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Well-being in doctoral students: Considerations for the academic community

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Abstract

Undertaking doctoral studies is a highly demanding academic activity, so it is important that those who embark on this challenge can experience the process positively. This article aims to expose and reflect on the relevance of the well-being of doctoral students as a need that must be addressed by the doctoral programs and higher education institutions. Considerations that the academic community, especially in the Latin American context, must take into account for an adequate development and training process for doctoral students, should include elements beyond the academic aspects. Based on the literature, these considerations include the student's relationship with their thesis supervisors, motherhood and family, the constant pressure to publish, and procrastination. Finally, some areas are included to consider possible interventions to benefit the well-being of doctoral students, and the need for further research in the area is emphasized.

Keywords: Doctoral students, PhD students, well-being, supervisor, motherhood, procrastination, publication.

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Introduction

Education is often conceptualized as the key to economic growth, providing strategic options for the development of a particular country (Hanushek, 2016). According to the indicators of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 1.3% of people aged 25-64 across the OECD countries on average hold a doctorate, the highest degree in official university studies, or its equivalent, and in average across the mentioned countries, 24% of those enrolled in a doctoral program are international students (OECD, 2022). This is evidence that graduate education has grown exponentially (González-Ocampo & Castelló Badia, 2019), which translates into greater scientific research, innovation, and economic growth (OECD, 2019).

The growth in the number of people obtaining a doctorate invites, among other things, to pay attention to the mental health and emotional well-being of doctoral students, who face new academic and social environments, as well as constant difficulties in completing their studies (Muniroh, 2019; Smith et al., 2006). Mental health is defined as “a state of well-being in which the individual realizes his or her abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively, and can make a contribution to his or her community” (World Health Organization, 2013, p. 9). Additionally, well-being is a construct that expresses people’s satisfaction with specific or global aspects of their lives, where positive states of mind predominate (García-Viniegras & González, 2000). Although there is no consensus on a single definition of the construct, there is evidence that low levels of well-being, are usually associated with mental health problems and abandonment of academic spaces; and high levels of well-being, with higher productivity (Schmidt & Hansson, 2018). According to the OECD (2021), it is estimated that 1 in 2 people experience mental health problems over the course of their life, indicating that on average 50% and 80% of those with severe and common mental disorders, respectively, do not seek or receive treatment. Therefore, the well-being of doctoral students is an important and critical matter to be considered, as it can shape future well-being throughout the candidates’ academic careers (Schmidt & Hanson, 2018).

The constant pressure from supervisors and peers, pressure to publish, high workload, deadlines, financial problems, relationships with supervisors, and fulfilling multiple roles (Kurtz-Costes et al., 2006; Li et al., 2022; Mays & Smith, 2009; Siltanen et al., 2019; Schmidt & Umans, 2014), among other factors, make achieving a healthy balance between work, family, and doctoral studies a constant challenge (Golde, 2005; Martinez et al., 2013). The skills and emotions experienced by doctoral students significantly affect their progress in their studies and their well-being (Juniper et al., 2012). Thus, a common experience for those starting their doctoral studies is related to the perceived level of disciplinary knowledge, which is influenced by gender and previous experiences (Flaster et al., 2020). Consequently, it is common for doctoral students to experience low levels of competence and self-efficacy. Clance and Imes (1978) originally defined this experience as *impostor syndrome*, which was later popularized by Clance’s book in 1985. In this syndrome, the person attributes their

successes to external variables, having difficulty attributing their performance to their level of competence accurately. A systematic review on this topic found that the prevalence of the phenomenon has a wide variation, between 9-82%, depending on a high number of variables, affecting mostly ethnic groups, with no gender differences or specific manifestation in any age group, concluding that this syndrome often occurs in comorbidity with depression, anxiety, and burnout, associated with a limitation in performance and job satisfaction (Bravata et al., 2019). Thus, the academic environment generates a space where these feelings of intellectual fraudulence can emerge, especially at the graduate student level (Cisco, 2019).

