

# THE BIRTH OF A CHILD AND A DISSERTATION: A MOTHER'S VIEW ON THE RESEARCH PROCESS

Amy Levin, Ph.D., California State University Northridge

*This narrative explores the parallel process that researchers can experience while simultaneously writing a dissertation and conceiving and giving birth to a child. The stages of anticipation, conception, gestation, birth, and growth are discussed. Suggestions are made for how to succeed at both ventures.*

“At work, you think of the children you have left at home. At home, you think of the work you left unfinished. Such a struggle is unleashed within yourself. Your heart is rent.”  
Golda Meir, Israeli Prime Minister 1969-1974

At a critical time in my life I was blessed with having the best of both worlds: a developing dissertation that led to the achievement of my professional career goals and a growing family that gratified my personal and loving needs. At times I felt stretched to the limit but, by testing my strength, I learned a lot about myself. I could not have accomplished any of this if it were not for the network of relationships that support and affect my life: my mentors, colleagues, family, and friends. I do not want to sound too dramatic, but I came out of this complicated process a changed woman. The research experience, like life itself, consists of important cycles that cannot help but change a person over time. I feel privileged to have been able to concurrently experience the parallel processes of birthing a baby and a dissertation.

## Anticipation

In 1999, my long sought-after goal of obtaining a Ph.D. was finally becoming a reality as I began to work on my doctoral dissertation in the third year of my studies. The anticipation I felt working up to that moment was not unlike the anticipation my husband and I were simultaneously feeling

about starting a family. Both require a decision that can have serious consequences. What if there were complications with the pregnancy? What if the research demanded more time than I could afford to give? What if I could not meet others' expectations of me as a mother and a researcher? Worst of all, what if I could not meet *my own* expectations for the type of parent and academician I wanted to be? I considered both very serious responsibilities and did not want to short change either.

I watched my friends who had professionally made a name for themselves give it all up and have nothing to talk about except their baby and his sleep schedule or eating habits. I did not want this for myself. When a child is born, there is a loss of freedom, especially for the mother, and I knew that my life would no longer be my own. My child would be dependent on me for most of the next 18 years.

I felt as if once I made the decision about a dissertation topic, I would be locked into that particular area of research, possibly for the rest of my academic career. It seemed as if there was a lot riding on this: Will the research topic change the way that others look at this problem in the future? Will I be able to make a significant contribution to the field? Will my future in academia be different if I have a child? Can I balance both responsibilities?

Just as a woman can delay starting a family to further advance her position on the career ladder, a researcher can put off beginning the dissertation process for fear of

the monumental task that lies ahead. Experiencing the anticipation of both the research process and an impending pregnancy left me feeling almost incapable of proceeding with either. There were certainly times when I contemplated giving up one or the other for the time being, knowing that ultimately one area of my life might suffer. Fortunately, I had a supportive husband as well as an understanding dissertation chair, and the input from both was important. They helped me to see that being a "superwoman" was a myth but doing it all was possible. After all, I had some great role models in my mother and in Dr. Michàlle Mor Barak, my chair, both of whom earned a Ph.D. while raising a family.

Despite all of my worries and fears, there was also a level of excitement in choosing a topic and knowing that I would immerse myself in the literature, the participants, and the data for the next few years. This positive anticipation ultimately won over the fear of the unknown as well as my concerns about what I already knew. It was going to take a tremendous amount of time and energy and a new set of skills to be able to get to the day when I would be defending my dissertation.

Likewise, thinking about my future role as a parent, I was concerned that I would not know what to do with the baby or have the skills to meet his needs. Many say that a woman forgets what her pregnancy and labor were like so that she will choose to have more babies. I think that researchers tend to forget many of the hurdles that they must jump so that they will feel like conducting research all over again. I anticipated that both the research and the pregnancy process would have their challenges. However, as each person's experience is different, no one could really prepare me for what was to come.

### **Conception**

As the anticipation wore off, I began to let go of many of my concerns on both fronts and allow the natural process of conception

to take over. I tried to relax into the notion of introducing two totally new experiences into my life and to focus on the enchantment of that possibility.

