Completing a graduate degree: a case of a female student

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Abstract

This paper was written as an assignment for one of my courses while pursuing a graduate degree in the Department of Education Studies at the University of British Columbia (UBC), Canada. I have made an attempt to explore perceptions and experiences of a female graduate student on four different aspects of her family and academic life. The four aspects that emerged as the themes while analysing interview transcript are: personal and family life; gender differences; funding and scholarship; and the role of supervisor. The paper also present how the interview was conducted, how the data were generated and how analysis was done. At the end of the paper I have presented my reflections.

This short and single-participant semi-structured interview research concludes with three basic findings as major impeding factors for a successful completion of a graduate programme, especially by a female student. The three findings are: female graduate students still face many challenges - as systemic barriers - that are more severe than their male counterparts face; financial problem is still a strong impeding factor that associate with all other major and minor barriers for the completion of a graduate degree; and finally, the relationship between a graduate student and her/his supervisor and the latter's expertise in the area of student's research interest is one of the significant factors for the successful completion of a graduate programme.

Interview contexts

The interview was conducted as an assignment for the completion of the 'Course EDUC 503A Ethnography and Education' in the UBC. The topic of this interview was 'journey to and through graduate school'. As I didn't know who the interviewee was I had no background knowledge about my subject. However, as instructed by the professor, I had known that the interviewee would be one of my classmates.

On the process of preparing interview protocol or guide I brainstormed on the interview topic and prepared "an outline of topics to be covered with suggested questions" (Kvale, An introction to qualitative research interviewing, 1996, p. 130). The outline of the topics were made in such a way that that could capture, basically, the three phases a graduate student has to undergo in his/her life: the time before joining the graduate school; the time during the studies at graduate school; plans and prospects after the completion of graduate school.

The outline of the topics was phrased as 'interview prompts' with few suggested questions. The reason behind that was not to limit the interviewee to the questions and not to allow too much digression from the mainstream discussion – semi-structured interview. The suggested questions covered the following types of questions: introducing questions, probing questions; follow up questions, direct questions, and indirect questions (Kvale, 1996). The main prompts were: background before joining graduate school, motivating factors to study, barriers to join graduate school, challenges at present, relation with supervisor, strategies to complete the study on time, and career goal after the completion of graduate school.

On the day of interview, I got my interviewee chosen – a female student doing PhD. We (interviewee and me) went to a separate room. With her verbal consent to take part in the interview and get her speech recorded I described my topic and my plan to get her opinions and

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experiences in three phases – before joining the graduate school, at present and after the completion of graduation. According to the dynamics of the situation I rephrased some of the questions; however, the interview prompts were the same. Some issues emerged during the interview and I had to generate questions and ask accordingly. The interview started at 4PM and ended at 4:24PM on October 25, 2011.

Transcription

After the interview I came to my residence, downloaded the audio file from my recorder to my computer and started to listen. I listened for five 5 times and started to transcribe verbatim - "the procedure for producing a written version of the interview" (Hancock, 2002, p. 14). While transcribing I faced the following issues.

1. Finding exact words to express her emotions and prosodic features - such as non-verbal means of expressions that were equally powerful as words to communicate her feelings, emotions, opinions and experiences – was really difficult. I have described them in square brackets [ ] whenever it deemed necessary.

2. When the tempo of her speech went faster I was not able to understand what particular words she was using - especially the grammatical words such as auxiliary verbs, prepositions and articles. However, through context (the utterances used before and after those words) I was able to render them in the written transcript.

3. Sometimes when I had to listen to the same bit of her utterance several times, I almost lost the flow of her speech. That is why I had to correct my transcript for 10 times by listening and reading the draft-transcript simultaneously.

4. Some of the non-verbal sounds, especially the 'fillers' she repeatedly used as her banal clichés were difficult to transcribe. I have used the terms such as 'ahm', 'um', and 'ah' to

denote those fillers of her speech. Her silences and pauses are denoted by three dots (...) and her laughter is transcribed as 'hahahaha' and 'hehehehe' as onomatopoeic expressions.

5. I have italicised her speech and bolded the utterances spoken by me to make it readable and distinctive.

6. It took me about 8 hours to transcribe the interview but that was only the first draft. It took me another 6 hours to complete by adding prosodic features, silences, body language, hesitant, and emotions.