Doctoral programs allow for a transition from dependent to autonomous research (Laudel & Gläser, 2007). Therefore, the emotional experiences from the beginning to the end of the doctoral studies will shape the future of doctors in academic life. This article seeks to promote reflection and discussion on some critical areas that those studying in a doctoral program often face, inviting Universities that offer such degree to go beyond the academic quality of their programs, to provide experiences that evidence care and promote the well-being of the future doctors.

This article aims to expose and reflect on the relevance of the well-being of doctoral students as a need that must be addressed by the doctoral programs and higher education institutions. The topics covered in the following sections consider the relevance of the relationship with supervisors, experiences related to motherhood and family, pressure to publish, and procrastination.

Doctoral Student-Supervisor Relationship¹

One of the most relevant components in carrying out doctoral studies is the relationship established with the thesis supervisor (Al Makhamreh & Stockley, 2020; Feizi & Elgar, 2023; Le et al., 2021). The performance, progress, and satisfaction of students during their doctoral studies may be impacted, positively or negatively, for various reasons, including cultural differences (González-Ocampo & Castelló Badia, 2019) the type of relationship established with the supervisor (Golde, 2000; Jackman & Sisson, 2022; Overall et al., 2011; Zhao et al., 2007), among others.

The role of the supervisor includes essential aspects, along with constant monitoring and support through meetings that generate close and collaborative relationships (Hemer, 2012; Wisker et al., 2007), and the necessary knowledge and skills to navigate a highly technological world (Bautista & Escofet, 2019). It is important for the student to feel comfortable, confident, and above all, free to ask questions for a better understanding of the processes and content. Together with constant and sustained supervision over time, this can lead to the successful completion of doctoral studies, highlighting the relevance of creating facilitating contexts for the proper completion of the process (Green & Bowden, 2012; Heath, 2002). Additionally, the supervisors’ task includes the provision of emotional support to their respective students for decision-making (Ali et al., 2007; Morrison Saunders et al., 2010; Pyhältö & Keshinen, 2012), as well as establishing

a safe learning environment where students can express their concerns, seek answers, ask questions, and analyze tasks together (Siltanen et al., 2019).

Various studies demonstrate that the relationship with the supervisor can affect the student's performance; therefore, it is recommended to research and inform oneself about potential supervisors before starting the program, as this can make a significant difference and turn the doctoral training process into a positive experience for the student (Al Makhmreh & Stockley, 2020; Kearns, 2021). According to the above, conducting doctoral studies from start to finish becomes an emotional experience for students and their families (Parsloe, 1993; Siltanen et al., 2019). Choosing supervisors becomes paramount, and as mentioned earlier, it is of utmost importance to know, research, and inform oneself about the profile of each potential supervisor before making the respective requests (Ives & Rowley, 2005).

Effective supervision should take the form of *mentorship*, which requires the supervisor to help and guide the student in developing decision-making autonomy and critical and innovative thinking (Brockbank & McGill, 1998; Manathunga, 2007). This process is characterized by the supervision provided by the supervisor to the student and has the essential feature of promoting self-efficacy tools in research work (Al Makhmreh & Stockley, 2019). For instance, an important strategy that the supervisor can provide to their students is to support them on the path to publication through example and joint publications, but also networking with colleagues in the field within the same faculty or other institutions (Curtin et al., 2016). Additionally, due to the lack of experience of doctoral students, it is relevant to motivate future doctors to make presentations at national or international conferences and to participate as co-authors of chapters in books or other publication formats, as all these factors help career success in academic life subsequently (Lovitts & Nelson, 2000; Tinto, 1993; Wladkowski & Mirick, 2020). Therefore, completing doctoral studies is considered a complex task that can be affected positively or negatively by the level of help provided, or the supervisor's style, making it relevant for academic training and learning experiences to become effective supervisors (Guerin et al., 2015; Turner, 2015).

