Interpersonal Hardiness as a Critical Contributing Factor to Persistence among International Women in Doctoral Programs: A Trioethnographic Study

Eraldine S. Williams-Shakespeare 2153760
University of South Florida, Tampa, ewilliamssha@mail.usf.edu

Joyce E. Bronteng
University of South Florida, Tampa, jeb7@mail.usf.edu

Adhwaa Alahmari
King Khalid University-Abha, adahmari@kku.edu.sa

Recommended APA Citation

Williams-Shakespeare, E. S., Bronteng, J. E., & Alahmari, A. (2018). Interpersonal Hardiness as a Critical Contributing Factor to Persistence among International Women in Doctoral Programs: A Trioethnographic Study. *The Qualitative Report*, *23*(8), 1799-1821. Retrieved from https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol23/iss8/2

Interpersonal Hardiness as a Critical Contributing Factor to Persistence among International Women in Doctoral Programs: A Trioethnographic Study

Abstract

Women in PhD programs, in particular minority and international women, are especially at risk for drop-out (Castro, Garcia, Cavazos, & Castro, 2011; Haynes et al., 2012). This initial part of a longitudinal trioethnography captures the experiences of three international women in a doctoral program, highlighting the challenges, support systems, and coping mechanisms they engage with in the process of completing their degrees. Discoveries include the identification of "Interpersonal Hardiness" as the potential vehicle which could ensure our success.

Keywords

Trioethnography, International Students, Minority Students, Interpersonal Hardiness

Creative Commons License

Acknowledgements

Interpersonal Hardiness as a Critical Contributing Factor to Persistence among International Women in Doctoral Programs: A Trioethnographic Study

Eraldine S. Williams-Shakespeare and Joyce E. Bronteng
University of South Florida, Tampa, Florida, USA

Adhwaa Alahmari
King Khalid University-Abha, Saudi Arabia

Women in PhD programs, in particular minority and international women, are especially at risk for drop-out (Castro, Garcia, Cavazos, & Castro, 2011; Haynes et al., 2012). This initial part of a longitudinal trioethnography captures the experiences of three international women in a doctoral program, highlighting the challenges, support systems, and coping mechanisms they engage with in the process of completing their degrees. Discoveries include the identification of "Interpersonal Hardiness" as the potential vehicle which could ensure our success. Keywords: Trioethnography, International Students, Minority Students, Interpersonal Hardiness

Introduction

Recent studies report that challenges associated with work life balance among international students in graduate school are more pronounced (Brus, 2006; Colomer, Olivero, & Bell, 2015; Haynes et al., 2012; Oswalt & Riddock, 2007) than for domestic students. Moreover, even though more women are enrolling in U.S. doctoral programs, they, especially ethnic minorities, are less likely to obtain a doctoral degree (Castro, Garcia, Cavazos, & Castro, 2011). Gardner (2008) cites a lack of diversity in graduate education as a growing concern in the United States of America (USA); this has given birth to a number of recruitment and retention programs for women and students of color. Despite these initiatives there remain various challenges to the success of women in doctoral programs of study. The isolationist and anti-Muslim agenda that is currently permeating the political atmosphere in the United States also has potential implications for international students and adds to the list of concerns they must face. These concerns align with Lovitts' (2001) assertion that "it is not the background characteristics students bring with them to the university that affect their persistence outcomes: it is what happens to them after they arrive" (p. 2).

A doctoral degree is both a process of becoming and of achievement (Smith, 1995). Smith states that this terminal degree "represents a way of life, and for women, the socialization process along this path is intimately connected with one's inner sense of self" (p. 21). This results in a need to reflect on "the nature of the doctoral experience and the protocols that guide the process, [and on one's] own abilities, proclivities and tolerances that necessarily will bound the process" (p. 21). It is no wonder three women from three different continents found themselves on a path to acquiring a PhD in Curriculum and Instruction, from a college of education at a southeastern university in the (USA). Our similarities were many, so too our differences. As our paths "paralleled" and intersected we could not ignore the fact that as international women with families, this would be a challenging journey.

The 2015-16 Open Doors report indicates a total 224 places across the globe from which international students travel to pursue higher education in the USA, (Institute of

International Education, 2016) with 383,935 enrolling in graduate programs. While there are no specifics on the percentage of this number that were female at the time the study was written, there is clear indication that many students continue to travel to the USA to pursue doctoral degrees and so this study will be relevant and of potential value to other women on issues relating to persevering and completing their programs.

Statement of Purpose

Research in the mid-90s reflected limited literature on doctoral education (Smith, 1995) even as the number of women pursuing doctoral degrees increased. According to Smith (1995), there was a noted absence of the voices of women in the literature. A lack of diversity in graduate education was also cited as a growing concern in the United States; this gave birth to numerous initiatives geared toward recruiting and retaining women and students of color across disciplines (Gardner, 2008). Nonetheless, current studies show that persistence issues related to completion of doctoral programs, especially for minority women with children, still lingers (Castro et al., 2011; Colomer et al., 2015). In fact, Gardner (2008) posited one challenge to their success, that of balancing time and priorities, and states that this is "particularly relevant for students with children" (p. 134). Tinto (1993) suggested that strategies for improving degree completion rates and for predicting doctoral persistence must "emerge from an understanding of the graduate experience as it is understood by doctoral students themselves" using qualitative methods (p. 243). Therefore, this study seeks to explore such experiences to ascertain the lived experiences of three international, women of color persisting in a doctoral program in the USA.

Research Objectives

The objective of the study was to document and share our intra- and inter-personal hardiness discovery through dialogue to identify challenges, support systems and motivators that we have individually and collectively experienced. The aim was to determine the impact of the identified challenges, support systems and motivators on our experiences in and with the program as well as determine a viable path to success that can be shared with other women in similar positions. The question that guided the study was: To what extent (if any) can "interpersonal hardiness" contribute to persistence of international women of color in doctoral programs at a US institution?

The rationale is to share with readers our early experiences of the efficacy of interpersonal hardiness and how far it carried us in pursuing our program so that other students who are facing similar issues could learn from our experiences. Even though we are yet to complete our programs, we are realizing benefits from our experience; hence, we decided to share our initial story with others. This would contribute to the body of literature relating to the experiences of minority, international women engaged in doctoral studies using a uniquely qualitative methodology: Trioethnography.

Review of Literature

Existing literature identifies numerous factors and practices that confront women's success in PhD programs. There are challenges relating to health, economic pressures, and culture which could pose a challenge to our being able to successfully complete our programs. Smith (1995) looked at the progress of women in doctoral programs and found numerous constraining factors, some personal others institutional. Role conflict was cited as a personal factor while funding, advisor/advisee relationship and departmental climate were cited as

institutional factors. The brief literature review also explores personal hardiness and its relationship with doctoral studies success for women.

Personal Factors

Issues relating to support systems, interpersonal struggles surrounding role conflict and stress were evident in the literature reviewed. Haynes et al. (2012) mentioned social support to include family, friends, spouses, professors and employers as being very important. As Offstein, Larson, McNeill, and Mjoni Mwale (2004) contended, stress becomes the core of the mother's experiences in their academic pursuits. Janta, Lugosi, and Brown (2012) stated in their netnography that "Isolation and loneliness are likely to have a major impact on the student's psychological health and his/her wellbeing" (p. 553). The assertion of these authors connects with our own experiences as mothers and doctoral students as well as experiences shared by colleagues with similar status and background.

Maher, Ford, and Thompson (2004) further posited that,

> Students who encounter marital or family problems during their doctoral work often experience considerable additional duress, regardless of gender. Emotional support from family members is often cited as critical to those in the throes of the doctoral process, providing them with the encouragement needed to persist and succeed. As women typically bear more of the responsibility for home and child care, problems in this domain seem more likely to impact them to a greater extent than their male counterparts. (p. 388)

While the above assertion is true for most women pursuing doctoral programs, for other women the issue may be different. Lester (2013) spoke about women who have delayed having children because they fear their survival rates as graduate students working in an academic space. Lenz (1997) reported a triple increase in the numbers of women over the age of 35 (non-traditional-age) who were enrolling in higher education programs. This increase was significant given "the potential impact of marital or family problems on women's degree progress" (Maher, Ford, & Thompson, p. 6). Whatever dimension the challenges facing women pursuing doctoral degree may take, the reality is that, women typically face more challenges than men in the pursuance of doctoral degrees.

