

Post-PhD: Reflections on Coming to Terms with the End of a Journey

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Abstract: This article is a narrative of my lived experience in coming to terms with the end of completing a doctorate in social work. I detail how what are assumed to be two happy occasions—defending a dissertation and graduating with a doctorate—left me with little cause for celebration. I share how both of these events instead culminated in a sense of loss surrounding my identity.

Keywords: lived experience, dissertation, doctorate, loss, closure, identity

By nature, I am a rather private person. The extent of my involvement in social media is limited to LinkedIn, and that is spotty at best. I know that Snapchat and Instagram are forms of social media; however, I am ignorant of their purposes. Similarly, while I am aware that one can find various support groups and message boards on the Internet, I have not searched into them outside of looking for tips to smoothly transition a skittish new cat into the home. Up until this point, I did not feel the need to share aspects of my experiences with others, let alone strangers whose knowledge of me is confined to my first and last names and that I have a PhD. It is my experience obtaining that PhD that has compelled me to step out of my privacy—all with the hope that my story may be relevant to even just one doctoral student/candidate in the helping professions.

Introduction

I had been anticipating the defense of my dissertation for a month. Little did I know at the time that within a couple hours of defending, my husband's happiness and pride in proclaiming "you're a doctor!" would be met with my apathetic "so what?" By the next day, I was in tears. What was wrong with me? Instead of euphoria, I felt waves of sadness. I assumed this was the result of sheer physical and mental fatigue: I had worked on my dissertation for nearly 10 months while dealing with complex, interacting autoimmune disorders (AUDs), grieving the loss of a beloved pet, and keeping my anxiety from getting the best of me. Yet, there had to be more to my sadness than all of this, because it was accompanied by a deep sense of longing. One might deduce that I was depressed. However, the symptoms of two of my AUDs and those associated with depression overlap; plus, I thought that even if I was depressed, my depression was situational, not clinical. Outside of my husband, I tried sharing my thoughts and feelings with others but, based on their responses, it appeared to me that all but a few did not or could not understand. One individual in this small circle mocked me. Thus, I drew further into myself. Two months after my defense, I realized that I rarely left our home except to run a couple times a week and do errands with my husband. I felt alone in my self-imposed isolation; yet, even more, I felt lost. Although taken out of context, I identified with Thoreau's notion that "a man needs only to be turned round once with his eyes shut in this world to be lost" (Thoreau, 1854/1992, pp. 152–153). In order to start to understand and unravel the potential cause(s) of

why I felt lost and how I got lost, I had to go back to re-examine why I decided to pursue a PhD in the first place and then retrace the steps I had taken throughout this journey.

The Impetus

At the age of 10, I knew I wanted a PhD. My desire was rooted in the notion that a doctorate was a sign of a well-educated person. This point leads me to my father. Literally, he was a genius. To say that my father was well-read is an understatement. The overflowing, wraparound built-in bookshelves in our basement rivaled the collection of a small local library. However, due to tragic and unforeseen circumstances, he did not complete his post-secondary education. When I entered college, I did so with the intent of earning straight A's. After all, I had a doctorate in mind and deemed, naïvely, that A's denoted intelligence. My father and I became very close during this time, and we talked in earnest about my desire to obtain a PhD. Unfortunately, as the end of my undergraduate career approached, he passed away. Consequently, my purpose for wanting to pursue a doctorate morphed into attaining a goal for the love of my father. He should have been a professor. He was brilliant. Twelve years later, I embarked on this journey to fulfill both of our dreams. Several factors contributed to my decision to pursue a PhD in social work, one of which was to prove to myself that not only could I do it, I would do it successfully.

