How long-time-to-doctorate PhD candidates persist to earn their degrees

by

Benjamin E. Kohl

BS, Emporia State University, 1998
MS, Kansas State University, 2005

AN ABSTRACT OF A DISSERTATION

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Department of Special Education, Counseling, and Student Affairs
College of Education

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY
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Abstract

Research into persistence and attrition of graduate students points to a variety of institutional barriers, individual characteristics, and personal circumstances that contribute to the decision to complete a program or abandon graduate study. Specifically, what is not known is how students who spend a great deal of time in the dissertation phase marshal their resources to successfully complete the degree. This study was intended to help understand the lived experiences of successful doctoral candidates and describe how doctoral candidates who lingered for an extended period in the dissertation phase of their degree program successfully complete their candidacy. The purpose of this study was to examine and describe the lived experiences of three doctoral candidates who earned PhD degrees from Colleges of Education at Midwestern research universities and spent five or more years to successfully complete their dissertations. Of specific interest was how the doctoral candidates made sense of the experiences and made progress to complete their dissertations. This study sought to answer the question: How do long-time-to-doctorate (LTTD) candidates describe the experiences associated with an extended, successful dissertation process?

The Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) methodological framework of this study guided sampling and participant selection, the research site, data collection methods, interviews, data management, and data analysis. Three LTTD candidates were interviewed and provided their experiences from the time of successfully completing their preliminary examinations to the time they deposited their dissertations. Additional sources of data included a timeline of the dissertation process completed by each participant and the acknowledgements section of two of the participant's deposited dissertations. These three sources of data provided rich and unique perspectives with similarity in experiences across the participants' narratives.

IPA methods were employed to analyze data including pre-analysis, initial notation, development of emerging themes, identifying gaps, and identifying connections across themes.

Although they assumed they were well-prepared for a PhD program, the participants described being surprised by how they struggled throughout their dissertation processes, and in some cases getting stuck in liminality. These times of stuckness and the depth of the liminality they experienced added time to their completion process, in part contributing to their long time to doctoral degree. The participants described strategies and supports they employed to survive the dissertation journey, and in some cases suggested that they wished they had used those strategies sooner. Finally, all of the participants detailed how important completion of the PhD program was to their personal and professional identities, and the way they made meaning about their experiences with faculty involved in the degree completion and identity formation process involved with becoming doctorate. Implications and recommendations for prospective PhD students, academic departments, and graduate schools are discussed.

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Approved by:

Major Professor
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Dedication

For my wife, Deborah. Thank you for giving me the opportunity you desperately wanted for yourself. Your sacrifice and encouragement made every line of this work possible.

To my children, Zane Rakham, Ezekiel William, Tirzah Joy, and Ezra Edward. Allow this doctoral journey of mine to be a reminder to finish what you start, even when it takes a long time.

Chapter 1 - Introduction

Over 986,000 students began graduate degrees in the United States in 2018 (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2018). If current media reports are to be believed, these students are embarking upon one of the most difficult stretches in their lives and education (Barreira, 2018; Evans, Bira, Gastelum, Weiss, & Vanderford, 2018; Flaherty, 2018). Due to the complexity of graduate student identity, the challenges and issues incumbent upon graduate students as adult learners, and the lack of graduate program data collected, increased attention has been paid over the last few years to graduate student persistence (Cantwell, Bourke, Scevak, Holbrook, & Budd, 2015; Jones, 2013). Studies of persistence at the doctoral level note attrition rates ranging from 33% to 70% depending on academic field (Ivankova & Stick, 2007; Jiranek, 2010; Jones, 2013; Kim & Otts, 2010; Salmona, Kaczynski, & Wood, 2016). In some of the early work on doctoral attrition, Golde (2000) described the seeming disconnect between the academy's perception of students' experience and students' report of their experience in graduate programs, highlighting that the academy may not truly understand all of the factors contributing to attrition.

Research into persistence and attrition of graduate students' points to a variety of institutional barriers, individual characteristics, and personal circumstances that contribute to the decision to complete a program or abandon graduate study. Historically, administrators attributed attrition in their colleges and departments to a single factor, usually circumstances or characteristics of the individual student such as lack of financial resources, talent, or commitment (Barnes & Austin, 2009; Golde, 2000). Recent studies examined the institutional factors that contribute to student persistence and attrition, centering primarily on student social integration and the relationship between graduate students and their major professors (Gardner,

2008; Jairam & Kahl, 2012; Rockinson-Szapkiw, Spaulding, & Spaulding, 2016). Institutional features and student integration into the department are important factors in graduate students' decision to stay or go, depending on where they are in the program of study (Castello, Pardo, Sala-Bubare, & Sune-Soler, 2017); however, research indicates that any number of personal characteristics including age, student debt, employment, marital status, and parents' level of education can influence a student's decision to complete or abandon a degree program (Luan & Fenske, 1996; Ostrove, Stewart, & Curtain, 2011; Strayhorn, 2005; Wao & Onwuegbuzie, 2011).

Increased recognition of the importance of degree completion to employment, earning prospects, and personal identity (Leppel, 2002; Rockinson-Szapkiw, Spaulding, & Lunde, 2017) have kept graduate student persistence at the forefront of consideration for those involved with higher education. Graduate students are the most academically capable and successful students on campus, among the most stringently evaluated while on campus, and subjected to one of the most careful selection processes prior to arrival; yet, they are also the least likely to complete their academic goals (Golde, 2000). Research also indicates that of those graduate students who complete graduate programs of study, especially at the doctoral level, a substantial percentage do not complete in a timely fashion (Jacks, Chubin, Porter, & Connolly, 1983; Lovitts, 2001; Maher, Ford, & Thompson, 2004; Taylor & Cantwell, 2015).

Previous research investigating graduate student experience centered on attrition and is based on the assertion that understanding the patterns of and reasons for graduate student departure is a critical step for institutions (Golde, 2000; Salmona et al., 2016). Students who do not complete their degrees, as well as those who take significantly longer than average to complete, are costly to an institution (Harris, 2011; Pauley, Cunningham, & Toth, 1999; Willis & Carmichael, 2011).

There are many potential economic and psychological costs that influence graduate student attrition. As a result, it is imperative to examine the institutional settings in which students are pursuing (or ceasing to pursue) their education (Golde, 2000), and to address any institutional shortcomings that might cost students. There are also characteristics and circumstances not associated with the institution that may impact a PhD student's decision to stay or go. Additionally, Golde (2005) maintained that "factors that spur attrition may also inflict damage on students who persist" (p. 670), as shown in several recent articles about mental health concerns among graduate students (Barreira, 2018; Evans et al., 2018; Flaherty, 2018). When challenges related to doctoral studies arise, even with good advisor alignment, candidates often work through difficulty without supervisory input, resulting in silent suffering (Keefer, Wisker, & Kiley, 2015). Students who are delayed in completion of their graduate studies may be at greater risk of experiencing the effects of potential psychological costs for a longer period of time than if they had finished in a timely manner.

As the graduate student experience and attrition have been examined, related lines of inquiry moved beyond the attrition issue to what does it mean to "be PhD" or "become doctorate" (Trafford & Leshem, 2008). Recent inquiries into graduate student experience (Dunin-Woyseth & Nilsson, 2012; Murakami-Ramalho, Militello, & Piert, 2013; Trafford & Leshem, 2009) identified a number of conceptual and research processes doctoral candidates must complete or clear in the process of earning the degree. Rooted in anthropological research tradition, the original definition of threshold concepts identified concepts and experiences (Keefer, 2015; Land, Meyer, & Smith 2008; Meyer & Land, 2006) that "are so critical to an understanding of the discipline that advanced disciplinary learning is impossible without having crossed the threshold of understanding" (Kiley, 2009, p. 297). For some disciplines, the mastery

of a specific theory or concept serves as a universal threshold for all students studying in that field. Understanding this threshold concept opens the door to students for future research and a deeper comprehension of the field of study. Demonstrating mastery of this concept indicates that the student has crossed a threshold. As research into thresholds developed, the threshold framework has been applied to higher education to identify a number of threshold concepts and skills involved in becoming a doctoral level researcher, regardless of discipline (Kiley, 2009; Trafford & Leshem, 2009). These thresholds include mastering the processes (e.g., topic selection, literature review, and navigating IRB) and actions (e.g., data collection and analysis) of scholarly research at the doctoral level (Kiley, 2009; Kiley & Wisker, 2009).

Within the application of thresholds to doctoral studies, some researchers refer to the crossing of thresholds as the completion of certain rites of passage necessary for candidates to successfully become "doctorate" (Dunin-Woyseth & Nilsson, 2012; Trafford & Leshem, 2009). It has been argued that doctoral threshold crossing includes ontological shifts that challenge a candidate's "security of self and identity" (Wisker et al., 2009, p. 19) as well as the epistimological shifts associated with deepening knowledge. As they complete these rites of passage to clear thresholds, graduate students are required to balance a multiplicity of roles and identities (e.g., student, adult learner, employee, parent, spouse, child), adding a level of complexity to the process (Wao & Onweugbuzie, 2011) of assuming their new identities as researchers who have earned a change in status and become doctorate.

A review of the research shows consistently that doctoral students who had not completed their degree, and even some who have, identify completion of the dissertation as a major threshold that is especially difficult to cross (Kiley, 2009; Pyhalto, Toom, Stubb, & Lonka, 2012). Both students and doctoral advisors identify this research portion of most PhD programs

to be uniquely challenging for students for a variety of reasons. The shift from coursework and companionship to isolation (depending on the design of the program); the less formally structured research process; and navigation of the major professor relationship can all impact the dissertation process (Barnes & Austin, 2009; Brailsford, 2010; Geraniou, 2010; Maher et al., 2004; Pyhalto et al., 2012). The dissertation process threshold is especially complex because there are several smaller thresholds that must be crossed while in the dissertation process. For graduate students who work on crossing the smaller thresholds and persist over a great deal of time, the knowledge of their subject area of specialty must be maintained for a longer period, and they must constantly seek ways to stay engaged and make progress toward degree completion (Wao & Onweugbuzie, 2011).

It is possible that long-time-to-doctorate (LTTD) students may abandon their doctoral pursuits not only because of institutional or personal challenges (Wao & Onweugbuzie, 2011), but because they get "stuck" in a liminal phase of threshold attainment, experience cognitive and affective distress to the point where they are not able to move forward (Kiley, 2015; Rattray, 2016), and/or simply give up. Liminality refers specifically to the experience of ambiguity or disorientation that often occurs as a student works to cross a threshold (Turner, 1974), and can be a highly stressful and emotional occurrence for students as they have begun the process of becoming doctorate, but have not yet attained the status of PhD (Wisker, 2016). As a result, graduate students who take a great deal of time to complete their degrees may need a higher level of self-efficacy to complete their graduate studies than those who completed in a timelier fashion.

Self-efficacy is dependent on time and task as well as shaped by the application of previous skills to a new situation (Bandura, 1997) which leaves LTTD students/candidates

especially vulnerable to using the experiences of others (e.g., the successes and failures of other students/candidates) to gauge their own abilities potentially forming faulty self-referent judgments (e.g., "I can't finish because they didn't"). Students who are stuck or failing to make progress on their dissertation for a long period of time would be expected to experience feelings of futility, a depressive mood, and the imposter syndrome (Trafford & Leshem, 2008; Wisker, 2016). Bandura (1997) maintains emotions and experiences similar to those tied to liminality (Rattray, 2016; Trafford & Leshem, 2008; Wisker, 2016) could result in depletion of self-efficacy. These emotions and experiences have also been shown to result in a decrease of motivation to engage in complex learning tasks (Rattray, 2016). For LTTD candidates, the dissertation may involve a variety of challenging learning tasks. The time spent in liminality at a threshold that delays progress may have a direct impact on a student's perception of their ability to control various cognitive strategies for learning and using strategies to result in better learning and performance, e.g., clearing the threshold (Garcia & Pintrich, 1994; Pintrich, Smith, Garcia, & McKeachie, 1993).

Need for the Study

Students completing doctoral degrees will encounter difficulty and be required to take risks as they complete their programs (Bain, Fedynich, & Knight, 2009; (Barreira, Basilico, & Bolotnyy, 2018). For some students/candidates, the difficulty and risk are too much, and degree abandonment occurs. As Lovitts (2001) aptly stated, "the most important reason to be concerned about graduate student attrition is that it can ruin individuals' lives" (p. 6). While a good deal of research has examined the factors that lead students to abandon a doctoral degree, examining doctoral degree holders who successfully persist on their doctoral journey and reach graduation has been understudied (Rockinson-Szapkiw, Spaulding, & Bade, 2014; Schell, 2017).

Specifically, what is not known is how students who spend a great deal of time in the dissertation phase marshal their resources to successfully complete the degree. Time-to-degree completion for some academic programs has extended in length to the detriment of students and the academy (Flaherty, 2018; McAlpine & Norton, 2006). This study is intended to help understand the lived experiences of successful doctoral candidates and describe how doctoral candidates who lingered for an extended period in the dissertation phase of their degree program successfully complete their candidacy. This study seeks to determine when and how the dissertation process was most challenging for the doctoral candidates, when and how the candidates felt they were making progress with the dissertation process, how their self-efficacy was influenced, what supports were utilized, and what strategies were employed to complete the dissertation process and become doctorate.

As undesirable as delayed completion of the dissertation is for candidates, it is also detrimental to the university when delay leads to attrition (van de Schoot, Yerkes, Mouw, & Sonneveld, 2013). Universities often invest significant financial resources, time, and energy into their graduate students; therefore, providing those students with adequate resources and support is required for protecting and increasing the university's return on investment in graduate students (Harris, 2011; Smallwood, 2004). State and federal reporting requirements regarding college enrollments typically do not require any data analysis about adult learners, non-traditional and graduate students as sub-populations, so campus-based institutional research departments frequently have little information about this group of doctoral students (Wilson & Hayes, 2000). Graduate students are a diverse group demographically, and require a complex set of academic coping skills, strategies, and supports to be successful as they balance the multiple roles they assume during their studies. Characteristics that impact graduate student success

include age, dependents, full or part-time study, employment, funding, and support network (Strayhorn, 2005; van de Schoot et al., 2013). Those who have successfully completed their degree programs will also have developed strategies to overcome challenges that arise due to these characteristics and others. Due to the level of specialized education and assumed advanced skill development they have attained, graduate students are often called into complex roles upon completion of their degrees; therefore, it is in the interest of all stakeholders to understand if and how doctoral candidates who successfully complete their degrees develop strategies (Grehan, Flanagan, & Malgady, 2011; Stracke & Kumar, 2014) in order to enourage others to develop similar characteristics and utilize the supports and strategies that have been shown effective. As a result, there is a need to understand more about graduate student characteristics in general, and especially the experiences of non-traditional and/or adult learners and the supports and strategies that are most effective in fostering their success as LTTD candidates.

There is a need to obtain the perspectives of students who have been successful in overcoming challenges because they may provide insight administrators and advisors can use to guide other students through what may be common institutional and personal barriers to success. Identifying especially difficult thresholds (e.g., developing a theoretical framework) can allow advisors to focus on strategies identified as helpful in building the characteristics for success in their graduate students once they are admitted and enrolled in a graduate program (Grehan, Flanagan, & Malgady, 2011; Johnson, Nicola, & Hobson, 2018). Effective advising of doctoral students has been shown to be more complex than formulative (Barnes & Austin, 2009), and this study will seek to ascertain differences and similarities in the successful dissertation process for those who linger for a long time at the dissertation phase. The literature contains reflections of advisors and mentors leading to the identification of specific areas of the doctoral program upon

which graduate students may become stuck at thresholds (Kiley, 2009; Wisker, 2016). Kiley's (2009) survey of doctoral supervisors indicated six potential thresholds related to learning to be a researcher that could lead to stuckness for students, including knowledge creation, analysis, research paradigm, argument/thesis, theory, and framework. There is, however, a paucity of research covering the perspectives of students themselves—especially those who have successfully completed degrees over a long period of time.

Finally, this study is needed to add to the literature regarding LTTD candidate self-efficacy and motivation and the factors that impact both. A great deal of research has been conducted on student self-efficacy and motivation, especially as it pertains to student success and persistence. There are many factors students attribute to being highly motivated to begin their graduate academic career; complete a degree program of study, thesis, or dissertation; and ultimately degree (Brailsford, 2010), but if the student is not academically resilient or buoyant, that motivation can erode, leading to extended time to degree or degree abandonment (Golde, 2000; Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012). As Martin (2002) asserted, "as critical as motivation is to student success, academic progress can be lost if students are not also resilient to everyday pressures, stress, and setbacks related to their academic settings" (p. 46). Students who are able to remain academically resilient or buoyant over long periods of time, such as those who have taken an extended period of time to complete their dissertations, have a unique perspective on maintaining motivation (Geraniou, 2010). In times of challenge, when a student is stuck in the "confusion, difficulty, and doubt" (Keefer et al., 2015, p. 15) of liminality, doctoral students rely on the supervising faculty member of their doctoral committee (major professor) to be the primary means of support and encouragement. Investigating the specific behaviors and factors that LTTD candidates identify as important to maintaining their motivation and re-motivating

themselves as motivation wanes may provide a toolkit for departments and universities intending to improve their graduate student degree completion rates.

Research Purpose and Questions

The purpose of this study was to examine and describe the lived experiences of three doctoral candidates who earned PhD degrees from Colleges of Education at Midwestern research universities and spent five or more years to successfully complete their dissertations. Of specific interest is how the doctoral candidates made sense of the experiences and made progress to complete their dissertations. This study seeks to answer the following question:

How do long-time-to-doctorate (LTTD) candidates describe the experiences associated with an extended, successful dissertation process?

Definition of Term

For the purposes of this study, the following definition informs the research and analysis:
Long-Time-to-Doctorate (LTTD)- Wao and Onwuegbuzie (2011) defined
Time-to-Doctorate (TTD) simply as "the time taken to attain the
doctorate" (p. 115). For the purposes of this study, a Long-Time-to-
Doctorate candidate represents a doctoral candidate who has taken five or
more years to successfully complete the dissertation process, from
completion of the preliminary examination to successful defense of the
dissertation.

Overview of the Study

This study was conducted within a framework of Interpretative Phenomenological Approach (IPA) as there are few studies in the literature exploring the lived experiences of successful LTTD candidates who linger for an extended time between finishing their preliminary examinations and successfully defending a dissertation. A phenomenological study describes the meaning of the lived experiences for several individuals about a concept or a phenomenon (Gribch, 2012; Moran, 2002). Experience being examined in the way it occurs, in its own terms, is central to phenomenology (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009) and the situation being studied is defined by individuals' interactions, actions, and engagement in a process in response to the phenomenon. The phenomenon in this study is the lived experiences of LTTD candidates between the time they finish their preliminary examinations to successfully defending their dissertations. The situation studied is how these LTTD candidates successfully complete their program and become doctorate.

Three sources of data were used to examine the lived experiences of LTTD candidates as they completed their dissertation. The three data sources included a timeline, three semi-structured interviews recorded for transcription, and a printed copy of the acknowledgement page of each participant's completed dissertation. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with three individuals in a convenience sample on the basis that they can grant access to a particular perspective on the phenomenon under study (Smith et al., 2009). The participants included in the sample persisted over an extended period (five or more years) in the dissertation phase of their doctoral program to successfully complete their degrees. Participants responded to a short demographic survey to confirm that they met the criteria for participating in the study. The questions on the survey included:

1. What was your employment status during your doctoral program; unemployed, part-time, or full-time?

2. What was your student status during your doctoral program; part-time or full-time?

3. How long (in years, months, days) did it take you to complete your dissertation, from the time you completed your preliminary examination to the time you successfully completed your dissertation?

4. What was the title of the degree you earned?

5. Was your PhD degree completed in a College of Education at a Midwestern research university?

Prior to the face-to-face interview, participants were given a timeline and asked to identify and plot their journey as they progressed toward degree completion in response to the following question: "What occurred (personally, professionally, and academically) between the time you completed your preliminary examination and the day you completed your degree?" Participants were asked a series of semi-structured questions (based on threshold research and a review of the literature) in a face-to-face interview via online, cloud-based teleconferencing software, due to national health restrictions concerning COVID-19. These interviews were transcribed, returned to the interviewee for validation, and analyzed for emerging themes. The data were analyzed by individual case initially, and then across cases to develop a set of themes representing the multiple perspectives of participants. An audit trail was established to document all research decisions and activity throughout the course of the research. Although not required in an IPA study, I kept a research journal to record impressions and personal foreknowledge throughout the investigation and interpretation with a cyclical approach to bracketing (Smith et al., 2009). The study was presented in a narrative format illustrating major themes in the words of the participants themselves.

Possibilities of the Study

If the description of LTTD candidate experiences includes strategies and supports that have been helpful to them, advisors can potentially provide advising interventions for those struggling to cross thresholds and complete their doctoral work. Additionally, student perceptions of institutional and other supports may be described and used to establish patterns of how different candidates at different stages in their doctoral degree progression prefer to be advised. While one strategy or support has been shown to be important to a student at the outset of their academic career, different strategies and supports may be more important as the student/candidate progresses through their career, especially at the dissertation phase where so many candidates get stuck.

Limitations of the Study

There are potential limitations of the study to consider. The rigor of this study is connected to the extent of the openness of the participants regarding what they chose to share regarding their experiences. As a result, the data collected are reliant on how forthright and open the participants are during the interviews. Participants were informed that their interviews and other materials will be masked, and their identities kept confidential, before interviews were conducted to help them to be more open during the interviews. My own experience as an LTTD candidate helped to set participants at ease as I am empathetic to their experiences, which is important to the IPA design, as well.

Because a crisis of representation was a potential limitation to this study, I removed myself somewhat as a researcher when analyzing and representing the data. Although IPA relies on a recognition that the researcher comes to a study with personal foreknowledge and a firm grasp on the literature surrounding the phenomenon under examination, I mitigated dominating

the participants' voices by using their own words, potentially long, interrupted responses (Reismann, 2002) throughout the narrative representation of the analysis.

Chapter Summary

At the start of their doctoral journey, students are embarking upon one of the most difficult stretches in their lives and education. Research into persistence and attrition of some graduate students points to a variety of institutional barriers, personal characteristics, and circumstances that contribute to the decision to complete a program or abandon graduate study. Increased recognition of the importance of degree completion regarding employment, earning prospects, and personal identity have kept the graduate student persistence issue at the forefront of consideration for those involved with higher education. Both students and doctoral supervisors (major professors) identify this research portion of the PhD program to be uniquely challenging for students for a variety of reasons and there are a series of thresholds that candidates must cross in order to successfully become doctorate.

This study examined and described the lived experiences of doctoral candidates who completed their degrees after spending five or more years in the dissertation process, from the completion of their preliminary examinations to the defense of their dissertations. This study illuminated the experiences of LTTD candidates to enable graduate advisors to better understand the strategies and supports that may be helpful to these candidates. This study may also influence the information shared in selection interviews and orientation sessions for graduate students.

Chapter 2 contains a review of the literature pertaining to graduate students as adult learners and research into graduate retention and attrition. The theoretical constructs of threshold and self-efficacy are explored as they pertain to graduate students. Chapter 3 presents and explanation of the methodological framework in which the study was conducted and the research

design for the study. Chapter 4 includes the findings of the study and provides a description of participants in the study and how they made sense of their long time to doctorate journeys in relation to periods of struggle, stuckness, and liminality, the strategies and supports they used to succeed, and how their identities were shaped by the doctoral journey. Finally, Chapter 5 discusses implications for prospective doctoral students, academic departments, and graduate schools where PhD's are earned. Opportunities for future research are considered.

Chapter 2 - Literature Review

This chapter presents literature that informs this study and illustrates the need for additional research beginning with a review of how long-time-to-doctorate (LTTD) students/candidates are defined and characterized in the literature. The previously identified reasons candidates become LTTD was examined and the theory and constructs that may help contextualize the LTTD experience were detailed.

Long-Time-to-Doctorate Students/Candidates

Two of the most critical questions regarding policy and practice to create lifelong learners include (a) how are the most important clients defined, and, (b) how are the needs of those clients interpreted (Wilson & Hayes, 2000). For faculty, staff, and administrators working in doctoral education, the most important clients are doctoral students. Understanding the needs of doctoral students is critical to making informed improvements to their education (National Science Foundation, National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics, 2018). In fact, Pearson and colleagues (2011) maintained that in order to set good policy and practice, educators must have an "accurate and nuanced understanding of the contemporary student population and the doctoral experience" (p. 530). To understand the needs of LTTD students, one must have a better idea of the layers of multiplicity embodied in graduate student identity. The complexity of doctoral students can be illustrated through demographic statistics as well as a review of the characteristics of members of this population.

Statistical Description of Doctoral Students

Data describing doctoral students are collected and analyzed for students enrolled in a graduate degree program, either full or part-time, across any academic or professional field (United States Department of Education, 2016). Some of the data represented in national reports

include both master's and doctoral level students. Distribution of students by graduate degree, demographic, institutional enrollment characteristics (e.g., department or field of study), and finally, across age, race/ethnicity, sex, attendance status, marital status, employment, and income (United States Department of Education, 2016) are also analyzed. Recently, time-to-degree completion at the doctoral level has been tracked in some fields and studies have identified the percentage of students completing specific types of degrees (National Science Foundation, National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics, 2018).

General Graduate Studies Demographics

Isolating data specific to LTTD candidates is difficult because many of the demographics of graduate students in the United States reported by the National Center for Education Statistics account for master's, doctoral, and professional students in combination. These statistics do not distinguish between level or type of degree sought. An understanding of the graduate student population can be helpful to understand the general population of graduate students to which LTTD candidates are a sub-set. Graduate student demographics vary by type of institution and region of the United States; however, the number of students participating in graduate studies is increasing. Between 2010 and 2017, post-baccalaureate enrollment was somewhat flat, at 3 million students, after a strong period of growth from 2000-2010, when graduate programs saw growth of 36% (United States Department of Education, 2019). In the latest figures, graduate enrollments are projected to increase by 3% to 3.1 million students by 2028, which is a downward revision to the previous projections made in 2016 by NCES of 21% growth by 2025 (United States Department of Education, 2016).

Distance education plays a role in graduate education in the United States. Between 2016 and 2017, 33.7% of graduate students took courses over the weekend, at night, or by distance

(Figure 2.1). A similar survey conducted in 2016 found that a higher percentage of graduate

students older than 30 years participated in distance education programs between 2011 and 2012

than their younger graduate peers. As many as 44% of these older students took a portion of their

program by distance, and as many as 25% completed their entire programs by distance; whereas

31% of graduate students 24-29 years of age finished some courses by distance and only 14% of

them completed entire programs by distance (United States Department of Education, 2016).
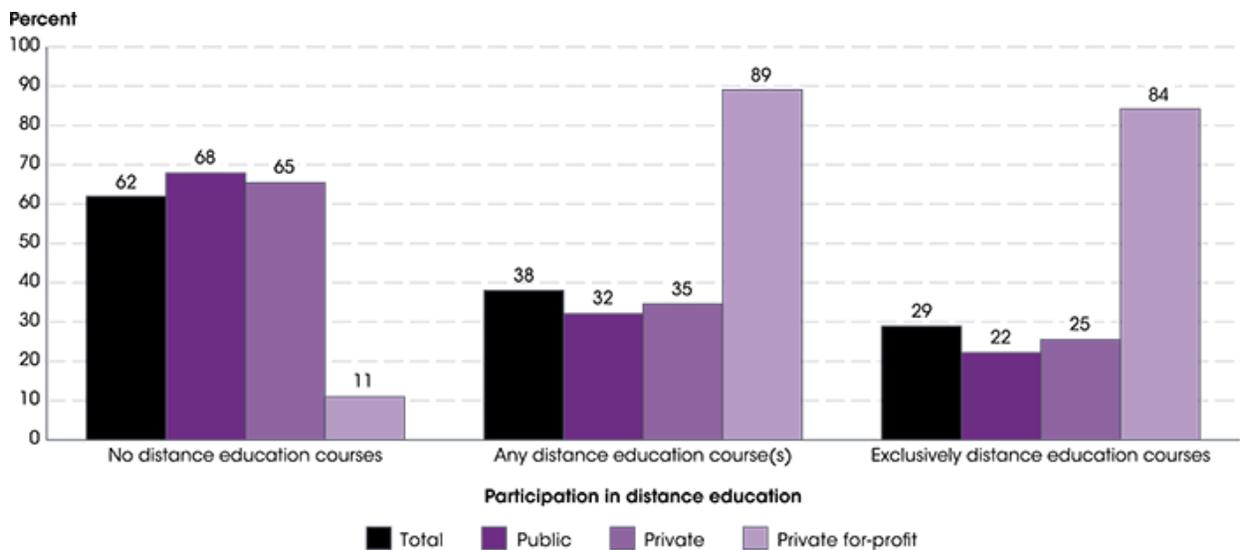
Percent

Figure 2.1 Graduate student demographics for nontraditional course delivery (from National Center for Education Statistics, 2019)

The same pattern of higher percentages of older rather than younger undergraduate and graduate

students taking distance education classes or entire degree program online was evident in 2007–

2008. Almost half of the married adult graduate students with children took either all (25%) or

part (46%) of their graduate degree programs online as presented in Figure 2.2.

18
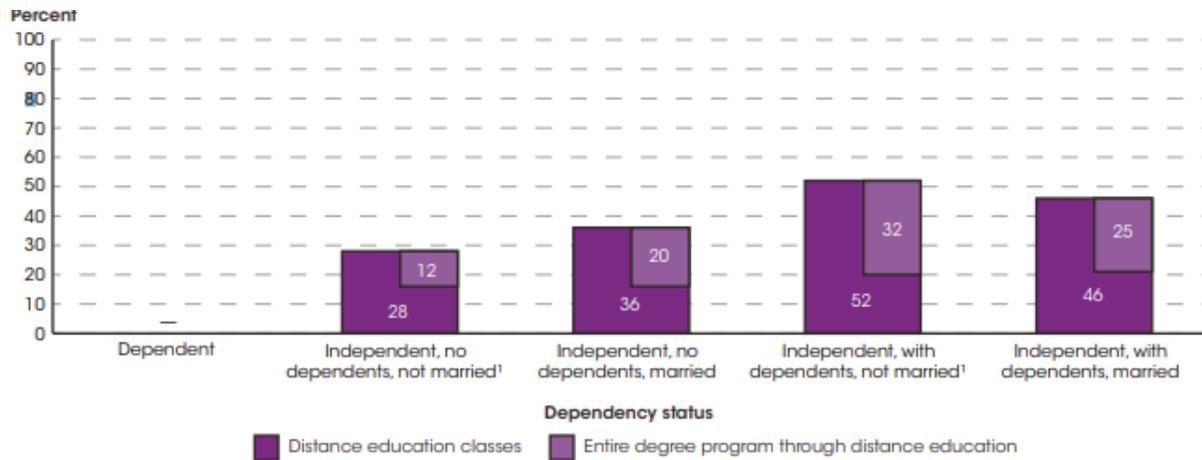
Figure 2.2 Demographics of graduate students with dependents in online courses (from United States Department of Education, 2016)

Compared to the students who were married with children, a higher percentage of unmarried graduate students with dependents participated in courses online (52%), or completed their entire program by distance (32%). This number is higher than any other demographic surveyed with dependency status, and speaks to the intersections of identity displayed by most graduate students.

