



Murdoch
UNIVERSITY

MURDOCH RESEARCH REPOSITORY

<http://researchrepository.murdoch.edu.au/1955/>

Morrison-Saunders, A., Moore, S., Newsome, D., Smith, A., Rodger, K. and Hughes, M. (2003) *Making postgraduate students and supervisors aware of the role of emotions in the PhD process.* In: Teaching and Learning Forum 2003: Partners in Learning, 11 - 12 February, Edith Cowen University, Perth.

It is posted here for your personal use. No further distribution is permitted.

Partners in learning: making our emotions work for us in the PhD process

Angus Morrison-Saunders*
School of Environmental Science
Murdoch University

Sue Moore
School of Environmental Science
Murdoch University

David Newsome
School of Environmental Science
Murdoch University

Michael Hughes
College of Business
The University of Notre Dame Australia

Amanda Smith
School of Environmental Science
Murdoch University

Kate Rodger
School of Environmental Science
Murdoch University

*Author to whom correspondence should be addressed:

Dr Angus Morrison-Saunders
Lecturer in Environmental Assessment
Murdoch University
Division of Science and Engineering
Murdoch University
South St
MURDOCH WA 6150
ph. 9360 6125, fax 9360 6787, email: A.Morrison-Saunders@murdoch.edu.au

Author biographies:

Dr Angus Morrison-Saunders is Lecturer in Environmental Assessment (Murdoch University). His PhD thesis examined the Influence of environmental impact assessment on management of development projects in Western Australia.

Dr Sue Moore is Senior Lecturer in Environmental Sociology (Murdoch University). Her PhD thesis examined the resolution of environmental disputes in public land planning activities in the US and Australia.

Dr David Newsome is Lecturer in Eco-based Tourism (Murdoch University). His PhD thesis examined the origin of sandplains in the Victoria Plateau region of Western Australia.

Michael Hughes is a PhD Candidate (The University of Notre Dame Australia) who has recently submitted his thesis on the influence of natural area experiences on visitors.

Amanda Smith is a PhD Candidate (Murdoch University) in the final year of a project examining the effectiveness of current management of recreation activity in the forests of Western Australia.

Kate Rodger is a PhD Candidate (Murdoch University) in the first year of a project examining the role of science and scientific monitoring in managing wildlife tourism.

Partners in learning: making our emotions work for us in the PhD process

Abstract

Emotions are an integral part of the PhD process. A range of emotions are common and to be expected. How do emotions affect the PhD process for both postgraduate students and their supervisors? How can we make our emotions work positively for us in the PhD process? To explore answers to these questions, three lecturers currently supervising postgraduates and three postgraduates at various stages in their doctoral studies collectively pooled their experiences. An interactive workshop was developed that was recently conducted for postgraduate students at Murdoch University and at the Australian Association for Social Research annual conference 2002. This paper explores the role that emotions play in the PhD process and how supervisors and postgraduates alike can benefit from reflecting on this issue. We explore, from the student's perspective, the role of emotions at the beginning, middle and end of a PhD programme. The data collection and analysis phases are a time when emotions may run riot. Trepidation is especially common when fieldwork or data collection is involved, as is anger when postgraduate's views about how the world works are challenged and then sadness (and relief!) when the data collection phase is finished. We suggest some strategies that students can use to help their emotions work for them rather than be an encumbrance. By partnering students in this emotion work, supervisors can greatly help students in their PhD journey.

Introduction

Enrolling in and fulfilling the requirements of a PhD is a major commitment on the part of the student in terms of time, energy and financial resources. During the period of enrolment a range of positive and negative emotions are likely to be experienced by the student, who will have to deal with many challenging issues.

In this study we examined the nature and role that emotions play in the PhD process. We commence with a brief review of the relevant literature. Our methodological approach is then presented followed by the main findings. We include suggested strategies that postgraduate students can use to help make their emotions work for them in a positive way as they undertake their studies.

Background

A number of studies have examined the complex and varied issues associated with PhD study. Phillips and Pugh (1994) consider a broad range of issues including how to do research and how to choose a supervisor. Rudd (1985) examines factors relating to success or otherwise. Some works (e.g Phillips and Pugh 1994) are primarily guides for the prospective or new PhD student, although others are written from the supervisors' perspective (e.g. Cullen et al., 1994). Many emphasise the key role of the supervisor and the student-supervisor relationship in the PhD process (Cullen et al., 1994; Cryer, 1997; Graves, 1997), an issue now addressed at some universities through provision of specific training or guides for PhD supervisors. However, very few studies have considered the role of emotions in the PhD process.

