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# Positive And Problematic Dissertation Experiences: The Faculty Perspective.

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## Abstract

We interviewed 14 clinical and counseling psychology faculty regarding their experiences chairing positive and problematic dissertations. Data were analyzed using consensual qualitative research (CQR). Participants reported that advisors' roles involved guiding/facilitating dissertations and helping students shape research ideas; students' roles included taking responsibility, working independently, and maintaining good relationships with the chair/committee. With positive dissertation experiences, chairs and students collaborated before the dissertation, worked together well during the dissertation, and students began the dissertation feeling competent and motivated; such dissertations positively affected participants. Problematic dissertation experiences evinced difficult relationships between chair and student, and students' low research capability; such dissertations negatively affected participants.

## Keywords

dissertation; advising; research training

## Introduction

The dissertation is often considered the capstone or final rite of passage in doctoral education, an endeavor that should be creative, exciting, technically sound, original, and illuminate part of the discipline (Delamont, Atkinson, & Parry, [6]). According to the Council of Graduate Schools ([4]), the purposes of writing a dissertation are to show research independence and make an original contribution to society. Sadly, only about half of all entering doctoral students in the US obtain their degree; although students leave programs at many different points in time, some 20–30% achieve dissertator status but then fail to complete the dissertation requirement (Bowen & Rudenstine, [1]; Davis & Parker, [5]), with the highest attrition rates occurring in the social sciences (Bowen & Rudenstine, [1]). Given these alarming rates of noncompletion, we sought to understand, from the chair's (advisor's) perspective, some of the factors that may contribute to positive and problematic dissertation experiences.

The advisor undoubtedly occupies a particularly crucial role in the dissertation process. According to students, the advising relationship may be the most important component of the research training environment (Gelso, [9]), mediating virtually every other factor that affects the dissertation. Hockney ([16]) and Schlosser, Knox, Moskovitz, and Hill ([24]) characterized this relationship as a critically important bond that heavily influences students' success or failure in completing the PhD. Furthermore, students who characterized their dissertation experiences as positive reported that their chair was responsive, supportive, and provided structure and guidance; in contrast, students experiencing problematic dissertations found their advisors to be non-responsive and to have limited availability (Burkard et al., [3]). Despite its acknowledged importance, however, the dissertation advising relationship remains not well understood, with little empirical research directly examining this topic. Relatedly, Bowen and Rudenstine ([1]) asserted that dissertation advising is perhaps the most unpredictable of all the factors that influence the dissertation process because the relationship depends so much on the interaction of the personalities, styles, and expectations of both faculty members and students.

In an intriguing study that examined dissertation advisor/advisee dyads, Goodman ([10]) interviewed six student/advisor pairs about their doctoral advising relationships early in the dissertation process. The students reported needing to balance intellectual freedom and evaluation; being in control and being controlled; being free to depend or not depend on the advisor; doing it their own way and seeking guidance; figuring things out on their own and having someone to tell them the answers; and independence from and connection with the advisor. Faculty advisors cited concern about wanting students sometimes to take a stand and other times be obedient; having students do the work themselves versus giving them lots of help; allowing students to make their own decisions versus influencing their decisions; not meddling, but not leaving the student hanging; letting

students figure out what to do on their own versus telling them what to do; and facilitating student ownership and conveying approval. The overarching struggle for these faculty/student pairs, then, was finding an appropriate balance with regard to intellectual freedom, control, guidance, and decision-making.

Unfortunately, the available literature is limited in that studies consist primarily of survey-based student perspectives on a single aspect of the dissertation experience (e.g., the influence of perfectionism, the influence of research efficacy). Our knowledge of the dissertation process may thus be enhanced by greater and deeper inclusion of the faculty point of view.

The purpose of this study was to gain a better understanding of advisors' perspectives on the dissertation process in professional psychology doctoral programs in the US/Canada. (Note that throughout this manuscript we use the words "chair" and "advisor" interchangeably, and in doing so refer to the faculty member who served as the student's primary source of guidance on the dissertation.) We examined, then, what chairs perceive to be the roles and responsibilities of advisor and student in the dissertation, and what they think contributes to positive or problematic dissertation experiences. We hoped that the findings would better inform advisors and graduate programs about how to facilitate more favorable dissertation experiences.