Coding

When I felt that the transcript copy was ready to analyse, I started reading to find out significant words, bits, and chunks of her speech. Those bits and chunks were underlined and extracted and a list of extractions was prepared in a separate sheet of paper. There were 39 extractions from the 7-page transcript. Then those extractions were grouped into possible themes or "conceptual categories" (Sipe & Ghiso, 2004) of the interview. There were eight categories altogether including the extractions that didn't fit in any categories. I again read those categories and merged them if they were found to fall in the same theme. Then I generated codes. I read again the transcript and matched the expressions with the codes generated. I made minor revisions on the code-phrases and the following codes were constructed as final ones.

1. Kids
2. Multiple roles
3. Personal life
4. Family life
5. Husband's role

6. Gender difference
7. Aging and study
8. Funding
9. Scholarship competition
10. Intimacy with supervisor

11. Supervisor's support	16. Career interest
12. Supervisor's expertise	17. Clear in research
13. Unmatched supervisor	18. Course selection
14. Study interest	19. Time management
15. Goal oriented	20. Research participants

Having enough thoughts and with adequate rationalization (heuristically) I started to find themes on those categories. I followed the "data collation technique" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 87) to generate those themes and finally following themes emerged. I had kept "outliers" (Sipe & Ghiso, 2004) in a separate theme assuming that they could be of use while analysing the data but at the end, I virtually decided to discuss by merging them in selected few themes rather than dealing separately. In this way, the following themes were made ready for analysis and discussion.

1. Personal & family life
2. Gender difference
3. Funding and scholarship
4. Role of supervisor

Analysis

As I delineated in the preceding sections, the themes were generated through "careful reading and re-reading of the data" (Fereday & Cochrane, 2006, p. 4). I analysed the data using thematic analysis technique (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 87) that follows the following steps: familiarizing with data; generating initial code; searching for themes; reviewing themes; defining and naming themes; and analyzing the data. As the five steps are completed, the following sections deal with data analysis. I have written the methodological approach applied for data analysis in the 'reflection' section of this assignment. The feelings, opinions and experiences of Marian (pseudonym used to denote the interviewee) are analysed and discussed in relation to

related literature. Substantiations are made to discuss but not to validate the meaning of researcher's, neither solely of participant's.

Theme 1: Personal and family life

Graduate students are not only the students of a university, they have different roles: at home they are father/mother, daughter/son or brother/sister. The type of personal and family life has a great role to play in getting chance to join graduate programme and complete it. Research has shown that the role of personal and family life is more significant for female graduate student than their male counterparts. One of the crucial reasons is that "women face the challenges of multiple role relationships such as partner, home maker, parents, wife, and worker" (Wiesenberg & Aghakhani, 2007, p. 109).

For Marian, her personal and family life has a crucial impact in her academic life. Having kids and her role as a primary caregiver delayed the time to join her graduate studies. She expressed her experience in the following ways.

> (Marian) For me it's having kids. I have two children and I decided and wanted to be really involved in their upbringing. When I started my Master's my second one was 18 months old. I can't imagine doing this kind of work before my kids of this age. It's the juggling act [supports her expressions with body movements, especially with her hands] of being a woman [pronounces with relatively strong stress], being a wife, being a housewife, being a mother, and being a PhD student. I am juggling it now. I couldn't have juggled it five years ago (Interview Transcript, Line No. 33-38).

Female graduate students also face difficulty in pursuing graduate degree and job that are not geographically accessible. Especially, if they have children it becomes more problematic. Gold and Dore (2001 as cited in Anders, 2004) found that "for women, family balance and

geography were negatively associated with planning on a family career" (p. 512). Marian is also facing the same problem.

> (Marian) If there was an assistant professor job in Toronto I would not move there probably...you know my family comes first. Probably moving to Victoria but not moving beyond. What I would like to do is when my kids are older… (Interview Transcript, Line No. 128-130).

The literature and the case of Marian shows that personal and family life and multiple roles associated with it are major barriers for a successful completion of a graduate degree, especially for women.