To this end, social support and interacting with peers have been cited as being useful in helping to avoid isolation (Haynes et al., 2012; Janta et al., 2012). Additionally, Lenz (1997) opined that family and peer support were important to the successful completion of the dissertation process, hence the relevance of this study that sheds light on another dimension from which peer support could be derived. Martinsuo and Turkulainen (2011) in their study of doctoral students' personal commitment, support and progress found that peer support has a positive effect on both course completion and research.

Academic pressure can be a stress inducer for many graduate students (Colomer et al., 2015; Haynes et al., 2012; Lester, 2013; Martinez, Ordu, Della Salla, & McFarlane, 2013). Female international students note that finance and school work are contributing factors to their level of stress (Oswalt & Riddock, 2007). For example, one-third of the participants in the Leonard, Becker, & Coate's (2005), study suggested "disturbed or uneasy family and social relationships" (p. 143) while one in eight participants reported a negative effect of pursuing doctoral studies on family life. Stress is a common factor experienced by humans in many spheres of life and personal hardiness is one measure that can have positive effects on the levels of stress one encounters. Kobasa (1979) and VandenBos (2007) define personal hardiness, as

a psychological phenomenon that is part of one's personality that allows one to succeed even when undergoing stressful situations.

Janta, Lugosi, and Brown, (2012) stated in their netnography that "Isolation and loneliness are likely to have a major impact on the student's psychological health and his/her wellbeing" (p. 553). Having social support and interacting with peers have been cited as useful in helping to avoid isolation (Haynes et al., 2012; Janta et al., 2012).

Institutional Factors

Funding. Female international students note that finance and school work contribute to their level of stress (Oswalt & Riddock, 2007). This apparently is not new as Vartuli (1982) stated that students experience high levels of anxiety owing to lack of adequate funding, which according to Smith, (1995) can impact the graduate students' [women] registration status as also their employment patterns. Earlier studies also point to the fact that assistantships and fellowships are more likely to be made available to students in the sciences than their education counterparts (Berg & Ferber, 1983). Noted also, was the higher expectancy to graduate for those students who received funding. Funding was also aligned with an improvement in the completion times for students. Given that there is less funding available in the field of education there is implied a greater challenge for female graduate students in education to complete or complete within less time doctoral programs (Smith, 1995).

Economic challenge is something graduate students battle with (Lester, 2013; Martinez et al., 2013; Seay, Lifton, Wuensch, Bradshaw & McDowelle, 2008). Costs associated with doctoral studies do place a burden on students and increase the level of stress many experience. Leonard, Becker, and Coate's (2005) study also captured data relating to the costs associated with doctoral studies. Their study indicated that doctoral students in Britain faced funding issues. While some students were self (credit-cards) or family funded, others received assistance from employers (they noted that the assistance was not very generous), and one student received government funding (international). Interestingly, the demographics for the participants in this study are the same in this regard.

Advisor/Advisee Relationships. "An established adviser-advisee relationship seemed vital to the dissertation process for all students" (Lenz, 1997, p. 6). Smith (1995) further states that the attitude of faculty impacts significantly women's performance in doctoral programs. Heinrich (1990) reported that the interactions between female doctoral students and faculty, to be specific, their academic advisors can impact "their feelings of well-being, academic progress and their production after graduation" (p. 16).

Personal Hardiness

As stated earlier, *Personal Hardiness* is a psychological phenomenon, part of one's personality that allows one to succeed even when undergoing stressful situations (Bartone, 2000; Hystad, Eid, Laberg, Johnsen, & Bartone, 2009; Kobasa, 1979; Lifton, Seay, & Bushko, 2000; VandenBos, 2007). Personal hardiness is referred to as being associated with retention and academic success (Lifton et al., 2006; Martinsuo & Turkulainen, 2011; Seay et al., 2008) – to stay the course. Commitment, challenge, and control are integrated components of hardiness (Lifton et al, 2006; Martinsuo & Turkulainen, 2011). "Commitment" is a sense of value, meaningfulness, and loyalty towards one's purpose in life. "Challenge" fosters a willingness to leave behind the status quo to develop and grow with a new set of circumstances. "Control" is a belief in one's ability to influence events (Lifton et al., 2006, p. 278). This is corroborated by Martinsuo and Turkulainen (2011) who assert that degree success is associated with students' personal characteristics, their expectations, motivations and goals.

Having looked at literature and evaluated our lives, we recognized that a doctoral program is a formidable journey. We wanted to document the journey as we face each hurdle, relying on *interpersonal-hardiness* to support each other in this process through. We also wanted to contribute to the body of literature relating to the experiences of minority, international women engaged in doctoral studies from a qualitative trioethography perspective.

Method

Trioethnography, a relatively new approach in qualitative studies, was the method adopted for this study. In this type of research researchers collectively examine an aspect of their lives. Therefore, they become researchers and at the same time participants. As posited by Snelson, Wertz, Onstott, and Bader (2017), trioethnograpy like duoethnography, is a method suitable for critical and reflective examination via conversations among people with different life histories and diverse points of view (p. 1441). Tinto (1993) stresses the need for studies that employ qualitative methods of inquiry. Qualitative methods "are needed to probe the meanings differing individuals attach to their experiences ... [and] ... more than any set of longitudinal path equations, help us to make sense of why it is that particular types of experiences lead to differing types of outcomes" (Tinto, 1993, p. 243). He argues strongly for the need for qualitative studies in the area of graduate recruitment and retention. He suggests that, strategies to improve degree completion rates and to develop useful models for predicting doctoral degree persistence must be based on something more substantive than "informed speculation." They must emerge from an understanding of the graduate experience as it is understood by doctoral students themselves. The voices of students, particularly those of women, have been notably absent from the research literature on doctoral education, and the current study has been designed with this in mind. Trioethnography enabled us to share our doctoral journey from our own perspective as researchers-cum-participants.

Theoretical Influence

Norris and Sawyer (2012) provided tenets of duoethonography which we found to be extremely beneficial as we tried to determine how best to represent our understanding of our experiences. Currere is an act of self-interrogation in which one reclaims one's self from one's self as one unpacks and repacks the meanings one holds, (Norris & Sawyer, 2012, p. 13). *Polyvocal and dialogic* as a tenet of duoethonography suggests that dialogue should not only be between the conversation partners but also between conversation partners and artifacts of cultural media. *Trustworthiness, trust* and *difference* three more tenets of duoethnography were also evident in our experiences.

Research Approach

Given the opportunity to discuss research interests in a qualitative research course, we discovered we had similar interests and decided to form a group to explore them further. We felt the need to explore our experiences as a way of making meaning of the doctoral process as minority women with families. We each penned our stories, our versions of our experiences as women, as international students and as mothers pursuing a PhD. The individual stories (3) were then shared with each other via email, this led to further discussions on the issues. We met later and discussed the stories. Through a process of open coding we identified three major areas for our conversations – challenges, support systems and motivation. Open coding refers to a process of coding data to identify the major categories of information (Creswell, 2013). We used open coding to establish themes as it gave us the freedom to allow the discoveries to

be "organic." We each took a theme and developed a list of questions that we would want to explore further. These questions later served as guides during our meetings. The stories were printed, photographed and embedded in a form of photo-collage and have become our representation of the beginning of our journey.

Meetings were conducted over a period of six weeks and included interview sessions and planning meetings. The interview sessions were designed to cover the issues of challenges, support systems, and coping mechanisms/strategies which were the outcome of the open coding process. They were recorded and transcribed and later formed the basis for the discussions we had in our final set of meetings. The planning meetings had specific focus and were related to: (1) decisions on what should be included in our conversation guides, (2) how we would represent our stories, and (3) to discuss the literature we reviewed. Our meetings were conducted face-to-face, via WhatsApp texting, and emailing. Thematic coding was then used to analyse the transcribed discussions by reviewing, individually, then collectively each transcript. Categories were found and discussed before we commenced the writing. According to Creswell (2013), "forming categories represents the heart of qualitative data analysis" (p. 184). Google Docs was used to facilitate the writing and rewriting process.