Doctoral Studies Statistics

Data collected for doctoral students alone indicate that the two largest areas of doctoral degrees awarded in 2017 included health and medical professions (43%) and legal studies (19%), which combine to make up a total of 62% of all degrees conferred at that level. The number of doctoral degrees in the medical professions continues to grow over time; however, the 2017 figure is a decline for legal studies (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). Education (7%), Engineering (6%), Biomedical Sciences (4%), and Psychology (4%) account for the bulk of the remaining doctoral degrees conferred. In total, there were 181,000 doctoral degrees conferred in 2017, as presented in Figure 2.3, an increase in degree confirmation over previous

years. Enrollment in doctoral programs in the field of education has grown steadily by 49% since

1990, and a total of 12,687 degrees were conferred in 2017.
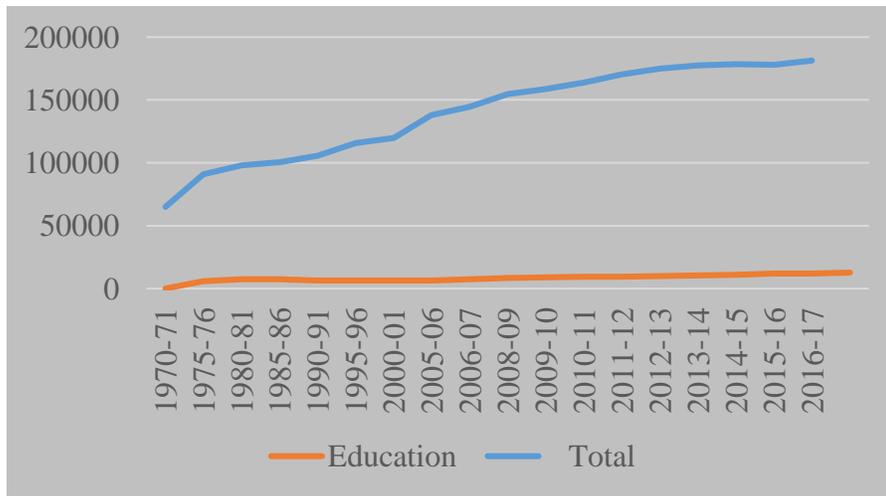
Figure 2.3 Total numbers of doctoral degrees conferred between 1971-2017 (from National Center for Educational Statistics, 2019)

Women earned more doctoral degrees than men across all fields in 2017, an enrollment

trend that shifted in the 2003-2004 measure, as presented in Figure 2.4. Additionally, women

accounted for 8,674 of the 12,687 doctoral degrees conferred in the field of education in 2017

(National Center for Education Statistics, 2019).
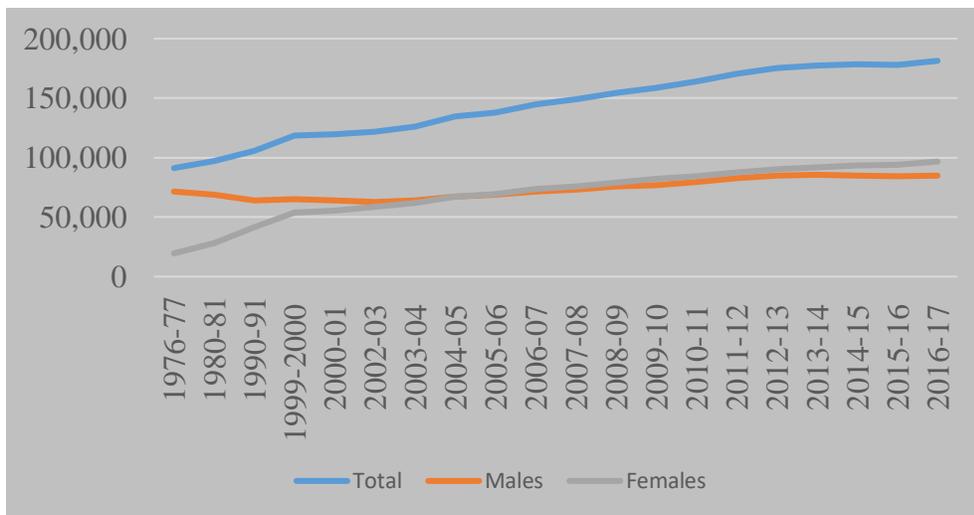
Figure 2.4 Doctoral degrees conferred by gender (from National Center for Education Statistics, 2019)

Students of diverse ethnic backgrounds have earned an increasing number of degrees at the doctoral level over the last two decades. However, students who identified as white made up 72% of those earning doctoral degrees during that time period, as presented in Figure 2.5.
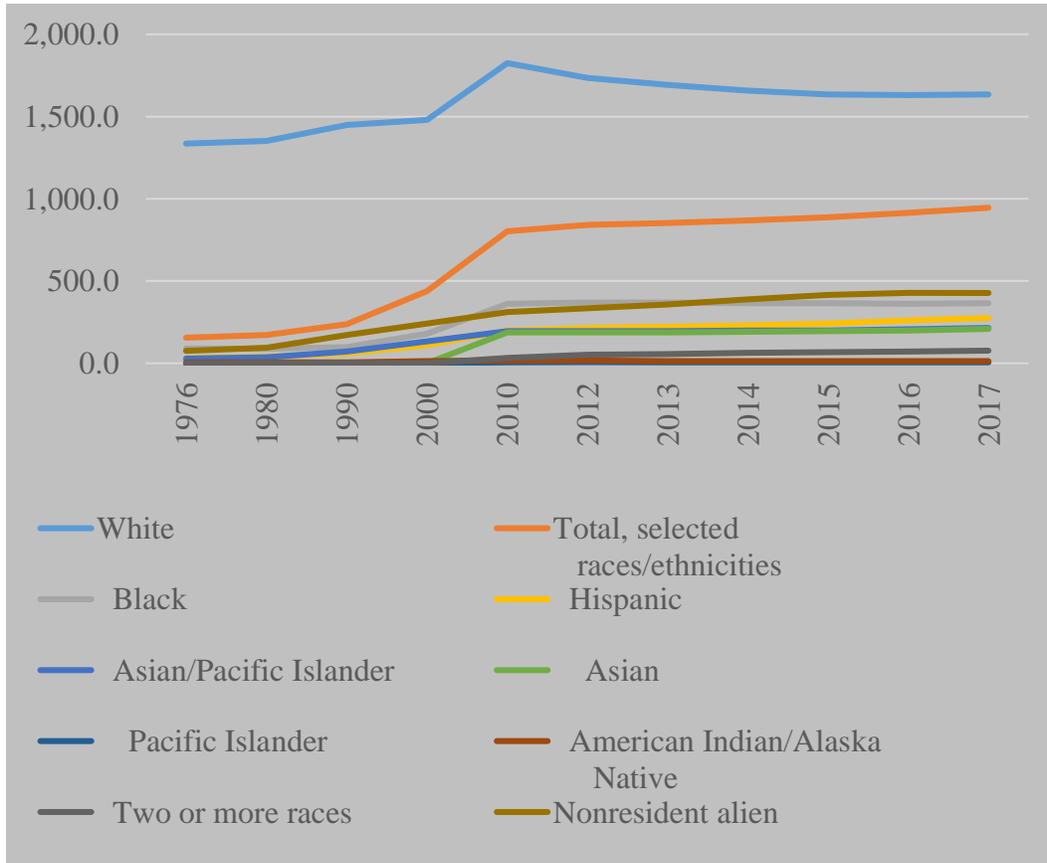
Figure 2.5 Enrollment by ethnicity 1976-2017 (from United States Department of Education, 2019)

Characteristics as Non-traditional Students and Adult Learners

A common approach in the literature to providing context about the doctoral experience is a discussion of the characteristics of doctoral candidates as nontraditional students (Petersen, 2014) and/or adult learners. The literature reveals a significant change over the last 50 years in doctoral student populations, the reasons for pursuing a degree, how doctoral students interact with programs, and the funding for doctoral education (Offerman, 2011). The definitions of both

adult learners and nontraditional students are based primarily on undergraduate population data; however, national surveys used to determine statistics about non-traditional and adult learners also include graduate student populations. In 1985, 25% of PhD students began their graduate program of study within a year of earning their bachelor's degree and an additional 27% enrolled 1 or 2 years later (United States Department of Education, 1998). The NCES (2016) indicates that 81% of graduate students are over the age of 25, and 48% are over the age of 30. Clearly, greater numbers of adult learners are seeking degrees than in the past (Bourdeaux & Schoenack, 2016; Gordon, Habley, & Grites, 2008). However, the NCES indicates although age is sometimes used in the definition of nontraditional students, "the definition used for NCES does not include age, but rather characteristics that are often correlated with age of a non-traditional student" (United States Department of Education, 2015, p. 5). Offerman's (2011) list of characteristics for traditional and nontraditional graduate students includes both age and stage related attributes (Table 2.1).

Table 2.1 Characteristics of traditional and nontraditional graduate students (Offerman, 2011)

Traditional	Nontraditional
White	Diverse
Male	Increasingly female
Full-time study	Part-time study
Twenty-two to thirty years old	More than thirty years old
Single	Married
Childless	Children and/or dependent parents
Preparing to be scholars (research faculty)	Numerous purposes
Research doctorate (PhD)	Increasingly professional research doctorate (EdD)
Work in assistant role	Career outside their program
Immersed in study	Study in addition to career, family
Funded through tuition waiver, stipend	Self-funded

This inclusion of stage and age descriptors speaks to the importance of life experiences in adult learning, often defined as mental training and academic pursuit during a journey engaging the heart and identity of the adult (Merriam & Bockett, 1997; Wilson & Hayes, 2000). In addition to these descriptors of doctoral students; characteristics of adult learners are presented in the literature as descriptions of graduate students as adult learners or nontraditional students. In addition to these descriptors of doctoral students, nontraditional graduate students are more likely to pursue a program leading to a vocational certificate or degree, such as a professional graduate degree; have focused goals for their education; consider themselves primarily workers, not students; are more likely to be enrolled in distance education; are more likely to speak a language other than English; and are more likely to leave postsecondary education without earning a degree (Gordon et al., 2008; Stein, Wanstreet, & Trinko, 2011).

Nontraditional students are often in the midst of transitions as they arrive at their graduate education. Experiences and challenges during their academic journeys may include separation or divorce, parenting, loss of a loved one, or coping with an empty nest (Forbus et al., 2011;

MacDonald, 2018; Skorupa, 2002). Due to the multiple roles they live, additional challenges and responsibilities may cause graduate students to actively engage and then withdraw from participation in their academic pursuits due to fluctuating life priorities and commitments (Bourdeaux & Schoenack, 2016; Gordon et al., 2008; Wilson & Hayes, 2000). Not every graduate student will assume the same roles in their time in academia; and this diversity makes the graduate student population difficult to analyze (Hegarty, 2011). Intersectionality of the different roles graduate students play in their lives during their time in graduate school adds layers of complexity to serving them as students. Additional characteristics of graduate students as adult learners that would make them vulnerable to leaving the university include:

- Lack of financial resources;

- Conflicts between academic pursuits and employment;

- Academic under-preparation;

- Learning disabilities;

- An absence of academic direction (particularly for research);

- Responsibilities for children;

- Personal mental health; and

- Negative self-concept as a student (particularly in comparison to other students) (Bruno, 1998; Forbus et al., 2011; Golde, 2000).

These characteristics challenge the historically undergraduate centric higher education mindset, deserve special attention, and require educators to approach adult graduate students and their development differently than the traditional undergraduate student (Dunkle & Presley, 2009; McClellan & Stringer, 2009; Wilson & Hayes, 2000).

Demographic Characteristics and Completion Time

Several different explanations for variation in completion rates (time-to-degree) for PhD candidates have been identified; many include the personal characteristics of the candidates themselves. Gender, ethnicity, age, having children, marital status, employment status, and enrollment status have been examined in relationship to attrition, persistence, and time-to-degree, with varying results. Jiranek (2010) determined that males completed their PhD process slighlty more quickly than females; other studies find no difference in time to completion between the genders (Seagram, Gould & Pyke, 1998; Wright & Cochrane, 2000). International students have been shown to complete their degrees more quickly than domestic students, possibly because international admission is more competitive and there may be more pressure to meet the time requirements of a student visa (Jiranek, 2010). Wright and Cochrane (2000) found no difference in completion times between those who worked full-time with part-time enrollment and those who were enrolled full-time; however, several other studies (Martin et al., 1999; Seagram et al., 1998) found that students enrolled full-time were more likely to complete and in a shorter time-frame. These differences may be the result of the exceptionally heterogenous and difficult to analyze composition of the group of PhD students who are not working full-time on their degrees (van de Schoot et al., 2013). A change in marital status (marriage, separation, divorce) has been shown to result in delays for women candidates, but not for men. Having children has been shown to result in delays for men, but children under the age of 18 in the home had no effect on the timing of completion for women (van de Schoot et al., 2013). However, Maher, Ford, and Thompson (2004) found that women students assume more responsibility for problems that involve home and child care, and late-finishing women reported more difficulties balancing degree-related and family-related responsibilities. Taking a new job has been shown to impact

degree completion time (van de Schoot et al., 2013), but students have reported being reluctant to discuss their employment or financial needs with their academic supervisors (Manathunga, 2005). Doctoral candidates were also reticent to talk with their supervisors about a variety of other personal issues they identified as delaying the completion of the degree including the death of a relative, personal illness (particularly relating to stress and mental health), and difficulites combining their personal roles with academics (Manathunga, 2005; van de Schoot et al., 2013). The students' unwillingness to disclose these factors that influenced their daily progression may play into not only time-to-degree completion, but also attrition, persistence, and intention to leave.

Identity and Intersectionality

No two candidates come to a PhD program with the same expectations, abilities, life experiences, or motives. Therefore, students will not approach their progression with equal skill and sophistication, nor will they make equally good choices about the opportunities encountered there (e.g. A Perspective on Student Affairs, 1987). The study of intersectionality typically focuses on intersections between different disenfranchised or minority groups; however, broadly defined, intersectionality [or intersectionalism] involves the processes through which multiple social identities come together to shape individual (and sometimes group) experiences (Shields, 2008). When the doctoral candidate is considered within the conceptual framework of identity, respect can be paid to the dynamic view of the doctoral candidate as constantly developing and changing in relation to the experiences that are part of their journey (McAlpine, Jazvac-Martek, & Gonzalves, 2008). Graduate students and adult learners maintain multiple identities and roles as they pursue degrees, so a look at intersectionality is warranted.

The term "intersectionality" was coined and established in 1989 by Kimberlé Crenshaw, with the view that intersectionality could be used as a methodology of studying "the relationships among multiple dimensions and modalities of social relationships and subject formations" (McCall, 2005). In circumstances where race, gender, sexual identity, and class collaborate to reduce or limit access to social welfare such as education, it is critical that it is understood how these factors function collectively. Recognizing intersectionality can provide a strong foundation for understanding how various biological, social, and cultural identities such as race, gender, socio-economic class, skill and ability, and sexual orientation interact simultaneously on multiple levels.

Historically, from a social justice perspective, an intersectional approach goes beyond orthodox inquiry to focus on wrongs that otherwise might go unrecognized. Currently, identity theorists attempt to apply the concept of intersectionality to all people and to the many different junctures of people groups. A student's understanding of self can pull from many groups with which they identify, and people can define themselves by race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, religion, and other aspects of their identities at the same time (Jones, 2009; Museus & Griffin, 2011). For LTTD candidates, the list of descriptors and characteristics of non-traditional graduate students and adult learners are not just demographic, they are facets of identity.

The relationships of the socially constructed identity dimensions among college and university students is complex such that each dimension cannot be fully comprehended alone. Abes, Jones & McEwen's (2007) model of multiple dimensions of identity describes the dynamic construction of identity and the influence of changing contexts on the relative salience of multiple identity dimensions, such as race, sexual orientation, culture, and social class. The model portrays identity dimensions as intersecting rings around a core, signifying how no

one dimension may be understood singularly; it can be understood only in relation to other dimensions (Jones & McEwen, 2000). At the center of the model is a core sense of self, comprising "valued personal attributes and characteristics" (Jones S. R., 1997, p. 383). Surrounding the core and identity dimensions is the context in which a person experiences their life, such as family, sociocultural conditions, and current experiences. The salience of each identity dimension to the core is fluid and depends on contextual influences (Jones & McEwen, 2000).

Designed by Abes, Jones, and McEwen and grounded in Kegan's constructivist developmental theory to more appropriately capture the complexity of intersecting domains of college and university student development, the reconceptualized model portrays the interactivity of the relationships between the contextual influences, meaning-making filter, and the self-perceptions of multiple identity dimensions. The contextual influences are external to identity but work together toward the meaning-making filter. The meaning-making component is identified as filter, separating the contextual influences and the self-perceptions of multiple identity dimensions. The contextual influences move through the filter, while the depth and porousness of the filter is contingent on the complexity of the student's meaning-making ability. By joining personal and multiple social identities of students, the reconceptualized model offers a holistic representation of intrapersonal development with the cognitive and interpersonal domains.

Applying this model to PhD students, the relationship between PhD students' meaning-making ability along with their perceptions of relationships among their multiple social identity dimensions can be better understood. Researchers of doctoral education have asserted that the doctorate is as much about identity formation as it is about producing knowledge (Green, 2005).

The process of becoming PhD represents a dynamic configuration of elements that are simultaneously internal and external, involving the social and disciplinary identities of the candidate (Jazvac-Martek, 2009). Viewing this identity formation through the multiplicity lens can also illuminate how students arrive to the point where they perceive their identity dimensions as relevant or irrelevant as well as what degree they understand their social identities as cohesive or distinctive. This knowledge provides the means for advisors to more effectively engage in meaningful and individualized educational partnerships with students to help them develop a more complex understanding of their identity and the power associated with defining identity for themselves (Abes et al., 2007). PhD students maintain a multiplicity of identities and how they perceive their self-efficacy in one area of identity may impact how they choose to behave in another area. It has been seen that in some cases, when an LTTD candidate felt they were failing at the dissertation process they chose to push the PhD candidate identity and related tasks away and focus more energy in areas where they perceived success, their professional career (Jones D., 2018). Understanding the concept of intersectionality helps those involved with mentoring students to know and be mindful of the campus culture and how the culture relates to students' representation and development of their multiple identities. For instance, the nature of each dimension of a student's identity could play a significant role in the salience of other dimensions of the student's identity. Moreover, Abes et al. (2007) suggested that "student affairs professionals should consider students' meaning-making capacity in relation to campus culture and other contextual influences. For doctoral candidates, there is variability in the experiences and interactions that influence shifting identities (Jazvac-Martek,2009). These contextual influences, experiences, and interactions may impact the way doctoral candidates make meaning of their journey. Because meaning-making is a filter for contextual factors that influence the self-

perceptions of identities and the relationships between each identity (Abes & Jones, 2004), this filter may be the defining factor in how contextual factors shape how doctoral candidates perceive themselves (Rockinson-Szazpkaw et al., 2017). The candidates' perceptions of their identity as a researcher may be impacted by the way they make meaning about the experiences they have on the doctoral journey.

The reconceptualized model draws attention to development of the complexities within the students' self-perceptions of their multiple identities, but also serves as an important reminder to student affairs professionals about the significance of developing their own meaning-making aptitude to provide better care and service to students. The more complex the meaning-making capacity and self-comprehension is for student affairs professionals, the more effectively they are able to understand and nurture the identity development of PhD candidates as they develop the new identity of being doctorate

Graduate Student Persistence and Intention to Leave

Most studies of graduate student persistence and attrition do not take in to account the amount of time a student has been in pursuit of a degree. Nonetheless, it is important to understand the causes of graduate student attrition in general. Luan and Fenske (1996) examined persistence of graduate students and identified economic factors, age, and teaching assistantships as having impacts on persistence. Wao and Onwuegbuzie (2011) identified marital status as a factor positively impacting degree completion. Strayhorn (2005) found that younger students are more likely to persist in graduate school, and debt did indeed impact graduate student persistence. Carrying no debt greatly increased the likelihood of persisting, and high levels of student debt decreased students' persistence (Strayhorn, 2005). Additionally, Strayhorn (2005) found that GRE scores did not significantly predict persistence in a graduate program; Ostrove,

Stewart, and Curtain (2011) found that the level of a student's parents' education positively predicted persistence. Demographics play a role in student persistence; however, they are not the only factors that determine if a student will persist in graduate studies. Beyond the demographic factors that impact graduate student persistence, both students and graduate faculty identify several influences on a student's decision to stay in a program and complete their education.

Factors to consider in persistence include those that are student related, institutional, and are influenced by student integration into the department (Nettles & Millett, 2006) and university (Tinto, 1993). The way that the student is integrated into the department and university influences persistence (Antony, 2002; Lovitts, 2001; Lovitts & Nelson, 2000). Student factors to consider include socialization with peers, personal attributes, motivation, and coping skills (Bair & Haworth, 2004; Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012). Institutional factors to take into account include program type and structure (Jairam & Kahl, 2012), curriculum, expectations, and communication (Tinto, 1993). Pursuit of the PhD full-time is correlated with persistence and degree completion (Girves & Wemmerus, 1988; Nettles & Millett, 2006; Zahl, 2015). The weight of these factors, and how heavily they influence a student's decision making depends greatly on where a student is in the program of study (Castello et al., 2017).

The importance of peer relationships and a feeling of belonging impacts a student's socialization as part of integration and factor into a graduate student's persistence (Gardner, 2008; Golde, 2000), particularly as a graduate student begins the first year of a program (Golde 1998; Jairam & Kahl, 2012). Absence of social integration can arise from two sources, incongruence, or a mismatch between the student and the institution, and isolation, more commonly caused by a lack of meaningful integrating experiences (Tinto, n.d.). Golde (1998) identified four tasks measured by specific achievements that socialization aids (Table 2.2)

Table 2.2 Golde's tasks of socialization in doctoral students

Task	Achievement	Question Answered
Intellectual mastery	Intellectual Competence	"Can I do this?"
Realities of graduate life	Fitting in and surviving the struggle	"Do I want to be a graduate student?"
Professional preparation	Clarification of career choice	"Do I want to do this work?"
Departmental integration	Career-life fit and balance	"Do I belong here?"

For some students, such as those completing a degree online, socialization with a traditional peer group may not be as important (Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2016). Part-time students find their peer groups critical to success (Zahl, 2015), but also have a more difficult time maintaining those relationships (Austin, 2010). In one study, the departure from the program of some students caused the remaining students to question their own abilities to persist (Zahl, 2015); however, these students also indicated that the remaining peer group was a large factor in their eventual persistence. Once a student moves to the dissertation phase of their degree plan, however, support from a peer group becomes less important (Devos, Boudrenghien, Van der Linden, Azzi, Frenay, Baland, & Klein, 2017; Golde, 2000) and other factors more heavily impact a student's decision to stay or leave a program.

The perception that students are making progress toward earning a degree is a student-related factor important throughout the pursuit of graduate studies and becomes even more critical once a student reaches the dissertation phase of their program. DeVos et al. (2017) found that students who felt they were moving forward toward a project that made sense to them experienced less emotional distress than those who got "stuck." The motivation to make progress and set and achieve goals personally and professionally has been shown to positively impact

persistence (Grover, 2007; Hoskins & Goldberg, 2005; Lovitts, 2005, Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012). There are many reasons students begin to feel they are not making progress including struggles with choosing a topic, challenges in life (e.g. personal, health, or financial) that derail coursework or research, and may lead to a poor relationship with their faculty advisor (DeVos et al., 2017; Golde, 2000; Maher et al., 2004; Tweedie, Clark, Johnson, & Kay, 2013). Each of these factors that keep students from making progress could be considered normal barriers that occur within a doctoral degree program.

The relationship with faculty members, and specifically the student's major professor or advising supervisor, has been documented as an extremely important factor in graduate students' perception that they are making progress and impacts student persistence to an even greater degree than interaction with peers (Golde, 2000; Lovitts, 2001). It would follow, then, that all things being equal, the advisor relationship could be the mitigating factor for a graduate student choosing to leave or stay at the university in pursuit of a degree.

Graduate Students and Faculty Advisor Relationships

Advising for graduate students bears some similarity to the advising that takes place at the undergraduate level. Some institutions utilize academic advising center models where advising takes place across a college or division; however, the locus for control in graduate education is almost without exception the department (Ferrer de Valero, 2001). The titles attributed to the faculty member charged with cultivating this relationship at the graduate level might include: director of graduate study, major professor, faculty advisor, advisor, academic advisor, or chairperson (Curtain, Stewart, & Ostrove, 2013). In this study, I refer to the faculty member who directs the transition of the graduate student to doctoral candidate and serves as the doctoral committee chairperson throughout the dissertation process as the major professor.

Because the graduate admissions process is highly selective, faculty members tend to have higher expectations of graduate students' commitment to academics. Many faculty members assume that graduate students enter a doctoral program with a specific level of academic preparedness and ability to manage academic workload. This assumption leads many faculty members to underestimate their role in helping graduate students adjust to the department, develop time management skills, and address future professional goals (Strayhorn, 2005). The relationship between the major professor and the doctoral student/candidate has proven to be one of the most critical factors to graduate student persistence or attrition, and ultimately, graduate student success (Bloom et al., 2007; Curtain et al., 2013; Devine & Hunter, 2017; Ferrer de Valero, 2001; Golde, 2000; Strayhorn, 2005). In a literature review conducted in 2013, Jones determined that 15% of research in doctoral education to that time pertained to the doctoral supervisor/student relationship (Jones, 2013). Given the impact a positive student-faculty advisor relationship can have on graduate student persistence; it is important to understand some of the complexities of the role of the graduate faculty advisor.

One clear purpose and practice should be operationalizing student learning to direct graduate students in developing a plan to achieve as many of their academic and professional goals as possible (Chickering, 1994; Kramer, 2003; Light, 2001). Most graduate programs utilize the first two or three years for students to take a combination of required and elective courses, with the elective courses informing the area of the thesis or dissertation (Lovitts, 2001). Determining when courses are offered, sequence in which they need to be taken (O'Banion, 2009), and the elective courses that will best inform a thesis or dissertation can be aided considerably by an effective graduate advisor, eliminating wasted time (Lovitts, 2001). To

enable students to progress through the course work portion of a program efficiently, Schuh (2008) suggested that students and advisors work closely together on the following aims:

- Conduct an analysis of the student's strengths and areas of potential development upon entry into the institution.

- Develop a plan to enhance existing strengths and improve areas of agreed-upon improvement.

- Have an understanding of the assets of the institution that are available to facilitate the student's plan.

- Use formative measurement techniques to assess the extent to the student is successful in making progress toward their desired goals while the student is enrolled and then use summative approaches as the student is ready to graduate.

In addition, Rockinson-Szapkiw et al. (2016) suggested using students' GRE scores to inform additional areas of skill remediation. This protocol might be difficult to adhere to for students at a distance who may or may not be able to fully utilize all university resources, but could be adapted and tailored for most graduate students.

Another reason the graduate advisor's approach has such great impact lies in the fact that they have the responsibility of framing academic careers for aspiring academicians. Faculty advisors are responsible for connecting students to the department (Lovitts, 2001), orienting them to the field (Green, 1991; Weiss, 1981), and acting as an explicit and tacit knowledge base of the field (Bieber & Worley, 2006; Curtain et al., 2013; Gerholm, 1990; Golde, 2000). This list of responsibilities can be daunting to advisors, especially those early in their career (Turner, 2015). In an examination of early career advisors, Turner (2015) noted that even at universities with formal training programs, many young faculty members draw largely from their own

experiences to inform their advising. Although on-the job learning, including accessing the experience of colleagues, begins to inform advising practice (Amundsen & McAlpine, 2009; Blass, Jasman, & Levy, 2012), the advising role requires perseverance and resilience (Turner, 2015). For faculty in programs in which a teaching or research role is not the aim of students earning a PhD this portion of the advising duties may be additionally complex.

Graduate Student Perceptions of Academic Advising

Regardless of the complexities of the tasks involved in advising graduate students, the students' perceptions of academic advising at the graduate levels, may be different than those of faculty. In a broad study of perceived characteristics of excellent graduate faculty advisors, Bloom et al. (2007) identified the following as those attributing to effective graduate student advisors: caring for students, providing accessibility, individually tailoring guidance for each student, serving as a role model, and proactively integrating students into the profession. Throughout the literature, understanding students individually is a key component of effective, caring advising at the graduate level (Golde, 2000). As faculty are increasingly pulled in a variety of different directions, however, the time and attention needed to create the environment where such relationships can be formed would seem to be at a premium.

The Doctoral Process and Threshold Concept Research

Doctoral education is the highest level of education one can achieve in academia, and as such the pursuit of this degree comes with certain standards and levels of rigor that must be met for a student to achieve the degree. Although degree requirements vary by discipline and location (some international programs do not require sequenced course work but immediately incorporate students into a community of research), all Doctor of Philosophy, or PhD, programs require students to complete a research study and write a dissertation to share that study with the

community at large (Castello et al., 2017). This culminating demonstration that the canidate has learned to be a researcher requires learning a set of research related skills, categorized by researchers into doctoral education as thresholds that must be crossed to be doctorate (Kiley, 2009).

Threshold Concept Research

Rooted in anthropology, threshold concept research originally focused on undergraduate education. In the initial definition, threshold concepts were those concepts identified as so critical to an understanding of the discipline that advanced learning is not possible without having crossed the threshold of understanding for that concept (Kiley, 2009; Land et al., 2008; Meyer & Land, 2006). For some disciplines there are a number of theories or concepts that are seen as universal thresholds, an example being the theories of gravity and relativity for those studying physics (Kiley, 2009). Other threshold concepts and the fields they belong to are listed in Table 2.3

Table 2.3 Threshold concepts identified by discipline

Author	Threshold	Field
Shopkow (2010)	Maintaining distance	History
Shopkow (2010)	Dealing with ambiguity	History
Breen & O'Shea (2016)	Limits	Mathematics
Breen & O'Shea (2016)	Functions	Mathematics
Breen & O'Shea (2016)	Cosets and Quotient Groups	Mathematics
Serbanescu (2017)	Electric field, electric field lines	Physics
Serbanescu (2017)	Waves, wave phase, superposition of waves	Physics
Launius & Hassel (2018)	Social construction of gender	Women's and Gender Studies
Launius & Hassel (2018)	Privilege and oppression	Women's and Gender Studies
Launius & Hassel (2018)	Intersectionality	Women's and Gender Studies
Launius & Hassel (2018)	Feminist Praxis	Women's and Gender Studies

When evaluating if a concept or learning experience meets the definition of a threshold, Meyer and Land (2006) identified five characteristics to examine. Thresholds are:

- transformative, to the point that the learners' views of what has been learned, and often they themselves as learners, have been transformed;

- integrative, in that they are likely to pull together disperate aspects of learning to a "Oh, that's what it all means" moment when "it all makes sense";

- irreversible such that once a concept is understood it is probable that the concept cannot be unlearned;

- bounded so that each concept does not explain the "whole" of the discipline, but specific and related aspects of the whole; and

- troublesome to the point that the concept is difficult or challenging to come to terms with—even counter-intuitive. (Meyer & Land, 2006)

Initially, there was little consensus on definitive criteria to identify threshold concepts (Schwartzman, 2010); however, as research progressed, the focus has been on the phenomenological experience of transformation in the student that results from the threshold being crossed. This learning can be described as a dynamic experience that moves a student from one state, identity, or level of understanding to another (Felten, 2016).

The journey toward the acquisition of a threshold embodies an encounter with a form of troublesome knowledge (Meyer et al., 2010). Knowledge can be troublesome for several reasons, including that it is conceptually difficult, alien to the learner, tacit, or ritual (Perkins, 2006). When students encounter troublesome knowledge they describe how they feel in this troublesome part as "stressful, debilitating, frustrating, and intensely emotional" (Felten, 2016, p. 4). When a learner encounters the threshold concept, the learner many times enters a period of liminality (Meyer & Land, 2006), which is unsettling because the threshold concept calls into question what the student knew before, and skills the student thought they had.

Liminality

The standard anthropological definition of liminality describes a rite of passage where the novitate lacks social status, remains anonymous, has to demonstrate obedience, and be humble in order to progress (Land, 2016). In threshold concept research, liminality refers to the part of the learning process where there is a reformulation of the learner's meaning frame (Schwartzman, 2010) and a shift in the learner's subjectivity (Meyer & Land, 2005). This process can be intensely uncomfortable as the learner wrestles with troublesome knowledge. A description of preliminality, liminality, and post-liminality as related to relationship to threshold concepts is presented in Table 2.4.

Table 2.4 Features of threshold concepts (Meyer, Land, & Baillie, 2010)

Mode	Preliminal	Liminal	Postliminal
Actions	Encounter with troublesome knowledge	Integration Discarding Ontological shift Epistemic shift	Irreversible transformation Cross conceptual boundaries Changed discourse
Feature	Instigative	Reconstructive	Consequential

Liminality is experienced both cognitively and affectively (Rattray, 2016). The experiences of students in the liminal phase are marked by a lack of confidence (Keefer, 2015), and one of the tools that students can use to navigate liminality is to mimic those who seem to grasp the threshold concept, without having true understanding (Baillie, 2008; Meyer & Land, 2006). In mimickry, students who are disillusioned or frustrated by their lack of understanding "take up surface approaches to mimic what they see other students doing" (Bailie, 2008, p. 11). There is a sense in this stage, there is an "underlying game" (Meyer et al., 2010, p. xi) learners play as they wrestle with the troublesome knowledge and attempt to earn entry into the community of learning. In some settings, for instance, when a student attends a lecture where content is beyond their grasp and mimics the language used in discussion the use of mimicry can be a valuable part of learning (Kiley, 2009). When mimicry takes the place of actual learning, however, difficulty can arise. The process to integrate new knowldege, discard the old way of thinking, and potentially shifting actions as a result, is often difficult for students (Land, 2016); however, experiencing the liminal phase is necessary for transformational learning.

Liminality has been described as a fluid state of being, where the learning will move back and forth with the fluid state as they wrestle and grapple with the threshold they are attempting to cross (Meyer & Land, 2005; Rattray, 2016). The process of threshold concept acquisition is

recursive, and involves movement back and forth between the instigative and reconstructive

phases of preliminality and liminality (Meyer et al., 2010). Liminality has also been described as

a no man's land, or a labyrinth or maze that learners need to make their way through (Hokstad,

Rodne, Braaten, Wellinger, & Shetelig, 2016) as they try to grasp the threshold concept.

Additionally, the metaphor of a liminal tunnel that the learner must enter and pass through to be

transformed (Vivian 2012) illustrates the idea of entering a dark and foreboding place where the

final outcome and the path to achieve it is uncertain or not able to be seen (Land, Vivian, &

Rattray, 2014). The uncertainty in the liminal phase of crossing thresholds is unsettling, but in

developmental theory, the periods of greatest personal growth are often thought to lie in the

"unamed and poorly defined spaces between stages" (Cross, 1999, p. 262).

Rites of Passage and Transformation

Some researchers have broken the threshold concept acquisition process into smaller

rights of passage that students complete in order to cross a threshold (Cook-Sather, 2006; Kiley,

2009). As students make their way through liminality and across thresholds, there is a

transformation that occurs. These *states* are described as somewhat "fixed or stable conditions"

through which the rite of passages serves as a transformation from one state to another (Turner,

1974, p. 234). The transformation, Turner (1974) suggests, consists of three stages, illustrated in

Table 2.5.

