Education Blues

A Study of the Emotional Roller Coaster Ride of Ph.D. Education

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Abstract

The study makes use of theories of emotions to describe and analyze interviews conducted with eight students who had recently taken part in, or were at the moment, taking part in a doctoral education at the Faculties of Humanities or Social Science at Stockholm University. This study is thus a qualitative study focusing on the following research questions: Firstly, how does the Ph.D education influence the student emotionally. Secondly: do the participants in the doctoral education experience emotionally intense situations related to contexts interpretable in terms of rites of passage. Thirdly: can the student, looking back, rate how the education met the expectations the student had beforehand.

Results regarding the first research question point to that the education as such – as time goes – becomes a part of the student.

Results regarding the second research question indicate that doctoral education mostly, with exceptions, is looked upon as a steady trot towards the dissertation, during which you are made as a researcher.

Results regarding the third research question indicate that many of the students had very vague ideas of what the the education would be like and thus; they had no clear picture to measure their education against.

Key words

Emotions, Micro Sociology, P.D. education
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1. Introduction – purpose and issues

Depending on its intensity and obviousness, rejection usually leads inevitably to the painful emotions of embarrassment, shame, or humiliation. By the same token, when we are accepted as we present ourselves, we usually feel rewarded by the pleasant emotions of pride and fellow feeling. /Thomas Scheff (1988:396)

This first section presents the purpose and the research issues of this study. Furthermore there is a description, using government statistics, of how many persons that are registered as doctoral students or recently have gotten their Ph.D. degree. Ending the section are the limitations of this study and an outline of the rest of the study.

1.1 The focus of the study

The main research questions posed in this study are three: Firstly, how does the Ph.D education influence the student emotionally. Secondly, do the participants experience emotionally intense situations related to contexts interpretable in terms of rites of passage. Thirdly: can the student, looking back, rate how the education met the expectations the student had beforehand.

In order to obtain answers to these questions doctoral students and recent Ph.D:s were approached for interviews about their time as doctoral students.

Generally speaking we may argue that any efforts of education are intended to change a person with respect to heightened skill levels or changed perspectives regarding the study area and hopefully in a wider sense, when perceiving the world. A Ph.D. exam may be regarded as a stepping stone into the business world, but is a requisite for a career within the academic world. The public oral defense of the student’s dissertation marks an end to an
effort that has lasted several years. During these years of vocational training some students are likely to go through an emotional roller coaster ride, filling them with doubts on whether this is an education for them, or not. The formation of a professional can be expected to produce some chafing of the soul, that is, stirring up emotions that may be taxing or painful.

In 2011, 18,000 people, according to the Swedish National Agency for Higher Education (Högskoleverket 2011), were conducting postgraduate studies in Sweden, which is a slight increase compared to the previous year. Of those studying at postgraduate level 49 percent were women and 51 percent men. The number of new postgraduate students was relatively unchanged in 2010 compared with the previous year, amounting to almost 3,500, and the proportion of foreign beginners remained about a third of the total beginners.

In 2010 2,600 Ph.D:s and 700 licentiates were issued in Sweden (Högskoleverket 2011:39). Of the Ph.D. degrees 50 percent were awarded to women. At Stockholm University 295 new doctoral students were accepted in 2011, and 1,500 were engaged in ongoing studies. During 2011 225 Ph.D. degrees were awarded at Stockholm University. In 2011 104 students were accepted as new doctoral students at the Faculty of Social Sciences and 42 at the Faculty of Humanities at Stockholm University (Statistiska meddelanden UF 21 SM 1201). The participants in this study were drawn from these faculties.

The Swedish National Agency for Higher Education (2012) reports that 31 percent of those who began doctoral studies in 2000, eight years later (2008) had not yet acquired a Ph.D. degree. Conversely, this indicates that 69 percent during these eight years indeed have completed a doctoral degree.

1.2 Limitations

A main limitation of this study is that it concerns the experiences of eight persons who have recently taken part in, or are at the moment, taking part in a doctoral education at the Faculties of Humanities and Social Science at Stockholm University, excluding students at the Faculties of Natural Science and Fine Arts. Since there are only eight persons interviewed no attempts to analyze experiences with regard to gender will be done. The empirical findings could not be claimed to be generally valid outside this group of students.
1.3 Outline of the text

Section 2 contains an introduction to the emotional field of Academia. In section 3 Methodology and Data are presented. Thereafter, in section 4, the empirical findings are described. Thereupon, in section 5, the empirical findings are analyzed in relation to the research questions using the theoretical framework introduced in section 2. Finally, I will take the discussion further, draw conclusions from the study and suggest new areas for upcoming studies.
In this section I will present the literature and the theoretical framework used in this study. The literature survey is based on the works by Arnold Van Gennep, Émile Durkheim, Thomas Scheff and Charlotte Bloch among others. Their writings on rites of passage, social currents, micro sociology, and the role of emotions in Academia are used to conceptualize the field of doctoral studies and students. Contemporary studies carried out in a Swedish context by Lena Gerholm & Tomas Gerholm, Billy Ehn & Orvar Löfgren and Fredrik Schoug complement the literature review.

2.1 Rites of passage – a theoretical frame

The Ph.D. education may be described as a rite of passage, in the manner Van Gennep (1960) described these combined series of events. A rite of passage is according to Van Gennep a series of events that, when you pass through them, have a major impact on you. Van Gennep takes the example of a peasant, who wants to become an urban worker and a mason’s helper in order to rise to mason.

As Van Gennep points out, the rites of passage theoretically includes preliminal rites (rites of separation), liminal rites (rites of transition), and postliminal rites (rites of incorporation). These separate rites may not all be equally important or equally elaborated (Van Gennep 1960:11). As for the doctoral education it seems that only the first two rites are present in the doctoral education as described by the interviewees in this study. They have encountered what may be labeled a preliminal rite as they were accepted to the education, leaving their well known existence behind upon entering. The entire doctoral education may be labeled a liminal rite, the students are on their way of becoming something they were not before, i.e. individuals with Ph.D. exams. As for the postliminal part, I assume that this will become a reality after their graduation as Ph.D:s, they may be incorporated into Academia. Van Gennep points out that the participants must fulfill certain conditions, all of which have one thing in common: their basis is purely economic or intellectual (Van Gennep 1960:1). That is, you may experience that you undergo a change of mind, that may be lasting, or temporary. Among
the rewards might be a more interesting or a better paid job. The Ph.D. education in this respect is aiming to form the students for their future life and career in the academy. The rite of passage is used as a conceptual frame in this study. The students are in what Van Gennep calls a transition phase, a liminal state – that is, they have left something behind, they are on the threshold to something new. They were, and still are, holders of master degrees, but as they enter the Ph.D. education they are on route of becoming something else. They are not there yet, but they (hopefully) will be, even if the students sometimes might doubt that.

2.2 Social emotions

We are, all human beings, in the fast grip of emotions (that is, we are emotional creatures). Emotions can be triggered by other people, or inflicted by what happens in our immediate surroundings or far away in the world. Emotions invoke feelings, and it is the feelings that make us sad, happy, angry or wanting to go for a run.

