought twists and turns for its advancement. In the university the multi-disciplinary approach was neither always understood nor was the wider perspective seen, in which case the doctoral student acted as a self-contained adapter. During the process the supervision of the multi-disciplinary research work was conflicting.

*I am in a little bit of a strange place, as my subject belongs (to two disciplines). When I talk to others, it is difficult to know what to say and how. In the seminar, I tried to tell about the other part of my doctoral thesis, and it was so difficult to make them understand. They didn't really understand me and that was very frustrating.*

In addition to the challenges of the multi-disciplinary subject, the students who were undertaking their doctoral studies part-time also regarded themselves as outsiders in the academic communities (also Leonard & Becker 2009, 79). The ones regarding themselves as outsiders to a scientific community want the support of the community for their own learning process and for the advancement of the doctoral thesis (Stubb, Pyhältö & Lonka 2012a, b). The part-time doctoral student's lack of time and the organization in life were a difficult equation. The lack of time slowed down the research and according to some studies (for example, Leonard & Becker 2009, 80), that causes doubts regarding one's own research abilities and possibilities to succeed. According to the women in my study, the wholeness of the full-time doctoral thesis process became dimmer and they did not have an idea of what was expected of them and what should be done. It indeed seems

that the doctoral thesis process in addition to other work was demanding to fit into everyday life especially for the female doctoral students with a family. Pearson, Cumming, Evans, Macauley and Ryland (2011) remind us that the individual doctoral students' lifecourse which is composed of individual areas is continuously changing and the situations vary during the doctoral process.

The loneliness of writing the doctoral thesis and the feeling of being an outsider surprised the women of my study on the whole. However, Leonard and Becker (2009, 74) state that even when usually the social relations of the doctoral students in the university are few, they concentrate more on the promotion of the study which is important to themselves. The wish of many female doctoral students of my study was the participation in the research group. According to Leonard and Becker (2009, 75), the inclusion in the research group reduces the feeling of the lonely research work and also speeds up the research. However, the doctoral student's experience of inclusion in the scientific community varies at different stages of the doctoral process (Stubb, Pyhältö & Lonka 2012a, b). The inclusion in the community can also be negative, even 53% of the doctoral students experience the community as burdening (Stubb, Pyhältö & Lonka 2012a, b). The female doctoral students in my study compared themselves and the progress of their doctoral studies with the others who had begun their doctoral study at the same time. One's own progress seemed slow, others' achievements and publications noteworthy. Comparison caused rushing and getting wound up, in which case the successful and profound work was trampled in the hustle.

*I am really longing for the working community. I need a scientific community and I'm really outside of everything. I am not seen as the staff, even if my colleague is, because my colleague has an office even though both of us are on a scholarship. It got so concrete and clear that in some situations I was even below the undergraduate students in the hierarchy and it was a shock. I had never imagined that this would be glamorous in any way, but still. My supervisor still encouraged me and said that I can ring and we can also meet more often.*

Also the fixed term nature of the research work and the uncertainty of the continuation were mentioned in the material of my study as clear disadvantages, the employment was from a few months to a year at a time. The current work assignments had been going for several years, as many as seven years, but still the constant fixed term contracts over-shadowed employments. The uncertain and fragmented financing was negatively reflected in the doctoral studies and in the other areas of life. Undertaking the doctoral studies with a scholarship or part-time can distance students from the networks and from the current discussions within the discipline (Murakami-Ramalho, Militello & Piert 2013).

Uncertainty regarding the income over-shadowed possibilities to plan for the future according to the women in my study. The prevailing economic situation was seen as temporary and they trusted that in the future their income would increase and stabilize. In the present situation the women were worried, for example, about the payment schedule of the mortgage in addition to everyday expenses. According to my study the economic income was meagre during the doctoral studies, in particular for those who were undertaking the doctoral degree full-time (also Leonard 2001, 78; Leonard & Becker 2009,

80). The salary of the doctoral student had been secured for a limited period but it was small compared to the expenses of a person with a family. On the basis of my study, the full-time doctoral students worried about money, the part-time students' challenges were time and its management (also Leonard 2001, 115).