We used consensual qualitative research (CQR; Hill et al., [14]; Hill, Thompson, & Williams, [15]) for this study. CQR fosters a deep examination of phenomena and uses a team of researchers to develop an understanding of the data. In addition, CQR allows unanticipated findings to emerge through its inductive process (i.e., researchers probe participants' experiences fully and without predetermined responses in mind). Finally, CQR allows investigators to use participant's actual language as the foundation of data analysis.

## Method

### Participants

#### Faculty

Fourteen (7 female, 7 male; 13 Caucasian, 1 Asian; 9 in counseling psychology, 5 in clinical psychology) faculty members in scientist-practitioner doctoral programs in the US/Canada participated in this study. Participants ranged in age from 34 to 59 years ( $M = 50.2$ ,  $SD = 8.20$ ), had chaired between 5 and 60 dissertations ( $M = 22.8$ ,  $SD = 16.7$ ), and had very few students who went "All But Dissertation" (ABD;  $M = 0.29$ ,  $SD = 0.47$ ). They categorized the majority of the dissertations they chaired as positive ( $M = 83.93\%$ ,  $SD = 14.03$ ) as opposed to negative.

#### Dissertators

As reported by the chairs, the 14 students (9 female, 5 male; 12 Caucasian, 2 Asian; 9 in counseling psychology, 4 in clinical psychology, 1 in combined counseling/clinical psychology) in the positive dissertation experiences ranged in age from the mid 20s to the 40s. Students in the problematic dissertation experiences (one did not report these data; 7 female, 6 male; 10 Caucasian, 2 African American, 1 Native American; 8 counseling psychology, 5 clinical psychology) ranged in age from the mid-20s to the 50s.

#### Interviewers and judges

The first four authors served as interviewers and judges on the primary team. One 46-year-old woman and one 49-year-old man were faculty members in a doctoral program in the midwestern US; one 26-year-old woman was a student in this program; the remaining 31-year-old man was a recent graduate of this program. The final two authors served as auditors: one woman was a 59-year-old faculty member in a doctoral program in the mid-Atlantic US; the other woman was a 32-year-old doctoral student in the primary team's program. All identified as European American counseling psychologists, and all except the female graduate student on the primary team had prior experience with CQR. In various combinations, the six authors had all worked together on prior

studies, leading to strong and respectful professional relationships. With regard to expectations about the results, the authors believed that the chair's role involved serving as the primary mentor for their students' dissertations (e.g., support, guide, advocate, serve as resource, provide feedback, address dissertation process, and relationship as necessary). In turn, they expected that students should take appropriate responsibility for the dissertation (e.g., develop idea, explore literature, collect and analyze data, write the document, be responsive to advisor feedback, keep chair apprised of progress, complete tasks in timely manner, be willing to address procedural or relationship concerns). All had completed or were in the process of completing their dissertation and so had personal experience with the phenomenon.

## Measures

### Demographic form

The demographic form asked for age, sex, program (clinical or counseling psychology), race/ethnicity, and dissertation experiences (i.e., number of dissertations chaired; number of dissertation committees on which participant had served beyond those chaired; percentage of dissertations characterized as positive versus problematic). In addition, participants were asked to provide their name and contact information so that a researcher could arrange the interview.

### Interview protocol

All team members participated in developing the protocol. The protocol was piloted on two non-participant volunteers who matched the participation criteria. Based on their feedback, we revised the protocol (clarified wording, removed any redundant questions). The resulting semi-structured 50-min protocol (i.e., each participant responded to a standard set of questions, with interviewers pursuing additional lines of questioning based on participants' responses) began with questions about advisors' and their dissertating students' roles and responsibilities during the dissertation. Participants were next asked to describe one positive and one problematic dissertation experience. The interview was closed by asking participants about the effect of the interview and their reasons for participating in the research. In the unstructured 10–30-min follow-up interview, the researcher asked additional questions that arose after the first interview.