Thomas Scheff (1990) builds on the work of Durkheim when he describes feelings of shame, or embarrassment, as a manner of social control (Scheff 1990:89). We tend to adhere to the opinion of the people around us, even when they seem to be wrong, in order not to be regarded as odd. Feeling shame, or adults experiencing other negative feelings might, according to Scheff be looked upon as social and cultural phenomena. Shame has, Scheff points out, a two-sided social aspect: shame arises when we are monitoring ourselves and when we experience more or less shame, depending of the normative structure of the culture. Shame may posses the individual into a spiral of shame which might become pathological if not acknowledged (Scheff 1990:84). Individuals can be expected to incorporate the cultural rules, or, as in the case with the doctoral students, are on their way to embody the normative codes of Academia. When they have accomplished that, they will feel shame if they break the normative rules. As students on their way, they might be unaware that they break the rules. When they are made aware that they have broken rules, invisible to them until this point, they are subject to feeling shame since they do not adhere to the rules of the group they are trying to become a part of.

Émile Durkheim (1938) considers Sociology to be about studying social facts, which are influencing us all the time in the form of social currents. If I choose to avoid speaking Swedish in Sweden, or run around naked, people would react. I would sense their disapproval
even if they did not speak out. So, other human beings in my surroundings are “telling” me how to behave or, in more modern terminology, the norms that I have internalized are guiding me. Since I am a member of my society I am able to perceive their approval or disapproval. The interesting fact here is that Durkheim sees the starting point of what we today may call norms, as emanating in the silent, often, unreflective thinking of the people surrounding the individual. According to Durkheim social currents are the collective soul of the population, their effects being enacted within individuals. Durkheim takes the example of how our children are raised. Educated and made to adhere to the expected behavior, they internalize the norms of the society they live in. The social currents have an impact on us whether we are aware of them or not. They give meaning to the collective and in this sense they are generally valid. Durkheim also asks us to consider social facts as things, arguing that understood as things they are easier and more accessible to study.

This dependence on or longing for mutual respect and security can be expected to restrain the individual from acting in a manner that breaks the bond of security between individuals in networks. As Durkheim (1938) sees it: “a social fact is every way of acting, fixed or not, capable of exercising on the individual an external constraint; or again, every way of acting which is general throughout a given society, while at the same time existing in its own right independent of its individual manifestations” (1938:13). In line with Durkheim’s way of arguing the students in my study can be expected to wish to maintain the equilibrium in their network through acting in the manner they want their peers to act towards them. In line with this way of reasoning the networks of the students in this study are more or less small societies that influence the individuals who take part, or try to take part, in the activities that each network/society embarks on.

If a social fact then is a collective wish for mutual respect and security it also leads to that social currents are what keep the loosely maintained networks of the students together. The great movements of enthusiasm, indignation, and pity in a crowd do not, according to Durkheim (1938), originate in any particular individual's consciousness. They come to each individual from external sources and can carry us away in spite of ourselves. We might not even feel the pressure that they exert on us. But it is revealed as soon as we try to resist them. Let an individual attempt to oppose one of these collective manifestations, and the emotions that the individual denies will turn against her (Durkheim 1938:4). The social currents in this manner describe the pros and cons of group activities.
Experiences of flow and stress are well-known occurrences in everyday life, according to Charlotte Bloch (2002). The students in this study are supposedly exposed to stress in their everyday studies, and supposedly they might even experience flow at some instances. Some of these experiences are related to tasks immediately connected with work such as administrative tasks, projects, computer services, dealing with people, working on one’s own or as a member of a team (Bloch 2002:106). Others are far removed from the work sphere such as activities in leisure hours which may indicate that experiences of stress at work could have its roots in the leisure time, and vice versa. If we perceive the flow that Bloch (2002) writes about we are filled with positive emotions loading us with energy. If we, on the other hand, are filled with shame in the manner Scheff (1990) describes it, continuously, or at moments, we will probably feel bad and will as a consequence not be particularly productive. Bloch (2007) points out that shame covers a group of emotional states such as embarrassment, humiliation, discomfort and uncertainty, which signals a threat of being rejected by the other. Shame carries an important signal value in social life. Shame is, however, a taboo feeling in our society (Bloch 2007:113). If we treat shame like a taboo that means that we do not readily speak about it. I see the possibility of using emotions as an indicator on how well we are coping with our reality at a given moment. Lived emotions are an indication of our reactions to what is taking place in our surroundings. The stream of emotions could help us describe antipathy or sympathy towards circumstances and other people. This is why I regard a study of how emotions affect the life of the doctoral students as an interesting way of trying to learn how it “feels” to go through a Ph.D. education.

2.3 Emotions in Academia

In this study I will use the concept Academia following Bloch’s (2007) way of using it to describe the realm of universities and university colleges. Bloch studied emotions in what she calls Academia, a summary term for universities, university centers and university colleges. What kind of field are the doctoral students living in? Gerholm & Gerholm (1992) tried to describe the student culture at Stockholm University in the 1990ies. Gerholm & Gerholm list five factors: the struggle for recognition, to learn how to criticize and be criticized, conflicts of interest between student and supervisor, friendship and rivalry between students, and assets in the fight, as crucially shaping the environment the student is expected to thrive within.
These five factors have, according to Gerholm & Gerholm, an impact on the doctoral student’s life, to different degrees, but the students have to learn to cope with all of them to survive in this environment.

Doctoral students’ academic world is an environment characterized by intersecting and partly overlapping cultural systems. The most important of these is the disciplinary culture. (Gerholm & Gerholm 1992:177)

The doctoral students’ academic world may with respect to what is said in the quote above be described as a complex habitat, where cultural systems meet and compete. That may indicate that will be instances when problems are to be expected.

Ehn & Löfgren (2004) describe the mixture of emotions that the doctoral students in their study give words to. When the authors asked a class in leadership about their worst and the best experience in the university, some of the participants expressed their relief to at last have the opportunity to speak about their experiences of the university. Still some of them hesitated to share their experiences of hard criticism and scathing comments to articles they had submitted for publication (Ehn & Löfgren 2004:14-15). The memories of low, or bad, feelings remained years afterwards.

The most recent work on emotions and feelings within the academic world is Bloch's (2007). Bloch identifies three intersections where we will meet emotions in Academia. The first one is emotions concerning research. Bloch states that research is an activity that involves the entire personality. It is even truer on the Ph.D. level since work there is focused on research and the doctoral students have limited experience of the essence of research. Bloch indicates that being a doctoral student, for some at least, is a lifestyle. They invest wholeheartedly to be accepted in this field of work. Doing so, they undergo a “storm” of emotions. The second intersection is about the relations with the student’s supervisor. The supervisor is described as the student’s lifeline to Academia. The relation with the supervisor is important, but also a relation where power and status is unevenly distributed. Thirdly Bloch lists the power structure in Academia. The doctoral students are described as “bottom feeders” in the power structure of Academia (Bloch 2007:31 ff). Together the three directions signify what the Ph.D. student has to relate to in order to gain total access to Academia. You have to learn and adhere to a number of rules, both the visible and the invisible in order to be accepted.
Friendliness as a standard is a representative emotion, expressed through a friendly neutral behavior, which does not show emotions. Convenience is also a necessary policy because of Academia’s special structures. It is particularly important if you have an uncertain position. (Bloch 2007:59)

To be friendly, or polite, is a strategy for survival in an environment where you are constantly being evaluated. The “special structures of Academia” that Bloch is referring to in the quote above might be about that the individual criticizing your work today might be your partner in a research project tomorrow (Bourdieu 1975). That of course makes the situation special for academic life.

