



**Exploring Doctoral Program Applicants' Negative Experiences:
A Phenomenological Study**

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Abstract

As people strive for good jobs and companies ask higher qualifications for good job positions, having a doctoral degree has become an essential qualification. However, doctoral programs have offered more challenging and competitive admission requirements than the past since the demand for doctoral degrees has increased and the number of highly selective doctoral programs has been limited. Although research on analyzing doctoral programs' admission requirements, exploring various admission requirements, and generating models for admission decision process is available, research on doctoral program applicants' admission experience is limited. The purpose of this study is to give a voice to three doctoral program applicants on their negative experiences of doctoral program admission process and inform doctoral programs' admission committees regarding possible applicants' feelings. Using a phenomenological approach, three themes were emerged from participants' significant statements to understand their difficulties, struggles, and stress during their doctoral program admission process. The themes were higher expectations and additional requirements, admission committees' unclear decision process, and people's negative behaviors towards applicants. Possible implications for doctoral program applicants and doctoral programs' admission committees are discussed.

Key Words: Higher Education, Doctoral Program Admission, Doctoral Program Applicants, Phenomenology



Doktora Programlarına Başvuran Adayların Olumsuz Tecrübelerinin İncelenmesi: Bir Fenomonolojik Çalışma

Özet

Günümüzde bireyler iyi konumda işler bulmak için uğraşmakta ve iş kurumları bu iyi konumdaki işler için doktora derecesi de dahil olmak üzere yüksek nitelikler istemektedir. Dolayısıyla, doktora derecesine sahip olmak önemli bir vasıf haline gelmiştir. Fakat, doktora derecesi için artan talepten ve kaliteli doktora programlarının kapasitelerinin sınırlı oluşundan dolayı doktora programları geçmişe göre daha zorlu ve rekabetçi kabul koşulları sunmaktadır. Doktora programlarının kabul şartlarının analiz edilmesi, çeşitli kabul şartlarının keşfedilmesi, ve kabul için karar verme süreciyle alakalı modelleme geliştirme gibi araştırmalara ilgili alan yazında rastlanmasına rağmen, doktora programlarına başvuru yapan adayların kabul sürecindeki deneyimleriyle alakalı araştırmalar oldukça sınırlıdır. Bu çalışmanın amacı doktora programına başvuran üç tane adayın karar sürecinde yaşadıkları olumsuz tecrübelerini yansıtmak ve doktora programlarındaki karar verme komitelerini başvuru yapan adayların muhtemel hisleriyle ilgili bilgilendirmektir. Fenomonolojik araştırma yaklaşımı kullanılarak yapılan analizlerle kabul sürecindeki adayların anlamlı ifadelerinden onların yaşadıkları zorlukları, sıkıntıları, ve stresi açıklayan üç tema ortaya çıkmıştır. Bu temalar yüksek beklentiler ve ek şartlar, kabul komitelerinin belirsiz karar verme süreci, ve etraftaki insanların adaylara yönelik olumsuz davranışları olarak bulunmuştur. Doktora programlarına başvuru yapacak adaylar için ve doktora programlarının kabul komiteleri için olası etkiler tartışılmıştır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Yükseköğretim, Doktora Programı Kabul, Doktora Programı Adayları,
Fenomonoloji



Introduction

Today, many people strive for a higher education to get a better job, make more money and have a better life circumstance. However, finding a better job, making more money, and having a better life circumstance can be difficult without a higher education degree (e.g., master's and Ph.D. degrees). Hence, more people attend to higher education programs to get a graduate degree and find a good job. Increased competition among companies has made the expectations for job applicants even higher. Although the level of expectations for higher paying jobs differs across countries, finding high paying jobs without a college level degree in most well developed countries is impossible to obtain. Recruiters in many companies only make the job to those candidates who have completed their higher degrees.

