

# The Meaning of the Cohort Community in Social Work Doctoral Education

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**Abstract:** Doctoral education in social work is designed to prepare the next generation of educators, researchers, and scholars. Although much has been written about the importance of curriculum, mentorship, funding, and the dissertation process in shaping individual experiences and programs, little has been written about the importance of cohort support in promoting and shaping successful experiences among students and graduates of doctoral programs. This article explores the meaning of cohort in doctoral education through the utilization of a narrative approach to inquiry. The final narrative analysis revealed that intentional community building, regular maintenance, the successful negotiation of difference, and the intentional use of anti-oppressive interactions provides modest beginning level guidance to other doctoral programs and cohorts seeking to better understand the traits and process of building a successful and supportive doctoral cohort.

**Keywords:** doctoral education, cohort, narrative, adult education, praxis

According to U.S. News and World Report, (2014) there are more than 70 accredited doctoral programs in social work and/or social welfare in the United States. The growing number of doctoral programs in social work demonstrates a broadened worldview of social work as not only a profession, but also an academic discipline (Kirk & Reid, 2002). While the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) oversees Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) and Master of Social Work (MSW) programs, the Group for the Advancement of Doctoral Education (GADE) oversees and helps to develop doctoral programs in social work. GADE emphasizes five major focus areas that doctoral programs should strive to promote and build among the program and students: 1) knowledge of social work as a profession and discipline, 2) research and scholarship, 3) teaching, 4) resources/administration, and 5) recommend aspirational outcomes to students (GADE, 2013, article II). While each of these elements is important, in order for them to be effectively enacted, schools must retain the students admitted to their program. One way to potentially assist and retain students is through building and nurturing a supportive cohort community.

## Doctoral Education Context and Challenges

Many articles have been written about doctoral education from an institutional/program level, speaking to resources, supports, and evaluation of doctoral programs (Bentley, 2013; Pryce, Werner-Lin, Browne, & Smithgall, 2011). While

supportive structures and resources are undoubtedly important to the success of students pursuing doctoral education, many graduates of doctoral programs have mixed emotions about their experience (Pemberton & Akkary, 2010; Powers & Swick, 2013). Additionally, others have written that doctoral education in social work has shifted in recent years to being exclusively a training mechanism for preparing the next generation of researchers and academics (Anastas, 2012; Boud & Lee, 2009). One of the major consequences of this shift is that cohorts are becoming younger and less experienced in social work practice, while racial/ethnic diversity continues to be a challenge for most programs (Anastas, 2012). As a result of this shift, non-traditional students and experienced practitioners may struggle in research-focused doctoral programs to forge community among cohort members. Subsequently, despite improved best practices in doctoral education, average graduation and retention rates for doctoral programs have stagnated at around 50% for decades (Holloway & Alexandre, 2012; Rosen & Stretch, 1982).

Factors contributing to whether someone has a positive or negative experience in doctoral education or whether or not they finish their degree are not entirely known; however, graduates' experiences tend to stay with them over the course of their careers (Anastas, 2012; Mayadas, Smith, & Elliott, 2001). While the literature of higher education and social work education have examined doctoral education and provided recommendations, seldom have scholars used a critical adult learning lens to try to understand how a

supportive cohort can serve as a sort of protective factor against typical challenges associated with doctoral education. This article will seek to expand upon the current understanding of a seldom considered, yet important, characteristic of doctoral education: the impact of an inclusive and supportive cohort community on success and perception of one's doctoral experience in social work. This article is based on the perceptions of eight members of one cohort that started their doctoral program in 2008 and came back together in 2014 to process and reflect upon their individual and collective experiences. This narrative was written collaboratively as one voice, but in places, uses individual voices of cohort members. Each cohort member wrote his or her individual narrative that was then used to construct the collective narrative in this paper. While this is not a research paper, we did try to apply some theoretical guidance in putting together our experience and narrative. Guidance from Gadamer (1975) and Riessman (2002) was utilized to uncover our own individual truths as members of the cohort, before constructing our collective narrative. Gadamer's focus on hermeneutics emphasizes that what many social scientists pursued as objective truth was not accurate in the context of human understanding and experience. In fact, people discover their own truths through taking part in events, experiences, and contexts that shape their consciousness and perspective of the world around them (1975). Furthermore, peoples' lived experience is a consequence of the deeper narrative that they construct through interactions with others (Riessman, 2002). Finally, underlying our narrative are theoretical roots in critical adult learning. According to adult education theorists, critical learning and associated empowerment based outcomes are related to engaging in group-based learning, which is necessary for the development of critical consciousness (Freire, 1998; Lange, Naydene, & Chikoko, 2011). These guiding theories provided the foundation for constructing our collective cohort narrative and the subsequent implications taken from it.