Using a constructionist orientation, we co-constructed the data through discussions, explanations and exploration of our individual experiences to create understanding and meaning on the focused topic through our interactions (Roulston, 2010). We each had responsibility for one of three themes. The third author (Adhwaa) led the support system theme and conducted the first interview. The second author (Joyce) led the challenges theme and conducted the second interview. The third interview on the theme coping strategies was facilitated by the first author (Eraldine). We spent about an hour in each interview. We also shared artifacts in the form of pictures of our families and videos (Skype messages). Additionally, we benefited from an impromptu informal meeting with Dr. Soria Colomer, co-author of a trioethonography (Colomer et al., 2015). This meeting was immediately following a presentation she made in one of our classes on her experience conducting a trioethnography. Her presentation provided us information on what to be mindful of and how to address the "other" as we engage in this type of work. This meeting was both insightful and inspiring and further fuelled our desire to take on this study.

The process and discoveries of our trio ethnographic experience is presented in first-person narrative form by the three participants at different stages in the study to enable us to highlight each voice. We infused John McLeod's (n.d.) poem titled "Awakening" into the narration because McLeod used the analogy of a painter to compare how we live our lives and we felt this was analogous to our doctoral journey.

Being fully aware of this fact, we managed through varying and similar ways to successfully complete the first two semesters of our program and found ourselves taking the same introductory qualitative course in the summer of 2015. We documented the journey as we faced each hurdle, supporting each other in this process. As we met, deliberated and finally composed this paper we were always mindful of ethical stances. Although the paper was about our lives it included reflections relating to others, and we gave due thought to personal disclosure. We also considered the privacy of our shared story. It was this consideration that led Adhwaa to exclaim in one of our informal meetings "*do not put that in the paper!*" According to Norris and Sawyer (2012), "one must weigh the potential harm to the disclosed "Others" and the likely benefit to the larger community" (pp. 22-23). They further stated that duoethnography and so too, trioethnography are research genres in which personal disclosure might be problematic. We were careful therefore, to protect the privacy of "others" represented in our reflections and where applicable shared the purpose of the study and sought consent form those we mentioned in our study.

Participants

Eraldine: I am a self-funded Instructional Technology major, and mother of three children. I work as a graduate instructional Assistant. My first nine months of the program were spent separated from my family, "It was the best of times and it was the worst of times." I was able to focus fully on my studies, completing as many credits as possible so that my work load would be less when they arrived. Financially, these nine months have been the least taxing. On the other hand, the time away was fraught with worries about their wellbeing as they adjusted to a new school, new home environment and most importantly being without both parents and living without some of the conveniences they enjoyed living in the city. Handling a separation from spouse further compounded issues related to my departure. My greatest fear was letting go of the reins and giving the control to others.

Joyce: I am a self-funded Early Childhood major student and a graduate teaching assistant. I am mother of four biological and three foster children. I live in the USA alone while my entire family remains in Ghana. Though I communicate with my familiar via phone and sometimes Skype, the physical detachment is a worry to me as well as them especially with my children who are in the school boarding house, this means I cannot reach them as I want to. Aside from the time zone difference which is either four or five hours between Ghana and Florida, I can only get the chance to speak with them during their visiting days when their father pays them a visit. Also, my physical separation from the family creates some challenges as it relates to academic situations especially with my children's homework and other issues due to time conflict. For instance, at times my ability to help my younger children to do their homework on the phone conflicts with me being able to post my reading response for my courses (a common practice in my program) as these are usually time bound. In this regard life becomes so unbearable for me. The situation becomes worse when the network is poor or down. Such situations sometimes put some fear in me and make me feel I am an irresponsible mother and wife (an attitude I abhor). Having lived in a close-knit family since my marriage and now being far away from them for this long (which is the first of its kind in the family) with such inconveniences bring worries to both sides (myself and the family).

Adhwaa: I am full-time Special Education major, married with two boys. I received full scholarship from my government. I have been in the USA since 2011. The first year of the doctoral program was stressful to understand the context of doctoral program, which required a lot of reading. I remember I spent a lot of time to translate most of the words and trying to figure out the meaning. I got weekly headaches because of the stress of the coursework. On the other hand, I was concerned about my boys who only speak English as first language. However, my husband was very supportive and was standing with me all the time. Prior to the end of the first year, I was recruited by a Saudi university, which made me very happy, though it is on condition that I complete my program on time. This has been my motivation to achieve my goal of completing the doctoral degree on the scheduled time.

Results

Through a process of open coding, the conversation sessions, and engagement with artefacts led to the following discoveries which are presented in narrative form using McLeod's (n.d.) poem "Awakening" as an introduction to each section. The poem we feel, aligns with our journey thus far in the program as it highlights the uncertainty we feel, yet holds much promise for the possibilities ahead.

Awakening: Eraldine narrates…

Awakening, dawn's chorus
Welcoming,
The day new, untouched
Waiting to be filled....
(Excerpt from the poem AWAKENING by John McLeod, n.d.)

I knew both Adhwaa and Joyce, but they were meeting for the first time. Having identified our challenges, we embarked on a journey to complete a trioethnography, not sure where it would lead us but hoping to determine if we each had the "personal hardiness" – that is referred to as being associated with retention and academic success (Lifton et al., 2006; Martinsuo & Turkulainen, 2011; Seay et al., 2008) – to stay the course.

Having reviewed the duoethnographic tenets, we could not help but observe that many were present in all our conversation sessions and in our sharing of experiences. Over time our level of comfort with each other increased and we were able to have open/frank conversations, cry in each other's presence, make connections with similarities identified as we each spoke and established that we are in fact different (race, family structure dynamics, cultural practices) but similar (international, married with children, students, with experiences in academia or will enter academia) women, leading different (Adhwaa has her husband and children with her, Joyce's family is in Ghana, and I have my children but their father remains in Jamaica) but also similar lives (we all still are heavily involved in the lives of our children and family and we have duties to perform as it relates to homework and general support), on a path – if only temporarily – to achieving the same goal, a PhD. Difference is encouraged in trioethnographies, it is expected (Norris & Sawyer, 2012). The major differences for us are our family dynamics and our economic support systems.

Graduate assistantships afford many scholars the opportunity to fund and acquire their degrees, Joyce and I are currently beneficiaries of this system, Adhwaa is on scholarship, so in this regard we are different. Graduate assistantships are however, not free rides, we must work the requisite hours and so there is the additional stress of managing our responsibilities – Joyce is a Graduate Teaching Assistant (GTA) and I am a Graduate Instructional Assistant. We want to share here, Joyce's reflections on adjusting to her new role as a GTA while managing her personal responsibilities.

> *My work as a graduate assistant (GA) in the US has its own story. Though I have over twenty years teaching experience, working as a GA in the US is very different. I felt like a fresh teacher when I met my first class in the fall semester. Working in an entirely new place coupled with cultural and language difference were the first things I started wrestling with. What compounded my problem was that I missed the orientation due to the delay in the issuance of my visa… I did not have the opportunity to experience how teaching is done in the US before meeting my first class because I met with them before attending any of my classes as a student. I hit the ground running and this experience made me have the authentic meaning of cultural shock. Though I could speak the English language because it (English) is the official language in my home country (Ghana), we are taught the British English and even that I speak with an accent because I am not a native. And here I was in an American classroom as a pre-service teacher educator who ought to use American English as a medium of*

instruction. This put additional stress on me because the situation was altering my teaching philosophy of making my teaching interactive where there is maximum flow of information through sharing and discussion. Aside from the numerous readings I have to do as a student for my courses, I had to read other sources apart from the textbook for the course I teach so to help me understand the topics very well and also to enable me to look for strategies suitable to enhancing my students' understanding so as to minimize the problem of language barrier. This demands extra time from the already saturated time I have, making things sometimes unbearable for me.

