

Doctorate motivation: an (auto)ethnography

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Intrinsic motivation is considered the dominant factor in the motivation of adult students in continuing postgraduate education. However, the strength of an intrinsic motivation to learn does not explain the phenomenon of dropout where the student withdraws and does not return or where the student withdraws and then recommences their postgraduate research studies. This paper draws on qualitative data collected as part of a doctoral thesis to examine this phenomenon ethnographically. The study explores motivations which have declined or disappeared under the influence of external factors and the effect that these external factors have on the motivation to learn with respect to their influence on student withdrawal.

Keywords: motivation, intrinsic, extrinsic, postgraduate research, continuing education, dropout, doctoral students, empirical

Motivations are considered to be the dominant factor in the decision to participate in postgraduate doctoral degree studies (such as the Doctor of Philosophy, PhD). The phenomenon of dropping out may be due to the student not abandoning but deferring their intrinsic or extrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation is suggested as the naturalistic motivation to commence and complete a doctoral degree and may be supported by an extrinsic motivation. However, according to McCormack (2005), students who withdraw from doctoral education often re-enrol and subsequently complete their doctorate.

This research explores the relationship between intrinsic motivations to learn, extrinsic motivations, the provocation to undertake doctoral study, dropout and the act of re-enrolling to complete a research doctorate. The research will seek to explain the motivational reasoning by exploring the participants' recollections of their motives to dropout and then return to their doctoral degree study.

Literature

According to Ryan and Deci (2000, p. 54), motivation may be defined as being 'moved to do something'. With

respect to the research literature on the motivation of postgraduate students, Hegarty (2011, p. 146) suggests that:

There is, however, limited research on adult learners' motivation in completing a graduate program. Furthermore, there is an absence of measurement of motivation in graduate students in general. We know that by enrolling in a graduate program an individual is motivated. We do not know, however, what type of motivation, nor do we know its strength.

The strength of the motivation to undertake postgraduate research may vary between people. This suggests that what is of inherent interest to one person may be of no interest to another. Motivations to learn are not restricted to formal education but include any learning activity or skill development.

People are motivated to undertake doctoral study by their curiosity, interest, or to procure the approval of another. According to Ryan and Deci (2000, p. 55) students 'could be motivated to learn a new set of skills because he or she understands their potential utility or value or because learning the skills will yield a good grade and the privileges a good grade affords'.

Motivations may be orientated as either extrinsic which involves undertaking a task because there is a beneficial outcome or intrinsic which infers undertaking inherently interesting or enjoyable tasks (Ingledeew & Markland, 2009; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Intrinsic motivation is considered by Ryan and Deci (2000) to contribute to a higher level of student commitment. This suggests that a higher level of problem solving is possible, which will lead to improved outcomes.

A motivational orientation is postulated to develop from a student's spontaneous behaviours, viz. those without apparent reason, which resulted in personally beneficial outcomes such that an interest can develop into a motivation with increased involvement by the person (Hidi & Ainley, 2012). That is, motivation is a naturalistic tendency which is critical to a student's cognitive, social and physical development as there is a benefit to the student academically and occupationally to develop knowledge and skills.

The motivation to enter higher education is, according to Thunborg *et al.* (2013) 'dynamic and changeable over time' (p. 180) and 'part of the process of forming student identities' (p. 181). They suggest that motivation is a disposition that 'energises an individual's actions involving both cognition and emotion' (p. 180) in that it may be an unconscious and possibly reflexive tendency to act. That is, a learning motivation is an indication that a student will enter higher education due to an enjoyment for learning or inherent interest in the particular academic field.

An intrinsic motivation is considered as being an important phenomenon in education due to its association with learning and achievement resulting in a high quality of learning and creativity according to Ryan and Deci (2000). Other factors include a life changing experience, an expectation of a better life and social status, or a need for intellectual stimulation (Thunborg *et al.*, 2013). However, in the findings of Lee and Pang (2014) intrinsic motivation can be a lower order motivator that influences adult continuing students' achievement with extrinsic motivations being stronger motivational factors, in contrast with Thunborg *et al.* (2013).

Lee and Pang (2014, p. 13) suggest in their conclusions that 'career advancement is the most influential motivational orientation' when predicting academic achievement. However, seemingly in contrast to their findings, they conclude that 'working adults with higher intrinsic motivation of personal development to participate in continuing education obtain higher learning achievement' will complete, a conclusion supported by Thunborg *et al.* (2013).