The doctoral degree represents the highest possible educational level and each year the number of awarded doctorates is very limited in most countries. For example, there were 51,008 total doctoral degrees granted in the US in 2012, and this represents 0.00016 % of the US population (Posselt, 2014). These numbers indicate that it is not easy to get admission into a doctoral degree program and successfully finish the degree in some countries (e.g., US) where there is a high interest in receiving a doctoral degree. In this sense, doctoral program applicants need to consider carefully for admission requirements before applying to a specific doctoral program. Admission requirements often differ across universities. For example, while some universities require a master's degree to enter into a doctoral program, others may accept students without having a master's degree as these universities offer combined master and doctoral programs. In some doctoral programs, master's degree students may directly be accepted if they successfully finish their degree and continue studying in the doctoral program without a new application. Some doctoral programs, however, require a new application whether applicants are already master's degree students in the same program.

The admission process for the doctoral degree applicants can be difficult, struggling, and stressful. While gaining acceptance to some doctoral programs can be easy, acceptance into some prestigious doctoral programs can be quite challenging (Posselt, 2014) because of higher requirements and expectations. Other issues (e.g., budget cuts, additional requirements, and admission committee members' conflicts) can make the admission process even more difficult for applicants. These issues may affect applicants' emotions negatively and lead to feelings of



oppression. In this sense, conducting a study on doctoral program applicants expressing difficult experiences during their application process can be useful in understanding the influence of the admission process for doctoral program applicants.

Research on the doctoral program admission process has focused on the analysis of the admission requirements (Walker, 2008), various admission criteria (Bonifazi, Crespy, & Rieker, 1997), generating mathematical models for admission in the decision process (Walker, 2008). Most researchers have used quantitative methods to explore the important factors in the admission process for applicants' successful acceptance into doctoral programs (Bonifazi et al., 1997; Goldberg, 1977; Walker, 2008). For example, Walker (2008) conducted a quantitative analysis using admissions requirements guidelines in education doctoral programs of the top 20 American universities and showed that admission requirements of the top education doctoral programs were highly competitive and comparable to the top 20 universities in the world. Walker (2008) also indicated that admission requirement of these top 20 American universities included competitive Grand Point Average (GPA), Graduate Record Examination (GRE) scores, English Language scores for international applicants, a satisfactory level of field experience, samples of professional writing, and recommendation letters from applicants' former professors. In their study, Landrum, Jeglum, and Cashin (1994) asked 55 doctoral program admission committees in psychology about their doctoral student admission processes and showed that while GPA, GRA scores, recommendation letters are crucial, applicants' previous research experience and autobiographical statements are found to be critical in the admission. Bonifazi and others (1997) conducted a study examined the importance of obtaining a master's degree before applying for doctoral programs in psychology and illustrated that although getting a master's degree may give more positive views to some admission committees, GRE scores, GPAs, recommendation letters are still essential criteria for admission decisions. Additionally, they reported that some doctoral programs in psychology consider applicants' research, work, and life experience as well as their success in journal publication. Hagedorn and Nora (1996) argued that current admissions criteria (i.e., GPAs and standardized test scores) measuring the capability to accept in doctoral programs be no longer considered as main criteria directing admissions committees. They noted that there are other alternative indicators including cognitive and noncognitive skills, writing samples, critiques of academic reports or articles, portfolio



preparation, group interviews, presentation about previous research or work, plan for research, and peer-group discussion. This list may even include a two-tier admission process in which prequalified applicants are required to give a ten to fifteen minutes presentation about an assigned topic.