## Procedures for collecting data

### Recruiting faculty

We recruited people through three methods: letters sent to two randomly selected full-time associate or full professors in 50 randomly selected APA-accredited counseling and clinical psychology programs (yielded five participants); a notice on the listserv for the Council for Counseling Psychology Training Programs (yielded one participant); and personal contacts (yielded eight participants). The cover letter informed potential participants that to participate, they had to be full-time faculty in an APA-accredited clinical or counseling psychology PhD program, have been the primary chair/advisor for at least five doctoral students, and able to speak about one positive and one problematic empirical dissertation experience within the last 10 years. Potential participants were also sent the demographic form, informed consent, and interview protocol. Those interested in participating were asked to complete and return the demographic form and the signed informed consent form to the primary investigator.

### Interviewing

Each interviewer conducted both the initial and follow-up audiotaped telephone interviews with three or four participants (none known to them personally).

## Transcripts

All interviews were transcribed verbatim (except for minimal encouragers, silences, and stutters). Any potentially identifying information was deleted from the transcripts, and each participant was assigned a code number to protect confidentiality.

## Procedures for analyzing data

Data were analyzed following CQR methods (Hill et al., [15], [14]). CQR requires that research team members arrive at consensus about both data classification and interpretation as they proceed through the three steps of data analysis (domain coding, core ideas, cross-analysis); auditors also review each step.

## Draft of final results

All participants were sent a draft of the results of the study and asked to verify that confidentiality had been maintained and provide comments. Five participants responded, and their remarks (all minor) were incorporated into the manuscript.

## Results and discussion

We first provide an overview of the findings that emerged when participants discussed their perspectives on advisors' and students' roles in the dissertation process. We then present illustrative examples that characterize the findings related to participants' descriptions of specific positive and problematic dissertation experiences, and compare the results for the positive and problematic dissertation experiences. Detailed results are presented in Tables 1 and 2. Categories that emerged for all or all but one case were considered general; those that emerged for more than half and up to the cut-off for general were considered typical; those that emerged for between two and up to half of the cases were considered variant. Findings that appeared in a single case were placed in an "other" category and are not reported.

Table 1. Contextual findings.

Domain/category	Frequency	Illustrative core idea
Advisor's role as dissertation chair		
Guide dissertation tasks	General	
Facilitate whole project	General	To provide guidance in all aspects of the study
Help develop and shape students' research ideas	Typical	Help students determine research question in area of interest
Ensure quality of dissertation	Variant	Ensure level of quality, quantity that will satisfy project as dissertation
Provide emotional support/ motivation	Typical	Foster student motivation and confidence
Role varies depending on student needs	Typical	Role varies depending on the student
Student's role on dissertation		
Take responsibility/work independently	General	Take ownership, responsibility, initiative
Maintain good relationship and communicate with advisor/ committee	Typical	Maintain good communication with committee to navigate process
Be an expert/contribute to field	Variant	Make an independent, important contribution to field

Note: General, 13–14 cases; typical, 8–12 cases; variant, 2–7 cases.

Table 2. Specific positive and problematic dissertation experience findings.

	Positive event	Problematic event	
	Frequency	Frequency	Core idea example
Domain/category			
How came to work with student on dissertation (diss)			
P and student worked together prior to diss	Typical	Variant	"Long-term relationship with student before dissertation"
Shared research interests	Variant	Variant	"Had similar research interests"
Student assigned to P as advisee	Variant	–	"Assigned to advisor at start of doctoral program"
P recruited/was assigned student as advisee	–	Variant	"Advisor selected student to be admitted"
Student asked P to chair diss	Variant	–	"Student approached P and asked her to be dissertation chair"
Student had difficulties with prior chair, so P agreed to take student	–	Variant	"Student had conflicts with other potential chair; P clear that situation would be a problem, but felt he had to step up and be student's chair"
Relationship with student			
Worked well together	General	Variant	
Good professional relationship	General	–	"Positive working relationship and liked each other's styles; clear communication"
Good personal relationship	Variant	–	"Had fun working on dissertation, learned about each other's lives, professional relationship emerged as friendship"
Problematic	–	Typical	"Relationship was tense, weird, conflicted, advisor felt anxiety and irritation; advisor 'grit her teeth' when took calls/emails from student"
Minimal involvement between P and student	–	Variant	"Relationship limited, dissertation the only project advisor and student did together"
Positive elements of the experiences			