Reasons for dropping out of higher education include a changing interest where students do not actually 'dropout' but rather change their academic program, loss of interest, loss of motivation or self-discipline or where the student was not fully committed to higher education and enrolled for 'something to do' or to 'try it out' (Thunborg *et al.*, 2013). Other students drop out of their higher education studies due to

struggles with the context of HE [higher education], of coming across harsh lecturers and demands, or not knowing how to act or where to get support and from whom, competing with peers, and finally they tell us about being afraid of failing in exams. When they start to identify themselves as losers who have failed, they generally drop out (Thunborg *et al.*, 2013, pp. 186-187).

This is consistent with the findings of Jarvela, Jarvenoja, and Naykki (2013, p. 170) who suggest that 'many students are unable to apply effective learning strategies when they are needed, and give up...'. This has relevance to doctoral students within the social sciences and humanities disciplines where learning is predominantly student self-directed. However, according to McCormack (2005), students who reconstruct their identities after dropout can regain their confidence and motivations and do return to complete their degrees.

Methodology

This paper is based on data collected for a doctoral thesis from participants at four Australian universities. This involved the author's personal experiences and motivations and those of three others to undertake higher research degree doctoral studies and the motivations to return after dropping out. These experiences are recorded as autoethnographic (with the researcher as a participant) and ethnographic recollections of the other participants. Autoethnography according to Ellingson (2011, p. 599), 'is research, writing, story, and method that connect the autobiographical to the cultural, social, and political through the study of a culture or phenomenon of which one is part, integrated with relational and personal experiences'; that is, ethnography of the Self. Narratives are presented to provide phenomenographic information of the participant's recollections of their experiences.

Consent to undertake the research was received from the researcher's university ethics committee. Participants were recruited by placing advertisements in the newsletters of two professional associations. Interested participants' enquiries and subsequent contact to arrange interviews were undertaken by email including receipt

of a signed Form of Consent from each participant. From an initial response of seven people, four interviews were conducted over a two-month period using internet-sourced communication software. Of the initial participant interest, three people were non-responsive to further communication. The interviews were recorded and the audio tracks transcribed. Each participant was emailed a copy of their transcript for comment and corrections to the intended meaning in their narratives. At this stage one participant withdrew from the research program. The three participants other than the author are referred to here using pseudonyms John, Beth and Clare to maintain their anonymity. NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software package, was utilised to analyse the transcripts of the interview narratives to develop meaning by sorting and aggregation of the qualitative data. The data used in this paper were extracted from these transcribed narratives and NVivo analyses.

Findings

The motivation to learn

Intrinsic motivation to learning is considered to be developed from early childhood due to familial influences that support the natural tendencies or genetic predispositions of the child (Grusec, 2011; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Therefore, children growing up in a household where the parents are university educated are more likely to undertake university study themselves according to Ishitani (2008) and Reay, David, and Ball (2005). According to John his intrinsic motivation to learning was influenced by his family's lifelong involvement in academia. He articulates his academic lifestyle involvement and influence within the interview with,

look it runs in my family. Basically they were a bunch of academics. My sister is an associate professor, and she's been researching for most of her life, and my grandmother was a researcher and medical researcher; it ran in my family. My father always read, so we've always done this and it seems I've been around people who have written a lot and it's also led to relationships and friends and of course family and that sort of thing . . . in the sense it was natural, a natural progression from these to develop work and develop my interest in visual arts and philosophy. So I'm in there totally; they are areas which won't get me employment so I've got to love it.

For John, the influences on the development of his motivation to learn and achieve appear to be strong. He is accepting of the effect of his family's academic lives as a natural progression to his own motivation to complete a doctorate. For him, the transition into doctoral research

studies was possibly an increasing interest as postulated by Hidi and Ainley (2012).

For Beth, the motivation to commence a doctorate was intrinsic but not due to family background. Beth narrates her family education background with:

I was actually thinking about that and I thought, well, I am the youngest of four children, both my sisters have Bachelor Degrees. On my Mother's and Father's sides of the family, my oldest cousins both have PhDs. I didn't think about that until, well, this morning when I was thinking about family influences. I can't say though, that that was a great influence. I really think it was my own interest in studying and learning... But I think the motivation was intrinsic in that I enjoy studying, I enjoy learning, I enjoy research - gathering information together and making sense of it. That is what I do in my working life.

