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Riding the auto/biographical PhD rollercoaster: experiencing difference, difficulties, emotions, and relationships

Robin A Hadley

In this piece, I discuss the differences and difficulties I found during the tumultuous, nerve-racking process of completing a PhD in a subject that is both very personal and extremely sensitive: male involuntary childlessness. A subject so sensitive that reaction to my work has ranged from genuine tears of empathy to sarcastic gestures of weeping and condescension (Hadley, 2020).

My doctoral research drew on my personal experience and the issue of auto/biography is relevant here. Auto/Biography acknowledges and embraces the significance of the personhood of the researcher in the research process (Brennan and Letherby, 2017).

Michael Brennan and Gayle Letherby (2017: 54) suggest that that there is an 'autobiographical continuum' ranging from auto/**biography** to **auto**/biography. The former refers to those that write about others but acknowledge the significance of their personhood in the process. The latter, in writing about themselves recognise the importance of others in their story. In my PhD and other academic writings, I write from an auto/**biography** perspective. However, here I write from the **auto**/biographical perspective as I share my story of being a doctoral student.

Undertaking my PhD took a great deal of emotional effort, and the call of my working class roots and feelings of unworthiness were constant companions. Qualitative researchers sometimes describe themselves as '*bricoleurs*' (makeshift artisans) in order to convey the eclectic nature of their research (Crotty, 1998). I resist that description and feel it conveys academic condescension and dismissal of the everyday art and skills of people of craft. Instead, I feel the word '*bateleur*' (a tightrope walker, juggler, acrobat, tumbler, and buffoon) captures the emotional/physical/cognitive ebb and flow I experienced through all my research studies. In my native Mancunian this is pronounced as 'battler'. In this chapter, I describe the highs and lows of my PhD 'rollercoaster'.

Mapping me

I am a 'late onset' entrant into academia. I come from a working class background; I am the seventh youngest of eight children. I was born and raised in Old Trafford, Manchester in 1960. At that time, the city was heavily industrialised and the bulk of the working class population served local manufacturers. I was born at home and struggled to breathe for the first 10 minutes of my life. Luckily, the National Health Service midwife had some oxygen in her car and after she had resuscitated me, she stabilised my breathing. Because of my birth trauma, I only have 30 percent hearing in both ears and constant tinnitus. I attended the local primary school and secondary modern school for boys. I exited secondary education at age 17 with a few 'O' levels. I was fortunate enough to get on the Youth Opportunities Programme; a government-backed work experience scheme at the Victoria University of Manchester. I qualified with a City and Guilds 744 in Photography in the early 1980's. I spent

the next 31 years slowly moving up the career ladder until a combination of technological change and outsourcing of services led me to re-train as a counsellor.

The vocational nature of counselling courses meant I was able to study part-time while working full-time. I completed my counselling qualifications' and then self-funded an MA in counselling (Hadley, 2008) and an MSc in Research Methods (Hadley, 2009). Aged 50 years old I began my PhD at Keele University in late 2010 and gained my doctorate in Social Gerontology in 2015. Beginning each new course my default expectation of being not worthy was and still is a constant companion. Here I focus on the significance of my relationships with my counsellor, peers, my supervisors, and with myself.

Wait. Weight. The excitement of applying for and being granted a fully funded studentship was counter-balanced with the weight of expectation of failure. 'They' would know I am blagging and bluffing. Through my counsellor training, MA, and MSc experiences I knew that I would struggle with my way of-being-me during the PhD. Consequently, I decided to see a counsellor before I started. I knew that I needed direction and structure in addition to emotional support and I chose someone I had worked with – Vicky*. Vicky was an experienced counsellor and life coach. One significant method that worked for me was drawing (see Wong and Rochlen, 2005) which gives me a practical way to channel my feelings and thoughts that I struggled to express verbally. My relationship with Vicky was very important in helping me not only deal with both not knowing or understanding but also how to work with my anger, depression, despair, elation, jealousy, joy and motivation.