Positive student characteristics	General	–	
Competent dissertator	General	Variant	"Student was extraordinarily competent, was expected to produce a good product, and did"
Motivated/invested in the work	Typical	–	"Student was engaged and invested in the process, listened to chair, never abandoned goal"
Open/non-defensive to feedback	Variant	–	"Student was open to suggestions and criticism"
Pleasant personality	Variant	–	"Student was agreeable and willing to help others out when was no benefit to her"
Positive relationship with student	Typical	Typical	"Through an early dissertation crises, chair and student forged relationship, and student realized that chair not thwarting student's progress; relationship was redemptive"
Benefited P professionally	Typical	–	"Student and chair presented poster on dissertation at APA"
P/student overcame obstacles	Variant	–	"Student had lot of remedial work to do, and chair saw student blossom"
Student finished	–	Variant	"Good to see student defend"
Student appreciated Ps help	–	Variant	"Student appreciated Ps effort"
Research was interesting	–	Variant	"Research was cutting-edge"
Problematic elements of the experiences			
Task-related difficulties	Typical	–	"Student not well-skilled in stats"
Giving feedback to student	Variant	–	"P wrestled with liking student so much, so was sometimes hard to give critical feedback"
Students' other commitments slowed diss progress	Variant	–	"Student's progress slowed by separation from husband"
Students' lack of confidence	Variant	–	"When student became insecure, he got nasty, critical, abrasive"
Negative student characteristics	–	Typical	
Difficult personality	–	Typical	"Student determined to do things her own way, even if incorrect; student did not meet deadlines, was kicked out of program but readmitted on appeal because of politics, did not take feedback willingly"
Not competent dissertator	–	Typical	"Student not intellectually capable of scope of proposed dissertation but liked to think that he was"
Not invested in the work	–	Variant	"Student viewed dissertation as assignment that had to be done rather than capstone of academic career, just wanted to appease chair"
Student chose topic outside Ps interest/ competence area	–	Variant	"Student's topic was 'pretty far stretch' of Ps area"
Dissertation not a good product	–	Variant	"Dissertation not high quality"
Committee member became difficult during diss	–	Variant	"Committee member rude, obnoxious, 'beat up' student and 'cut the legs out from under' the dissertation"
Effect of dissertation on P			
Positive	Typical	Typical	
Elicited positive feelings	Typical	Variant	"Nice to see student succeed"
Stimulated Ps ideas for future research	Variant	–	"Sharpened Ps thinking to see future research directions"

P learned something that will help select students	–	Variant	"P will be more careful in accepting students who have at least moderate interest in research"
Negative	–	General	
P hurt/disappointed/sad	–	Typical	"Experience was rotten and sad; P felt badly treated by student"
P frustrated/stressed/exhausted	–	Typical	"Experience was anxiety-provoking and a 'horror story'; P feels he was 'burned' by student"
P critical of self	–	Variant	"P wondered if she to blame, if she did something wrong"
What P tried to make event more positive			
Work on communication	–	Typical	
Regarding Ps expectations of diss	–	Typical	"P communicated to student that dissertation was student's project, that student needed to take initiative"
Regarding relationship with student	–	Variant	"Had multiple conversations with student about why feedback so hurtful"
Regarding relationship with co-chair/ committee member	–	Variant	"P and co-chair talked about need to present a united front so student no longer 'split' them"
Supported student through emotional difficulties	–	Variant	"P tried to empathize with student's anxiety, reassure student"
No changes	–	Variant	"P and student persevered, P 'sucked it up and dealt with it' because that part of job"

Notes: Positive event: general, 13–14 cases; typical, 8–12 cases; variant, 2–7 cases; problematic event: one participant did not have such an event; thus, general, 12–13 cases, typical, 7–11 cases, variant, 2–6 cases. P, participant; – denotes that no category emerged for that event. Categories in bold note a difference of at least two frequency levels (e.g., general versus variant, typical vs. none) between the positive and problematic dissertation experiences.