### **Cohort Context**

The cohort experience described here began in the summer of 2008. The school of social work that serves as the setting for much of our narrative

housed an undergraduate, masters, and doctoral program. In any given year more than 700 students attend the school with anywhere from 25-45 doctoral students or candidates at various stages in the doctoral program.

The physical building that existed when the cohort commenced in 2008 was a historic building with three floors and a basement, where the doctoral offices were located. When you entered the building you immediately noticed a slight mildew or stale smell. The paint on the walls was old and chipping away as a result of being painted over countless times over the years. The elevator was a scary experience for anyone who took it for the first time as it made clangs and jarred your entire body upon stopping. Despite all of the dated features of the building, it also possessed the character of an old southern Victorian home somewhere out of a Faulkner novel, complete with high ceilings, antique craftsmanship, and portraits of former deans lining the hallway. The classrooms were plain, small, and often had pillars in the middle of them that made presenting and interaction with one another difficult. Despite these architectural challenges, we always made the best of it.

The doctoral offices (or tombs as some referred to them), were void of almost all daylight, always either too hot or too cold, and had an even stronger mildew smell than the rest of the building. There were only four old desktop computers when we began the program with slow operating systems and outdated software. There was donated furniture in both doctoral offices and tables to gather around. Regardless of the smell, lack of technology, and dated décor, the cohort spent many days and evenings here engaged in work and conversations. We were seldom very quiet as a group, something that in hindsight seemed unique about our time. We immediately made the doctoral offices our temporary home and our voices, laughter, and rants could be heard down the halls.

For the purpose of this paper, our collective narrative in the subsequent pages of this paper is primarily based on the two plus years that we spent in close proximity to one another in coursework and in preparation for comprehensive exams. We are telling our story in order to discuss a different truth related to doctoral education than the competitive, individualistic, antagonistic one that is often experienced by many doctoral students. We make no

claims that our story is generalizable to other cohorts, however within our narrative readers may find commonalities, differences, and takeaways about the building and importance of a supportive cohort community, which we welcome and embrace.

### **Our Grand Narrative**

As we walked out of classes our first day in 2008, we wondered if we had bitten off more than we could chew. We all had doubts on the first day. Some of us doubted if we were smart enough for doctoral education, while others wondered if a Ph.D. was really what we even wanted. One cohort member responded, “Everyone was from such great backgrounds and went to major schools, and here I was from a small town wondering if I could cut it.” We were all anxious, scared, unsure, and yet also excited and hopeful as illustrated by this cohort member’s statement, “I am a first generation student and while I was petrified to be in a Ph.D. program, I also felt like nothing could be harder than my life was before the program... I was ready for the challenge.” We came from small towns and large cities dotting one side of the country to the other as well as from outside U.S. borders. We differed in terms of gender, spirituality, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, socioeconomic class, and age. For some of us a Ph.D. was the crowning achievement of a career, a pathway into a teaching career for others, a spiritual pathway for some, and the fulfillment of a dream for many.

