



## *Piled Higher and Deeper? Is this what PhD really stands for?*

*This paper is not intended to suggest absolute ways for the budding PhD candidate to proceed. In fact, it is neither informed by the literature nor is it supported by empirically derived evidence although such words of wisdom and data do, no doubt, exist. Instead, this paper stems from a blend of a personal vignette and critical reflection about the PhD experience after the fact. In this paper, the author exhorts those intending to undertake doctoral studies to make sure that they have a strong support network because the generation of a thesis is seldom, if ever, a solo affair; instead it is a team effort that involves a range of collaborators. Hence it is important to make sure that a supportive climate is established before candidates begin their 'opus magnificus'. The paper emphasises the crucial role that a support network has in ensuring that the PhD candidate achieves 'academic resiliency' because such resiliency, it is proposed, is a necessary condition to eventual doctoral success.*

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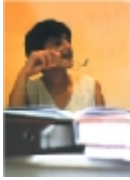
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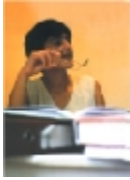
The book by Philips and Pugh (1987), *How to Get a PhD – the Peaks and Troughs of Postgraduate Studies* was seminal to me. It was influential, not because it told me much about how to succeed in doctoral studies, even though it did do that. It was important, not because it told me terribly much that I didn't already know about, for instance, how to choose a faculty, a supervisor, and a thesis topic (and not necessarily in that order). Instead, it was seminal because it included a chapter on how not to get a PhD.

You see, even before all of my PhD work was completed, I'd become convinced that I could have rewritten that chapter many times over. What's more, I know that I would have achieved a mighty comprehensive list of things not to do during the PhD candidature. For instance, and these are only some of the things that pertained to my particular set of circumstances – it is folly to undertake whilst you are completing a doctorate, the building from go to whoa, of a seven bed-room, three bathroom, massively alternative house – especially if you have never ever built anything in your life before!

As a corollary to that, you should never ever decide that it would be a good idea for you and your family to live in a tent until the house is completed to lock-up stage. You should never ever do so, even with the support of an ever tolerant, long suffering partner, who in our case was also the mother of our three children, who, at that time, included a pre-schooler, a junior primary student and an argumentative teenager.

The reason for never ever living in a tent, by the way, is not so much that it is folly to live under canvas, but rather, that you can guarantee that as soon as you decide that tenting will be a fun way of saving money, you will precipitate the wettest and coldest winter there has been for at least two decades. In our case, it actually snowed before we had reached lock-up stage and we were in rural Australia! Inclemency and tenting do tend to stifle doctoral progress. (A quick aside here: I know of a couple who lived in a tent at the commencement of their PhD candidature and they ended up having twins. Was theirs a case of *loitering within tent?*)

It would be an easy matter to list a whole host of quirky things for doctoral candidates to avoid. But these would be almost certain to cast rather a negative hue and skew on the proceedings of today and



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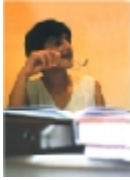
I don't want to be that gloomy. Instead, I want to convert these challenging matters into some positives. These positives have emerged from reflecting, nostalgically now, upon the experiences that my family and I shared. But as there is insufficient space to do that extensively, and as that would entail writing another tome, a sort of sequel to the PhD, I'm going to limit my discussion to stressing the importance of making sure that you have a supportive network before you begin your PhD studies.

Other sessions today will deal with strategies for helping you to manage your studies. Yet other slots will introduce you to skills for success and there will also be opportunities for you to discuss PhD issues of concern. Most importantly, there will also be opportunities for you to network with fellow candidates. My challenge to you is to network vigorously so that you might discover a kindred spirit who is actually interested in what you intend to do for your doctoral thesis! You never know, it could be the start of a beautiful friendship.

Seriously though, I claim that you need to learn, if you don't already have them, a wide range of skills that will help you to carefully frame the specific focus of your study. Time spent at the outset in generating such a focus will save you time and money later on. Equally, effort devoted to honing academic skills at the outset of your candidature will almost certainly yield a lifetime of benefits.