The amount of time the Swedish doctoral students spend doing courses and writing their thesis is, according to Schoug (2004) problematic. Schoug questions if this time even may be called education or, a question that the doctoral students being socialized into the research world with a mystical conveying of traditions that lets the talents of the student emerge in time. Looking at the education in Schoug’s manner, a researcher is nothing you can be schooled into, it is something you have within, even if it does not show yet. The objective for the time spent in doctoral education is according to this manner of thinking to, with the aid of your supervisor, bring into the open the traits in you that are possible to forge into a scientist (Schoug 2004:63). What Schoug is saying is that the Ph.D. education only reveals the personality traits that makes the person suitable to work as a researcher.

To sum up. Being a doctoral student means that you are in a state of transition, in this case on your way to earn a Ph.D. degree in the realm of Academia. In Academia the normative culture indicates that you behave in a polite, "neutral” manner, have to adhere to the normative rules – visible or invisible – and learn what to do and what not to do. Two core tasks are to pass courses and write a thesis. Thirdly – while engaging in these assignments – there appears to be intrinsic rules and patterns you have to learn or embody en route towards the finalization of your studies. In doing that, you are experiencing emotions – pleasant or taxing – that will influence you and your work. This last sentence epitomizes my first research question: how does the Ph.D education influence the student emotionally.

In the next section follows a description of the methodology and the data used in this study.
As we have seen in the previous section the field of emotions in society in general is wide and can be expected to be wide in the academic field as well. The assumption was made that semi-structured interviews were a method to quickly gain some insight into how the doctoral students in the study had coped with their doctoral education. In an effort to cover different perspectives on what is happening during the Ph.D. education, four individuals who had recently undergone the Ph.D. education and four students who were approximately half way through their education towards a Ph.D. were interviewed about their experiences. In all, eight students were interviewed, four women and four men.

3.1 Data

The data used in this study are from interviews, conducted during the fall of 2012, digitally recorded and transcribed into text. What is present in the recordings are statements on the way the students felt at a certain time and what they thought about that at the time and how they regard it in hindsight. The interviews were conducted in the office of the interviewees, or in an adjoining room. The interviews were approximately one hour long. An interview-guide (see Appendix) was used for the interviews. As long as the student in front of me was speaking on subjects that I judged relevant for the study I interrupted only when I wanted to learn more about what was said. I had the interview-guide in front of me and after the first two interviews I knew it by heart. The interviews may be said to have been semi-structured.

The study was presented to the interviewees as a study of the experiences of students on the doctoral level with focus on the worst and best experience. The presented aim was to use the material gathered in the interviews in order to write a magister thesis in Sociology. The interviewees were informed that they were to be anonymous in the study and that they were to be presented under an alias. Furthermore departmental belonging was not to be mentioned and the recording of the interview was to be saved by me labeled with the alias, and the current date. This thesis does not present the interviewees in a list matching alias with age: All of the
participants, when presented, are done so with indistinct aliases in order not to reveal age, ethnical or disciplinary background, since that could make it easier to identify them. The women have been named after prominent historic Swedish women and the men after characters in the Nordic saga literature.

Regarding the ethical dimension of this study the aspect of informed consent, the anonymity and the archiving follow the guidelines for good research practice published by the Swedish Research Council (2011).

Going through the transcripts I was looking for themes, i.e. marking what caught my eye as interesting, setting a mark where what could be a possible theme occurred. Folkestad (2008) calls this “quote-research”. The quotes from interviews are used as illustrative or confirming examples (Folkestad 2008:4). The answers on questions from the interview-guide may be said to have generated most of the empirical material I used in this thesis, but some comments beside that have also been used. Since the interviews were conducted in Swedish quotes were translated from Swedish into English for use in this thesis. Finally, during the presentation of the empirical findings I make use of the theories I discussed and presented in the chapters on theory and previous research.

3.2 Accessing the field

Setting out to contact possible individuals to interview it was no problem to identify five candidates that had recently obtained a Ph.D. The website of Stockholm University was helpful, researchers in most departments give the year of their doctoral exam on the website. It was harder to identify possible candidates enrolled in the Ph.D. education since it was difficult to find out how many years they had been enrolled. One was pointed out by one of the recent Ph.D:s as a minimal “snow ball effect”. Two were approached at events like seminars. In order to come around this problem visits to the student affairs offices were undertaken to gather information on Ph.D. students that were approximately half way through their doctoral studies. Five of the persons that were approached I had met in courses or seminars – either as fellow students or as teachers.

Seven individuals were contacted by e-mail. These candidates were harder to get replies from. A couple never answered, two thanked for the attention but said they were too busy to spare an hour on an interview, some wanted to know more than what was said in the e-mail message. They were supplied with additional information and one accepted. In total, booking
and conducting the interviews took a lot more time than expected. Due to the rescheduling I decided to make do with eight interviews instead of the planned ten. The interviewees’ age range between 29 and 49 years. All of them had work experience prior to commencing their doctoral education.

3.3 On interviews

Interviewing as a method of collecting data is exciting. This is a situation where two individuals meet, one with the motive to gather information that the other person provides. I have had the professional privilege of doing journalistic interviews during four decades. Journalistic interviewing, especially in news journalism, often aims at obtaining a comment – maybe on the introduction of new laws and regulations or on a decision in an industry many people are employed in.

Regarding the researcher's interviews with informants, the interaction between interviewer and informant is important. The interviewer must try to build confidence that the material is not used in any other way than intended. The informant may think it is alright to tell everything about her life, her hobby and her work, and still, there might be room for suspicion that what is said may reach the boss or any other, unintended recipients.

Gubrium & Holstein (2001) point out the importance of understanding that the two parties in the interview can shift perspective during the interview. Perspectives can be based in structural roles in society such as gender, class and ethnicity. Perspectives can also involve interaction between interviewer and interviewee (Gubrium & Holstein 2001:85 ff). Similar shifts in perspective might include the interviewer in the attempts to understand and interpret what is being said. During the interview relationships may be constructed that are affected by both the participants' personal and social identities. The response to what is being said, whether it is the interviewee or interviewer who speaks, continuously alters this relationship, something called “double subjectivity”, i.e. attitudes, feelings and thoughts of all the participants affect the interview and its content. The interview as a means of gathering information puts high demands on the interviewer. It is hard to anticipate what kinds of emotions we stir up when we want people to talk about themselves.