During the first semester we all had to grapple with program and personal challenges. In the classroom, we were feeling each other out, trying to get to know each other. Many of us had experiences in higher education or had heard stories about the perils of doctoral education. There was no shortage of tales of super competitive cohorts, the stealing of intellectual property, backstabbing, bullying, and professors pitting cohort members against one another in the classroom and for funding opportunities. Many of us felt as though we were the dumbest one in the room at any given time. We marveled at how smart everyone else was compared to us. We were cautious of one another during our early days together as we attempted to build trust, community, and identity as a cohort. One cohort member indicated this well by saying, “During our first week of classes, people would mention these theories and

philosophy, people that I had never even heard of before...seriously, I wondered if I was over my head in a doctoral program.”

Although we spent time getting to know each other during the first semester of the program, and again during the start of our second year, due to the addition of a new cohort member and the loss of others, we were also developing bonds and cohesiveness as a group. While the strength of the bonds we developed with one another varied due to common interests, age, and circumstances, as a group we were forging an identity rooted in mutual support, respect, and trust. Many, if not all of us, had points in time during our doctoral program where we doubted whether or not we could successfully engage in the doctoral process. These are the times that can make or break a doctoral student, and for some it can be the most isolating of times as you feel like you are the only one who is having doubts. It was during these times that we would reach out to one another and learn that our feelings were not occurring in isolation, but similar to what others were feeling or had dealt with at some point during the program. One individual replied,

I remember running into a cohort member in the doctoral office one day and reluctantly asked if I could study with them. We both realized that we were both a bit scared to voice our fears, but became quick friends in the process of studying together.

What is interesting is that while we each had our own friendships among various cohort members, some of the most powerful conversations and dialogues occurred between members who were not necessarily close friends. Our ability to engage in these conversations demonstrated just how close we were as a group. One member discussed this point by stating:

It must have been about midway through the first semester and here I was engaged in a conversation about religion and social work with three individuals with very different upbringings than me. I sat silent for a bit, but then chimed in when I was asked about my own spiritual beliefs and what I thought about their place in social work education...I mean seriously, I couldn’t remember the last time that I had talked about my spiritual beliefs, and here I was engaged in a deep conversation about them with people that I only

vaguely knew; how cool is that?

As a cohort we did many things to help build community and to support one another. During our statistics classes, we formed study groups to help each other grasp and understand the material. Everyone was welcome to attend, but if some people could not make it, they would get together with others to study and go over homework on their own time. The doctoral offices were another place where we forged relationships through venting about classes, studying on occasion, and more than anything, getting to know each other beyond academic interests. Where else in life can a diverse group of people in their early 20s to 60+, from every end of the socioeconomic spectrum, with differing sexual orientations, religions, experiences, interests, and values come together and create a space of mutual respect, caring, and admiration? A cohort member reflected on this aspect of their education with the following perspective,

I couldn't help but notice that I was one of the oldest members of the cohort, but here I was talking to these young ones about 80's music at a time when we were all cramming for final papers and exams. The conversations in the doctoral office often served as a nice distraction for many of us from the realities and stress of the program.

Were there differences that existed between us that sometimes caused conflict? Of course, but somehow our spats and disagreements were less similar to the destructive kind that occurred among other cohorts that we knew and more like those that occur between sisters and brothers. One cohort member stated,

It was hilarious how we all interacted with each other. Sometimes during class, I would become long winded about a concept or I would poke the bear so to speak by pissing off the professor, and when this happened, a certain cohort member would just gently kick me under the table to let me know to shut up or she would shoot me this glance from across the table. We laugh about it to this day, but I generally listened to her, most of the time at least.

During the summer prior to comprehensive exams, we held study sessions and posted notes online for those who could not attend. These study sessions

were highly important to the cohort as it felt like we were in the process of studying for comps together. We could have easily all went our separate ways to study on our own, but many of us came together, and even those who could not physically be there, regularly touched base with the group. When we all successfully passed through comps, we celebrated together, all nine of us, for what would be the final time together. While we all knew that our days together were numbered, no one wanted to say it. We wanted to enjoy one last moment together – captured for all of time – in the only picture of all the cohort members that we took during our doctoral experience; sometimes a picture says a thousand words.

