Six stages of doctoral study: a new model for PhD students

Carol Haigh, Pip Hardy and Fiona Duncan take a tongue-in-cheek look at what it is like to do a PhD

WITH A new academic year almost upon us a number of enthusiastic souls will be about to set out on the long and winding road to their doctorate. Beginning any new course of study can be a challenging time but none more so than the PhD, where there is no fresher’s week to orientate you to your new life and the formal classroom-based support, that is characteristic of most other academic study, is not available or is much more limited.

New doctoral students often find the early days difficult as they struggle to develop relationships with their supervisors, clarify the nature and focus of their research and deal with university bureaucracy. In such testing times it is not surprising that students experience strange and difficult emotions for which few, if any, doctoral induction courses prepare them. Thus, many doctoral students find themselves in a situation which they have never experienced before and for which it is difficult to prepare. This article offers a light-hearted introduction to some of the emotional stages of doctoral journey.

The authors’ personal experiences and wider observation of the doctoral student population have suggested to us that an emotional and psychological framework exists within the doctoral study experience and the emotional journey taken by doctoral students. This comprises six stages. We have entitled this the Haigh Hardy Duncan (HHD) Theory of Doctoral Study.

Stage 1: elated smugness
This is the preliminary stage of doctoral study and typically occurs immediately after registration. You are thrilled to have written a proposal that has been accepted. You are enrolled and you have a library card, you can join the students’ union and, in many cases, you are able to apply for a student travel card. You have become part of the doctoral student body, in your own university and your professional discipline.

This elated smugness will be enhanced by a sudden interest shown in you from individuals who have ignored you in the past. However, you quickly learn to distance yourself from people who want to question you in depth because being unable to articulate the aims of your research can be de-motivating or even embarrassing.

Students in this stage can be identified by their copy of the PhD ‘How to’ book, which they carry with them at all times, and the fact that their apologies for their absence from any events are accompanied by the phrase: ‘It’s my PhD day.’

Stage 2: paranoid bemusement
Elated smugness can be relatively brief and soon turns into paranoid bemusement. Students who reach this stage tend to haunt the university library, wandering the aisles aimlessly looking worried.

This phase typically occurs early on in the student’s doctoral career, usually after they have woken at 3am with no clear idea about what they want to do, no research question, no strong methodology, possibly no income and the certainty that, sooner or later, someone will spot them as an imposter and drive them from the programme.

This stage can last from a few days to a few months, but rarely persists throughout the entire doctoral journey.

Stage 3: domination
Students soon adjust to the isolation of the doctoral path and start to value the freedom to express their own ideas. At this point students have moved into stage 3, the most pleasant part of the entire journey.

Domination tends to occur around the time that data are being collected; research questions are clarified, methodologies are finalised and a literature review is taking shape. A supervisor-student relationship has developed and receiving an email from a supervisor is no longer cause for fear, panic or loathing. Ethical approval has been obtained and, naively, students might think they are on the home run.

The doctoral candidate usually feels competent and confident and is far removed from the individual exemplified in stages 1 or 2. Students usually know at what point they are on their journey and have a clear idea about the direction they need to take to get to the finishing post.

Stage 4: obsession
Stages 3 and 4 typically occur sequentially because, after the domination of data collection and analysis seen in stage 3, a doctoral candidate moves into the writing up phase. At that point, some unfortunate individuals briefly revisit stage 2, or indeed stage 1, as procrastination reaches new heights. It is at this stage that students sign up for the London Marathon, decide to renovate their house or get divorced, all techniques intended to distract from the writing task. Sometimes it can seem easier to step off the path than to continue the journey.

When writing is in full flow students are characteristically hunched over their laptops, found haunting cyber cafes at conferences or desperately tapping at keyboards until 4.30am. Taking part in everyday activities becomes difficult as most of the student’s brain is absorbed with chapter planning, data organisation or referencing. This stage puts the most strain on support networks, loved ones and household pets, since nothing rates as more important than working on the thesis.
Stage 5: fear
This stage tends to be composed of a number of sub-stages, some of which are analogous to stage 2 and others that make stage 2 feel like a fuzzy, warm, safe place.

It is not abnormal, even when you are a number of months or years into your PhD to wake up absolutely certain that someone will spot you for the fraud that you are certain you are. This is natural and should not lead to panic. At this stage students typically begin to bargain with their supervisor, requesting extensions or even consider quitting altogether. Good supervisors are adept at listening to fears before the student is sent home to get on with the writing. Even minor setbacks assume the status of major disasters. An empty printer cartridge can be the cause of inconsolable sobbing and wailing.

By far the worst of part of this stage occurs during the final days of thesis writing. The tome is complete and it is ready to submit but the student becomes convinced that it is ‘not PhD standard’. It does not matter that doctorates are not like chocolate bars with clear and measurable production criteria, it does not matter that by definition a doctoral thesis should be unique and innovative or even that you know your work is good. Students still fully expect examiners to take one look at their thesis before dismissing it.

It seldom occurs to doctoral students, at this stage, that they have acquired a particular expertise in the topic of their thesis during their journey. This fear stems from an unfounded expectation that their life’s work will be assigned, by the examiners, to the pile entitled ‘for immediate, if not sooner, shredding’.

Stage 6: tranquillity
Once the thesis has been soft bound and submitted, the external examiners have been confirmed and the viva date agreed, and the separation anxiety of being parted from your work has subsided, a peculiar sense of tranquillity will descend. This is characterised by finding lots of free time again, starting to take an interest in television programmes, beginning to recognise your family and remembering the names of pets.

Unfortunately this stage does not last for long because as the viva date approaches students quickly retreat to earlier stages – usually stage 4 with the slight modification that repeatedly reading your thesis becomes a raison d’être with a souppon of stage 5 to keep you keen. Stage 5 can intensify as the list of post-submission grammatical and spelling errors spotted enters a second volume.

However, nature is wonderful and knows that the human psyche cannot sustain stage 4 or 5 emotions indefinitely, so on the actual day of your viva a Zen-like calm descends. This feeling deepens as examination time draws closer. For some this tranquillity can last for the entire duration of the doctoral defence and may explain why so few people actually remember their viva once it is over.

Those who leave their viva having been awarded their doctorate experience emotions never before encountered but, most of all, they are surprised that a brass band is not waiting outside the viva room to announce your success to the world. Those who leave their viva with revisions or a rewrite to undertake quickly, stagger back to Stage 5 in the fear that they might never complete, but usually do.

You are not alone
Throughout the doctoral journey and the associated emotional stages described in this article, it is important to remember that enrolling on a doctoral programme does not make the student the first, the last or the only person to have made this journey.

The emotions described above are common but there are many ways that doctoral students can manage these. There are formal and informal networks, in institutions, in professional groups and nationally. For example, the Royal College of Nursing Research Society hosts a doctoral student network and the European Academy of Nursing Science regularly holds summer schools.

Both offer an opportunity for doctoral students to meet and share ideas, and there are many more networking opportunities. Successful completion of doctoral studies can be dependent on searching out and taking advantage of these opportunities.

Conclusion
We hope this exposition of the HHD theory will go some way to reassuring doctoral students that strange and deviant behaviour is the norm when travelling the doctoral journey.

Doing a doctorate is complex and scary and has implications for social and family networks. At the same time as being challenging, it is worth taking the journey and it can even be enjoyable. No matter what happens, it is important to remember that you are on a long, life-changing journey – but you are never alone.

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