You need to learn how to manage information, truckloads of information, effectively and efficiently. You need to learn how best to gather, manage and analyse good quality data; and you need to work out how these data can stand you in good stead whilst you are actually writing your thesis. You need all of these skills so that your data and ideas coalesce to address the highly specific focus of your highly original study because that's what a PhD is about.

It is the sum of such skills, which, when applied with rigour, will enable you to succeed. It is the effectiveness of your application of the sum of those skills that determines the extent to which you allow yourself to manage data that are piled higher and deeper than any you have ever encountered before. Or put another way, if you do not have a *kite* of academic skills, you are likely to flounder in a tangle of loose unconnected thinking and loose unconnected information that



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will seem to get exponentially higher and deeper and altogether more and more uncontrollable as you proceed through your candidature.

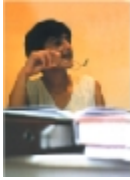
In short, you can either drown in ever-broadening and ever-ascending piles of vaguely relevant snippets, papers and internet addresses, or you can become sensibly immersed in an adventure of highly focused learning that will impact upon you and those close to you for the rest of your life. And only if you learn to work smarter and not harder, will you succeed.

Remember though, that even if your PhD impacts upon you and those around you for the rest of your life, it does not follow that your thesis will become an earth shattering best selling book and a ticket to making millions. Just look at the people who work as academics. They are living proof that this does not happen. In fact, the majority of academics are content merely to have run the academic gauntlet that is the PhD. They are pleased to have had the stamina to have seen their endeavours through to successful completion. Often, the very last thing on their agenda is to convert their thesis into a book and the reality is that minds, time, and interests move on.

But in order to succeed, and to my way of thinking, this is far, far more important than any other factor that I know of that is associated with the PhD, you need to make sure that you have a support network that will work with you and for you. It is hugely essential that you make sure that your support systems are in place – especially those stemming from kith and kin.

If you are single or unattached, generating a support network means negotiating with close friends or with members of your family of origin. You need to be able to ask, unashamedly, for unflinching, stolid long term support. You need, from the outset to negotiate space and time be able pursue your work in peace. You need to forewarn those who are close to you that your withdrawal from many mainstream and routine social activities should not give rise to angst which is a feeling that comes about when those close to you feel that they are being neglected and thrown over for a mere thesis.

If such fears are allayed from the outset, and if it is made clear from the very beginning that you will need to have both time and space for your thesis; if these matters are clarified at the very, very start, you will be less likely to encounter resistance to your work. There will be



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also be less opposition to the inevitable withdrawal you will make from a number of family and social occasions. In fact, you will be less likely to encounter antipathy towards your thesis if you negotiate clear understandings about your intentions well before you begin.

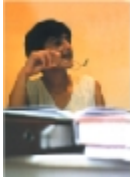
And if you have a partner and/or offspring, that is, a family of procreation, reaching such understandings becomes many, many times more important. Indeed, I'd go so far as to venture that without a support network, you have far less hope of success.

Your support network has many roles. It needs to be able to literally support you financially, cognitively, socially and emotionally. It also needs to be able to keep you in touch with the real world so that when you finish your candidature, you can move away from the ephemeral life of academia and back into a worldlier context with comparative ease. Your support network needs, therefore, to not only be able to prop you up from time to time, but also, on other occasions, to deliberately cut you down to size. PhD candidature is not an excuse for the rubbish and compost to be allowed to become piled higher and deeper, no matter what the title of this paper. If you think that, then your support network needs to remind you that living a balanced life whilst completing a doctorate is a prime facet of what I'm going to call *academic resiliency*.

To that extent, I really think that, from the outset, you need to understand that your doctoral undertaking is not yours alone, but instead, is a team enterprise. Your team, therefore, will contribute to the ninety per cent perspiration and ten per cent inspiration that is a PhD. Your team are the backbone of your academic resiliency.

But your support network should, in my view, extend beyond your family network. It should also include one or two significant others – surrogate supervisors if you like. Often these are fellow PhD candidates. They can quickly be identified because they almost always want to talk to you about their own studies just as you want to talk to them about yours.

Typically, during the early stages of candidature, the focus will be on 'what's your research question?'; during the middle stages of the process, conversations will centre (frustratingly) on, 'have you finished your interviews/ transcription/ data-entry/ field-work/ experiments yet?'; and during the latter stages talk will mainly be



concerned with ‘how many chapters have you got left to write – will you finish on time?’