Her resolve to persevere despite the odds made us feel a sense of pride knowing that we three have set out on this path with multiple children and multiple roles and have found each other and a support system that we hope will last. In line with the first segment of McLeod's (n.d.) poem (*Awakening, dawn's chorus ... Welcoming, the day new, untouched ... Waiting to be filled...*) we were each excited and enthused to begin this journey, the pursuit of a PhD represented something new for us, as a new day it was filled with promise and we were indeed waiting to be filled, to be edified to broaden our knowledge.

A Journey Begins

And will we paint a rainbow
With all its promise
Or dull the canvas
Sadly seen?
Each day brings its own colours
To be chosen, mixed,
Pigments of joy,
Happy moments,
Smiles and laughter....

From Asia, Africa, and a tiny speck in the Caribbean Sea, we awoke to this reality, a PhD at a University in the southeastern United States. As this stanza from the poem suggests, there were uncertainties, we did not know what to expect. We were fuelled however, by optimism, joy, excitement, promise … different yet similar desires, passions. Like McLeod's (n.d.) poem each day brings its own colors, some days have been wonderful, Adhwaa and I were especially excited about our first weeks at USF, for Joyce it was less exciting as she experienced difficulties prior to arriving and missed her orientation which created a domino effect for her adjusting in her first semester. Below is an excerpt from the conversation depicting this:

> **Joyce***: I had a rough start ... when it was time for me to go for my visa, American Embassy in my home country said they had problem with issuance of visa... Then I had to stay for almost three weeks before getting my visa, so it's like my coming was a little rough.*

Having to play catch up, there was no room to breathe. Since then the colors have changed much like a chameleon for all of us. Adhwaa shared her difficulties with understanding the structure of one class and the distress it caused her, then later she shared the excitement of being offered a job job upon completion. Joyce expressed that her journey thus far has been

rewarding especially as it relates to improvements in her writing among other things, the following excerpt from our conversation expounds further:

> ***Joyce***: *...I have seen positive things ... my husband tells me "I like the way you are writing," ... there was a competition and myself and Aaron tried to join it .... When the results came, we were part of the winners and I sent it home and told them what had happened, ... they were very happy ... And I remember my husband telling me ... when my first girl came home and saw it ... she captured a picture of it and used it as her display photo. It was the NAECTE graduate membership award ... just to see my name ... is like it had a positive impact on the family that at least, yes, I have travelled but I have done something, I have separated from them, but something has come out of this journey.*

For me, the journey although still in its infancy has been rewarding. We all shared our joy at being able to complete our first year amidst the challenges and even with the uncertainties of what is to come.

Facing Reality: Joyce narrates…

And which will you choose?
For "Life" is choice,
We are all painters
In our own way,
All needing to create
Something of worth,
Of lasting beauty,
Marking our journey....

Although we know stress is at the core of graduate studies (Offstein, Larson, McNeil, & Mjoni Mwale, 2004), we realize it is not only affecting us as individuals but extend to our families, especially our children (Haynes et al., 2012; Johnson, Batia, & Haun, 2008; Leonard, Becker, & Coate, 2005). Our individual stories penned at the beginning of this research process reflect significantly the direct and indirect negative effects on our children. However, to answer the question in McLeod's (n.d.) stanza above, we are hoping personal and "interpersonal" hardiness will help us sail through our doctoral journey (Our "Something of worth, of lasting beauty") irrespective of the numerous challenges of which stress is key.

The results showed that our doctoral journey began with "family" stress that resulted from us leaving our home country for another. Eraldine shared in her story how traumatic it was for her girls who were uprooted from their home, school and friends and relocated to a rural part of Jamaica for the first nine months of her doctoral journey. The shift from private to public school and the change in their circumstances (not having mother around, walking to school) was hard on them. Especially when there was an incident after school one day in which they were exposed somewhat, to danger. Her decision to leave them behind initially was hard for them and her. For me (Joyce), aside from the initial family stress that resulted from the late issuance of my visa, leaving home has put stress on my youngest child especially as can be seen in this excerpt from my personal story

> ***Joyce***: *...there was this time in the spring when my last girl (biological child) was admitted in the hospital and for one whole week the doctors could not diagnose the illness.*

Adhwaa was not left out of the negative effect of stress on her family members. For her, apart from the completely different culture she finds herself in now, she was concerned about not getting much time to speak with her sons, especially the older one, to enable him to acquire his native language as well as helping him with his education. She is afraid her son will lose his native Arabic language for the English language which to her will not augur well for the boy as well as for them (Adhwaa and her husband), the parents, when they return to Saudi Arabia in that their son may be alienated in his own country. We could see that her son's inability to speak the Arabic language will cause an embarrassment to the family when they go back to Saudi Arabia after the course. Now that her children are here, Eraldine shares with Adhwaa's language concerns as well because of fears that her baby may be labelled as not being able to speak the English language when she goes to school, because she naturally code-switches between English and Patois her native dialect. Consequently, she is compelled to speak English with them instead of "Patois." The excerpts below illustrate Adhwaa and Eraldine's concerns for their children and the potential language challenges.

> *Adhwaa: ...The Arabic is his language and uhh he speaks English more than Arabic so that is difficult for me because my son should know Arabic very well...*

> *Eraldine: My baby more than anybody else, you know I don't want her to get to school and for the teacher to assume that she is not speaking English. She just chooses to switch between both.*

We have noticed that stress is compelling us not to give our families the attention they need, and this causes us some intra-battle as to how to identify our priorities concerning our personal, family and academic life (Haynes et al., 2012; Martinez et al., 2013). For instance, I sometimes refuse to pick calls from my family which in the long run causes me much pain. Adhwaa sometimes refuses to play with her younger son when he wishes and Eraldine worries about who will take of her children during her evening lectures. The excerpts below extracted from our conversation show the pain and worries we as well as our families undergo as a result of our inability to give our families the desired attention:

> *Joyce: ...it got to a time I was not picking any calls from my family ... when I don't pick calls from them, is like I have refused them and am not doing anything because psychologically, I am not ... free*

> *Adhwaa: ...especially the younger one, when I wake up and drink my coffee and I start with my assignment, then the one, the 18 months boy, he just push me. I know what he wants, he wants to play. ... He wants to watch video on my laptop...*

> *Eraldine: ...I have been worried about the help within, so I am gonna be at school at 5:00-9:00 pm on average two to three times a week, during those times you know, thinking about who's gonna keep them safe or do I drag them along to class, that I would much prefer but then I wouldn't want to inconvenience the other people in my class so... I don't know.*

As discussed earlier, the above excerpts show that the stress that results from the conflict with school work and giving our families especially our children time and care do not affect us alone

but have repercussions on our families. There is also this fear of exposing the children to aspects of the American culture that are different from that of our home countries.

As evidenced in literature economic challenge is something we are battling with (Lester, 2013; Martinez et al., 2013; Seay et al., 2008), especially Eraldine and me. Costs associated with doctoral studies do place a burden on students and increase the level of stress many experience. For Adhwaa though she faces financial problems, she enjoys full scholarship from her home country's government and so she does not struggle as much as the two of us do. Though the two of us are Gas and enjoy tuition waiver, our stipend is not enough to cover our bills and the upkeep of our children. Eraldine has her three children with her now in the U.S. and looking at the cost involved in raising these children with her stipend plus the limited salary she earns back home (employer), it clearly shows the nature of her financial battle. Also, her study leave with pay is for just two and half years and so after the end of this period, she will not receive any salary from her home country, meaning she is going to depend on just the stipend and support from her husband for the children.

For me, even though I don't have children here with me I still have the responsibility of supporting my husband in paying for their tuition especially the eldest child who is at medical school. What bothered me most was when the news reached me that they had increased the tuition to 45% for her but fortunately for me I heard a relieving news from my husband that the proposed increase has now been reduced to 22%, less than half of the former. Even at 22% it is going to be a struggle because my second child is going to college this year, the third child is in the boarding house at Senior High school and the last one is at the basic school (basic school covers two years of kindergarten education, six years of primary education and three years of junior high education/education prior to high school). Apart from my biological children (4) we (my husband and I) have 3 other children (two orphans from my cousin and an adopted grandchild) living with us. All these people are in school so apart from the school fees the expenses for the daily feeding is another problem. As shown in existing literature, financing doctoral education is a challenge in doctoral studies but it becomes more burdensome for students with families. These findings confirm the financial difficulties doctoral students, especially international ethnic minority women with families (Castro et al., 2011; Gardner, 2008).

