Reflections on Parallel Studies of Doctoral Student Completion

Eric R. Baltrinic
David Burkholder
Steven Brown
Christopher Janson
Jennifer A. Waugh

We are grateful to the Editor of *Operant Subjectivity* for inviting the five of us to write this collaborative article addressing the comparabilities of and differences between our two independently submitted Q studies (Burkholder & Janson, 2013; Baltrinic, Waugh, & Brown, 2013) examining doctoral student completion. The virtually simultaneous appearance of two Q studies examining the same phenomenon understandably attracted the Editor's and reviewers' attention and gave rise to this unique opportunity to examine the studies side-by-side.

What follows are a few discussion points relevant to design similarities and differences between the two Q studies, including reflections and thoughts about further research and discussion about the generalizability of Q research—i.e., about the "reliable schematics" (Thomas & Baas, 1993) that exist in our respective studies of PhD student program completion in the field of counselor education.

Convergences and Divergences

Coincidental Beginnings

The study by Baltrinic, Waugh, and Brown (BWB) was initiated in a Q-methodology seminar (taught by Brown) and was inspired by experiences in a counseling doctoral residency seminar designed to aid first-year students' adjustment to full-time doctoral study. The study by Burkholder and Janson (BJ) was an extension of Burkholder's (2009) dissertation, a phenomenological study of doctoral students who, like himself, had returned to their programs following a brief hiatus. It was Burkholder's desire to capture the perspectives of counselor educators in addition to doctoral students that led to his collaboration with Janson, who had also taken an earlier Q-methodology workshop with Brown and had written a Q-based dissertation (Janson, 2007).

The authors of the BWB study were not initially aware of the BJ study. As they were completing the design phase of their study, however—i.e., putting the finishing touches on the Q sample and obtaining IRB approval—they became aware of the BJ study as they began to consider selection of the P set. Out of curiosity, Baltrinic and Waugh (unknown to one another) also completed the BJ Q sort, which was accessible on-line through a counselor education listserv.

With the exception of Brown, the authors of both studies are counselors and have either graduated from or are currently enrolled in Kent State University's Counseling and Human Development Services doctoral program, which has historically encouraged enrollment in Brown's seminar and the pursuit of Q dissertation research. Parallel personal experiences have also been a driving factor in both studies. As noted, Burkholder returned to doctoral studies following a semester leave, which sparked his interest in doctoral student completion. Additionally, all of the counselor researchers completed a first semester doctoral residency seminar (taught by the same professor) that focused on the tasks necessary for program progression, completion, and post-degree career choices. It was in the context of this seminar that Baltrinic and Waugh learned that as many as 50% of doctoral students do not complete their programs, a troubling fact that influenced their study design during the Q seminar. As a result, it is safe to say that all of the authors have an interest in program completion and have developed an interest in empirically examining this topic through the framework of Q methodology. It is not surprising, therefore, that their accidentally tandem studies have constituted yet another example of "seeing together" (Ryan, 2011).

Purpose

The purposes of both studies are rooted in the personal experiences of the authors and have similar intent: To turn personal experience into a research experience that might benefit other doctoral students facing similar circumstances; that is, students who are considering departure from study or have actually left a program.

> Study 1 (BWB): The purpose of this study was to describe and illustrate a strategy for uncovering student and faculty perspectives about program retention and completion in a department of counselor education and supervision and to use those perspectives as a springboard for recommending policy innovations.

> Study 2 (BJ): This study investigated departmental approaches believed to best support counselor education doctoral students toward the successful completion of their degrees.

The emergent factors from both studies were clearly intended as a vehicle for discussion with program faculty about how best to help students complete their programs. As can be seen:

BWB: Analysis revealed three Q factors: (a) those participants who view the students as flourishing under the guidance of an encouraging faculty, (b) those concerned with issues of diversity, and (c) those who stress the importance of external supports of family and friends. These factors, conceived as *decision structures*, serve as a basis for recommending various courses of action designed to address problems that are implicit in the three perspectives.

