

Greetings from the PhD path:
How do doctoral students perceive the thesis process?
Well-being and study engagement

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Jenni Stubb (KM), Doctoral student
University of Helsinki, The Faculty of Behavioral
Sciences

The ultimate question:

Why do a PhD and what to do with it?



TODAYS TOPICS

- To understand the destination, we must also explore the journey there!

Today I am going to share with you some results about:

1. *Doctoral students experiences of becoming a PhD in regard to well-being and study engagement.*
2. *These themes will be considered from the perspective of:*
 - * *Meaning of the scholarly community*
 - * *Perceptions of research work*

The research project

- This study is a part of a national research project on PhD education in Finland that aims to understand PhD education from three complementary perspectives:
 1. *Central regulators and preconditions for a successful PhD process*
 2. *Academic supervision*
 3. *The dynamics of research groups as learning environments for academic expertise*
- The work has been carried out by using multiple methods (e.g., surveys, observations, and interviews).
- The data were collected at three different levels of PhD education from students, supervisors, and scholarly communities (e.g., research groups or seminars).

(Pyhältö et al., 2009; Stubb et al., 2011)

The research group

- Project leaders: Prof. Kirsti Lonka and Docent Kirsi Pyhälto
- Doctoral students: KM Jenni Stubb and KM Jenna Tuomainen
- In collaboration with: Prof. Kai Hakkarainen (UTU), Docent Sanna Vehviläinen (UTA), Docent Auli Toom (HU), Prof. Anna Raija Nummenmaa (UTA), and Docent Tiina Soini (UTA).

THOUGHTS OF DEPARTURE

- Doctoral students form a highly selected and high-achieving population, based on their academic background.
- Yet, the attrition rates among PhD students are high. Several studies suggest that the drop-out numbers range from thirty to fifty percent, depending on the discipline and country (Bair & Haworth, 1999; Golde, 2005; McAlpine & Norton, 2006).
- In our study a large proportion, 45%, of Finnish doctoral students had considered quitting their studies (Stubb et al., 2011).

THOUGHTS OF DEPARTURE

- Many factors may counteract with engagement in one's own PhD process, such as:
 1. Stress
 2. Workload, frequent evaluation, competitive atmosphere
 3. Supervision, relationships to faculty and peers
 4. Resources
 5. Combining research work and private life
 6. Study orientation and perceptions of research

(Appel & Dahlgren, 2003; Bair & Haworth, 1999; Kurtz-Costes, Andrews Helmke, & Ülkü-Steiner, 2006; Pyhältö et al., 2008; Pyhältö et al., 2009; Stubb et al., 2007; Wright, 2003).

Small group discussion

Who are your scholarly community?

What does scholarly community mean to you?

→ Discuss with a couple of peers

DATA COLLECTION AND PARTICIPANTS

- A questionnaire

- 669 doctoral students from HU completed the survey
- Domains: behavioral sciences, humanities, and medicine
- Participant group was heterogenius
- Questionnaire consisted of Likert-type statements and open ended questions

- Student interviews

- Doctoral students (37) from three case units were interview
- Domains: behavioral sciences, natural sciences, and medicine

(Pyhältö et al., 2009; Stubb et al., 2011)

MEANING OF THE SCHOLARLY COMMUNITY

- Doctoral students perceived scholarly community in varying ways:
 - Supervisory relationship
 - Own PhD seminar group
 - Peer community
 - Own research group
 - Department/faculty
 - International community/discipline
- Perceptions of the ways in which people belong to community varied:
 - Publishing (articles etc.)
 - Presenting own work in conferences
 - Working in a group, working in the university (for instance teaching)
 - Communicating with other members of the scholarly community

(Pyhältö et al., 2009)

MEANING OF THE SCHOLARLY COMMUNITY

- Perception of one's own scholarly community was not, however, every time clear.
- It is often a question of multiple (also overlapping) communities instead of just one.

(Pyhäntö et al., 2009)

Interdisciplinary Madness!

I work in

(Lab)

but get paid by

(Program)

My Advisor is in

(Department)

...but my *real*
Advisor is in

(another Department)

Officially, I'm
part of

(Research Center)

...even though
my office is in

(Basement of another
building)

Most of my
classes are on

(Stuff I haven't seen
since High School)

yet technically,
my degree is in

(Major other than my
undergrad's)

So basically,
I belong

(Nowhere)

On the other hand: Experience of belonging to one's own community varies

- Majority (54%) of the students experienced to be part of a community.
- A third (30%) of the students experienced themselves as outsiders.
- Others (16%) experienced their own role as unclear or as contradictory.