Some studies acknowledge that emotions are an aspect of the PhD process, but they are given only brief mention. For example Graves (1997) highlights the need for students to share with their supervisors any worries about their research or other factors that might

affect it, while Phillips and Pugh (1994) recognise that postgraduate students are on a psychological journey and briefly cover some emotional aspects in general terms. There are also a few examples written from personal perspectives (e.g. O'Leary, 2001).

The lack of studies into the role of emotions in the PhD process reflects the lack of research on the issue of emotions in education generally. Few studies of the role of emotions on academic learning, with the exceptions of test anxiety and attribution research on achievement emotions, were undertaken prior to the 1990's (Pekrun et al., 2002). Recent research demonstrates the important but complex roles of both positive and negative emotions on motivation and learning in school and undergraduate university students (Pekrun et al., 2002; Turner et al., 2002), although to what extent these findings can be related to the experiences of PhD students remain unclear.

Methodology

In the absence of a well-defined literature, there was no existing guidance or proven methodology for evaluating the role of emotions in PhD studies. We engaged in an exploratory, qualitative study based on the experiences of six staff and students in the School of Environmental Science at Murdoch University, an approach in keeping with Neuman (2000). The six participants were three academics who had completed their PhDs within the previous six years and three PhD candidates currently being supervised by them. The three candidates were at various stages in their PhD. The studies crossed a broad range of disciplines within environmental science (e.g. soil science, policy analysis, tourism).

Each participant prepared an account of their emotional state during their PhD. In particular we focussed on different stages of the study (beginning, middle and end) and different tasks (e.g. field work and data collection, thesis writing). These shared experiences provided the basis for an interactive workshop that we presented to the Murdoch University Postgraduate Forum and the Australian Association for Social Research (AASR) annual conference 2002.

The remainder of the paper focuses on our experiences with emotions during our PhD's, especially in relation to stages in the process, fieldwork and data collection activities and suggested coping strategies.

Emotions and the PhD Process

Although we had different disciplinary homes, a number of common themes became apparent involving varying combinations of excitement, fear, frustration, insecurity, exhilaration, satisfaction, depression and loneliness. These highs and lows make the PhD process an emotional roller coaster ride. We suggest that while there is no set procedure for dealing with this process, awareness of emotional highs and lows allows for realization that this is a normal part of the experience. Increased awareness may allow for appropriate coping strategies to be put in place by PhD candidates and their main partner in the process: their supervisor(s). We found that for all of us emotions varied in approximate accordance with the stage of the process.

Stages in the PhD Process

The beginning of a PhD appears to be generally characterised by positive emotions, influenced by factors such as:

- elation at candidature and/or award of a scholarship;
- enthusiasm and anticipation associated with tackling an important and interesting problem; and
- a high level of motivation.

Negative emotions that may be experienced at this point relate to initial bewilderment (e.g. deciding on where to start, how to approach the topic) and a certain level of confusion and frustration associated with narrowing down the area of research into a manageable but worthwhile project. At this stage there is also the possibility of concerns associated with establishing the working relationship between the candidate and their supervisor(s).

The middle period of a PhD is often accompanied by a slump in enthusiasm and motivation associated with the realisation of the enormity of the project (cf. Phillips and Pugh, 1994). Distractions from casual teaching jobs or other employment with very real and immediate deadlines make it easy to procrastinate on PhD activities; this can generate feelings of guilt and frustration. Frustrations also arise from things tending to take longer than expected owing to research dead ends and administrative requirements (e.g. budgets, progress reports). The repetitive nature of re-writing drafts and ongoing literature searches can also pose a source of frustration and even boredom (cf. Phillips and Pugh, 1994). We found that this is the period when isolation and loneliness associated with working individually on a big project starts to set in. Additionally, field trips and data collection activities dominate this stage and generate their own emotional responses. On a more positive note though, the relationship between the candidate and their supervisor(s) is usually sorted out, or at least a position of mutual understanding has been reached.

The end of the PhD process seems to be characterised by stronger and diametrically opposed emotions. There is the satisfaction and elation associated with completing final drafts of thesis chapters and then the entire full draft of the thesis. Although during the writing up stage, there often comes a point at which the candidate becomes thoroughly sick and tired of writing and constantly thinking about the project. Hence the satisfaction of completing chapters and thesis drafts is tempered by these feelings.