My relationship with Vicky was especially important when, during the latter part of my first year, my 'progression' report - and associated interview - failed. My relationship with my lead supervisor, Hazel*, had started well. However, it deteriorated following the rejection of my 'progression' report. 'Progression' was a mandatory part of all doctoral studies and involved two elements. First, a written report arguing the case that the study qualified as PhD worthy. Second, a 'viva voce' defence of the report to a panel of three independent academics. My supervisor had approved my report and had offered to sit in the viva. Alarm bells started ringing when the day before the meeting she withdrew. Five minutes before the meeting started, I was told the chair – a senior academic – had decided to change role and be a panel member. One of my abiding memories is when at the end of the meeting she threw my report across the table towards me. The impact was huge and I seriously questioned what right I had to think I should be attempting a PhD. I felt I had a black cloud over me as I noted in my researcher diary:

'What the fuck am I doing here? Who fucking cares? What is the fucking point?

How do I manage to get myself into such shite positions?'

Having an arena where I could express my frustration with the system, with others and with myself turned out to be essential to my continuing. Moreover, Vicky helped me see how I focused and stayed with the negative elements of the feedback and avoided the positive comments. Likewise, she helped me take a structured solution-focused approach to my successful resubmission.

Difference and Difficulties

As a PhD candidate being an older, hard-of-hearing man from a working class background highlighted several 'differences'. My reduced hearing directly affects my way of being and

my self-trust. I tend to position myself so I can lip read. I often miss out in discussions because by the time I have processed the dialogue the debate has moved on. Moreover, at that time the vast majority of my peers were at least 25 years younger and the staff (of all levels) were either younger or of a similar age to me. In addition, I commuted to the campus so; my time on campus was different to the majority of my PhD peers. One vivid memory concerns attending the compulsory modules. Here the majority of the attendees were previous undergraduate students who had continued on to PhD's and were familiar with staff and institutional practises. Initially, I was very aware of being new and significantly, an older man. I thought I had to make the first approach to engage with any group. The other students were always accepting and accommodating. However, every group has its dynamic of 'norming, storming, reforming, performing' (White, 2009 p. 5). I was dazzled by how confident and at ease with academic language and theories my fellow students were: I had to make notes and look up the meanings of words, phrases and concepts they seemed to take for granted. Likewise, I found my peers' ease with technology and their ubiquitous use of social media disconcerting. I was very aware of my accent, not being terribly confident and although accepted, not quite fitting in. I have often wondered what difference having their shared experience of undergraduate life would have made to me as a person and my way of being.

Throughout the duration of my PhD, the composition of my peer group changed as we each moved through the different phases of our research. Moreover, organisational changes led to being relocated to different shared offices – often with people completing doctorates in completely different fields. The faculty I was in funded a coffee morning every Wednesday for all the faculty postgrads. The composition of any meeting would have a variety of people

completing doctorates in different disciplines and fields. Despite the mix, I found this group one of the best places for both emotional and practical support. For the most part the group would have more women than men. Typically, the ratio would be at least three women to one man. However, when there was a nearly or equal balance, I noticed the younger men would tend to dominate the conversation. This was particularly noticeable when new attendees increased the group's membership. Was this just exuberance or was it gendered and/or generational difference? Perhaps it was my background. Coming from a large working class family, I was raised in an environment that held a strong ethos of fairness and sharing and felt uncomfortable with this behaviour. At the time, I would try to broaden the conversation to include others. Consequently, in academic and other settings I endeavour not to repeat similar behaviour.