Theme 2: Gender difference

As discussed in the Theme 1, the problems of female graduate students are more severe than their male counterparts. Different researches have concluded that gender difference still persist in different communities of the world irrespective of the level of economic development.

Canadian Association of University Teachers (2003, as cited in Anders, 2004) reported that "women are underrepresented in the professoriate compared to men" (Anders, 2004, p. 511). Similarly, Kimura (1997) found that in Canada, "the proportion of women declines at each stage along the pipeline, from undergraduates (58.9%), master's students (52.3%), doctoral students (36.1%), and academic job applicants (20%)" (Anders, 2004, p. 512). Though Kimura's research is almost 13 years old, however, when females grow older and have babies "all mothers face challenges when trying to balance the demands of mothering…the difficulty of combining work and family in today's fast-paced technological world is difficult" (McDowell, 2008, p. 45).

Marian doesn't perceive the issue of gender difference as a pervasive factor to impede the academic and professional life of female graduate students. In one of my curiosity (see

Transcript line No. 134) on the challenges for females to complete graduate study, at first she promptly reacted that she faced no challenges as such. But when she started to explain in detail, I could see clear indications that her problem was directly associated with gender differences.

> (Marian) I think 'No'...I think the challenge is that if you wanna have a family and have children; it's really hard to do that and to do the graduate school at the same time when they are young. I think women who wanna have family; I think...it will really be tough to have it all – to have the family and to have a great career. (Transcript, Line 135-138).

The gender difference for Marian is not so explicit because she has a cordial relationship with her husband and he is so supportive to her studies and career. Marian reveals that her role as primary caregiver to her children is acceptable to her. She hilariously put her thought in the following ways.

> (Marian) In our relationship, I was the primary caregiver. I was the one that looked after the home; provide the meals; pick up Max from daycare or whatever, right? Eric worked at school he couldn't take anymore. So in an effect...I think he had a bit easier. My joke is that ....hahaha...what I need is a wife...hahaha... If I had a wife to do cooking and cleaning and all that would make my life much easier. We have a very traditional role in our marriage and it works for us...you know, you can't generalize right, everybody's relationship is different (Transcript, Line 153-159).

Williams (2003) claims that "as domesticity entered, it changed the designation of family responsibilities to women as ideal worker; child rearing became mothers' work, an allocation that persists up to present day" (p. 3 as cited in McDowell, 2008, p. 26). The case of Marian exemplifies this claim. In another conversational turn Marian opined,

> (Marian) I still think that there is male stereotype that men are supposed to be breadwinner, to pursue a career and so you [she was indicating to me as a male graduate student] don't have to take

ten year out of your career to raise a family. You can put your energy in; you can be a father until you are sixty, right? I couldn't...I chose not to do that. So I think women have to make choices but men don't have to make. I think there is a difference to be a father graduate student and a mother graduate student (Transcript, Line 145-149).

In this way the literature and the case of Marian allows us to say that gender difference and associated gender related roles in family is one of the important impending factors for the successful completion of graduate programme by a female student.

Theme 3: Funding and scholarship

This theme stands as an important issue in the case of Marian. There may be several factors behind her frequent jump into the topic of funding in our discussion. However, Marian's experiences and opinions make it clear that funding is one of the vital issues associated with graduate study.

Most often our conversation moved around - whether I raised this issue as an interviewer or not – funding and scholarship competition. She reiterated the issue of funding time and again (see Transcript Line No. 31, 41, 43-48, 95, 101, and 125). For her the most vital challenge and most crucial impending factor to complete her graduate study is funding. She has an extreme desire to get some sort of government funding but she thinks such scholarships are really competitive. Some of her quotes are:

(Marian) My tuitions covered...but nothing else and so I have to... I can apply to federal funds so the Canadian Institute of Health Research provides doctoral scholarships… but it's so competitive … my husband works full time and he really a kind of allowing. We are able to fund for me to be here for two semesters. It's a kind of financial... [Takes pause and deep breath] it's a huge financial commitment... (Line, 43-47)

Ah...ahm....I will be doing if I get funding...hahahaha... [Laughs loudly] that's the bottom line (Line, 101)

You know, funding is a huge issue (Line, 125)

Before joining UBC, and especially, talking with Marian, I had a kind of stereotypical assumption regarding funding and scholarship. As a student from the Third World country, I had to wait for 3-4 years to join a graduate school until the UBC offered me some scholarship. I had assumed that the problem of funding is not so big for the students of economically prosperous countries. But now, I found that funding problem still persist and maybe it has become more severe than before because of global financial crises, increasing market prices, increasing needs of technological goods, and most importantly growing number of prospective graduate students as scholarship competitors.