When it comes to health issues as indicated in literature, the academic pressure has put much stress on each of us (Colomer et al., 2015; Haynes et al., 2012; Lester, 2013; Martinez et al., 2013) and has had its toll on our health. Adhwaa has developed migraines, Eraldine has fat on her liver and I (Joyce) had a serious stress problem that affected my weight so much so that I had to be given emergency attention.

> *Adhwaa: For me, I have headache. I usually have migraine. Last fall, I was struggling with a course and I got headache.*

> *Eraldine: ...I was told I had put on so much weight that my liver had fat on it...*

> *Joyce: With the stress, I think that we're all going through ... mine took me to the clinic last semester... she [the doctor] was very serious, eeh at my stress level ... because within two weeks I lost 5 how do you call it? Is it pounds or weight? Weight and the lady (the doctor) was very angry at me but I wouldn't say angry because she was just being concerned that this is serious on my health ... The doctor just told me, "if you lose your life you cannot continue this course."*

The challenges relating to health, economic pressures, and culture are of concern to all of us and could pose a challenge to our being able to successfully complete our programs. We realize however, as outlined in the stanza of the poem preceding this section that we have to choose how we react to each challenge, individually and where possible collectively, for as McLeod states, "...*which will you choose? For 'Life' is choice*" (n.d.) His proclamation that we all are painters reminds us that we too can succeed, complete the journey and make something of worth.

Getting through: Adhwaa narrates…

Each day brings its own colors to be chosen…

The need for support in varying forms was a common feature of this discussion. With each day we are faced with the realization that this is not a journey that can be achieved on our own. Haynes et al. (2012) mentioned social support to include family, friends, spouses, professors and also employers as being very important. From our discussions, we are led to agree with these findings as we have benefited from most if not all of these different types of social support. We have all received support from other women in the College of Education, this is reflected in our stories. Eraldine and Joyce got some support and help from friends who are ahead of them in the program. I receive support from Eraldine and some Saudi friends in my Statistic courses. Eraldine is very supportive to Joyce and me, and we appreciate her assistance to us.

> ***Joyce****: …I mean people who are supporting me, Eraldine is one... So, for iTeach Lounge[1] staff, they have been a very tremendous help to me. And my faculty… most of them did well. … Those who are ahead of me were very helpful as well…*

The other observation is that we also had support from faculty in the College of Education. Faculty (mostly females) seem aware of our struggles and have helped us to adjust in courses. Some Professors are flexible and give consideration when necessary, for example, I missed a presentation because my son was ill, and my professor was kind enough to allow me to present another day. Eraldine spoke of her professor who came on Saturdays to help and support students who needed it. So, we have received support from women (including other international) as well as professors in the College of Education. A noted example is our "one-day retreat" which we used to prepare the first draft of our paper. The professor for the Research course we were taking was kind enough to come to work and grant us access to the facilities even though the University was closed for a holiday, she was also kind enough to answer some questions that stumped us as first time trioethnographers.

Worthy of mention too is the fact that technology enables us to have greater access to our support systems. Skype can bring our families closer and it has made the separation that much easier to bear. Joyce and Eraldine call their family who live far from them. I can contact my parents who live in Saudi Arabia. So, technology helps to bridge the geographical divide that so often causes us stress. Eraldine shared how she used and still uses Skype to put her daughter to bed and Joyce uses technology to stay in touch with her family.

In our conversations and deliberations about what other support systems could possibly make our situations better we all expressed a desire to have the support of parents or our extended families. Eraldine and I wish to have parents or other relatives here to help take care

---

[1] The iTeach Lounge is an open use grant-funded facility which provides technological support to all students and staff at the University

of our kids as well as to reduce the stress level we have been experiencing. Joyce shared with us the value she has seen in her children being supported by their dad and older siblings.

> **Adhwaa**: *I think if I have my parent here will be better for me. Even my son goes to his Pre-K. I still worry if he eats or not. He used to eat from home. He is also very picky at food. Also, when my kids got sick, my husband does not know how to care them, and he is not patient to kids. So, it is beneficial for me to have my parents here that also my kids can see their grandmother and fathers around them living here without your parent is boring for me.*

As Offstein et al. (2004) mentioned, stress becomes the core of the mother's experiences in their academic pursuits. We would prefer parents or trusted others to provide secure care rather than day care facilities, all this as we struggle to maintain social support (Haynes et al., 2012). We still want them to talk with them and enjoy their time. Especially Joyce and Eraldine need someone to talk with them when they go home at the end of the day. When I hear this, I realize they feel lonely sometimes. We believe in addition to this and other forms of support that family and parent support is helpful for international mothers and may reduce our stress with our kids.

The issue of greater support on the part of the university for international mothers, as raised by Eraldine, was related to an experience she encountered while trying to get faculty signature on an application for the early childhood school readiness program. The form was simply a request for verification that she is indeed a student within the College. She did not know who had responsibility for signing the document and it took a while to establish this.

This conversation as with others highlighted the value of us working together as conversation partners. From this discussion, Eraldine was able to provide me with information on the school readiness program, I had applied but had not received any response from them. In this regard, then together we support each other. While we have much in common, we also differ much. We have different economic support systems that fund our lives while we are studying here. For instance, I receive secure funding from Saudi Cultural Mission. I receive full cover for coursework, health insurance, and the cost of travelling. Joyce and Eraldine constantly have to manage their limited budgets to ensure most of their needs are met.

Another noted difference is our family's geographic dynamics, while I have the full composite of my family here with me, Joyce's family is in Ghana and Eraldine has her children with her, but her husband is still in Jamaica. This means that Eraldine will have full responsibility for her children. Joyce, mentally, is concerned with the pressure her husband is under on his own and her inability to contribute directly to the daily management of the home especially with the fact that her youngest daughter is not doing well health wise. For me because both my husband and I are students there is added pressure which limits the time we each have with our children.

"*Each day brings its own colors to be chosen,*" this line of McLeod's (n.d.) poem was used to introduce this section on support because as we go through the program we recognize and are grateful for the support systems we have but we are also cognizant of those that we need and the implications of not having them. We have to "choose" how we react to the demands each day brings.

Staying Motivated, finding ways to cope: Eraldine narrates…

Footprints in the sand….
The sky today is azure,
The sun warm and golden
A filigree of light and shadow-play

Through the gently swaying trees.
I clean my brushes
Choose my palette
Of vibrant, living colours,
And begin to fill
Today's Blank Canvas

As the number of women who earn doctoral degrees increases research suggests that female doctoral students struggle with their wellbeing, including managing role conflict due to multiple roles, developing coping skills, and maintaining social support (Haynes et al., 2012). Our experiences have led us to agree with the findings of Haynes et al. (2012) as we too have used varying strategies to cope with our challenges. Joyce decided to make a deliberate attempt to manage her time so that there is a space for her to just relax, Adhwaa is dedicating time to working away from home at the Library and I talk to friends and exercise up to three times per week and this I have found to be beneficial to me.

Job retention (Joyce and I) and acquisition (Adhwaa) were identified as key extrinsic motivating factors driving our pursuit of a doctoral degree. Joyce and I are both on study leave from our full-time jobs where we serve as lecturers at the university level in our home countries. We must acquire a terminal degree if we are to retain our jobs. Adhwaa on the other hand, wanted the opportunity to find a better job so after teaching at middle school for three months she decided to pursue a master's degree. She knew that if she was to acquire a professor position in her home country she would need a PhD and so she is on this path to acquire qualifications in an area that is of importance to her country – special education. She excitedly shared with us how blessed she has been to have been offered a professor post upon completion of her studies, an offer which currently provides a small stipend to her as motivation. This reassurance of a job makes it much easier for her to press on.