Table 2.5 Stages of transformation through rites of passage

Stage	Turner (1974)	Timeframe	Meyer and Land (2006)
Separation	Learner leaves the fixed and understood state that he/she knew,	Begins at outset of rite of passage	
Margin (limenality)	Student is no longer in the state she/he was in, but not in the final state to which she/he is to become	Can last days, months, years	Learner is in a transformational state, seeking new status; Characterized by oscilation and being stuck
Aggregation	Transition is consummated, the learner is in the new state.	Occurs at the end of the rite of passage	

Cook-Sather (2006), in an application of Turner's (1974) theory, argued that for twenty-first century learners, there is not a space to withdraw and contemplate troublesome knowledge. Current learners must instead conduct their learning while simultaneously navigating a number of contexts and "different communities with different authorities" (Kiley, 2009, p. 295). The transformation that comes after completing a rite of passage is signified by a change in identity. In threshold concept research, this identity is tied to the learning environment in which the learner participates, and defined not only by how the social identity group perceives them (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010), but also by successful completion of the rites of passage signifying they have crossed a threshold.

Thresholds to Doctorateness

In recent years, researchers of the doctoral learning process have applied threshold concepts or thresholds to the more general processes involved in becoming a researcher at the graduate level (Kiley, 2009). When applied this way, thresholds may provide a measure of student progress and definition of what it means to be a researcher and to become doctorate. The

process to earning a doctorate in the United States is usually comprised of a series of discipline related courses and a dissertation that makes an original contribution to the discipline (Keefer, 2015). The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (2015) in the UK noted that doctorates should only be awarded to students who have crossed a series of clear thresholds. These students will have demonstrated the ability to:

- search for, discover, access, retrieve, sift, interpret, analyze, evaluate, manage, conserve, and communicate an ever-increasing volume of knowledge from a range of sources;

- think critically about problems to produce innovative solutions and create new knowledge;

- plan, manage, and deliver projects, selecting and justifying appropriate methodological processes while recognizing, evaluating, and minimizing the risks involved and impact on the environment;

- exercise professional standards in research and research integrity, and engage in professional practice, including ethical, legal, and health and safety aspects, bringing enthusiasm, perseverance, and integrity to bear on their work activities;

- support, collaborate with and lead colleagues, using a range of teaching, communication, and networking skills to influence practice and policy in diverse environments;

- appreciate the need to engage in research with impact and to be able to communicate it to diverse audiences, including the public; and

- build relationships with peers, senior colleagues, students and stakeholders with sensitivity to equality, diversity and cultural issues (Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, 2015, pp. 4-5).

This set of standards forms expectations for all students throughout the United Kingdom, and each institution of higher education has set similar standards or thresholds that learners must cross in order to progress. As threshold concept research around doctoral student learning evolved, three broad areas are highlighted: strategies of research; issues with learning and metacognition that engages learning; and issues tied to student well being and ability to learn (Wisker, 2016). Each of these broad areas can be divided into smaller threshold concepts and/or rites of passage.

Successful defense of a dissertation, the committee's acceptance of the final copy of the written document, and the student's subsequent graduation are the last few steps over the procedural dissertation threshold; however, many students get "stuck" prior to even reaching this point. Both students and doctoral advisors identify the research portion of the PhD program to be uniquely challenging for students for a variety of reasons: the shift from coursework and companionship to isolation; the less formally structured research process; and navigation of the major professor relationship are all challenges that acompany the dissertation process leading to doctorateness (Barnes & Austin, 2009; Brailsford, 2010; Geraniou, 2010; Maher et al., 2004; Pyhalto et al.,2012).

Trafford and Leshem's (2008) work on the doctoral process merges the *doing* and *achieving* process of doctoral work into a notion of doctorateness that addresses both the process and techniques of research. This process combines the theoretical and conceptual thresholds and the activities associated with demonstrating the ability to do the research. Their components of doctorateness, illustrated in Figure 2.8, provide a roadmap for students and examiners to follow as the learner approaches the thresholds associated with completing doctoral education.
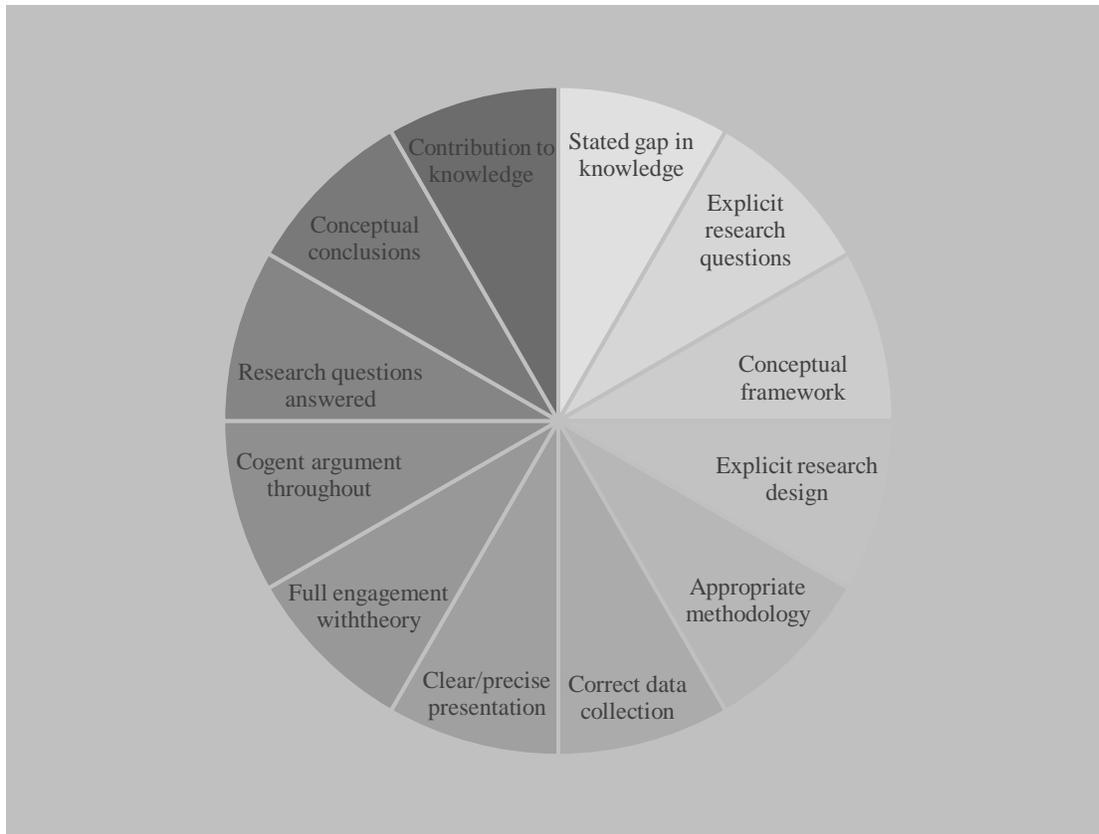
Figure 2.8 Components of doctorateness (Trafford & Leshem, 2009)

Kiley's (2009) survey of doctoral supervisors indicated six potential thresholds related to learning to be a researcher, including knowledge creation, analysis, research paradigm, argument/thesis, theory, and framework. These thresholds all involve key concepts and skill sets necessary for progression as a reasearcher that can be articulated and evaluated.

Liminality and Thresholds in the Doctoral Process

Throughout doctoral degree completion, students who encounter thresholds at which they experience *stuckness* are said to be experiencing a liminal period of growth necessary for their progression as a researcher and ultimately member of the academy. Students in a liminal state will likely experience a great deal of intellectutal challenge and an overall lack of progress—this lack of making progress can be especially difficult.

For some doctoral students, the departure from pursuing course work, a current, known state with which these academically successful students have already proven themselves to be comfortable, and transitioning into the ambiguous state of liminality that is incorporated in the research phase of a doctoral degree, can take years. There are 'mini' rites of passage incorporated with this liminal phase that may include proposal seminars, conference presentations, and pilot studies (Kiley, 2009). Once all of these "mini' rites of passage are completed (aggregation), the successful defense of a dissertation is the signal that the threshold of becoming doctorate is complete.

To illustrate liminality in doctoral research education, Kiley (2009) adapted Meyer and Land's (2006) application of liminality in undergraduate education. The undergraduate examples encompass students experiences stepping into a transformation where they are seeking a change in status and oscillating between levels of accomplishment and understanding as they progress through the liminal stage. Within the liminal state of doctoral research, the learner begins to see themself as an academic researcher who is seeking the new status of becoming doctorate. It is this phase where the learner moves two steps forward and one step backward in their reading of pertinent literature, study and moving forward with their work (Kiley, 2009).

Seeking to understand the *why* aspects of the intellectual difficulties that restrict the progress of doctoral candidates, Tafford and Leshem (2006) distributed an open-ended questionnaire to 55 current and recent graduates of universities in the UK to capture accounts of their doctoral experiences. In response to the invitation to provide brief accounts of significant intellectual difficulties they experienced and how they coped with these difficulties, the candidates provided insight into the difficulties they encountered. Follow-up interviews revealed that each of the participants experienced some sort of blockage varying from perceptions of what

to do, how to do it, to concerns about the cohesion of their written work (Trafford & Leshem, 2009). The blockages occurred frequently and produced concerns (ranging from minor to quite serious) for all of the doctoral candidates. Participants described worrying about what came next in their reading, concerns about data collection methods, concerns with their ability to analyze collected data, being unclear about writing principles in their doctoral dissertation, writing clear and coherent in their dissertation chapters, and being embarrased to ask their major professor to explain directions again. The embarassment of coping with a blockage may lead to students adopting mimicry to cope with the lack of confidence.

When an encounter with troublesome knowledge brings about the sense that one should not be in academia or working on a doctoral degree, or that others will learn how little the individual knows, imposter syndrome can result (Espino, Munoz, & Marquez Kiyama, 2010; Haigh, Hardy, & Dunacn, 2011; Herrmann, 2012). Imposter syndrome, a pattern of behavior where people doubt their accomplishments and have a persistent, often internalized fear of being exposed as a fraud (Clance & Imes, 1978), can also been seen as an exemplar of doctoral liminality (Keefer, 2015). The ontological and epistemological shifts that occur due to dealing with troublesome knowledge and result in a transformation of how one sees their discipline (Keefer, 2013; Parchoma & Keefer, 2012) occur at identified points in the doctoral process and can result in a loss of confidence (Kiley, 2009).

In a study of doctoral students who had experienced difficulty crossing thresholds to complete their work, Keefer (2015) found that there were several common experiences that triggered liminality including research misalingment, and real or percieved supervisory differencs between the student and the supervisor. In these cases, doctoral liminality was marked by loneliness and isolation that continued for months or longer and triggered an imposter

syndrome from which students never fully recovered (Keefer, 2015). Additionally, individuals who struggle with liminality and imposter syndrome often do so in silence, not sharing that struggle with anyone else (Keefer, 2015; Kiley, 2015) as they play the game in hopes of entering the community of practice (Meyer et al., 2010). It is during these challenging periods of confusion, difficulty, and doubt that the supervisor has been pointed to as a primary means of support and encouragement (Keefer et al., 2015). Homing in on the periods of liminality during which graduate advisors can focus their efforts to have maximum impact becomes increasingly important.

Crossing Doctoral Thresholds

Strategies and supports to aid doctoral candidates in crossing thresholds exist and can be leveraged by advisors. In a survey of 26 experienced doctoral supervisors across 11 universities in 5 countries, Kiley (2009) investigated learning challenges research candidates encountered in the doctoral process and strategies the supervisors used to assist the candidates. The strategies shared were as follows:

1. Utilize concept maps and other visual aids in outlining the project;

2. Engage in one-on-one discussions, often playing devil's advocate about the work;

3. Encourage candidates to undertake very small pieces of research;

4. Utilize assigned readings about the area of stuckness, discuss articles with candidates;

5. Encourage candidates to attend dissertation camps or writing retreats;

6. Introduce candidates to other faculty, etc. to help them feel a part of the community;

7. Collaborate with peers.

(Kiley, 2009)

In a similar study, supervisors indicated that recommending reading of simple research books, honest communication, giving personal examples of struggle through research, and engaging in dialogue were strategies that advisors found helpful (Trafford & Leshem, 2009). In Kiley's (2014) later research, strategies were identified for helping students become unstuck and crossing the conceptual threshold of theory and theorizing including group discussion, writing, and structured reading. Of course, just as not all students will experience thresholds the same way (Rattray, 2016), not all students will respond the same way to strategies to help them cross thresholds. There is understanding, however, that doctoral candidates will get stuck as they make their way toward doctorate and there are strategies that can be utilized to help them along.

The dissertation process requires students to be highly self-regulated learners and performers (DeVos et al., 2015). There are certain conceptual and procedural thresholds within the dissertation process at which some students get stuck. Students who have completed the dissertation process successfully, and those who have departed from the pursuit of a PhD during the dissertation process indicate that their belief that they could complete the degree played a role in their decision-making process (Curtain et al., 2013; Trafford & Leshem, 2009).

Self-Efficacy

Self-efficacy, or the belief in one's ability to influence events that affect one's life, and control over the way these events are experienced (Bandura, 1997) likely plays a role in LTTD candidates' approach to thresholds they encounter throughout the journey to doctorateness (Rattray, 2016). Self-efficacy is rooted in social cognitive theory, which examines how an individual's behavior, personal factors, and environmental factors interact with each other as the individual identifies and pursues an appropriate course of action (Bandura, 1997). In social cognitive theory, the triadic reciprocal determinism model addresses each of these influences as a

product of self-generated and external sources of influence. In addition, Bandura (1997) maintained that people regulate their behavior through internal standards and self-evaluative reactions to their own already completed behavior. People often do not behave in an optimum manner, even though they can identify the best course of action, and Bandura (1997) attributed this incongruity to an individual's self-referent thoughts mediating between knowledge and action, creating a perception of their ability. Self-efficacy is created through the marriage of cognitive skills, social skills, and behavioral skills leading to a course of action; it is not just knowing what to do but is a reproducible or generative capability that produces behavior. Efficacy is not a "have it or don't have it" construct, which is important because how people judge their capabilities, their self-precepts of efficacy, affects motivation and behavior, but can also be taught and developed in an individual.

With self-efficacy, success comes after creating and testing different behaviors and strategies requiring perseverance (Cervone, 2016). Indeed, growth comes from slightly exceeding what one can do at any given time. On the other hand, overestimating one's capabilities can produce serious, irreparable harm—leading to considerable difficulty in future endeavors, undermined credibility, and repetitive suffering of needless failure (Bandura, 1997). If one does not have a good awareness of actual ability and underestimates oneself, self-limiting behavior can ensue. Behaviors that may be chosen at this point can include a constriction of activities; failure to cultivate personal potential; and a tendency to create internal obstacles when approaching a task because of unnerving self-doubt (Bandura, 1997). It is critical to make good judgments about one's efficacy to choose the optimum behavior, and the sources of information one relies upon to make good judgments are important.

In making judgments of self-efficacy, individuals sift through different configurations of self-efficacy information coming from different sources and in different ways. Bandura (1997) identifies four sources that inform self-referent judgments of self-efficacy: mastery experiences, vicarious experiences of others, verbal persuasion, and physiological state (or emotional reactions). The most trustworthy contributor to self-efficacy is mastery experiences, where the individual can tie personal assessments of ability to past successes or failures. In new undertakings, however, people do not have enough experience to assess how truthful their self-appraisals are and must infer their capabilities from knowledge of what they can do or have done in other situations, which may or may not be accurate translations (Bandura, 1997). Due to the potential to make an incorrect translation when doing something new, people are vulnerable to relying more heavily on vicarious judgment, especially where the criteria or measures used to evaluate success in the undertaking are not clear.

 Using vicarious experiences includes seeing or visualizing others (similar people) perform successfully. If an individual has a great amount of uncertainty about their ability or the criteria by which the skill or ability is to be judged is lacking, he or she must refer to others to make self-referent judgments about performance (Bandura, 1997). These judgments can be faulty, as well, because it is easy to misjudge another's ability or circumstances.

Another mechanism by which an individual can establish self-efficacy judgments relies upon the expressed judgments of others as to one's abilities. Receiving positive feedback from others about one's performance or perceived ability to perform a skill can be a powerful motivator; conversely discouraging feedback can limit one's endeavors (Pintrich & Garcia, 1994). Although this mechanism is more likely to mobilize greater sustained effort than if an individual has self- doubts and lingers on personal deficiencies rather than acting, talking

someone into believing they possess capabilities that will enable them to achieve the goals they seek can also backfire if those skills are truly not available to leverage.

Finally, individuals can rely on the physiological state and emotions they experience when considering a goal as they assess their efficacy at attaining the goal. Individuals who generate fear-provoking thoughts about their own ineptitude rouse elevated levels of distress and can produce the ineptitude that is feared (Bandura, 1997). Alternately, an individual can create mental images of their own success that empower a feeling of strength and capability that may not completely exist, which can be equally damaging.

The more difficult a task, the greater need for perseverant effort in generating and testing alternative forms of behavior to be successful when someone does not have the underlying skills needed for the task and efficacy-sustained behavior promotes skill development. When people are fully assured of their capabilities, they remain unshaken in their perceived efficaciousness and can persevere even though they may fail repeatedly at problems that are unsolvable (Bandura, 1997; Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, & Kelly, 2007; Lucas, Gratch, Cheng, & Marsella, 2015). For those of exceptional ability, deficient performance can be especially problematic, as self-efficacy can take a hit, and become a major obstacle for future performance (Bandura, 1997; Dickinson & Dickinson, 2015). Of all the sources of information about self-efficacy, self-referent mastery experiences are more likely than experiences involving other people to pose a threat to one's self esteem and social valuation if there is failure, which can lead to self-exaggeration and self-belittlement (Bandura, 1997). Individuals will fail, at times, and the important matter is not that failure arouses self-doubt, but the degree and speed of recovery in the face of failure (Bandura, 1997; Ivcevic & Brackett, 2014). This recovery can be impeded, especially because someone who is calling into question their judgments of self-efficacy can be

impacted by a depressive mood that lowers their judgment of personal controlling efficacy and inflates the judgments of efficacy of others (vicarious experience) under identical outcome feedback (Bandura, 1997). Due to the complexity of self-referent thought judged through the lenses of multiple sources of information about self-efficacy, making a good judgment about what one is truly capable of is a difficult task, indeed.

Regardless of the source of information or the time it takes to implement an action, individuals can make a self-referent judgment and give up trying to meet a goal they previously thought attainable for several reasons. Self-efficacy theory paints two judgmental sources of futility, efficacy-based futility, and outcome-based futility. In efficacy-based futility, one harbors serious doubt one can do what is required. In outcome-based futility, one can be assured of capabilities but expect that efforts will not produce any results due to an unresponsive, negatively biased or punitive social environment (Bandura, 1997). The solution to efficacy-based futility is developing in the individual a set of competencies and using those competencies to build the perception of self-efficacy. Dealing with outcome-based futility, however, requires changing the social environment so people can gain benefit of the competencies they already have (Bandura, 1997). When individuals leverage vicarious experiences to form their perception of self-efficacy, especially when there is a disparity between what others have achieved and what they, themselves have achieved, the difference in securing valued outcomes that seem readily attained by others creates a depressive mood and cognitive debilitation (Bandura, 1997; Kavanaugh & Bower, 1985; Salovey & Birnbaum, 1989). This self-efficacy demoralization operates in temporary and then more enduring slumps in endeavors and self-misgivings can set in quickly after a few failures or setbacks (Bandura, 1997). Interestingly, males are more easily depressed by such conditions because they start out with high perceived efficacy and repeated

failure can take a toll on their sense of competence (Bandura, 1997; Cervone, 2016). As previously stated, however, failure will happen on occasion, and what is most important is how one recovers from that failure. Because people are more influenced by how they read their performance successes and failures than the actual performance attainments it is not uncommon for perceived self-efficacy to predict future behavior better than past performance (Bandura, 1997; Feltz, 1982). In an oft repeated platitude, if people believe they can or cannot, they are correct.

Self-Efficacy and Graduate Students

The research regarding self-efficacy and graduate students does not, in many cases, differentiate for master's, doctoral, or professional level students. Some of the most applicable research into graduate student self-efficacy examines the self-referent judgements and beliefs that graduate students hold about their abilities. Graduate student self-efficacy has also been shown to be influenced by the messages received from faculty members involved with their degree process (Goldman, 2019; Hakkarainen et al., 2014). In a study of graduate level nursing students, Laurencelle and Scanlan (2018) found that students relied most heavily on their own mastery experiences and seeing others success as sources for self-efficacy. Support of others around them, including family members, friends, and co-workers has been identified as helpful to graduate students (Laurencelle & Scanlan, 2018; Mosyjowski, Daly, Peters, Skerlos, & Baker, 2017) and the lack of support has been shown to undermine graduate student self-efficacy (Ward & Dixon, 2012). To illustrate the interplay of these sources of information and support regarding self-efficacy, Munoz (2020) created a concept diagram of graduate student self-efficacy in terms of productive thoughts, feelings, and actions as well as successful outcomes.

In this model, confidence- and competence-building experiences feed into the student's self-efficacy, which in turn fuels productive thoughts, feelings, and actions, and directly contribute to both successful outcomes and more perceived positive experiences. Successful outcomes contribute to perceived positive experiences, or mastery experiences upon which a good assessment of self-efficacy can be made.

It is known that how people judge their capability to accomplish certain levels of performance or the belief that they can accomplish something can affect the level of motivation, but a positive judgment of self-efficacy will not produce performance if the underlying skills needed for a task are not present (Munoz, 2020). The reverse of this tenet is also true; however, an individual may possess a set of skills, but not use them in certain situations, which explains why different people with the same skills behave differently in the same situations. This is also why the same person with a set of skills behaves differently in different situations. In either case, perceived self-efficacy is an influential process in which ability and non-ability factor into performance success must be evaluated (Bandura, 1997). For graduate students, the link between confidence and competence is critically important because students run the risk of having high confidence in their abilities to perform graduate work (Munoz, 2020); however if they do not have the competence building experiences they may actually be unable to do so.

Nonetheless, self-belief is important because it impacts choice behavior including how much effort one will put forward and for how long one will pursue a goal to meet an outcome expectation. A positive perception of one's abilities combined with a positive outcome expectation or judgment of the likely consequence the behavior will produce causes individuals to choose positive activities that contribute to growth in these abilities or competencies, partially independent of underlying skills (Locke, Elizabeth, Lee, & Bobko, 1982). When developing self-

efficacy, it is therefore important to identify past successes and point to skills already obtained and push the individual to approach thresholds of learning and performance to further develop the skills they possess. Understanding that challenging experiences are capable of building a student's self-efficacy (Barry et al., 2019; Cheng et al., 2019; Goldman, 2019; Munoz, 2020), and that difficulties can build endurance in graduate school (Laurencelle & Scanlan, 2018), it would seem that the PhD process could be designed to help build self-efficacy in graduate students.

A concept similar to self-efficacy that may also come in to play with how graduate students approach their studies involves the way students control their thoughts and emotions as they relate to learning. Self-regulated learning is a construct involving the active control of three aspects of academic learning: behavior, motivation and goal orientation, and cognition (Garrin, 2014; Pintrich, 1995). Self-regulation of behavior incorporates active control of a variety of resources, including time, study environment, and leveraging peers and faculty members for support and assistance (Pintrich,1995). Self-regulation of motivation and affect involves controlling and changing motivational beliefs like efficacy and goal orientation to adapt to demands of a course or endeavor (Pintrich, 1995; Zimmerman, 2002). Finally, self-regulation of cognition involves controlling various cognitive strategies for learning and using strategies that result in better learning and performance (Garcia & Pintrich, 1994; Pintrich, Smith, Garcia, & McKeachie, 1993). As students progress through their academic pursuits, the ability to self-regulate motivational factors becomes increasingly important. For graduate students, feedback on formative assessment becomes less frequent and it is necessary for students to learn for mastery rather than performance. Students who have set mastery goals with a primary focus on learning, or mastering, course material put forth more effort than those who have set performance goals

focused on the outcome of learning to avoid getting a bad grade (Ames, 1992; Ames & Archer, 1988; Dweck, 1986; Hagen & Weinstein, 1995). Self-regulation may also be a skill that is leveraged by graduate students as they enter the dissertation phase of the PhD program, already known to be a taxing and emotional part of the journey (Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012; West, Golkap, Edlyn, Fischer, & Gupton, 2011). The ability to regulate thoughts and emotions when faced with difficult, self-efficacy building experiences may be the strategy that helps PhD canidates push through and finish the degree.

In a concept review of the literature pertaining to graduate students and self-efficacy, Munoz (2020) did not report any findings for self-efficacy over time. One can assume however, that for LTTD candidates, the strategies employed to keep the conversation going with a major professor, maintain a level of interest in their area of study, and balance a host of external and internal factors related to their academic pursuit likely requires a high level of self-regulation and strong goal setting. A blend of performance and mastery of goals is needed to successfully complete any academic pursuit, but the actions one takes are related to a students' self-efficacy, as presented in Table 2.6.

Table 2.6 Goals, abilities, and behaviors and self-efficacy (Hagen & Weinstein, 1995)

Type of Goal	Perceived Ability (Self-Efficacy)	Behavioral Pattern
Performance	High	Mastery (seeks challenging tasks, uses effective strategies, has high persistence)
	Low	Helpless (avoids challenging tasks, uses less effective strategies, has lower persistence)
Mastery	High or low	Mastery (seeks challenging tasks, uses effective strategies, has high persistence)

Students who reach the doctoral candidate stage have successfully completed some of the most challenging coursework offered and have persisted through many years of education

training. As students with high self-efficacy will choose eventually mastery behaviors and strategies, no matter which type of goal they are striving to meet (Imus, Burns, & Weglarz, 2017; Peterson-Graziose, Bryer, & Nikolaidou, 2013), it can also be assumed that LTTD candidates who have high self-efficacy will eventually find ways to complete their degree, even over time.

Chapter Summary

Graduate students and graduate education can be defined and described demographically as well as by the characteristics of graduate students as adult learners who operate in a variety of contexts and navigate many facets to their identities. Complex individuals, often in the midst of transitions as they arrive at and pursue graduate education, doctoral candidates have been extending the time to completion of their programs and choosing to exit their studies at an alarming rate over the last two decades. The perception that a student is making progress toward earning a degree is a student related factor important throughout the pursuit of graduate studies (Devos et al., 2017), and likely becomes even more critical once a student reaches the dissertation phase of the doctoral program and there are not opportunities for intermediary gauges of progress, like tests and course completion. The doctoral advisor relationship is crucial to guiding students through the PhD process.

In order to complete a PhD program, there are a series of thresholds, concepts, or skills critical to a learner's or researcher's understanding of the discipline and research process that must be cleared before a student can move forward with the degree. Throughout doctoral degree completion, students who encounter designed thresholds at which they experience "stuckness" are said to be experiencing a liminal period of growth necessary for their progression as a researcher and ultimately member of the academy (Kiley, 2009). Doctoral candidates may not all get stuck in the same places, and they may not respond to these periods of stuckness, or

liminality in the same way. For some, these periods of stuckness can last for long stretches of time, calling into question a student's belief that they are capable of completing the doctoral program and leading to imposter syndrome.

Though not yet linked in the literature, self-efficacy may play a significant role in LTTD candidates' approach to thresholds they encounter throughout the journey to doctorateness. Doctoral candidates compared their perceived progress against that of other candidates, which influenced their perception of their ability to complete the doctoral program. Doctoral candidates who remain stuck over a long period of time are at increased risk of utilizing faulty frames of reference to guage their own abilities. Doctoral candidates need to leverage self-effecacious strategies to complete their programs in this case. Given the demonstrated importance of the advisor-candidate relationship, doctoral supervisors who are able to identify strategies to help LTTD candidates complete their degrees are able to better support these candidates.

Chapter 3 - Methodology

The purpose of this study is to examine and describe the lived experiences of three doctoral candidates who earned PhD degrees from Colleges of Education at Midwestern research universities and spent five or more years to successfully complete their dissertations. Of specific interest is how the doctoral candidates made sense of the experiences and made progress to complete their dissertations. This study seeks to answer the following question:

How do long-time-to-doctorate (LTTD) candidates describe the experiences associated with an extended, successful dissertation process?

In this chapter, I discuss the research framework and processes that informed my inquiry. I discuss the ways in which I conducted this study, including the collection, analysis, and representation of data. This chapter also addresses how I account for challenges to academic rigor and trustworthiness in this interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA).

Rationale for Qualitative Study

This study seeks to reveal the lived experiences of successful doctoral candidates during what has been previously described as an intensely stressful and emotional time (Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012; West, Golkap, Edlyn, Fischer, & Gupton, 2011), to determine if and how they experienced and overcame barriers over a long period of time to degree completion. Qualitative research is used to gather expressive information that cannot be conveyed in quantitative data, specifically the values, beliefs, thoughts and feelings that underlie participants' behavior and motivation (Berkwits & Inui, 1998). Prior studies emphasized the need to conduct qualitative studies to capture students' thoughts, feelings, and behaviors regarding the amount of time it took them to complete their degrees (Bair, 1999; Wao & Onweugbuzie, 2011). Part of the motivation for this research was to answer questions about meaning and perspective of these

experiences from the standpoint of those who experienced them (Hammarberg, Kirkman, & de Lacey, 2016). This study was conducted within the framework of IPA as there are few studies in the literature exploring the lived experiences of successful LTTD candidates (e.g., Margerum, 2014).

A phenomenological study describes the meaning of the lived experiences for several individuals about a concept or a phenomenon (Gribch, 2012; Moran, 2002). Experience being examined in the way it occurs, in its own terms, is central to phenomenology (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009), and the situation being studied is defined by individuals' interactions, actions, and engagement in a process in response to the phenomenon. The phenomenon in this study is the experience of LTTD candidates between the time they passed the preliminary examination and successfully defended a dissertation. The situation studied is the way these candidates successfully interact, act, and engage with strategies and supports to complete their program and become doctorate.

History of Phenomenology

There have been many different philosophical approaches, emphases, and interests among phenomenologists over time, each adding a layer of richness to the practice of phenomenology as a research method. Phenomenology is not a "singular, unified philosophy and methodology" (Vagle, 2014, p. 14), and is constantly being interpreted and re-interpreted. An understanding of the foundation and development of phenomenology over time aids in the understanding of why IPA is a good fit for this study.

Husserl's Phenomenology

Phenomenology began with the writings and teachings of German mathematician, Edmund Husserl, whose work formed the philosophy as early as 1765 and eventually a

qualitative research method (Dowling, 2007; Mottern, 2013; Vagle, 2014). Husserl drew from the writings of Kant, Hegel, and Brentano to develop phenomenology in a time when human phenomena were explored independently of the people actually experiencing the phenomena (Matua & Van Der Wal, 2015). The focus of Husserl's phenomenology was the generation of knowledge that emphasized direct exploration, analysis, and description of the discovery of what it is like to undergo a particular experience as free as possible from unexamined presuppositions about the experience and phenomenon (Matua & Van Der Wal, 2015).

Fundamental to the application of phenomenology is an understanding of the intention, or way of thinking about an object, of thinking about something as something (Christensen, Welch, & Barr, 2017). For the researcher in Husserl's phenomenology, intention is to put to one side and keep out of analysis all personal knowledge related to the phenomenon and this is accomplished by a phenomenological method developed by Husserl (Smith et al., 2009). This method, also called pheomenological reduction, is used to suspend impressions, conceptions, and beliefs about the truth or accuracy of the phenomenon studied (Christensen et al., 2017). Bracketing, the primary tool used in phenomenological reduction, involves reflecting on the experience or phenomenon being studied and consciously putting aside any preconceived beliefs or understandings about the experience and phenomenon. Bracketing is used to achieve a state of transcendental subjectivity to "eliminate everything that represents a pre-judgment, setting aside presuppositions" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 14) to understand the experience in its purest form. The researcher then proceeds through a series of "reductions," each offering a different way of thinking and reasoning about the phenomenon at hand (Smith et al., 2009). Bracketing and reductions serve to direct the researcher away from their own, personal thoughts regarding the phenomenon to arrive at the "essence" of the experience.

Most of Husserl's writing was philosophical; he did not supply examples of what the results of their method would look like. Indeed, much of their work was conducted with first-person processes explaining what he had to do to achieve phenomenological inquiry on their experience (Smith et al., 2009). Other researchers, like Moustakas (1994), took up Husserl's philosophical underpinnings and developed more concrete methods to formally conduct research. Moustakas' work (1994) embraces transcendental phenomenology, where the researcher is always concerned with uncovering exactly how an experience presents itself without adding or taking anything away from that experience. In practical application to research, the transcendental framework proposes that researchers allow the experience to unfold exactly how it is (Matua & Van Der Wal, 2015) without conducting an in-depth literature review prior to research that would contaminate with prior knowledge and not provide analysis tainted with the participants' social, political, or cultural context. For a dissertation produced in this tradition, there would be no literature conducted as part of the proposal.