Motherhood, Family, and Doctoral Studies

Combining doctoral studies with family-life has become more common than in previous years (Fundación Nacional de Ciencias, 2017). Currently, there is evidence of inequality between men and women regarding family-life and academic careers (Bailyn, 2003; Ferreyra, 2020; Sebastián-González et al., 2023). Studies such as Myers et al. (2020) reveal that the inequality gap has become more evident since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. On average, women spend three more hours per day on household chores than men do. This translates into female academics sharing fewer pre-prints than men and starting fewer projects, which highlights the challenges, especially for women, during times of pandemic (King & Frederickson, 2021; Viglione, 2020). Different studies have found that balancing motherhood and pursuing a career in academia involves a chain of difficulties and sacrifices

(Gilbert, 2008; Hillier, 2023; Trepal & Stinchfield, 2012). Among these sacrifices are long nights of sleep deprivation, breastfeeding, children's illnesses, etc. The difficulties that mothers experience during doctoral studies may be related to the lack of support from the institution and the inconsistencies at this level, the lack of lactation rooms, and the feeling of shame of telling colleagues and supervisors about the details they face, especially as first-time mothers (Hillier, 2023; Phu, 2020). There is lack of awareness and underestimation about the overload of raising a child and pursuing a doctoral career. Students realize the impact on academic life with a small child once they are already on the path, trying to balance multiple roles, which usually become more complex, for example, when the child becomes sick (Phu, 2020; Schriever, 2021; Utami, 2019).

Based on the previously stated, results challenging to balance motherhood with academic life (Castañeda & Isgro, 2013; Mason et al., 2013). This is not only discouraging and questionable, but also quite unreasonable since the average age of women studying for a doctorate is 33 years (Holms et al., 2015; Mason et al., 2013), and the average age at which women give birth in most of the OECD countries stands at 30 or above (OECD, 2023). These discussions highlight important reflections, as while evidence poses significant difficulties, this should not translate into women deciding to postpone their academic and professional development, nor to decide whether to have a family. This is why the support that institutions can provide to doctoral students who are mothers is crucial (Sebastián-González et al., 2023). Many future female doctors identify informal support, for example, greater flexibility and peer support, however, there is a need for formal instances that allow policies for balancing work and family, thus fostering a sense of community (Hollenshead et al., 2005; Mirick & Wladkowski, 2020).

Starting or continuing a professional career in academia can be influenced by past experiences, which can have an impact on the lives of doctoral students (Gallardo & Gindidis, 2020). For example, deciding to pursue these studies outside the family nucleus and without a support network in a foreign country. Living in a different country, learning another language, without close networks, involves a series of difficulties and confrontations with experiences that only families in similar situations can understand (Phu, 2020). These factors and experiences lead to constant questioning about one's ability to adjust and perform all roles satisfactorily and successfully, generating significant tensions in well-being (Bracco Bruce & Ruiz-Bravo López, 2017). As a result, the constant routine and accelerated pace increase the experience of negative emotions and the risk of burnout or emotional and physical exhaustion (Khadjooi et al., 2012; Trepal et al., 2014). This emotional exhaustion and stress are also increased by the cultural environment, different parenting styles, and cultural or idiomatic differences (Myers-Walls et al., 2011). Combining two highly demanding activities such as pursuing doctoral studies and motherhood requires significant effort, generating stress not only for the mother but also for the family nucleus, which is further increased if the studies are conducted abroad (Moreau & Kerner, 2015; Utami, 2019). Unquestionable characteristics such as survival and efficient time management,

persistence, patience, and above all, resilience are present in women who decide to pursue doctoral studies and be mothers simultaneously.

Pressure to Publish

As mentioned, pursuing a PhD is a challenging yet fulfilling experience. Candidates engage in the development of various skills, including the development of their research idea, learning how to carry out research, building a profile as an independent researcher, engaging with national and international research networks (Trippas & Maxwell, 2021), and, of course, publishing their research results in scientific articles (Frandsen et al., 2019).