BJ: Four factors emerged from the data, each representing distinct collective perspectives: (a) focused and clear mentoring, (b) programmatic and financial clarity, (c) relationships that facilitate relevant learning, and (d) caring and support. These factors aimed to increase and diversify the ideas doctoral programs may consider when addressing student completion, as opposed to "discovering" a set of best practices.

Number and Nature of Factors

It might initially be thought that the differences between the factors of the two studies (in both number and content) might be a result of the different sources that were used for the concourses as well as the participant sets used in each study. For instance, in the BWB study, although the authors did utilize professional literature that was not tied to any particular program, other sources of information used—notes from a doctoral residency seminar class, interviews with faculty members/students, and a doctoral student handbook—all originated from one university's counselor education and supervision doctoral program. Conversely, in the BJ study, the sources utilized by the authors (interviews with students and faculty, statements from conceptual and empirical literature) were not affiliated with one particular program. The same could be said of the participant sets used in the two studies. In the BWB study, the participants were representative of one counseling program, while in the BJ study the participants were solicited from a national electronic listserv open to the entire counseling community. Therefore, the possibility exists that some differences between the factors of each study (for example, the presence of a diversity tolerance factor in the BWB study that was not present in the BJ study) could be an idiosyncratic feature of that particular university's counseling program. This is neither unprecedented nor particularly surprising. Rhoads and Brown (2002), for instance, provide reasons why a factor located in one site failed to appear in another site.

The similarities among the factors of each study (broadly stated, the

importance of relationships between faculty and students, and financial support) are likely due to the universal nature of these variables and the impact they have on doctoral study and completion, which is reflected in the literature (Hoskins & Goldberg, 2005; Hughes & Kleist, 2005; Nettles & Millett, 2006; Protivnak & Foss, 2009). It is hard to imagine these factors being other than universally present among doctoral students and faculty in all doctoral programs.

The Practical Value of Findings

The basic premise behind the BWB study is that doctoral student program persistence is a two-way street involving interactions between students and program. This study supports the findings of the BJ study in that a combination of individual, programmatic, and relational supports are essential for student program persistence, and not just at the beginning of their programs, but throughout the advising and candidacy phases. Based on experiences in their own program, Baltrinic and Waugh consciously included statements from the diversity literature in their Q set in response to their experiences with students of color in their particular program. One of their findings was that the program needed to create a "safe zone" characterized by the acknowledgment of student diversity. Similar to the BJ study, the findings of BWB support the need for faculty to review all factors in recognition that one size does not fit all when developing and implementing departmental practices.

After multiple readings of the manuscripts, a dialogue between the lead authors yielded consensus on the key similarities and differences between the studies. The authors of BWB, for instance, proposed that faculty advising and faculty meetings provide the key forums for the utilization of findings. They also recommended assertive outreach, student advising-load management, reflective questions, and standard criteria for the evaluation of students' idiosyncratic needs and status. Collaboration on professional activities and the dissertation in particular was shared by all three of these factors. Regarding differences, diversity tolerance and the creation of a "safe zone" within the program vs. outsourcing student diversity supports were regarded as essential for program completion.

One of the propositions highlighted by the BJ authors was that the existence of a set of "best practices" for doctoral student completion might be a myth. Individual institutions likely have idiosyncratic needs; instead of searching for "the answer" (which has been the focus of retention research since its beginning), programs may want to focus more on examining the needs of their students. This could include doctoral students sorting the Q sample used in the BJ study. The BJ authors also stated that approaches could be categorized as (a)

programmatic or (b) relational, and that faculty should consider both. Regarding similarities, the authors note that both studies identified the importance of the relationship between faculty and students and the safe and trusting environment that this can create. They also mentioned collaboration on professional activities (writing and presenting) and the importance of financial support. Regarding differences, diversity tolerance was not present in the BJ article, which, however, identified the importance of doctoral students having clear expectations and understandings of what doctoral study requires and how best to complete it—a dimension not identified in the BWB study.

