The Lived Experience of Late-Stage
Doctoral Student Attrition in Counselor Education

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Doctoral student attrition occurs across academic disciplines and presents problems for noncompleting students and the programs from which they withdraw. The following research question guided the present study, "What is the experience of doctoral attrition in counselor education?" Six late-stage doctoral noncompleters from counselor education programs participated in research interviews that were analyzed using a grounded theory approach. Results showed two distinct types of attrition. Five participants reported a negative experience of encountering barriers that acted against the internal desire of the participants to obtain the doctorate. One participant reported a positive experience of an internal change that altered the priority of continuing in doctoral study. Results of the present study have implications for prospective and current doctoral students. Key Words: Counselor Education, Doctoral Student Attrition, and Grounded Theory

Doctoral student attrition often creates negative consequences for the university and the student. Attrition results in the waste of a university's human and financial resources (Kerlin, 1995; National Research Council, 1996). Time spent on students who never graduate drains the resources of a doctoral program, and these resources are unrecoverable (Pauley, Cunningham, & Toth, 1999). Doctoral study noncompleters (students who drop out of doctoral programs prior to graduation) pay an emotional toll. Students' personal lives may be devastated as they spend years explaining why they did not finish the degree (Sternberg, 1981). The emotional impact of attrition causes some to struggle with bouts of serious depression, and has even resulted in a few cases of violence and attempted suicide (Hinchey & Kimmel, 2000; Lovitts, 2001). Given the various costs associated with doctoral student attrition, a study of the experience of doctoral student attrition in counselor education is vital.

Various barriers found to contribute to doctoral student attrition include (a) procrastination (Green, 1997; Kluever, 1997), (b) low researcher self-efficacy (Faghihi, Rakow, & Ethington, 1999), (c) finances (Abedi & Benkin, 1987; Bair & Haworth, 1999; Girves & Wemmerus, 1988), (d) poor advisor relationship (Ferrer De Valero, 2001), (e) low integration level with faculty (Golde, 2000; Hoskins & Goldberg, 2005; Lovitts, 2001), (f) low integration level with peers (Hoskins & Goldberg; Lovitts), and (g) incongruence between student goals and program focus (Bair & Haworth; Golde, 1998; Hoskins & Goldberg; Lovitts). Because barriers leading to attrition vary widely across academic disciplines (Bair & Haworth), barriers leading to doctoral attrition in counselor education need to be identified and examined.

In the specific context of counselor education, Hoskins and Goldberg (2005) conducted qualitative interviews finding three main categories of the student–program match: (a) the social-personal match between the student and his or her peers, (b) the social-personal match between the student and the faculty, and (c) the academic match that entails the congruence of the student's goals with the program's focus. The findings of Hoskins and Goldberg represent only a few of the barriers that have been shown to impact doctoral attrition across other disciplines. In addition, all five of the permanent noncompleters in the Hoskins and Goldberg study withdrew during the first three years of doctoral study.

Given the limited scope of research on doctoral student attrition in counselor education, additional research is appropriate. In particular, the voices of noncompleters who withdrew during the dissertation stage of doctoral study need to be heard. The current study attempted to add to the existing body of knowledge concerning doctoral student attrition by focusing on noncompleters in counselor education who withdrew during or after the third year of doctoral study. Studying noncompleters who withdrew later in doctoral study will add to the picture begun by Hoskins and Goldberg (2005).

The research question for the study was: What is the nature of the participants' experience of doctoral attrition in counselor education?

Method

This study was conducted within a grounded theory framework in order to fully explore the experience of the participants. Grounded theory is an inductively developed theoretical stance taken from the body of data. The most desirable outcome of the analysis is that the theory espoused will fit the dataset perfectly. The contrast is with a theory formed deductively without data, which may not fit any data set available. Grounded theory is most appropriate when dealing with case studies or case-oriented data. A case rather than a variable perspective is used in Grounded Theory. Another way to look at this case construct is that the researcher takes each case to represent a whole or gestalt, where the individual variables interact to produce a specific outcome. This case-oriented paradigm is built on the assumption that the variables interact in complex ways which cannot be reduced to study by main effects, as with quantitative methods like ANOVA (Borgatti, 2006). Grounded theory describes the process of anchoring concepts in the data. This approach is an appropriate way to analyze qualitative data in order to discover concepts related to the topic under consideration (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