In addition to the challenging external conditions, the women of my study regarded their **own inability to make decisions** as a difficulty at different stages of the doctoral thesis process. Even the earlier decisions had been laborious and their minds had been changing for a long time. Simultaneous hurry, inability to make decisions, changes, lacking supervision and one's own limited time resources were poison to the doctoral thesis process. In a busy, stressed and uncertain phase of life the women also told that the physical and social welfare had received less attention, which for its part may have weakened the experienced quality of life.

Some of the women in my study were misled by the image which was formed of the doctoral studies beforehand and which later on proved to be wrong. The doctoral studies indeed were laborious and time consuming. Some students told of their desire to learn new things quickly and about their joy of discovery. In the doctoral studies the achievements were the result of long toil and the moments of insight at the advanced stage in the studies were not weekly events. The awareness of one's own limited knowledge even depressed them. The freedom in the doctoral studies was limited: it was possible to pace one's own everyday schedule individually but the major lines, objectives and responsibilities were ready set. The responsibility for high quality and progressing research work was the researcher's own.

*At first you learn at such a fast pace and get so much satisfaction from it at that first stage. Then when you begin the research, it is not so, learning and gaining insights is so slow and there is so much that just has to be done, things that don't satisfy that curiosity any more but they must be done.*

The conflicts experienced by the women of my study were multi-dimensional and they reflected well the complex wholeness of life. The challenges for the students living their busy years were brought on by the many interesting areas of lifecourse that require dedication, and their overlap. The conflicts were different, some were possible to solve by oneself, some could be affected indirectly and some just had to be adapted to. The hurry, stress and inadequacy were present in the lifecourses of the female doctoral students. An attempt was made to control negative matters by anticipating, planning and proportioning. Many told that they had faced both small and extremely big difficulties during their doctoral process but so far they had managed to overcome them in different ways.

## **DISCONTINUING THE DOCTORAL STUDIES AS A SOLUTION ?**

During the doctoral process the thoughts of discontinuing the studies were common among the doctoral students of my study, seven of the 12 women told that they had considered discontinuing their doctoral studies. As high as 45% of all the doctoral students consider discontinuing the doctoral studies (Stubb, Pyhältö & Lonka 2012a, b). At the initial stage of the doctoral process, the women in my study had a narrow understanding of what was to come, the challenges relating to graduating with a doctoral degree and to other

areas of life were met on the way. The doctoral studies offered interesting challenges but at times they were considerably exhausting and frustrating. The feelings varied in the cycles of the progress of the research work at the same time when one's own knowledge was tested. The feelings which vary during the doctoral studies intertwine naturally to different cognitive processes (Stubb, Pyhältö & Lonka 2012a, b).

One of the women of my study who was at the final stage of the doctoral studies recounted that she had seriously considered several times discontinuing her doctoral studies but the encouragement from the supervisor made her continue. Eventually she was pleased as well after nearly having completed the project even though it appeared to her only as an intermediate stopping point. According to Martinsuo and Turkulainen (2011) the personal commitment (also Stubb 2012) and the different factors which support the doctoral process have a positive effect on progress in the doctoral studies. The dimensions of the personal commitment are the commitments to the objective, time and the plan, and the factors which support the process are the support from the supervisor, the peers and the employer.

*I have been the most important spur for myself and then my supervisor has been as well, without that support I would have discontinued. I have seriously thought a few times of leaving it unfinished. When I have gone to tell my supervisor, I have got the response that I must be joking, there aren't any problems in your work, even though I have felt that the work is not progressing and I don't know anything and all the negative feelings come. So my supervisor is always saying that there is no problem with my work, that what are you babbling about.*

The combining together of several separate areas of life and problems formed into a real difficulty. The long-term difficult situation required clear new choices. Two women of my study were acutely considering discontinuing their doctoral studies. One of them considered returning to the Master of Arts studies of another field that she had discontinued earlier, these would result in a more concrete and more employable profession. The image of the doctoral studies she had formed did not correspond with the reality according to her, and the future image as a doctor did not tempt her either. The increase in the number of doctors and the demand for the excellence in research caused the profound doubt of oneself and the process. The doctoral degree does not guarantee anything for certain, the competition at the top of science is increasingly though.