## Contextual results

Participants viewed their role as dissertation chair quite broadly, one that demanded that they attend to both the tasks and the emotional demands of the project, a perspective consistent with Gelso ([9]). Similarly, Spillett and Moisiejewicz ([25]) described the dissertation chair as a combined cheerleader (making themselves available for students' needs and questions), counselor (focusing on the dissertation work itself and helping students identify additional resources, as needed), coach (helping students learn the skills of research), and critic (providing constructive feedback on students' dissertation ideas and written products). The findings also parallel recent perspectives obtained from students regarding contributors to positive dissertations, in which they characterized advisors in such circumstances as providing structure, guidance, and support (Burkard et al., [3]).

When describing the student's role in the dissertation, participants similarly espoused that students are expected to complete the dissertation responsibly and independently, and to maintain a strong relationship with their chair and committee. Thus, students, like their advisors, are to attend not only to the dissertation tasks, but also to the relational environment in which these tasks are accomplished, mirroring Leder's ([21]) contention that both faculty and students must work collaboratively to share the responsibilities of the dissertation.

## Specific positive and problematic dissertation experiences

These examples are based on the general and typical findings. In each example, we incorporate details from several different cases. Content in parentheses represents core ideas.

### Positive dissertation

Dr C (chair) and Stacy (dissertator) had similar research interests and had completed three studies together prior to the dissertation. They worked well together and enjoyed a strong professional relationship (Dr C never felt that s/he was "pulling" Stacy but rather that they were "walking side-by-side," and Stacy was not just a follower but was also a developer and doer). The dissertation experience was positive for a number of reasons. First, Stacy was a competent dissertator (Stacy did one of the best dissertations "by far" that Dr C had chaired, so it was hard to identify any problems). Stacy was also truly invested in the work (she was engaged in the process, intrigued by the work, and was excited about new ways of looking at questions). In addition, Dr C benefited professionally from involvement in Stacy's dissertation (Stacy's results were intriguing, exciting, and made a contribution to the literature; Stacy and Dr C gave a few presentations based on the dissertation and were working on publishing the findings). The only difficulties they encountered were task related (Stacy had some trouble getting participants for the study). Finally, the effects of the dissertation on Dr C were markedly positive, for the experience made Dr C feel thankful to be paid to think, write, and work with bright and engaging students on areas of mutual interest.

### Problematic dissertation

Dr A (chair) and Chris (dissertator) had a difficult relationship (the relationship was "permanently dented" and meetings were arduous; Dr A perceived that Chris was resistant, was not being responsible for what needed to be done, and was not following through on the implicit contract of finding a dissertation topic that would be mutually productive). There were, however, occasionally moments when Dr A felt a strong connection with Chris (they maintained their professionalism and did not give up on each other), but this was a rare positive element in an otherwise overwhelmingly problematic experience. The dissertation was made even more troublesome because Dr A found it difficult to work with Chris because of the latter's personality (Chris was socially awkward, passive-aggressive, encountered difficulties with situations that did not fit Chris's rigid worldview, and seemed to be working with Dr A only because of Dr A's reputation). Furthermore, Chris seemed incapable of conducting dissertation research (Chris would ask Dr A how to do things, which Dr A felt Chris should already know how to do; Chris could not work independently, did not take initiative, did not read independently, did not take advantage of available resources, and expected a lot of extra help from Dr A).

Despite these difficulties, there were some positive effects of the dissertation (Dr A learned important factors to consider when selecting future students), but the predominant effects were quite negative. Dr A felt hurt, disappointment, and sadness as a result of this dissertation experience (Dr A felt disappointed, angry, and bitter, and felt that s/he put in lots of work that did not pay off), and also felt frustration, stress, and exhaustion (Dr A was worn out, lost patience, and wondered if the dissertation would ever end). Dr A attempted to make the experience more positive by communicating with Chris about their process dynamics and the underlying strain, but doing so did not seem to help.

## Comparison of positive and problematic dissertation experiences

Participants reported quite similar patterns with respect to how they came to chair both the positive and problematic dissertations (e.g., prior research collaboration, shared research interests, assignment of student to chair as advisee). Of those differences that did emerge, one is noteworthy: only when describing problematic dissertation experiences did advisors report that the student had difficulties with a prior chair, after which the advisor agreed to take the student as a dissertator. Although we do not know the exact nature of the prior difficulties, it is possible that whatever their source, they persisted in the relationship with the new chair (i.e., participant), and thereby inaugurated a tenuous dissertation relationship (see below). Relatedly, some participants spoke here of feeling a sense of obligation, of "it's my turn to take on a tough situation" or "the student really has no other options," likely not the most conducive circumstances for beginning a project as demanding as the doctoral dissertation.