To examine the experience of doctoral attrition in counselor education, interviews were conducted with doctoral study noncompleters and the resulting transcripts were analyzed for content and meaning. Following the process of grounded theory as described by Strauss and Corbin (1998) and Glaser and Strauss (1967), a series of steps were taken to develop a sound theoretical outcome. Strauss has indicated that the quality of the theory is determined by the theory's construction, as opposed to the quantitative perspective that the quality of the theory is based on the theory's ability to explain new data. This theory is constructed by reading and re-reading the textual database and labeling variables (categories, concepts, and properties) and indicating their interrelationships. The ability to perceive variables or develop theoretical sensitivity is enhanced through reading of the literature and using methodology described by Strauss, Glaser, and Corbin to further develop awareness and sensitivity (Borgatti, 2006; Glaser & Strauss; Strauss & Corbin). Given these qualities of

grounded theory, grounded theory was selected as the methodology to examine the cases and to construct a theory.

Participants

This study used a criterion-based sampling method to select participants (Heppner & Heppner, 2004). The criteria for participation in this study were as follows: Each participant must have been enrolled in any doctoral program in counselor education between 1975 and 2005 and must have subsequently withdrawn from the program (Golde, 1998). Participants were recruited through an announcement on CESNET, a national counseling listserv, and a state-level counseling listserv. Eight participants met the criteria for inclusion in the study. Two of the participants experienced attrition in the middle stage of doctoral study and six participants experienced attrition in the late stage of doctoral study. The themes that emerged from the middle-stage noncompleters were unrelated to the themes which emerged for the late-stage noncompleters. In order to focus the findings presented in this article, only the six late-stage noncompleters will be discussed. One participant, Marie, participated in a phone interview while all other participants had face-to-face interviews with the principal researcher.

The sample included four female and two male participants. All six participants were Caucasian. The participants ranged in age from 27 years to 71 years. Three participants conducted doctoral study in the 1970s, two in the 1980s, and one in the 1990s. Five participants were from states in the southeastern United States, and one participant was from a state identified as being in the southwestern United States. All six participants withdrew during the late stage of doctoral study, defined by Tinto (1993) as being the period of dissertation work. One participant (Marie) was known professionally by the principal researcher prior to the beginning of this study and five participants were unknown to the researcher prior to the beginning of this study. Marie was candid and calm during the interview and subsequent expert review indicated no discrepancies between her transcript and the themes which emerged from her transcript. In addition, Marie, as with all participants, verified the results of the study through member checks. All interviews were conducted during the fall of 2006 after receiving approval from the University of Alabama Institutional Review Board.

Researchers

The principal researcher was a doctoral student in counselor education and supervision at the time this research was conducted. Having completed the content portion of the doctoral program, the principal researcher learned that a large percentage of doctoral students never graduate. With great empathy for those who did not finish, the principal researcher chose this research topic as his dissertation topic. The primary assumption going into the research project was that doctoral noncompletion was not due to a lack of academic ability or desire but because of a lack of adequate resources and guidance needed to complete the work. In other words, the principle researcher believed that the academy, rather than the student, was the main source of late-stage doctoral attrition. As the results of this project suggest, however, both the academy and the student have a part in late-stage doctoral

attrition.   The secondary researcher served as the dissertation chair for the principal researcher.

Data Collection

In this study, the principal researcher collected participants' narratives via audio recording of interviews, which were transcribed into text. Each participant interview lasted between 30 and 90 minutes. A semi-structured protocol was used to ensure that the research question was fully covered in the interviews (see Appendix). At the end of the interview, each participant chose a pseudonym to be used for this study.

Data Analysis

Following each audio-taped interview, the researcher began data analysis by listening to the tape of the interview in order to get a sense of the whole session (Morrissette, 1999). The researcher prepared the raw data for further analysis by creating a transcript of each audio-taped interview.   The transcription process went smoothly, if not quickly.   No difficulties arose from the primary researcher transcribing the interviews. After transcription was complete, each participant was given the opportunity to make modifications to his or her transcript. After participant modifications, the researcher read each transcript several times in order to create a deep familiarity with the text (Colaizzi, 1978).