Theme 4: Role of supervisor

For graduate students, who would be more important than their supervisor in their university for the completion of their degree? As family members in their family, the mentors and supervisors of their department play a crucial role in their academic and career life during as well as after the graduation. Research shows that "skilled mentors promote the professional productivity of their students and also foster students' confidence in their abilities" (Steiner, Costes, & Rya, 2000, p. 296).

The case of Marian raises three serious issues pertinent to graduate students in their role with their supervisor. The issues are: availability of supervisor's time for graduate student, expertise in student's research area, and the overlap between the philosophies of the two – supervisor and student.

Rose (2005) claims that "mentoring is a key element of graduate education and can have large impacts on students' perceptions of the quality of their graduate experiences" (p. 53). In her first semester, Marin's supervisor was on a sabbatical and they had only one phone call and no meeting in person. So she felt detached from the university. She says,

> (Marian) my supervisor was on a sabbatical in my first semester. So...I think, I felt detached and not belonging because she wasn't...she wasn't physically around I think we had one phone call but now she is extremely busy and hard to pin her down…

Thus it becomes evident that the duration of time the supervisor and graduate student spend together determines the experience and degree of confidence of the students to do well in their studies.

Winston and Polkosnik (1984) argue that a successful graduate supervisor must fulfill five essential roles and functions – "reliable information source, departmental socialiser, advocate, role model, and occupational socialiser" (cited in Rose, 2005, p. 56).

The issue of whether these five roles and functions her supervisor fulfilled or not is out of the scope of this writing, however, the remaining two issues (as I mentioned above) are really crucial in Marian's life and I personally believe that that applies to almost all graduate students.

At the time of the interview she had two supervisors – primary and secondary. Because of the fact that her area of research doesn't match with the interest of her secondary supervisor and they belong to different philosophical paradigms – positivism and constructivism – in their research orientation, she is in a dilemma whether to replace her with another supervisor whose expertise in methodology and research area she could really exploit. But she is in a state of ambivalence as she doesn't want to upset anybody. Her direct quotes make this issue clear,

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(Marian) I have another supervisor ... [takes a pause and becomes serious] and I am actually wondering about whether to change her before I go on too much longer because I am not sure what she is brining to my research committee. I don't want to upset anybody but I am actually started thinking; maybe before I go much longer in second semester I need to think about whether to have somebody whose research methodology or research background can provide me with more support. I have a really strong primary supervisor than ... co-supervisor who is not so strong (Line, 56-63)

My motive doing this [changing co-supervisor] is to really exploit supervisor's knowledge and expertise as much as possible (Line 65).

She [her co-supervisor] has done a lot of quantitative research and has positivistic view on health [speaks slowly] which I am the opposite (68-69)

My home department is Rehabilitation Sciences so what I have to do before I do anything is to see if there is anybody to replace her, because I need somebody in my home department. So...I don't know whether I will be just causing a lot of problems... (Line 73-76)

Hartnett and Katz (1977) claim that "greater supervisory mentoring should be more likely when the student possesses characteristics that signal the advisor that the student is likely to be committed to his/her endeavours, has positive attitudes towards the advisor and has talent to succeed" (p. 54). Whether Marian is a talented student or not – because it goes beyong the scope of my exploration in this topic – she frequently admitted that she has a positive attitudes towards her supervisors but in such condition she is unable to continue with her secondary supervisor because of latter's different research philosophy and expertise.

Conclusion

This study – though short in duration and very much limited in scope – has provided some important issues that are directly or indirectly related to the successful completion of a graduate

programme, especially in the case of female graduate student. The four themes – personal and family life, gender difference, funding and scholarship, and the role of supervisor – highlight the barriers that may impede the studies of graduate students. There may be several types of "systemic barriers" (Anders, 2004, p. 512), however, "one of the most important issues…is the challenges of balancing work [studies] and personal life" (Lee, Dobson, & Reissing, 2009, p. 75).