In his 1994 book, *Phenomenological Research Methods*, Moustakas' described specific steps for phenomenological research. Moustakas indicated that the first step to conducting phenomenological research is participating in Epoche, "focusing on a specific situation, person or issue" (p. 5) in a quiet place where the researcher can review their current thoughts and feelings regarding the situation, person, or issue at hand. The researcher sets aside biases and pre-judgments with the intention of seeing the situation, person, or issue with "new and receptive eyes" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 5), which may take several sessions of mind-clearing. In Moustakes' practice, epoche is combined with a variation of Husserlian phenomenological reduction, a process which involves bracketing; horizonalizing; clustering the horizons into themes; and coherent textural descriptions of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). Phenomenological

reduction is followed by imaginative variation, where the researcher seeks meaning through using imagination, examining polarities and reversals, and looking at the phenomenon from divergent perspectives, positions, roles, or functions. The final step of this generation of phenomenological research is the synthesis of meanings and essences into a unified statement of the experience of the phenomenon. All these steps to approaching research are viewed as critical to making sure that the researcher is examining the phenomenon in its purest form and frame the basis for later iterations of phenomenology.

Husserl's assertions about the researcher's ability to isolate the phenomenon or experience from foreknowledge or outside influence has been roundly criticized both internally and externally as phenomenology has evolved (Moran, 2002). Critics of this type of phenomenology (e.g., Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Findley, & Marias, as cited in Smith et al., 2009) question the possibility of an individual to completely isolate their own judgments and experiences regarding a phenomenon. Both Heidegger (1962) and Merleau-Ponty (1962) questioned the possibility of executing reduction completely and others reject Husserl's reduction because of the need for the researcher to rely on an esoteric experience before approaching the analysis, rather than objective arguments and critical consideration of evidence (Moran, 2002). Heiddeger (1962) maintained that descriptions are already an interpretation because understanding is an inevitable basic structure of being in the world (Matua & Van Der Wal, 2015; Wojnar & Swanson, 2007). Even Moustakas (1994) conceded that "some entities are simply not 'bracketable'" (p. 6) and explained that especially intense or traumatic life experiences may create difficulty for individuals to create clear openness or pure consciousness. Any inability for individuals to separate from the influences of preconceived thoughts,

judgments, and biases calls into question the application of transcendental reduction, a problem which was explored in later renditions of phenomenology.

Heiddeger's Phenomenology

A phenomenological tradition and approach to research, with roots in Husserl's original work, was developed by Heiddeger (1962/1927) to further explore the possibility of isolating knowledge about an experience from the context in which it occurred. In his work, *Being and Time,* Heiddeger (1962/1927) examined Dasein, or the "uniquely situated quality of human-being" (Smith et al., 2009, p.16), and asserted that humans exist in a world in which they are caught up in activities and relationships that make their existence meaningful and from which experiences cannot be separated. The descriptions of an experience provided by a participant are already interpretations of their experience influenced by their intersubjectivity, which in turn influences the context of how they live. The Heidegarrian phenomenologist seeks to gain a deep understanding of experience and phenomenon, but in context of the world in which the participant lives (Vagle, 2014). The goal is not only to raise awareness about the phenomenon, but to gain a broad and deep understanding of what the phenomenon means to those who experience it in their reality, including how the experience alters their entire beings.

Further Developments

Other phenomenologists also emphasized how relationships play into human experiences and cannot be separated from human descriptions and interpretations of them (Moran, 2002). According to Smith et al. (2009) and Vagle (2014), Merleau-Ponty was influenced by both Heidegger and Husserl, but centered their work on how the body shapes the fundamental character of knowing about the world. Merleau-Ponty also maintained that practical activities and relationships are more significant than abstract interpretations of experiences (Anderson,

2003; Moran, 2002). Sartre (1966), in *Being and Nothingness*, described the ways in which individuals conceive of their experiences are contingent on the presence and absence of relationships to other people. For Sartre (1966), human nature was more about becoming than being (as cited in Smith et al., 2009), and becoming is informed by imagination, conscious choices, intellectual freedom, failed dreams of completion, fulfilment, and social roles that must be taken into context as meaning is made (Moran, 2002; Smith et al. 2009). Sartre extended Heidegger's emphasis on the worldliness of our experience to examine the development of experience in context of personal and social relationships (Smith et al., 2009). Regardless of the practice or interpretation of phenomenology developed over its history, the main contribution of phenomenology is arguably the protection of the subjective view of experience as crucial to a full understanding of knowledge (Moran, 2002). Information and data cannot be fully analyzed or applied to life without an understanding of the experiences of those who have created the information and data. As psychologists and philosophers employed phenomenology over time, it has evolved in both theory and practice, and each evolution aims to provide a description of experience; in the case of this study, interpretation of the experience.

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

Researchers engaged in interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) make use of a research approach that is committed to examining how people make sense of their major life experiences, in the tradition of Husserl, and with attention to the researcher's foreknowledge of the phenomenon and experience (Finlay, 2019; Smith et al., 2009; Vagle, 2014). Additionally, hermeneutics, or the theory of interpretation, informs decisions about the relationship of the context of the circumstances surrounding a text's creation and how those circumstances might influence its interpretation (Matua & Van Der Wal, 2015). In the case of IPA, the text of the

interview or other documents being analyzed in the phenomenological study are interpreted

through the hermeneutic lens.

Hermeneutics

Several theorists' works provide the foundation for hermeneutic interpretation in

phenomenology, including Schleiermacher (1998), Heidegger (as cited in Smith et al., 2009),

and Gadamer (1960). Schleiermacher (1998) suggested that there was something unique about

the techniques and intentions of each writer that created a particular form of meaning, like a

fingerprint, on the text they produced (Smith et al., 2009). Schleiermacher (1998) also saw

interpretation of a text as a craft or art that required the use of a researcher's intuition, which

opened possibilities for the researcher to bring into the interpretation shared ground with the

participant, and in some ways understand the author of the piece better than the author knew

themselves. Heidegger specifically focused on making a case for hermeneutic phenomenology,

as he stressed the importance of foreknowledge of an experience (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014).

Gadamer (1960), in *Truth and Method*, discussed the analysis of historical and literary texts,

emphasizing the importance of history and tradition on the process of interpretation. Gadamer

(1960) maintained that even the researcher might not understand all of their preconceptions

about an experience or phenomenon until they engage with the interview process (Smith et al.,

2009). This stance on foreknowledge can greatly impact how a researcher approaches reflection

and dialoging with the research through the process.

Idiography in IPA

Additionally, important for this study is the focus on idiography or concern with detail

and the level at which generalizations about knowledge are made. IPA focuses specifically on

understanding how a particular event, process, or relationship is understood from the perspective

of particular people in particular situations (Smith et al., 2009). The influence of idiography leads researchers employing IPA to select a small group of carefully situated participants and to develop in detail their experiences with special attention to their unique contexts (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; Smith et al., 2009). The idiographic focus situates Heiddeger's "Dasien" as an experience understood in relation to a phenomenon that is experienced by multiple individuals and interpreted through their individual perceptions. Each understanding and interpretation of the experience adds detail to the description of the phenomenon which cannot necessarily be generalized to the population at large.

Rationale for IPA

Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was chosen for this study because it allowed me to approach data collection and analysis with a respect to my own experience and historical knowledge of the phenomenon. IPA combines ideas from phenomenology and hermeneutics to create a descriptive method that allows experiences to speak for themselves, but interpretative because it recognizes that there is no such thing as an uninterpreted phenomenon (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). The focus of IPA is to gain a deep understanding of the experience and investigate the meaning of the participants' experience as they are related to issues that have implications for research and practice (Matua & Van Der Wal, 2015). Analysis in the IPA tradition takes into consideration the context of various participants and seeks to attain a broad and deep understanding of how the experience alters the participants' entire beings (Matua & Van Der Wal, 2015). When using IPA, the researcher is asserting that the data collected will help make meaning about people's orientation to the world and their involvement with a phenomenon (Smith et al., 2009). As stated, the purpose of this study is to describe how PhD candidates successfully complete an extended or long dissertation phase of their doctoral study. Research

indicates that the dissertation process is especially challenging (Devos et al., 2017; Kiley, 2015; Pyhalto et al., 2012); the examination of the lived experiences of those who persist and finish their dissertation over five or more years after completing their preliminary examinations provided valuable insight that informs the advising of future candidates. The use of IPA in this study led to a better understanding of how those candidates see themselves in the world, in the situation of being LTTD candidates, and how they experienced the phenomenon of completing the dissertation process.

Research Design

The IPA methodological framework of this study guides sampling and participant selection, the research site, data collection methods, interviews, data management, and data analysis.

Sampling and Participant Selection

In qualitative research, especially phenomenological research, samples are selected purposefully rather than through probability methods (Smith et al., 2009). Additionally, in determining the number of individuals to interview and how long to interview them, the tenets of IPA come in to play. The main concern in IPA is to give "full appreciation to each participant's account" (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014, p. 8); as a result, researchers often utilize small samples to allow for detailed, case-by-case analysis. The sample size for this study was three participants, a number which in the IPA tradition provides sufficient data for the "development of meaningful points of similarity and difference between participants" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 51) and does not produce an overwhelming and unwieldy amount of data. The number of participants were determined based on the richness and meaningfulness of the data that were collected, identified

by the researcher's ability to represent original problems, mechanisms, or experiences from the data (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014).

I conducted semi-structured interviews with three individuals in a convenience sample on the basis that they can grant access to a particular perspective on the phenomenon under study (Smith et al., 2009). The participants included in the sample persisted over an extended period (five or more years) in the dissertation phase of their doctoral program to successfully complete their degrees.

Participants for this study were chosen on the basis that they could provide access to the particular phenomenon being studied (Smith et al., 2009). This purposeful, homogenous sample found the research questions meaningful (Smith et al., 2009) given their lived experiences. I contacted the Department Chairs/Heads and Program Directors in Colleges of Education at Midwestern research universities and asked them to forward an email invitation with my contact information to alumni who fit the criteria of the study (see email message presented in Appendix A). If I did not receive enough interest, I used my own professional network to solicit participants via email invitations. Participants considered spent five or more years between the completion of their preliminary examinations and the successful defense of their dissertation.

Participants responded to a short demographic survey to confirm that they met the criteria for participating in the study. The questions on the survey included:

1. What was your employment status during your doctoral program -- unemployed, part-time, or full-time?

2. What was your student status during your doctoral program -- part-time or full-time?

3. How long (in years, months, days) did it take you to complete your dissertation, from the time you completed your preliminary examination to the time you successfully defended your dissertation?

4. What was the title of the degree you earned?

5. Was your PhD degree completed in a College of Education at a Midwestern research?

I responded to these individuals in a first-come, first-served order and scheduled an initial interview with each of the first three participants. I thanked two additional respondents for their time and gathered contact information in case scheduling did not work with one of the initial three respondents or I needed to interview additional participants for a richer data set. I provided a gift card and thank you note to each participant who proceeded to the final interview process. Due to the highly sensitive nature of the study and the experiences that may be shared, I do not acknowledge the participants by name in this study, but I thanked them in general and will provide them with ongoing information about how this study will be used.

Research Site

The participants in this study chose the location for the interview portion of the research in keeping with the best practice of choosing a semi-private location in which the participant feels comfortable (Creswell, 1998; Jacob & Furgerson, 2012; Moustakes, 1994). Every interview was conducted via online cloud-based teleconferencing software, due to national health restrictions concerning COVID-19, which was recorded and transcribed.

Data Collection Methods

To examine the experience of LTTD candidates, I used three sources of data: a timeline of the dissertation process completed by each participant, three semi-structured interviews recorded for transcription, and the acknowledgements section of two of the participant's deposited dissertation. One participant did not have an acknowledgements section. These three sources of data provided rich and unique perspectives with similarity in experiences across the

participants' narratives. I conducted member checks after each formal one-hour interview (total of three member checks per participant). I also retained my research journal entries for analysis. The anticipated progression of research and page production for each source follows:

Table 3.1 Data inventory

Source of Data	Number of Pages	Number of pages total
Timelines	2 x 3 participants	2 x 3 timelines = 6 pages
3 one-hour interviews per person	25 pages per one hour of transcription x 3 x 3	75 x 3 interviews = 225 pages
Acknowledgement page	2 x 2 participants	2 x 2 acknowledgements = 4 pages
Member check	25 pages per one hour of transcription x 3 x 3	75 x 3 interviews = 225 pages
Research journal entries	1 page per week for 12 weeks	12 pages
	Total pages	472 pages

Timelines

Participatory diagramming is a research strategy that refers to a set of research techniques with a variety of diagramming methods including timelines (Umoquit et al., 2008). The potential strengths of visual methods like the use of timelines include building rapport and enhancing contextualization of narratives and non-verbal communication (Kolar, Ahmad, Chan, & Erickson, 2015). Through visual representation the researcher can encourage the sharing of memories and stories about an experience to be extended and elaborated (Sheridan, Chamberlain, & Dupuis, 2011). The use of timelines has been found to be especially effective when the researcher is dealing with especially complex or sensitive topics which are difficult to communicate about completely with verbal exchanges alone (Umoquit et al., 2008). Focusing

on the visual allows people to go beyond a purely verbal mode of thinking, and this may help participants share a wider dimension of their experiences with the researcher (Bagnoli, 2009).

As with most types of qualitative data collected, timelines are often layered with other types of data collection for validation and richness in the data. Timelines and other visual representations are most effective when combined with interviews, as they serve as an "aide-memoire" (Sheridan et al., 2011, p. 554) to focus the participant's thoughts beyond what is possible through talk alone, and through this process the timeline becomes more than just a piece of data, it serves as a "vehicle through which further data" (p. 554) is produced. The process of asking questions and the sharing of responses may be more clear when a visual aid is available for both interviewer and interviewee (Crilly, Clarkson, & Blackwell, 2006). In combination, timelines and interviews can enhance the understanding of phenomena and how they work, identifying points for intervention (Patterson, Markey, & Somers, 2012).

There are several different ways to create a timeline for use in qualitative research; in all cases, timelines are usually used to chronicle events over a period of time. Timelines are usually created by highlighting events of interest in an individual's life, and the significance and meaning attached to those events may also be shown (Patterson et al., 2012). Some researchers choose to give specific instructions and parameters for construction of timelines, going so far as to draw a line for participants to use, others, like Bagnoli (2009), choose to keep instructions as broad as possible to enable participants to structure the task in their own way. In some cases, timelines are constructed by the researchers from the data provided by the individual in the interview setting, with the data then aggregated into one "master" timeline (Patterson et al., 2012). Timelines can also be co-constructed with the researcher and the participant together. In one such study, the process of "timelining" was a multifaceted process, as the participants took the timelines home after initial co-construction to review and reflect on

the timeline eventually adding details as they re-considered events (Sheridan et al., 2011).

Within the context of IPA, the timeline will provide some context into life history as

recommended by Seidman (2006). Regardless of how they are constructed, timelines create a

basis for additional questioning and allow both the participant and the researcher the

opportunity for reflection as the interviews progress.

For this study, the timelines were completed by the participants independently, prior to

the first interview. The following instructions were given to the participant via email and phone

regarding the timeline activity:

I'd like for you to create a timeline of the events and experiences that were meaningful

to you from the time you finished your preliminary examination to the final uploading

of your dissertation. You can make the timeline linear or nonlinear. The timeline should

illustrate your journey in the timeframe from finishing your preliminary examination to

your final deposit of your dissertation. I'm interested in the events and experiences that

impacted your journey to degree completion. The more detail, the better, and dates are

always helpful.

The participants enumerated periods of success and forward movement on the

dissertation, as they successfully completed the doctorate. The candidates also mentioned

difficulties they experienced throughout the dissertation process, including those identified in

the literature (e.g., topic selection, identifying theory and the conceptual model, returning to

writing after an extended time away) (Kiley, 2009). As they described the timeline, the

participants were able to explain in a cursory manner the strategies and supports they leveraged.

 Interviews

For this study, I conducted interviews with each participant to discover their lived

experiences. Interviews have long been considered the backbone of qualitative research as the

interview gives the participant an opportunity to be heard and to express their experiences

(Bagnoli, 2009; Schwandt, 2007). A variety of interview strategies and techniques are available to phenomenological researchers, and interviews do not have to be completely identical because each interview is treated as an "an exciting opportunity to learn something new about the phenomenon" (Vagle, 2014, p. 79). In a phenomenological study, the questions in an interview are as open-ended as possible, and the participant is asked to share experiences around a phenomenon about which the researcher is attempting to discover essential meanings and relationships (Benner, 1994; Giorgi, 1997).

Best practices for qualitative interviews are framed with the following in mind:

1. Identify interviewees based on purposeful sampling,

2. Use research to guide questions,

3. Script the beginning and end of the interview,

4. Design an interview protocol with open-ended questions, asking questions in language and vocabulary of the interviewee,

5. Use adequate recording procedures for both the interviewer and interviewee,

6. Determine the place for conducting the interview,

7. Block uninterrupted time for the interview,

8. Obtain consent from the interviewee to participate in the study,

9. Start with the basics, a social conversation or brief activity to create a relaxed and trusting atmosphere, and

10. Stick to the questions, complete the interview within the time specified, be respectful and courteous, and offer few questions and advice.

(Benner, 1994; Bevan, 2014; Moustakas, 1994; Smith et al., 2009; Vagle, 2014)

IPA researchers generally set a schedule for the interviews which shapes the interviews but does not necessarily guarantee the content of the interviews (Smith et al., 2009). This schedue becomes a "virtual map" (Smith et. al, p. 58, 2009) for the interview and allows the researcher

to attempt to plan for difficulties that that might arise in the interview as well as hone the phrasing of complex questions.

For this study, the schedule for the interviews included three interviews with each of the participants, for nine interviews. The first interview was based on what the participants detailed on their timeline, giving them the opportunity to talk through the events and experiences that impacted the journey to degree completion. The second interview delve more deeply into the general experiences described on the timeline, and the third interview elaborated on certain themes and relevant ideas from the first two interviews, as identified by the researcher and/or the participant.

Semi-structured, open-ended questions for all three interviews in this study have been developed to engage the participants to share their thoughts, perceptions, and opinions about their specific experiences (DeMarrais, 2004) as LTTD candidates. The interview protocol was developed with previous research (including doctoral thresholds, self-efficacy, motivation, and doctoral student persistence) in mind. The first interview was an elicited interview, using the timelines to provide context and build rapport between the interviewer and the participant (Seidman, 2006). In this interview, specific semi-structured questions were asked to establish a consistent protocol; these questions were designed to be fluid and were intended to generate a response to the research question, establishing a better understanding of the candidates and their journey through their program. Probes have been identified for the first question to provide context. The protocol for the first interview was as follows:

1. Please tell me a little bit about yourself and why you decided to pursue a PhD.

2. Please walk me through the timeline of degree completion.

3. Tell me about how you felt making this timeline.

4. What else you would like to share about the timeline and your experience today?

The following probes will be explored throughout the interview questions.
Reasons for beginning the program
Motivations for PhD
Support network
Professional or academic aspirations
Roadblocks to beginning program

Throughout all the interviews, I used secondary probing questions to develop some of the initial themes. In the second and third interviews, I followed a specific interview protocol. Not all questions or probes were addressed in the order listed below, and it was impossible for the interview to describe every facet of the participants' experiences in depth in one hour. As a result, probes were used to develop the emerging narratives throughout both remaining interviews.

Following are the protocols for the second and third interviews:

1. Walk me through the first part of your dissertation process in as much detail as you can remember.

   Probes to be explored:
   Confidence in ability as researcher at outset of dissertation
   Topic selection-how
   Topic selection-when
   Major professor selection-how
   Major professor selection-when
   Major professor relationship
   Support network
   Strategies used
   Proposal process

2. At what points on your timeline, if any, did you feel like you were not making progress or had run into a barrier?

   Probes to explore:
   Cause of "stuckness"
   Time management tools
   Emotional distress
   Emotional distress- coping
   Social network of support
   Academic network of support

        Major professor relationship
        Attitude toward dissertation
        Confidence in ability as researcher
        Getting "unstuck"

3. At what points on your timeline, if any, did you feel like you were making progress quickly?

    Probes to explore:
        Causes of progression
        Time management tools
        Emotions surrounding progress
        Social network of support
        Academic network of support
        Major professor relationship
        Attitude toward dissertation
        Confidence in ability as researcher

4. Reflect on the end of your dissertation process.

    Probes to explore:
        Confidence in ability as researcher
        Motivation changes over time
        Current feelings toward dissertation topic

5. What else would you like to share about your dissertation process?

Finally, discrepancies and similarities between details included on the timeline, what was shared in interviews, and what was included in the acknowledgement page of the dissertation, were explored in the third interview. It was noted in the pilot study that the individuals and groups mentioned in the acknowledgement page of the dissertation and those mentioned in the interview were not the same. In fact, the participant did not include in the timeline and interview several of the groups and individuals mentioned in the acknowledgement page. One of the participants did not have an acknowledgements page in their dissertation, and, as a result, questions about this omission were developed. The other participants referenced their acknowledgement pages specifically when describing their support networks. The participants'

review of these materials did seem to help provide opportunities for them to elaborate on the individuals who supported them through the dissertation. Questions were developed to probe about those in the acknowledgement pages had the participants not described them in the interviews.

Data Management

I transcribed interviews from the audio recordings, indenting to allow for a 2.5-inch margin (for notes and pre-analysis), and lines were numbered to keep the data organized as it was manipulated to discover themes. Identities in the data were masked and the transcripts of the recordings of the formal interview was returned to participants for member check and reflection prior to analysis to ensure multivocality. The transcripts of the member check were not returned to the participants for analysis, but changes or clarifications were addressed prior to data analysis.

Data Analysis

The analytical focus in interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) is always on the "participants' attempts to make sense of their experiences" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 79), but there is great flexibility in how a researcher works with data. When analyzing the data, the researcher must try to understand and describe the world of the participant during the time the participant experienced the phenomenon (Larkin, Watts, & Clifton, 2006)In this case, creating a picture of what the participant's world was "like" as they made progress through the dissertation phase of the PhD program. Additionally, the interpretative frame of IPA was intended to provide a "critical and conceptual commentary" (Larkin et al., 2006, p. 104) of how the participants made sense of their dissertation experience.

The focus on analysis in IPA directs the researcher's attention to the participants'

attempts to make sense of their experiences. In this case, the experiences of LTTD candidates as

they completed the dissertation phase of their PhD was the focus. In keeping with the

hermeneutic circle (Smith, 2009), the researcher must approach the data with the understanding

that there is a dynamic relationship between the part and the whole of the data being examined.

To understand a part, the researcher must examine the whole, and to understand the whole, the

researcher must examine the parts. This means that rather than a linear coding process, I was

constantly going back through the data in a cyclical manner as themes were identified and

connections were made. Figure 3.1 illustrates the data analysis cycle for this study.
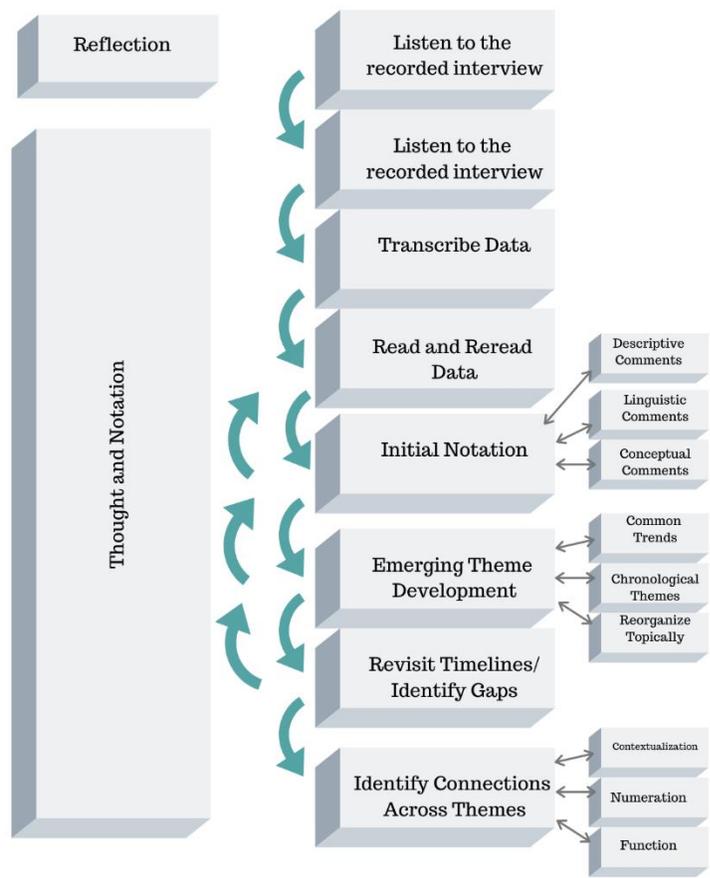
Figure 3.1 Interpretative phenomenological data analysis cycle (Smith et al., 2009)

Although there are a series of methods that can be employed by IPA researchers in analyzing data, the researcher must move between the parts and the whole in an iterative fashion. There is no prescribed, lockstep method for data analysis in IPA, but the following methods are usually employed and repeated for each case:

1. Reading and rereading the data,

2. Initial noting,

3. Development of emergent themes, and

4. Searching for connections across emergent themes. (Smith et al., 2009)

Pre-Analysis

I conducted a reflection exercise focused on my own individual experience with a LTTD candidacy to try to identify the personal foreknowledge that might influence interpretation. Although bracketing is not a strict tenet of IPA research, this allowed me to isolate my thoughts and judgments regarding my experiences. It would be unrealistic to claim that I was fully able to bracket myself away from the study or the topic at hand, as I am a LTTD candidate with similar experiences to the participants in the study. My bracketing efforts were completed for self-awareness and out of a vigilant stance toward respecting the stories of my participants. Bracketing was an exercise in metacognition so in order that I would have my own experiences listed prior to analysis and to provide awareness to inform, but not overshadow the analysis. I listened to the recording of each interview twice before transcribing the interview into a Word document, noting the additional thoughts and key words in my research journal. I reviewed the earlier pages of the research journal to revisit any comments I had logged during the interviews.

Prior to the interview process, in the reflection exercise, I created my own timeline to reflect upon and add awareness of my own individual experiences that might influence my

interpretation of the data as seen in Figure 3.2. This was an exhilarating process for me that

provided additional motivation to continue with the interview process and push through to

completion of this part of the dissertation, as I recalled all that I had already accomplished in the

process.

Benjamin Kohl Dissertation Timeline

2013-12-13 Completed preliminary examination, but had to revise the quantitative analysis
section.

2014-01-22 Received notice from my Major Professor that I passed my preliminary examination.

2014-08-20 Introduce topic for dissertation to major professor. Currently president of Kansas
Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators (KASFAA). Topic idea: Administer the
Sallie Mae survey(s) to parents of current and college bound students in the State of Kansas to
look at how the people of Kansas pay and save for college.

2014-08-20 Sent email message to Major Professor about possible topics.

2014-08-29 Major Professor asks if I have considered a study related to spirituality because I
reviewed a book on college student spirituality and was published and had presented on college
student spirituality at conferences.

2014-09-02 Committee member gives ideas for spirituality topic. Emails and meetings with
committee member for months to develop a topic and literature review.

Figure 3.2 Excerpt of Benjamin Kohl dissertation timeline

During the interview process I was attentive to the pace and verbal cues of the

participants, making notes in my research journal when a participant seemed to struggle for

words, showed great emotion, or described the experience in a way that seemed to flow

especially freely.

Every interview was conducted via online, cloud-based teleconferencing software, due to

national health restrictions concerning COVID-19. After each interview was conducted, I

listened to the recording twice before entered the text into transcribe

(https://transcribe.wreally.com) software. Then, I listened to the interview again while double-

checking the interview transcription and entering notes of thoughts in my research journal. The

transcriptions were line-numbered, and the Microsoft Word document was formatted with 1.5

spacing between lines and a 2.5-inch margin to the right for initial notations. These transcripts

were then sent to the participants for member check prior to initial notations. Two of the

participants were concerned that their identities and those of their committee members be

protected, and I was especially careful to check with them that they were comfortable with

masking. Although, the third participant did not express a need or desire for masking, I did mask

the data consistently after member check. On two occasions participants presented changes that

they asked to be made to the transcript.

Initial Notation

In the method of Smith et al. (2009), initial notation was included in the following three

types of exploratory comments:

1. Descriptive comments focused on describing what the participant shared, in some

   cases a paraphrase, in some cases a few lines of actual quoted texts;

2. Linguistic comments focused on the specific use of language, e.g., pauses,

   laughter, repetition, times where the participant struggled to describe a facet of the

   experience; and

3. Conceptual comments focused on the researcher's engagement with the text and

   questions that arose from the data. (p. 84)

Initial notations were completed for each of the three interviews, as I received the member

checks back. I found that there were questions that arose from first interviews that informed the

second interviews and questions that arose from the second interviews that informed the third

interviews. A sample of notation is presented below in Figure 3.3.
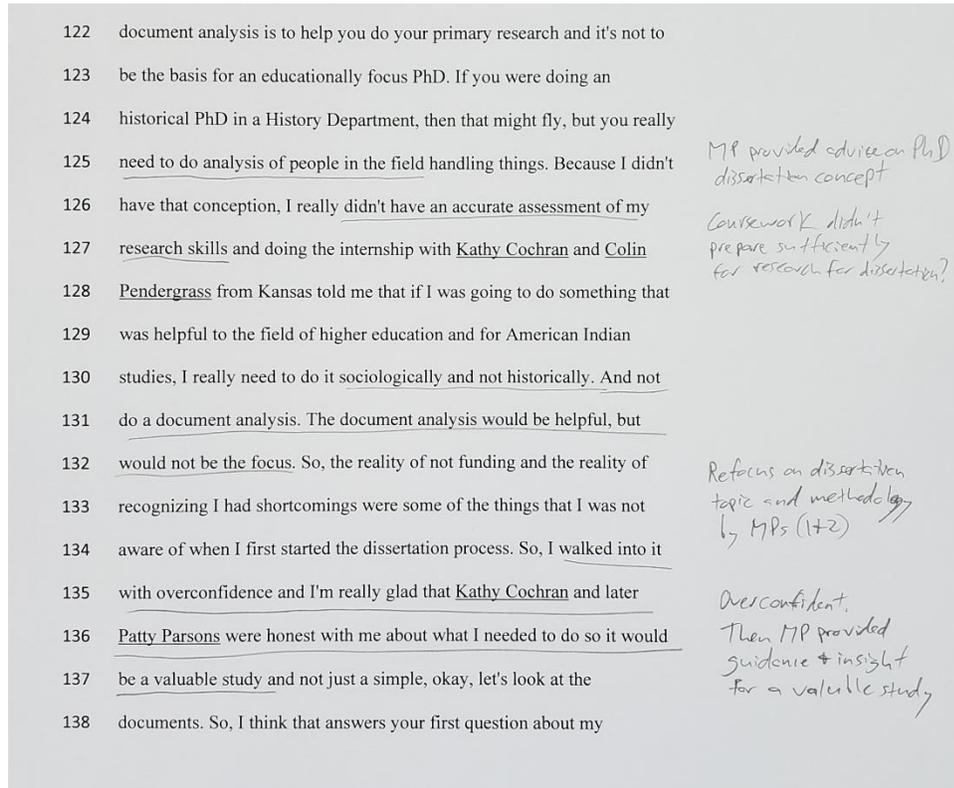
Figure 3.3 Sample of initial notation

I found that there were questions that arose from first interviews that informed the second interviews and questions that arose from the second interviews that informed the third interviews. The design of the study enabled me to add those questions to the protocol to dig more deeply into the experiences of the candidates.

Development of Emerging Themes

Following the comments in initial notation, I identified emerging themes by analyzing common patterns and trends in the data, initially focusing on discrete chunks of the transcript (Smith et al., 2009), while keeping in mind the entire transcript, the literature, and my experience. I read and re-read the text of the interviews to identify themes that repeated. I made notations on the left side of the transcripts as shown in Figure 3.4 to be able to have all my

thoughts in one place. At this point, I moved all the transcripts over to NVivo and began

highlighting each block text that I had manually notated. Text associated with each theme were

highlighted with a color assigned to each theme in NVivo. Following this, I ran reports in NVivo

to organize all the sections of text corresponding to specific themes from chronological order to

being organized by theme. I identified patterns between emergent themes, or development of

sub-ordinate themes aided by the reorganization of the data.

Figure 3.4 Example of emerging themes

The challenge of developing emerging themes lies in the simultaneous work of "reducing the volume of detail" while at the same time "maintaining the complexity" of the data and connections as they emerged (Smith et al., 2009, p. 91). In IPA, these themes are "usually expressed as phrases which speak to the psychological essence of the piece and contain enough particularity to be grounded and enough abstraction to be conceptual" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 92). A list of the results of initial coding is presented in Appendix F.

I analyzed each participant's group of three interviews, which provided insight into specific lived experiences that were especially important for each participant. For example, Pat shared or referenced the same story in all three interviews.

> I talked to the Vice Chancellor of Student Affairs and she said, "If you want to progress in higher ed, you need to have a PhD. It is your union card saying 'I've done the hard work. I can now become an administrator.'" I might as well leave the field of higher ed because I will not have the union card. I will have had valuable experience, but, you know, to progress in the field, you need to have the PhD.
>
> Carrie Sherwin was very supportive of me and she's the one who said, remember the PhD is your union card to progress in higher education. Without it, you're not going to be taken seriously.
>
> She drove the point home and edified what Dr. Carrie Sherwin said and that was that you need the union card, and that's the PhD.

These multi-referenced experiences were noted for further analysis, and full descriptions were created using the pieces of description from the individual interviews. Each block of text involved in the description of the experience was copied and pasted into a single document.

Viewing these parts of the whole as whole experiences provided context for the individual lived experiences of each participant.