Part I of the Journey: Doctoral Student to Doctoral Candidate

I remember, quite vividly, my first day as a doctoral student. After my classes had ended that evening, I sat outside of the library and reflected upon the past couple of hours. I loved every single minute of that first day. There was a budding sense of belonging and community that continued to grow and develop throughout the three-and-a-half years of coursework. My classmates were accomplished, and my professors were intellectually stimulating. I looked forward to being with them every week. The program was challenging—I was pushed out of my comfort zone. As expected, there were many papers to write. Yet, each paper presented a unique opportunity to further explore, expand, and hone my interests. Eighteen months into the program, I decided to leave my full-time position. I enjoyed my work, but I had an insatiable appetite for my studies. On several occasions, I lugged around a tote bag (or two) of books I had checked out of the library right before class that were filled with works by Bandura, Erikson, Etzioni, Goffman, Habermas, Heidegger, Horkheimer, Kant, Lévinas, and Rawls. I was drawn to the relevance of theory and philosophy in social work and devoured these materials with intensity. This is not to suggest that I understood and agreed with every aspect of what I read; rather, I considered myself fortunate to have multiple occasions to ponder how each of these individuals' assumptions and conclusions related to whatever topic I was writing about at any given moment. In turn, I realized that somewhere early on in my journey, I had fallen in love with the doctoral program. However, this recognition was accompanied simultaneously by a glimpse of angst in knowing that this relationship would come to an end eventually. As such, I made a conscious effort to remind myself of that and to appreciate my time as a doctoral student and then later as a PhD candidate. Yet, this neither lessened nor helped to prepare me for the pain I felt in completing my degree. In reflecting upon the end of this relationship, I initially equated it to a break-up. This is a work in progress as I continue to negotiate my way toward achieving some semblance not just of closure, but of inner peace. Thus, I have come to realize

that the end of this relationship is more like dealing with the death of a loved one, as the gravity of the loss and finality associated with death more accurately reflects how I have experienced and tried to make sense of my thoughts and feelings.

At the start of my third year in the program, I began teaching in my university's BSW program. The uncertainty and nervousness I experienced during a few initial class periods that first semester was quickly replaced with confidence and enthusiasm. As with my doctoral classmates, I looked forward to being with my BSW students. I immersed myself in assuming a new role. It was through these early experiences that I came to view teaching as my social work practice. As such, I spent countless hours researching and reading about pedagogy in general and with respect to social work education. I had a responsibility to them as future BSWs, as well as a responsibility to the social work profession, to ensure that I had done my part in preparing them. Working with these students on a collective and individual basis was a privilege, and I learned a lot from them not just in terms of learning about each student, but also myself. Teaching was not merely a job; it became a calling. A side effect of engaging with these vibrant, eager young people was that doing so provided me with a sense of purpose and bolstered my optimism regarding both their futures and mine. I continued to teach in the BSW program for a couple of years after passing the doctoral comprehensive exam while fumbling along in nailing down a dissertation topic. After having my original dissertation fall apart more times than I care to remember because I was not able to secure an agency from which to collect data, I put the dissertation on the backburner. This was my first experience in the doctoral program with failure, or what I considered to be a failure. I was embarrassed, but I masked it as disappointment. However, I was not a failure when it came to teaching, so I increased my load from one class to three, two of which I co-taught. I threw myself into my work that semester and began to work on a new dissertation proposal, which was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB).

Yet, the culmination of years and years of choosing to work seven days a week on either or both my coursework and teaching caught up with me, and I paid a price. By the middle of what would be the second-to-last semester that I would teach in the BSW program, I did not feel well. I thought I knew what I was dealing with—the one AUD I had lived with since 2000. Although I was exhausted, I did not share that with anyone but my husband, and I continued to teach that semester and the next. I had planned to keep teaching, but it became obvious, with the addition of a laundry list of new symptoms that surfaced every so often, that I had to put myself first and figure out what was wrong. Thus, I took a leave of absence from the BSW program for what was to be one semester. To this day, I regret doing so as I never returned to teach BSW students at my university. I interpreted this as another failure. In hindsight, it was also a loss. While I had been an instructor in my university's online MSW program for nearly two years at this point, I missed my BSW students and our face-to-face, twice-a-week interactions.