Marked differences emerged, as well, in participants' descriptions of their relationships with their dissertators, with advisors of positive dissertations noting their good relationships and those in problematic dissertations often enduring quite difficult alliances. We cannot assert causality in either direction (effect of relationship on dissertation; effect of dissertation on relationship), but also cannot ignore the pattern: Positive dissertation experiences were characterized by good relationships between advisor and student; problematic dissertations were often characterized by poor relationships. As previously noted (Burkard et al., [3]; Gelso, [9]; Hockney, [16]; Schlosser et al., [24]), the relationship between chair and dissertator indeed seems to be a crucial component of the dissertation experience.

Differences also emerged with regard to positive components of the dissertation. In the positive dissertation experiences, favorable elements arose from both students and advisors, as well as from their relationship together. For example, students' positive characteristics (competence, motivation, investment in project) facilitated the good dissertation process, as did their strong relationship with their chair, echoing earlier findings (Dong, [7]; Green, [12]; Kluever, [18]). Interestingly, advisors' potential to benefit (presentation, publication) from the dissertation also played a role. Given the extensive time and effort invested in the dissertation not only by students, but also by their advisors, the prospect of such a tangible reward, one that may support advisors' own careers, is understandably attractive.

With problematic dissertation experiences, substantially fewer favorable elements emerged, and only one (relationship with student) was endorsed by a majority of participants. Perhaps the existence of at least a functional relationship made such dissertation experiences endurable and enabled both chair and student to persevere to the project's completion. Perhaps, also, advisors in problematic dissertations sought to identify any potential strength or redeeming attribute in these students, even amidst a very difficult dissertation process. We do acknowledge, however, the seeming contradiction that emerges: participants describing problematic dissertations usually labeled their relationship with these students as problematic, and likewise attributed much of the difficulty of the experience to the students being hard to work with because of their personality; nevertheless, some advisors also noted that they were able to maintain at least a semblance of a working relationship with the student.

Competent dissertators had more extensive early research training (as was also found by other researchers; Burkard et al., [3]; Delamont et al., [6]; Isaac, Quinlan, & Walker, [17]) than their problematic dissertation peers. They also possessed qualities identified in other studies as contributing to successful dissertations (clarity, coherence, critical reflection, engagement with the literature, good grasp of method, independence, intellectual grasp of material, originality, planning and problem-solving, persistence, professionalism, research self-efficacy; Burkard et al., [3]; Faghihi, Rakow, & Ethington, [8]; Gordon, [11]; Green, [12]; Green & Kluever, [18]; Kluever, [18]; Kluever & Green, [19]; Kluever, Green, & Katz, [18]; Lovitts, [22]; Phillips & Russell, [23]). In addition, their perceived greater motivation and investment (as compared with the problematic dissertation students) suggests that advisors felt that these students viewed the dissertation as an integral step on their ultimate career path rather than simply as a means to an end (Delamont et al., [6]), regardless of future career intentions. Given that these advisors served in academic departments, where scholarship is likely quite valued, the degree to which students seem to share those values and abilities may contribute to the valence of the dissertation experience.

Similar to what emerged with regard to positive components of the dissertation, striking differences were also found with regard to problematic components. In fact, the only finding that arose for more than half of the sample describing positive dissertation experiences involved the inevitable task-related difficulties posed by any major research project. Such difficulties reflect the inherently challenging nature of an endeavor as sizable as a dissertation, rather than some genuine shortcoming or conflict involving student, chair, or their relationship. As such, these findings portray expected difficulties that need to be overcome but are not likely to imperil the project itself.