   After examining each participant's narratives together, I isolated blocks of text as I began identifying themes from all three participants. The next step in IPA is searching for connections across emergent themes, which I found began to occur even as I developed the emerging themes. Some of the data seemed to naturally "fall" within other themes as I interacted with the data, especially where selections of the transcript were coded for multiple themes. I began to list ideas and phrases of themes in my research journal and utilizing NVivo software helped me confirm my impressions of these overlapping themes as I could quickly identify experiences where this took place.

   For example, the overarching theme of Struggle emerged as a theme fairly quickly, and several of the segments of text coded for Struggle also contained an element of Stuck or Stuckness within them. Examples from each participant are presented below.

   From Jessie: I knew that I needed to be able to articulate how I was doing and what were my struggles. It's hard to put words to some of our struggles. You know, and that you have to learn to articulate what you are struggling with and what is going on. Not easy. But again, it is interesting, that kind of leads you to being more productive and getting through some of those writer's block areas more than anything.

   From Pat: The second sticking point was when I got to my defense the first time. It was the clarity of, you know, Pat, you have written a good descriptive write-up of the relationship, but you really haven't applied your paradigms to any full extent in this study, so we want you to, basically, rewrite your findings in this 6 to 9-week period of time… and then if you can't, then you start over.

From Dani: It seemed like I would be getting somewhere and then, you know something

would happen and then I was waylaid. Some of that is just my decision making, my

prioritization. Some of it was my major professor saying, "I think you need to change

your topic" to, you know, submitting something and then getting told "no this isn't good

enough."

Figure 3.5 shows what the coded transcript of Pat's interview looks like in NVivo.
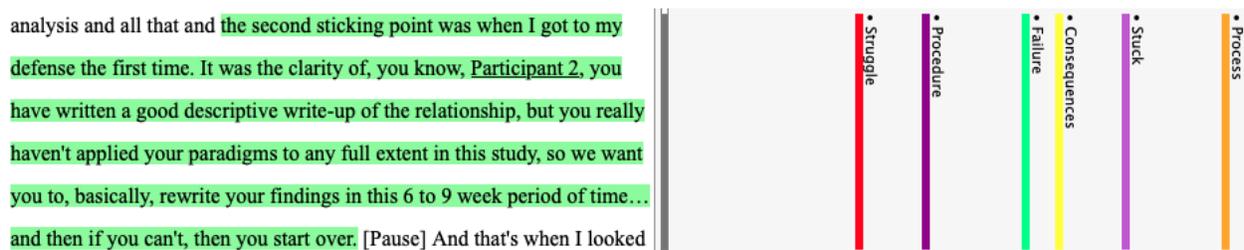
Figure 3.5 Sample of multi-coded text from NVivo

As I continued to comb through sections of text, the multiple codes in these sections helped me

to identify connections between themes.

One of the tools for analysis in IPA is to examine themes chronologically and then

examine the same experiences of the participants as whole experiences not in chronological

order. This tool provided a challenge for me as there were multiple ways to view chronology

with the lived experiences of the participants. The timelines created before the first interview

provided a historical picture of the chronology of the dissertation process for these participants.

A sample of one participant's timeline is presented in Figure 3.6.

```
April 2017
Submitted 2nd extension

April 2017 - April 2018
Wrote more on dissertation. Hand firmed up topic and had a clearer sense of what I needed to do.

April 2018
Submitted 3rd extension

April 2018 - November 2018
Worked a lot on dissertation, thought I would be able to defend in December but advisor did not
feel that my writing was complete enough and suggested I move to the following spring.

April 2019
Defended
```

Figure 3.6 Sample timeline, Participant 3

In the interviews, however, the participants chose to illustrate their experiences "out of order."

The participants described some, arguably more impactful, experiences first, regardless of where

they fell in the historical chronology. For example, while explaining the early stages of the

dissertation process, Jessie shared about an experience interacting with a faculty member not

associated with the committee while waiting in the hallway outside of the defense room.

Although this experience did not happen chronologically in line with the rest of the

stories he was telling about their process, it would appear to have been of great importance to

them. These types of chronology jumps were noted and considered. Additionally, when asked to

talk about their timelines, which began with the successful completion of preliminary

examinations, all three participants began telling of their PhD journeys by reaching back to their

undergraduate preparation and master's work. The interview questions did not specifically

address this aspect of the participants lives; however, all three seemed to see these experiences as

important parts of their lived experiences. This could be because all three participants were first-

generation undergraduate students, and two of the three participants were first-generation PhD

participants. A decision was made to include these segments for analysis, even though they did

not fall within the initial purpose of the study because the experiences as undergraduate and master's degree students seemed to be important in identity development and the way the participants viewed their abilities as researchers.

Revisit Timelines and Identify Gaps

The hermeneutic circle of IPA requires for the constant analysis and re-analysis of the different transcripts throughout the interviews and data collection time frame, each interview adding to the foreknowledge of the interviewer, knowledge that, in turn, informs a more complete analysis of the data. I revisited the timelines and acknowledgement pages to identify what was missing or omitted from the interviews, and to see if there were patterns that might further describe the experience. Each of the participants shared information in the interviews that they did not share within the timeline exercise. For instance, Pat shared about the experience with the previous supervisor not hiring them because they did not have a terminal degree:

> Pat: Yeah, really interesting, just really weird. I don't think I've told this to anyone outside of my partner, my ex-partner and my current girlfriend/fiancé.
>
> Ben: Wow, well I appreciate being in the circle. [Laughter]
>
> Pat: [Laughter] Well, you're trying to do a study on those of us who took forever, so you need to know the knowledge.

This was not included on the timeline. Dani shared about some developments in their personal life that were not on the timeline, but on reflection realized how much this part of personal growth and development influenced the dissertation process. Reflecting on the timeline process and the first interview, Dani said, "You know, I don't know that I included it. But, the more I thought about it later on, I think this also impacted my momentum," and then shared about the extremely painful personal circumstance experienced during the dissertation process.

However, there was not any information shared on the timelines that was not shared in the interview. I did not notice any real gaps between what was included in the acknowledgements and the interviews themselves.

Identify Connections Across Themes

To identify relationships in themes, I began with numeration, identifying the number of times themes appear throughout each case individually and then across all cases. The interviews were shaped by the participants' narratives; I paid attention to where throughout the interview participants narrated specific events that impacted their experience and added contextualization where needed (Smith et al., 2009). Finally, if appropriate, I focused on the specific function of themes across the transcripts, e.g. how the participants framed the positive and negative aspects of their experiences.

On several passes through the data, contextualization (Smith et al., 2009) was employed to determine if a passage truly fit within an emerging theme or should be paired with another theme as connections emerged between themes. For example, Jessie shared the following messaging experience which was initially coded for stuck and struggle:

> You are also going to expand your ability to deal with change, and your ability to cope
> with difficult times, in regard to academics and struggling with information being at that
> stuck point of what do you do next. I don't know if what I'm doing is accurate, valid.

When considering the context of this section of text, the participant was sharing a message about struggle that was shared from a faculty member in Jessie's support network. There is no specific identifiable "stuck place," which led to setting it aside for development into an overarching theme that would incorporate both struggle and stuckness.

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I recorded the number of times different codes were identified and when themes appeared within the transcripts. This strategy to analysis, known as numeration (Smith et al., 2009), was helpful in confirming themes that had already begun to rise as primary or superordinate themes across the data. The number of times each theme emerged in the data is indicated with the codes/themes (see Appendix F). Smith et al., 2009, encouraged against using numeration as the primary tool in developing superordinate themes; however, it was helpful in making additional connections and evaluating specific sections of the text. For instance, when trying to decide if Being Doctorate or Shifting Identity were superordinate themes or subordinate themes, I looked back at NVivo to determine which was utilized more. As a result of these activities, I was able to identify 3 themes. The first theme "Surprised by Struggle and Stuck in Liminality" captures the experiences the participants described by being surprised by a variety of struggles, some of which led to stuckness and eventually liminality characterized by intense emotions. Another theme, "Strategies and Supports for Survival" incorporated the strategies and supports the participants described implementing as they sought to emerge from stuckness and liminality to complete their dissertations. Finally, "Assuming Identity by Becoming Doctorate" captures the importance the participants placed on earning the PhD because of its impact on their identities, the sources of meaning they relied upon when evaluating their identity as researchers throughout the process, and the way they navigated relationships with those they saw as key to granting them entry to the doctoral community.

Quality in Qualitative Research

The design of a qualitative study is such that issues of trustworthiness and rigor should be addressed as adequately as possible. Tracy (2010) identified eight key markers of quality in qualitative research that provide a framework for best practices in addressing potential concerns

regarding methodology. The end goal for qualitative research is that it: have a worthy topic, demonstrate rich rigor and sincerity; be credible; resonate with readers, make a significant contribution, take into account ethical considerations, and achieve meaningful coherence (Tracy, 2010). This study draws upon Smith's Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (2009) as a guide and has been designed to address each of Tracy's goals.

Worthy Topic

Research in the qualitative tradition has historically been characterized and motivated by the author's desire to facilitate change (Kidder & Fine, 1997). Tracy (2010) indicated that topics worthy of research often arise from areas that are compelling or personally and socially important for the researcher. This topic for this study is relevant because of the demonstrated impact of degree abandonment on individuals who choose to walk away from pursuit of a PhD program (Golde, 2000), and the implications for students and university faculty associated with the mental health risk assumed by students who undertake a program (Barreira et al., 2018). Candidates who linger for long periods of time in the dissertation phase struggle with issues of identity as they evaluate their own knowledge and ability (Kiley, 2015). These candidates also negotiate issues of power and control as they navigate the advisor/advisee relationship (Hunter & Devine, 2016; Lovitts, 2001). Tracy (2010) asserted that studies featuring issues that "shake readers from their common-sense assumptions and practices" (p. 841) meet the standard of worthy topic. The assumption, based on theory of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997), is that students who linger for a long time in liminality before crossing a threshold may lose motivation, causing them to abandon the degree. The stories of those who have not done so, but who persist and earn a doctoral degree over a long period of time, may hold surprises that will shake advisors' and candidates' assumptions and shift practices in graduate education. The literature review

identified a gap in the research as much of the focus has been on candidates who finish their degrees in a timely manner, or those who abandon study, but there are few studies of the lived experiences of candidates (e.g., Margerum, 2014) who spend a great deal of time in the dissertation phase and successfully complete their degrees. The pilot interview for this study brought to light the highly emotional nature of the degree completion story, and each of the participants in this study shared about times of anxiety, frustration, and emotion as they described their journeys.

Rich Rigor

In setting up the opportunities for participants to tell their stories, qualitative research must be rich in rigor. A rigorous study must use appropriate theoretical constructs, involve spending plenty of time in the field; gathering plenty of data to support significant claims; accounts for appropriate sampling procedures; and uses appropriate field note, interviewing and analysis procedures (Tracy, 2010). In this study, I interviewed each participant three times, allowing a significant amount of time to explore the lived experiences of LTTD candidates with the theoretical framework and literature in mind. The sampling procedures were developed to find participants for whom the topic is meaningful and who can provide perspective about the phenomenon. Field notes were kept throughout the process and analysis procedures were well documented. Further, I kept a research journal, conducted member checks, peer-debriefed, tested assumptions, and ensured that meaning making was co-constructed and not solely driven by my subjectivities.

Sincerity

One of the markers of quality in qualitative research design is sincerity (Tracy, 2000). Sincerity is addressed by a posture of self-reflexivity (not just reflection) where the researcher is

able to be transparent in answer to the questions of "How did the author come to write this text?" and "Is there adequate self-awareness and self-exposure for the reader to make judgments about the point of view of the author?" (Richardson, 2000, p. 937). Tracy (2010) suggested researchers practice self-reflexivity "before even stepping into the field" (p. 842) with an assessment of biases and motivation, evaluating if "they are well suited to examine their chosen sites or topics" (p. 842). Peshkin (1988) asserted that researchers should systematically seek their own subjectivity to be aware of how subjectivity may be shaping inquiry and outcomes throughout the course of their research. This search for subjectivity is recommended so that the researcher can learn about the "particular subset of personal qualities that contact with their research phenomenon has released" (Peshkin, 1988, p. 17). In an interview, Anzaldúa speaks of being aware of the "I" in writing and reflection, specifically "the 'I' who writes, the 'I' who is in the text, and the 'I' who reads what is in the text and reflects on it and even puts that reflection in the text" (Reuman & Anzaldua, 2000, p. 5). Understanding the personal qualities of Anzaldúa's I can help to guard against the capacity to "filter, skew, shape, block transform, construe and misconstrue" (Peshkin, 1988, p. 17) the activities of the research. As noted previously, the foundational phenomenologists worked diligently to not only identify but also isolate and set aside their own experiences and foreknowledge of a phenomenon or experience. My own reflection is not an effort at epoch, but an opportunity to communicate transparently and sincerely with readers about the context informing my approach as I brought substantial personal foreknowledge of an extended dissertation process.

Like the participants of my study, I spent an extended amount of time in the dissertation phase of my doctoral program. I finished my preliminary examinations in December of 2013 and was admitted for doctoral candidacy in January 2014. At that time, I did not have a solid topic to

study or questions to answer. Over the following five-year period, I changed dissertation topics four times, digging into literature for four distinct topics and areas of research in order to determine if I had viable questions and conceptualization, until my major professor and I finally agreed on a topic for me to pursue. I changed employment two times over that five-year period, and I struggled across thresholds and over barriers while my motivation concerning the dissertation process ebbed and flowed. My interest in this topic stems from my own lived experiences and my curiosity about the strategies used to maintain academic relevance and motivation toward the dissertation by those who have been successful in completing their degrees over a long period of time. The selection of IPA to guide the design of my research is, in large part, because I was able to bring to the table my own experiences to inform the design of inquiry, data analysis, and reporting results.

In this study I am able to be both an insider and outsider to the phenomenon. Although I may have experienced some of the challenges, setbacks, and successes the participants experienced, I have not yet completed my PhD. This unique positioning allowed me to ask additional questions to dig deeper into the experience, but also created situatons where the participant did not have to fully describe the experience and phenomenon because I already understood it. To mitigate this, I needed to make sure I was asking probing questions to get thick descriptions. For example, Jessie briefly described their proposal meeting in general terms because they knew I had already been through this. I took this opportunity to reframe the description:

> Ben: Help me understand what that meeting was like and then when you walk out of that meeting, what were you like at that point? What was your confidence level like?
>
> Jessie: I had no confidence whatsoever. I was done. It took me a few days to even think about reattempting. They framed it as you know, your proposal is mostly there. You just

have to reword some stuff and redo a few things and I'm like… you're changing my

topic.

Simply knowing that there was likely more description that was left unsaid because of

understanding my position in relation to the participants and the subject matter, allowed for a

deeper dive into the experience.

Credibility

In qualitative research, credibility refers to the trustworthiness and verisimilitude of the

findings (Tracy, 2010). The study should be designed in a way that the findings make the readers

feel that they can act on and make decisions in line with the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Some

of the standards to keep in mind when designing a study that is credible include thick

description, triangulation, and multivocality and partiality (Tracy, 2010). Each of these standards

are addressed within this chapter in the design of this study in data management, analysis, and

reporting. These design decisions were made in accordance with precedence set for qualitative

research and IPA.

The idea underpinning triangulation in qualitative research is that the phenomena being

studied can best be understood when approached from a variety or combination of data collection

techniques (Rothbauer, 2008). Three types of data were collected for this study: a participatory

diagram (timeline), the acknowledgements section from deposited dissertations, and transcribed

interviews. The context of each piece of data collected is different and enabled the participant to

reflect upon the phenomenon in question.

Transcribed interviews were returned to participants for member validation. The

participants were asked to verify that their experiences were accurately rendered in the transcript,

and that the meaning of those experiences was fully captured to establish descriptive validity

(Maxwell, 1992; Sandelowski, 2012). Changes were noted and made. This step was especially

critical as the verbaitm quotations from the data were used to illustrate and support interperative analysis (Sandelowski, 1986).

The purpose of research, procedural decisions, and details of data generation and management are transparent and explicit, and recorded in a research journal (Hammarberg, Kirkman, & de Lacey, 2016). This journal also contains personal reflections along the way to allow me to be more aware of myself insofar as I understand my own assumptions and biases and where they may impact the inquiry (Lindsay, 2006).

Verisimilitude is often addressed in qualitative research through thick description of the data. Thick description requires the researcher to present data in a way that clearly shows (not tells) the reader details of the scene to create understanding (Tracy, 2010). This can be especially difficult as so much communication is shared in non-verbals, and nested in humor or silence (Tracy, 2010). IPA does not require the recording of the length of time spent in a pause, or all of the non-verbal utterances (Smith et al., 2009); however, the research journal allowed me to record some of these observations during the interviews that are not able to be transcribed. In this way, I was able to account for not only what was said, but what was not said. In the pilot study it became apparent that when talking about especially frustrating or emotional experiences, the participant paused and gave a meaningful look before moving through a response. This behavior pattern occurred in the interviews, and I communicated the "signal" it provided for readers of the study. Additionally, negative cases were sought and cited.

Resonance

Another hallmark of qualitative research, resonance, is achieved through a report of research that affects the audience through aesthetic merit and generalizability or transferability (Tracy, 2010). Studies that resonate connect with the readers, and this study was designed in a

way to retain the voice of the participants' personal experiences as well as my interpretative

commentary (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Data representation involved taking the themes

identified and discussing them one by one, describing and exemplifying each theme with extracts

from interviews (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). I included analytical comments to make the case

for the importance of experiential items found in the study. Each theme was illustrated using the

participants' actual words (Smith et al., 2009). A discussion section follows the narrative to tie

the themes identified with the existing literature, comments on implications, the study's

limitations, and opportunities for future research (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). The reliance on

large sections of direct text from participants creates a series of ethical considerations that must

be accounted for.

Significant Contribution

To illustrate significant contribution, at the conclusion of this study I anticipate the

development of a series of thematic diagrams that can be further described through a narrative

account of the study. These thematic diagrams could be used in the future to inform practice by

major professors, academic advisors, and doctoral candidates themselves. Good qualitative

research should enhance and cultivate critical intelligence to engage in moral critique (Guba &

Lincoln, 2005; Schwandt, 1996) as well as provide the participants being interviewed with

normative principles about how to act (Tracy, 1985). The focus of IPA is on how the particular

experiential phenomena have been understood from the perspective of particular people in a

particular context (Smith et al., 2009); thus, findings from this study are not generalizable to

every LTTD candidate in every situation. However, the accounts provided are intended to be

insightful and illuminating and lend to the understanding of how LTTD candidates experience

the dissertation phase of the doctoral degree, potentially providing insight for other LTTD candidates and those who supervise them.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical issues could have arisen with this study stemming from the purposeful sample and the sensitivity of the information shared. The field of education is relatively small, and I identified some of the participants by word of mouth referrals (snowball), which means that participants may know each other. I needed to be especially careful to not allow information shared in one interview that informs questions asked in future interviews (in keeping with IPA methodology) to be attributable to any previous participants. I specifically asked about concerns with data masking before interviewing and asked the participants to make sure they are comfortable with masking during the member check.

Finally, the pilot interview conducted for this research brought several intense emotional reactions for the participant. This is not unusual in IPA studies, because they are often concerned with significant existential issues (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). The individual interviewed in the pilot indicated that they had several "ah-ha" moments as they were reflecting on their timeline and experience prior to the interview and ended the interview by saying "I've got to go back into therapy, now. . .". I am aware that this may not have been just a joke; that this may be a common experience for participants in the study. In case the emotions triggered by sharing their lived experiences creates a need for additional care, I was prepared to follow up with participants to see how they are doing post-interview and as my research progresses, and to offer referral to services if necessary.

Meaningful Coherence

The purpose of this chapter is to describe a research design that achieves the stated purpose of the study, thereby meeting the final quality standard of qualitative research, meaningful coherence. To meet the standard of meaningfully coherent qualitative research, a study must "eloquently connect the research design, data collection, and analysis with theoretical framework and situational goals" (Tracy, 2010, p. 848). For this study, the purpose statement and research question are articulated, and the findings are clearly tied back to the purpose statement and research question. The research has been specifically designed within the framework of IPA because of my own passionate interest and ongoing experiences with the phenomenon under investigation. The literature review shows a clear gap in the research as well as a theoretical framework built around self-efficacy, motivation, identity, and the relatively new concept of thresholds. I captured and provided new perspectives on the lived experiences of LTTD candidates that describe the strategies and supports they utilized to overcome the barriers they encountered as they completed their degrees.

Chapter Summary

The method used in this study was utilized for the purpose of describing how PhD candidates in a College of Education completed their degrees at Midwestern research universities through an extended dissertation process. Analysis revealed the lived experiences of successful doctoral candidates during an intensely stressful and emotional time to describe how they persisted for a long period of time to completion of their PhD programs. IPA methods were used to examine how these PhD candidates made sense of their life experiences throughout the extended dissertation process. The IPA methodological framework used in this study guided sampling and participant selection, the research site, data collection methods, interviews, data

management, and data analysis. Timelines of the candidates were used to obtain data about their experiences, along with three semi-structured interviews to garner rich data about their lived experiences throughout the dissertation process. Data were analyzed to determine themes which ultimately demonstrate strategies and supports utilized by and for the candidates that led them to successful defense of their dissertations and completion of the PhD program.

Chapter 4 - Findings and Discussion

The purpose of this qualitative, interpretative phenomenological study was to examine and describe the lived experiences of three doctoral candidates who earned PhD degrees from Colleges of Education at Midwestern research universities and spent five or more years to successfully complete their dissertations. Of specific interest is how the doctoral candidates made sense of the experiences and made progress to complete their dissertations. Chapter 4 begins with a description of each participant followed by the themes identified through analysis of the shared lived experiences.

Participants

Participants for this study were chosen on the basis that they could provide access to the phenomenon being studied (Smith et al., 2009). Three individuals who spent five or more years completing the dissertation phase of a PhD program in a College of Education at a Midwestern university participated in the study. The sample of participants included one woman and two men. One participant identified as an Asian American and two identified as Caucasians. The participant descriptions provide insight into each participant's individual background and initial thoughts regarding their motivation for pursuing the PhD.

Identifying details describing the participants have been intentionally hidden, at their request. For example, gender, program of study, and other details, even if masked, could lead in the identification of the participants. Details such as family make-up, professional role, institution of study, and employment have been masked to further protect the identities of the participants in alignment with the confidentiality agreement made with the participants and ethical positions included in the Institutional Review Board (IRB) proposal.

Jessie

Jessie spent five years in the dissertation portion of the PhD program and is a first-generation undergraduate student. Jessie described their academic progression:

> I never intended to go to college, early on. I didn't intend to get a graduate degree. I never really intended to get a PhD, but I thought that this is an opportunity that I had access to. I might as well try. This is an opportunity not everybody has access to and I wasn't going to throw that away.

Graduating with a master's degree in Higher Education, Jessie worked at two midsized, Midwest universities in the capacity primarily working with students. Jessie's pursuit of the PhD was motivated by an opportunity to "reframe some of my thinking on processes." Jessie did not feel an immediate need to advance in their career at the time they began coursework. The motivation was to be eligible to teach at the graduate level in the future. Additionally, Jessie expressed an interest "to keep moving up and move to more of a policy level at the university." As Jessie explained,

> I would like to explore possibly working in this same work but at an upper level in regard to policy institution-wide and I think the PhD informs you, of just the breadth of, we use this word too often, *stakeholders* involved in all of the decisions impacted by campus.

Although Jessie was uncertain about what the future would hold for them professionally, pursuit of the PhD was perceived as needed for them to effectively lead at any level and in any part of a higher education institution.

Pat

Pat spent six years in the dissertation portion of the PhD program. Pat is a first-generation student, entering the undergraduate career with their father, who also began pursuing a degree that same year. Their father finished a PhD program in the mid-2000's. Pat pursued the master's degree as an avenue for career advancement, after considering a path outside of higher education, as they explained:

> This may not be as well thought out as a lot of people who approach the PhD. I had originally wanted to leave higher education after doing my master's degree at Coastal College back in 1990, finishing it then, and eventually being in the United States Foreign Service. I ended up working at Red Rock State and Valley View University and then Pillars University in Student Affairs because I did not complete the process for US Foreign Service and within the first year I found out that Pillars University had this special program where if you pursued the PhD in any discipline, not just Higher Ed, and you're a full-time staff member, you would only be paying 25% of all fees and tuition. That was roughly $1000 a semester. And I thought, "Let's do it. It'll only be 4 years of my time." [Laughter]

In addition to gaining perspective about student affairs practice at several universities, Pat's roundabout career journey continued and allowed them to develop a wide network of professionals across the country. Pat rose through the ranks and continues to serve in upper-level administration, which provides them a unique understanding of the inner-workings of higher education.

Dani

Dani spent nine years in the dissertation portion of the PhD program and is a first-generation undergraduate student. They began working on advanced degrees to reposition a career. Speaking of the work they were doing when they started the master's degree, Dani shared, "I enjoyed it and I wasn't unhappy. But, you know, I kind of had a moment where it's like, okay. Well, if I'm not doing this, what do I want to be doing?" As they thought through what the future could hold, Dani identified working with students as the best part of the role they were serving in during that time:

> It was just cool working with these students and getting to know them and being a part of their lives and stuff like that. And, so, the more I thought about it, this is what I want to do. So, I got started in it and you know classes were going good. My bachelor's degree was a long haul in and of itself. I went for a while and quit for a while. I saw success in the master's program.

Dani finished the master's degree quickly as a part-time student, and it was the academic advisor for the master's program who encouraged consideration of a PhD program. Dani explained the guidance they received with the following:

> We talked a lot about where this goes and what this means and how do we do this and how do we do that? They made a PhD seem doable. The more I talked to them and the more I saw and got into other things, my desire was to teach. And you know, you really don't teach if you don't have a PhD at the college level. So, that's the reason that I went that direction.

Dani mentioned the struggle of their undergraduate process, but thought those struggles were behind them, and that they had gained a more advanced skill set through the master's program.

Dani also transitioned through several different areas of service at a number of different universities during their PhD program, finishing in a role adjacent to, but outside of, higher education.

Themes

Three themes were developed through analysis of the data that are related to the research questions and the areas of focus of this study. The themes were unearthed from the interpretative analysis of the transcribed interviews, timelines, and acknowledgement pages. The themes are as follows:

1. Surprised by struggle and stuck in liminality,
2. Strategies and supports for survival, and
3. Assuming identity by becoming doctorate.

Contextual information to support each of the themes including excerpts from the participants' data sources is also provided. In recounting the experiences of their doctoral journeys, all three participants described periods of struggle and blockages at which they got stuck. Consistent with the literature, there were specific parts of their processes which were difficult, and some procedures that they had to navigate to complete the degree.

Surprised by Struggle and Stuck in Liminality

All the participants described multiple places of struggle and stuckness in the dissertation process. The dissertation process can be viewed as a journey into uncharted territory, full of rites of passage that must be completed while venturing into unstructured periods where the candidates must determine a great deal about the path they are on while they are on it. Deciphering how to frame their study, where to go for help, how to leverage suggestions of the major professor and committee into a written document, and how to do all of these while staying in the good graces of the gatekeepers who would let them through each stage were part of the

experiences of the participants. When taken as a whole experience over time, there was not one specific or overwhelming struggle any of the participants identified as the reason they were long time to doctorate. Rather, the struggles began as seemingly manageable setbacks or slow spots; the cumulative effect of which was delay. Over time, the energy and effort invested in working through struggles depleted resources; when struggles turned to stuckness, the participants found themselves unable to move from one stage of the dissertation process to the next, unable to cross the threshold they were attempting to cross. Some of the thresholds involved in the journey included topic selection, identifying a conceptual model, the interview process (e.g., finding enough participants and eliciting thick and rich description), data analysis, and navigating the revision/resubmission process once feedback was received from the major professor. In these moments, the emotions associated with the betwixt and between space of previous accomplishments and the next phase of the process were intense.

All three participants knew that the dissertation portion of the PhD program would include struggle. Each of them described known individuals who had not finished the dissertation 5 to 6 years or more after passing preliminary examinations. The possibility that they might need to identify strategies to complete the degree went almost unrecognized and was not included in their descriptions of the doctoral experience. Jessie, alone, described proactively making the decision to step away from PhD work after completing their preliminary examination to give themselves a break. Jessie explained their thought process at the outset of the liminality that is the dissertation process, the space between preliminary examinations and a successful defense:

Okay, great, I passed. Now, I've got this project to finish up at the university and I've got this to do and we're going into summer and I need to get ready for this process and then in the back of my mind going, okay, so what's my next part in doing my proposal?

Mentally, I was kind of giving myself a gap. I think I took two months before I started really diving into my proposal. It was a very busy time where I was working. And, so, it was, okay, now I'm giving myself flexibility to step away from it right to catch up at work right before I dive into the dissertation.

From the outset, Jessie recognized that the journey was not going to be easy, and that they would need a store of energy to complete it. Jessie's description of this time away includes the common experience of the dissertation looming in the back of their mind, constantly calling to their attention that they needed to work on the dissertation and did not know what that meant even while trying to focus on other roles and responsibilities. Jessie shared that they were already, even before beginning the research and initial writing process, being pulled in multiple directions with work and school, and this pull created a constant split focus.

Struggling to balance work and writing was a struggle for Pat throughout their process, but one that should have been anticipated. Pat described being busy professionally during the time they were writing their dissertation and recognized that it was part of what kept them from completing more quickly. Pat stated, "I would have been a perfect candidate for life interfering because you saw what I was doing workwise." Pat's career advanced quickly, even before they completed preliminary examinations, but the independent nature of the dissertation made it easier to prioritize work ahead of writing. In some ways, Pat became a wanderer on the journey to dissertation, moving slowly from topic to topic in the liminal space between preliminary examination and successful defense because they chose to focus repeatedly on the career progression over the dissertation. Pat shared several examples of other candidates who took a long time to finish because life interfered. As an upper-level administrator, Pat shared that they had "run into so many people who have gotten into ABD (all but dissertation)" and that they

have "had a number of discussions with candidates at both my most recent institutions," and asked the question "You know ABD is not a degree?" It is interesting that even though Pat knew to anticipate that not finishing in a timely manner—or at all, they did not discuss any behavior adjustments or strategies at the beginning of their program that would mitigate the risk for them. Pat described the experience of a colleague in higher education who was, like Pat, well respected in the field, but who failed to complete the dissertation before they succumbed to illness. Pat knew of the supports the University offered to that candidate, including the opportunity to meet with a faculty member regularly. Pat, however, did not employ that support until late in the process, possibly because they thought this type of a delay would not happen to them. The delay in employing support may have contributed to some of Pat's intense emotional reaction at a later point of stuckness.

Struggling to balance the pull of business and responsibility was the common thread for Dani. When describing unpacking their journey with their partner for the timeline portion of the interview process, Dani shared: "The only thing that we thought was consistent in all of that was that I was busy. I was always trying to, you know, accomplish something else in the process." For Dani, the "something else" often extended the time to completion and they described "being pulled at so many ends that you end up not doing anything. You know, there were times that I can't work on it (the dissertation) this month. I'm busy. I need to not do it." Dani described the result of being pulled in so many directions: "That first year, I really didn't get much done on the dissertation. I'd at least got in my head what I wanted to do." Even though Dani was not spending time writing, like Jessie, the thought of the dissertation was not far from mind. Although the struggle of not making progress quickly was not initially emotionally taxing for the

participants, it came at the cost of progress and time, which did eventually create pressure for them when they did get stuck later.

When Jessie, Pat, and Dani did find time to work on writing, they encountered struggle navigating how to begin. Navigating uncertain next steps was difficult for all of them, but Jessie described the initial phase:

There was a bit of a feeling of okay now, I'm on my own. There's nothing to give me the structure and so I'm having to create the structure myself and I did a little, but you become very cognizant of the fact that your agenda is based on yourself. There's not a class coming up. There's not a test to study for. You're now creating the goal. You're establishing the steps towards that goal and you're telling yourself when to pick up a book and read it. Kind of like you've been given the skills to swim. Now, you're on your own to swim upstream.

The feeling of not being quite sure that they were taking the right steps in the dissertation process created a great deal of struggle for the participants. Jessie described taking stock of their situation and piecing together a plan, essentially creating the structure for themselves to make progress. It is interesting that Jessie felt so alone during this time. Although Jessie never implied in the interviews that they expected handholding or felt entitled to a different experience, they were honest about how difficult it was to navigate the unscripted, independent nature of the dissertation process. They did not describe discussing this difficulty with their major professor, nor was it an area at which Jessie got stuck, but they experienced struggle in finding direction due to being unprepared.

Some of the struggles the participants experienced may have cost them time and worked in their favor in terms of their final dissertation product. Jessie was unsatisfied with the depth of

information in the first population they interviewed, struggled with next steps, and at the direction of their committee expanded the population and the scope of the dissertation. Pat went through several topic changes, explaining the first topic change came about after some honest feedback about the funding they would need, and their abilities as a researcher:

> The reality of no funding and the reality of recognizing I had shortcomings were some of the things that I was not aware of when I first started the dissertation process. So, I walked into it with overconfidence and I'm really glad that Kathy Cochran and later Dr. Visor were honest with me about what I needed to do so it would be a valuable study.