Gubrium & Holstein (1997) argue that talk is a way of expressing the emotional experience. But, Gubrium & Holstein issues a warning for the researcher – how do we know how others
feel if these others do not use words which adequately convey their feelings (Gubrium & Holstein 1997:197)? In qualitative interviews the interviewer must accommodate empathy with the interviewee, and be able to understand the participants' stories and show respect for the participants' feelings. During an interview, the target is to collect material for as fair a picture of the interviewee's opinion and personal experience as possible. This would be about being responsive to what is said and how it is said. When I quote, I do it by “translating” what is said in speech and turning it into text. It is about realizing both media’s restrictions and make an interpretation of the spoken word that best conveys the interviewee's thought.

The message stack is a concept used by Scheff (1990) to show how the four components of messages may be composed (Scheff 1990:114). The four components are: words, gestures – which are observable – and thoughts and emotions. Observable are words, and to lesser degree gestures. The really hard part of the message stack to observe are the two remaining components of the message stack – thoughts and emotions. This picture of how a message is composed is implying that we hardly can observe more than half of the components in a message in face-to-face encounters. The idea of the message stack indicates that it is hard to just observe a change in attitude. The subject might tell us what we want to hear, mask the gestures, and think and feel whatever she pleases. That leaves the interviewer with little to go on, but as long as we do not design a study with video cameras and a polygraph machine we have to do with the words and some interpretation of gestures.

I made some notes on wandering gazes, but for the most part the interviewees did not tell me any gruesome stories, or at least, they did not let me know what was gruesome or not in their stories. When asked if they thought the interview was easygoing or tough, most of the interviewees answered that they experienced it as easygoing. One of the interviewees, Egil, made a remark: “I have been in therapy so I have tools to handle whatever surfaces afterwards”. I am not sure if he was joking or if he meant that thinking of the education might have stirred up some unpleasant memories, or might get them to surface long after the interview. At the time of the interview he seemed okay.

During some of the interviews I was too strict following the interview guide and found myself not really focused on what was being said by the person in front of me. It was a source of bad emotions for me, because I always argue that you must know what you are going to ask when you sit down for an interview. If you read the interview guide during the interview you
are not up for a heuristic approach and cannot catch where the interviewee is going with the story.

The interviews were overall done in a amicable atmosphere, there were laughs from both sides at times and there was, I believe, established a good contact between me and the interviewees.

### 3.4 Source criticism

The individuals approached for interviews were chosen primarily because of their accessibility. They had to fulfill the criteria of studying at either the Faculty of Humanities or the Faculty of Social Science and either be half way through their doctoral studies or having recently completed a doctorate at these faculties. These individuals were in fact not selected because I beforehand was confident they would have something interesting to tell. The fact that they accepted the invitation to an interview at least gave the signal that they were willing to share their experience. The ones not even answering with a simple “no, thank you” on my invitation might have been the ones to interview. It might have been lack of interest in this study, but it could also have been that they were the ones with the most interesting stories to tell.

Still, you can never be completely sure that people tell you what they have experienced or, if they may choose to tell you what they think you want to hear. They may not lie, but rather might inflate an experience to give it more significance or tone down another to render it less importance.

To what degree do I as an individual – a 65 year old white male – influence the study? Since Academia is described as an environment filled with competition and judgement among colleagues at least I might not present a direct threat to the interviewees as a competitor – my career days are over. That might be seen as a good influence.

The next section is devoted to the empirical findings. They will be presented with quotes from the interviewees.
4. Empirical findings

This section presents the empirical findings. These are the result of the interviews described in the previous chapter. While conducting the interviews it soon became apparent that the students taking part in the study are individuals, and as individuals they react in different manners to what they are exposed to in their work as students. Regarding emotional reactions the whole spectrum is represented, from tears and nearly total breakdown to almost a shrugging of the shoulders and a “the working conditions are okay” attitude.

This is a study of how emotions influence individuals and how the feelings experienced become a phenomenological creation of meaning, in the sense that the emotions either hinder you or support you. In order to present the empirical findings the presentation will start with a description of and an analysis of the more spectacular manifestations of emotional pressure that, in some instances, resulted in emotions that generated tears and depression. The works of Thomas Scheff and Charlotte Bloch with ideas on emotions, shame and Academia is used as a support to help understand what the doctoral students told me. Arnold Van Gennep is used trying to understand how the process of passing through the unknown realm of Academia affects the students. This chapter will follow the main research questions. Firstly, how does the Ph.D education influence the participant, and secondly, does the participant undergo a change in attitude towards the education. Let us, despite that, begin from the beginning, with the arrival at the department where our students will study for their Ph.D. Then I will return to the research questions.

4.1 New as doctoral student

Arriving at the department where you are supposed to earn a Ph.D. is described by the students in this study as immediately being left alone. The new student gets the key to an office. For the most part it takes time before they even get to meet their supervisor.

I had not even grasped that I could get pencils, paper-clips and folders from the office supplies, so I went and bought some in town. /Anna (Ph.D.)
Anna did not have the information that she had access to office supplies. This may be seen as the liminal state of a rite of passage according to Van Gennep’s (1960) manner of explaining the liminal as a kind of threshold you pass in your rite of passage. The first passing of the threshold is what counts, like the first few days in unfamiliar surroundings is the most important day in your doctoral education (Van Gennep 1960:175). The interviewees describe that being accepted as a doctoral student generated a good feeling. They were seen as someone whom others regard as a person with the capabilities of becoming a Ph.D. According to Van Genneps way of looking at this the major importance in this is that you are chosen to participate in doctoral studies and this is a first time for you. Starting the education, some students describe it as an experience of loneliness, especially those who were the only applicants to be accepted in their department that semester. Being a student at advanced level interacting with occasional doctoral students taking the same courses, it seems all too easy to assume that you are on the same step of the ladder. But here are two different ladders of excellence, one for the master students and one for the doctoral students. Bloch (2007) points out that the doctoral students are placed at the bottom of the academic hierarchy, that is, in a position where the hierarchical power structure of Academia is experienced from below. The newcomer also has an “open” mind about the silent emotional demands that academic life puts forward (Bloch 2007:31). This might evolve into a troublesome experience.

The newcomer in the doctoral education might encounter surprises, like that you are supposed to attend conferences, even present papers at them. Your supervisor may ask if you have written articles based on your bachelor’s or your master’s thesis. It may dawn upon you that you have not had a clue that it is possible to offer articles to academic journals before you accomplish your dissertation. It may also be the first realization that your relation with your supervisor is vital for your success, or failure.

When we got a new professor at the department she taught us doctoral students new ways of strategy and also encouraged me to write articles. I had not been aware that you could publish in academic journals before your have a Ph.D. exam. /Karin (half way)

Karin was vitalized by her new professor telling her that she could, and ought to, publish and Karin regarded the effect of this to be that she experienced a leap forward in her work.
Some of the students in this study were a little nervous taking on their first classes as teachers, but they eventually found teaching rewarding. Some complain that it takes time away from work on their thesis with all the preparations. The conference part seems to be received as an adventure, even though they have to prepare a paper and some expressed that it was rewarding to meet colleagues that were working in projects similar to their own. The additional courses were just a run of the mill experience, all students have taken a lot of previous courses so there was nothing strange about that activity.

Most of the interviewees describe influences from people they had respect for as instrumental in their choosing to engage in doctoral studies. Several of the students in this study have been asked to apply for the doctoral program. Some professor had seen their potential and had let them know that they thought that the student, like Ellen below, would suit in the program.