I remember professors telling me that the dissertation did not have to become my life's work. Many times I was admonished to just do the research, write up the results, and move on with my career. However, the more involved I became in the development of the model, the more I wanted to make this the best study. I think that often people who choose to get a doctoral degree have a tendency toward perfectionism. I certainly wanted my study to be one that was remembered and to stand out among the others. I also wanted to please the members of my committee and have them remember our work together as worthwhile. Having high expectations for myself motivated me to succeed and allowed me to achieve all that I could. Hindsight is valuable. If I had to write my dissertation again, I would spend less time on the conception of the problem and the development of the hypotheses. At that time, the process felt so demanding and stressful, as if every decision could make or break the entire study.

I was lucky to have been involved in analyzing the data from one of Dr. Mor Barak's previous studies, which looked at variables similar to the ones I was interested in studying, but with a different population. Many of the measures contained in my survey were "borrowed" from the questionnaire Michàlle used in her previous research on workplace issues. However, as the population being studied was quite different, I had to create several other measures in order to investigate how to retain child welfare employees in the workplace. My study was going to explore the relationship between perceived levels of job satisfaction, stress, social support, well-being, work-family balance, commitment to the organization and

intention to leave and ultimate retention of child welfare workers.

I thought a lot about which variables would be important to look at as a professional woman who would also have to balance work and family life for years to come. Concepts such as job satisfaction, stress, and social support were important because I had worked with so many clients, friends, and family members whose decision to remain on the job was influenced by any number of these variables. Although the business-related literature dealt with the variables related to organizational commitment and turnover, limited research had been conducted in social work in general and in the field of child welfare in particular, fields largely dominated by women.

I found the creative process of constructing the instrument stimulating: meeting with Michèle to discuss ideas, selecting five stress measures and narrowing the selection down to the final measure, and researching the instruments that would have the best fit with the given population. However, the isolating elements of conducting research were also ever present in that much of the work would be done independently.

My feelings about conceiving a child mirrored thoughts about my dissertation. I wanted to be the perfect mother and for this child to be special. My high expectations for myself, for the baby, and for how we would function as a family were not that different from wanting to write the best dissertation. With all of this spinning in my mind, I knew that conception was really just the beginning of exciting lifelong challenges, both as a researcher and as a mother.

### **Gestation**

The parallel similarities of growing a dissertation and a baby continued during the gestation period. Just like a fetus, original ideas for research have to germinate, and the dissertation process takes time to grow. Both

had a very long incubation period. Both were uniquely personal and demanded a lot of me. A research agenda cannot be rushed to suit one's timetable. It takes a lot of hard work and determination, and sometimes it is painful. Both the dissertation and the baby humbled and thrilled me. And I didn't want to disappoint either.

In the gestation phase of the dissertation process I began to look into how I would find support from those around me. The ongoing encouragement and tremendous amount of knowledge and experience that my advisor Michèle and committee member Rino Patti shared with me was invaluable. They were reassuring during times of self-doubt. Similarly, while the baby was growing inside of me, I looked to others who had been mothers and researchers to provide me with information that would help me to succeed on both counts. A first-time mother looks to her friends for guidance on how to care for the baby, in which mommy-and-me classes to enroll, what baby goods to buy, and which pediatrician will provide the best care. A good researcher does not reinvent the wheel but looks to a more seasoned colleague as a role model, a sounding board, and a mentor.

Michèle and other professors and peers were able to guide me in the right direction so that my dissertation was a solid piece of research but not my life's work for the next decade. I was able to put some of these issues in perspective and bring a balance to my life. I felt confident that I could do it all as long as I was able to modify some of my expectations and focus more on what I needed to get the jobs done. I began to realize that what I was doing and how I was doing it had to be okay with me and everything else would fall into place.

Several weeks before the birth of our first son, I received approval to conduct the research from the University's Human Subjects Committee. I quickly made plans to attend upcoming randomly selected domestic

violence, child abuse, child neglect, and other child welfare trainings, regularly held by the department for their employees. I asked the participants to be involved in our study, and they agreed. Finally it all began to come together, and just in time.

Days before delivering, I attended the randomly selected training seminars twice a day to collect data, a strong start for the 418 subjects who eventually participated in the study. I believe that early participants readily agreed to become involved with the study because everyone wants to help a pregnant woman. Later participants saw me bring the baby along and my son became instrumental in reaching my goal. The fact that our grant allowed us to provide pizza and soda for participants didn't hurt either. Being a new mother, I already recognized and respected the fact that the nourishment of food had both a physically and emotionally soothing component.