Pat was surprised that they were not as prepared as they thought they were, and that a topic would be eliminated because of those shortcomings. Becoming aware of shortcomings and limitations is a part of the goal of the dissertation process. In fact, Pat did not describe this topic change as an area of stuckness. Instead, Pat noted that the change helped them become a better researcher. The second topic change and struggle also moved Pat forward in skill development: "I had a problem with the adjudication with Asian American students who would have been the cohort I studied." Although this was an inconvenience, Pat found that this change in direction saved them in the long run:

> There is a very strong prejudice, still, in academia against doing research on populations from which you grow from, when it comes to an ethnic minority or marginalized population. And you're not considered a true scholar by some fields.

Pat was not aware at that time of the stigma associated with "me-search" or that they would potentially be penalized professionally in the future had they continued in that line of research. On reflection for Pat, the shift in topic, though it cost time, saved them trouble in the long run.

Choosing a topic was not the only topic challenge, for Pat, though, as they proposed their topic twice due to another threshold to be crossed:

> I proposed my subject twice, and the reason why is, methodologically, I had not really figured out what paradigm I was going to use. I still had trouble with understanding what a paradigm was at that point in time. And I think all of us have that problem of some sort or another.

Pat explained that a faculty member eventually suggested the theoretical framework that was finally decided upon for the study, which was a relief and help to Pat. Even though proposing the topic and research plan twice took additional time, these types of struggles did not trigger intense emotions, but again, cost the participants time to completion, and that time became a critical factor as their journeys extended.

Although not every struggle became a source of stuckness for the participants, when they did get stuck, the depth of emotion they experienced was very clearly described in the interviews. Dani went into the dissertation process believing that they could simply build on the report from their master's thesis. The idea of building on a topic that became a successful paper was a confidence-builder for Dani:

> I would say, you know, initially that I had quite a bit of confidence, you know, in my ability as a researcher. The classes that we had to take weren't that difficult. Everything seemed to make sense.

The steps in the PhD program had gone smoothly for Dani up until the dissertation, and their master's report was well received. As a result, they had no reason to believe that the dissertation would be any different for them. When a topic change was quickly suggested by the major professor, however, Dani, who already struggled with confidence in their writing, felt much less

confident about their abilities as a researcher, and stated, "I didn't feel confident." Dani's topic originated from their work during the master's program, an area of accomplishment for them; to step away from the foundation of previous work was difficult. This blow to Dani's confidence as a researcher caused them to be "waylaid" as they took a step away from the dissertation process because they were no longer confident that they could move forward. Throughout the rest of the journey Dani repeatedly became stuck when given feedback about their writing:

> I didn't feel confident simply because, you know, I would write pieces and provide them and I would get some level of major professor fixing, you know, but then in the end it's like, you know, this isn't structured correctly. Your sentence structures aren't right. You know, it was going back to, I mean, even just kind of basic grammar, if you will. And, so, I think on some level, at times I got to a point where I wasn't sure, you know, what I was supposed to be doing.

For Dani, being told that they did not write at a level acceptable to successfully earn the PhD was a major blow, and the feedback that continued throughout the process. Dani knew going into the degree that their writing was not a strength, but shared: "Even though I'm a really crappy writer, I really enjoyed the research part of writing my report for my master's degree." To accommodate for the writing skill set in which Dani had completely lost confidence, they hired a professional editor. Even with that expert eye shoring up their work, Dani still experienced intense emotion as they received feedback: "I was *that* close. I had it and then it would be that same damn thing, you know, I don't think your writing is good enough and you need to work on it more." This happened with every draft Dani submitted, and to deal with the frustration, Dani made a choice: "I was like, well, I'll work on other stuff." The effect of working on "other stuff" not related to the dissertation is that Dani repeatedly lost time in the dissertation process, extending their long-

time-to-doctorate degree. Additionally, Dani described repeatedly making changes, submitting a chapter, and receiving feedback from the major professor that would set the writing process back:

> So, I'd do my stuff and then I'd send it to them and then it's like, well, do this and that. I'd be a little deflated and so, you know, I'd sit on it for three months. Then I'd start working on it a little bit. Then, six months later, you know, I'd turn it in again. It was a really slow process.

The deflation and back-and-forth coping to deal with disappointment signaled that Dani was, in effect, stuck in a liminal phase with their writing. In fact, Dani expressly discussed the cost of liminalty on their process; she stated, "Whenever something happened to set me back, that would immediately stop me from working on it for months or years." Also, Dani discussed the feelings and frustration with another candidate in their program: "Grace Ashton and I had several conversations and they were feeling some of the same struggles that I was feeling. They were getting the push back that their writing is not good enough and struggling along." Although the emotional support of a peer was welcome, Dani did not share any strategies the pair discussed to overcome the area of stuckness and period of liminality, nor did she share the depth of their feelings of frustration with their major professor.

Unfortunately for Jessie, feedback was not regular in timing of consistency as they spent an entire first year working on their first chapter, then invested a great deal of time in the literature review. Jessie said,

> A lot of time through second year of doing lit review stuff and going down avenues, being told that I needed to research other areas, use the literature over and over again, doing deep dives and then being told, maybe you don't need that after all. None of that

literature is in my dissertation. There were times like that. I would spend a week, I'd

spend weeks, going through literature that ended up having no impact.

The idea of spinning wheels without good direction depleted Jessie's resources. For Jessie, there

was no sense of momentum; as a result, when Jessie was stuck in a cycle of research, reading,

and being sent back to the drawing board, they grew frustrated. When the suggestion to make a

topic change was made, Jessie recalled "I felt very stuck with having to switch gears and trying

to figure out a slightly different topic," and later shared, "I was going in a completely different

direction and it pushed me in a way that I didn't expect." The surprise of having a solid topic

developed under the guidance of the major professor and peers in the field, only to be rebuffed

by the committee was daunting. At the outset, Jessie spent hours in meetings and consultation

with colleagues across campus identifying needs in the hope of finding a topic that would make

an impact. When the new topic was suggested, it appeared that all that time and energy was lost.

In fact, the new topic direction had a great impact on Jessie:

I had no confidence whatsoever. I was done. It took me a few days to even think about

reattempting. I felt like it was toast. There was nothing worth keeping and I pretty much

thought I'm just done with the whole process and I'm just stepping away from it and I

wasn't prepared for it.

The level of frustration Jessie experienced was clearly something they were not prepared for, and

as a result, they, like Dani, stepped away from the process for a while. When Jessie did re-

engage, they sought more outside guidance and help with not only the topic, but also the research

method. Jessie described the stuck place of wrestling with the troublesome knowledge involved

in learning a new research paradigm and technique: "I had to work on my research methods. I

had to work on some pieces and I spent a lot of time trying to track down a professor." Jessie went on to explain more about seeking resources to deal with this troublesome knowledge:

> It was an area that I was uncomfortable with because one of the elements of my dissertation was something very new to me in the style that was being done. So, I needed that input more than anything, but there wasn't a lot of time and so emails would take a long time to respond to and when finally that would happen and we would set up meetings that were then canceled and moved multiple times. That was frustrating because that really set back my writing process by a couple months.

Jessie had, at this point, marshalled their resources and energy to work on the dissertation, and acknowledged they needed help. Jessie alluded to feeling the pressure of time, which exacerbated the frustration. It is clear from other parts of the interview that Jessie did not express to the faculty member that they "needed that input more than anything." In fact, in another interview, Jessie described being embarrassed when other faculty saw them waiting for meetings that never occurred, because Jessie did not want to cast dispersion on the faculty member. At this point in the dissertation, the previous struggles built upon each other and Jessie stated, "I questioned everything I did." Unfortunately, Jessie ran into another place of stuckness because a faculty member was not as responsive as they needed. Jessie's frustration built because they were trying to work the process correctly and were losing time in the process. Jessie indicated that seeking guidance created liminal emotions over a long period of time:

> And there had been a history of that. There were times that I would get a meeting with that professor and that professor would not have looked at my previous draft and then, all of a sudden, kind of looking through it quickly. Then that professor would have a little more time to look at it, then they would have a lot more feedback at a different meeting.

So, I would think we went over this and I feel really confident that they approved of this chapter or this piece of data and then would be going over it again later and it would come up again. I would be like, okay, I thought we were okay with this because you said this looks good, and now it doesn't. So, you're going back and forth.

The back-and-forth movement in this stuck place described by Jessie is consistent with many of the threshold concepts associated with becoming doctorate. Jessie described the feelings involved with this liminality: "Anxiety, because you know, you're anxious about the feedback you're going to get and the changes you need to make." Jessie's frustration with the experience was evident as they thought the draft was complete and specific issues in the dissertation had been put to rest, only to have them brought up again in the next meeting. It was quite clear this negatively impacted their momentum.

The intensity of emotion and feelings of liminality are palpable in Pat's description of being stuck at two specific thresholds. The first stuck place for Pat occurred with the interview process which they identified as a "horror story" about lack of participants in their interviews:

When I was running into the stuckness issue on the two to three trips I made to Limestone University where no students showed up, I was just going, well, I've screwed up this study. I'll never finish this dissertation and I'll pay for it in a karmic way somehow.

The thoughts that Pat played internally during this situation were highly self-critical, but it should be noted that this came rather late into Pat's process, after they received the first extension on their dissertation. If a candidate experienced a situation like this in an earlier part of the process, perhaps it would not have seemed so traumatic, but because of previous struggles and setbacks, the pressure was greater on Pat. In another interview, Pat described the time:

I was despairing because I thought they would say, well your study is over. And they

didn't. But I was fully prepared to go, okay, it's 2011… I'm over. Maybe I should just

leave Pillars University and leave this part of my life like other people who were ABD

and just go.

Pat was acutely aware of the time they had left on the clock to finish the degree, and not

finishing had serious professional implications for them, hence the despair. Pat experienced

stuckness, and liminality came quickly afterward, especially as the clock wound down. For Pat,

there was another, more critical stuck place to come in the journey, to which they reacted even

more strongly:

Basically, rewrite your findings in this 6 to 9-week period of time… and then if you can't,

then you start over. [Pause] And that's when I looked at my time period. It was the end of

the semester. I don't know if that is something that you've run across with other people,

but the fear that I had spent all this time, money, and energy… it would all be lost if I

didn't do it in this particular period of time.

In this situation Pat was asked to do a complete overhaul of their analysis and results—after the

defense. Stepping back to evaluate the consequences of all the previous struggles, lost topics, and

sacrifice was daunting for Pat. The idea of all their work being lost and having invested time,

money, and energy into something that might not come to fruition created intense fear for Pat.

Pat explains their feelings:

Now, the emotion with regard with the extension to rewrite finding section… that

emotion was complete abject fear and realizing that I will be like everybody else who

started and then faltered out at the writing process, which is the vast majority, and I will

have nothing to show for it.

The abject fear of failure that Pat described is clearly a highly emotional response to being stuck in a liminal phase. Pat was clearly not anticipating this part of the journey when they began, nor when they changed topics, but the weight of incompletion and the consequences that could result loomed large for them. Interestingly, Pat did not mention that their committee was encouraging or helpful in this part of the process. Pat's major professor came alongside and indicated, "We have work to do, we are not going to fail," but it is uncertain if Pat disclosed the depth of emotional distress they were experiencing as they were stuck at a place of being unable to cross the analysis threshold.

The participants' reactions to being stuck, especially late in the process, reveal the pattern of behavior including doubt of accomplishment, and the persistent, internalized fear of being exposed as a fraud. It is important to remember that all three participants are well respected and accomplished practitioners who have a history of service in senior leadership roles at a variety of universities concurrently with degree completion, making the description of liminality and imposter syndrome that much more poignant. Jessie was in a mid-level administrative role while completing the degree but described the effect of liminality: "Oh yeah. I questioned everything I did." The loss of confidence in their ability as a researcher was stressful; Jessie stated, "It was tense. It was very difficult. It was very stressful. It was the worst part about the entire process, I would say, because you didn't know if you're making progress or not and you couldn't feel confident about what you're doing. So, yeah, that was challenging." Again, it is possible that had Jessie disclosed to the faculty they were working with the feelings associated with this portion of liminality there might have been a different outcome.

The participants in this study described how they struggled in many ways throughout the overarching liminality in the dissertation process of their PhD programs. They were aware that

the dissertation portion of the PhD program would include struggle and they provided several

examples of the struggle they experienced. Sometimes the areas of struggle resulted in a feeling

of being stuck. The participants described stuckness when they had come to a point in the

dissertation process that they needed to get through in order to move on to another phase of the

process, but did not have the knowledge, ability, or information needed to make progress. They

described periods of intense emotion as they were stuck at thresholds to becoming doctorate and

shared the internal dialogue they engaged in during this time. Struggling and getting stuck

throughout the dissertation process was a shared theme for all participants. They knew they

would struggle at times because they knew of colleagues who struggled through the dissertation

process and ultimately failed; however, there were times where simply knowing that there would

be struggles was not enough to prevent them. As the participants struggled and felt stuck at

various times through the dissertation process, they persevered with strategies and relied on their

support network to move through the process until completion.

Strategies and Supports for Surviving the Journey

Doctoral candidates can purchase a number of trade books, almost road maps, rife with

tips and suggestions about finishing a dissertation and surviving the dissertation journey. There

are also methods detailed in the literature for major professors to leverage when working with

students. If one does not recognize that stuckness and liminality will be part of the journey at the

outset, however, it is unlikely that they will build these strategies in their work. Jessie, Pat, and

Dani described the strategies and supports that they developed along the way and drew upon

during their long process. The supports and strategies described addressed the personal factors

including peer group, individual skills and attributes, motivation, and coping skills as they

struggled and became stuck. All three participants were pursuing the degree part-time, and found

their integration and contact with the department shifting in nature due to the time it took to be integrated and their proximity to the campuses at which their faculty supporters were based. As might be expected, these strategies took on different shapes and forms during the extended time frame these participants experienced as they completed their dissertations. What was not expected were the trade-offs that Jessie, Pat, and Dani described as they discovered, employed, invested in, and leveraged these strategies; and how they deemed these trade-offs worth it to get unstuck, over thresholds, and through the liminality of the dissertation journey.

A common strategy employed by candidates, regardless of their time to completion, is the use of a copy editor, but for these participants, this plan was not foolproof. When making sense of how to pull their dissertations together, Jessie, Pat, and Dani employed qualified copy editors to help with their drafts. This strategy should have provided additional confidence in the written product of all three participants. Dani shared about the qualifications of their copy editor:

> In terms of grammar, there is nobody better than Laura. When I worked at the university, if we hired anybody who had to do any kind of writing, we had them take this grammar test and Laura is the only person who got it 100% right. I was like, "hey you got it all right," and she's like "I know." [Laughter] She was my final editor.

The expert eyes that Dani brought to the table for editing their dissertation were skilled; however, while providing what should have been a measure of confidence in the writing, the additional set of eyes outside of the committee on the documents also created some unexpected additional frustration through the revision processes. Dani explained, "I would send them what I was given by major professor and Laura would be like, there's nothing wrong with that sentence. So, that was a huge frustration." This frustration played into the liminality that Dani experienced with the writing process, because now Dani was bouncing between two writing "experts"

without the confidence to contradict or correct either of them. Dani maintained the relationship and kept using the copy editor; however, because they had lost all confidence in their own ability to write and needed the extra help to escape liminality.

Using a copy editor was not an infallible strategy for success for Jessie, either. Jessie described part of the defense where "one of the folks who had not been reading the final copy said I think you should send this to an editor, and they gave me an editor they liked and used quite often." Jessie had already invested resources in a copy editor and spent a great deal of time working with them to create the final draft. Jessie felt in between a rock and a hard place for two reasons. First, Jessie needed the committee member to sign off on the draft and was not sure if this was a quid pro quo situation. Second, Jessie described: "there for a while I was really nervous because that was going to cost me a few thousand dollars. I didn't have that money at the time." The prospect of investing even more financial resources was daunting to Jessie, who did not make a habit of pushing back on committee suggestions or sharing the true nature of their feelings about the process. Fortunately, it came to light that the committee member who suggested this strategy was reading an older copy of Jessie's dissertation that had not been sent to the editor Jessie had already employed. Clearly, however, this additional frustration and worry at the end of the process was difficult for Jessie.

For all three participants, becoming familiar with the writing process took some adjustment, and required adaptive strategies. Jessie, Pat, and Dani were candid in their descriptions of practical process-related strategies they employed at various times over the long time to their degree completion, many of which dealt with the writing process itself. These strategies sometimes created unexpected complications and came at a cost, but were on balance, critical to their completion.

Ultimately, the strategies they landed upon with writing served to move them forward to completion, although they did have to determine what worked best for them. Pat's writing process changed over time as they made progress, because of the pull of other responsibilities: "There were periods of time where I was looking at the writing process primarily as okay, can I fit it all in this weekend." This strategy limited Pat's ability to make progress; however, Pat identified a seasonality to the timing of their writing. Pat said, "So, I slowed down in the Spring when I was on Spring projects. I did the best data collection and the writing in Fall and Summer because Summer I didn't have a lot of evening commitments." The concept of fitting writing in around other projects shows that the dissertation was still not top priority for Pat, but that finding some time to write helped them feel that they were still in the game.

Finding a rhythm to writing took time, and in some cases, a long time which at some point LTTD candidates do not have. With the final topic they selected, Pat needed to travel to several other universities out of state from their place of employment. During the cross-country interview process, and the struggle that ensued with a subset of the interview participants never showing up to interview, Pat described writing as both a strategy and an escape:

> I was driving out to the city to collect data, usually driving out on Thursday and usually spending the night Friday and interviewing all day Friday and then driving back on Friday night or Saturday morning. And then being in my dissertation cage on the weekend to decipher the information I had gleaned from the interviews. That's when I started making progress.

Pat was, at this point, under the pressure of time constraints to complete the degree and had finally prioritized writing along with the data collection over the pull of work and other commitments. Figuring out a way to optimize the time left was an important strategy for Pat in

this period of writing. Pat described their routine in more detail: "I spent a lot more time in the dissertation cage, like pretty much three to five times a week and on the weekends. Usually Saturdays I was spending time there, but Sundays was pretty much sleep deprivation correction." The cost of the shortage of time was depleted resources—in this case, sleep; and the crazy schedule cost Pat even more deeply as they lost a relationship with their partner of 26 years.

In addition to carving out time to write, all three participants had to find an environment in which writing could occur. Each participant described a different location that they used for writing, and all the locations had one thing in common: limited distraction. After attempting to work in their office, to no avail because of the constant stream of students coming through, Pat found a safe haven in a rather unique spot on the university's library:

> I was able to put 200 research books in my lockable carrel after I've checked them out, so
> they wouldn't disappear, and it was and annual renewal of $40 to rent this lockable carrel.
> I would leave my laptop there. I bought a separate laptop, left it there, and then just
> started going through books so I can do my lit review and that became the space where I
> actually wrote my dissertation.

The space Pat found had several important features: it was away from distractions, especially on football game weekends; it was secure; and it was inexpensive. Although not every candidate will have a locking carrel like Pat, identifying this as a need and strategy early in the process might save others time to completion in the future.

Out of sheer necessity, Jessie, Pat, and Dani discovered that in addition to a place to write, the next important strategy to employ was to identify and protect specific times to work on their dissertations and write, often at the cost of sleep and family engagements. This strategy is likely a necessity for every candidate, but all three of these participants were working full-time

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while completing the degree, so there were specific trade-offs in prioritizing writing. The trade-offs were worth it because time was short, as Jessie described: "So, at this point, I still had the energy to work on things, but I recognized that if there was one more hiccup, I was pretty much done. I was just exhausted of the process." At the point that Jessie committed to writing at specific times, really every time they were able, they were clearly motivated by a "last ditch effort" mentality. Dani had a similar "last ditch effort experience" when, in discouragement they discussed stepping away from the degree with their partner. During this discussion it was decided that they would finish, because the degree was something "they couldn't ever take away from" Dani. At that point, Dani indicated that they told their partner "I'll see you in 2019" and made the following adjustment to their writing schedule:

> I'd get up early. I mean, it was very common for me to get up at four o'clock in the morning because nobody bothers you four o'clock in the morning. You know, there's no one sending you emails that you think you need to attend to, and Lord knows none of my family is up, right? So, I would get up early.

Although getting up early to write was a drain on their resources, it was the best strategy, and after committing to the time frame, Dani made progress in completion. Tying together the time and focus themes with making progress, all three participants highlighted the importance of working on the dissertation for some time nearly every day—and illustrated the difficulty of setting it aside for long periods of time.

Carving out time to work and focus was an important strategy because it helped the participants feel that they were making progress. Jessie, of all the participants, was most cognizant of the energy it was taking to work on the dissertation, and how their energy ebbed and flowed throughout the process of their writing. At times of momentum and success for the

participants, energy was high and it was easier to commit to working on the dissertation. When there were setbacks and delays, energy was lower and it was harder to maintain commitment to the process. The strategy of managing energy and focusing specifically on the dissertation became critical to all three participants. After a series of setbacks, Jessie described the process of changing their level of commitment:

> I just said, "You know, I think I'm done with it, I don't have any more energy." There were multiple times the last two years that I just said, "I'm done with it." I basically allowed myself to think that it's over, put everything away, and didn't think about it for a month and gave my mind a break. Then scheduled time, came back to it, but I'll be honest, there are probably a couple of moments where I had no intention of returning to it. Where I said "It's done. If it's going to happen, I am going to feel passionate about it in the future and I'll pick it up again." And I did and finished it.

Jessie, having reached a point where there were no more resources left to give, stepped away to give themselves a break from the dissertation. During this time Jessie also described asking their partner if they should quit, to walk away and abandon it. Jessie's partner assented that they could quit, but asked Jessie to give it one more try. When Jessie admitted that even after picking up the last effort to get the dissertation completed, they had some moments where they had no intention of finishing the degree, one must ask how the energy and drive was replenished. In this case, it appears that just having been given the freedom to quit the degree altogether if the one last effort did not work, allowed Jessie to adopt a new mentality about the journey. Jessie then made a commitment to write regularly so that writing became a routine activity. As a result of this routine activity, Jessie devoted a lot of time when they were not working to focus on their

writing. As part of engaging in this new writing practice, Jessie described their efforts to be in the flow of writing:

> When I could spend a lot of time on the process to begin with and once I could devote a lot of time to it, I had a lot of confidence because I didn't have to wake up and think, "Where was I? What was I doing? It was, "oh, yeah. I was working on this yesterday. I know exactly what I'm doing today." Any time that flow is disrupted, that's when it got more difficult. But if I could have days to flow like that, it was great!

Jessie's flow was created by regular engagement in writing. When they stepped away from writing regularly, Jessie realized that they lost momentum and experienced confusion about where they were in the writing process. The importance of protecting the flow of writing and thought lies not just in making time, but in the confidence level Jessie described they maintained after adopting this strategy. Jessie described how a change in behavior, writing a little bit every day, mitigated the liminal thoughts and feelings of disorientation to the research and analysis. Dani described a similar experience defeating liminality and maintaining momentum: "what I experienced is that if I don't do it every day, then the small snippets of time that I had to work on it were spent figuring out what I was doing." Prior to committing to everyday writing, Dani had been trying to fit writing into time segments at work where they thought they would not be interrupted. There was not a set time or place to write so when they were able to spend a few moments here and there, much of that time was spent trying to unravel previous trains of thought. To make the most progress quickly and combat the fear associated with the stuck place of the re-write at the end of their process, Pat shared: "I was lucky to have accrued a lot of vacation in the time I was at the university and I was able to set aside four straight weeks of

writing." When the participants felt they were making progress on their topics, it became easier to stay engaged in the work of the dissertation.

To navigate the doctoral journey, including the struggle and stuck places, all three participants relied on a group of supporters to their process. All three participants were able to identify personal and academic support networks they drew upon for accountability and motivation while finishing the degree. Jessie described a social, familial group of supporters as well as a group of academicians with whom they were "checking in" frequently. This group included office staff, faculty, and Deans with whom they worked closely. What was helpful about this group was the nature of their "checking in":

A lot of questions about the process from them in a lot of support and encouragement. They wanted to know how things went and they were very encouraging. And good advice too. And folks who were there, you know, family was the same way. Okay, what do you need from us? No expectations. Just…what do you need?

The questions about process, support, and encouragement were critical to Jessie as their process lengthened. Jessie described the group as being supportive throughout the process; there was never any mention of support waning for them. At the outset, Jessie shared: "I immediately was already connected to that cohort on campus I think I connected with them and that was a support group. But over time some of that moved online, there were a few online colleagues I got to know really well." Jessie was employed on the campus at which they were studying throughout degree completion, and that proximity to campus provided opportunities for peers to check in and be a source of support. The periodical check-ins were valuable for Jessie primarily for the accountability and motivation they provided:

I knew that I needed to be able to articulate how I was doing and what were my struggles. It's hard to put words to some of our struggles. Not easy. But again, it is interesting that kind of leads you to being more productive and getting through some of those writer's block areas more than anything.

The act of identifying and speaking about the struggles they were facing to the support network around them was a help to Jessie. In fact, Jessie found that the consistent accountability of peers checking in was enough to keep them from throwing in the towel. It is interesting to note that Jessie did not mention their major professor or committee as part of their support network when asked generally about who supported them. There is also no mention of the major professor or committee initiating "check-ins" with Jessie during their process.

Pat's cohort not only supported them through the process of the dissertation, but also reminded them of why the PhD was needed in the first place, credentialing to advance. Pat further described the connection point for the group being specifically about earning the PhD:

A cohort of sorts, but we were all at different universities and we all coalesced around supporting each other periodically. Touching base about "How's it going with the writing?" and so on and so forth. . . We were all in the process of finishing our PhD's and it was one of those things where it was like "Oh, let's compare notes."

In this situation, there was benefit to the support network not all being on the same campus, as Jessie's was, but scattered across the country. For Pat, this cohort of sorts truly came together with the goal of helping each other complete the degree, and provided many of the examples that could have helped Pat finish in a more timely manner if they had not struggled with divided attention and not prioritizing the dissertation.

Dani's support network looked different from Pat's largely because of their movement in and out of higher education. Most of Dani's supporters had not directly experienced the emotions associated with the liminality that comes with writing dissertation. Dani described their support network:

> I have a group of friends that, you know, that were especially supportive, and you know, encouraging and tried to give me opportunities. Like Marsha Sanders, you know, they let me teach with them as part of my practicum. That was fun. That was very encouraging. My kids were encouraging to the extent that they could be. My kids were encouraging and acted like it was something that they were proud of. Beyond that, probably all my friend groups and my family thought it was cool. When I look at my dad's family and my mom's family, gosh, I have like one cousin's kid who has an MD. But, otherwise, I'm probably the one in both families with a PhD.

Dani had a support network but felt isolated somewhat because only a handful of friends knew the PhD journey first-hand. While it was encouraging to Dani to have those around them supporting "to the extent they were able," often this was not enough. Further, as relationships changed over time, Dani felt isolated and distanced even from those who were on campus and understood the journey. In addition to the nature of the support relationship changing, Dani also described their own approach to discussing their research with their support network:

> You know, my friends were supportive of it and my colleagues and, you know, they'd ask periodically but you know, I guess I'm also not somebody who, you know, sits around with people who this isn't their gig and spends a lot of time talking about what I'm finding and what I'm researching and what I read and stuff like that.

The limited manner in which Dani shared their journey with those who would have been supportive, created a disconnect between the parts of Dani's life, which may have made it more difficult for the support network to speak to Dani's journey. Dani described colleagues checking in periodically, but as Dani shifted roles across universities and other institutions during their completion, maintaining those relationships was difficult for them. The likelihood that a support network will lose interest in the dissertation process, or take it for granted, is one of the risks of taking a long time to complete a degree. This raises the question, of whether this is a place for intervention on behalf of students in a program without a built-in cohort, and for students, like Dani, who are working full-time and carrying a multitude of responsibilities in addition to completing the degree.

One of the strategies and supports that is often recommended to help curtail the difficulty associated with the independent nature of the dissertation is to create a cohort for candidates. These cohorts are created either by design during coursework or in the form of writing groups later in the dissertation process. Dani was invited by other students to join a writing group, but initially time was a major impediment for them to participate:

> It's just time and effort and, you know, where do I want to spend my time? Sarah would invite me to these writing group meetings, and they'd be working on their writing and stuff like that. You know, but I'm like I don't know most these people and it never clicked.

Here Dani raised another issue about cohorts for LTTD students; finding a group that understands the struggles associated with LTTD. Dani alluded to not identifying with many of the other candidates in the writing groups to which they were invited, and that created a disconnect for Dani, and a barrier to leveraging this support strategy. It is difficult for candidates

balancing multiple roles and responsibilities, especially if "outside" of their studies the social

network is not higher education driven, as Dani's was not. Dani directly attributed not joining

one of the writing groups as one of the factors that may have slowed their process saying,

"Maybe had I taken the time, I would have moved faster. I don't know. But, I didn't and that's the

way it is." Part of the reason Dani did not prioritize time is that as one of the only LTTD

students, they did not identify with the others in the group. Some institutions have examined

ways to put together cohorts for students. None of the three participants mentioned an

institutionally created cohort, but Dani described a "support group" put together by a faculty

member at the institution:

> Thinking back, you know, that group that faculty member put together, in my opinion,
>
> really helped a lot. Especially when there were quite a few people there. It lets you see
>
> that you weren't the only one. To see that I was not the only one feeling this way really
>
> helped. The people who were moving forward, you know, didn't get on my nerves. They
>
> were like me. They had a real job and the same struggles versus those who sat around and
>
> wrote all day kind of people.

For Dani, having a group of people they could identify as being like them in their roles and

responsibilities was encouraging. Being surrounded with other LTTD students was helpful to

Dani and allowed them to open up in a way they could not when surrounded by others, even

well-meaning others, who did not share the same dynamic of being involved in multiple roles.

Reflecting on this group, Dani indicated that it would have been helpful to have had the group

earlier in the process:

> Probably what might have been better is if at the moment I finished my comprehensive
>
> exams and started the beginning of the dissertation process, I would have been put into a

group like the one that faculty member put together. If I had a group like that to meet with and commiserate with at that time, that would have helped. Having a group like that early on instead of later in the process would have really helped. I felt like I used it as a band-aid later, but wish I could have had it earlier.

Dani's suggestion includes their opinion of whose responsibility it is to put together a group of supporters—the academic department. Dani also indicated that they waited too long in the process to implement this support, but in looking at the other decisions Dani made regarding prioritizing the dissertation at the outset of the process, it appears that Dani needed the pain of liminality to motivate them to make the support group a priority.

The participants in this study described the strategies they used and support networks they developed and were encouraged by throughout the dissertation process. All three participants described how designated space and time to write became more important throughout the dissertation process, especially as the energy and motivation for pursuing the degree ebbed and flowed. They employed copy editors to help with their various drafts throughout the dissertation process, and this provided additional confidence to all three participants. Pat and Jessi had strong personal and academic support networks to encourage them and keep them accountable throughout the dissertation process. Dani, however, had a strong personal network of support, but most of their supporters were not familiar with the PhD journey first-hand. Although none of the participants were in a cohort throughout their PhD program, all of them created their own cohort of sorts from colleagues, friends, and family members. These cohorts changed over time due to the length of time the participants spent working on their dissertations and the transient nature of working in higher education. Many of the supporters changed jobs, went to other institutions, or left higher education together,

requiring a shift in the way support was given, if it was given at all. The participants also described how they made sacrifices, professionally and personally, to complete the dissertation process. As strategies and support networks were used by the participants to move through the long dissertation process, the participants were internally driven and motivated by the opportunity to become doctorate.

Assuming Identity by Becoming Doctorate

Completing the dissertation and becoming doctorate were critically important to an aspirational identity of all three participants, in part because they were driven by career aspirations and goals they set for themselves, for which they needed the degree. Although being involved in the higher education arena at the outset of their journeys to doctorate, none of the participants had attempted a PhD program prior to the experiences detailed in the interviews for this study. The participants based evaluations of their ability on the relatable mastery experiences they had and by evaluating the experiences of others. The participants also went to great lengths to gain and maintain the approval of those they deemed as gatekeepers to their PhD degree completion: their major professors and doctoral committee members.

All three of the participants in this study were working full-time at a university when they began their studies. This focus on their current career in academia was a major theme that arose with all three participants, likely because Jessie, Pat, and Dani viewed earning the doctorate as a vehicle that would secure and cement their careers in higher education. Several of the references to career began with motivation for beginning the program but changed as the program progressed. Jessie expressed teaching in the collegiate classroom as a reason for embarking on the PhD:

If I ever wanted to teach again, I taught when I was a master's degree student, I taught for

a short time, decided that really wasn't for me, but I did like the academic conversations

at the graduate level and thought that might be an option.

Through past experience, Jessie knew they enjoyed teaching, but did not want to teach at the

undergraduate level. To teach graduate level courses in their field, Jessie needed the PhD. The

reason for continuing to work on the degree shifted for Jessie over time, but they had already

begun the degree as the focus shifted. Dani also embarked upon the PhD with the hope of

leveraging it into a teaching position. As their dissertation process continued and extended,

however, Dani faced a new reality:

As my career progressed, became obvious that even though I wanted to be able to teach, I

recognized that I don't have eight published papers and, I'm not going to have that. I'm

going to have my dissertation, that's as close as I'm going to get and this is what it is.

Getting that faculty member position was going to be a tough row to hoe.

There was some disappointment in Dani's voice as they related the perceived reality that they

would not be in a position to attain the original goal with the PhD process. The recognition that

even though they had struggled through the dissertation, it would not be enough was difficult for

Dani, especially as they had defined their future identity by that goal.