Publish or perish has become a matter directly related to survival in today's academic world, which affects both academics and PhD students (Huang, 2020). While this is not a practice that occurs in all countries, academics are increasingly rewarded financially for publications that maximize personal and institutional prestige (Backes-Gellner & Schlinghoff, 2010). For PhD students who decide to pursue an academic career, their ability to publish is one of the most relevant indicators for judging their competence (Carr & Hayes, 2017; Sinclair et al., 2013). Publications as outputs of the PhD's research will not only benefit them but also contribute to the universities' research performance and rankings, which have led to many institutions adopting the "publish or no degree" policy (Guerin, 2016; Shamsi & Osam, 2022). The pressure to publish is a deeply ingrained issue in the 21st-century university, and research has shown a negative relationship between doctoral students' mental well-being and the number of publications (Zhang et al., 2022)

It is important to note that there is not only the pressure to publish, but the PhD students must also do so in high-impact journals (Pickering et al., 2015), which generates greater difficulties and challenges. Therefore, students must have a viable publication strategy in the early stage of their careers. There is evidence that the more realistic the publication plan is; the more likely it is to produce positive results. This indicates that it is important for PhD programs to support students' efforts to develop their publication strategy in the early stages of their careers (Wien et al., 2020), and for this, supervisors have a central role.

It is also important to recognize the heterogeneity that exists in the various doctoral programs, which does not necessarily imply that all doctoral students must actively contribute to the indicators associated with the scientific production of a department or faculty (Bonaccorsi et al., 2021). In this context, some perspectives support the idea that the pressure to publish leads the PhD candidates to think of their research in instrumental terms (e.g., as an "obligatory step" to obtain the degree or to fulfill future hiring requirements in academia) (O'Keeffe, 2019; Yeung, 2019). Contrary to the famous *publish or perish motto*, academic publications should be developed as result of the natural research process, or the students' intrinsic motivation to publish, and not as a response to the external pressures of social or professional requirements to produce academic work (Stoilescu & McDougall, 2010). This pressure

would generate a significant psychological burden, negatively affecting the well-being of doctoral students (Cuschieri, 2021).

The use of English as the language of science (*lingua franca*) could be translated as an additional challenge to the fact of publishing (Shamsi & Osam, 2022; Tardy, 2004). It should be considered that non-English speaking students must also demonstrate a certain level of proficiency in the English language, either as an admission requirement to a program or as a means of publishing, further increasing the level of anxiety experienced by the future doctors (Kwan, 2010; Lillis & Curry, 2010; Wellington, 2010).

Finally, it is important to mention, again, that productivity decreases in the case of women and of academics with young children, but concerns about feedback, isolation, and health disproportionately affect new faculty and doctoral students (Barber et al., 2021).

Procrastination

Procrastination seems to be the easiest way to avoid work among graduate students and academics in general (Lonka et al., 2018). Procrastination is a well-known phenomenon that is defined as the unnecessary delay of things that are proposed or should be done, being a behavior that has accompanied humanity since ancient times but is still considered a modern problem (Chun Chu & Nam Choi, 2005; Klingsieck, 2013; Sánchez Hernández, 2010). This phenomenon affects a considerable part of the population, and particularly, the statistics are not in favor of students. In the Australian context, this practice affects 50% of students (Wessel et al., 2020), and in the United States, 40% of the university population have considered themselves chronic procrastinators (Sánchez Hernández, 2010). Moreover, it has been identified that more than 50% of doctoral students in this latter case do not obtain their degrees because they fail to write their theses (Garza-Almanza, 2018).

The activities carried out to avoid duties are varied, but all aim to avoid the inevitable, writing. Doctoral students commonly adopt this approach when writing their thesis projects (Machin et al., 2019). The most common practice in this situation is to postpone the task to the limit, and then write for prolonged periods to finish the task. This process is called *bingeing* (Machin et al., 2019), and applied to this context, it is quite detrimental to the writing process, as it produces considerable fatigue that leads to not wanting to repeat such practice. Delaying the writing process is often influenced by the belief that more reading is necessary to be able to write, that one does not know enough to start the process, or that one is not ready, thus reading ends up being a "procrastination device" (Fisher et al., 2019, p. 9) to postpone the writing process.