The hardship which had been associated with the doctoral studies was reflected in other aspects of life, especially in the family life, which made everyday life worse. In particular, the difficulties which are reflected in the family were a significant factor when discontinuing the studies was considered – family should not be allowed to suffer from the choices and stages of the mother's work career. According to another woman, one possibility for a pause to think, away from the stressful and scheduled thesis work was to have a child and family leave.

Both the women who had seriously considered discontinuing the doctoral studies were writing the doctoral thesis as a part of their employment and as paid work, one in natural science and the other in a field of human sciences. The student of human sciences emphasized the study subject was uninteresting and the work career uncertain, the

student in natural science did not trust her own knowledge and experienced the everyday life as too much of a burden. Both of their studies were at about halfway and the process was supported by the outsiders, such as supervisors and financing. Both were the main earners in their family, which placed further burden on the situation. One's spouse was unemployed and the other's a student. The women experienced that they were getting understanding and support inside the family. In an uncertain situation the spectrum of alternative possibilities and the experienced support can be interpreted as positive. The ones discontinuing their doctoral studies are not failures (Leonard 2001), but aware and courageous choosers of their own lifecourse. On the other hand, the doctoral studies indeed were meant to be demanding at times according to the women, but within certain limits.

None of the female doctoral students in my study carried out their doctoral studies by sacrificing other aspects of their life and by only aiming for the success. The feelings and thoughts of female doctoral students varied during the process and they also realized it themselves. Getting over the difficult stages had given new strength and confidence in their own work. On the basis of the material, it was an important skill to distance oneself from the exhausting and unclear situations and see the wholeness in a wider perspective. The discouraging comments or the ununderstanding attitude took away confidence for a moment but one had to dare to try again, however, it was still only a question about the doctoral thesis. The encouragement of the supervisor that was received in difficult situations was appreciated.

*Getting stuck with my own work, it always comes, that I don't know how to solve a certain thing. I was completely stuck with one chapter and then I put it on hold for a while and started a fresh from another chapter. Later I took it up again and unexpectedly got a lot done indeed, the pieces just slotted together. Even the supervisor is saying that the chapter is well written.*

Apart from two exceptions, the female doctoral students of the study and their supervisors had a strong trust in completing the doctoral theses in spite of everyday challenges, one way or another, sooner or later. In this study, the progress of the doctoral process was more generally challenged by a situation in life. The critical stages connected to the stage in the thesis research process were not specified, the actual difficulties were more comprehensive. The women in my study emphasized in particular the skill to organize their life, the time management and the importance of the received supervision.

## **CONCLUSION**

The road to become a doctor is a long and comprehensive process. The adversities are a part of the everyday research work. Also during the doctoral processes of the women in this study, the individual challenges and larger difficulties appeared and the solutions for them were individually looked for. The stages of doctoral process are manifold, at the same time life became full of other matters than just the ones connected to graduating with a doctoral degree. As Barnacle and Mewburn (2010) emphasize, graduating with a doctoral degree is a comprehensive process which is reflected in the identity and in which one becomes the expert of their own field, a scholar. The doctoral process changes people and different people change in different ways. The change in one matter is unavoidably reflected in the wholeness.

The meaningfulness of the doctoral thesis and the conditions that are possible to arrange would seem to be central in conquering the adversities. The women had the strength to struggle on and to organize because of a meaningful project - and wanted to experience successes. In one's own lifecourse there had to be an inkling of good outcome or the plot of one's own lifecourse story had to be changed, even by questioning the meaningfulness of the doctoral process. The subject of the doctoral thesis and the lure of the future as a doctor were essential. These factors are important also when examined at the macro level: there is a need in society and in working life for the academic experts that are aware, questioning and able to change.

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