In a similar way, Pat defined their identity by the places they served professionally and at

what level. Pat said, "I have now served on Cabinet-level positions. And I reported directly to the

President at my most recent institution." This professional level of service was critical to Pat's

view of themselves, and the journey to being doctorate was inextricably intertwined with their

career and how credentialing impacted their ability to do their jobs. Jessie, Pat, and Dani thought

that earning a PhD was a privilege and critical to advancement, being taking seriously, and

improving their ability to advocate for students. Pat noted, "Because there is innate prejudice against non-PhDs." All of the participants saw the PhD as something that was permanent to them and their identities apart from their professional advancement.

Because their career aspirations were so closely tied to earning the doctoral degree, when their progress was extended, and eventually threatened with non-completion, the threat was not just to their personal identity but also to their future livelihood. When approached with the possibility that they might not finish the degree in time, Pat described experiencing abject fear and the thought "I might as well leave the field of higher ed because I will not have the union card. I will have had valuable experience, but, you know, to progress in the field, you need to have the PhD." After coming into the process admittedly overestimating their abilities as a researcher, Pat was afraid that they would be one of the many who did not finish, but might also have to step away from the career at which they had worked so hard and prioritized over the dissertation.

In part because the participants were balancing the pressure of finishing the degree to keep their careers, the messaging about their abilities and completion had significant implications for the participants as they experienced the LTTD journey. This verbal persuasion ranged from informed and uninformed evaluation of the participants' experiences to confident platitudes. In some cases, the messages provided by others set the expectation for how the PhD process would work. Dani described a discussion they had with a faculty member friend who illuminated the dissertation process: "She's like write your report and then you can take all the research that you did and roll it into a dissertation and, poof, you're done." Dani recalled this messaging throughout the long time to completion, each time they received the edits from the major professor with the messaging about their writing not being good enough. The misguided

direction Dani received at the outset of the journey ended up serving as a great source of frustration to Dani when their journey was not so simple.

Often, the messaging that Jessie relied upon was matter-of-fact evaluation of what the process would be like and what they should expect to experience and feel:

One of my committee members had also said, "You're pushing your brain to do something… to do something you've never done before. You are pushing it to its limits. You are going to expand your knowledge. You are also going to expand your ability to deal with change, and your ability to cope with difficult times, in regard to academics and struggling with information being at that stuck point of what you do next"

Jessie recalled this message later when they were surprised by some of the struggles they encountered. The reminder that there was a light at the end of the tunnel and that there were skills being developed were encouraging to Jessie. This message helped with the period of time where Jessie expressed feeling that: "I don't know if what I'm doing is accurate, valid." For all three participants, the positive and negative messaging about the process was salient and provided motivation to complete the degree.

For Pat, there was an additional driving message, they repeatedly mentioned a supervisor who was critical of the progress they made. Pat said:

They made many critical comments about my process. They'd say well, you went to do your PhD full-time and I'm doing mine part-time while working full-time. I think that's a qualitative difference of approach. I don't think they saw it that way. There were two other people working on the PhD in our department as well and I think they ran into the same sort of criticism from them. I don't know why he decided to criticize us.

Pat described the effect of this supervisor on the way Pat perceived their ability multiple times during the interviews and it clearly made an impression Pat carried with them and referenced internally throughout the journey. In one sense, this supervisor's messaging and lack of support made Pat's process more difficult and caused Pat to question many parts of their journey. On the other hand, this supervisor's messaging proved to be a motivating factor for Pat to complete, even as LTTD. Messaging from individuals inside and outside of the participants' networks of support framed their experiences and impacted how they saw themselves as researchers and professionals.

Partly because of their successes in their careers and master's degrees, each of the participants were fairly confident in their abilities as researchers and students coming into the PhD process. Success through undergraduate and master's programs formed the basis for these evaluations of their previous experiences. These self-referent judgments were not always correct, as the participants discovered as they worked on their studies through topic changes and re-writing analysis sections, and their assessment of their identities as researchers shifted throughout the process.

Even though they were situated in careers in higher education and had a reference for what becoming doctorate was about, none of the participants had prior experiences with writing a dissertation; they measured themselves against the experiences of others. All three participants used the experiences of other candidates as reference points when they came to periods of struggle and stuckness in their process. At the beginning of the dissertation process, and in trying to find a topic and appropriate literature, Jessie poured over several completed dissertations recommended to them by their committee. Jessie described how they felt as they read paper after paper:

Looking at other dissertations and feeling incompetent and saying, "How did they come

up with so many theories and how did they come up with this much literature?"

This comparison with other's final projects at the outset of their own process may have

contributed to the "deep dives" and "rabbit trails" Jessie described as part of their literature

review process. Jessie doubted their identity and ability as a researcher and worked doubly hard

to make sure that they were gathering enough material to complete a dissertation.

Dani did not have a group of supporters around them academically or personally in the

same way that the other participants did, so the comparisons that they drew about their abilities

to complete the degree came from the experiences of other students as a reference point.

Although comparing circumstances and outcomes provided perspective and strong emotions for

Dani, as well, they could see that their journey to doctorate had taken a different path than the

other students in their classes:

I really felt envious and still do of people who were able to you know, go Bachelor's, then

master's, then PhD, and they're 30 years old and they've got the same degree that I do and

ready to go off and start their life. And they've been able to do that working a part-time

job.

Dani felt isolated in the multiple roles they were balancing, and when referencing the

experiences of others, saw little in common. These comparisons with others and the emotions

they brought to bear for Dani may have contributed to their inability to identify with a cohort

unless that cohort had similar experiences as Dani.

It should be anticipated that in this new undertaking, the participants would infer their

capabilities from knowledge of what they can do or have done in other, similar situations.

Because they did not have prior experience with actually completing a PhD, each of the

participants ran the risk of making an incorrect translation of their abilities and were vulnerable to relying more heavily on vicarious judgment, because the criteria or measures used to evaluate success in the undertaking were not clear. The reliance on the comparisons of their abilities with others became the criteria of success for Jessie, Pat, and Dani. That success was also measured by the feedback they received from their major professors and committees.

All three participants described going to great lengths to navigate the relationships with the "gatekeepers" to the identity that they wanted to assume. In attempting to complete the rites of passage necessary to become doctorate, Jessie, Pat, and Dani identified their major professors and committees as being the holders of the keys to the community, which made seeking help and assistance from them significantly more nuanced.

One of the parts of the journey that all three participants experienced was a disagreement between the participants and their committee about a part of the dissertation. The examples that were given included word choice and writing techniques, development of theory and method, analysis of the findings, and even the purpose and intent of the research itself. For all three participants, there were times in the process when they did not push back or argue with their major professor or committee due to their lack of confidence as a researcher. All three participants seemed to see themselves as initiates into the community and their major professor and committee as the gatekeepers to that community. Even with outside, expert confirmation of a recommended path, Dani did not feel confident enough to push back on the committee suggestions: "I think it's both because I didn't have the confidence level to push back to my major professor and say 'No, I think the sentence is right.'" Dani was repeatedly receiving feedback from their faculty member that their writing was not good enough, and because they were relying on the "poof, you're done" perspective set out for them by another faculty member,

each time they received that feedback their confidence took a hit. This inability to be able to confidently push back, eventually led Dani to select a survive-and-advance perspective on their dissertation:

> I had definitely, by that time, adopted the attitude that you know, this is not a Pulitzer Prize winning paper. I don't necessarily intend to turn it into a book or anything like that. I just wanted it done, and throwing up red flags to my major professor was not going to get it done.

Dani was frustrated with the back and forth between the editor and major professor, but saw any disagreement as potentially calling into question whether or not they were worthy of earning the PhD. Due to this fear of stalling or failing, Dani adopted a pattern of mimicry associated with the imposter syndrome. Dani did not push back on suggestions made by the major professor, even if they did not agree with the suggestions. They began to write in the words selected by the major professor in order to move forward through the path of least resistance.

Not pushing back on the committee did not always find its roots in not wanting to throw up red flags. Pat shared that although they knew that they were probably correct in their disagreement with their committee about some interpretations in their work, they did not push back for cultural reasons:

> You are taught to always take the feedback and the criticism and never challenge an authority figure. You don't challenge them in a public venue, but you ask a question that gets them to think about something in a different way and I didn't have questions as I was new to this process. I accepted pretty much everything they said because they had been there and I had not. So, that's cultural.

Pat's experience is not unique, and it should be noted that a major professor should understand the cultural implications of power and authority for their students. Although Pat's relationship with their major professor was good, had there been difficulty for Pat they likely would not have pushed back, and if the feelings of not being heard continued, could have been in danger of abandoning their studies.

Because the committee members held the key to finishing and becoming doctorate, the participants did not want to create issues or make them angry fearing that if they did so they would be denied the PhD. Jessie scheduled time with a committee member for feedback specifically on the method of study and the analysis of the data. Scheduling these meetings took effort on the part of the participants. Jessie described:

> There were multiple times where I set up a meeting and waited at their office and they weren't around. I saw a lot of their colleagues and it felt really awkward because they were wondering why I was waiting and when I explained it, I didn't want to make anybody feel bad. That's just reality. I would set up Zoom appointments where the faculty member did not appear.

Jessie described the processes of negotiating roles and power, struggling to get the feedback they needed, but also being aware of the social structure of the department and not wanting to cast blame on the committee member. It should be noted that the professor Jessie was meeting with was crucial to the dissertation process as they were the faculty member most familiar with the type of research Jessie was completing. Even when the committee member did appear for meetings, Jessie described experiences where this strategy was not as helpful as it could have been:

We'd sit down to look at a chapter and I'd go in to meet with them and they hadn't taken a look at it before. So right then and there, they're cruising through it really quickly to give me feedback. I should have, at that moment, said this isn't the person for my committee. This isn't a person who has the time to devote to students right now because they don't have the time to read things ahead of time and provide feedback. And that happened a number of times. Feedback was not thought through because they hadn't had the time to read my paper. I mean that happened a couple times throughout my process.

Jessie understood that there was a system in place to switch committee members for a better fit, and in hindsight, Jessie wished that they had done so. Jessie did not see themselves in a position to be able to push back on the committee structure, partly because of the needed expertise from that committee member, and partly because they did not want to extend the process any longer than it had to be. When explaining this situation in the interview, Jessie's frustration was evident as their answers at this part of the interview became much slower and Jessie took more time in answering, clearly choosing words carefully when describing this part of the process. In the end, Jessie felt they had lost time in consultation with this faculty member, time that added to the LTTD. Jessie described the power differential as they explained the defense process:

So, while I was sitting outside while people were discussing whether or not I was worthy of the doctor title, doctor of philosophy, my future had changed. There are direct consequences to getting that PhD.

In the end, Jessie was acutely aware of who made the decision on if their body of work as an initiate researcher was worthy of earning them access into the community of doctorate. The prospect of the consequences to obtaining that PhD, both positive and negative, far outweighed the need to push back. This understanding of who makes the decisions about becoming doctorate

may also shed light on why Jessie, Pat, and Dani were not more forthcoming with their struggles, stuckness, and liminality throughout the process. There was simply too much risk involved with being honest and sharing truthfully.

The interactions with major professors and committee members were influenced by the self-perception of the participants, mainly by their confidence level of knowledge regarding research and data analysis coupled with their ability to write. The participants were hesitant to push back on suggestions made by their major professors and committee, but for different reasons.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine and describe the lived experiences of three doctoral candidates who earned PhD degrees from Colleges of Education at Midwestern research universities and spent five or more years to successfully complete their dissertations. Of specific interest was how these long-time-to-doctorate candidates made sense of experiences and made progress to complete their dissertations. This study sought to answer the following question:

How do long-time-to-doctorate (LTTD) candidates describe the experiences associated with an extended, successful dissertation process?

The themes uncovered as the participants described their experiences overlap to some degree, and in this section, I will compare each participant's experiences along the three themes that emerged in response to the research question. The table presented below briefly relates how the described experiences associated with the participants' extended, successful dissertation processes related to the themes uncovered. The table also presents the research insight gleaned from the descriptions and the themes. In addition, this chapter includes a discussion of the results of the study.

Table 4.1 Themes developed in response to research question and research insights

	Jessie	Pat	Dani	Research insight
Surprised by struggle and stuck in liminality	Took time away at outset of dissertation, slow to get started. Went down "rabbit trails" in initial literature review, changed topic and lost time invested in topic. Presented proposal draft and was told to completely change topics. Questioned everything they did; lost momentum and energy; asked partner if they could quit. Struggled with faculty who were extremely difficult to schedule with at a critical juncture in the analysis part of the dissertation. Did not completely trust faculty guidance.	Focus on rapidly growing career took time away at outset of the study. Multiple topic changes due to situations out of their control used time. Ran into difficulty with lengthy IRB process due to population being studied, then became stuck with interviewing process as participants did not show up. Over-estimated ability as a researcher. Was told at defense that they had not actually done analysis and needed to rewrite entire final chapters. Was under great stress.	Focus on family, career, viewed 6 years to finish as a long time. Needed a break after preliminary exams. Planned to write on same topic as master's thesis, was surprised by topic change. Struggled with writing competence and feelings of failure when given feedback. Stepped away for weeks and months when given feedback that was difficult to take. Experienced several job changes and health challenges.	Not every struggle led to stuckness, rather the small struggles at the outset resulted in lost time, so when real stuckness arose later in the process, pressure was greater due to lost time. Even when rites of passage were successfully completed and thresholds were crossed, the participants' self-efficacy was not positively impacted, participants questioned everything they did.
Strategies and supports for survival	Established a place and specific time to write. Scheduled time to meet with faculty who had expertise in their specific area of analysis. Set deadlines for defense and dedicated time and energy to writing at the exclusion of other life happenings.	Sought help on topic, conceptual model, and interviewing strategy from faculty members. Assembled a cohort of sorts to support them. Discovered seasonality of writing, found writing carrel in the library. Took	Hired a copy editor, but continued to be told their writing was not good enough, even after the copy editor looked at it. Did not have confidence to push back. Did not have an academic support network because friends and family were	Strategies and supports are personal for each candidate, what works for one may not work for another. Some supports are consistent across participants but were tailored to the individual learner. Strategies that should have helped the participants also

		several weeks off of work to focus on writing	not in higher education. Keenly aware of their LTTD status, and that they were different from traditional candidates, but eventually found support with a group of other LTTD candidates. Awakened early to write, decided to forgo family commitments to finish.	created difficulty with which they had to confront.
Assuming identity by becoming doctorate	"Covered" for faculty who did not show up for scheduled meetings. Hid displeasure with faculty who did not read their work prior to meetings. Identified consequences to becoming doctorate. Viewed committee as the ones who decided if they were worthy to be PhD.	Did not push back on committee because of cultural implications. Concealed displeasure with faculty who did not read draft prior to defense. Considered reality of leaving student affairs if they did not earn the degree. Viewed PhD as "union card" signifying belonging in higher education. Did not disclose limitations in research ability to faculty. Did not disclose fear and anxiety over not completing to faculty.	Did not push back on edits or changes to drafts because they did not want to throw up any "red flags." Concealed displeasure with criticism. Suppressed struggle with writing. Stepped away from dissertation for months when given criticism to focus on other areas of life where they were successful.	The participants saw the faculty they worked with as gatekeepers to the new identity they sought, worked hard to not jeopardize the relationship with faculty. Participants filtered messaging and experiences during the journey to make meaning about their abilities as researchers. Demonstrated behavior associated with imposter syndrome. When they struggled, participants prioritized areas of success in their lives over the dissertation they were struggling with, while maintaining ABD identity.

The theme of surprised by struggle and stuck in liminality overlapped with strategies for survival, as these participants found strategies to emerge from struggle and stuckness. The struggles experienced at the outset of the dissertation process were small in affect and not all struggles resulted in stuckness. As the process lengthened the awareness set in that these smaller struggles drained the participants of energy and resulted in lost time, creating pressure at the end of the dissertation when time was short. The strategies the participants leveraged were similar, yet unique to each of them and adapted for their individual situations. However, some of the strategies the participants leveraged led to additional struggles with which they had to be dealt. There is an interplay between the first two themes and the assuming identity and becoming doctorate theme, as some of the supports the participants leveraged were directly tied to the multiplicity of identities they assumed. Additionally, the participants worked hard to maintain the relationships with the gatekeepers they viewed as holding the key to the identity they wanted to assume, becoming doctorate. When struggle and stuckness occurred, the participants suffered silently through imposter syndrome rather than raise in the minds of faculty members the question of their worthiness of being doctorate.

That the participants experienced struggles throughout the dissertation process was not surprising. The literature clearly addresses areas that doctoral students are known to struggle with during their programs, and the dissertation is one of them (Kiley, 2009; Pyhalto et al., 2012). Many individuals who struggle with the dissertation for an extended time become stuck and do not finish their programs; instead, they walk away (Golde, 2000; Lovitts, 2011, Jacks et al., 1983). The analysis of the participants' descriptions of their experiences as LTTD candidates draws a differentiation between struggling and stuckness. The participants' experiences included areas of struggle associated with the dissertation that do not result in stuckness. Jessie described

spending a great time researching literature because they struggled to narrow their topic. Pat described a long search for a conceptual model and a lens through which to view the research. Dani described shifting gears on their topic at the suggestion of the major professor. The participants characterized these experiences as struggles, but did not relate them as areas of stuckness. It was when the participants were unable to make progress with the struggle that they became stuck.

Threshold concept research identifies stuckness as a wrestling with troublesome knowledge and an opportunity for growth in the learner as they assume their new identity (Meyer et al., 2010). Some of the thresholds at which the participants became stuck included topic selection, choosing conceptual model, the interview process, analysis, and the submission process. For instance, Pat had to complete two proposals on their final topic because they did not quite understand what was required in a conceptual model. Although Pat did not describe intense emotions with this stuck place, they did express great relief when a faculty member finally suggested a model that they could understand and use. During these in-between times of wrestling with transition, the participants experienced deep misgivings about their abilities. These misgivings manifested in thoughts of not being worthy of being doctorate, questioning if they would ever finish, and wondering if the journey was even worth it. As they struggled to clear thresholds, the participants compared their journeys to those of others, often viewing their journey unfavorably. Stepping away from the dissertation for a period of time often helped the participants cope with their feelings of failure and frustration with the lack of progress. Similar to mastery learning, as candidates complete one smaller task or rite of passage in the dissertation process, they should move on to the next task with more confidence (Bandura, 1997; Cervone, 2016), therefore, may not experience the depth of emotion associated with being stuck in

liminality. That assumption was not evident in the descriptions of the participants. In fact, even when they completed rites of passage and cleared thresholds, the participants described no increase in confidence or self-efficacy.

Jessie struggled to begin the dissertation process, and then struggled to secure consistent support and guidance from their major professor and committee as they researched, wrote, and analyzed data. Overcoming smaller struggles in the dissertation process did not serve to enhance Jessie's confidence at crossing these thresholds; instead, it took a toll on their energy and motivation. As a result, when a major re-write and topic change was suggested well into dissertation work, Jessie had little energy to give to the dissertation. At this time, rather than drawing on some of the successes achieved in the first topic write-up, Jessie asked their partner if they should quit the dissertation process. Jessie's partner encouraged Jessie to try one more time; this allowed Jessie to reframe their mindset that one way or another (complete or walk away) there was a light at the end of the tunnel of the doctoral process. This shift in perspective allowed Jessie to garner energy to start one last push for completion of the degree before they walked away. Behaviorally, Jessie blocked time and focused solely on the writing to the exclusion of other activities. The literature revealed that candidates most feel they are making progress when they have momentum (DeVos, 2017), and that momentum can often motivate them to finish the degree (Grover, 2007; Hoskins & Goldberg, 2005; Lovitts, 2005; Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012). Once Jessie was able to employ these strategies, they were able to gain momentum, though not confidence in their abilities, and that momentum saw them through the remaining struggles and stuckness to successful completion.

It is unclear why Pat chose to prioritize their professional career over the dissertation at the outset, other than they were experiencing success in their career at the time. The literature is

mixed with regard to the impact of working full time while completing a doctoral degree (Gordon et al., 2008; Stein, Wanstreet, & Trinko, 2011); however, choosing to prioritize the job over the dissertation delayed Pat's progress. Once they started, Pat found that they had greatly over-estimated their ability as a researcher; Pat sought expert opinions of committee members to help determine which conceptual model to use and how to best set up methodology for the study. Several procedural variances occurred during Pat's journey, including having to submit three requests for Institutional Review Board (IRB) approvals to carry on with research. It was not until Pat reached the interview stage for the study that they truly got stuck when interviewees did not show up to participate, and the study had to be reconceptualized. Pat described this stuckness as a difficult time, full of self-doubt and internal thought processes that were overly critical of themselves. The self-doubt and questioning were part of the final area of stuckness for Pat, when they had to re-write the analysis section of their dissertation. Pat's description of this time relates in many ways to the imposter syndrome (Espino, Munoz, & Marquez Kiyama, 2010; Haigh, Hardy, & Dunacn, 2011; Herrmann, 2012). Questioning if one should be in academia or working on a doctoral degree, combined with the fear that others will learn how little the individual knows, are characteristic of imposter syndrome. Even more deeply troubling to Pat was the revelation that they had overestimated their abilties as a researcher; Pat felt there might be some truth to the judgement about their inability to be PhD. The persistent, internalized fear of being exposed as a fraud (Clance & Imes, 1978) was painful for Pat as they wrestled with the troublesome knowledge needed to successfully analyze their data; however, this fear and anxiety also served as the motivator for completion.

Dani, also, stepped away from beginning the dissertation as soon as they completed preliminary examinations with the understanding that there were several years available to

complete the dissertation. Several personal and professional happenings, including illness and job changes, pulled their focus away from research. These types of occurrences have been linked to degree abandonment and delay in completion (Manathunga, 2005; van de Schoot et al., 2013), and these factors played in to Dani's LTTD journey. When Dani did reengage with the dissertation, they realized that they had overestimated their ability to write at the level required for PhD research. When feedback was given about their abilities, Dani was deflated and found it necessary to take even more time away from the process focusing on areas of their life where they did have success to rebuild their confidence, thereby extending the process even further. As time drew near and pressure mounted to finish the dissertation, Dani discussed with their partner if it was better to complete or walk away. With new clarity of purpose after that discussion, Dani hired an editor and allocated time to work at the exclusion of all other parts of their life.

The participants described the in-between phases, when they were wrestling with troublesome knowledge, as difficult times full of self-doubt. These times in the journey were characterized by internal thought processes where the participants were overly critical of themselves. During these times the participants sought expert opinions of committee members, discussed quitting the process all together, and stepped away from writing. The participants eventually blocked time to focus solely on writing to the exclusion of other activities, and once they had momentum and continuity of thought in their writing felt they were making progress and gained energy. The times of wrestling with the troublesome knowledge involved fear and anxiety, and also served as a motivator for completion.

The participants leveraged a number of strategies and supports to help themselves become unstuck and gain momentum to complete their dissertations. These strategies and supports were identifying with a peer group, honing individual skills, becoming motivated, and

developing coping skills (Bair & Haworth, 2004; Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012). Each

of the participants found a place to write that was unique to them and where they could focus

without interruption. This took a different shape and form for each of them, but all three utilized

this strategy. The focus on writing created a set of challenges for each of them in their personal

relationships, however, and Pat described losing a relationship of 26 years in the process. A

cohort or support network is known to positively impact doctoral completion (Strayhorn, 2005;

van de Schoot et al., 2013). Jessie did not rely on a cohort of students for support during their

process; they had a number of faculty and peers who knew about their area of research who

checked in. Pat formed a cohort of sorts with a group of culturally similar professionals scattered

across the country, all of whom were working on their PhD programs. This group of

professionals checked in with one another and encouraged each other. Dani had a difficult time

accepting invitations to join a cohort of students pursuing the degree full-time. Dani viewed their

journey as very different and became frustrated with those who were able to devote more time

and energy to the dissertation process. All three participants were pursuing the degree part-time,

a decision that has been negatively associated with completion (Girves & Wemmerus, 1988;

Nettles & Millett, 2006; Zahl, 2015), and found their integration into and contact with the

department shifting in nature, another factor that has been shown to impact persistence (Antony,

2002; Lovitts, 2001; Lovitts & Nelson, 2000). The group with which Dani eventually found

support consisted of a number of LTTD candidates who were more like Dani, and with whom

they shared several layers of identity.

  There are a multiplicity of roles and identities that adult student learners carry with them

into education (Offerman, 2011; United States Department of Education, 2016); for these

participants, the potential consequences of obtaining the degree, and their experiences during the

process greatly influenced the way they viewed themselves. Due, in part, to the multiple roles the participants juggled while completing the degree, the LTTD process required a great deal of shifting, which itself turned into a strategy of sorts for them. When working on the dissertation was especially difficult due to the discouragement and deflation that accompanied negative feedback or a recognition that no progress was being made, one strategy that all three participants used was to shift their focus onto, or prioritize, a part of their identity in which they were successful. The participants described this shift differently in the interviews than times when the participants were pulled in other directions by responsibilities that they prioritized over working on the dissertation. There were times in the interviews where the participants described focusing on work, or health challenges arose; the choice to privilege an area of success over the dissertation was described differently. Dani, especially, described stepping away from the dissertation for months at a time when they received critical feedback about their writing. Neither Jessie, Pat, or Dani identified their motivation for pursuing the degree as being to better their field through research, and focusing on an area where they felt accomplished—particularly their family or career—seemed to help them feel competent and not so discouraged about the dissertation. Both Dani and Jessie discussed completely abandoning their dissertation process in an effort to alleviate themselves of the burden of the dissertation. This set of behaviors can be viewed in two different ways. Avoiding the work of the dissertation would seem to signal a lack of self-efficacy (Elliott & Church, 1997; Liem et al., 2008) as self-efficacy is built on success that comes after creating and testing different perseverant behaviors and strategies (Cervone, 2016). From another perspective, however, these participants did, eventually, choose mastery behaviors and strategies, which is characteristic of high self-efficacy (Imus, Burns, & Weglarz, 2017; Peterson-Graziose, Bryer, & Nikolaidou, 2013), and it could be argued that they were able

to do so precisely because they returned to an area of their lives where they felt good about themselves and their abilities. The limitation to this strategy was that the shift in focus took time away from making progress and increased the pressure toward the end of their long time to doctorate.

The shift in focus proved a double-edged sword for all three participants, because their professional identities were tied to this educational accomplishment, which heightened the participants fear of being a fraud (Clance & Imes, 1978; Keefer, 2015). Pat described the fear and anxiety that motivated them to finish the degree as being directly tied to their identity because the logical consequence to not finishing the PhD would necessitate an exit from a bright career in higher education. The inability to complete the dissertation would not only impact their identity as a researcher, but also their personal and professional identities.

As the participants encountered difficulty and struggled through the dissertation process, they filtered those experiences to make meaning about their identity as researchers. These contextual influences, experiences, and interactions may impact the way doctoral candidates make meaning about their journey. Because meaning-making is a filter for contextual factors that influences the self-perceptions of identities and the relationships between each identity (Abes & Jones, 2004), this filter may be a defining factor in how contextual factors shape doctoral candidates' perceptions of themselves (Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2017). The candidate's perception of their identity as a researcher may be impacted by the way they make meaning about the experiences they have on the doctoral journey. Not earning the "union card" associated with having a PhD motivated the participants to finish at the end and kept them from sharing with faculty the times when they were especially struggling, and the depth of their emotions when stuck.

The individuals the participants worked the hardest to keep their stuckness and struggles from were the major professor and committee responsible for appraising their strengths and weaknesses as researchers worthy of earning the doctoral degree. The ability to navigate the relationship with a major professor has been seen as a critical factor to persistence among PhD students (Gardner, 2008; Jairam & Kahl, 2012; Rockinson-Szapkiw, Spaulding, & Spaulding, 2016). The participants in this study saw the faculty in the role of gatekeepers who controlled not only the direction and pace of the academic work, but also held in their hands the future of the participants' personal and professional identities. The fear of being found not worthy was, in the minds of the participants, a real one based upon multiple incorrect assessments of their abilities as researchers, failed proposals, failed topics, and difficulty with writing. According to Keefer et al. (2015), in times of challenge, when a student is stuck in the "confusion, difficulty, and doubt" (p. 15) of liminality, doctoral students rely on the supervising faculty member of their doctoral committee (major professor) to be the primary means of support and encouragement. For the participants in this study, however, the depth of their struggles was kept secret and they chose not to share their intense emotional reactions to liminality. This is consistent with research, as individuals who struggle with liminality and imposter syndrome often do so in silence, not sharing that struggle with anyone (Keefer, 2015; Kiley, 2015) as they "play the game" in hopes of entering the community of practice (Meyer et al., 2010). Instead of disclosing to faculty and reaching out for the support they needed, the participants internally played the messaging from others about their shortcomings as researchers. Pat replayed the messaging about ABD not being a degree; Jessie revisited the fear of being one of the many who did not finish; and, Dani wrestled with the difficult academic journey they had experienced prior to being PhD and questioned their ability with everything.

The unequal power differential between Jessie, Pat, and Dani and the faculty influenced those relationships. The participants saw the faculty as the ones holding the keys to the community they so desperately wanted to join. Identity in threshold concept research is tied to the learning environment in which the learner participates and is defined not only by how the social identity group perceives them (Evans et al., 2010), but also by successful completion of the rites of passage signifying they crossed a threshold (Kiley, 2009). There were times in the journey when the participants were thankful for the help and assistance of their major professors as they navigated rites of passage and thresholds, but also times when the major professor was the source of frustration for two of the three participants. When gatekeepers did not keep appointments, did not come to meetings prepared, or arrived at the defense with the wrong copy of the dissertation, the participants were frustrated and disappointed. Jessie described waiting for a faculty member for a meeting and being embarrassed when other faculty asked about it. This frustration became an additional drain on energy and momentum; however, the participants did not share this frustration with any of the faculty. There is no way to know how the experiences of these participants would have been shaped had they shared the depth of the difficulty they encountered; however, examples in the participants' descriptions of times where they did share with a positive outcome are included in the data.

When the gatekeepers to the doctoral community worked together to support the participants, the process ran more smoothly, the participants felt they were making progress, and self-messaging improved. Participants described instances where these gatekeepers helped clear the way for interviews, reframed topics, refined conceptual models, checked in regularly, and even helped with the analysis of data. These would be instances of faculty acting as an explicit and tacit knowledge base of the field, which is a critical role for them to play (Bieber & Worley,

2006; Curtain et al., 2013; Gerholm, 1990; Golde, 2000). Pat relied heavily on their committee for not only the theoretical model, but also thinking through the logistics involved in the process of interviewing participants in multiple cities and states. When Jessie ran into difficulty getting the rich data they were hoping for from interviews, they shared the dilemma with the committee and the committee helped them reframe the study to accommodate for an additional population that could provide richness and depth. Dani's major professor was excited by the data and findings during the analysis process and worked with them to tease out meaning and develop themes. These efforts provided illumination on the path to finishing the degree and gave the participants a way forward, which has been shown to be key to persistence (Golde, 2000; Lovitts, 2001). All three participants acknowledged that they could not have completed the degree without the help of their major professors and committee members.

As the participants struggled through their LTTD journeys, at various times, they found themselves stuck and experienced the emotions associated with liminality. The process of working through their programs provided opportunities to experiment with a variety of strategies; some were successful, some not. The procedures in place described by the participants were helpful in guiding the process, and the major professor and committee members impacted all three participants' experiences. Finally, all three participants relied on the messaging from a variety of sources to define themselves and their progress throughout their programs. Driven by career aspirations and the goals they set throughout the process, these participants evaluated their progress and achievements considering the ultimate goal they set for themselves of being doctorate.

Chapter Summary

This chapter provided a description of each of the participants, Jessie, Pat, and Dani as well as analysis of their descriptions of their experiences in the process of becoming doctorate over a long dissertation journey. All three participants completed their degree while working full time, and were employed, at least for part of their doctoral studies, at a university. All three earned a PhD degree in Education from a Midwestern university. Though many of their experiences were similar, as there are parts of the PhD journey that are commonplace, each described unique areas of struggle and stuckness by which they were surprised. All three participants leveraged strategies and supports along the way and found individuals in their lives who would support them. They interacted at varying levels of satisfaction and success with their committee members and major professors. They withheld areas of struggle and weakness from the faculty members and experienced intense emotions when stuck. Ultimately, all three participants successfully finished their degrees and became doctorate and were changed by the journey.

Chapter 5 - Implications, Recommendations, and Conclusion

Graduate student persistence and mental health have been much publicized in higher education literature and the general media (Barreira, 2018; Cantwell et al., 2015; Evans et al., 2018; Flaherty, 2018; Jones 2013). Previous studies of persistence (Devos et al., 2017; Golde, 2000) at the doctoral level noted high attrition rates and a seeming disconnect between student experiences in graduate programs and graduate programs' perceptions of students' experiences. In some disciplines the time-to-degree completion extends to several years, during which time graduate students face a series of increasingly difficult challenges (Jacks et al., 1983; Lovitts, 2001; Maher et al., 2004; Taylor & Cantwell, 2015). Research involving candidates who successfully complete their degrees over extended periods of time who successfully defend a dissertation and become PhD is sparse. This study sought to provide perspective about the experiences of long-time-to-degree (LTTD) doctoral candidates by answering the following question:

> How do long-time-to-doctorate (LTTD) candidates describe the experiences associated with an extended, successful dissertation process?