Procrastination can be caused by various factors. Among them is the self-imposed pressure by each student, the quality of work to which one is oriented, the level of perfectionism, the sense of low productivity, and mental blackout when writing (Lonka et al., 2018; Machin et al., 2019). Writing a doctoral thesis is one of the greatest pressures that doctoral students must face, and there are various published works on

the subject. For example, the method of 100 hours to write the doctoral thesis: *Toolbox for the (very) rushed thesis writer* (Garza-Almanza, 2018). *The failure of dissertation advice books: toward alternative pedagogies for doctoral writing* (Kamler & Thomson, 2008), in addition to the over 4,000 guides and manuals that Garza-Almanza (2018) uses in his research.

Some authors argue that the characteristics and identity with which each student identifies could also affect the way they approach writing (Adams, 2018; Aitchison & Lee, 2006; Fisher et al., 2019). For example, some people identify themselves as social learners and they need interaction with others to learn and do their work (Fisher et al., 2019). Therefore, carrying out doctoral writing can be difficult, as it can be considered a rather solitary task. Another type of learner is the visual learner, who does not necessarily spend their time writing but developing matrices or conceptual maps that can guide their research project (Fisher et al., 2019). Although tools like these are useful for a better understanding of the project when it comes to submitting a doctoral thesis, they do not replace the writing itself, so making matrices or maps also end up being a distraction that contributes to procrastination.

It is common for doctoral students to be involved in a vicious circle where they experience negative emotions, lack of interest, and considerable levels of stress during their studies (Stubbs et al., 2011). However, some authors propose that not all procrastination is harmful. In this line, Chun Chu and Nam Choi (2005) differentiated between active and passive procrastinators. Active procrastinators are those who prefer the pressure of doing things at the last minute, who decide to do the task close to the deadline and still get good results. On the other hand, passive procrastinators postpone activities until the last minute due to their inability to act in time. Regardless of how active or passive they are, it is likely that all procrastinators feel pressured and overwhelmed, especially when it is time to evidence progress to supervisors or in terms of metrics regarding their scientific publications.

Avoiding writing tends to result in a writing blockage (Lonka et al., 2018) with negative consequences. The problem with procrastination, in addition to leading students to this blockage, is that it also affects their overall well-being. Procrastinators have difficulty finding time to exercise, for example, and also tend to have high levels of anxiety that cannot be reduced due to the lack of time to perform activities that can have a positive impact (Robson, 2021). Therefore, writing as early as possible, results a critical task and it is probably why researchers have developed phone applications to reduce procrastination. In a review of the 10 best apps to avoid procrastination (Rodríguez, 2021), *Todoist*, *Trello*, *Quality Time*, *Forest*, *Remember the Milk*, and others are found. All these apps provide tools to organize different tasks and to achieve their resolution. Procrastination, therefore, proves to be a real problem and if it is not properly managed can generate negative consequences, especially when it comes to writing a thesis.

Final considerations

The challenges that future doctors must face to complete the highest academic degree go beyond a passing grade. For this

reason, it is critical to establish a positive relationship between PhD students and their supervisors, create safe and supportive academic environments for mothers undertaking their PhD; regulate expectations about publications; and develop strategies to be productive. The results of a survey conducted by the journal *Nature* on more than 6,000 doctoral students show that 16% of the participants are dissatisfied with their decision to pursue a doctorate; 45% indicate that their level of satisfaction has worsened over time; nearly 40% are dissatisfied with the balance between work and personal life, and 36% indicate that they have sought help for anxiety or depression due to their doctoral studies (Woolston, 2019). Academic suffering, therefore, seems to be a product of a particular culture and not an isolated problem that doctoral students face during their studies (Esposito et al., 2016; Marsico & Varzi, 2016; Martino et al., 2019; Mele et al., 2021; Silva & Marsico, 2022). For these reasons, and those previously stated, this article contributes to highlight the importance of caring for the well-being of doctoral students as a relevant aspect that should be considered by all higher education institutions that offer such programs.

