A Grounded Theory Study Explaining how Female Doctoral Candidates Negotiate Their Identities as Mothers and Scholars and Persist Unto Degree Completion

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Abstract

The purpose of this grounded theory study was to generate a model that explains how female doctoral candidates manage and negotiate the tensions relating to their roles and identities as females, mothers, and academics within the social structure of academia. Data was collected via a questionnaire, life map, and semi-structured interview from 11 doctoral candidates enrolled in a nationally accredited Doctor of Education (EdD) program in the southeastern United States. The theoretical model produced from this study depicts the development and relationship among EdD students' identities as females, professionals, and academics and how the roles and responsibilities related to these identities may be managed and balanced in order to motivate persistence in a doctoral program. Contributing to the empirical and theoretical literature on doctoral persistence and female identity, these findings underscore the importance of choosing "the right season" in life to embark on doctoral studies, having realistic expectations about pace and progress, and not becoming "genderless" or "scholarless," but rather, learning to honor and intersect all identities.

Literature Review

Though females are increasingly represented in higher education (National Science Foundation, 2012), females have longer time-to-degree completion rates than males and are less likely to men to complete their degree (Council of Graduate Schools, 2009). As females in doctoral programs are often adding academic responsibilities to the responsibilities of being a wife, mother, and professional (Johnson, Greaves, & Repta, 2007), many women experience guilt and shame when pursuing their doctorate, feeling that they are unsuccessfully balancing family responsibilities and academics (Brown & Watson, 2010). With the "stress of trying to be successful as both a mother and a student contributing to dissatisfaction in both roles" (Haynes, Bulsam, City, & Grani-Harris, 2012, p. 3) females experience internal conflict and identity confusion.

The inability to successfully intersect the demands of being a "scholar" with other demands results in internal conflict, bringing females to a point where either (a) personal and familial relationships "break down as a result of a student's involvement in her studies" (Wellesly & Sikles, 2006, p. 731), or (b) the goal of earning a doctorate is abandoned (Lovitts & Nelson, 2000). As both outcomes have significant consequences for society, the individual, and research is needed to explore how female doctoral candidates manage and negotiate the tensions relating to their identities and corresponding roles as females, mothers, and academics within the social structure of academia.

Jones and McEwan's (2000) Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity served as the preliminary framework for this study. At the center of this model is the core sense of self, that is, an individual's personal attributes, characteristics, and identity. Intersecting and surrounding this core identity dimensions such as gender, race, ethnicity, and religion. These identity dimensions develop within the context of family background, life experiences, and socio-cultural conditions. While there are multiple identity dimensions, "no one dimension can be understood singularly; it can be understood only relative to the others" (Jones & McEwan, 2000, p. 410). This premise that identities intersect and develop in relation to one another provided the framework for this study seeking to explain how female doctoral candidates develop and intersect their multiple identity dimensions.

Method

The research site was a university in the southeastern United States with a nationally accredited Doctor of Education (EdD) program. Via an online questionnaire, a theoretical sample was purposefully selected from a pool of 64 candidates who responded. Information rich cases (N = 11) were purposefully selected from the 31 eligible respondents based on the following criteria: (a) successfully completed course work and the comprehensive exam, (b) enrollment in dissertation coursework, (c) pregnant, have children in the home, or a desire to have children, and (d) evidence of scholarship (e.g., submitted a manuscript or published a peer-reviewed journal/article, presentation at a professional conference, or a desire to publish after dissertation). Participant selection ceased upon achieving theoretical saturation. Two participants self-identified as Hispanic; one African American, the rest Caucasian. The average age range of participants was 33 – 40 with an average of 4 children (range = 0 – 6 children). Data collection included (1) a questionnaire, (2) creating a life map, and (3) participating in a semi-structured interview.

Method (cont.)