The dissertation process and experiences of the participants is understood through the threshold concept lens and the ways the participants marshalled resources to complete the degree. The parts of the process where the participants experienced challenge were explored alongside when and how participants felt they were making progress with the dissertation. Finally, participants' descriptions of their self-efficacy throughout the process were found and compared with the identities they assumed during the dissertation journey.

To frame the experiences of LTTD candidates, literature was presented and discussed that explained the multiplicity of roles and identities (e.g., student, adult learner, employee, parent, spouse, child) PhD students juggle as they complete their doctoral degrees (Forbus et al., 2011; MacDonald, 2018; Skorupa, 2002). Many PhD students are non-traditional students and adult learners (Forbus et al., 2011), and there are risks associated with this population of students who are seeking graduate education. PhD student identity is critical to the discussion of LTTD experiences, because it has been argued that doctoral threshold crossing includes ontological shifts that challenge a candidate's "security of self and identity" (Wisker et al., 2009, p. 19). As they complete these rites of passage to clear thresholds, graduate students are required to balance a multiplicity of roles and identities adding a level of complexity to the process (Wao & Onweugbuzie, 2011) of assuming their new identities as researchers who have earned a change in status and become doctorate. This complexity was seen, especially at the end of the journey, when candidates wrestled with self-doubt about their abilities as researchers and worked against the clock to complete their degrees. The participants were keenly aware of the impact of completing the degree on their professional identities as well as their identities as researchers, so the pressure was greater to complete and not fail.

The doctoral process was also viewed through the threshold concept lens. The research showed both candidates and doctoral advisors identify the completion of the dissertation as a major threshold that is difficult for candidates to cross (Kiley, 2009; Pyhalto et al., 2012). The independent nature of the work on the dissertation can lead to isolation during this time (Barnes & Austin, 2009; Brailsford, 2010; Geraniou, 2010; Maher et al., 2004; Pyhalto et al., 2012); all three participants experienced some isolation as they worked through the dissertation process. Some of this isolation at the end of the dissertation was due to their long time to degree because

students with whom they began the PhD program were graduates by this time. Additionally, each candidate imposed some isolation on themselves at the end of the degree when they focused on writing. This isolation added to the complexity of attempting to cross several smaller thresholds during the process, which requires LTTD students to find ways to stay engaged with their content knowledge over a longer period of time (Wao & Onweugbuzie, 2011). The possibility of getting "stuck" in a liminal phase of threshold attainment and being negatively impacted by the cognitive and affective distress for a long period of time (Kiley, 2015; Rattray, 2016) was identified as a significant risk for LTTD students. It was described by the participants as they worked to identify conceptual models, struggled with the interview process, and attempted data analysis.

The participants in this study described how they marshalled their resources to successfully complete the degree. There is no question that students completing doctoral degrees will encounter difficulty and be required to take risks as they complete their programs (Bain, Fedynich, & Knight, 2009; Barreira et al., 2018); struggle in a PhD program is to be expected. As the participants progressed through the phases of momentum and stuckness, they leveraged supports and strategies to complete the dissertation process and become doctorate. Supports and strategies used by the candidates included prioritizing the dissertation above all other parts of their life, finding time to write when they were able to focus, and finding a place to write where they would not be disturbed. All three participants employed a copy editor. The participants described cohorts of sorts in which they found encouragement, and these cohorts also defined how the candidates saw themselves through messaging and verbal persuasion. The committees and major professors contributed to the participants finishing the degree; it was the

faculty that helped provide valuable feedback on theoretical frameworks, methods, and data analysis.

This study illustrated when and how the dissertation process was most challenging for the doctoral candidates. All three participants in this study identified areas of struggle, both anticipated and unanticipated. Consistent with the literature, especially difficult thresholds for the candidates to cross included topic selection, theoretical model formulation, and analysis of the data (Dunin-Woyseth & Nilsson, 2012; Murakami-Ramalho et al., 2013; Trafford & Leshem, 2009). Although these times of difficulty were manageable at the outset of the degree program, as time to completion grew short, pressure built on the candidates and emotions were high. In times of challenge, when a student is stuck in the "confusion, difficulty, and doubt" (Keefer et al., 2015, p. 15) of liminality, doctoral students rely on the supervising faculty member of their doctoral committee (major professor) to be the primary means of support and encouragement. The participants in this study did not always divulge to their major professors the depth of struggle and emotion they were experiencing when they became stuck at a threshold; they chose to work through difficulty without supervisory input, which resulted in silent suffering (Keefer et al., 2015). In addition to understanding that doctoral candidates will struggle with the dissertation process, the descriptions of these participants revealed the depth of their emotions, especially when stuck, and with whom they shared these experiences.

This study also endeavored to examine when and how the candidates felt they were making progress with the dissertation process. Investigating the specific behaviors and factors that LTTD candidates identify as important to maintaining their motivation and re-motivating themselves as motivation wanes may provide a toolkit for departments and universities intending to improve their graduate student degree completion rates. Consistent with the literature, all three

candidates felt they were making progress when they had momentum (DeVos, 2017). These times of momentum occurred when the candidates successfully presented a proposal and were given permission to begin research, as they began the process of interviewing, and at the end of the dissertation process when the candidates were fully committed to finishing the degree.

Finally, through this research more was learned about how LTTD candidates describe their self-efficacy throughout the dissertation process. The experiences of the candidates evidenced a close connection between their self-efficacy and their identities. Although these candidates defined themselves by many different aspects of their identities (Jones, 2009; Museus & Griffin, 2011), the motivation to begin the PhD was primarily related to their identities as professionals. These candidates were academically capable, successful professionals who had been selected for admission to their degree programs. The importance of degree completion to the employment, earning prospects, and personal identity (Leppel, 2002; Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2017) of these candidates weighed on them to the point that the prospect of not completing the degree created distress and a sense of desperation. Each identity dimension is fluid and contextually influenced dependent (Jones & McEwen, 2000). As doctorate identity was threatened, all the facets of the participants' identities were influenced by that threat. As they progressed through their careers, the being doctorate identity became inextricably tied to the personal and professional identity, largely because of the verbal persuasion and messaging of others regarding the importance of being doctorate to their career advancement. As the external factor of the pressure of decreasing time to complete the degree combined with the feelings associated with liminality and the messages about the importance of being doctorate, these LTTD participants' self-efficacy waned, and they questioned their identities. During these times,

the LTTD candidates chose to push the PhD candidate identity and related tasks away and focus more energy in areas where they perceived success, most often in their professional careers.

Contributions to the Literature

This study provides rich description of three LTTD candidates' experiences as they successfully completed their dissertation and became doctorate. While a good deal of research has examined the factors that lead students to abandon a doctoral degree (Bair, 1999; Bair & Haworth, 2004; Devos et al., 2017), doctoral degree holders who successfully persist on their doctoral journey and reach graduation have been understudied (Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2014; Schell, 2017). All three participants completed the degree in no fewer than five years while working full time, mostly in higher education. These candidates would be identified as non-traditional, adult learners as defined in the literature (Bourdeaux & Schoenack, 2016; Gordon et al., 2008; Offerman, 2011; Wilson & Hayes, 2000). The findings of this study extend the understanding of non-traditional, adult student learners in PhD programs.

The results of this study provide insight on how three LTTD students created networks of support for themselves and committed time and energy to marshal their resources and successfully complete the degree. Consistent with the literature, the participants illustrated the importance of peer relationships and a feeling of belonging in the graduate students' persistence (Gardner, 2008; Golde, 2000), and the support of others around them, including family members, friends, and co-workers has been identified as helpful to graduate students (Laurencelle & Scanlan, 2018; Mosyjowski et al., 2017). Part-time students have identified peer groups as being critical to their success (Zahl, 2015). The study extends the description of a helpful peer group for LTTD students as being students who have similar characteristics of the LTTD students. A group that is culturally similar, even if geographically separated, can be more helpful to a LTTD

student than a group of students on their home campus. This study provided a description of what it can feel like for a non-traditional, adult learner to be expected to participate with a cohort of students working full time on their dissertations and not balancing the same roles and identities. The participants in this study also addressed the timing of the cohort support, which they felt would have been helpful earlier in their processes rather than later. These insights add depth to the cohort support for LTTD literature available.

The participants' descriptions identified when and how the dissertation process was most challenging for them and when and how they felt they were making progress. The motivation to make progress and to set and achieve goals personally and professionally has been shown to positively impact persistence (Grover, 2007; Hoskins & Goldberg, 2005; Lovitts, 2005; Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012), as a result the momentum and energy gained here was to be expected. However, the experiences of these participants showed that it was also in some of these times of momentum that the participants thought they were making progress, only to realize later that they were not. This limited their momentum and their motivation to work on the dissertation. When a candidate's motivation erodes, time to degree can be extended and degree abandonment considered (Golde, 2000; Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012). Additionally, it was these moments of discovering that they had not made progress, but had instead wasted time that the participants most questioned their abilities as researchers, and the validity of messaging they were given from their faculty guides. This study showed the distrust that was sown in the minds of the participants because of their previous failures, which influenced the way the participants made meaning about their abilities as researchers. In these moments, the participants considered the ramifications of not finishing the degree, sought perspective from their support networks, and considered abandoning their research.

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All three candidates identified times where their self-efficacy was greatly influenced by successes and failures in mastery experiences. They also described times where their own progress was compared with the progress and achievement of others, and the messaging received from others about their abilities influenced emotions that impacted the ebb and flow of their energy. Graduate students who take an exceptional amount of time to complete their degrees may need a higher level of self-efficacy to complete their graduate studies than those who completed in a more-timely fashion. Self-efficacy is time and task dependent (Bandura, 1997), and it can be assumed that LTTD candidates are vulnerable to gauging their abilities by the experiences of others and verbal persuasion; the two least effective measures upon which to base self-referent judgements (Bandura, 1997). Students who are stuck or failing to make progress on their dissertation for a long period of time are likely to experience feelings of futility, a depressive mood, and the imposter syndrome (Trafford & Leshem, 2008; Wisker, 2016). For LTTD candidates, the extended time spent in liminality at a threshold that delays progress was anticipated to have a direct influence on a student's perception of their ability to control various cognitive strategies for learning and using these strategies (Garcia & Pintrich, 1994; Pintrich et al., 1993). Successful use of these strategies would be expected to result in better learning and performance (e.g., clearing the threshold). The experiences of the participants in this study demonstrated that when progress was not being made, the feelings of futility and a depressive mood did set in, and they largely kept this to themselves, which is consistent with imposter syndrome. It has been shown that the embarrassment of coping with an area of stuckness may lead to students adopting mimicry to cope with the lack of confidence (Trafford & Leshem, 2008). The experiences described in this study add another layer to this picture; in those moments the participants chose not to mimic, but to step away from their dissertation processes

and focus on other areas of their lives where they knew they could excel. Because they no longer trusted themselves or their abilities as researchers, the candidates found other areas of success to strengthen their self-efficacy, and then reinitiated their studies. The participants in this study described the multiplicity of roles that formed their identities both in and out of the dissertation process, and they were aware that they did not yet belong in the world of academia. The awareness of privilege extended to members of the PhD community was ever-present for these participants. In order to maintain their hopes of membership in the community, the participants went to great lengths to keep their own fears and misgivings about their qualifications for membership hidden, which influenced how they interacted with their committee and major professor.

The differences and similarities in the successful dissertation process for these participants who struggled and lingered for a long time provide some additional insights into effective advising strategies for LTTD students. Effective advising of doctoral students has been shown in the literature to be more complex than formulative (Barnes & Austin, 2009); however, insights gained from the experiences of these three LTTD participants contributes insights into how those on the PhD journey may be better guided. This study provides an improved understanding of where struggle turned to stuckness for LTTD candidates, the emotions associated with liminality caused distress, and how the candidates viewed themselves through the process to become doctorate. Additionally, as the participants received feedback from their committee, some of which was intended to be constructive, they filtered that feedback to make meaning (Abes, Jones, & McEwen, 2007) of the experience. Due, in part, to the participants' depleted self-efficacy, they may have contextualized this direction as criticism rather than an attempt to help the participant through the writing process or threshold. In those times, the

meaning made by the participant was that they were not worthy of becoming doctorate, and they worked to hide their fears from faculty and did not make progress.   Some faculty members underestimate their role in helping graduate students adjust to the department, develop time management skills, and address future professional goals (Strayhorn, 2005). Although these participants were already situated in careers, their described experiences indicate that they could have benefitted from additional direction in managing time and their multiplicity of roles and identities to meet their future professional and career goals. Although Schuh's (2008) list of advising tasks has been previously characterized for students in courses, not post-preliminary examination, the participants in this study identified weaknesses in each of the areas the tasks addressed. Additionally, this study added layers of description about the effect that faculty action or inaction can have of a LTTD student's momentum, progress, and energy.

Implications

There are a number of implications of this study to be considered by individuals considering embarking on a PhD journey, those who are nearing completion of the preliminary examinations, and the faculty and graduate programs who support them. First, all three participants in this study described coming to the dissertation part of the doctoral journey with an incorrect assessment of their skills and abilities as researchers. All three successfully completed master's work and the coursework required for doctoral study, as well as passed preliminary examinations. As a result, it could be argued that they should have had a correct assessment of themselves in this area. The independent nature and unfamiliarity of the dissertation process, however, contributed to difficulty in accurately assessing their skills. All three participants in this study did not discuss dissertation topics with a major professor or committee earlier in their doctoral journey, and therefore struggled to find an acceptable topic. Choosing a topic earlier in

their PhD program and then constructing a coherent plan for the completion of their dissertation may have been beneficial for the participants, major professors, and doctoral committees.

Perhaps if discussions about the dissertation process began earlier in the PhD journey, the participants would have had more time to prepare themselves, formulate ideas, and develop a research base from the outset of their studies. To facilitate this, students could be assigned a major professor at the beginning of their doctoral coursework with whom they meet once a semester prior to preliminary examinations. The purpose of these meetings would be to establish a topic of interest and a base of literature around that topic that the faculty member and student could read and discuss in addition to taking classes. In that discussion, an assessment of research skills could be made. This discussion could also include studies that would potentially contribute to the topic, and evaluating the conceptual models and methodology of these studies. This meeting, outside reading, and discussion should be completed as part of a research hour counting toward degree completion.

Additionally, all three of the candidates were working full-time in successful careers while completing the dissertation. None of the candidates described an awareness of the potential that the dissertation process might be more difficult for them than a traditional graduate student because they were juggling the full-time professional role with the PhD candidate role. This may be an intuitive conclusion; however, all three candidates were side-tracked to some degree by their careers at the outset of the dissertation. The time spent focusing on their professional aspirations and opportunities detracted from the dissertation process and created more pressure toward the end of their degree programs. PhD candidates need to be made explicitly aware of the risks of non-completion associated with maintaining a full-time career and doctoral research.

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That is not the sole responsibility of the department or graduate school; the doctoral students share responsibility in this.

One of the most striking implications for future practice concerns the need for faculty to understand the perceptions that PhD students may have about the role of faculty in the process. All three of the participants in this study described times at which they disagreed with their faculty members but did not push back. Also, there were situations where they were in distress that they did not divulge their personal status. In all cases, the participants chose behavior they perceived as a survival strategy or part of their role as an initiate to the PhD community. That is not to imply that the participants viewed the roles as adversarial; instead, they viewed the faculty as being in a position of power, with the ability to deny the participants access in to the community, and the participants were afraid to challenge or share their true experiences because of this power differential. The complexity of these roles is increased because of the layers of identity that are affected by whether a candidate is deemed worthy of being PhD. Even the descriptors "becoming doctorate" and "being PhD" speak to the identity shift that occurs with earning the credential and assuming privilege. If faculty are unaware of how this power differential and privilege can influence the relationship with their advisees, damage can inadvertently occur. Additionally, understanding that the shift in identity for candidates does not just impact them as researchers, especially if they are professionals working in higher education. The shift in identity also influences their careers and livelihood in the future. The responsibility for managing all the layers of complexity around doctoral candidate identity and development lies with both the candidate and the faculty.

Given the mental health crisis identified among graduate students today, it would be helpful if candidates and faculty were able to contextualize student success and failure within a

multiplicity of roles and identities. Faculty and candidates must be able to view the PhD program as a factor that influences multiple facets of candidates' identity, especially if they are a professional building a career in higher education. This implication reaches beyond LTTD students in this study and could be extended to traditional full-time students who have based their identity and future entirely on being doctorate. Perhaps it would be helpful to know more about the needs and identity of traditional full-time PhD students outside of the research realm, with the intention to help them spend time on developing and maintaining the other parts of who they are. Once the student successfully completes preliminary examinations and becomes a doctoral candidate, the meetings with the major professor should shift to a monthly meeting with targeted goals and evaluation of progress toward the goals. For some students, establishing a Gannt chart indicating progress may help to track progress. In the situation where a student has difficulty making progress, that can easily be identified with monthly meetings and if a trusting relationship has been established with the major professor, honest conversations can be had about areas of struggle before they become areas of stuckness.

Finally, the participants in this study described difficulty finding and staying connected with a viable cohort over time. The participants acknowledged that their time to doctorate was influenced by life happening, focusing on their careers, and choosing to prioritize the areas of their lives in which they were successful over when they struggled with the dissertation. These behavior choices extended their time to doctorate and consequently distanced them from the cohort and colleagues they began the journey alongside. Additionally, they had a disconnect from the students who were currently in their same degree programs but had a more traditional path to doctorate. Having a cohort to begin and finish the program seems to make the doctoral journey easier. However, when a department has LTTD students who are disconnected, it is not

just about having a cohort. It is also about having a cohort that is experiencing a similar journey that is encouraging. Students could be assigned to a cohort of students with similar backgrounds at the outset of their program. Major professors and committees could monitor when and how these cohorts shape and change, and make sure that LTTD candidates have a support network of similar candidates as much as possible.

Again, the onus for leveraging strategies that can increase the likelihood of PhD candidate success does not fall on the shoulders of the faculty alone. PhD candidates have responsibility for educating themselves about the journey to doctorate and seeking illumination of the path. There are a variety of ways departments, faculty, and students can work collaboratively to enhance the experience of students. A better understanding of the journeys of the participants in this study may well do that.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study raises several opportunities and directions for future quantitative and qualitative research for LTTD students and those on a more traditional path to doctorate. The research on successful LTTD students is limited; there are countless directions and areas that could be researched. As a result of this research and to address gaps in the literature, it is recommended that more specific study be conducted in the areas of LTTD identity, impostor syndrome, and messaging candidates draw upon to make sense of the doctoral journey. Given the descriptions and importance of the relationship between the participants and the faculty members of their academic programs and doctoral committees, it would be informative to continue to evaluate strategies being employed in advising LTTD and traditional doctoral candidates.

If the proclivity of LTTD candidates is to silently shift their time and attention to another area of success in life when encountering difficulty or perceived failure with the dissertation, it

would be helpful for faculty to better know their students outside of the classroom and advising role. It is recommended that a mixed-methods study be conducted to evaluate the protocols that advisors find particularly helpful in illuminating the path for doctoral students. In particular, a mixed-methods study involving the guidance graduate students receive regarding specific areas of their journey could further identify best practices in steering candidates away from stuck places or illuminating them before they become stuck places. It could be helpful to know the impact on the relationship, if and when faculty members see that a LTTD student is shifting their attention to another area of their identity (e.g., family, work, volunteer commitment) and they engage in an honest conversation with the candidate about why they are privileging that part of their identity over that of being PhD.

Another area of research recommended for study is the structure departments are utilizing to advise LTTD and traditional doctoral students. Structural features such as time of major professor assignment, method of assignment, cohorts, benchmarks to completion, advising protocols, and departmental expectations for quantity and quality of interactions with candidates could be evaluated quantitatively in light of PhD candidate success factors. One method of advising that could be employed might be that of a case-management approach to doctoral student advising. Research of this strategy could be completed in a mixed-methods study over time, with both LTTD and traditional students.

Another recommendation for study is to focus more specifically on one of the roles or identities doctoral students claim during their LTTD journey. A qualitative study on the experiences of LTTD students who experience loss during the time of the dissertation, whether that be a lost long-term relationship or a career opportunity, would be of particular interest.

Expanding the study to incorporate students at universities outside of the Midwest and to degrees outside of Education would provide additional information and insight.

Finally, the participants in this study described doctoral privilege and hierarchies that impacted their journeys and their behaviors along the way. Another recommendation is to study how students come to understand the nuanced structures in higher education that shape their identities as initiates into the academic community. Topics included in this area of research could include doctoral identity and privilege; faculty members' perceptions of their roles as gatekeepers; and how these facets play into the relationships among candidates and their guides. A better understanding of the phenomenon of doctoral power and privilege could inform the culture and practice of higher education.

Conclusion

Based on the results of the study, LTTD candidates were surprised by struggle and became stuck at thresholds to doctorate as their time to degree extended. The participants described strategies and supports they utilized to become unstuck and to complete their dissertations. The participants shared how they characterized their self-efficacy and identities as researchers as they wrestled with the dissertation process.

At the start of their doctoral journey, students are embarking upon one of the most difficult stretches in their lives and education. A variety of institutional barriers, personal characteristics, and circumstances contribute to the decision to complete a program or abandon graduate study. Increased recognition of the importance of degree completion regarding doctoral candidate employment, earning prospects, and personal identity should keep the graduate student persistence issue at the forefront of consideration for those involved with higher education. The risks associated with a LTTD process should be considered by all stakeholders including the

candidates, those who support them, and the faculty guides and graduate schools that facilitate the journey. Perhaps illuminating the journey will make it less difficult, and encouragement can be found to help those who wander, but are not lost.

Chapter Summary

This chapter began with a summary of the purpose of the study and a brief description of the participants. The research question was framed through threshold concept research and the multiplicity of identities of LTTD candidates. This was followed by a discussion of the experiences of LTTD candidates by addressing how the participants marshalled their resources to successfully earn the PhD; when and how the dissertation process was challenging for the doctoral candidates; when and how the candidates felt they were making progress throughout the dissertation process; and how the participants described their self-efficacy within the dissertation process. An overview of the contributions of this study to the literature was provided and implications for practice were discussed. Future directions for research were presented, which include continued examination of the LTTD and traditional PhD candidate journey. The chapter concluded with encouragement to candidates, those who support them, and the faculty guides and graduate schools that facilitate the doctoral journey to be more aware of the risks associated by a LTTD process and to illuminate the journey for others.

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Appendix A: Email message to Department Chairs/Heads and Program Directors of Colleges of Education at Midwestern research universities to inform of study and encourage participation

Subject: Opportunity to participate in research on doctoral candidacy

Dr. Lastname,

My name is Benjamin Kohl, and I'm a PhD candidate in the College of Education at Kansas State University. I'm conducting a study on the experiences of PhD doctoral alumni who successfully completed a PhD program from a College of Education at a Midwestern research university after spending five or more years in the dissertation process. I'm interested in learning about the lived experiences of PhD doctoral candidates from the time they finished their preliminary examinations to the time they defended their dissertations.

I plan to interview a minimum of three people who have experienced an extended dissertation process. I will ask each person to provide a timeline of events and experiences throughout the dissertation process and will conduct three 1-hour interviews with each person to gather rich data about their experiences.

I will follow this email message with a phone call to discuss PhD doctoral alumni of your programs who fit this research criteria.

Thank you for your consideration.

Warm regards,
Benjamin Kohl, PhD candidate
785-341-9842
benkohl@ksu.edu
Kansas State University
College of Education
Department of Special Education, Counseling, and Student Affairs

Appendix B: Email message to PhD doctoral alumni of Colleges of Education at Midwestern research universities to inform of study and encourage participation

Subject: Opportunity to participate in research on doctoral candidacy

Dr. Lastname,

My name is Benjamin Kohl, and I'm a PhD candidate in the College of Education at Kansas State University. I'm conducting a study on the experiences of PhD doctoral alumni who successfully completed a PhD program from a College of Education at a Midwestern research university after spending five or more years in the dissertation process. I'm interested in learning about the lived experiences of PhD doctoral candidates from the time they finished their preliminary examinations to the time they defended their dissertations.

I plan to interview a minimum of three people who have experienced an extended dissertation process. I will ask each person to provide a timeline of events and experiences throughout the dissertation process and will conduct three 1-hour interviews with each person to gather rich data about their experiences.

Because your dissertation process was five or more years, I'm interested in hearing about your experiences. If you're interested in learning more about this opportunity to participate in this study, please contact me via email at benkohl@ksu.edu or by phone at 785-341-9842.

Warm regards,
Benjamin Kohl, PhD candidate
785-341-9842
benkohl@ksu.edu
Kansas State University
College of Education
Department of Special Education, Counseling, and Student Affairs

Appendix C: Email message to PhD doctoral alumni who demonstrate interest in participating in the study

Subject: Thank you for your interest in research on doctoral candidacy

Dr. Lastname,

Thank you for your interest in participating in my study on the experiences of doctoral candidates who successfully completed a PhD program from a College of Education at a Midwestern research university after spending five or more years in the dissertation process.

As a reminder, I'm a PhD candidate in the College of Education at Kansas State University. I'm interested in learning about the lived experiences of PhD doctoral candidates from the time they completed their preliminary examinations to the time they defended their dissertations.

I plan to interview a minimum of three people who have experienced an extended dissertation process. Each participant will create a timeline of the events and experiences that were meaningful from the completion of the preliminary examination to the final uploading of their dissertation. Each participant will provide a printed copy of the acknowledgement page of their deposited dissertation. I will conduct three 1-hour interviews with each participant to gather rich data about their experiences. Names and responses will remain absolutely confidential and any identifiable markers will be masked.

The goal of the interviews is to gather information about the lived experiences of doctoral candidates who spent more than five years between the completion of their preliminary examinations and the successful defense of their dissertations. Through the information gathered in the interviews, themes about experiences will be developed.

In order to determine if you meet the criteria for this study, please answer the following questions:

1. What was your employment status during your doctoral program -- unemployed, part-time, or full-time?

2. What was your student status during your doctoral program -- part-time or full-time?

3. How long (in years, months, days) did it take you to complete your dissertation, from the time you completed your preliminary examination to the time you successfully defended your dissertation?

4. What was the title of the degree you earned?

5. Was your PhD degree completed in a College of Education at a Midwestern research university?

Thank you for your interest in the study and willingness to participate!

Warm regards,
Benjamin Kohl, PhD candidate
785-341-9842
benkohl@ksu.edu
Kansas State University
College of Education
Department of Special Education, Counseling, and Student Affairs

Appendix D: Kansas State University Informed Consent Form

PROJECT TITLE:
INTERVIEW STUDY OF CROSSING THRESHOLDS TO AN EARNED DOCTORAL DEGREE: HOW LONG-TIME-TO-DOCTORATE PHD CANDIDATES PERSIST TO EARN THEIR DEGREES

PROJECT APPROVAL DATE:	Spring 2020	PROJECT EXPIRATION DATE:	Fall 2020	LENGTH OF STUDY:	4 months

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR:	Dr. Kenneth Hughey

CO-INVESTIGATOR(S):	Mr. Benjamin Kohl

CONTACT DETAILS FOR PROBLEMS/QUESTIONS:	Dr. Kenneth Hughey: 785-532-5544 Mr. Benjamin Kohl: 785-341-9842

IRB CHAIR CONTACT INFORMATION:	Rick Scheidt, Chair, Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects or Cheryl Doerr, Associate Vice President for Research Compliance 785-532-3224 Room 203 Fairchild Hall, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS 66506

INTERVIEW STUDY OF CROSSING THRESHOLDS TO AN EARNED DOCTORAL DEGREE: HOW LONG-TIME-TO-DOCTORATE PHD CANDIDATES PERSIST TO EARN THEIR DEGREES

PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH:
The purpose of this study was to examine and describe the lived experiences of three doctoral candidates who earned PhD degrees from Colleges of Education at Midwestern research universities and spent five or more years to successfully complete their dissertations. Of specific interest is how the doctoral candidates made sense of the experiences and made progress to complete their dissertations. Of specific interest is how the candidates make sense of the experiences and progress to complete their dissertations.

PROCEDURES OR METHODS TO BE USED:
The participants in this study will choose the location for the interview portion of the research in keeping with the best practice of choosing a semi-private location in which the participant

feels comfortable (Creswell, 1998; Jacob & Furgerson, 2012; Moustakes, 1994). The researcher anticipates that most of these interviews will take place where the participants live or located on or around the university campus. If individuals to be interviewed have left academia, the location will likely be wherever they are comfortable. If participants are not available to interview face to face, they will be interviewed by distance technology of their choosing such as Skype (https://www.skype.com) or Zoom (https://zoom.us). The researcher will study the descriptions and experiences of long-time-to-doctorate (LTTD) candidates associated with an extended, successful dissertation process.

To examine the experience of LTTD candidates, three sources of data will be used: a timeline of each participant's dissertation process (from the time of completion of preliminary examination to the time of successful defense of dissertation) completed by each participant, three semi-structured 1-hour interviews recorded for transcription per participant, and a printed copy of the acknowledgment page of each participant's deposited dissertation. These three sources of data will provide unique perspectives and triangulation of data. A recorded transcription of a member-check, where the interviewer and participant review the written transcript of the previous interview, will be included in the data collected. The research journal entries made by the researcher will also be retained for analysis.

RISKS OR DISCOMFORTS ANTICIPATED:

There are no foreseeable risks, but the participants may experience stress in discussing experiences and perceptions.

BENEFITS ANTICPATED:

Throughout the data collection process, each participant will be exploring their or their own thoughts and feelings about the lived experience of becoming doctorate. This process will provide the participant with a deeper understanding of what their experiences and perceptions mean to them. This information will also be valuable to higher educational faculty, staff, and administrators as they are considering the doctoral journey of students in their programs.

EXTENT OF CONFIDENTIALITY:

A hard copy of the timeline from preliminary examination completion to dissertation defense will be collected (a copy made and given back to the participant). An electronic audio recording of the semi-structured interviews, transcripts of the interviews, and acknowledgment pages from each participant's dissertation will be collected. The laptop computer, used in the interview process, will be password protected. The audio and video recording will be stored on the password-protected laptop computer. Any other documentation, such as the researcher's notes will be stored on the researcher's laptop where individual files will be password protected. All paper-based data will be stored in a secure filing cabinet in the researcher's office. Data will be stored indefinitely. The researcher will have access to the data, which will be password protected. Names and responses will remain confidential and any identifiable markers will be masked.

   The information or biospecimens that will be collected as part of this research will not be shared with any other investigators.

IS COMPENSATION OR MEDICAL TREATMENT AVAILABLE IF INJURY OCCURS? ☐ Yes ☒ No

Terms of participation: I understand this project is research, and that my participation is voluntary. I also understand that if I decide to participate in this study, I may withdraw my consent at any time, and stop participating at any time without explanation, penalty, or loss of benefits, or academic standing to which I may otherwise be entitled.

I verify that my signature below indicates that I have read and understand this consent form, and willingly agree to participate in this study under the terms described, and that my signature acknowledges that I have received a signed and dated copy of this consent form.

PARTICIPANT NAME:		**DATE:**	
PARTICIPANT SIGNATURE:		**DATE:**	
WITNESS TO SIGNATURE: (PROJECT STAFF)		**DATE:**	

Appendix E: Debriefing Statement

Dr. Lastname,

Thank you for your participation in this study on the lived experiences of doctoral candidates who successfully earned PhD degrees from a College of Education at a Midwestern research university after an extended dissertation process. A timeline, set of three interviews, and acknowledgement document were used for all participants. The goal of the interviews was to gather information about the lived experiences of doctoral candidates who spent more than five years between the completion of their preliminary examinations and the successful defense of their dissertations. Through the information gathered in the interviews, themes about experiences were developed. Some themes identified as a result of this research includes: (insert themes from study).

Final results will be available from the researcher, Benjamin Kohl, by (DATE). You may contact me at benkohl@ksu.edu to receive an email copy of the final report. Your participation, including your name, will remain confidential and any identifiable markers will be masked.

If you would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, you are encouraged to contact my major professor: Dr. Kenneth Hughey at khughey@ksu.edu. Also, you may contact the Kansas State University Institutional Review Board: Dr. Rick Scheidt, Chair Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects or Dr. Cheryl Doerr, Associate Vice President for Research Compliance. They are both located in 203 Fairchild Hall, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS 66506 and the telephone number is 785-532-3224.

Warm regards,
Benjamin Kohl, PhD candidate
785-341-9842
benkohl@ksu.edu
Kansas State University
College of Education
Department of Special Education, Counseling, and Student Affairs

Appendix F: Codes and Frequency

Code	References	Code	References	Code	References
Struggle	233	Confidence	20	Part-Time	8
Process	103	Faculty	20	Realization	7
Time	92	Energy	19	Cohort	6
Major Professor	91	Progress	19	Direction	6
Committee	71	Topic	19	Education	6
Stuck	71	Advice	18	Pay It Back	6
Procedure	62	Done	18	Plan	6
Strategies	58	Family Support	17	Defense	5
Career	54	Failure	16	Opportunity	5
Support Network	53	Encouragement	15	Purpose	5
Identity	48	Consequences	14	Doubt	4
Motivation	46	Policy	14	Intentionality	4
Colleague Support	42	Regret	14	Original Intention	4
Comparison	37	Anxiety	11	Familiar	3
Movement	31	Financial	11	Push Through	3
Messaging	30	Job Change	11	Relief	3
Redirection	29	Structure	11	Flow	2
Goals	28	Change	10	Listening	2
Being Doctorate	27	Optimism	10	Over	2
Life	26	Sacrifice	10	Pushing	2
Topic Change	26	Colleagues	8		
Check In	20	Full-Time	8		