Surviving Your PhD*

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Part I
Module 1

1 Setting the Scene

1.1 The emotional life of research students

1.1.1 We argued a lot about what this course should be called.

Lots of negative stories circulate about research degree study - especially online. Too often students are told that the PhD experience is tough and they need to be resilient to get through it. The problem with this 'resilience discourse' is that it ignores the complexity of the academic environment in which students are located. Sometimes, no matter how resilient you are, problems happen with the research, or with relationships. This can make the PhD extraordinarily - and perhaps unnecessarily - difficult.

It's important to stress that research degree experience is not always negative. Sometimes, as Helen Kara points out, students find all that misery talk depressing. 'Troubles talk' can, perversely, create the problems it seeks to address. Students who are coping well might start to believe they are not a 'real student' because they are not suffering enough. This sounds crazy right?

This course is here to unpick these commonly held ideas about research degree study and explore their complexities.

Our position is that emotions are an inevitable - and necessary - part of learning. No emotion is 'good' or 'bad', which is why we have tried to respect the research on emotions. But we have put it in the social context of

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academia (a system with some 800 years of history) and what happened in medieval times still has some influence over how we behave today. This has been difficult and by the time we were finished we didn't know what to call the course.

That's perhaps, because it's not really meant to be a course - you can't teach someone how to feel, but you can teach them about the common emotions and their effects. We think of this course as more of an experience. We hope you will enjoy the journey with us.

1.1.2 Why study the emotional life of research students?

Up to 50% of research students in some disciplines will not finish their course of study. In Australia, where this course was written, around one in four students will never finish their PhD. Many students, worldwide, will take longer to finish than they anticipated. It is important that we understand why research students - our best and brightest - are not succeeding at the rate we might expect them to.

While universities might count the financial effect of research student attrition, rarely do we stop to consider the social and emotional impacts of attrition and long completion times. There is growing evidence of poor mental health amongst research students. This is a problem for students, supervisors, universities and families. A study at the University of Exeter showed that 85% of research students were stressed and that the sources of stress were multiple: money worries, lack of social contact and time pressure.

In her book Leaving the Ivory Tower, Barbara Lovitts claims that many students believe that they are totally to blame for their failure to finish. Lovitts claims the tendency to leave in silence is a result of 'pluralistic ignorance', where students fail to realise the emotional reactions that they are experiencing are common and partly a result of the system itself.

Effects of Pluralistic Ignorance

More awareness of the common emotional difficulties created by process of research study - and how they can result in certain distinctive work problems - can help us create a more supportive research workplace, for students and supervisors alike.

Research students are typically high achievers who are under a lot of pressure to succeed. Some can feel a keen sense of performance anxiety. In contemporary universities, many students are put under time pressure for funding reasons. The prospect of being examined and found wanting haunts many others.

Pluralistic ignorance persists if these problems are not openly discussed.

Research over the last couple of decades in particular has highlighted the need for emotions in decision making and in creativity. Margaret Kiley summarised in studies about the 'ideal supervisor' that:

> ... the findings all suggest that it is the affective dimensions that candidates value the most highly, e.g. support, availability, interest and enthusiasm. Issues of technical 'know-how' are usually rated somewhat lower down the list of desirable characteristics. (ANU research supervisor guide)

The approach to emotions in this course

Emotions are complex and no two stories of research study experience are the same. We cannot provide clear cut 'do this' or 'don't do this' advice. As although every research student is different, they do in fact face very similar challenges.

For this reason we have structured the course to look at each emotional response in both positive and negative ways.

Confidence is a good quality for a researcher to have. Under confidence can have extremely negative effects on researchers (as we will see in module three), yet over confidence can create problems too - both for the researcher, and those around them.

In this course we have tried to connect the emotions to real life examples from research degree experience settings so we can think about why these responses happen and what effects they have on us.

But first, lets take a deeper look at the emotional life of research students.

1.1.3 Are there common emotions in research study?

Some time ago the Thesis Whisperer blog did a post called "The Top 5 PhD Emotions". It was an analysis of some 130 tweets shared by students on Twitter about the strange feelings that the PhD can evoke. The Thesis Whisperer counted 71 distinct emotional states, analysed the ones that seem to resonate the most and came up with a top five:

1. Elation when you realise you know more than your supervisor about your topic and you feel brave enough to argue about it
2. Fear of being 'found out' as fraud, not really knowing enough or being smart enough to be a PhD student
3. Unexpected admiration of your own writing
4. The "I'm a genius! Why hasn't anybody thought to do that before?" moment before people point out the obscure paper you've not read
5. Misplaced smugness after photocopying or downloading loads of stuff but not actually reading it

The light-hearted discussion on the Thesis Whisperer backs up decades of much more serious research into research student experience. This research suggest that students have similar emotional experiences while doing a research degree, regardless of where in the world they are studying.