Data were analyzed in accordance with Corbin and Strauss’ (2015) procedures for a systematic grounded theory study. Open coding generated a set of codes, concepts, and in vivo codes. Through analytic memos and axial coding, initial codes and concepts were grouped, categorized, and related in order to identify the processes and contexts for the development of the identity dimensions of being a female and an academic. After coding for the core category (i.e., the primary theme), a theoretical model was developed to explain the related processes and contexts for the core category and "describe the interrelationship of categories in the model" (Creswell, 2013, p. 87).

Findings

Figure 1. Female Doctoral Student Multiple Identity Model (adapted from Jones & McEwan, 2000). “An individual’s values and most valued attributes and characteristics.” “Balance between individually and togetherness in the family unit.”

Theoretical Propositions

1. Five females desire or feel they can successfully honor or intersect all identities concurrently: some honored identity of mother first (delay doctorate), some honored professional and academic identities first (delay motherhood); some stepped away from profession to balance female and academic identity

Central theme: “pick the right season.”

2. Selecting a primarily DE program maximized opportunities to further their professional identity (remain in their profession) and dimensions of their female identity (not uproot children or move from loved ones [e.g., parents] needing their care)

3. The choice to honor academic identity by starting the doctorate was motivated by family (financial provision, security, or expanded opportunities for children) or profession (to ‘advocate’), ‘gain knowledge,’ to ‘contribute,’ to ‘serve,’ to ‘make a difference’

4. The female EdD candidate seeks to integrate her professional identity into her academic identity (evidenced by dissertation topics) and seeks to integrate her academic identity into her profession (the Practitioner-Scholar). 

5. Though there is a tendency to hide academic identity in outer social circles (colleagues, boyfriends, initially, within close friends and family, the candidate’s academic identity serves as a motivator for others to continue their own education.

6. Identities are formed in relationship with others, are dependent on differentiation within the relationships, and there are seasons where one identity needs to "take center stage" for healthy relationships (e.g., mother/child, husband/wife, daughter/parent) and optimal identity formation.

Discussion & Implications

The model generated from this study provides several implications for females contemplating doctoral studies. Females need to:”Pick the right season” by considering with their loved ones what roles and responsibilities they currently have and whether their collective schedules can accommodate the responsibilities and adjustments associated with doctoral studies. Delaying motherhood, reducing professional responsibilities, or renegotiating roles and responsibilities within the household may be necessary. Develop rich dialogues about their pace and progress, realizing that if they have children, honoring and prioritizing this role is necessary for persistence, or guilt and shame will lead to departure.

Honor agreements made with spouses about roles and responsibilities within the home and family.

Develop a schedule; learning to compartmentalize personal, professional, and academic tasks and responsibilities is essential so the individual can be fully “present” while also modeling family values to children.

Value and apply skills and attributes that contribute to their success in one identity dimension to others, also allowing motivations in one role to foster persistence and commitment to another role. For example, motivation to address a problem in one’s profession can motivate dissertation research and academic persistence.

Develop a strong support system, beginning with the spouse, and including friends, family, social groups (e.g., military wives or neighbors), professional colleagues, doctoral peers, and seek and develop mentor relationships with faculty, ideally female faculty who are successfully negotiating multiple identity dimensions.

This study’s Female Doctoral Student Multiple Identity Model also provides clear implications for doctoral faculty and administrators in their efforts to recruit and retain female candidates.

• Flexible programming (e.g., online, asynchronous courses) and childcare options during residential coursework is recommended, along with opportunities for financial integration (e.g., scholarships, grants, assistantships, fellowships).

• To increase candidates’ access to female mentors, programs should recruit and hire female faculty members with developed female, professional, and academic/scholar identities in addition to supporting female faculty by offering flexible work hours and teaching schedules and extend time to earn tenure/promotion if having children. Administrators should also encourage and facilitate female faculty should model maternal vulnerability, and male faculty should model paternal vulnerability.

• Programs should be designed to harness the motivation of the Practitioner-Scholar by designing coursework to intersect with professional goals and practices and supporting dissertation research that is applied to problems in practice (second generation EdD model).

References

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