The first phase of data analysis began with a detailed, line-by-line analysis of the transcripts (Giorgi, 1985). The researcher marked each significant statement in the text, resulting in open coding of the interviews (Colaizzi, 1978; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). A statement was considered significant if it related to the participant's doctoral study in any way. For instance, in Gandalf's interview, he described how he became interested in the field of counseling. He stated, "What got me interested in the field of counseling, I was in seminary and took some pastoral psychology." That material was not considered significant to his doctoral study and, thus, was not coded. After significant statements were identified, the researcher paraphrased each one and assigned it a code (Harry, Sturges, & Klinger, 2005; Morrissette, 1999; Strauss & Corbin).   For example, Gandalf described the emotions he experienced after not completing the doctoral degree. He stated, "I developed full-fledged clinical depression." This statement was coded "depression." This procedure was done for each transcript.

The second phase of data analysis entailed grouping the codes into related axial codes or broader codes representing the intersecting meaning of the open codes (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This process was accomplished using constant comparisons between the open codes (Harry et al., 2005). For example, the code "depression" was related to the code "futility." These codes were clustered together into the code "personal emotions." Clustering was done separately for each participant's transcript. The researcher noted patterns in the axial codes (Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Seidman, 1998) and gathered the axial codes into similar groups (Creswell, 1998; Giorgi, 1985; Shank, 2006).

The third phase of data analysis entailed refining the codes into themes to tell the story of the participants' experiences (Harry et al., 2005; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). For example, the codes "personal emotions" and "family emotions" were included in the larger theme "emotional consequences of Dropping Out."   Using these themes, the researcher

created an expanded individual description of the experience for each participant (Morrissette, 1999) that elaborated on the themes by integrating researcher commentary and participant quotations.

The fourth phase of data analysis entailed the principal researcher seeking validation of the initial findings. Two reviewers, each with a doctorate in counselor education and at least one class in qualitative methodology, were recruited to analyze a portion of the findings. Each reviewed two separate participants' transcripts and individual descriptions to ensure that the findings were derived from the data and not the researcher's own presuppositions or biases (Shenton, 2004). In addition, individual descriptions were sent to the participants to validate the findings (Colaizzi, 1978). After the findings were validated, the researcher formulated an overall description for all the participants. The overall description was sent to the participants and they were given an opportunity to make comments or suggestions.

Trustworthiness

In order for any research project to be deemed trustworthy, it needs to demonstrate a high level of quality (Shank, 2006). Two procedures were conducted to ensure the trustworthiness of this study. First, member checks were used to ensure the congruence of the study results with the perspectives of the participants (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Shenton, 2004). All participants agreed with the findings generated by the data analysis. Requests were made by two participants to eliminate portions of text that were deemed to contain potentially identifying information. All requests for change were made to the findings. Second, two reviewers not previously associated with the research project critically analyzed a portion of the findings. Both reviewers signed affidavits stating that the findings they reviewed were directly related to the participants' transcripts and did not flow out of researcher bias or misunderstanding.

Results

The pseudonyms chosen by participants are used to identify them in this section. All proper names used in participant quotes have been altered to protect confidentiality. The research question for this study was: What is the experience of doctoral attrition in counselor education? Reflection on the data revealed that more than one type of attrition existed for the participants. Participants in the present study encountered one of two distinct experiences of doctoral attrition in counselor education: a negative experience termed *Dropping Out* or a positive experience termed *Leaving*.

Dropping Out

Five participants (Gandalf, Angie, Sally, Cookie, Drew) spoke of the same basic attrition experience, which was termed *Dropping Out*. Dropping Out was the experience of barriers acting against the internal desire of the participant to obtain the doctorate. Gandalf epitomized this experience when he stated,

>   The committee would not, you know, they were not helpful. It was just like I
>   was there by myself, it's sink or swim, and this fella had the power and I

>   didn't….I asked for help and it just didn't materialize….Here I am, I have
>   three earned degrees, two of them graduate level. I made one grade less than
>   an A in my Master's program and here I am wanting to finish something up
>   and it's like spittin' in the wind.

