

Balancing Family Responsibilities and Graduate School Demands

Kellie J. Pop and Lynda R. Wiest

University of Nevada, Reno

Abstract

Graduate school is a demanding endeavor for those who seek advanced degrees for reasons such as bettering their careers. An increasing number of women are pursuing doctoral degrees in various fields. With this change, the roles and responsibilities of the family also shift. This paper presents a synthesis of research findings on how women with family responsibilities balance those responsibilities with the rigorous demands of obtaining a doctoral degree.

Traditionally, women's roles were based within the home in order to take care of the house and the children. Women took important professional strides during the 1990's and into the new millennium as more women began to seek advanced and professional degrees in various fields, including the male-dominated business and science professions (Wyss & Tai, 2010). Although women obtained advanced and professional degrees prior to that time, it has become more common for women to obtain such degrees.

For most women, obtaining a doctoral degree occurs after they have started their career and family (Shepard & Nelson, 2012). It can take a woman longer to complete a program because she must balance the demands of graduate school and her family responsibilities (Wyss & Tai, 2010). Although not all women who are obtaining doctoral degrees have family responsibilities, this paper focuses on the women who do. This paper addresses the responsibilities of family, the rigors and expectations of a doctoral program, and the methods of support used by women who have chosen to do both.

Traditional Expectations for Women

Traditional expectations for women have not changed and society expects women to care for home and children even if they seek doctoral degrees. As a woman pursues her doctorate, she faces the additional challenges of balancing it with her gender role responsibilities (Haynes, Bulosan, Citty, Grant-Harris, Hudson, & Koro-Ljungberg, 2012). These situational barriers, as defined by Cross in Shepard and Nelson (2012), may include childcare, household chores, and budgeting.

For most women with family responsibilities, choosing to pursue a doctoral degree can mean a great deal of sacrifice on the part of the family. Shepard and Nelson (2012) argue not only do women pursuing graduate degrees have to balance the demands of the household, but they also sacrifice time with the family, such as missed recitals or sport meets due to scheduled class

times and homework commitments. Family friends can fade away from a woman engaged in doctoral study, withdrawing their acceptance of her and accusing her of deviating from her expected gender role (Arric Young, Harris, & Farrow, 2011; O'Shea & Stone, 2011).

Demands on the Working Mother

The workforce has historically been a hostile environment for women, with the exception of gender-typical careers such as teaching and nursing or midwifery. Today, many women work outside of traditional gender expectations society has placed on them. For women this conflict induces role strain as defined by Arric et al. (2011). This strain increases greatly when a woman is also a graduate student and can lead to higher rates of depression as compared to men.

The trend toward seeking advanced degrees has also yielded a greater percentage of women seeking these degrees (Arric et al., 2011; Carter, Blumenstein, & Cook, 2012; Holm, Prosek, & Weisberger, 2015). Women in doctoral programs who are also mothers working full-time find themselves having to budget not only their time but also increased demands on household finances. More often than not, funding for graduate school programs comes from the family's household budget (Shepherd & Nelson, 2012). Hopwood, Alexander, Harris-Huemmert, McAlpine, and Wagstaff (2011) note that most financial aid resources for doctoral students are awarded to those who fit the assumption that all doctoral students are young, non-working full-time students with low responsibility. Because of this assumption, full-time working mothers tend to not be awarded available financial aid, which increases the financial burden on the family budget and leads to greater risk of attrition (Carter et al., 2012; Wao & Onwuegbuzie, 2011).

The Rigors of Graduate School

Obtaining a doctoral degree is challenging and requires commitment and perseverance. Doctoral programs involve demanding, rigorous study that typically takes four to ten years to complete as students learn to become researchers (Wao & Onwuegbuzie, 2011). Castro, Garcia, Cavazos, and Castro (2011) contend that for most doctoral students, the path towards success in obtaining the degree relies on the intrinsic factors of emotional intelligence and resilience. In order to complete a doctoral program successfully, one must be resilient and emotionally secure. Arric et al. (2011) also found in their research that women who pursue doctoral degrees compete at an unfair level with men because not only do they face the challenges of a doctoral program, but they must also face bias and negative assumptions about women and their emotional intelligence.

For women, balancing family and career obligations compounds the stressors. The constant struggle for balance leads to higher rates of depression in women graduate students (Arric et al., 2011) and lower overall satisfaction with life achievements. According to Carter et al. (2012), due to higher expectations and greater inclination toward depression, attrition rates for women who are also mothers and working full-time are fifty percent higher than they are for men under the same conditions.

Finding the Right Support

Women who pursue a doctoral degree while juggling the responsibilities of motherhood and a career are not alone. Well-rounded sources of support can make the difference for a woman who is also a mother with career responsibilities, as well as a doctoral student. Proper support begins with the family. In order for the family to provide the right kind of support, they need to understand the full demands of obtaining a doctoral degree (O'Shea & Stone, 2011; Shepard & Nelson, 2012). Finding the time to complete doctoral coursework is challenging, and the family

must expect many hours of work dedicated to attaining the degree, which for many can mean at all hours of the night (Carter et al., 2012).

Support for doctoral students should also come from the institution. Universities deemed “family friendly” should reflect in their tenured professors women balancing the roles of family and career successfully (Goulden, Mason, & Frasc, 2011, p. 9). When women see themselves in the faculty, success at the doctoral level becomes believable (Goulden et al., 2011). With proper advisement and mentoring, women are more likely to obtain their goals when paired with mentors who have encountered the same challenges. Recently, universities have provided alternative study programs to attain an advanced degree in the form of online or distance learning. Depending on the degree program and university requirements, the doctoral student can earn most, if not all, of the degree through online learning programs (Arric et al., 2011).

Peer support is another effective strategy for supporting women doctoral students. Women who face the challenges of obtaining a doctoral degree while juggling career and motherhood find studying with peers concurrently facing the same challenges both beneficial and rewarding (Castro et al., 2011). Shared experiences are a unique way of providing support. Like most support groups, women share coping strategies and study methods to assist each other through the doctoral process as well as offer advice for balancing family obligations. Group support in this manner aids in decreasing stressors and reduces feelings of solitude (Carter et al., 2012), which can be overwhelming when the woman does not receive the support from her family and colleagues. Peer support can also lead to additional family support, as families can join together and support each other.

Closing Comments

In decades past, women have been funneled into a subservient role in society. In the later part of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, women have shifted away from the gendered role of wife and domestic servant. From the 1990’s into the present, women have sought to attain professional status and doctorate degrees previously dominated by men.

With the right kind of support, women have learned how to balance the roles of motherhood and career and have taken on the challenges of obtaining doctoral degrees. Family, institutional, and peer support all contribute to the success of women achieving new heights while shifting to a level more equal to that of men in the workforce. Men and women earn professional degrees at an equal rate. In time, the next hurdle conquered will be equality in professorial positions and in salary.

Women do not need support to obtain a doctorate degree because they are weaker but because they take on the challenges of doctoral study in addition to their already heavy responsibilities of family and career. The forms of support described in this paper can encourage women doctoral students to persevere through the hardships and to be resilient in their efforts until they reach the end with a positive feeling of accomplishment.