In the problematic dissertations, on the other hand, the difficulties were quite troubling, may have jeopardized the success of the research, and denoted tensions in the chair–student relationship as well as concerns about students' capabilities. Working with students who not only often had difficult personalities, but also quite frequently had limited research abilities, presented a daunting challenge. When combined with the additional findings that some of these students did not appear to be invested in their dissertations, chose a topic outside advisors' areas of interest or competence, and ultimately did not create a good product, the challenge was intensified. For an endeavor that advisors hoped would be creative, original, exciting, technically sound, and illuminative of a particular area of study (Delamont et al., [6]), the absence of these elements was surely disappointing. Furthermore, in only the problematic dissertation experiences did any negative effects arise (and they did so for all participants in the negative experiences), the range of emotions (hurt, disappointment, sadness, frustration, stress, and exhaustion) reflecting the pervasive toll that such a difficult experience exacted from those involved.

In an attempt to render such experiences more positive, advisors in problematic dissertations sought to better communicate with their students, particularly with regard to expectations of the dissertation. Such attempts, however, appeared not to positively affect the final outcome of the dissertation process (i.e., advisors still identified these as problematic experiences). In seeking to improve communication, perhaps advisors were responding to what they realized was students' insufficient preparation for independent research (Brause, [2]; Isaac et al., [17]). Sensing the delicacy of the problematic dissertation circumstances, advisors may also have been hoping to clarify what they perceived as acceptable standards for a successful dissertation, standards that currently lack consistency and are often not conveyed to students (Lovitts, [22]). The need for such conversations may also have arisen out of a tenuous negotiation of advisor and student roles (Goodman, [10]; Leder, [21]); this negotiation may not have reached a clear resolution and may then have led to some of the very problems that developed during the dissertation process.

## Limitations

These findings arise from the experiences of 14 clinical and counseling psychology faculty members in the US/Canada who agreed to complete phone interviews regarding their experiences chairing doctoral dissertations. The majority identified as White/Caucasian, and as a group they had few ABD students. It is possible, then, that faculty from other racial/ethnic groups, other regions of the world, as well as those with more ABD students, may have yielded different findings. We also do not know to what extent, if any, differences in race/ethnicity between advisors and students may have affected the dissertation experiences. We had difficulty recruiting participants for this study, perhaps because faculty are very busy. We note, as well, that we have only the chairs' perspectives here.

## Implications for advising and training

Although perhaps not surprising, since many of us are intimately familiar with such experiences, these results provide information that can improve graduate training. First, it may be wise for both chair and student to explicitly discuss their expectations of each other, and of the dissertation process, at the beginning of the dissertation relationship. For instance, they might discuss advising or work style, interpersonal patterns, research competence and motivation, perceptions of each other's roles, level of monitoring sought or needed, preferred mode of communication (email, phone, in-person meetings).

Furthermore, if advisors find themselves in a difficult dissertation relationship, they may benefit from having appropriate resources (colleagues, supervisors, and therapists) to assist them, whether with regard to addressing such challenging situations or managing the emotional toll they exact. Similarly, new faculty may benefit from mentoring about how to advise students.

Finally, graduate departments also have a vital role to play here. The existence of clear policies and procedures regarding the dissertation process (e.g., chair and student expectations and responsibilities) may prevent difficulties from arising, or may prove useful when mediating a dissertation that has, in fact, become problematic. Providing students access to exemplary dissertations may also help them understand the nature and extent of the project. Additionally, ensuring that students have opportunities to do research with their potential chair before embarking on the dissertation itself may help both members of the dyad learn more about each other's research interests and work styles, and thus make a more informed decision regarding whether or not to work together on the dissertation.

## Implications for research

Future researchers might examine the effects of culture or gender given that such factors may play an important role in the dissertation process. Furthermore, it would be interesting to investigate how experiences differ in other countries (e.g., in Europe) where there may be different doctoral education models. In addition, advisors and advisees could be asked about how expectations regarding dissertation responsibilities are communicated and negotiated, and how the "research culture" of the doctoral program may affect student and faculty dissertation experiences. Equally interesting would be interviewing (separately) both members of the same dissertation dyad (i.e., faculty member, dissertator) regarding their experiences to see how similar or different their perspectives may be. We would also be interested in learning how both the positive and problematic dissertation experiences affect these participants' later dissertation relationships and processes, as well as their future research endeavors. Finally, it may be helpful to learn more about what advisors who have successfully resolved problematic dissertation experiences have done to reach such resolutions. Understanding what they did to transform a difficult situation into a more positive one would be beneficial for all who have a stake in the dissertation process.

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