Part II of the Journey: The Dissertation and Graduation

After being misdiagnosed and consequently mistreated, I learned that I had two additional AUDs, one of which led to the manifestation of the other. Having lived with one AUD for years was humbling; dealing with another two was taxing. I was told by my doctor that it would take

up to, if not longer than, a year until I felt better. I spent a couple of months resting, as that was all I could manage. Once again, I perceived this as a failure. I considered myself to be lazy, because I did not teach and did not work on my dissertation. Every day was akin to reliving the same 24 hours repeatedly. I could not tell where one day ended and another began. By late spring, a year after the IRB approved my dissertation proposal, I began to write while returning to teach online MSW students for 16 weeks. I felt somewhat better, but knew that recovery would continue to be slow, and that I needed to be mindful to not jeopardize any of the progress I had made thus far. Hence, I devised a detailed schedule as to how I was going to complete my dissertation within the next 10 to 11 months, with a lot of extra time built in to account for possible relapses. Also, I knew that at the end of August I would have more time to work on my dissertation as I opted to not teach until January. Writing that first page was a significant milestone that I celebrated along with the third, 10th, and 15th pages. By the end of July, I had written a chapter, and then my 18-year-old cat, Peep, who had been by my side as I wrote every single paper for my doctoral classes, suddenly became very ill and had to be euthanized within less than a week. To say that making that decision and living through the sheer anguish of it was gut-wrenching is putting it mildly. I dreaded that this might happen because I knew my reaction would be intense. For 21 consecutive days, I sobbed and did not write. I could not function, period. Peep was more than a member of my family; my best friend, Amanda, concluded that the pain I experienced in losing her was exacerbated by the fact that Peep was an integral part of my identity. She was also a source of my optimism. I attribute Amanda's remark as to how I came to deduce, after I had defended my dissertation, that while I had achieved a change in status, I had lost myself and my positive outlook. The irony of this is that the two dependent variables in my dissertation pertained to optimism and the development of a stable sense of identity. Yet, how I made further sense of my doctoral experience became even more complicated and connected to my dissertation—and this would not become apparent until after I graduated.

I navigated my way through writing two more chapters, all the while reminding myself to savor the moment—"remember, this is temporary." By November, I was ready to send my first three chapters off to the chair of my dissertation committee. Once I had attached my document to the email, I had a difficult time clicking the "send" button. I opened and closed that email several times over the next few days. Obviously, these chapters needed to be sent for review, but it felt like I was giving a part of myself away in doing so. Throughout my journey in the doctoral program, I had heard comments to the effect of "the dissertation is not your life's work." Fair enough; however, this comment did not sit well with me each time I heard it. It irked me, and I interpreted these sentiments to mean "hurry up and finish it; just get it over with." For some, I assume the dissertation is a means to an end. However, for me, the dissertation was an end in itself—it had become a labor of love. I poured all my energy, both physically and mentally, into crafting those three chapters. I looked forward to writing, and although I knew at some point there would be an ending, I pushed those thoughts to the back of my mind and soon completed my fourth chapter. Knowing that I had one more chapter to write brought a mix of thoughts and emotions. The whole experience of completing a dissertation seemed surreal, and even though I had written over 100 pages by this point, I still had thoughts of "I cannot believe I am doing this." I managed my AUDs quite well during the entire process and allowed myself to rest when needed. I started teaching online again in January, and on days when I had to grade, I found that I missed my dissertation. All I wanted to do was get back to it. Writing had been cathartic,

invigorating, and immensely gratifying. Nonetheless, halfway through the last chapter, those feelings started to dissipate. I was frustrated that the final chapter was taking me longer than I had anticipated. I kept on writing, but I could not see the end of this chapter. It was like I had stalled in a tight S-curve. Yet, once I negotiated the second part of the turn, there was the end—brief and abrupt. I texted my husband and sister to let them know I had finished, and then I sat at my desk in stunned silence, contemplating the gravity of this event. It was over. It was done. Yes, my committee members still had to review my dissertation, and I had to defend it, but in those moments I started to feel as if something bad had happened. When my husband came home from work and asked if I was okay, I quietly replied, “No.” It would take until three weeks later, right after I had defended my dissertation, for me to begin to figure out how and why I was not okay.