What Beth is describing is the enjoyment of learning which she suggests was not inherited from her familial situation. That is, although there are family members with university degrees and some with higher research degrees, her motivation to learn is embodied; it is intrinsic. Later in the interview, she indicates the belief that part of her motive for attempting a doctoral degree was extrinsic, such that the expected outcome was separable and occupational. This she articulates as

a few years earlier I had missed out on a job in Melbourne purely because I didn't have a PhD, and it came down to two final candidates. I was told later by one of the supervisory panel that I had, that I was by far the better candidate but the Director of the institute wanted someone with a PhD. So I thought if a PhD is going to get me the jobs that I want, I'd better get one.

The desire to attain a specific occupational role is an extrinsic motivation due to its having a separable outcome to the completion of the doctoral degree. As Ryan and Deci (2000, p. 60) explain: 'extrinsic motivation thus contrasts with intrinsic motivation, which refers to doing an activity simply for the enjoyment of the activity itself, rather than its instrumental value'. Thus, for Beth, the motivation to complete a doctoral degree has the added dimension of having an instrumental value that she desires; that is, her occupational motivation.

Clare had made the conscious decision to undertake doctoral study while completing her undergraduate degree. She suggests that her motivation for commencing a higher research degree was influenced as:

Oh, look it was definitely in my undergraduate degree. [I] looked around at the people that were teaching in there and I thought no this is where I want to be. I actually thought that all of the academics that were

teaching me had much better jobs than I could find anywhere else you know the hours are pretty flexible; they do interesting stuff; you engage with students; there's a lot of, you know, colourful people in universities and it's always great to work with young people.

Within this narrative Clare is articulating an extrinsic motivation to learn such that she may gain a university academic position. When questioned further on her choice of possible occupational motivation, she responded with;

Students are really great to work with; I mean this was something good that I can do with my time; this is something that I really liked [in] my undergraduate degree. I really liked doing my honours project. This is something that I can do that by the time I finish should position me at about the right place for someone that's 40. So I thought, well although I won't have extensive work experience I'll have a PhD and a bit of work experience and I'll be ready to step off into the second part into a fairly well paid job.

With this narrative Clare is suggesting that there is an intrinsic motivation in her attempting a Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) degree which is expressed in her enjoyment of undertaking an honours project in her undergraduate degree. The influence of the undergraduate degree appears to be a defining influence on her motivations to learn which she attributes to her lecturers, a non-familial influence. There is an implied inference within Clare's interview that her intrinsic motivation to transition into a higher degree research program was the result of her involvement within the university environment as suggested by Hidi and Ainley (2012).

My own motivation to commence higher education was self-developed and intrinsic in that I enjoyed learning, which was reinforced by the achievement of good grades during my primary and secondary schooling and previous higher education. Later in life this motivation was intensified by observing and working with geoscientists whose qualifications ranged from undergraduate to doctoral. I wanted to achieve what they had accomplished academically. This motivation was accompanied by a desire for intellectual stimulation which I perceived would assist in changing my life course. My perception was that this could be achieved with the development of applied research skills that would be learned with a professional doctorate. However, I was not interested in enhancing my social status. These personal reasons for attempting a doctoral degree are among the motives for studying in higher education as suggested by Thunborg *et al.* (2013) and self-fulfilling as stated by Hidi and Ainley (2012).

My extrinsic motivations were to complete a doctoral degree to enhance and improve my research abilities

which I perceived would provide a greater level of income to satisfy my travel ambitions or wanderlust. I have an innate curiosity about other cultures and how people interact with and within their cultural environments domestically and internationally. The intensity of this wanderlust had been increased with the opportunity to work within countries of the southwest Pacific which provided the basis for my limited level of understanding of these cultures and the everyday lives of the people.

The motivation to drop out then continue

The four participants in this research study have dropped out of their respective doctoral degree programs. Thunborg *et al.* (2013, p. 186) suggest that there are a number of reasons for student withdrawal. Three of these possible motivations for withdrawing from study include 'changing interest - wanting something else to do', 'lacking in interest, motivation and self-discipline' and 'struggling with studies and/or failing'. Within the researched group, these motivations encompass the reasons given by the participants to dropout from their studies.

For John, the possibility of failing his degree or not completing within the allotted timeframe was a determining motivation. Being unable to proceed with his research due to hospitalisation for some months resulted in his perception of possible failure or non-completion of his research.

Basically I had an accident [and] I required surgery from that; so it was pretty major surgery and you may not be able to see [points to large surgical scar on left hand side of face from temple to throat] but I have a big slit down the throat from the accident. It was pretty major you know. I was on a farm in New Zealand when it happened and basically I lost a fair bit of time. The reason for withdrawing, it was only a temporary withdrawal of seven months.

That John would not complete his doctorate was never an issue. His withdrawal was planned to conserve his allocated time for completion.