> **Adhwaa:** *I think for me the happiest thing for me during this year, it happened last spring when one university in my country called me to hire me… So, I get a limited salary monthly from them, but they await me until I am finished I will come back and work for them.*

The fact that we all have jobs upon completion is indeed a major motivator.

Spousal support was identified as another motivator, both Adhwaa and Joyce could identify with having husbands who pushed them and spoke this feat into their [potential] reality.

> **Adhwaa**: *…so the encouragement from my parents, mother and father, the encouragement also from my husband, he said "ok, go ahead I [would] like to see how your name write "Dr."*
> *You see that he, actually he pushed me a lot and when I talk with him I say yesterday I felt bad, he said if I were you I will be more, if he has my opportunity now, he will do better. Yeah that actually keeps pushing me, push me to do very well in this, yes.*

Joyce then shared a somewhat similar story.

> **Joyce**: *Ok, another thing was, ah, I don't know whether it was a prophecy or something. But I remember when we got married, some 23 years ago, my husband told me I will be professor in no time. He was in the university I had*

> *not entered, I had not even decided to go and do my bachelors so, he keeps on, and he sometimes, calls me, Prof.*

Even when his "prophecy" did not seem possible, according to Joyce, "*he was still calling me Professor.*"

Common to all of us also, is the matriarchal influence of our grandmothers (Joyce and I) and mother (Adhwaa). It was for us a surprising yet welcomed discovery when we identified this similarity in our motivation. Equally enlightening was the realization that this influence has impacted how we envision our children's futures.

> ***Eraldine****: My being here has a lot to do with my grandmother, my maternal grandmother who raised me, because she wanted to do so much in life, and she was brilliant, but she grew up in an era where women were not empowered and people didn't spend money on women and so when she got to a certain age her father's desire was just to marry her off so she would be somebody else's expense and so when she had children and she had grandchildren she purposed in her heart that we should all go to school and we should all do well ... I feel I owed it to her as a woman in the family to do well.*

> ***Joyce****: Yes, your grandmother raised you, my grandparents raised me in that same village, so I have to go to high school then I moved to my parents, so they started and this thing when I get anything I have to go back and tell them* [her village folks] *that we can also make it in life no matter where we are.*

> ***Adhwaa****: I know that it was my mother, she was the first one who pushed me to get my highest score, you know, you have to get excellent GPA because when you get excellent GPA you can get more opportunity than others. And she is right if I didn't get higher GPA in my bachelors I would not have got accepted into scholarship. If I did not get high GPA in Master's I would not get accepted in PhD which she is right when she told me.*

> ***Eraldine****: So, we have foundations of grandmothers and mothers so the maternal side of us is what is pushing our development as women…*

> ***Joyce****: Yes!*

We found that as parents we also push our children and hope that our path will influence their decisions later in life. We reflected deeply on the impact of these maternal influences on our lives and on how we now raise our children. We discovered that our faith [belief in God as the head of our lives] serves both as a motivator and a support system as we face different adversities. I reflected on the impact of devotions on my spiritual wellbeing, this resonated with both Joyce and Adhwaa.

> ***Eraldine:*** *Another thing that helps me to cope too, is just sitting down at my window and looking out and thinking ... reading my bible doing my devotionals ... So, my motivation is built around my spirituality, built around God around those things.*

> ***Joyce:*** *I also forgot about that devotional aspect, it's one thing that helps a lot because I remember when I was going through the thing with my daughters I*

> *told you she was in the hospital ... Even that when I am praying I can just imagine that I cry my heart out to God and it relieves me because sometimes I just when I am praying it's like ... I just tell him whatever I want and it's so relieving when I pour my heart out...*
>
> ***Adhwaa:*** *...also when I have struggle situation I pray a lot, yeah. I read Quran, I pray a lot... I am religious person I follow the message from God and the prophet Mohammed. As you work hard you will receive what you seek to that's how I think what happened to me. That's what motivates me.*

Individually, we each use different techniques to cope, for Joyce, she dedicates thirty minutes of each day to herself, for introspection, for walking, and clearing her mind, she sometimes, just sits in the library and observes the environment during those thirty minutes. Adhwaa has her Starbucks moments when she just sits and has her coffee. I go to the gym, shop, give myself manicures, watch movies or just cook, these moments take me away from the reality that is sometimes overwhelming.

The results from our conversations in this session revealed commonalities in that we each have job related and matriarchal motivators, found avenues through which to destress and regroup, leaned heavily on our spiritual faith to cope and Adhwaa and Joyce drew on support from their spouses. Much like this stanza in McLeod's (n.d.) poem "*…footprints in the sand.*" We are drawing on the past, living in the moment and moving forward to make the best of what we have been given… each filling our blank canvas.

Discussion

The main purpose of this trioethnography was to share the role intra- and inter-personal hardiness is playing in our pursuance of doctoral degrees. Also, as Tinto (1993) advocates, we wanted to add to literature the story of the challenges international, minority women with children face in pursuing doctoral degrees from our own lived experiences. The analysis of our conversations generated three major themes: challenges, support systems and coping strategies which is presented here as motivation. Our study like many other studies was not without limitations. The prominent limitation was with the generalization of results. Due to the approach adopted, trioethnography as well as the limited number of participants, the findings cannot be generalized although personal and "interpersonal" hardiness could be adopted by other people who are in similar situations.

While, the study did not require IRB clearance given its design as a class assignment and its focus on self – the authors were the researchers and at the same time the participants in the study, we sought the approval of the other people involved, our spouses, children, and colleagues. Where mention was made of a colleague we obtained his consent to include his name in the study.

Challenges

As evidenced in existing literature (Haynes et al., 2012; Johnson et al., 2008; Offstein et al., 2004), our identified challenges included stress on ourselves and our immediate families, role conflicts, uneasy family relationship, and financial difficulty. Our results confirm that no one journeys through doctoral studies without stress but, it is more burdensome (if not unbearable) for international minority women with children (Gardner, 2008). From the results, it could be seen that the stress on us has its repercussions on our families as well which compounds what we are already undergoing.

This study also confirms Leonard et al.'s (2005) findings that there is "disturbed or uneasy" (p. 143) family and social relationship associated with the pursuit of doctoral studies. The results clearly show that we are undergoing uneasy family relationship, the paramount of it is denying our spouses and children the desired attention which is the resultant of stress. As was evidenced in the results, the stress is compelling us not to give our families the attention they need, and this causes us intra-conflict as to how to identify our priorities concerning our personal, family and academic life. Though this situation has been found to be associated with doctoral studies (Haynes et al., 2012; Martinez et al., 2013), we realized in our study that it is worse for international women of color who live with their children without external family around to offer them support that could ease this type of stress. More so, as evidenced in literature we have not been not spared on health issues (Colomer et al., 2015; Haynes et al., 2012; Lester, 2013; Martinez et al., 2013). All the three of us have individually have our fair share regarding illness resulting from too much academic pressure from the program.

Like the experiences of participants in the studies reviewed, stress is compelling us (authors) not to give our families the attention they need, and this causes us some intra-battle as to how to identify our priorities concerning our personal, family and academic life (Haynes et al., 2012; Martinez et al., 2013). Although we know stress is at the core of graduate studies (Offstein et al., 2004), we realized it is not only affecting us as individuals but extend to our families, especially our children (Haynes et al., 2012; Johnson et al., 2008; Leonard et al., 2005).

Issues relating to language and cultural differences though not noted in literature were found to be of concern to us. These challenges though not directly affecting us were potential issues for those of us who had our children here in the US. Adhwaa's boys did not have the opportunity to learn their native language as the foundation as the parents needed to help them function in their current context and there is limited access to resources or institutions that would allow them to learn and use their mother tongue on a consistent basis. This poses a challenge when the family returns to Saudi Arabia and currently is an issue that Adhwaa is concerned with. Eraldine's youngest child code switches between her local dialect and English and there is the fear that her teachers may find this to be a challenge. These as well as issues relating to differences in culture add to the list of concerns we face as mothers. Independently they may not hold as much significance but when compounded with other challenges, there is limited time to address them appropriately.

