

International Practice Development Journal

Online journal of FoNS in association with the IPDC and PcP-ICoP (ISSN 2046-9292)



IDEAS AND INFLUENCES

PhD trials and parenthood tribulations: adopting a person-centred approach to support the ticking of two clocks

Alison Kelly

Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh, Scotland
Email: AKelly@qmu.ac.uk

Submitted for publication: 8th February 2023
Accepted for publication: 27th April 2023
Published: 24th May 2023
<https://doi.org/10.19043/ipdj.131.010>

Keywords: Person-centred culture, doctoral student mothers, PhD, academia, motherhood

Women who are trying to carry out doctoral studies and build a career may find this time overlaps with their biologically optimal reproductive years. The assumption that this should oblige women to prioritise one or the other needs to be challenged and a person-centred approach adopted for students wishing to start a family during their PhD studies. Challenging this binaristic premise and taking person-centred approaches to support doctoral student mothers can help to encourage further women of childbearing age to undertake doctoral research training. Person-centredness is defined by McCormack and McCance (2017, p 3) as:

'...an approach to practice established through the formation and fostering of healthful relationships between all care providers, service users and others significant to them in their lives. It is underpinned by values of respect for persons, individual right to self-determination, mutual respect and understanding. It is enabled by practice development.'

Research has shown that the ability of women to balance work and family responsibilities is a significant determinant of their ability to advance academically (Thanacoody et al., 2009). Studies have also demonstrated that women take longer than men to complete doctoral programmes and experience a lower publication rate compared with men as a result of family obligations (Velander et al., 2021). Equally, it has been shown that starting a family during academic studies can negatively affect women's careers but not men's (Acker and Webber, 2017). Combining motherhood and academic work within higher education has long been discussed and these discrepancies are significant when it comes to women developing research careers. So we need to ask, how can we adopt person-centred approaches to support doctoral student mothers in completing their PhD research and its associated publications as well as successfully navigating motherhood?

Doctoral student mothers can struggle to balance academic and parenting responsibilities, leading to high levels of stress and burnout, as well as physical strain (Brown and Watson, 2010; Marandet and Wainwright, 2010). They face a unique set of challenges and, as well as the impact on their health and

wellbeing, there can be an adverse impact on PhD research and on parenthood. A person-centred approach can help support these women by taking into account their unique needs and experiences (Brown and Watson, 2010) and developing an academic plan specifically tailored to their individual circumstances.

One of the key components of person-centredness is collaboration (Fox and Reeves, 2015). For doctoral student mothers returning to PhD studies after maternity leave, this should involve open and honest communication between their PhD supervisors and the academic institution in terms of their experiences, concerns and challenges. According to Radbron and colleagues (2021), such a collaborative person-centred relationship can be embedded within the supervision process by sharing knowledge, learning from one another and incorporating theoretical concepts and models to help develop transformational doctoral learning. From these discussions, a shared decision-making process about the course of research needs to be planned, with realistic time frames for the completion of work that take into consideration the overlap of academic and family responsibilities and the intense demands of both. Simply taking steps to incorporate person-centred planning can allow parenting to go hand in hand with academic success.

Another important aspect of person-centredness for doctoral student mothers is the provision of emotional support and resources. Research shows that new mothers returning to PhD studies after maternity leave can experience a range of emotions (Brown and Watson, 2010) and need resilience when faced with two roles that can each demand their full focus. While the definitions of resilience are broad and varied, two commonly cited components are the ability to overcome adversity and to adapt positively (Fletcher and Sarkar, 2012). Although doing a PhD or having a baby are certainly not adverse events, they each pose unique emotional challenges in addition to the everyday stressors that call for resilience. These emotions can range from feelings of guilt and anxiety about balancing responsibilities, to feelings of pride and accomplishment in academic achievements (Brown and Watson, 2010). Academic institutions that offer a supportive and empathetic environment for doctoral student mothers can help them navigate these challenges and promote their overall physical and mental wellbeing (Marandet and Wainwright, 2010).

With this in mind, academic institutions need to consider the systemic barriers doctoral student mothers face to completing their studies. These may include poor access to affordable and flexible childcare options, or a lack of resources for breastfeeding mothers in the academic setting. Addressing these barriers can help to ensure they receive the support and advice they need to succeed while balancing the demands of study and motherhood.

A researcher's axiological perspective is no different from a mother's perspective in terms of being influenced by what is considered to be ethical and valuable in both research and raising a baby for the first time. Adopting a person-centred culture can help doctoral student mothers develop their research training in order to further upskill, support and broaden the many diverse perspectives that are important in conducting the most innovative research.

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Alison Kelly (MSc Clinical Research, PgCert Higher Education, BSc Hons Physiotherapy), Lecturer in Physiotherapy, Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh, Scotland.