Months before the defense, I had bought a new dress for the occasion. Every now and then, I would take it off the hanger and try it on, much like a bride-to-be does for her wedding gown fittings. The defense shares a similarity to a wedding in that the next day is like every other day for your guests, but not for you. My defense was scheduled for a Tuesday. Once the last individual on the panel asked her questions, I stepped outside while they deliberated. As I walked down the hallway to the end of the corridor to wait, each one of my steps was deafening and accompanied by a slew of very fast-moving snapshots of memories I had of my time in the program—getting a heel caught on one of the steps of the stairways in the library stacks, causing the 18-inch pile of books I was carrying to go flying in every direction; trying to figure out how to use a qualitative coding software with Angie and Ash in the doctoral lounge; taking statistics and being relegated to a classroom in which the thermostat was controlled by a penguin—it hit me hard that this experience was about to come to its inevitable end, and I was not ready. In a matter of minutes, I would no longer be a doctoral candidate, but a doctor. I wanted to flee. I briefly contemplated running down the stairs and out of the building, yet that would not change the outcome. It felt like a huge part of me had died in that hallway and again upon hearing the news that I had passed my defense. I had been to finishing school. I was a lobbyist on the Hill. I lived with AUDs. Hence, I was well-versed in how to plaster a genuine-looking, thousand-watt smile on my face as this occasion demanded, even though I had no sense of happiness, but rather an impending and swelling sense of despair.

The time in between my defense and graduation was unsettling and uncomfortable. I threw myself into my online class and worked on the design for another; I did not want to think about what had just happened. I had not planned on going to graduation and not merely because I loathe “Pomp and Circumstance.” The last graduation of mine that I had attended was high school. Without my father, I did not see the point in going to my undergraduate and MSW graduations. Moreover, while I am happy to share others’ joy and celebrate their accomplishments, I am reticent to even acknowledge mine. Nonetheless, I went to graduation because I felt obligated to do so. In addition, I tried to convince myself that I owed it to my father and 10-year-old self. Besides, what if I woke up years from now and regretted that I had not gone? I also thought that maybe this would bring some semblance of closure. I was wrong. *Commencement* is an ironic word as graduation, for me, was not a beginning, but an ending. This was all coming to a close, and I felt like an actor on a stage who had forgotten every single line. I got through the ceremony uneventfully, likely because I encountered it as an out-of-body

experience. Someone who looked like me had just graduated, but she certainly did not feel like me. Hours later, as the host at the restaurant seated us for dinner, he remarked that notes in the reservation book indicated that we were celebrating a momentous occasion—my graduating with a PhD. I replied, “It is overwhelming,” and I took comfort in his response—“I bet it is.” In that moment, this man’s brief reply was validating. I had a tiny sense of relief, not in reference to my sadness and despair, but with regard to my nascent understanding that there was nothing wrong with how I was processing that a big part of my life had come to a close.

Post-PhD

During the summer, I had an epiphany. In addition to losing my identity and overall sense of optimism, I was proverbially homeless. Although I continued to teach at my university on an adjunct basis, I had no institution to call home. This was yet another paradox associated with my dissertation—my population of interest pertains to individuals who are experiencing homelessness during the transition to adulthood. Looking back, I wish I would have had the wherewithal to realize that I was in transition. Instead, I felt stuck, as if my life had just stopped. This was accompanied by a sense of paralysis. I could not turn the page and start a new chapter. Rather, I wanted to burn the book and erase all evidence of my journey. I likened the idea of carving out articles from my dissertation to submit to peer-reviewed journals to being eviscerated. I gave birth to an idea, nurtured it, and raised it, and was not ready to chop it into pieces. It is only recently that I submitted my first article from my dissertation for review. I needed time. I needed time to grieve. I needed time to heal. I needed time to find me. I needed time to just be. I am blessed to have an incredibly supportive partner who not only knew I needed time, but repeatedly encouraged me to take my time.