Another existing finding that our study confirmed was the issue of economic challenge that doctoral students face (Leonard et al., 2005; Lester, 2013; Martinez et al., 2013; Seay et al., 2008), it is particularly profound for Joyce and me (Eraldine), because we are self-funded students. The results of this study links with Leonard et al.'s (2005) in that funding a doctorate with only graduate assistantship without supporting grants or fellowship in a foreign land is a battle on its own. Even Adhwaa who is enjoying full scholarship from her home country has her fair share of financial difficulty indicating the seriousness of the financial problems international minority female doctoral students with children face (Castro et al., 2011; Gardner, 2008).

Support Systems

Support represents a major aspect of our journey thus far and is evident in many forms. Personal support systems (family to include spouse, children, extended families), friends, and institutional support systems are important variables and can impact significantly the doctoral journey. Studies reviewed highlighted the impact of faculty attitude and support on the success of women in doctoral programs (Heinrich, 1990; Smith, 1995). Smith's (1995) finding, contrasted with our experiences thus far, we have found that the attitude and support received

from faculty greatly increased our ability to do well. We did not experience any discriminatory practices. In fact, we benefit from mentoring relationships with our faculty, this too contradicts the findings of earlier literature which reported a small number of women faculty who provided mentorship relationships to female doctoral students (Heinrich, 1990). The changing times and perhaps initiatives aimed at recruiting and retaining women have provided for us a somewhat unique experience, we all have majority female doctoral committees. This is perhaps, an important element of our support system.

Support from spouses (2 of 3) was identified as a major contributing factor to alleviating stress and providing support and engagement, conversely, the lack of support from spouse contributed significantly to the stress level experienced. This was consistent with literature reviewed as it relates to the impact of family support for women pursuing doctoral studies. Leonard et al. (2005), found that family life was negatively affected by this pursuit which indicates a need for support and understanding from the family if one is to succeed.

Martinsuo and Turkulainen (2011) in their study of doctoral students' personal commitment, support and progress found that peer support has a positive effect on both course completion and research. Reflections on our experiences we see evidence of the components of hardiness, commitment, challenge and control and believe that individually we are exercising personal hardiness, a psychological phenomenon that is part of one's personality that allows one to succeed even when undergoing stressful situations (Kobasa, 1979; VandenBos, 2007), we have all benefited from peer support in one form or other outside of our research triad, furthermore, we have started to benefit from what we consider to be "interpersonal hardiness."

Psychologists define the term interpersonal as having to do with actions, events and feelings that exist between two or more persons, in other words, relationship between persons. Hardiness speaks to exercising resilience. The American Psychological Association (n.d.) defines resilience as "the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats and even significant sources of stress – such as family and relationship problems, serious health problems, or workplace and financial stresses" (n.p.). In our context studies suggest that as minority, international, married women, we are less likely to complete doctoral studies (Castro et al., 2011). Our separation from family in some contexts, financial challenges, limited support, family and other responsibilities could be considered as adverse realities that we face, with each reality having the potential to cause significant stress which is further compounded when combined. We therefore coined the term "Inter-personal hardiness" to represent the resilience evident in our mutual associations and how we encourage and support each other to forge ahead irrespective of the challenges we are individually and collectively experiencing. Thus, resilience resulting from the relations between persons is our definition of "interpersonal hardiness." Interpersonal Hardiness is therefore, our mechanism to combat adversities as we strive to successfully complete our course of study. Overtime, we have become our own support network in defiance of failure.

We started this paper as part of a course but found that we not only fulfilled this requirement but found ourselves and a very important support system that is all our own – each other. I recall sharing at the end of our third special conversation session [focus meeting] that the sessions that we meet and talk with each other really elicited a good feeling for me, Adhwaa shared that she too enjoyed the discussions, while Joyce acknowledged how much we have in common. The most prolific finding was Adhwaa's proclamation of how much this dialogue has helped her. We believe that in finding ourselves we have found a great interdependent support system independent of others we have or desire to have. We found us and as we spend more time together we have come to understand more about the factors that encourage high attrition rates among women in doctoral programs and about those factors that will help to keep

us staid. In supporting each other we hope to become our own defense mechanisms against the many existing factors that can delay or otherwise permanently affect completion.

Motivation/Coping Strategies

Motivation is an essential element to success, whether it is intrinsic or extrinsic. We found in this study that we are all motivated in both ways. We are budding academics, each hoping to make our mark as educators it was therefore not surprising that job retention and acquisition was discovered to be extrinsic motivators common to all of us. For Joyce and me (Eraldine), we are both on study leave and require a terminal degree to retain our jobs. Adhwaa wants to become an educator and already accepted an offer to lecture in her home country. The fact that we all have jobs to return to is an extrinsic motivator to us and in some regard, serves as a coping mechanism for the long road ahead. We did not review literature that is directly related to this construct however, we appreciate that this is an important aspect of our life post dissertation.

Matriarchal influence is another motivator that we discovered common to the three of us. Two of us were heavily influenced by our grandmothers while the other was encouraged by her mother to pursue academia. In many regards their inability (owing to circumstances in their time and cultural issues) to pursue further education fueled within them a desire to ensure that their children and grandchildren were encouraged to make the best use of opportunities given. We each draw from them strength that helps us to cope during difficult times, and a passion that is evidenced in our desires for our own children. Matriarchal influence is a surprise discovery for us as we did not find it in literature we reviewed. The fact that all of us have been influenced by women in our families and this has been a major factor in where we are today, is absolutely fascinating and augurs well, we believe, for the future if we are able to have the same impact on our children.

Self-actualization and our individual spiritual faith base serve as intrinsic motivators common to us. While some of us were encouraged by significant others, it is fair to say that we all had a natural desire to pursue a PhD. Self-actualization represents one's need for personal growth and discover, this need is evident throughout one's life, that is, you never remain as is, you are always becoming, always aiming to improve yourself (Maslow, 1962). We believe we are at this stage in Maslow's hierarchy, on a path to self-actualization. Tied into this is our individual yet common dependence on faith, on our belief in a supreme, higher being – God. This discovery came late in our discussions but injected much energy in the session. We were surprised to find that devotions were an integral part of our daily activities and that we each rely heavily on this belief system to sustain and motivate us.

Issues relating to Generalizability and Implications of the Study

Given the many similarities found between existing literature and our study, we are inclined to hold the view that this study may be generalizable to women with similar demographics who are pursuing higher degrees. This study may be of interest to women with families who are pursuing or are interested in pursuing doctoral studies. We do not hold the view that women who are domestic (studying in their home country) are exempt from some of these experiences and so they too may find the results of this study to be relatable. It should provide them with an idea of factors they may wish to consider prior to embarking on this journey.

The need for support is reiterated throughout this study and so there is an indication that this study holds implications for institutions that recruit international students and women in particular who have families, to provide support systems in the form of child care services that coincide with the scheduled class times for graduate students, advisors who are able to relate to the needs of this type of students and who can point the students to resources that could help to alleviate some of the financial burdens (school readiness and other social interventions where applicable).

Conclusion

As our journey continues, we hope to see where our paths lead us over the next four years. As we continue to intersect and parallel each other on this doctoral journey that is fraught with high attrition rates (Colomer et al., 2015; Haynes et al., 2012; Martinez et al., 2013) and potential tensions given the current political climate, we will hold to the view that personal and "inter-personal" hardiness will indeed help us to finish and finish well.

Quae futura erit ... totus est puteus ut terminus puteus.
(What is to be will be ... all is well that ends well)

References

American Psychological Association (APA). (n.d.). *The road to resilience*. Retrieved from: http://www.apa.org/helpcenter/road-resilience.aspx.

American Psychological Association. (2010). *Publication manual of the American Psychological Association* (6th ed.). Washington, DC: Author.

Bartone, P. T. (2000). Hardiness as a resiliency factor for United States Forces in the Gulf War. In J. M. Violanti, D. Paton, & C. Dunning (Eds.), *Posttraumatic stress intervention: Challenges, issues, and perspectives* (pp. 115–133). Springfield, IL: Charles C Thomas.