The well-being of researchers who are starting in this field has a cyclical impact, as it is highly likely that in the future they will be the academics who will supervise new doctoral students and will have the responsibility of not only guiding research processes but also ensuring the well-being of their supervised students (Schmidt & Hansson, 2018). In this sense, a study conducted in the Italian context, identified that the supervisor's encouragement and motivation to publish the work conducted by the PhD student, and research training received had the most significant impact on the level of satisfaction regarding their doctoral programs (Astarita & Crisci, 2023). A study conducted in Australia consulted masters and doctoral students on the strategies that universities could implement to better support their well-being, indicating topics related to four areas: supervisors and supervision practices, culture and community, support services, and collaboration with peers and networking (Ryan et al., 2021). This illustrates that the generation of formal training spaces for academics who will serve as doctoral supervisors is an important element to consider by programs and institutions of higher education, as regulated in some parts of the world, especially in Europe and Oceania (Manathunga, 2005). In addition, the support and collaboration of supervisors positively affects pre-employment academic productivity (Shen & Jiang, 2023). Therefore, training and development result critical to provide the academics with options for complex and relevant learning to conduct doctoral supervision effectively (Halse, 2011). Additionally, due to the globalization of higher education studies (Cutri & Pretorius, 2019; Nerad, 2010), academics who serve as supervisors should have training not only at the level of supervision but also at the level of intercultural competencies (Zheng et al., 2019) to facilitate the adaptation of students.

Although it is well known that there is no single approach, some elements could contribute positively to the well-being of doctoral students. Various studies have found that future doctors who participate in activities with other postgraduate students tend to report lower levels of hopelessness and anxiety by having a support network, increasing their perception

of efficacy to complete their studies, as well as feeling more supported by their universities (Panayidou & Priest, 2021; Tommasi et al., 2022; Usher & McCormack, 2021). Creating formal and informal instances for interaction with peers, such as faculty postgraduate conferences, discussion groups, etc., could be a positive mechanism to promote the well-being of doctoral students through safe spaces for connection. In addition, the need to provide psychological support, the generation of spaces that facilitate motherhood/fatherhood, and the development of environments that have workspaces and spaces for relaxation, could be some strategies that benefit future doctors. Likewise, training and development in topics that facilitate their formative process is necessary, such as writing strategies, optimal use of time and avoiding procrastination, activity planning, and knowledge of the main research records and repositories, to be known and used early by students (Jackman et al., 2023; Salas, 2017, 2019). Thus, pursuing a PhD is associated with increased mental health risks (Vigil Avilés et al., 2024); specific risk factors, especially in terms of psychosocial limitations (Gaudel et al., 2024); and there is even significant concern around illnesses related to depression or anxiety (Almasri et al., 2023). For these reasons, and given the limited evidence available on these topics in Latin American countries, greater research is required to account for the reality experienced by doctoral students, as well as their needs, and that in turn can systematize the initiatives of different universities and existing legislation to generate a quality formative space that cares about the well-being of future doctors. For all of the above, it is essential to consider the well-being of students in the knowledge ecosystem (López-López, 2019) and thus avoid having a fractured view of the processes of advanced human capital formation, which inevitably deepens the inequalities of Latin American countries (Programa de las Naciones Unidas para el Desarrollo, 2021). Future studies will aim to continue analyzing these issues, given that Latin America and the Caribbean is a region of great contrasts, where violence and inequalities are not exempt in doctoral studies. Among the limitations of the study is that the present manuscript does not address issues such as students' independence from their supervisors (Patsali et al., 2024), time management in the doctoral process (Lee et al., 2023), motivation and satisfaction in students (Turner, 2023), or the development of programs to cope in work environments and work-life balance (Tullet et al., 2024). Giving relevance to the well-being of their PhD students should be a responsibility for third-cycle programs, and must be included as a relevant indicator in government agencies responsible for their accreditation.

Note

¹ This document uses the concept of “supervisor” to refer to the academic who accompanies the doctoral student during their research process. In some countries, this role is identified as thesis director or guide teacher.

Ethical approval

Ethics approval was not required for this article.

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References that support this theoretical article are available in different academic databases and other sources.

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All authors contributed to this work.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

Authors have no known conflict of interest to disclose.

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