A small number of researchers have used qualitative methods (e.g., Dawes, 1971; Posselt, 2014) to determine the critical factors in the admission process for applicants' successful admissions into doctoral programs and applicants' experiences of the doctoral program admission process. For example, Landrum et al. (1994) asked graduate school committees to write down their specific decision protocol and found that admissions policies for graduate school admission protocols should be explicit and definite to applicants. In another study, Posselt (2014) examined decision making process of 10 prestigious doctoral programs and noted that in the decision making process admission committees use conventional academic achievements (e.g., GRE scores, language test scores for international students, and GPA) to make a pre-selection and professors in the doctoral programs act as gatekeepers to accept or reject applicants into their doctoral programs. Other studies (e.g., Turner & Thompson, 1993; Williamson & Fenske, 1998) also indicated that healthy social and academic relationships between faculty and students (e.g., current master's degree students who plan to continue to a doctoral degree program in the same department) can be a major factor impacting on doctoral program admissions.

As the admission requirements for doctoral degree programs have become more complex and competitive, applicants are subject to have negative admission experiences than those in the past. Therefore, research on applicants' admission experience has become critical to guide new doctoral program applicants about the process and prevent them from potential negative experiences. Doing so may yield less struggle and stress for applicants, help admission committees to understand applicants' feelings, and result in designing a better admission process for doctoral program coordinators.

As mention above, although many studies have focused on doctoral program admission criteria and processes, research on individual doctoral program applicants' negative experiences of their doctoral program admission process is limited. The purpose of this study is to give a voice to doctoral program applicants on their negative experiences of doctoral program



admission process and inform doctoral programs' admission committees regarding possible applicants' feelings. The doctoral degree applicants' negative experiences are defined as applicants' experiences including struggles, difficulties, oppression, and stress to get acceptance into a doctoral program. The central question of this study is: What were the negative experiences of participants who applied for a doctoral program during their last year of master's degree study? Moustakas (1994) procedures were used to analyze participants' responses.

Methodology

Research Design

In this study, a phenomenological approach was used to understand doctoral program applicants' negative experiences during their admission process. The purpose of a phenomenological approach is to describe several individuals' lived experiences of a particular phenomenon (Creswell, 2012). The lived experiences consist of each perception of a specific phenomenon and show what the phenomenon means in individuals' lives (Giorgi, 1997; Penner, & McClement, 2008).

Participants

Criterion sampling was used to select participants for this study because "criterion sampling works well when all individuals studied represent people who have experienced the phenomenon" (Creswell, 1998, p. 128). In two tier-one research universities at the Southern part of the US, 14 education doctoral program applicants were asked to participate in this study and three participants (1 female and 2 males), who expressed negative experiences in their doctoral program admission process, agreed to take part in the study. The female participant, Amy (pseudonym), was 27, and males, John and David (pseudonym), were 26 and 28 years old at the time of the data collection. All participants were senior master's degree students at the college of education, applied to several doctoral programs, and had negative experiences during their admission process.

Study Instruments

In phenomenological research, conducting interviews is a primary method (McCracken, 1988) and interviewing small numbers of individuals who have experienced the phenomenon is critical (Creswell, 2012). In addition, determining the most effective interview type for a specific study is another necessary part of the qualitative research (Creswell, 2012). For this



phenomenological study, one-on-one interviewing was used because the researcher was able to have direct access to the participants. An interview protocol (see Appendix), created by the researcher, was used to ask questions during the interviews. The interviews were conducted in a private room, audio recorded, and transcribed for the analysis.

Analysis

In this study, the researcher used Moustakas's (1994) phenomenology procedures to analyze the data. First, for overall understanding, the researcher read the transcripts and listed participants' expressions that found related to the experience in the horizontalization process (Brown, Sorrell, McClaren, & Creswell, 2006). The researcher found 178 significant statements related to the participants' experiences. Then, overlapping significant statements were reduced and constructed into meaningful units from constant structures. Finally, the researcher put the significant statements into clusters and made themes from the meaning units.

Findings

The researcher constructed a set of themes from the significant statements and meaning units and found some issues that contribute to the negative experiences of the applicants. Based on the three participants' expressions of their admission process, the researcher found three themes relevant to understanding participants' negative experiences. The themes are (a) higher expectations and additional requirements, (b) admission committees' unclear decision process, and (c) people's negative behaviors towards applicants.