We can see this most clearly in the research on attrition.

1.1.4 Why do PhD students quit?

There have been a number of studies on the reasons research students quit. Pearson (1999)[1] summarises what we know about attrition from prior studies on three continents and names a complex set of interlocking factors in research student's decision to leave:

- Research mode (full time / part time or movement between the two)
- Structure of the programme
- Dissertation definition
- Advising
- Departmental climate
- Research money
- Type of financial support
- Campus facilities
- Job market opportunities.

Somewhat surprisingly, this list echoes a much earlier study of UK students who quit or took a long time to complete by Rudd (1985)[2]. This study found the following factors affected whether or not students left and/or extended their candidature:

- Problems with motivation, particularly in relation to wanting the qualification
- Injury or Illness
- Family commitments, including marriage breakdowns
- Conflicting work

[1] Pearson, M. (1999). The Changing Environment for Doctoral Education in Australia: implications for quality management, improvement and innovation. Higher Education Research & Development, Volume 18(3). 269–287.

[2] Rudd, E. (1985). A New Look At Postgraduate Failure. Society For Research Into Higher Education and NFER-NELSON: Guildford.

- Problems in choice of topic
- Cross disciplinary research issues
- Failed lab work
- Problems with 'writing up'
- Supervision issues

In an analysis of 179 comments from around the world on a Thesis Whisperer blog post "Should you quit your PhD?"[3], we found students mentioned the following and things that were making them want to quit:

- Loss of supervisors / lack of appropriate supervisors
- Intellectual isolation
- Feelings of being trapped or powerless to act
- Poisonous, competitive research environment
- Being made to do non-thesis work Being asked to do extra work to make the project 'submittable'
- Mounting debt
- PhD study is not family / relationship / carer responsibility friendly
- Desire to change disciplines or topic, but difficulty in doing so
- Failed lab work
- Stress / exhaustion / mental health issues (like depression)
- Bullying or disinterested supervisors
- Loss of interest in the research / lack of internal motivation (essentially drift)
- Don't want to be an academic anymore and therefore see no point in continuing
- Worry that the PhD might make them 'unemployable' outside and wondering if 'out there' is better

We can see from these lists that the reasons students leave are multiple and complex. It is rarely one factor that will make a student leave and many of the pressures can cause feelings of inadequacy, hopelessness, shame and fear. Of course, when research is going well exactly the opposite emotions can emerge. This is why many people talk of the PhD as an emotional rollercoaster!

1.1.5 Where do supervisors fit in this picture?

What do research students want from their supervisors?

Does poor supervision significantly contribute to research students leaving? Adrian Lee, Carina Dennis, and Philip Campbell (2007) analysed the 350 applications from science mentors and mentees for the Mentors' Award of the journal Nature to see what students valued most in the people who advised them and came up with the following list:

- Mentor for life: career development and long-term interest
- Enthusiasm: for science, for the student's project and the student
- Sensitivity: to personal and professional needs and circumstances
- Appreciating individual differences

[3] Should you quit your PhD? The Thesis Whisperer blog, published on the 7/11/2012 (a further analysis is available on the post Why do people quit the PhD? , published on 26/03/2014).

- Respect
- Unselfishness: "lack of intellectual jealousy"
- Supports others: outside their own sphere of responsibility
- Teaching and communication skills

Except for the first, and possibly the last, item on the list, these characteristics all imply emotional states: enthusiasm, happiness and so on. In other words, students want their academic supporters and advisors to be highly engaged, both with the work and the student's well being.

Highly engaged supervisors need to do emotional work - let's explore this idea in more detail.

1.1.6 My supervisor, myself?

How we display emotions affects the emotional state of other people who are with us. Feelings are contagious. Think of how happiness can spread at weddings or birthdays, but sadness infects crowds at funerals.

Hochschild (1983)[4] developed the concept of 'emotional work' to explain how certain kinds of work require the active 'management of feeling'. Hochschild's classic example of emotional work is the Delta airways hostess, whose smile is a work place asset geared to help produce positive feelings in customers. In other words, the air hostesses' smile is meant to help create in the customer an emotional state - a good 'holiday mood', which is likely to make them want to fly on Delta again.

Emotional work requires effort, organisation and planning. Salisbury (2014)[5] argues that teachers do a lot of emotional work to display emotions such as: care, surprise, joy, anger, sadness, fear, excitement and pleasure in student achievements. She argues that emotional teaching labour is complex and diverse - and much of it occurs outside of time tabled classes and thus is invisible to managers. As she puts it:

> When emotions are underplayed, overplayed, neutralised or changed in order to advance educational goals, teachers perform "emotional labour"... It may involve faking, enhancing, and/or suppressing emotions to modify one's emotional expressions. (pg 49)

We know that emotional work is important between individuals, but there are also 'crowd effects'. Stories of bad supervision can spread like wild fire within the research supervision cohort, leading to all kinds of morale problems for both students and staff.