Dropping Out participants had progressed to the late stage of doctoral study but were
prevented from completing the doctorate by a combination of barriers. Each had the desire
and the energy to complete the task but encountered circumstances that forced them to quit
pursuing their goal. Each felt powerless in the face of the power of the barrier. Sally
described her experience as follows:

>   I always felt powerless, I never felt like I had any power….As I said, there
>   were times that I would drive to campus, after having taken off from work and
>   my advisor wouldn't show up. I can remember sitting in the hall outside the
>   office door and crying. This is when I was in the last third of the program and
>   getting close to completing it….My advisor was going through a divorce and
>   he was just not with the program. He was a nice person but he had *so* many
>   problems himself.

>   **Barrier #1: Problematic chair relationship.** All five Dropping Out participants
reported problematic relationships with their dissertation chair. Neglected, and in one case
harassed, these doctoral students were left without a guide to navigate them through the most
difficult academic journey they had ever attempted. Gandalf reported feeling neglected by
his dissertation chair. He stated,

>   At that time I believe he was living (out of state) and was commuting back
>   and forth so he wasn't on campus a lot. He was in the process of transitioning
>   to something else, another job as I recall. It was… again, the committee just
>   wasn't helpful.

Drew described how his dissertation chair was unable to keep him on-task. He said,

>   I do remember meeting with my major professor, a guy named Bob Sanders,
>   he was real well known at the time. He was extremely busy and we couldn't
>   ever find times to meet so we'd do things like meet at (a fast-food restaurant)
>   at 6:30 on some morning and we would end up talking about sports, church,
>   and religion and just everything but- and then it would be time for him to
>   go….I'm not blaming him… neither one of us could really get focused on a
>   topic.

Angie described the harassment she endured from her major professor who eventually
became her dissertation chair. She stated,

>   One day in front of all of us in statistics class my major professor made
>   reference to my divorce in a very sarcastic way insinuating that I was a bad
>   person for leaving my husband....I can't remember what he actually said, but

the whole room went silent. I left the classroom….On one occasion he made the trip to (my new city) and called me at my office to invite me to dinner; he was obviously drunk. When I declined he became extremely angry and said, "Well this train only comes down the track once so I guess you're out of luck." I never heard from him again.

Cookie expressed her need for more assertive research mentoring from her chair. She said,

I was thinking, wondering, if there had been one thing that would have made a significant difference for me, what would it have been? And what I thought was if there could have been, rather than just say "go do it," if there could have been somebody, a coach, or mentor, or whatever, that's what was missing for me.

Barrier #2: Career as refuge. All five Dropping Out participants described their career as a place of refuge from doctoral study. The counseling profession has historically embraced the master's level practitioner model. As a result, each of the Dropping Out participants entered the late-stage of doctoral study with a professional work position. As the frustration with doctoral study increased, each began to take refuge in their career. Feeling powerless in the dissertation process, each began to turn to their career for feelings of power and belonging. Sally talked of the contrasting power roles she experienced between her work and her doctoral study. She stated,

I was in a very powerless situation with the school but I was really excelling in what I was doing in my jobs, both the state job and the one I later took with the nonprofit agency…. So, in a sense, I had power over them in this area. I was in the "real world" doing "hands on" what we were being taught in the classroom, if that makes any sense.

Angie reported that the job she obtained just prior to her dissertation work afforded her a new sense of respect from others. She said, "I was finally making a decent salary, liked my job and the work environment. I was respected and made many professional friends."

Emotions Experienced in Dropping Out

A negative emotional reaction was part of the Dropping Out experience. Dropping Out participants described how they still valued obtaining the doctorate at the time of attrition and experienced negative emotions as they were prevented from obtaining something they desired. Drew described the shame and embarrassment of letting a former mentor down as a result of his attrition. He stated,

He's probably disappointed that I didn't finish. I think he is, and I'm too embarrassed to call him. I haven't talked to him in years….I've kind of lost track with Dr. Sanders, I think 'cause I'm ashamed to call him. I didn't finish. There's some guilt about that.