One of the strengths of this group was people could offload their anxieties and fears. However, on one occasion the informal nature of the group brought home another form of 'difference'. I was discussing the findings from a psychological study and used the authors terms, 'male' and 'female'. This brought an aggressive response of 'Those females were women!' from an English literature PhD candidate. Later that day this exchange was triumphantly posted on Facebook as me (unnamed) being variously 'flamed' 'burnt' 'taken down'. The related comments by people who were not present were congratulatory – frequently with added viciousness. A few weeks later, the same person advised me to watch Game of Thrones – a programme renown for semi-naked young women and violence. That incident gave me insight into three issues. First, the use of language between academic disciplines. Second, how social media forums alienate and exclude. Finally, how negative comments fed into my feelings of being unworthy and an outsider.

There were two peer relationships that were particularly significant to me – Jake* and Emily*. I was introduced to Jake in his role as a ‘student rep’ when I attended my PhD studentship interview. Jake was already a year into his PhD when we met and, as fortune had it, we shared various offices for most of my time at Keele. In addition to being a few years older than I am, Jake was middle class, degree educated, and had a Master’s in Gerontology. Moreover, he had taught the subject and had been a community activists/worker as well. He had an encyclopaedic knowledge of the arts and literature. Possibly, because we were both older men and came from the same region, we supported each other and became good friends. I think because of Jake’s way-of-being and his background in sociology and gerontology I was never aware of class being an issue between us. To me, he seemed a ‘natural’ academic and someone who ‘fits’ in easily in any academic situation. By comparison, I tend to feel awkward and diffident in similar situations.

Emily was a classmate in the two of the compulsory modules. Like the majority of the PhD candidates, she was in her early twenties and had completed her undergraduate and master’s degrees at Keele. Emily was very popular. Looking back, she took me under her wing – although I did not realise that at the time. However, as one of the module essays was due, she asked for my advice. Her relationship with her peers from undergraduate days had broken down and she now felt rejected and lost. Consequently, we supported each other: she helped me with academic issues and I listened to her. I had assumed she was middle class but her parents were working class and she lived with her grandmother on a local council estate. Following the completion of the modules, we remained in contact. I think some of the reasons Emily and I became friends was because I was older, an outsider, and

not part of her established peer group. As with many of my younger university peers, we keep in contact through Facebook.

The PhD process is tightly structured and when I first started, I was slightly taken aback by the detailed forms that regularly required completing. I always felt awkward when completing the 'assess your supervisors' section of the annual assessment. It felt like this was a metric driven user satisfaction exercise. As my 'progression' report was resubmitted, the university restructured and my lead supervisor moved faculty. Consequently, a new lead supervisor, Kathy*, took her place. My default position with my supervisors was that, as they knew more than I did, I should follow their advice. After all, they had doctorates and had a deeper understanding of the system and its machinations. On one of our first meetings 'Kathy' said, 'Congratulations! You are through progression and on to the next stage. We start with a clean slate. Let's look to the future.' That meant a lot to me at the time – and still does.

For me the PhD process was one that challenged everything – intellectually, emotionally and physically. There were many times when I thought I knew nothing and understood less. My recollection of supervision meetings was of friendly, supportive but focused meetings where I felt both listened too and challenged. Despite that, I also know that I always thought, "Today is the day they say 'Well, Rob this has been fun but we all know that you're not good enough'." Initially, in my eagerness to impress and to show I was worthy, I would send draft chapters that were incomplete. Kathy and Louise* (my second supervisor) gently pointed out that they needed the full chapter to review. I still feel much attached to my supervisors, which reflects my background, and possibly ties in with social stereotypes that women are

seen as more nurturing (Inhorn, 2012), empathetic (Toussaint and Webb, 2005), supportive (Emmert, Emmert and Brandt, 1993) and trustworthy than men (Boltz, Dyer and Miller, 2010; Liddon, Kinglerlee and Barry, 2018; Eagly, Mladinic and Otto, 1991).