### **Birth**

Introducing a new element disrupts the homeostasis of any system. Starting to collect data and deepening my grasp of the literature both impacted my academic life. There was less time to be the relaxed student as more time was devoted to interviewing subjects, visiting the libraries, and sitting in front of a computer. At the same time, the arrival of our son affected the serenity of everyday home life and turned our partnership into a family. Although my husband was involved, with me nursing, the long and wakeful nighttime hours became my shift. The crying in the middle of the night was something that the baby and I needed to work through with limited intervention from the outside world. The worrisome thoughts that go through any parent's mind about what could potentially happen to the baby, as well as the fears about being in charge and totally responsible, were ever present.

Similarly, once the research ideas were formulated and the data had been collected, I was on my own to develop it into a dissertation that made sense to others. I had to make policy recommendations that would impact not only me but all of the subjects who participated in my research as well. Simultaneously, I was making decisions that would affect this new little guy who had worked his way into my heart. Both the dissertation and the baby were priorities and there was precious little time for me. I vacillated between feeling the pressure of so many people counting on me and delusions of grandeur, thinking I had so much decision-making power. From time to time, sleep deprivation affected my mood and my ability to concentrate. That was when keeping a positive attitude and reframing negative thoughts became necessary coping mechanisms in both the research and the parenting process.

I thoroughly enjoyed the data collection phase of the research. As a social worker I am curious and like getting to know people. I was privileged to be able to engage the participants on a level that researchers often are not likely to experience. Because the subject population consisted predominantly of social workers, they were more willing to participate, open up, and disclose to a fellow social worker. The information I gained from just talking to them over a slice of pizza, after they completed their surveys was invaluable. When they understood that our study was going to examine and devise interventions to reduce the high turnover rate of social workers, I believe they were able to see the potential long-term benefits for themselves, their colleagues, and the agency.

In addition to administering the quantitative instrument, I conducted a more in-depth, qualitative interview with 33 of the participants. Through this method I acquired a deeper understanding of their feelings, thoughts, and ideas. Participants had the

opportunity to talk at length about why they considered leaving the organization; why they experienced stress and dissatisfaction; and why they felt a lack of support from their colleagues, their supervisors, and the organization. Despite negative feelings, I also saw so many encouraging examples of dedication, framed by the personal stories of the participants. There were a variety of reasons why the social workers still wanted to stay on at the job, but the overriding one was because of the clients whose lives they were impacting on a daily basis. I see this kind of an attitude as incredibly admirable and selfless. I try, as best I can, to use this as a model in my professional and personal life.

I felt privileged to hear such honest and intimate details from complete strangers in my first real experience with qualitative data collection. These were good people who were willing to lay their jobs on the line. Perhaps they were so frustrated with their situation that it was a relief to unload about such issues as apathy in the workplace, struggles with too large caseloads and too much paperwork, difficulties with their supervisors, and their own feelings of burnout. Conducting the in-depth interviews fascinated and empowered me. Using my counseling skills, I gained the trust of the interviewees. This took some time, which I gladly gave. It also required my assurance that there would be no identifiable characteristics on paper when the results of the study were given to the administrators in the organization. In order to feel safe and open up to me regarding their thoughts and feelings about the organization, these interviewees needed to believe in me as well as in the final research product. These in-depth interviews not only provided rich data, but also enriched my communication skills. And these skills proved valuable as I learned to be better attuned to understand the needs of and to build feelings of trust in my baby.

The actual analysis phase of the research was both exciting and isolating. As is typical of any doctoral dissertation, it called for original and solitary work. Since I was often not at liberty to discuss my thoughts, ideas, and findings, at times I felt alone and confused. I constantly questioned my ability to do such complicated research-oriented work on my own. The mentors, dissertation chairpersons, and professors were involved in many projects and there were other students who were also desperately trying to get through the program. Although I have not conducted bona fide research, my random polling has indicated that such feelings of insecurity and isolation are not uncommon among doctoral students.

Once again, as so often happened during this period, my feelings about motherhood were similar to those about the dissertation process. Immediately after our son was born, I felt impatient and at times isolated. I could hardly wait to develop the many skills that would make me a more competent mother. Yet, most of the time I loved my new role and was amazed at how quickly our new little family felt so connected.

### **Growth**

As I worked on fitting the last pieces of the dissertation puzzle together, I felt as if I was setting the stage for what my future career would look like. Similar to the final days of my pregnancy, there were times when I felt as if I would never be finished writing the dissertation. Between my pregnancy and the dissertation writing process, I learned a very important lesson in patience. I realized that I can rarely be impulsive and spontaneous. Everything must be well thought out and planned ahead of time. I prepare my lectures weeks in advance, I submit articles and grants well before the deadline arrives, and I make sure to pack pajamas for the boys if we will be out past their bedtime. Presently this life lesson continues to be valuable as I wait for colleagues to prepare their part of a project,

for grants to be funded, and for my children to listen to me on a regular basis.