I have always been interested in science and research and I got into the doctoral education without my really choosing it, it started when I got positive comments on my master’s thesis. Then I was asked to apply for the program so you could say that I was headhunted. ..... I did not really know what I wanted to do. ... I liked doing home exams, liked to write my thesis and have always been keen on praise and affirmation, and I got a lot of positive feedback. So, when someone told me that I was good at it, okay… /Ellen (Ph.D.)

Others give testimony to similar experiences and for some, like Olav, it was like the results on the exams indicated where he was heading:

When you see that you get A:s and an occasional B on the home exams, it kind of tells you that you might be suited for a Ph.D. education /Olav (half way)

Olav seems like he was very confident that he was made of the material that Ph.D:s are made of. It was easy for him to see his capacity in doing work on advanced level – but that, besides the obligatory thesis – is rather short periods of work before the grading. On the doctoral levels we are considering months of steady work before you get any input.

A couple of the interviewed students speak of how their background in a non-academic world at first made them filled with awe thinking of a career within Academia. They describe their entering into a world that they knew very little about as a satisfactory experience. They, themselves, had the drive and the interest, but as Egil describes it:

In my family their main interest was doing business and it was more or less implied that the children should go into the family business. Before I, before the
Egil describes a constant revelation of what university studies and doctoral education made possible. It made him feel that he was more capable than he ever had imagined, in an area that was new to him, and his family. Another student, Magnus, describes how he, coming from a working class background, started earning his living in the café-business, becoming a partner in a café. During the same period he was very much influenced by a friend who studied at the university.

It was like, I thought more or less that if he could do it, why couldn’t I? So, I started studying at the university and it just rolled on. I earned a B.A. And I continued without reflecting. /Magnus (half way)

Magnus also, through the studies at the university, became aware that he previously had not imagined that he could become a part of this academic world.

### 4.2 Influence on the participant

Regarding the first research question, how the Ph.D education influences the participant, there seems to occur a certain point of revelation in the doctoral students’ educational careers when they begin to regard themselves as, doctoral students, and after their exam, of course, as Ph.D:s. In the latter case it is inarguable – after the exam they are carriers of a Ph.D. degree. In the first case, the point in time when the doctoral student begins to consider herself a doctoral student to the degree that she tells people they meet in private, outside Academia, that she is in fact writing on a thesis that eventually will lead to a Ph.D. exam seems to depend on what people she fraternizes with during her leisure hours. The family, of course, will be informed and other relatives to some extent. But outside that close network it may look very different from person to person.

A study by Asch from 1956 is by Scheff (1990) taken as an illustration on how emotions may lead to social control. In a laboratory study an experiment was designed in such a way that single subjects found themselves alone, facing what seemed to be a unified majority. Since the task was a simple comparison of lengths of lines, subjects must have been baffled by the completely erroneous responses of other “subjects”. The naive subject did not know that the others were confederates of the investigator, instructed to give erroneous responses (Scheff 1990: 89). What was striking in that study was that the majority of the subjects found
group standards compelling even though they were exterior and contradictory to their own standards. Scheff points out that those who yielded to the group pressure were those who attempted to avoid the shame (embarrassment) of appearing different from the group. If I try to draw the parallel to doctoral students it is hard to hold your ground if others seem to have a different, even joint, perspective than yourself. At the same time, backing up your arguments with strong examples or theories is what is expected of the doctoral student. She is supposed to get better at it during the time spent in doctoral studies.

I gather that in a vocational training the participant has to adhere to certain standards – you have to be mainstream in your profession – with a twist of creativity. Experiences of stress are well-known occurrences in everyday life, according to Bloch (2002). Some of these experiences are related to tasks immediately connected with work such as administrative tasks, projects, computer services, dealing with people, working on one’s own or as a member of a team (Bloch 2002:106). Others are far removed from the work sphere: here there are activities during time spent away from the studies. That would indicate that experience of stress at work could have its roots in the time off work, and vice versa. If the Ph.D. students are malcontented with their environment in the university department it does not make the education badly suited for them.

There have been periods during this (education) when I have doubted that this is something for me. It all changed when I had a baby. Then I had to leave the work for parental leave and things were more appealing when I returned to work on my thesis. /Ellen (Ph.D.)

Whether Ellen did put too much pressure on herself or if it was the atmosphere in her department that did it is hard to tell. When she got her child it put demands on her that forced her to shift her focus on a regular basis between her baby and her work. Anna tells a story that has similar effects. Anna bought a dog to force herself to have a more regular life, and above all, not to focus entirely on her thesis night and day.

The emotional pressure may come suddenly or it may sneak up on the student. The critical incident or thought letting loose the stress may appear as a result of something that happened at work or in combination with a demanding private life. This emotional pressure may manifest itself in that the student perceive a grey everyday steady trot with nothing
remarkable ever happening. The student just knows that the expectations are that you present
something in writing and make progress in your scientific endeavor.

That I was a doctoral student was an emotion that sunk into me rather quickly, but the moment when I really thought that I knew what I was doing took some
time. It really took some time before I knew what to do and how to do it. But, my feeling like a “real” scientist did not come until my oral defense of my
dissertation was over.

/Ellen Ph.D.

The students who said they did not notice anything remarkable might have understated their
experience. They might have been more suited than the average doctoral student for the daily
run of the mill in the production of people with a Ph.D. degree. Is this description of the life
as a doctoral student an indication of adaptation meaning that you are suited for the
education? Maybe, or it may merely indicate that you adapt to the rules and the norms of the
department you are in. They might even, as human beings commonly do, have pushed aside
the bad parts in order to go on with their educations and their lives.

Most of the students in this study speak of the importance of having good relations with
their main supervisor. Some students even see their supervisor as a role model for academic
conduct and a mentor in order to acquire the necessary skills while teaching that you must
focus, kill your darlings and delete what is not necessary. In our era of mass education it feels
almost like a medieval concept to deploy a master and apprentice system. Contemporary
students are products of this mass education system and might not be accustomed to this one-
to-one relationship with the teacher/supervisor. This lack of experience might be grounds for
controversy. It might put serious strains on the interaction between supervisor and student. It
might be easier to see the benefits of the supervisor when you have left the doctoral
education. Anna tells a story about having big problems towards the end writing her
dissertation. Both she and her supervisor thought that the text was without a clear focus, but
they did not come up with a solution until the supervisor suggested that Anna would omit one
of her dissertation chapters.

Then the text suddenly became good and focussed. It is fascinating that it took
us so long coming up with the solution. Without my supervisor I would have
struggled for a much longer time. /Anna Ph.D.
There is a large amount of control of the students exercised through the supervisors, the seminars and their fellow students. Whenever you take part in any group activity you are supervised and seen by the other group members. They all seem to know if you delivered your text on time, on par and what you are going to comment on at the next seminar. In that respect any working place or university department is in its small way a panoptic surveillance. The idea of panoptical surveillance was presented by Bentham (2002), originally published in 1791, presenting his vision of prisons built as a Panopticon. Bentham establishes that the effectiveness of the new method is that a few jailers can monitor a large number of inmates. Here, writes Bentham, the imprisoned need not wear shackles (Bentham 2002:84). The impression from what the students in this study narrated, is that a continuos checking of what the students do takes place. Even if the doctoral students are not inmates in a prison, the emotions that the constant presence in the realm of Academia stir up, to some extent has an effect as if the doctoral student were visually watched.