April 10, 2019, marked the one-year anniversary of my defense. In the time that has transpired, I have come to accept that there will be no euphoria associated with completing my doctorate. Yet, there is a sense of accomplishment which I did not feel until a few months ago. While my sadness and despair have dissipated, I still have a sense of longing. However, it does not stem from pining to return to and relive the past. As I floundered about months after I graduated with no sense of direction, my husband, knowing that I thrive in having a project to work on, provided me with a lifelong assignment—attaining inner peace—that he broke up into smaller tasks, the first of which was to focus not on what would make me happy, but what would make me fulfilled. The implication was not that happiness is unimportant; it was that happiness can be fickle and fleeting whereas fulfillment may be more sustainable by comparison. I came to realize that being a doctoral student and candidate made me happy, while teaching BSW students fulfilled me. Thus, my sense of longing is rooted in getting back to the classroom, which I will do in a few months. Come this August, I will begin a new adventure as Assistant Professor of Social Work at a small public university. Yet, I already feel at home there based on the limited interactions I have had with my soon-to-be colleagues and students. Little by little, I have been cultivating a renewed sense of optimism that is different from its prior form. That is, it is more refined and reflective and less raw and reflexive. With respect to my identity, I am in transition. As Thoreau eloquently stated:

Every man has to learn the points of compass again as often as he awakes, whether from

sleep or any abstraction. Not till we are lost . . . do we begin to find ourselves, and realize where we are, and the infinite extent of our relations. (Thoreau, 1854/1992, p. 153)

Thus, I continue to learn about and contemplate who I have been, who I am, and who I aspire to be, while being mindful that my sense of identity is separate from my roles and responsibilities. I lost sight of that and ended up bobbing around like a buoy in a vast ocean. Instead of swimming to shore, I dived deeper into the water. I had to, as in order to find myself, I needed to explore what was beneath the surface. Writing about my experience was unpleasant at times. After writing a few paragraphs, in which I relived what I was relaying, I stepped away from this project for six to seven months, knowing that I would return to it at some point. I was determined to complete this article because although this is an account of my lived experience, I assume that there are at least a handful of doctoral students and candidates who, like me, will struggle, are struggling, or have struggled in coming to terms with the end of a journey that was so very rewarding in and of itself.

Concluding Thoughts

In a discussion among faculty members, a professor in my department mentioned that she did not want to know her students. At the time this comment was made, I was in the process of preparing to take my doctoral comprehensive exams and transition from being a doctoral student to a doctoral candidate. I admired this individual. Yet, her comment had such a profound impact on me. I interpreted it as she, and by default most or all of her colleagues, did not want to know any students regardless if they were in the BSW, MSW, or doctoral program. Outside of my being an introvert, I feel this comment is a large part of why I kept my thoughts and feelings to myself. It was not until after graduation that I confided in a former colleague about what I had gone through and the challenges associated with coming to terms with the end of my doctoral journey. I am grateful that she suggested that I write about my experience. Notwithstanding, I regret that I had not felt comfortable sharing my thoughts and feelings throughout this process. That being said, doctoral program faculty should pay close attention to students who are introverted as well as fiercely independent because these individuals are likely reticent to ask for help even though they might be the most in need of validation and support. As such, it would be astute of doctoral program chairs to help students identify and develop a solid mentor-mentee relationship with at least one faculty member. This should be accomplished well before one makes the transition from doctoral student to doctoral candidate, in order to allow sufficient time and opportunities to establish a meaningful relationship. Moreover, doctoral program faculty should help current and prospective doctoral students and candidates to prepare, as well as plan, for the end of their doctoral journeys. In particular, doctoral students and candidates should be mindful to consider how they anticipate they will feel upon attaining a PhD and recognize that these expectations may not align with how they experience the ending.

While my doctoral experience may be relevant to both men and women, I wrote my account with the latter in mind, given that data from the National Science Foundation et al. (2018) indicates that women accounted for 46.7% of all doctorates awarded in 2017. Despite that no differences were detected between men and women with respect to factors such as median completion time and median age at matriculation, this does not represent parity in regard to their

experiences. Indeed, research has documented the distinct challenges and needs associated with being a woman and doctoral student/candidate (e.g., Aitchison & Mowbray, 2013; Brown & Watson, 2010; Carter, Blumenstein, & Cook, 2013; Gammel & Rutstein-Riley, 2016; Haynes et al., 2012; Schmidt & Umans, 2014; Webber, 2017). To this end, it would be beneficial for future research to explore how women come to terms with completing a doctorate, as well as the emotional toll the experience may have on their overall psychosocial well-being. Results from such studies could be used to inform the development of doctoral program interventions that are designed to address and support the intrapersonal and interpersonal needs of doctoral students and candidates.

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