The looming deadline of the end of scholarship funding evokes a mixture of panic and strong motivation to finish. The second year slump in productivity disappears in a frenzy of research analysis and thesis writing. During this writing up period, most of us reported experiencing fear of failure. There was a certain amount of anxiety associated with second guessing conclusions drawn from the PhD research and worry over the question: Does anyone care? We also had fears of 'undermining gurus', especially in relation to the examiners chosen to assess the thesis.

In the stress of reaching the end of the PhD project, tensions between candidates and their supervisors can arise. These mainly revolve around the utility of supervisor guidance and feedback on draft chapters (e.g. when the supervisor is not adequately engaged in the PhD project to discuss issues at the depth expected by the candidate) or frustration and anger when supervisors demand that further material be included or the candidate's ideas and arguments are challenged. The competing time commitments of supervisors can also be frustrating to candidates, especially if they are required to wait

for supervisors to provide them with feedback and guidance. At this point, the candidate may be so focused on their PhD project and keen to progress it that any delay seems unreasonable.

Finally the moment when the thesis is actually submitted for examination is usually a great anticlimax. Rather than a grand ceremony that a candidate who has invested such time and energy into their PhD might hope for and deserve, the final moments are spent in the mundane tasks of getting the thesis bound and completing administrative requirements for submission. This is followed by a protracted period of restless waiting for the feedback from supervisors; it being difficult to fully relax with the PhD still being 'unfinished business' but out of the candidate's control.

In our personal lives, a PhD may also create problems. The demands and individual nature of a PhD project can make candidates very pre-occupied and consequently they can easily become somewhat out of touch with news and events in their immediate social surroundings. One source of frustration concerns the difficulty of trying to explain what a PhD is about to friends and family.

In short the PhD process appears to involve a love-hate relationship. Candidates love the exhilaration of research and discovery but hate the emotional and intellectual drain of the experience. However, there are strategies that postgraduate students and their supervisors can put in place to overcome the negative emotions experienced during a PhD.

Managing negative emotions during the PhD stages

Our forum for postgraduate students at Murdoch University and at AASR was well received and participants provided lots of positive feedback on the benefits of the session. We found that workshop participants related strongly to our experiences. This highlights the value of encouraging postgraduate students (and supervisors) to take part in academic forums or discussion groups with other PhD students. Sharing experiences and ideas is emotionally and intellectually beneficial, and the benefits of participation in self-help, peer-support groups (Phillips and Pugh, 1994) or in supervised collaborative cohort groups (Burnett, 1999) has been noted elsewhere.

A number of other suggestions for managing emotions during the PhD process arose from our study such as:

- talk to experts in the field and publish journal papers during candidature. This reaffirms that what students are doing is important and interesting, and is a good source of feedback on the direction and progress of the research;
- avoid getting stuck on a particular approach to a thesis problem. Be open to new ideas and suggestions;
- avoid working at home to minimise feelings of isolation (although students are typically expected to share offices and these rooms can become noisy and distracting, making working at home an attractive alternative);
- write up a timetable of due dates for drafts and field trips or other data collection activities. This provides motivation and direction and can be used to measure progress;
- build in time for holidays away from the PhD. These allow rejuvenation and relaxation; they may also result in new ideas and inspirations for the project; and
- adjust the explanation of what you are doing in your PhD project according to whom you are talking to. This means preparing a simple (e.g. one sentence)

explanation as well as more in-depth answers for those that are more interested.

Finally, we suggest that attending a graduation ceremony provides a wonderful sense of closure and celebration of the completion of the PhD project.

Managing negative emotions during field work or data collection

Collecting data for a PhD project; whether it is through experiments, interviewing, field trips or archival research; is a core activity that is essential for project success. We found that this demanding activity generated a mixture of emotions including fear, excitement and frustration, with the underlying issue of loneliness also occurring.

As environmental scientists, we relied extensively on field trips. All of us experienced a level of fear when embarking on these trips for the first time. The fear appeared to be connected with leaving the safety and comfort of the office and, often, meeting people. We were also frightened at the prospect of meeting experts and interrogating them as part of research project because we feared that they might somehow disapprove of our research. Other concerns arose in relation to being able to gain access to experts or other information sources as part of the research. For those engaged in research involving members of the public, there were additional concerns relating to cultural differences (e.g. how to communicate with Japanese tourists visiting a national park).