Higher Expectations and Additional Requirements

From the participants' significant statements, the researcher found that doctoral programs considered high-qualified applicants and the programs had high expectations from applicants for the admission into doctoral programs. These higher qualifications and expectations made the application and admission process more challenging for the applicants. According to the participants' statements, the admission committees' expectations increased and the committees considered highly qualified applicants comparing to previous admissions in the applied doctoral degree programs. John said, "in the previous semesters the admission committee could accept a lower GRE verbal score, and they were more flexible to accept the verbal score around 330, but now they are insisting on having at least 400 verbal score." Regarding higher expectations and additional requirements, Amy stated,



Two years ago, when I applied to the master's degree program in this university, I remember I checked the requirements for the doctoral degree program as I was planning to continue here after getting my master's degree here. I was meeting all qualifications for the doctoral degree program with my scores at that time, but now requirements for the Ph.D. program is higher and I have been asked to retake the GRE for a higher score and this put more stress on me.

English language proficiency expectations for international applicants can be greater than regular application requirements in some doctoral programs. Regarding the issue David indicated:

Even though I already passed the university's English language proficiency exam, the admission committee asked me to take some additional language courses in my first year of the doctoral program, and they offered a sort of conditional acceptance for me to get accepted into the program, and this made me really upset.

Based on participants statements, the additional requirements (e.g., taking an English language course even though the applicant already met the program's English language proficiency criteria) and higher expectations (e.g., asking for a higher GRE verbal score comparing to previous semesters' GRE verbal score minimum requirement) resulted in negative feelings and made the applicants upset and oppressed.

Admission Committees' Unclear Decision Process

From the significant statements and meaning units, the researcher found admission committees' unclear decision processes made the applicants oppressed. During the decision processes, the participants had many problems because of the applied doctoral programs' long and unclear decision process. The participant Amy said, "The decision process was not straight, and there was no deadline that indicates the decision to the applicants. When I wanted to ask to learn, one doctoral program's admission contact person did not respond my emails." In addition, participants indicated that the admission committees changed some admission requirements that went beyond their regular admission criteria. For example, an admission committee changed requirements for an applicant that includes making a commitment in which the applicant is required to go some important conferences in his research areas and present papers in these conferences in the first year of his doctoral study. David noted:



When I was asked to make a commitment to go at least three leading conferences in my research area during my first year in the doctoral program, I felt so bad because I cannot imagine both taking at least nine credits course and English language courses and preparing conference papers and get them accepted for the leading conferences.

In addition, because of John's low verbal score of GRE, a committee asked for a conditional acceptance requiring applicants to retake the GRE again and receive a satisfactory score in the first year of the doctoral program although the applicant already had a sufficient combined GRE score that met program application requirements. Overall the participants in this study indicated that some different requirements than those were listed in programs' application requirements list really made the applicants upset and resulted in feeling oppressed during their admission process.

People's Negative Behaviors towards Applicants

During the admission process, the participants had many negative experiences because of people's negative behaviors towards applicants. In this study, all the participants were in their last semester of master's degree study and all of them were wishing to continue right after their master's degree in the same department for their doctoral studies, but they had many bad experiences because of people's negative behaviors towards applicants. These behaviors included master's degree advisors' negative behaviors towards applicants and the advisors' conflicts with other faculties in the department, learning some news from other people in the department rather than responsible people (e.g., graduate advisors) about applicants' application status during the admission process, and questions from other people (e.g., peers, friends, professors, and family members) regarding participants' application status.

