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# Understanding the Role of Childhood Poverty in Doctoral Motivation and Persistence

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# Understanding the Role of Childhood Poverty in Doctoral Motivation and Persistence

*Conference on Higher Education Pedagogy (2014)*

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# The Problem

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- ▶ *Doctoral attrition*
    - ▶ doctoral candidates/programs experience high attrition rates (40 – 60%)
    - ▶ this percentage increases 10-20% when the program is offered online
  - ▶ *Childhood poverty* has a negative influence
    - ▶ on academic motivation
    - ▶ and educational outcomes (Sirin, 2005; Young, Johnson, Hawthorne, & Pugh, 2011).
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# Purpose

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- ▶ The purpose of this systematic grounded theory study was to explain how individuals from backgrounds of poverty persist through to successful admittance to doctoral candidacy and to extend the theoretical foundations of
    - ▶ Self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2008),
    - ▶ Tinto's (1993) integration model of graduate persistence,
    - ▶ Framework of Resilience (Cefai, 2004; Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000)
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## Research Questions

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- ▶ **Research Question 1:** How does childhood poverty serve as a resilience mechanism with regard to doctoral persistence?
  - ▶ **Research Question 2:** What are the intrinsic and extrinsic motivations to earn a doctoral degree for individuals from backgrounds of poverty?
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# Method, Data Sources & Analysis

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## ▶ Research Design

- ▶ Qualitative systematic grounded theory design (Strauss & Corbin, 1990)

## ▶ Data Sources

- ▶ Questionnaires
- ▶ Semi-structured interviews

## ▶ Analysis

- ▶ Following Strauss and Corbin's (1990) systematic grounded theory procedures, we analyzed the data,
    - ▶ informal data analysis by memoing
    - ▶ formal data analysis by open, axial, and selective coding to develop a grounded theory.
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# Methods

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## ▶ Population

- ▶ Initial questionnaire yielded a response from 124 doctoral candidates.
- ▶ 12 participants (7 female, 5 male) were purposefully selected to serve as the theoretical sample for the study.
- ▶ Participants met the following criteria to participate in the study:
  - ▶ (a) successfully completed their course work and passed the comprehensive exam,
  - ▶ (b) current enrollment in the dissertation coursework,
  - ▶ (c) experienced poverty for a significant part of their developmental years.

## ▶ Setting

- ▶ Online Ed.D. program
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# Theoretical Sampling Questionnaire (N = 12)

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<b>Parental Income</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>%</b>
1. Recall being homeless (residing in a shelter) or living with relatives for an extended period of time (> 3 months).	9	75%
2. Recall receiving public assistance such as free-reduced lunch, food stamps, or visiting a food pantry or food kitchen.	10	83%
3. Lived in rented accommodations most of your childhood.	7	58%
<b>Parental Employment Status</b>		
4. Either one or both parents were unwillingly unemployed for several (> 2) periods (> 6 months) of time in your childhood.	4	33%
5. Recall receiving public assistance such as welfare or unemployment insurance.	6	50%
<b>Parental Education</b>		
6. Neither parent earned a college (2 or 4 years) or university degree	11	92%
7. Few or no memories of being encouraged to excel in school and go to college.	6	50%
8. Few or no memories of parental involvement in your education (attending school functions, parent-teacher conferences, etc.).	7	58%
9. Few or no memories of being read to or being assisted with homework when you were a child.	7	58%
<b>Perceptions of Child Deprivation</b>		
10. You had a general awareness of being “poor” compared to your peers during your childhood.	12	100%
11. Your friends typically had more material goods/resources than you did growing up.	12	100%
12. You were aware that your neighborhood was “rough” or unsafe.	6	50%

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# Interview Questions

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## **Childhood (0 – 18 years)**

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1. Please describe your childhood, from birth to 18 years old.
  2. Please describe your family's employment and economic situation when you were growing up.
  3. In what ways did your parents play a positive or negative role in your education as a child?
  4. Please describe the character traits and values that were modeled for you as a child.
  5. Are there any individuals other than your parents who played a prominent role in your childhood? Please explain.
  6. Looking back, are there any events in your childhood that you feel are responsible for shaping who you are today?
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## **Adulthood**