Angie described the shame and anger she experienced when she thinks about her attrition experience. She stated,

> I felt ashamed of myself for not finishing the program like all my cohorts. I also felt a great deal of anger toward my major professor, the counseling program, and all the good ole boys that preyed on female graduate students. In retrospect, I wish I would have pursued a complaint through the Graduate School. My thought at that time was that the good-ole-boy system would protect their own...I would just be victimized again.

For Cookie, the irritation experienced was less about being dropped from the program and more about the lack of options available to salvage some kind of recognition for all of her hard work. She stated,

> And I do have some irritation about the way I was dropped from the program. You know, the fact that I was dropped, I don't have any problem with that, they have their rules, they've got numbers that they've got to meet, credit hour production and all that kind of stuff, I understand that. But the way it was done, particularly after I had been told there were options and then I was not offered those options.

Long-term emotional impact. An unexpected finding emerged related to the negative emotions experienced by the Dropping Out participants. Some participants reported that the emotional consequences of Dropping Out were felt for an extended period of time; for some, the emotions were still fresh during the research interviews, even though the interviews happened ten to 25 years after Dropping Out. Perhaps because the locus of control was perceived by the Dropping Out participants as being outside of them, the emotions did not quickly, if ever, fade. Cookie carried the disappointment and frustration of Dropping Out with her for 15 years. She stated,

> It was months before I could even say to people, "I'm not going to get my doctorate." It was years before I could ever say to myself, "You're not ever going to get that doctorate" and believe that I wouldn't one day go back and get it. And that happened when I finally said, "I just cannot resolve this. I want to do something to try to finish it." So I made an application at another school and then found out all of my work, because I had been doing the dissertation work for…see I didn't realize my coursework was so old 'cause I had been doing a dissertation for two or three years. That made the coursework older than what I had realized and the coursework was too old, the schools wouldn't accept it. I would have had to start over. And I said, "That closed the door for me." And that was just last year….It was disappointment but it was relief because now I can really put it behind me. It's been 15 years I've dragged this thing along with me.

Drew, on the day of his research interview, was still struggling with regret over not completing the doctorate. Drew stated, "Today's one of those days I wish I'd finished and I'd probably be…" He couldn't bring himself to finish his thought. Gandalf, as well, was

struggling with strong emotions during and after the research interview. In a post-interview email, Gandalf reflected on his emotions after the interview by saying, "I guess I ripped the scabs off some old, still painful, wounds. I wonder if I'll ever 'get over it.' Probably not. I do not think I need therapy. I sure could have used a different outcome." Gandalf's Dropping Out occurred more than two decades prior to this interview and yet the wounds were still painful.

Emotional impact on family members. The participants were not alone in their emotional reactions to Dropping Out. Gandalf's wife, Jane, refused to leave the room during the research interview because she wanted to share with the researcher how angry she was about Gandalf's attrition. She had walked through the fire with him and now she wanted a chance to vent her frustration toward the system that she perceived held her husband back. Jane's anger is evident in this exchange with the researcher:

Jane: And I was angry. I'm still angry at that process. Wouldn't you be?

Researcher: Tell me more about your anger.

Jane: That was the most frustrating, nonsensical thing I had ever witnessed in my life. I knew Gandalf, a person, his character, his demeanor. I knew what he put out and I knew he had put out the work.

Not only was Jane angry and frustrated by how her husband was treated, she was sad and concerned by the toll the attrition had taken on Gandalf. After the attrition, Gandalf had slipped into a depression and admitted in the interview that the emotions he experienced after attrition began to impact his marriage. Gandalf stated about Jane that he was "surprised she didn't leave me." Jane described it as follows, "It was hell. I don't know how else to describe it. And when he was in his deep depression, those were dark days. I mean, you know, it affects you when you see your mate in this condition."