Even if it’s Friday, being a doctoral student, it doesn’t feel like that. You are never really relaxed from your work. It feels like you are preparing all the time to meet the expectations. /Olav (half way)

Some of the other students in this study spoke about a similar feeling that even if the others in the department told stories about things they had done during the weekend, you could never be sure that they had not worked on an article instead. Maybe the members of Academia check on their colleagues in order to know what the competition for the next promotion is, or just to be prepared, in a broader sense, keeping track of what is going on.

Some of the students in this study speak of the “corridor small talk”, the rules that are expressed outside the seminars, outside the meetings with the supervisor and outside other official encounters with colleagues. Here the students are learning what to do and especially what not to do. Why should they behave in a specific manner or think about strategies? The answer is: “because that the way things are”.

Some of the rules are in the walls and you find out what they are through the comments in the hallway, or by interpreting the comments you get at the seminars. It's not explicit, but I get to know that there is a way to behave that I am expected to live up to. /Ellen (Ph.D.)

Part of what is expected from you are, as Bloch points out, these silent emotional demands that academic life puts forward (Bloch 2007:31). You cannot read the rules in print anywhere, they are not on the university’s website and, often enough, you do not have the rules
explained to you by your supervisor. Hearing this it almost seems to be a zen-like experience aiming for satori that according to Suzuki (1956) is about enlightenment on the nature of existence (Suzuki 1956:83). Schoug (2004) describes the manner in which doctoral students are expected, with the help of their supervisor, to bring out the scientist within themselves (Schoug 2004:63). If you have to ask if you have reached satori you are not there yet. In congruence with the zen ideas; if you have to ask about what rules are valid in your department you show that you are not enlightened yet. Long before you understand in full what you are up against chance is that you will experience some emotional pressure.

Some people in this department do not consider my subject to be proper for the discipline, so you can imagine how the discussions may go some times. It is not that they openly criticize me all the time, but I can feel their discontent. /Olav (half way)

Olav is sure of himself and his chosen subject, in Scheff’s way of expressing it he has high self-esteem, high enough for him to argue that he does not bother, that a number of the staff in his department do not consider his subject for the thesis being what they would hold as a typical subject within the discipline. Olav argues that his choice of subject is a more contemporary approach of choosing subjects. Olav also has the backing of his supervisor and other key persons in his department.

4.3 Emotionally intense moments

The second research question – do the participants in the doctoral education experience emotionally intense situations related to contexts interpretable in terms of rites of passage – relates to participation as trying to act in the same manner as the persons surrounding you, an endeavor that can be expected to result in a behavioral change. The interviewees were asked to describe a moment, or an event, that was the single worst experience during their doctoral education.

It would maybe be fair to state that the stories of bad experiences, from the students in this study, seem to occur in the first half of the education. One can speculate that the education and its culture influence the students, over time, in such a manner that they incorporate the ideals of what/how a Ph.D. in their respective discipline should be and that this change leads to fewer emotional incidents in the latter part of the education. The working culture in the department is provided by the supervisor, the rest of the staff and by the doctoral student’s
fellow doctoral students, especially if there are doctoral students that were accepted the same semester.

You might have been a straight “A” grade student at the basic level of your studies and “A” and “B” grade level student at the advanced level. We might suspect that the other doctoral students also were “A” and “B” students at advanced level. The population of “E” average students on this level will probably be negligible. To add to the pressure then, here are the supervisors, assisting supervisors and lecturers who all may express opinions on your work. One of the interviewees, Anna, tells a story of her very first text seminar, where she got a very thorough criticism on the paper she presented, went home and was in bed crying for two days until the supervisor phoned her and told her that it had not been a bad seminar. It was a grim experience for Anna who was used to being “best in class” at basic level and now had met all the other doctoral students who also were “best in class”. Anna had not anticipated how the seminar was structured, what was going to happen during it. Anna “isolated” herself by disappearing from the scene where she experienced her shame and tried to handle what Bloch (2007) calls her “helpless anger” (Bloch 2007:119). Anna had, in the manner Bloch explains it, given up her possibility to relate to the others, i.e. the critical voices in the seminar, who were identified as dangerous or repulsive. In circumstances like this Bloch points out that you may stop hearing the other, and hear only yourself, and as a continuation may have experienced a feeling of outmost loneliness. Feeling shame, or adults experiencing other negative feelings might, according to Scheff (1990) be looked upon as a social and cultural phenomenon. As described in the theory section, Scheff defines shame as two-sided: it arises when we are monitoring ourselves and when we experience shame we experience more shame, depending on the normative structure of the culture (Scheff 1990:84). Anna might have experienced in a sense that she was breaking rules, by not know how to behave when she was encountering a set of rules in the seminar that she was not prepared for.

In Anna’s case the doctoral education may be said to have meant “admitted” change, she went from being the one who was always best to a person that understood that sometimes she is not:

It took some time, but as I believe is the case for many doctoral students, after a while I saw that the old days, when I was best in class, were over and I was now only mediocre. /Anna (Ph.D.)
Scheff (1990) argues that people who remain independent, even though they experience shame, do that because of their good self-esteem. They have sufficiently high self-esteem to act on their own judgement, despite experiencing shame (Scheff 1990:92-94). They can manage their shame and discharge it so they could go on with their lives. One interpretation of that is that Anna, in spite of her reactions to the experiences at the seminar with tutoring of her supervisor could handle her emotions and return to the seminar and deal with the situation.

Egil, at the oral defense of his dissertation¹, came across a situation similar to the one described by Gerholm & Gerholm (1992), where a student at the oral defense of his dissertation sits calmly with his book closed and utters: “Exactly what argument on page 8 do you mean is not reasonable?” (Gerholm & Gerholm 1992:190). The doctoral student forces the opponent to feverishly leaf through the dissertation, in search of the questioned sentence. Egil can be said to have been one with his subject: Answering his opponent’s questions, Egil did not open his dissertation, did not have to leaf through it in search of the exact places the opponent was questioning him on.

Yes, I knew my material and did not have to look it up! I had spent so much time writing it, that it was really a part of myself. /Egil (Ph.D.)

It was a remarkable feat of a man from a background where writing a book was a new thing. Egil could be said to have adapted and changed during the doctoral education.

4.4 Did the education meet the expectations?

My third question was if the student, looking back, can rate how the education met the expectations the student had beforehand. To be able to evaluate the expectations on the doctoral education you need an idea of what to expect. Most of the students in this study had no clear image of what to expect besides that they were going to write a thesis. It seems that several students in this study had not expected to be left so much alone. Some of the students recall that they were rather lost in the beginning.