My own motivation for dropping out from my doctoral research study was similar to that of John; struggling with studies and allotted time for completion. My self-belief in my abilities and knowledge to develop a research proposal were severely challenged which resulted in the belief that I could actually fail by non-completion of my research. Using semesters in what was seemingly a futile attempt to develop a proposal and after interventions by the faculty and the realisation that I had not progressed with my research proposal, I withdrew rather than lose more time in the proposal development. My loss of pride and self-beliefs were possibly the main effects of this withdrawal

in conjunction with anger and denial concerning my own abilities or lack of abilities.

However, my belief in education and my intrinsic motivation to learn and the reduction of self-imposed stress to complete the proposal was the catalyst to regroup my thoughts. I was able to reinstate my enrolment and, with the assistance of a new supervisor, the proposal was completed and candidature achieved. This personal experience has demonstrated to me the strength of intrinsic motivations to overcome adversity and complete projects. The extrinsic motivations pertaining to lifestyle had been deferred but had not been forgotten; they still existed within me.

Clare and Beth withdrew from their respective doctoral programs due to the academic neglect by their supervisors. For them their interest and motivation had been severely reduced by their experiences of benign neglect. While Beth had instigated her own withdrawal after one year, Clare's university withdrew her candidature due to non-completion after ten years. Both had lost interest in their research study and while Beth has not recommenced her doctoral degree, Clare is part of a peer-supported group and intends to complete her doctorate.

Both have however, retained their intrinsic motivation to learning but Beth has not regained her extrinsic motivation, an occupational aspiration. Clare's occupational aspiration has been retained and is closely aligned with her educational aspiration of employment within an academic environment at university.

Summary and conclusion

Motivations are a part of our everyday lives affecting almost every decision we make regarding current and future personal and professional trajectories. One such trajectory is postgraduate research education which can change our life course by providing an improved life and social status because of our ongoing intellectual stimulation within a field of interest as suggested by Thunborg *et al.* (2013). However, Hidi and Ainley (2012) conclude that while it is our intrinsic motivations which can motivate the enjoyment of learning, it is our extrinsic motivations developed from our interests that can have the determining effect on what we learn. Thus, our

dominant learning motivation may be intrinsic or extrinsic according to Lee and Pang (2014) depending on our motivational orientation of personal development, career advancement or social and communication improvement.

The interaction between intrinsic and extrinsic motivations is observed within the qualitative research data and demonstrated in the participants' narratives. While Beth, Clare and I all hold an intrinsic motivation to learn, our extrinsic motives are an intermingling of occupational drivers. While our individual motives to commence a doctorate were a combination of intrinsic and extrinsic motivations, John's motivation was intrinsic and a natural progression in his education influenced by his family's educational achievements. He does not aspire to a particular occupational outcome resulting from his doctorate as would be expected if his predominant motive was extrinsic.

This personal experience has demonstrated to me the strength of intrinsic motivations to overcome adversity and complete projects. The extrinsic motivations pertaining to lifestyle had been deferred but had not been forgotten; they still existed within me.

There is a dualism within intrinsic motivations relative to their mode of formation. Clare, John and I have intrinsic motivations towards doctoral education that were formed from genetic predispositions and an immersion within socio-cultural environments that

encouraged our predispositions to learn as theorised by Grusec (2011) and Ryan and Deci (2000). Our motivations to learn are autonomous which can emanate as an achievement focus to complete our doctorates despite withdrawing from our studies and recommencing at a later time. That is, the completion of a doctorate had greater personal value as we commenced our studies without reference to a definite occupational role.

However, while Beth has an autonomous motivation to learn, her provocation to commence a doctorate was an interest in attaining a particular occupational role. Thus her interest was socio-economic rather than socio-cultural. With an increasing interest in the aspiration to attain a vocational role, her motivation to achieve a doctorate became personal and developed into an intrinsic motivation as discussed by Hidi and Ainley (2012) and Jarvela *et al.* (2013). Beth was the only research participant not to recommence her doctoral studies although she does harbour an aspiration to complete a PhD in the future.

Thus, while an intrinsic motivation may contribute to a higher level of student commitment, this does need to be moderated dependent on the formation of the motivation.

Intrinsic motivations formed from predispositions and a supportive socio-cultural environment may be more resilient than intrinsic motivations formed from an aspiration and an increasing interest to attain a socio-economic role that requires the completion of a doctoral qualification. This may also provide a partial explanation of why some withdrawing students recommence their doctorates. However, as the research data was collected from a numerically small sample, this would not be generalisable to all withdrawing students.

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