Your PhD colleagues will also want to share with you, often in great detail, a discovery that they have made even though chances are that their particular discovery may come from an understanding which you have taken for granted for years. (How boring, you think.) They will also frequently want to complain to you about their supervisors, about their poverty, their lack of time, having to take out the compost, and so on. (How boring, you think.)

What this boils down to is an observation that PhD candidates very quickly learn to demonstrate what can only be described as Venetian Deafness. That is, they demonstrate an ability to let only certain selective things to be heard. The phenomenon manifests something like this. You tell another PhD candidate, a significant other, about your thesis. While you are talking, the significant other, like a well trained automaton, politely says ‘yes,’ and ‘uh-huh’ and even, ‘right, I see what you mean’. They do this many, many times so that eventually, after what would seem to the outside observer to be an eternity, you get to talk your issue right through to its endpoint. And in between, while you are telling the other person about your study, they in turn are earnestly engaged in telling you, yet a-bloody-gain and interminably, about their own study.

Of course, you, like a well trained automaton, politely say, ‘yes’ and ‘uh-huh’ and even, ‘right, I see what you mean.’ The Venetian Deafness of PhD candidates, you see, is invariably accompanied by mirror behaviours. Thus, when you encounter a gaggle of Venetian Deaf, mirror mimicking doctoral candidates, the atmosphere fairly steams with demands that you, the candidate, must clearly and with clarity, without repetition and without deviation, precisely articulate your research question – ‘*nudge, nudge, wink, wink – what’s your research question?*’

But then, and this is the important bit, your Mirror Mimicking Venetian Deaf listener suddenly shows you that their behaviour was actually just a front. They actually respond to your monologue, just as you, in turn, respond to theirs. For you, they suddenly become incisively critical and they provide you with honest, deep feedback. This shows that not only has critical listening occurred, but also that they have



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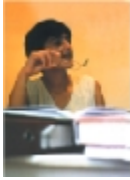
understood, challenged and even extended your thinking in a useful and constructive manner. Equally, because it is fair to do so, you show that you have cleverly understood their thinking and their deepest most intellectual discoveries. And thus are the frontiers of PhD's extended, often by fiat of rerun, rehearsed conversations which give rise to illusions of originality. Mind you, to be fair, such august occasions are frequently augmented by just a little bit of Chardonnay. Or Merlot.

Now there are two factors at play here – first – as I mentioned before, you already actually know all about the unique thinking and discovery of the work of your colleague and, yawn, you have known about this for many, many years. So for you it really is, at first glance anyway, yawn, old hat. And of course, it goes without saying that your own discoveries and insights are probably, yawn, very passé for them as well.

But the second factor, as I noted just before, is that you have probably heard what each other have to say many, many times before. Yours and theirs are well rehearsed scripts that keep improving with every cocktail party and barbeque. You gradually learn to condense the nub of your thesis into a single easy-to-understand statement.

Sound cynical doesn't it? But it's not. These rituals can give rise to longstanding intellectual partnerships and these expressions (between fellow PhD candidates) of scholarly intent are important both cathartically and developmentally.

It is useful to be able to vent your spleen with a significant other who knows what your angst is all about. It is even more useful to have that same person, or even a succession of significant others, critically appraise a survey you have designed, an interview schedule you have developed, a database framework you have constructed, a statistical procedure you want to trial, a theoretical construct you need to explore, an argument you want to advance, or an idea that you want to flesh out. And even more important is the opportunity that significant others, and even insignificant others afford you practice in being able to express your thesis in a *Readers' Digest* genre. Thus the role of the critical other, in parallel with the role of the family, is pivotal in ensuring academic resiliency.



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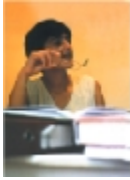
So is the role of the supervisor. Supervision is about teaching and it is, at once, a deeply personal and extremely intensive experience. If your supervisor is not a teacher, they should not be supervising because they are neglecting their primary task which is to teach. That means that your support network is being sold short because, after all, this PhD belongs to you in partnership with members of that network. Hence, if your supervisor does not teach, both you and your resiliency supporters become thwarted. Indeed, Phillips and Pugh explain that in days of yore, masterates bestowed a right to practice and doctorates signalled the right to teach.