¹ In an ongoing study I am studying the ritual aspects of oral defenses of doctoral dissertations and have so far observed twelve oral defenses in the Faculty of Social Sciences and the Faculty of Humanities at Stockholm University. Egil’s oral defense is one of the twelve in this study.
There seems to be a lack of information on the departments behalf, and some students describe the feeling of being lost at the start of the education. For Magnus it was in the beginning all about doing what he loved:

I really didn’t know what to expect, the university was a world so far apart from what I was used to. But I immediately loved being able to sit down for hours reading and writing. /Magnus (half way)

The interviewees were asked to describe a moment, or an event that they regarded as the single best experience during their doctoral education.

Even though there might be highlights in the everyday life of a doctoral student the students also perceive a constant emotional pressure to perform, to enable them to earn that doctorate which is what it is all about during this period in their lives.

The best moment does not seem to be correlated with the moment in time when it occurs. It may have happened any time during the studies. Harald holds that when the prospectus for the thesis, after he had changed subject, went through a seminar with approving comments was the best moment, so far, in his education:

Well, I guess, it must have been when I finally decided to change the subject for my thesis. It was … I felt for the first time that I to some extent really knew what I was going to write about, I had at last a feeling that I could do it. /Harald (half way)

Harald expresses a feeling of relief, which indicates that he had experienced some pressure during the time when he was trying to figure out the direction he would pursue writing his thesis.

Anna, in the other extreme of the timeline is convinced that the best moment during her studies was when she sat down after her oral presentation of her Ph.D. thesis and watched the members of the examiner’s board leave in order to discuss her oral defense and her dissertation:

I don’t remember much from the oral defense. It was like… you may say that I was inside a bubble, terribly nervous. But… my auto-pilot must have been on, because my friends told me afterwards that I had been really good. As I became aware of what was happening around me I really felt good. /Anna (Ph.D.)

Anna describes the emotion of coming out of the bubble and a good feeling sweeping over her, after a severe experience of nervousness the moment before.
Some of the students have experienced both the emotional pressure to their bursting point, and the more lenient steady trot of everyday work. Some experience more emotional pressure than others. It might seem odd, but work-related activities are not smooth all the time. Sometimes you will be too close to some border, and your colleagues or your supervisor will warn you not to cross that border. You are supposed to be creative, but it is my impression that you at the same time have to harness your creativity, or else you might easily be out of bonds regarding the borders of the academic discipline you are doing your education within.

In the beginning there were things like the role of the doctoral students in relation to the others in the department that I did not have a clear picture of. I do not know if I was not told or if it had to do with my own personality.

/Karin (half way)

Karin had worked for over a decade outside Academia when she restarted her doctoral studies, but she felt insecure about what was really her role. The doctoral students were badly prepared for what was waiting for them in their respective departments. It is remarkable that several of the interviewees speak about their lack of insight into what was waiting for them during their doctoral education. Most of them had just the notion that they were going to write a thesis.

The next section is devoted to a discussion of the empirical findings with reference to the research questions.
5. Discussion

This concluding section contains a discussion on the empirical findings related to the research question. The main research questions posed in this study are three: Firstly, how does the Ph.D education influence the student emotionally. Secondly, do the participants experience emotionally intense situations related to contexts interpretable in terms of rites of passage. Thirdly: can the student, looking back, rate how the education met the expectations the student had beforehand. Collecting data on what emotions the students had experienced during their vocational training is hard to do during a one hour interview, still I argue that some interesting experiences, with adhering emotions did surface in this simple study.

This study does not contain material from students who have dropped out from the doctoral studies, but is rather concentrated on students who kept at, or are keeping at their studies. That means that the students in the study may have been critical, but they have not become so overwhelmed by the sources of their criticism that they have left the doctoral programs.

I want to emphasize that most students in this study did not readily mention any really bad experiences, on the contrary, they seemed to have a hard time scanning their memory for anything out of the ordinary. They were more into the highlights, the good moments, of their education.

The story of Anna’s oral defense of her dissertation seems to be the most complex situation, her being so nervous that she shut herself in a bubble, to the effect that she afterwards did not remember the oral presentation, but came to her senses when the examiners were leaving for their meeting. Anna was exposed to stress in her final stage of her studies, which could be said to be the aim of her everyday activities the previous years. As Bloch (2002) argues most experiences of stress are linked to everyday activities (Bloch 2002:106). Anna’s performance during the oral defense was, in spite of her being “locked into a bubble”, also an experience of flow since she, according to the present colleagues was performing well during the defense.

The students in this study generally did not, in advance, have a really clear idea of what the doctoral studies would contain except writing the thesis. What thus would come as surprises
for individual students were that they were supposed to take additional courses, teach, or attend conferences. There seems not to be any differences between men and women, but that is perhaps because the interviewed population is small. It dawned upon me during the writing of this text that a different insight into the experiences during doctoral studies would have been if I had chosen all women or all men for this study.

Is it possible to earn a Ph.D. exam being discontent? You may argue that students who are accepted into doctoral studies are highly motivated from the start. What for some students at basic level is grueling work is for some doctoral students a lot of fun. Challenging, yes, but that seems to be the fun in it.

5.1 Influencing the student

Starting with the question on how the Ph.D education do influence the participant. One of the interview questions concerned if the students presented themselves as doctoral students in private settings, introducing themselves to strange people at parties and similar circumstances. The answer to that question is in principle that it depends on the circumstances. In general, they say that they state that they are doing research. The closer they get to their graduation, the more sure of themselves they tend to be. That probably has to do with that the risk of failing your doctoral studies tends to become smaller and smaller the more time you spend on your doctoral studies. The risk of failing and thus be subject to shame in Scheff’s (1990) manner of arguing seems to get reduced over time. To draw some kind of conclusion from what the students in this study told me, it has to do with if they are trying to avoid drawing ”unnecessary” attention to themselves in their private life through describing their education as “doing research” or “working at the university”.

The students seem to adapt to the demands of their education, including the demands put on them from the daily work in the university, manifesting itself in the form of office rules, office hours and the local culture of their department. In addition you have the expectations on the students to deliver texts on a regular basis. These texts are then scrutinized by their fellow doctoral students and the rest of the staff in the department. They will get questions regarding their texts and how they want to pursue their investigations. Van Gennep argues that the participants in rites of passage must fulfill certain conditions, all of which have one thing in common: their basis is purely economic or intellectual (Van Gennep 1960:1). The conditions
to fulfill for the doctoral students are intellectual. As time goes on the doctoral student gets more accustomed to the ritual surrounding the seminars they take part in. They start to behave more like their older colleagues. In this respect I argue that they are influenced by the arena that the doctoral education is set in.

5.2 Intense emotional moments

The second research question is – do the participants in the doctoral education experience emotionally intense situations is possible to answer in the positive, but it seems to be far between the emotionally intense moments. Some of the students in this study thought that it was emotionally in a positive manner to be accepted as a doctoral student, others describe moments of stress when discovering chores (participating in conferences, etc.) they were supposed to master which they had not anticipated. Others describe crucial moments like the change of subject for the thesis or the oral presentation of the thesis as emotionally taxing. There seems to be emotions drifting to and fro in the corridors of Academia.

There seems to be more emotions/surprises in the first part of the education. It might be about the students own approach to their capabilities of going through with the education.