Leaving

One participant (Marie) described an attrition experience distinct from the other participants, which we termed *Leaving*. Leaving is described as an internal change that alters the priority of continuing in doctoral study. The only participant to experience Leaving (Marie) had progressed to the late stage of doctoral study but no longer wanted to continue because of a reassessment of personal goals. This was an unexpected finding. Prior to this point in the data analysis, it was assumed that all late-stage doctoral attrition was a negative experience that would result in negative emotions. However, Marie's story showed that not all late-stage doctoral attrition is a negative experience.

Marie reported that she began doctoral study in part to prove to her father that she was capable of doing it. She had endured his criticisms as a child and had set out on a path to prove to him once and for all that she was a smart and capable woman. Marie described the moment in the late-stage of doctoral study she realized that she no longer had anything to prove to her father:

> I've been beating my head against this wall for all these years to try to prove to (my dad) that I'm not as stupid as he thought I was. How stupid is that? I don't need to do this anymore….I think it was probably after that fifth quarter where I sent my grades to my dad one more time and went, you know, "See, your dumb kid is on the dean's list again." And I thought, "What is the purpose of this?"

A positive emotional reaction was part of the Leaving experience. For Marie, leaving the program resulted in positive emotional reactions, such as relief and peace. Doctoral study had drained her of most of her free time and most of her money. Discontinuing her doctoral study meant that Marie no longer had to make large tuition payments and would have the free time to pursue leisure activities outside of her professional position. Marie described her emotions about discontinuing doctoral study as follows:

> This may skew all your research because it felt good….It was a very good thing for me. I had no depression. Actually depression was relieved….It felt like a lot of relief. I got back easily 30 hours a week. Money came back to me. Time came back to me. I thought, "Well, this ain't so bad!"

Discussion

Golde (1994) found that attrition might be characterized by the experiences encountered in doctoral study rather than the stage at which attrition occurs. Negative experiences might lead to negative outcomes regardless of the stage of doctoral study. The findings of the present study support the findings of Golde. For the participants in this study, the lived experience of attrition was related to their level of autonomy in the attrition decision. Dropping Out participants were prevented from obtaining something they wanted, which resulted in negative emotions. In contrast, the Leaving participant no longer wanted the degree and, thus, experienced positive emotions related to attrition.

Previous research has described the negative impact of a problematic chair relationship on late-stage doctoral attrition (Bair & Haworth, 1999; Ferrer de Valero, 2001; Girves & Wemmerus, 1988; Lovitts, 2001). The results of the present study support this previous finding. Dropping Out participants all described a how a problematic relationship with their dissertation chair played a significant role in their attrition.

Previous research has described the pitfall of full-time employment off campus for doctoral students (Abedi & Benkin, 1987; Bair & Haworth, 1999; Girves & Wemmerus, 1988). The results of the present study support this previous finding. All Dropping Out participants in this study reported already being in a full-time career position upon entering the late stage of doctoral study. Dropping Out participants described how the presence of a full-time job created a refuge from the negativity of doctoral study. The presence of a career gave Dropping Out participants an area of life in which they experienced fulfillment and success. In essence, full-time employment functioned as a viable "plan B" to finishing doctoral study.

Previous research has noted the link between student–program incongruence and doctoral attrition (Bair & Haworth, 1999; Bowen & Rudenstine, 1992; Golde, 1998; Lovitts, 2001; Tinto, 1993). Hoskins and Goldberg (2005) found that incongruence between the

student's goals and the program's focus was a common theme related to persistence or attrition decisions among counselor education doctoral students. However, previous research depicts student–program incongruence as an exclusively early issue. The findings of the present study suggest that student–program incongruence can occur even at the late stage of doctoral study as a result of a reassessment of personal goals. The one Leaving participant initially reported congruence between her goals and the focus of the program, only to have her goals change later in doctoral study.

Implication for Doctoral Students

In light of the findings related to a problematic dissertation chair relationship in doctoral attrition, current or prospective doctoral students are encouraged to consider possible dissertation chairs early in the doctoral program. The choice of a dissertation chair might be the most important decision in doctoral study (Bair & Haworth, 1999). Certain conclusions regarding dissertation chair qualities can be extrapolated from these findings. Preferable qualities in a dissertation chair include the following: (a) the chair is familiar with the student's methodological preferences, (b) the chair shows an interest in the student's topic, and (c) the chair is actively engaged in research mentoring. Doctoral students thinking through the choice of dissertation chair are encouraged to find recent doctoral graduates from their program and ask for candid feedback about various faculty members' performance in the role of dissertation chair.