Research supervisors who want to help produce positive emotional states in their students will first need to concentrate on 'managing' their own feelings. The rest of this MOOC will explore the territory of the managed heart - for research supervisors and for their students.

Join us in the discussion session for a chance to introduce yourself to others and talk about what you would like to get out of doing this course.

1.2 Discussion

Tell us about yourself!

Are you a student, supervisor or interested supporter of a research student?

Share a short (around 200 words) bio about yourself. You can tell us where you are from, why you are interested in doing this course, and share your experiences with a PhD or research degree.

If you are a student or a supervisor we'd love to hear about your experience of research study or supervision so far.

1.3 Links and Resources

The following links and resources are offered as additional material which can be used as part of the social media activity outlined in the discussion section, or just to browse!

[4] Hochschild, A. R. (2003). The managed heart: Commercialization of human feeling. Berkeley: University of California Press.

[5] Salisbury, J. (2014). Emotional labour and the ethics of care in further education teaching. In Gronall, L., Cook, C., Salisbury, J., & Bloomsbury, T. B. (Eds.), Academic Working Lives: experience, practice and change. Bloomsbury Academic: London. 47 - 57.

There is a culture of acceptance around mental health issues in academia Do academics ignore mental health problems among PhD students? This article comments on the the unfortunate suicide of a PhD student from the point of view of a research developer who works with many students and often offers a 'shoulder to cry on'.

40% of PhDs at Exeter suffer ill health A survey by the student guild at the University of Exeter finds that the doctorate causes stress for 85% of students. Money and lack of human contact were reasons often given in addition to time pressure. The findings at Exeter align with trends identified by the National Union of students.

Book: Leaving the Ivory Tower "Graduate schools have faced attrition rates of approximately 50 percent for the past 40 years. They have tried to address the problem by focusing on student characteristics and by assuming that if they could make better, more informed admission decisions, attrition rates would drop. Yet high attrition rates persist and may in fact be increasing. Leaving the Ivory Tower thus turns the issue around and asks what is wrong with the structure and process of graduate education. Based on hard evidence drawn from a survey of 816 completers and noncompleters and on interviews with noncompleters, high- and low-Ph.D productive faculty and Directors of Graduate study, this book locates the root cause of attrition in the social structure and cultural organization of graduate education". (Text from Amazon.com)

Higher education homogeneity on the rise worldwide Studies have shown that tertiary systems around the world have become less diverse and differentiated in recent decades. And despite a desire among many states to increase diversity within higher education, a combination of "strict and uniform government policies" and the ability of powerful academic communities to defend their norms and values, are largely to blame for growing homogenisation.

Book: Supervising Doctorates Downunder This helpful book is broken into sections dealing with various supervision issues. Although the book is clearly aimed at the Australian and New Zealand market, it is utmost engaging.

Academic sell-out how an obsession with metrics and rankings is damaging academia Increasingly, academics have to demonstrate that their research has academic impact. Universities normally use journal rankings and journal impact factors to assess the research impact of individual academics. There are, however, several serious problems with relying on journal rankings, journal impact factors and citation counts. This paper discusses these and several other problems and suggests alternatives such as post-publication peer review and open-access journals.

In universities obsessed with research here's what falls between the cracks In Australian universities at the moment research is everything. They obsess over the rankings in the new ERA system which measures research performance. For academics publishing in the top journals isn't just part of playing the game, it's the whole game.

The references in the list below appear in paywalled journals - you will need a university subscription to read them.

Boud, D., & Costley, C. (2007). From project supervision to advising: New conceptions of the practice. Innovations in Education and Teaching International, Volume 44(2). 119-130.

Gatfield, T. (2005). An investigation into PhD supervisory management styles: Development of a dynamic conceptual model and its managerial implications. Journal of Higher Education and Policy Management, Volume 27(3). 311-325.

Grant, B. (2000). Pedagogical issues in research education. In M. Kiley & G. Mullins (Eds.), Quality in postgraduate research: Making ends meet. Adelaide: Advisory Centre for Univesity Education. 31 - 34 (PDF)

Johnson, L., Lee, A., & Green, B. (2000). The PhD and the autonomous self: gender, rationality and postgraduate pedagogy. Studies in Higher Education, Volume 25(2). 135-147. (PDF)

Lee, A., Dennis, C., & Campbell, P. (2007). Nature's guide for mentors. Nature, Volume 444. 791-797.

Hochschild, A. R. (2003). The managed heart: Commercialization of human feeling. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Salisbury, J. (2014). Emotional labour and the ethics of care in further education teaching. In Gronall, L., Cook, C., Salisbury, J., & Bloomsbury, T. B. (Eds.). Academic Working Lives: experience, practice and change. Bloomsbury Academic: London. 47 - 57.

1.4 Wrap Up