Eventhough the barriers related to personal and family life may apply to both genders, "childbirth and parenting of young children may substantially hamper the professional development of women compared to with men" (Marshall & Jones, 1990 as cited in Steiner, Costes, & Rya, 2000, p. 297).

On top these two barriers – multiple family roles and gender role – funding remains the most pervasive barrier for the successful completion of graduate study. Obviously, economy affects not only social and political but also one's academic and, thereafter, professional life. As graduate programmes – for most of the students – start after having children, the family responsibility and economic burden associated with it becomes more demanding. As suggested by Andres (2004), "universities that wish to attract the most meritorious doctoral students should increase quality childcare and parental leave to support graduate students" (p. 520). Had there been no financial constraints, Marian would have joined graduate degree quite earlier in her life – "I am gonna be 50 soon" (Transcript, Line No. 121).

"The relation of graduate students with their supervisor are regarded by most graduate students as the most important aspect of the quality of their graduate program" (Hartnett & Katz, 1977, p. 647). The degree of intimacy in their relation depends on the frequence of their meeting, expertise of the supervisor and the match between the philosphies of the two parties. When these

conditions are not fulfilled the graduate students will be in a moral dilemma on whether to go along with the unmatched supervisor or take the risk of replacing with another one.

Reflections

The interview with Marian was a kind of "platonic dialogue" (Kvale, 2006) as I found myself - while listening to the audio file and reading the transcript - cooperating to her to reach the conclusion. There are two reasons behind this. Firstly, we were classmates and some of the problems she was facing such as the problem of funding matched with my own. Secondly, our topic was, by nature was not something that led us to have an "agonistic interview" (Kvale, 2006). However, if I had to interview for the second time, I think, I would ask some critical questions that not only provokes her to share her stories but also provides her impetus to argue rather than seek consensus.

Though I had not planned to talk on gender related issue it emerged during the discussion. While listening to the audio file and transcribing I found some of the questions I asked were not well framed so as to create a meaningful dialogue. I think it happens in every semi-structured interview and we, as researcher, have to face that.

I didn't feel any power imbalance between us (interviewee and interviewer) even if we were from totally different geographical and cultural backgrounds. I don't think the gender difference between us was any significant factor because she was describing her past, present and future in relation to her family including her husband without any hesitation. When she was describing her traditional relationship with her husband she was a bit hesitant which I resolved using "conversational space" (Owens, 2006).

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While narrating problems she faced as a female, she made frequent comparison between the two gender-groups (male and female students). She took me as someone representing the male group of students. The conversations, for some readers, may seem that she was taking me as a rival – a privileged gender. However, in reality she was just using me as a referent to make me clear what she tried to say. I didn't feel any role of power related to the sexuality of the researcher.

During coding I didn't follow exactly the top-down or bottom-up approach, neither I parsed the data. I tried to find the real essence of interviewee's meaning in a larger context. At initial stage of coding and developing conceptual categories, I extracted those bits and chunks of her speech that carried the meaning that she expressed holistically.

While analysing the transcript I tried to strike a balance between objectivity and subjectivity because I believe that intersubectivity is the best possible technique to generate real meaning or the truth in qualitative research. I think this ontological and epistemological standing started functioning at the time of interview too. I believe that "our struggle lies in finding a balance between a respectful, collaborative alliance with participants, and drawing on our own body of academic knowledge (both intellectual and experiential) gained from working in academic and practice settings" (Hoskins & Stoltz, 2005, p. 97). Because we shared the experiences we created the shared meaning on the barriers that a graduate student faces.

Though my plan of structuring the interview by dividing into three phases – before joining graduate school, during the graduate studies and after the completion of graduation – worked well for what I wanted to cover, at the end, I realized that it didn't turn out to be so fruitful because what I had thought as important aspect of graduate study was not completely true. Now I think I should have discussed more on the barriers to the completion of graduate degree for a

female student. Moreover, I feel that some of my personal idiosyncrasies such as my upbringing in Asia, my age, my race and my habitus have played some significant roles. Sometimes I feel if there was somebody interviewing her on the same topic the dialogue would have been different affecting my analysis and findings

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