After the comprehensive exams and during the dissertation phase, we organized cohort breakfasts for those still in town, communicated via Facebook and through e-mail. While some cohort members kept in touch more frequently than others, everyone touched base on occasion, and knew that the support was there if they needed it. Most of us have finished our journey through doctoral education, which we believe to be due to the strength and support we provided one another. The friendships and relationships forged during our time as a cohort transcend geography, boundaries, and time. We are and always will be the 2008 cohort of one doctoral program, who came into it with our own unique reasons, challenges, and purposes, and leave as sisters and brothers forever united and bonded together.

### **Implications**

Although narratives are not generalizable in the same way that findings in more formal research studies are, narrative inquiries are built from a tradition of learning through the experience of others. In this discussion of our cohort experience, we hope that others find something useful to them, even if it is that humor is the best medicine for success in a doctoral program. As with any narrative inquiry, what the reader takes away from the story is entirely up to them; however, it is our hope that those reading our story will pause to think more deeply about the importance and impact of cohort on the experiences of students in social work doctoral programs.

### **Cohort as an Intentional Community**

One of the major lessons learned from our cohort

experience is that we all experienced doubts about whether our decision to enter a doctoral program was the correct one. While the doubts may have been more frequent during our first semester, they arose for all of us at various times during the program, especially right before comprehensive exams and throughout the dissertation phase. The cohort's ability to come together and support one another was essential to overcoming doubts. The cohort's ability to support one another inside and outside the classroom was imperative to building the necessary trust needed to work together in the program, instead of on our own or against each other. Furthermore, the supportive environment constructed by our cohort helped to create a space where learning easily emerged. Some of us felt empowered by the learning community we established, which helped facilitate opportunities for individual intellectual growth (i.e. some cohort members who were apprehensive and anxious about research received support that led to self-empowerment, regarding their abilities to engage in research). The implications of this is that doctoral students should consider the purpose of cohort beyond just classroom learning, but as an intentional community of support that can help serve as a buffer from the stress and anxiety that often comes with pursuing doctoral education.

### **Cohort as a Mechanism for Intercultural Learning**

Another major shared experience of our cohort was how to deal with difference among cohort members. Difference was expressed in our cohort through differences in social identities, religious views, political ideology, and cultures as well as by differing ontological views, perspectives on human nature, and preference in research methods. Although some differences were more readily apparent than others, the cohort respected and accepted differences. During the course of our time together, starting from early on in the doctoral program, we established rapport with one another beyond the classroom. Our regular cohort gatherings, study sessions, and celebrations helped us get to know each other as people, which helped us challenge previously held stereotypes, assumptions, and viewpoints that otherwise may have created divisions among us in the program. As time went on in the program, many of us changed our thinking

due to interactions, relationships, and respect for the differing perspectives of cohort members. We benefitted and learned as much from one another as we did from the program and classes.

### **Cohort as a Catalyst for Critical Consciousness**

Lastly, our cohort dealt with many individual and collective challenges through the doctoral program, which is not uncommon; however, when we experienced adversity or if one of us was struggling, we came together to support them. While this simple aspect of cohort may seem unworthy of analysis or as something implicit in the meaning of cohort to begin with, many cohorts go through doctoral programs segregated into different groups or as individuals; only a cohort in namesake (Ford & Vaughn, 2011). Our cohort has published together, presented together, guest lectured for one another, and provided social and professional support for one another. We engage in these actions, not because we are merely colleagues, but also friends, who have shared a unique journey together that few people can ever fully understand unless they lived it. It is through our cohort experience that we built community; community that we can rely on not only in our doctoral program, but also in the future. In a Freirean sense, we became critically conscious as a result of the cohort, the relationships, the difference, and the support (Freire, 1998).

