

# **Socialization and Social Capital in Online Doctoral Programs**

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## **Abstract**

Online doctoral programs are gaining in popularity, both among students and institutions. However, research to date on the effectiveness and popularity of such programs has looked largely at either measures of student satisfaction or of administrative effectiveness and design. Further, previous research has also tended to focus on the early part of doctoral study, particularly coursework. This mixed method study that will be conducted on three different online doctoral programs in one university in UK is aimed to contribute to the literature in two important ways. First, we aim to look specifically on current and recently graduated students' experiences of *doing their thesis* using a demographic and experiential survey. It will follow up with more in depth interviews to better understand what kinds of academic experiences and knowledge they both bring to, and receive from their program. Second, we aim to analyse the data through two lenses, that of academic socialization to help explore how academic identity changes over time, and that of social capital to help us understand the individual trajectories of students through their programs. Results will contribute both theoretically and practically to our understanding of student experience of the thesis process in online doctoral programs.

## **Keywords**

Online Doctoral Program, Socialization, Social Capital, Academic and Professional Development, Online Doctoral Students

## **Research Background**

There has been a growing interests among both learners and institutions in online doctoral programs across disciplines including nursing, management, and education (e.g., Candela et al., 2009; Halter, Kleiner, & Hess, 2006; Kumar & Dawson, 2012; Lloyd, Byrne, & McCoy, 2012). Many online doctoral programs and research about them have claimed the effectiveness and success of these programs and these claims are often based on generally perceived advantages of distance education such as its accessibility, flexibility, or interactivity (Leners, Wilson, & Sitzman, 2007; McAlpine & Norton, 2006) rather than issues concerned with specific programme design or goals.

Two of the most common perspectives on this research that appear in the current literature are: 1) student experiences of, or satisfaction with, their online doctoral program (e.g., Bolliger & Halupa, 2012; Halter, Kleiner, & Hess, 2006) and 2) administrative or institutional reviews of the process and outcomes of online doctoral program planning, design and implementation (e.g., Effken, Boyle, & Isenberg, 2008; Kumar & Dawson, 2012). In these studies, several drawbacks or limitations of online doctoral programs, such as student difficulties in learning at distance and a lack of social presence in the programs, are also reported. Nevertheless, in general, students' positive learning experiences are highlighted far more than these difficulties, at the same time, program success is evaluated based on the attractiveness of the program to prospective student groups who are likely unable to pursue their doctorate degree otherwise. In this context, a growing number of enrolments in the program is often considered as primary evidence of program success.

However, the previous studies have arguably failed to consider and describe unique features of doctoral studies, through which students are expected to conduct an original research study that contributes to the advancement

of knowledge in their own discipline. Many studies have exclusively focused on the early part of doctoral studies in which students take a series of well-organized online courses as a member of their cohort (with a few exceptions, e.g., Kumar, Johnson, Hardemon, 2013; Winston & Fields, 2003). Consequently, little is known about how online doctoral students pursue and complete the often challenging later part of their program, the so called thesis completion part. In fact, a large number of students in online doctoral programs tend to have additional job or family responsibilities—many having both—and have reported the challenging nature of being a part-time student working at a distance from their institution and juggling all these different life responsibilities.

In addition, studies concerning traditional doctoral student learning experiences in campus-based universities, have suggested that doctoral students tend to acquire more sophisticated research skills or practical tacit knowledge (e.g., interview skills, research ethics) through their apprenticeship with other experienced researchers including their supervisors rather than gaining this knowledge through their coursework. This apprenticeship often requires doctoral students to be actively engaged in different research projects and research groups led by their supervisor or mentor, activities which part-time online doctoral students are likely to find challenging (Winston & Fields, 2003). In particular, Kumar, Johnson, and Hardemon (2013) discuss multiple challenges that online doctoral students face when communicating with their online mentors during the completion of their dissertations. Taking into account both our limited knowledge about how online doctoral student experience thesis work and difficulties faced by online doctoral student difficulties as reported in current literature, we have decided to explore the nature of online doctoral studies with a particular focus on students' research skill acquisition and academic socialization experiences during the thesis part of their program.