In light of the findings related to full-time employment, prospective doctoral students are encouraged to identify programs that offer adequate financial assistance. Some common sense advice can be extrapolated from the findings. Namely, programs should be identified that not only offer assistantships early in doctoral study but that also have a record of providing fellowship support to late-stage doctoral students (Girves & Wemmerus, 1988; Tinto, 1993). Adequate financial assistance will allow doctoral students to avoid the potential distraction of full-time work and focus on doctoral study.

Limitations

Several limitations exist for this study. The findings of this qualitative study represent the experiences of a small number of participants and do not necessarily generalize to other noncompleters of doctoral study. Five of the six participants were conducting doctoral study in the 1970's and 1980's. Because most participants were describing recollections of their experience from the distant past, such recollections might be incorrectly remembered or altered over the course of time. A related issue is the possibility that doctoral programs have changed over the course of 30 years. What was an issue for participants who conducted doctoral study in the 1970's might not be an issue for students today. In addition, although efforts were made to guard against researcher bias, the researcher's presuppositions might have affected the outcome of this study by affecting the questions asked in the interviews, and the interpretations of the answers to those questions (Cieurzo & Keitel, 1999).

Recommendations for Future Research

No participant in the present study was classified as a racial minority. As a result, this study was not able to address the specific experience of racial minority attrition. Although the percentage of female doctoral graduates in counselor education has risen sharply over the past several years, the percentage of racial minority doctoral graduates has not shown such sharp increase (Hoffer, Welch, Webber, Williams, Lisek, Hess, et al., 2006; Sanderson & Dugoni, 1999). A qualitative study is needed that specifically focuses on the lived experiences of racial minority doctoral noncompleters in counselor education. A better understanding of racial minority doctoral attrition will enable policy changes aimed at reducing such attrition.

Conclusions

Results of the present study reveal two distinct attrition experiences among participants. Findings related to the experience of Dropping Out lend support to previous research. Full-time employment and problematic chair relationships prevented doctoral completion and led to negative emotional reactions. Findings related to the experience of Leaving challenge previous findings that all late-stage attrition is negative by showing that the one Leaving participant in the present study experienced an internal shift in goals that led to a positive attrition experience, even during the late stage of doctoral study.

Results of the present study suggest that prospective doctoral students would be well served to consider doctoral programs that will provide adequate financial support during doctoral study. Prospective doctoral students should also consider dissertation chair choices early in doctoral study. The present study was limited by methodology and sample demographics so that future researchers need to conduct similar research with racial minority doctoral noncompleters. Future research on this topic would further increase understanding and potentially result in the improvement of the doctoral student experience.

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Appendix

Doctoral Attrition Interview Protocol

1. Describe your decision to begin doctoral study.

2. What emotions did you experience as you began?

3. Describe your experience in doctoral study.

4. When did you begin to think about not finishing? When did you determine you would not finish?

5. Describe the experience of withdrawing from doctoral study.

6. What was the biggest obstacle you faced in doctoral study?

7. How far along in the program were you when you withdrew?

The following are follow-up questions designed to ensure that all three areas of potential obstacles are covered.

Were there any personal traits that factored into your decision to withdraw from doctoral study? (e.g., procrastination, perfectionism)

Did you feel prepared for the research aspect of doctoral work?

What about your social support; did you ever feel unsupported in relation to your doctoral work (e.g., by family, friends, community, nonschool peers)? Was that a factor in your withdrawal?

Speaking of social support, what was your relationship like with your peers in the doctoral program? Was that a factor in your withdrawal?

Were finances ever a factor in your decision to withdraw from doctoral study? Did you receive any type of financial aid for your doctoral work?

What was the environment or culture of your program like? Was it ever a factor in your decision to withdraw from doctoral study?

What was your relationship with the faculty like? Was it ever a factor in your decision to withdraw from doctoral study?

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