Scheff (1990) describes feelings of shame, or embarrassment, as a manner of social control (Scheff 1990:89). We tend to adhere to the opinion of the people around us, even when they seem to be wrong, in order not to be regarded as odd. The students in this study may have adjusted to the norms and the visible or invisible rules of their department without really taking notice that there are adjusting.

5.3 Meeting the expectations

The third part of the research question addresses if the doctoral education lived up to what the student expected beforehand. This is a hard question to answer. As described above, most of the students in this study did not have a clear picture of what was expected of them during the doctoral studies, more than that they were expected to write a thesis.

As Egil explains in the quote below when you are accepted as a part of system it is hard to make the effort to stand on the side looking at yourself:
One becomes a bit loyal to a system you made it through, but if you had asked me earlier, I probably thought that the training could have been a little more structured from scratch. I did decently know what I wanted to write about, but in our department we have doctoral students who re-started (their thesis) several times with different topics. /Egil (Ph.D.)

Generally put, individuals tend, over time, to become more like the people they work with, or socialize with. It might be blunt arguing that the mere fact that three of the interviewed students have earned their Ph.D. exams indicates that they have changed sufficiently to endure their educations and finding it fulfilling, thus creating meaning in their lives.

Since all students in this study either completed their studies or have come half way through them you might expect that they at least must find something rewarding in their studies. The general feeling interviewing the doctoral students is that, after the initial awkwardness, most of them have felt welcomed and in time adjusted to the office routines, the academic agenda and have acquired a more realistic perspective on what was expected of them regarding their academic work.

Durkheim (1938) argued that social currents come to each individual from external sources and can carry us away in spite of ourselves. We might not even feel the pressure that they exert on us. But they are revealed as soon as we try to resist them. Let an individual attempt to oppose one of these collective manifestations, and the emotions that she denies will turn against her (Durkheim 1938:4). What Durkheim was talking about may in this context be said to indicate that if the students in this study wanted to belong to the group of people with a Ph.D. degree in Academia they had to accept the social currents, or the “invisible” demands from the group they want to belong to. If you do not trust your ability you will be intimidated by the emotions this lack of trust fills you with.

5.4 Conclusions

Summing up this study it seems that, with minor exceptions, there is generally mostly a steady trot for the students during the years of doctoral education.

Some of the emotionally “awkward” situations seem to have occurred because of the lack of information or the misinterpreting of information on behalf of the individual student that led to misunderstandings. Still, some of the bad emotions on a lesser level may linger for years, they might not surface until after graduation. It seems that the Ph.D. education qualifies as a
rite of passage in Van Gennep’s (1960) manner of describing rites of passage as a series of events that, when you pass through them, have a major impact on you. The concept of the rite of passage also implies that you can not reverse your direction. You are, like the doctoral students, forced to move along. You either make it to the end and receive your exam or you do not. If you terminate your studies you can not go back to where/what you were before.

Results regarding the first research question indicates that doctoral education mostly, with exceptions during the first half, is looked upon as a steady trot towards the dissertation, during which you are made as a researcher.

Results regarding the second research question points to that some of the students have experienced emotionally taxing moments during their doctoral education, but these moments are not the rule, but rather the exception.

Results regarding the third research question indicate that most students in advance did not have a clear image of what the doctoral education contained more than writing a thesis. Some students that were accepted with a fellow doctoral student at the same department seem to have had it easier to adapt to the daily life of the department. Maybe this depends on how different departments greet their new doctoral students and I have a vague feeling that a “programme” introducing the new Ph.D. students would be good.

In hindsight I regret that I did not arrange to take photographs or to video tape the interviews. It might have been hard to implement imagery in the sessions, since the interviewees might have been reluctant to accept pictures being taken of them. I still think that it might have added some information watching the facial expressions when the interviewees talked about their experiences.

The premise for this study, as indicated in the title: “Education Blues: A Study of the Emotional Roller Coaster Ride of Ph.D. Education”, was that a vocational training like the doctoral education would be likely to be experienced as a turmoil of emotions. For some of the interviewed students it may be said to have been on an emotional Roller Coaster Ride, but not to the extent that I envisioned. The emotional journey seems to be experienced, at least afterwards, as some years of hard work coupled with an experience of learning how to behave in Academia.
5.5 Suggestions for further studies

Considering suggestions for further studies there is, of course, a lot to be done. I will offer two areas for further studies. The first area to consider is to target whether there are differences between students who do their dissertation on subjects that they have a previous familiarity with and students that are embarking on writing their thesis on a subject that is mainly unknown to them. Such a study might give knowledge on if the emotional experiences differ between the two approaches. The second suggested study would be to follow some doctoral students for a prolonged time, with intermittent interviews, and maybe asking them to write diaries on what they are doing. Such a study would have the possibility to generate data to more accurately describe how the students’ attitudes towards their studies change over time.
6. References


Bourdieu, Pierre 1975: “The specificity of the scientific field and the social conditions of the programs of reason“. *Social Science Information*, 14(6), 19-47.


Appendix

Interview Guide

A: Introduction of the study, conditions, etc.
1. Introducing myself - retired full-time student for two years.
2. Information about the study, an essay in the sociology of experiences of the graduate with a focus on the worst and best experience, is what this interview is going to be about. I interview a total of ten people.
3. What you tell me in the interview is the basis for an analysis and I will potentially use anything you say as short quotes as examples in the paper, and possibly in an article in an academic journal.
4. You are anonymous, I give you a alias, and is careful with details that allow you to be tracked, like mentioning institutional belonging. When in doubt, I will contact you so that we can anonymize you better. I hope you understand that I want to record what you say. The recording of the interview will be saved by me under the alias, and the current date.
5. You will get the essay as a pdf in a finished state, if you wish.

B: Query Battery
The background is the most stringent of the list of questions.
For the other questions, the interview becomes more open, ie, I listen to what the interviewee says and ask no questions he / she has already given me the answer to.
If the interviewees spontaneously starts talking about something that there are issues on further down the list, I let them continue and make follow-up questions.
This approach means that the interview may seem unstructured.

1. Background:
How old are you? When did you graduate? (For those who made it)
How was it that you decided to invest in graduate studies?
Did you have any role models?
Did you have any professional experience before that? What did you work with?
When did you start your graduate studies?

2. General:
How did it feel the first time in the graduate program?
How long did it take before you got your "feet wet"?
Are there specific moments when you felt that you become / is becoming a "real" scientists?
On what occasions do you present yourself as a researcher / PhD student in private?
What commitments in private life, as a child, union commitments make demands on your time?
What did you experience teaching?

3. The emotional:
How has the program met your expectations?
What was the best period in the graduate program?
What period do you think was the hardest?
What is the worst incident during your time in the graduate program?
How did you experience it?
How did the environment, the department, in the family react?
What did you do?
How do you look upon this today?
What is the best event of the graduate program?
How did you experience it?
How did the environment, the department, in the family?
What did you do?
How do you look upon this today?
Can you give examples of some of the training that you were not prepared for?
Would you recommend others to undertake graduate training?

4. Final stage:

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We are coming close to the end of this session. Now I have just a few final questions.
(questions for clarification, did I understand, has the interviewee understood?)

Did you experience it as hard or easy to talk about this?

What question would you have asked for you if you were me?