Here, we use the term *socialization* to conceptualize both the implicit and explicit processes by which doctoral students acquire the knowledge and skills necessary for their scholarly development and professional career. To facilitate socialization differs from the traditional process of providing support, because while support often refers to the planned and formal activities or resources limited by what administrative/academic staff can offer, socialization is a more inclusive concept and considers “every part of the student experience, from the first contacts with a graduate program through the dissertation defense” (Gardner, 2008, p.126). Thus, through conceptualizing doctoral student academic experiences as a process of socialization and understanding how this socialization may be distributed within, and supported by an academic community of online doctoral program (i.e., all participants in the program including administrative/academic staffs and peer-students as a whole), we may be able to more effectively help doctoral students' academic development. In order to examine and articulate how socialization happens throughout online doctoral studies, we also use the notion of *social capital*. We define and explain how we are using the terms socialization and social capital in more detail in the following section.

## Theoretical Framework

### Socialization in Graduate Schools

As a general term, socialization refers to the transmission of material or symbolic cultural practices and incorporation of those activities by new members. In the case of graduate education, it refers to the “process through which individuals gain knowledge, skills, and values necessary for successful entry into a professional career requiring an advanced level of specialized knowledge and skills” (Weidman, Twale, and Stein, 2001, p. iii). As a process, socialization into graduate school requires different level of understanding and commitment depending on individual needs, goals, profession, and study of discipline.

According to Weidman et al. (2001), socialization into graduate schools includes four interactive stages: Anticipatory, Formal, Informal, and Personal. The Anticipatory Stage is characterized by students entering the program and learning new roles and responsibilities. Students in this stage tend to seek information and become aware of the expectations (Weidman et al. 2001). The Formal Stage occurs as students observe older students while learning about responsibilities and expectations. Students in this stage are primarily concerned about task issues. The Informal Stage is where students have an understanding of roles and responsibilities, and carry out roles and duties accordingly. “Many of these cues will be received from the students' cohort, those with whom most interaction occurs at this stage” (Gardner, 2008, p.121). According to Gardner, in this stage, students may begin to feel less “student-like” and more professional. Finally, the Personal Stage is when “individual and social roles, personalities and social structures become fused and the role is internalized” (Weidman, et al. 2001, p. 14). In this stage, students may identify themselves as full members of academic or scholar community as the socialization is accomplished. Now, students can find their own path and develop their unique identity while they redefine themselves in relation to but different from the others in their community.

## Social Capital

Social capital has been employed by many sociologists to study connections within and between social networks. While the definition of social capital remains open to debate, Pierre Bourdieu, James Coleman and Robert Putnam offered conceptualizations that are frequently cited in the relevant research. Bourdieu (1986) defined social capital as “the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition” (p. 249). For Coleman (1988), social capital is an attribute of a given community and is inherent in the structure of relations between and among actors. As we have argued elsewhere (Authors, 2014), Coleman’s interpretation of social capital theory can offer a means to study the structures of social relations among community members by allowing systematic investigations into the ways that relationships and connections are diffused in communities. Three conditions for diffusion are described: “(a) level of trust, as evidenced by [social] obligations and expectations, (b) information channels, and (c) norms and sanctions that promote the common good over self-interest” (Dika & Singh, 2002, p. 33). Putnam (2001) describes social capital as a “function of network qualities, norms of reciprocity and trust” (Pigg & Crank, 2004, p. 60).

Both Bourdieu’s and Coleman’s definitions emphasize the benefit gained by the individual within the community whereas Putnam’s definition focuses on how the community can benefit from social capital through the development of interaction among its members. Our previous work (Authors, 2013; 2014) discussed that these accounts emphasize the benefits attained by participating in a community as a dynamic that exists as a result of the community itself and the individuals that comprise it. Thus, the central tenet for social capital is that different relationships within and between social networks hold different values.