Berg, H. M., & Ferber, M. A. (1983). Men and women graduate students: Who succeeds and why? *The Journal of Higher Education*, *54*(6), 629-648.

Brus, C. P. (2006). Seeking balance in graduate school: A realistic expectation or a dangerous dilemma? *New Directions for Student Services*, *2006*(115), 31-45.

Castro, V., Garcia, E. E., Cavazos Jr., J., & Castro, A. Y. (2011). The road to doctoral success and beyond. *International Journal of Doctoral Studies*, *6*, 51-77.

Colomer, S. E., Olivero, M. M., & Bell, J. (2015). A dialogue among bilingual language educators: An exploration of female attrition in the doctoral pipeline. *International Review of Qualitative Research*, *8*(1), 90-108. doi: 10.1525/irqr.2015.8.1.90.

Creswell, J.W. (2013). *Qualitative inquiry & research design: Choosing among five approaches*. Los Angeles, CA: Sage Publications.

Gardner, S. K. (2008). Fitting the mold of graduate school: A qualitative study of socialization in doctoral education. *Innovative Higher Education*, *33*(2), 125-138.

Haynes, C., Bulosan, M., Citty, J., Grant-Harris, M., Hudson, J., & Koro-Ljungberg, M. (2012). My world is not my doctoral program… or is it?: Female students' perceptions of well-being. *International Journal of Doctoral Studies*, *7*(1), 1-17.

Heinrich, K. T. (1990). *Toward gender sensitive advisement of women doctoral students*. (Report No. HE024453). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 331 396). Retrieved from https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED331396.pdf

Hystad, S. W., Eid, J., Laberg, J. C., Johnsen, B. H., & Bartone, P. T. (2009). Academic stress

and health: Exploring the moderating role of personality hardiness. *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research*, *53*(5), 421-429.

Institute of International Education. (2016). International students by academic level and place of origin, 2014/15-2015/16. *Open Doors Report on International Educational Exchange*. Retrieved from https://www.iie.org/Research-and-Insights/Open-Doors/Data/International-Students/Places-of-Origin/Academic-Level-and-Place-of-Origin/2015-16.

Janta, H., Lugosi, P., & Brown, L. (2014). Coping with loneliness: A netnographic study of doctoral students. J*ournal of Further and Higher Education*, *38*(4), 553-571.

Johnson, B., Batia, A., & Haun, J. (2008). Perceived stress among graduate students: Roles, responsibilities, and social support. *VAHPERD Journal*, (Spring), 31–35.

Kobasa, S. C. (1979). Stressful life events, personality, and health-inquiry into hardiness. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 37*(1), 1–11.

Lenz, K. S. (1997). Nontraditional-aged women and the dissertation: A case study approach. *New Directions for Higher Education*, *1997*(99), 65-74.

Leonard, D., Becker, R., & Coate, K. (2005). To prove myself at the highest level: The benefits of doctoral study. *Higher Education Research & Development*, *24*(2), 135-149.

Lester, J. (2013). Family-friendly policies for doctoral students. *New Directions for Higher Education*, *163*, 55-65.

Lifton, D. E., Seay, S., & Bushko, A. (2000). Can student "hardiness" serve as an indicator of likely persistence to graduation? Baseline results from a longitudinal study. *Academic Exchange Quarterly*, *4*(2), 73-81.

Lifton, D., Seay, S., McCarly, N., Olive-Taylor, R., Seeger, R., & Bigbee, D. (2006). Correlating hardiness with graduation persistence. *Academic Exchange Quarterly*, *10*(3), 277-283.

Lovitts, B. E. (2001). *Leaving the ivory tower: The causes and consequences of departure from doctoral study*. New York, NY: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc.

Martinez, E., Ordu, C., Della Sala, M. R., & McFarlane, A. (2013). Striving to obtain a school-work-life balance: The full-time doctoral student. *International Journal of Doctoral Studies*, *8*, 39-59.

Martinsuo, M. & Turkulainen, V. (2011). Personal commitment, support and progress in doctoral studies. *Studies in Higher Education*, *36*(1), 103-120.

Maslow, A. H. (1962). *Toward a psychology of being*. Princeton, NJ: D. Van Nostrand Company.

Maher, M. A., Ford, M. E., & Thompson, C. M. (2004). Degree progress of women doctoral students: Factors that constrain, facilitate, and differentiate. *The Review of Higher Education*, *27*(3), 385-408.

McLeod, J. (n.d.). Awakening. MDJunction. Retrieved from: https://www.mdjunction.com/forums/positive-thinking-discussions/general-support/2041974-awakening-john-mcleod

Norris, J., Sawyer, R.D., Lund, D. E. (2012). *Duoethnography: Dialogic methods for social, health, and educational research*. Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, Inc.

Offstein, E. H., Larson, M. B., McNeill, A. L., & Mjoni Mwale, H. (2004). Are we doing enough for today's graduate student? *The International Journal of Education Management, 18*(7), 396-407.

Oswalt, S., & Riddock, C. (2007). What to do about being overwhelmed: Graduate students, stress and university services. *College Student Affairs Journal, 27*(1), 24-44.

Roulston, K. (2010). *Reflective interviewing: A guide to theory and practice*. London, UK: Sage.

Seay, S. E., Lifton, D. E., Wuensch, K. L., Bradshaw, L. K., & McDowelle, J. O. (2008). First-

generation graduate students and attrition risks. *The Journal of Continuing Higher Education*, *56*(3), 11-25. doi: 10.1080/07377366.2008.10400158

Smith, B. (1995). Hidden rules, secret agendas: Challenges facing contemporary women doctoral students [Presentation]. *Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association*. San Francisco, CA.

Snelson, C., Wertz, C., Onstott, K., & Bader, J. (2017). Using World of Warcraft to teach research methods in online doctoral education: A student-instructor duoethnography. *The Qualitative Report*, *22*(5), 1439-1456. Retrieved from https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol22/iss5/18

Tinto, V. (1993). *Leaving college: Rethinking the causes and cures of student attrition* (2nd ed.). Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

VandenBos, G. R. (Ed.). (2007). *APA dictionary of psychology*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

Vartuli, S. (1982). *The Ph.D. experience: A woman's point of view*. Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger Publishers Inc.

Author Note

Eraldine Williams-Shakespeare, B.Ed., M.A., is a doctoral candidate at the University of South Florida, pursuing a Ph.D. in Curriculum and Instruction - Instructional Technology. Her research interests include instructional technology in teacher education, collaborative learner interactions in the online environment, online communities of learning, and interactivity in the online environment. She currently works as a Graduate Instructional Assistant with the Florida Centre for Instructional Technology. Correspondence regarding this article can be addressed directly to: Email: ewilliamssha@mail.usf.edu. Contact: 813-215-3760. Address: 18265 Bridle Club Drive, Tampa, FL 33647.

Joyce E. Bronteng, B.Ed., M.Phil., is currently a Ph.D. student in Curriculum and Instruction with emphasis on Early Childhood Education Curriculum and Instruction in the University of South Florida. Her research interests include multivocal studies, bilingual and literacy pedagogies involving young learners, parents and teachers. She is a graduate assistant who teaches language and literacy courses and supervises early childhood preservice teachers at the Early Childhood Department. Correspondence regarding this article can also be addressed directly to: Email: jeb7@mail.usf.edu. Contact: 813-362-7137. Address: 14509 Prism Circle, Apt. 306B, Tampa, FL 33613.

Adhwaa Alahmari, Ph.D., is a faculty member at King Khalid University-Abha in the Special Education department. Adhwaa's interests include learning disability, Response to Intervention (RtI) and evidence-based practices. Correspondence regarding this article can also be addressed directly to Email: adahmari@kku.edu.sa. Contact: 813-600-7470. Address: 1124 Big Creek Drive, Wesley Chapel, FL 33544.

Article Citation

Williams-Shakespare, E. S., Bronteng, J. E., & Alahmari, A. (2018). Interpersonal hardiness as a critical contributing factor to persistence among international women in doctoral

programs: A trioethnographic study. *The Qualitative Report, 23*(8), 1799-1821. Retrieved from https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol23/iss8/2