### **Recommendations for Building Supportive Cohort Communities**

While much of the effort in building a strong cohort came about over the first two years in the program, there were some things that the school of social work did early on that facilitated the process. The program offered several opportunities for Ph.D. students to begin getting to know each other before classes began. They offered a Mentor Monday, where all new Ph.D. students and their student mentors met and shared information about themselves, asked questions, and discussed how to be successful in the program. The program arranged several other opportunities in the initial weeks of the first semester that allowed students to interact outside of class time. Since other cohort members were often the only familiar faces, this provided opportunities to begin getting to know and rely on each other.

Although it is difficult to provide recommendations to

others from a single narrative inquiry, it is possible to leave others with some thoughts on what worked for us in building a cohort community. Firstly, our cohort took time from the beginning to get to know one another as people, not just as scholars or researchers. Getting to know one another as people, as is consistent with social work ideals, was essential for building trust and rapport as a group. We also celebrated important personal milestones, such as the birth of a child, acknowledging the significance of these life-changing events. Secondly, we tackled classes, comprehensive exams, and even to a lesser degree dissertation work together as a cohort. When we had tough classes in statistics, we formed study groups that were well attended. During the summer before comprehensive exams, we held regular study sessions and posted notes and materials online for other cohort members who could not attend sessions. Finally, during the dissertation phase, cohort members would meet for breakfasts, talk on the phone, and provide support via social media. Although it is not easy to juggle schedules or to deal with the competitive culture present in many programs, by working together from day one, it became a habit to approach each hurdle of the doctoral program as a group and not solely as individuals. Cohorts in social work doctoral programs should remember that you do not need nor should you rely solely on the program to build community among your cohort, but should take it into your own hands to forge relationships and establish the foundation for a cohort community.

Lastly, as a cohort we had many disagreements, debates, and opposing dialogues in the classroom, but we handled them with respect and professionalism. We all at different points in time probably got on each other's nerves, which is bound to happen when you spend nearly every day with each other over a two year period; however, we never held grudges or allowed our differences to divide us as a group. Different members of our cohort may have built closer relationships with some members than others, but all of us were always included in gatherings and study sessions, etc. It was also our disagreements in the classroom over science, philosophy, social problems, and research that were the source of our individual growth as scholars. After all, it is not conflict that is negative, but what you do with it that makes all the difference in learning (Addams, Bell, & Griffin, 2007). It is fair

to say that our individual empowerment was directly linked to our collective empowerment as a group (Freire, 1998; Gutierrez, 1990). This may be important for new cohorts to remember when they have heated debates or disagreements inside or outside of the classroom. While it is naïve to believe that a group of adults will always agree with one another, it is not impossible to respect one another and to embrace the differences in opinion as an opportunity for personal and professional growth.

### **Final Thoughts**

This narrative inquiry can only speak to the experiences of members of one cohort, yet we believe that our experience was somewhat unique. While many doctoral students in social work programs compete with one another and find themselves isolated, we found a way to forge and nurture a cohort community. We respected the assets that each one of us brought with us into the program. Some cohort members were young scholars with limited practice experience; they possessed excellent knowledge of theory and statistics, which they happily shared with other members who struggled in this regard. Other cohort members may not have taken a recent research course, but brought many years of practice experience into class discussions, that provided a much needed real world context to discussions of research and social problems, that enriched the perspectives of everyone. Within the cohort, we had experienced instructors who brought in pedagogical learning that improved how many of us approached teaching and learning of complex material. Regardless of whether a cohort member was seeking a Ph.D. to engage in research, to be a more effective educator, or to become a better-rounded practitioner, the cohort provided a community of respect and appreciation for theory, research, practice, and teaching. These aspects may be lacking in some doctoral programs in a day and age where research and grant writing take precedence over teaching and practice; this is something social work education needs to critically consider. Finally, our hope is that other doctoral students will read about our cohort experience and understand the power and benefit inherent in working together and supporting one another. For faculty and administrators of social work doctoral programs, we hope more time is invested in understanding, discussing, and promoting the idea of building community in doctoral cohorts. It is our belief that this cohort community positively

impacted each of us during the Ph.D. program as well as after graduation. Our cohort experience enriched us as scholars, researchers, social workers, and individuals.

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