According to Putnam (2001), two types of social capital are most prominent: bridging and bonding. Bridging social capital refers to the relationships with people from other communities, cultures, or socio-economic backgrounds. Typically, bridging social capital provides “a basis for collective action” (Pigg & Crank, 2004, p. 68) by allowing individuals to “share their histories and experiences, as well as establish their common values and prosocial goals” (Tseng & Kuo, 2010, pp. 1044–1045). Indeed, similar claims – though not explicitly referring to bridging social capital – can be found in social presence research (Garrison, 2006; Rovai, 2002). For instance, research suggests that social presence in online learning environments “[has] to do with getting to know each other [and] committing to social relationships... [because] if group members are initially not acquainted with each other and the group has zero-history (which is often the case in distance education institutions), then group forming, developing a group structure, and group dynamics are essential to cultivating a learning community” (Kreijns, Kirschner, & Jochems, 2003, p. 342). We have already argued that bridging social capital can help to explain the relationship between diverse social interactions and social presence as they relate to online learning environments (Authors, 2014).

Bonding social capital refers to the strong ties of attachment between relatively homogeneous individuals. In this sense, individuals with similar interests or backgrounds develop higher levels of bonding social capital (Lesser & Prusak, 2000), which leads them to establish and maintain peer relationships (Tseng & Kuo, 2010; Wasko & Faraj, 2005). These stronger relationships, then, provide important environmental conditions for knowledge exchange (Chiu, Hsu, & Wang, 2006) by allowing information to flow throughout the existing social contacts (Fetter et al., 2010). Bonding social capital, therefore, improves the acquisition of knowledge and fosters learning in a community (Daniel, Schwier, & McCalla, 2003; Kanawattanachai & Yoo, 2007). Similar to the case for bonding social capital, social presence research indirectly offers support for the fruitfulness of studying bonding social capital to inform community-level understanding. For example, the literature argues that senses of affinity, belonging, and closeness are required for individuals to both appreciate the benefits of collaboration and learn from peers’ ideas, critiques, and suggestions (Garrison, 2006). As we have argued elsewhere, then, bonding social capital may help explain the relationship between strong social interactions and social presence (Authors, 2014).

Consequently, social capital theory can provide a lens to examine how the stages of socialization into graduate schools can be actualized for online/distance doctoral programs. Given that socialization is a unique process for each individual, experienced differently, the concept of social capital, particularly the distinctions between bridging and bonding social capitals can shed light on how communities within cohorts may provide opportunities for students to become socialized effectively into doctoral programs. While the weak but diverse ties (bridging social capital) can maximize chances to appreciate differences among members, strong but close ties (bonding social capital) can maximize the opportunities for apprenticeship. Since social capital is the sum of these weak and strong ties, it can not only explain how different dynamics of online/distance education programs have an impact on students’ socialization but also inform our design decisions on supporting students during their doctoral experience.

## Research Question

What do online doctoral students' socialization process look like? (How do they experience the socialization process? How do they acquire the academic knowledge and research skills through the socialization? What are the challenges and difficulties they face in the process? What are the strategies and methods that they use to address the challenges? etc.)

## Research Methods

This study will be conducted in three online doctoral programs in a university based in UK. There are approximately 150 doctoral students in those programs who are professionals pursuing their doctoral studies at distance. The programs consist of two academic phases: students, as a program cohort, take six courses for the first two years and independently work on their thesis projects for the next two or three years. In this study, we will only focus on the students who are close to the complement of their thesis project or recent graduates of the three programs within the past five years because our primary focus lies in their post-course (or thesis) phase of the program experiences. All students and graduates who fall into this category will be invited to participate in an initial survey, which includes open-ended questions about participants' demographic information and learning experiences in their online doctoral program. About 15 to 20 interview respondents will be invited to participate in a semi-structured follow-up interview. The collected data will be analysed using our theoretical framework described in the previous section.

## Conclusion

The ultimate aim of this proposed research is to design effective academic supports for online doctoral students' socialization process during their program period based on a more comprehensive understanding of their distance learning experiences. Results can provide both theoretical and practical contributions to the literature on doctoral academic socialization and online degree programs.

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