Generalizability and "Reliable Schematics"

Having noted the coincidences, similarities, and differences between our studies, we considered the potential of our joint findings for counselor education programs and the faculty and counselor educators in training within them. When examining these two studies on the subject of counselor education doctoral student completion, each designed without prior knowledge of the other, the next question that inescapably arises is: Are the factor findings generalizable to other counselor education programs?

As has been pointed out on previous occasions (Expositor, 1987; Thomas & Baas, 1992–1993), replicability as to facts can be achieved when the same Q statements are employed in both studies, but that in the absence of this, comparability can be achieved only through the observation and comparison of the schematics of the factor arrays under consideration. Consider, for instance, some of the positively distinguishing statements from the first factor in each of the studies (consult the appendices in BWB and BJ for the statements and scores):

BWB

(33)   Students are encouraged to stay aware of their needs, strengths, and weaknesses to be psychologically healthy.

(22)   Students are encouraged to talk about personal or professional issues and concerns as they arise.

BJ

(15)   Educating departmental faculty regarding the unique position they are in to positively or negatively influence students' experience.

(21)   Focus on forming and cultivating faculty mentorships with individual students.

In both contexts, a mentoring environment is being fostered and something of this kind (however expressed) could be expected to emerge in virtually every setting. This would especially be the case when participants are instructed to reflect on what would be desirable for the

sake of degree completion. Or consider these positively distinguishing statements from the third factor in both of these studies:

BWB

(4)   The curriculum includes the development of teaching and supervision competencies.

(13)   The faculty promotes student–faculty relationships.

BJ

(11)   Encourage individual faculty members to cultivate quality relationships with doctoral students.

(20)   Encourage and support students' creativity, initiative, and curiosity.

The focal attention shared by these two perspectives is on the promotion of close student–faculty relationships (Nos. 13, 11) and on the acquisition of competencies (Nos. 4, 20).

In the case of these two factors, issues of these kinds would be expected to be ensconced in departmental handbooks, to be raised for discussion in professionalizing seminars, and to be intermittent topics of conversation in the hallways and around drinking fountains, all as a matter of shared communicability within a community (Stephenson, 1980). It should not be surprising, therefore, that similar factors would appear, even in studies with independent beginnings.

Even so, there are mediating influences that could run counter to generalizing tendencies. In this particular case, for instance, although the conditions of instruction were functionally equivalent—that is, describe the situation in "your department"—all participants in the BWB study were describing the same department, whereas those in BJ study were for the most part describing the situation in different departments. There is also the potential for divergent statistical artifacts: Although both studies utilized varimax rotation, the BWB study relied upon centroid analysis, which extracts common variance, whereas the BJ study relied upon principal components analysis, which extracts both common and specific variance. It is unclear what differences in outcome this might make, but the fact that the BJ study had more variance to explain could have contributed to a greater number of factors than in the BWB study. Finally, even the common application of varimax (with all else held constant) will not necessarily lead to replicable factors, even though similar factors may inhere in the correlations. In some instances, it may require judgmental rotation to reveal comparable factors (D'Agostino, 1984; cf. Stephenson, 1984).

Reflections on Further Research

The common denominators that exist among each study's factors—such as the importance of relationships, the need for financial support, and

the bi-directional nature of student–program progression—are, from our point of view, no mystery. As previously stated, they are part of the "common knowledge" of the faculty and students in most counselor education programs. This shared knowledge has been described by Stephenson (1980) as *consciring*, where knowledge about a phenomenon is commonly understood by all parties involved, but rarely communicated in any formal or overt way.

It has been our intent through acts of "modern science" (that is, through our Q studies) to make scientific findings, or special knowledge, a common communicable fact of doctoral student life. Thus, our factors, while not the Procrustean Bed for all counselor education doctoral students navigating their programs, can serve as the basis for providing practical advice (from faculty to students and vice versa) about how to proceed given their perspectives and resources.

One thought on future research concerns the creation of an integrated Q set that contains salient elements from our respective samples. This would not necessarily guarantee similar findings of factors, but it would provide an opportunity to see if factors—derived from the integrated Q set and obtained from different sites—match after being subjected to a second-order factor analysis (see Rhoads & Brown, 2002).