My field is human reproduction and this subject is largely populated by women. I have been to many conferences where I am the only man. I have noticed that at conferences women PhD candidates seemed to have a close relationship with women supervisors. For example, at one conference informal evening social I was sat with a small group of women delegates consisting of two younger PhD candidates and their older supervisors. The conversation and interactions between them was very supportive and seemed almost familial. Obviously, not all women PhD candidates and supervisors have such good connectivity and it could be the generational difference was a significant factor. Similarly, there may have been other factors I was unaware of. For example, it could be standard working practice in the 'reproduction' fields for supervisors and PhD candidates to attend the same conference. However, I have observed similar relational depth in a number of academic situations but not between male PhD candidates and their supervisors. Laurie Rudman and Stephanie Goodwin (2004, p. 507) concluded that women had an automatic in-group bias through 'a dramatically greater liking for women than men show for men'. Likewise, Nathan Hook (2019) deduced that 'females' identified more strongly with computerised own gender fictional characters while 'males' identified equally with either gender (apostrophes' added to denote 'male' and 'female' are contested terms outside of some branches of psychology).

Further Reflections

The great thing about a PhD is that it is pass or fail. Few people know if my thesis crawled across the pass mark or is a work of genius. Although I feel that I am an 'A for effort, B for attainment' fella, I am a Doctor of Philosophy in Social Gerontology. Getting my doctorate was a rollercoaster and much of that effort went into carrying and harrying my background and the difference(s) that exposed.

Although I had a secure upbringing, I did not have the attention someone in a smaller family would probably have. Moreover, there was the fear of being out on the streets and shame of our home surroundings. For me, this insecurity is a major difference between the classes. It is not that you fall but what, if any, safety net do you have. Furthermore, like any child, I wanted attention but with six older siblings, being in the spotlight was often risky. Likewise, in academia for me the fear of humiliation is held in the context of the need for peer validation. Equally, my route into higher education is a different one to the norm and I am aware that I do not have a first degree and that my three degrees are from different fields. I think my awareness of what I do not have that others, particularly the middle class, have, leads to me being tentative.

The social aspect of being a student in higher education is often trumpeted. Nevertheless, being an older PhD candidate meant that a number of factors affected that element of my PhD life. Entering campus life was a balance between my own social world and the university community that was geared up for the semi-permanent residents. Nonetheless, unlike some younger peers, my studentship covered my costs: I did not have to find paid work to subsidise my living costs. Therefore, my interactions with peers were limited. Similarly, my age and hearing is also a factor. My hearing is such that in any environment

where there is ambient sound, I become almost completely deaf. Perhaps that is why I do not have many close continuing relationships with my university peers. I was often asked if I was a staff member and whereas I am cautious with technology and social media, my younger peers were very accepting of it.

Recently there has been increased interest in working class academics experience of academia. While there is a demand for Universities to widen their intake to include people from lower socioeconomic status areas (SES), the class background of academics if collected, is not collated. Although class/SES had been covered in my MA and MSc degrees, it was only through my PhD that I began to appreciate the impact it has on me.

What strikes me the most is how I use the difference of working class identity, disability, and gender to both fit in but also not fit in. I can step into an academic identity and use language, dress and posture to project that. However, internally I often disassociate myself from that identity. For example, in academic discussions I often think 'Did you just say that?' Similarly, when I read some of my previous publications I think, 'This guy seems to know what he is talking about.' Therein lies a direct link to my upbringing where being in the spotlight frequently did not bring the form of attention desired. Consequently, I am tentative when engaging and potentially opening myself up to humiliation. Likewise, my hearing effects of my ability to socialise not least in relation to environmental conditions at the time. I am told I have a quiet voice although it is loud in my head. Moreover, my area of male childlessness frequently means I am the only man among women. Significantly, my supervisors and my counsellor were women and each was in positions of power. However, while their roles overlapped, my supervisors also represented the university and had to

balance our agency (personal) and the structural (political). On the other hand, my counsellor was solely there to aid me. In doing so, she had to work across a wider brief including the past, present and future. I could not have completed my PhD without them.

*All names have been anonymised

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