Regrettably, the intensity of the PhD experience can often lead to a falling out between the candidate and the supervisor. Often this is due to poor supervision. The candidate is left to fend alone and help comprises an occasional grunt and a suggestion about still more literature to read. Sometimes, the falling out is occasioned by disagreements about the direction of the thesis with the candidate and the supervisor construing matters about theory and/or procedures from polarised viewpoints. At other times, the falling out occurs simply because the candidate and the supervisor get sick of each other.

In fact, often, after an initial apprenticeship, the candidate moves ahead insofar as a grasp of the field being studied is concerned. This is hardly surprising given that the domain being studied is expected to expand the bounds of knowledge and will, therefore, be epistemologically fresh. The maxim of *sometimes learner, sometimes teacher* applies here and a constructive supervision partnership will have acknowledged that dynamic very early on.

From time-to-time, talk of sexual impropriety, either real or rumoured, surfaces and I believe that there is probably a fairly widely held, but probably relatively unresearched belief that the candidate and the supervisor will, at some stage, become intimate. What two consenting adults do is their business but I have to say in humble deference to my late supervisor, Professor Grant Noble, that there was no way that that sexual impropriety was ever going to be an issue with him. He was as old, as ugly and as cantankerous as me.

But seriously, in the event that unwanted overtones do eventuate, the PhD candidate is strongly advised to seek help – PRONTO – they



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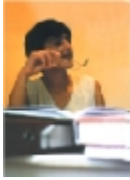
can get help from the postgraduate student support services and/or from sexual harassment counsellors. Just do it.

I want to make a final point about the PhD. The title of the address was intentionally provocative and yet it is a serious title. A focused piece of research that is of the order of magnitude of a doctorate can only ever be completed if the research is utterly focused. Hence, if there is no properly formulated thesis, or if there is no clearly defined hypothesis, or if there is, perhaps, a neo-nebulous research question at the outset of the study (even allowing for grounded theory actually having veracity), the research path will be risky. It will be undefined and the precipices into which the unfocused candidate can fall will abound.

To that extent, the supervisor, at the early stages of this grand learning process, is rather like a guide-dog. The supervisor can help the candidate to see research possibilities and in due course, but not too much later, the supervisor, through careful and continuous teaching, can facilitate a specificity of research focus that will enable a deeply intense and rewarding learning experience.

I say not too much later because I know of more than one instance in which the PhD proposal has become so elevated in importance that both the supervisor and the candidate developed a phobia and an overt avoidance syndrome when it came to the gathering of any form of primary data. In one instance, after three years of trying to perfect a proposal, a candidate I know who already works as an academic, withdrew his candidature. This candidate's network of colleagues was slim and fragile and, in a way, was more imagined than real. This candidate was unable, perhaps even unwilling to listen to his support network of critical friends and colleagues. He was unable to sustain academic resiliency and he withdrew.

Another former colleague will never progress beyond her proposal but it sure as hell is a sustainable topic of conversation in the cocktail circuit. She has no support network and neither does she want one because her agenda is not actually to complete her PhD. Ironically, her long-suffering husband knows and understands the score but he continues to support her. His support is the sign of a true gentleman and of a loving spouse who does as he is told.



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I know yet another candidate who is also an academic. By contrast to the first candidate, this person enjoyed unequivocal support from his family and he duly submitted his work. This person's thesis was, sadly, not accepted and it is notable that in this instance, the supervision was poor to the point of being almost non-existent. Regrettably, the candidate in question was reluctant to engage with critical and significant others who may have been able to critique and even proof-read the thesis prior to submission. Again, the network that could have provided a springboard to the gaining of academic resiliency was not exploited.

In my view, therefore, it is quite clearly the support network, the academic and familial whanau that hold centre stage; they are the key to success. If they are not there to support the candidate, the team effort that is the very flux of the doctoral study is likely to flounder. This means that the candidate, the person at the centre of the learning process, will be at risk.

Strictly speaking, that refers to all of you who are here today. Without a support network, I believe that you increase the risk of failure. You could even be in the proverbial *shite* because the academic resiliency that could have saved you remains invisible and unformed. Go well in your efforts.