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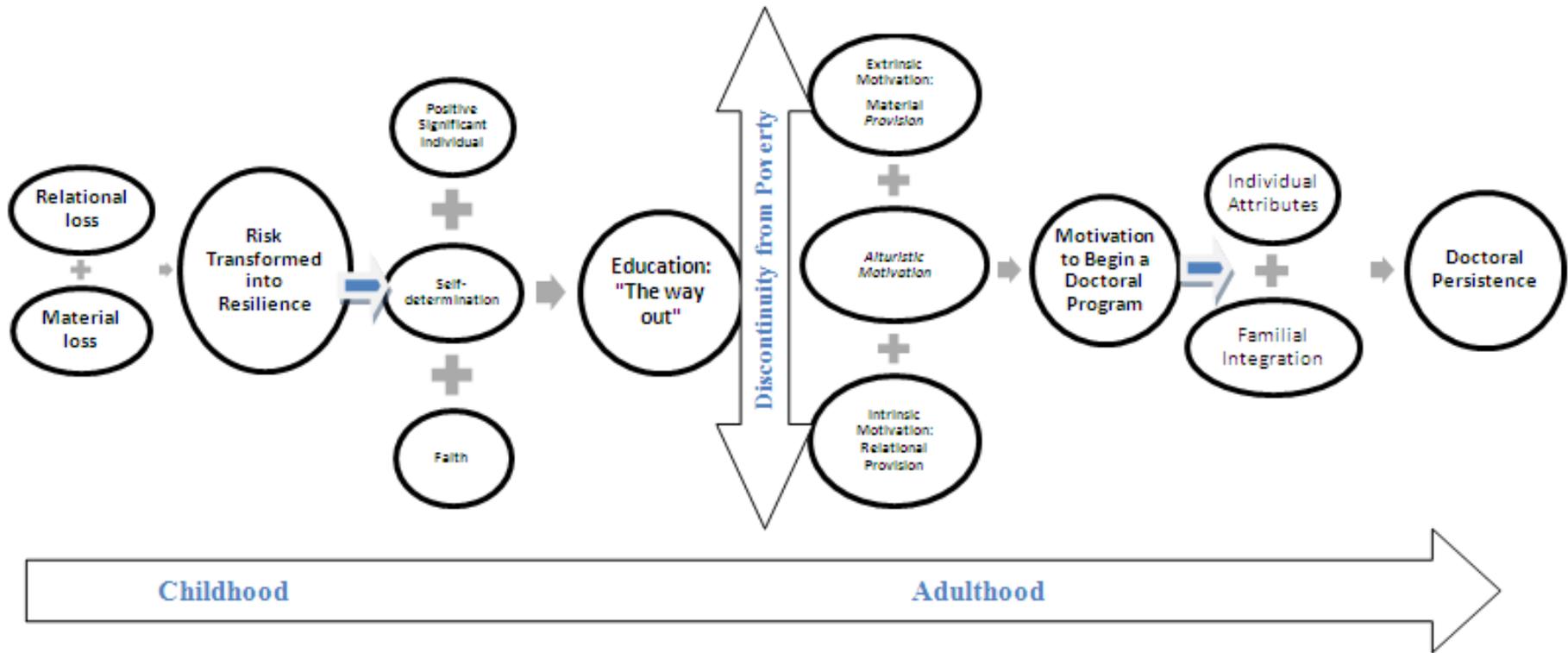
1. Please describe your transition from being a teenager to becoming an independent adult.
  2. What was your experience moving into higher education?
  3. Looking back, can you identify any specific turning points or experiences in your life that pointed you to the professional and academic path that you are on today?
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## **Doctoral Persistence**

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1. What is your primary motivation for earning a doctoral degree? What are your secondary motivations?
  2. What factors did you consider and/or barriers did you overcome before beginning this degree?
  3. What are your goals for the future?
  4. What strategies have you employed to help you persist to where you are today?
  5. To what do you attribute your educational successes?
  6. What are your fears associated with the dissertation process? How do you plan to or how are you currently addressing them?
  7. If you could impart just one message to your own children (or the next generation) when it comes to education, what message would that be?
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# Theoretical Model





# Theoretical Implications: Pursuit of a Doctoral Degree

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- ▶ The SDT model developers have not operationalized *altruistic motivation* as a unique type of motivation. While intrinsic, extrinsic and altruistic motives explained the pursuit of the degree.

*Altruistic motivation* is the motivation to do something selfless in order to advance others' means, opportunities and social, emotional and cognitive well being (Szapkiw, Spaulding, Swezey, Wicks, in press).

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# Theoretical Implications: Persistence in a Doctoral Degree

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Tinto's (1993) theory was only partially confirmed, and findings of this research uncovered the phenomenon of *familial integration*.

***Familial integration*** is the degree to which the candidate's sense of connectedness with family members is met while pursuing the doctorate, providing motivation to not only pursue a doctoral degree but also to persist (Szapkiw, Spaulding, Swezey, Wicks, in press).

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# Practical Implications

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Provide family orientations at the beginning of the program

Set up social networking forums for doctoral candidates and their families to engage in throughout each step of the process.

Invitations to school social functions and other on-campus events can be extended to doctoral candidates and their families.

Offer courses in a convenient format that allows candidates to avoid major disruptions in family time. This may include online, evening, and weekend courses

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# Limitations and Future Research

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## Limitations

- ▶ Sample limitations
- ▶ The study did not consider persistence unto a conferred degree

## Future Research

- ▶ Replicate with broader sample (e.g. degree, public institution)
  - ▶ Replicate with a sample of participants whose degrees are conferred as well as a sample that withdrew
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# Questions and Discussion



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