It seems to be the quality of the interaction that matters, not the mere group: also students working in research group sometimes experienced to be outsiders in their own community.

(Pyhälto et al., 2009, Stubb et al., 2010)

Belonging can be versatile...

“Sometimes I consider myself still as a student when it comes to doing research and sometimes I already perceive to be an expert in my area. I feel that I’m doing a meaningful and important work in my scholarly community.”

”My role is extremely important because the department has to produce PhD in order to get funding and a stronger status”

“At the moment I am a total outsider: I attend the seminars on a regular basis but I do not have any other contacts. I can consult my supervisor on official matters but I miss having more informal contacts and discussion with somebody who would be interested in the same kind of questions that I am.”

”In our own research group I feel that I am a valuable and respected member ja definitely an important part of the group. More generally at the university the role is harder to understand. On the other hand I do feel that I am ’important’ there as well but on the other hand nobody wants to invest anything to a student doing research on a grant. They want maximum output with minimum input. Sense of respect suffers a bit there.”

Why does belonging to a community matter?

- Scholarly community functions as a context for developing as a scholar.
- Scholarly community is also a context for the development of well-being.
 - At best, it may be the source for empowerment and inspiration (44%)
 - But sometimes it may be a risk for burdening (56%)
 - "Outsiders" also experienced more stress, exhaustion and anxiety than others
- The way scholarly community (and own role in it) was experienced, was related to engagement in terms of interest and intentions to interrupt.

Altogether it was 45% who reported to have considered interrupting studies but they were less often those who experienced to be part of the community and who experienced the community as empowering.

(Stubb et al., 2007; Stubb et al., 2011)

Perceptions of research

What are they and why do they matter?

Small group discussion

- Continue the following phrases:

Doing research is like...

I as a researcher am like...

- Why describe it the way you did? → elaborate!

WHAT IS RESEARCH ALL ABOUT?

	PERCEPTIONS	OF	RESEARCH	WORK
	Research as “a job to do”	Research as qualifying and meriting oneself	Research as a personal journey	Research as making a difference
Why is research done?	<i>Doing research is part of one’s job description, doing research is seen as fulfilling the requirements for a doctorate</i>	<i>Doing research is seen as meriting and qualifying oneself.</i>	<i>Doing research is seen as investigating something personally meaningful and interesting to oneself.</i>	<i>Doing research is seen as making a contribution to the discipline</i>
What is relevant in the PhD research?	<i>Essential to the problem and to the straight requirements of the curriculum</i>	<i>Something that one has to find out. One has to find out what else has</i>	<i>Essential to the thing that interests one</i>	<i>Things that are important to a certain discipline or questions of the discipline.</i>
What is the eligible outcome of the research?	<i>The goal is to achieve a concrete (a finished thesis, an article etc.)</i>	<i>The goal is to earn one’s own place and respect in the scholarly community or in some other community (for example in one’s work place).</i>	<i>The goal is the development of own understanding and expertise.</i>	<i>The goal is to strive for something that is valuable for the discipline or society.</i>

More product and person centered perceptions

More process and community centered perceptions

(Stubb et al., 2012b)

Perceptions in different domains

Domain	Research as...				
	A job to do	Qualifying	a Journey	Making a difference	Total
Medicine	32	9	12	5	58
	55%	16%	20%	9%	100%
Natural sciences	14	8	22	7	51
	27%	16%	43%	14%	100%
Behavioral sciences	25	14	57	33	129
	19%	11%	44%	26%	100%
Total	71	31	91	45	238
	30%	13%	38%	19%	100%

(Stubb et al., 2012b)

WHY DO PERCEPTIONS OF RESEARCH WORK MATTER?

- Whether students emphasize the meaning of *product* or *process* has been shown to be in relation to:
 1. *Experienced well-being (in terms of stress, exhaustion, and anxiety).*
 2. *Study engagement (in terms of intentions to interrupt studies and one's own interest towards own PhD work).*

(Stubb et al., 2012a)

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