Future research could also attempt to isolate institutions of higher education that have strong doctoral completion rates and, if possible, individual doctoral departments with high doctoral student completion. Examining such institutions/departments may highlight certain known practices (relational or programmatic) that are used across programs with high completion, as well as reveal new strategies to consider for facilitating doctoral student completion.

Conclusion

Doctoral student completion matters—for students, faculty, doctoral programs, and universities—and research has not isolated a proven approach or set of approaches. Although neither the BWB study nor the BJ study claim to provide a solution for doctoral student attrition, we do feel that both studies' methodological choice of Q (the first known studies on doctoral student completion to do so) has newly demonstrated the promise of this approach. Namely, Q methodology provided an uncommonly nuanced and sophisticated glimpse into the subjective and idiosyncratic nature of doctoral student completion. Looking ahead, we see Q methodology's potential as a research-informed vehicle for decision-making (through the use of factors or decision structures) that may be used in any counselor education program.

As we reflect on this collaborative effort and on both studies, we agree that the most important truism present is the overarching subjectivity of doctoral student completion; from the way each student experiences doctoral study, to how they successfully complete. Thus, our collective wisdom garnered from this process leads us to believe that counselor education programs might avoid a search for singular solutions to doctoral student attrition, in favor of reflectivity grounded in faculty–student relationships and engaging in the process of "searching for subjectivity;" a search that may involve the use of Q methodology and yield multiple solutions for a program's needs.

References

Baltrinic, E. R., Waugh, J. A., & Brown, S. (2013). Faculty and student perspectives on what helps counselor education doctoral students towards program completion. *Operant Subjectivity: The International Journal of Q Methodology, 36*(4), 253–271.

Burkholder, D. U. (2009). Returning counselor education doctoral students: Issues of retention and perceived experiences. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Kent State University.

Burkholder, D., & Janson, C. (2013). Supporting PhD completion: Student and faculty perspectives. *Operant Subjectivity: The International Journal of Q Methodology, 36*(4), 272–287.

D'Agostino, B. (1984). Replicability of results with theoretical rotation. *Operant Subjectivity, 7,* 81–87.

Expositor. (1987). Reliable schematics. *Operant Subjectivity, 10,* 81–86.

Hoskins, C. M., & Goldberg, A. D. (2005). Doctoral student persistence in counselor education programs: Student–program match. *Counselor Education and Supervision, 44,* 175–188.

Hughes, F. R., & Kleist, D. M. (2005). First-semester experiences of counselor education doctoral students. *Counselor Education and Supervision, 45*(2), 97–108.

Janson, C. A. (2007). High school counselors' perceptions of their educational leadership behaviors: A Q-methodology study. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Kent State University.

Nettles, M. T., & Millett, C. M. (2006). *Three magic letters: Getting to Ph.D.* Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press.

Protivnak, J. J., & Foss, L. L. (2009). An exploration of themes that influence the counselor education doctoral student experience. *Counselor Education and Supervision, 48*(4), 239–256.

Rhoads, J. C., & Brown, S. R. (2002). "Sex, lies, and videotape": Attitudes toward the Clinton impeachment. *Operant Subjectivity, 25,* 99–116.

Ryan, F. X. (2011). *Seeing together: Mind, matter, and the experimental outlook of John Dewey and Arthur F. Bentley*. Great Barrington, MA: American Institute for Economic Research.

Stephenson, W. (1980). Consciring: A general theory for subjective communicability. In D. Nimmo (Ed.), *Communication yearbook 4* (pp. 7-36). New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction. Reprinted: *Operant Subjectivity*, 2007, *30*, 89–136.

Stephenson, W. (1984). Comment [on D'Agostino's "Replicability of Results with Theoretical Rotation"]. *Operant Subjectivity, 7,* 87–91.

Thomas, D. B., & Baas, L. R. (1992–1993). The issue of generalization in Q methodology: "Reliable schematics" revisited. *Operant Subjectivity, 16,* 18–36.