Field work was also exciting due to:

- the thrill of getting out in the field and applying theoretical ideas in a practical situation;
- achieving a sense of progress after months spent reading literature and designing the study. Getting practical research done also acts as a progress marker;
- satisfaction when patterns in the data became evident and they supported our theories or ideas (however, if data refuted our ideas then frustration and fear was a potential outcome); and
- for environmental scientists, it is always a pleasure to return to 'our natural habitat' rather than being confined in artificial spaces. We imagine that other researchers feel a similar thrill when they visit places that relate to their discipline area (and enjoyment of these places is probably one of the major reasons for choosing to undertake a PhD in a particular discipline in the first place).

Frustrations associated with field work were linked to the need to collect a large volume of data in relatively short spaces of time. We frequently experienced feeling rushed, forgetting important bits of equipment, and things generally not going the way they were planned. Frustration may also manifest itself as a symptom of fatigue, through repetitive or physically and emotionally demanding data collection regimes. For candidates involved in surveys in which volunteers were used to assist with data collection, frustrations also arose from volunteers not following instructions properly with the risk that the data collection process could become flawed in some way.

As with other stages of the PhD process, loneliness can also be experienced during data collection activities, especially if field work is undertaken in remote settings for extended periods of time. Even in populated areas, but away from home, the experience can be lonely if there are no friends, family or colleagues to socialise with.

To overcome the negative emotions associated with field work and data collection activities, we suggest the following:

- carefully plan and organise expeditions (e.g. budgets, equipment lists, vehicles etc) well in advance of each trip;
- have a set timetable of action and stick to it. This builds confidence by providing a tangible framework to work from and prevents dithering or other forms of 'lost time';
- socialise while on field trips (e.g. live in shared accommodation, make contact with local staff or organizations associated with your research, or simply visit the local pub occasionally). It can be beneficial to take along a friend, spouse or partner, especially if they can provide assistance; and
- schedule a day off to do something not related to the research if away for protracted periods of time. As with taking holidays during a PhD, it is important to relax and recharge and simply have some 'time-off'.

Conclusion

We engaged in a collaborative exploratory and self-reflective study in an attempt to identify the roles that emotions can play in the PhD process. Although candidates will experience a PhD in unique ways depending upon their personal situation, the discipline area and the university context, we suggest that similar emotional highs and lows will be experienced by most candidates. We believe that it is valuable for both postgraduate students and supervisors to be made aware of the role of emotions in the PhD process and to reflect on this. The recognition of emotions makes their management by students possible. The process can be enhanced by partnership with PhD supervisors. We suggest that such 'emotion work' (Hochschild, 1983) by student and supervisor greatly assists the PhD process and subsequent outcomes.

References

- Burnett, P.C. (1999). The supervision of doctoral dissertations using a collaborative cohort model. *Counselor Education and Supervision*, 39 (1), 46-52.
- Cullen, D.J., Pearson, M., Saha, L.J. & Spear, R.H. (1994). *Establishing Effective PhD Supervision*. Canberra: DETYA.
- Cryer, P. (1997). Handling common dilemmas in supervision. *Issues in Postgraduate Supervision, Teaching and Management*, No. 2. London, UK: The Society for Research into Higher Education & The Times Educational Supplement.
- Graves, N (1997). Problems of supervision. In N. Graves & V. Varma, (eds) *Working for a Doctorate – A Guide for the Humanities and Social Sciences*, (76-95). London, UK: Routledge.
- Hochschild, A.R. (1983). *The Managed Heart: The Commercialization of Human Feeling*. Berkley, USA: University of California Press.
- Neuman, W.L. (2000). *Social Research Methods: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches*, 4th ed. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.

- O'Leary, Z. (2001). Conversations from the kitchen. In A. Bartlett & G. Mercer (eds). *Eruptions. Vol 11. Postgraduate Research Supervision – Transforming (R)Elations*, (195-198). New York, USA: Peter Land Publishing Inc.
- Pekrun, R., Goetz, T., Titz, W. & Perry, R.P. (2002). Academic emotions in students' self-regulated learning and achievement: A program of qualitative and quantitative research. *Educational Psychologist*, 37 (2), 91-105.
- Phillips, M., & Pugh, D.S. (1994). *How to Get a PhD – A Handbook for Students and Their Supervisors*, 2nd ed. Buckingham, UK: Open University Press.
- Rudd, E. (1985). *A New Look at Postgraduate Failure*. Guildford, Surrey, UK: The Society for Research into Higher Education & NFER-NELSON.
- Turner, J.E., Husman, J. & Schallert, D.L. (2002). The importance of students' goals in their emotional experience of academic failure: Investigating the precursors and consequences of shame. *Educational Psychologist*, 37 (2), 79-89.

(word count = 2,940)