As I reflect on my dissertation-writing experience, I have come to realize that despite the importance of a good mentor and chairperson, it is really the student's development of unique ideas, critical thinking skills, and proficiency in writing that are most crucial if a person is to truly grow through the dissertation process. How she interprets and internalizes information, learns from the subjects and research results, and applies it all in her work ultimately help to shape the graduate who becomes the future educator and researcher.

Now that I have graduated and am an Assistant Professor of Social Work, I have come to discover and fully appreciate the importance of guidance and support during the various stages of conducting research. At a recent Council on Social Work Education conference, I listened to the awards recipients express their gratitude for support and the privilege of collaborating with colleagues. I believe that this is one of the greatest strengths of the social worker, the willingness to collaborate. It does not come easy to many people to share thoughts, ideas, responsibility, and authorship, but social workers are a rare breed. Don't get me wrong. There are certainly those out there who like to be the only author when the research is published. However, for the most part, social workers are able to work together and support each other. These are the very same values we are teaching our sons, especially when in the midst of a sibling-rivalry episode.

I have had the pleasure of having two outstanding writing partners. In terms of dissemination of our research findings, we have published three journal articles and presented variations of our findings at four conferences. I have presented papers at two other conferences in recent months, and the team continues to analyze different

configurations of the data for future publication and presentation.

The development of a complicated instrument has provided a wealth of information through diverse analyses of various combinations of different variables. I would recommend this to any doctoral student or new researcher, as it offers the opportunity to use this kind of an instrument with diverse populations and to evaluate the data in a variety of ways. My endorsement of this research tool reminds me of the positive reinforcement I give my sons when they develop new skills that will serve them well over time.

For the most part, the research results were consistent with my hypotheses. However, once the results were presented to the child welfare administration, no changes were initiated to alter the pattern of turnover. The implications for policy and practice were addressed, as well as suggestions for cost-effective interventions to improve rates of retention for the organization. Still no adjustments have been made to date. My frustration is that this particular organization and others like it are losing so much money each year as they have to recruit, hire, and train new employees due to rapid and extensive turnover. Most important, the children being served are more likely to be put in harm's way as the effectiveness and efficiency of services are compromised due to inexperienced caseworkers.

Despite the many great benefits I derived from completing my dissertation, I was disappointed that the findings were not put to good use. On one level, I feel that in the end I let down the agency employees who participated in the survey. As researchers, we were able only to conduct the study, not to implement any of the changes that we recommended to the organization. I feel responsible to the social workers who took the risk to fill out the survey and especially to those who personally confided in me. Those

employees expected some positive changes to occur because the evaluators who assessed the culture came from outside of the organization.

However, I am not totally discouraged that my dissertation results have not yet been utilized in more practical ways. I could walk away, give it up, and let it feed my negativity, or move on and accept the reality of the situation. I believe that this is the case for many researchers who invest time, energy, and enormous amounts of intellectual inquiry. They spend years conducting exploratory research, develop wonderful ideas for future interventions, and discover that their findings are filed on a shelf only to collect dust over the years to come. Instead of accepting defeat, I plan to continue to try to convince the social work organization to make policy changes that impact stress, job dissatisfaction, and turnover. Perhaps this will occur through meetings, presentations, published articles, further research, work by my students, or a combination of all of these efforts. In the end, I think this whole process has made me a better person and a stronger social worker.

Being the mother of two strong-willed and active sons, I have my moments of frustration and discouragement. However, I am committed to improving my parenting skills as I am dedicated to nurturing my sons. The two major defining emotions of motherhood are forever present for me: the protective feelings that accompany the deep love, and the worry that I am not doing it quite right. Like the parenting process, my research is a work in progress, and my mothering responsibilities are far from over. I am devoted to my family and to my work, both such value-laden investments. In so many ways they are already paying off, and I am confident that the dividends will continue far into the future.

Amy Levin, Ph.D., is an Assistant Professor at California State University Northridge School of Social Work. Comments regarding this article can be sent to [Amy.levin.39@csun.edu](mailto:Amy.levin.39@csun.edu).

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