The significant statements of participants revealed that if a student in a master's degree program plans to continue her/his doctoral study in the same department, the person's advisor has a critical role in that person's admission process. All participants indicated that because of their advisors' negative behaviors towards them, the participants felt oppressed many times. David said, "the advisor sometimes really made the admission process so oppressive for me because he made some unexpected interviews that I learned last minute via email from him and the interviews did not go well because of the pressure on me." Also, the participants noted that because of the personal conflicts between their advisors and some faculty members in the



department including department head, they experienced some oppressive situations. For example, John stated, “there were some personal problems between my advisor and the department head. When I made a commitment with the advisor, the department head did not accept it, and when I told the advisor this situation, he got angry.” In addition, the participants believed that their advisors did not support well them during the admission committees’ decision processes. Amy said, “if the advisor supported me in the admission decision process, I would get acceptance without any problem.”

Additionally, hearing some unexpected news from some people in the department (e.g., faculty members, doctoral degree students, and department head) disappointed the participants because they were expecting to hear their admission status from their advisors and/or the department’s graduate advisors. John stated, “a professor asked me whether I learned my application status and told me that I got a conditional acceptance because of my low verbal GRE score and I was expecting to hear this news from my advisor instead of others.” Also, questions from other people (e.g., peers, friends, professors, and family members) regarding the applicants’ admission status sometimes made them feel oppressed. For example, David stated, “maybe people around you don’t want to make you uncomfortable by asking questions about my application status, but when like ten people asked in a day, it really annoyed me.”

Discussion

In this study, the researcher aimed to give a voice to doctoral program applicants who had negative experience during their doctoral program admission process to understand their feelings and inform doctoral programs’ admission coordinators/committees about possible applicants’ feelings. Using a phenomenological approach, the researcher found three themes emerged from participants’ significant statements to understand their difficulties, struggles, and stress during their doctoral program admission process.

As admissions to doctoral programs have become more challenging and competitive due to the increased demand for doctoral degrees and doctoral programs offer a limited number of student admissions, the programs tend to increase their expectations and require additional qualifications to select high-qualified doctoral students for their programs. When admission committees make decisions on doctoral program applications, therefore, they may keep the expectations higher than what doctoral programs state in their official requirements. The



researcher found that participants in this study faced with these higher expectations and additional requirements, and because of these higher expectations and additional requirements the participants had struggled during their admission decision process. As identified in this study, many previous studies (e.g., Bonifazi et al., 1997; Hagedorn & Nora, 1996; Posselt, 2014; Walker, 2008) reported higher expectations and more requirements of doctoral degree programs due to the goal of having “the best” qualified doctoral students in their programs.

Admission committees’ unclear decision process was another theme that appeared from participants’ statements. This result is consistent with previous researchers’ suggestions (e.g., Landrum et al., 1994; Posselt, 2014) about the need for a precise and straightforward decision process in the graduate program admission. Participants in this study had difficulty to understand how the decision process was going on since they could not receive satisfactory, timely updates about their application. When the participant asked responsible people (e.g., program coordinators, graduate advisors, secretary) about updates on their application, they did not receive satisfactory responses from the contact persons during the decision process. Moreover, the participants noted that the admission committees’ efforts to make commitments, which were not listed in the official application requirements, made the applicants more stressful. These commitments can be useful to increase productivity and success of the doctoral degree programs, but participants can be negatively affected with these commitments since the commitments may put extra responsibility to doctoral students in addition to their regular tasks (e.g., course work, research, assistantship).

People’s negative behaviors towards applicants was the third theme appeared from participants’ significant statements. Participants indicated that they had difficulties because of their current master’s degree advisors’ negative behaviors towards them such as unexpected interviews with the participants to talk about their doctoral program application, the advisors’ conflicts with other faculty members in the program, and people’s questions regarding the applicants’ admission status. Additionally, the participants heard the updates from other people (e.g., faculty, committee members) instead of responsible individuals who were in charge of doing the communication with applicants and this made them feel “worthless” among other applicants who were able to receive timely updates from their advisors and responsible people in the programs. It seemed that all participants had the problem to have a good relationship with



their advisors as well as program coordinators. This finding suggests the critical role of establishing good academic and social relationships between faculty and students as emphasized in the literature (Posselt, 2014; Turner & Thompson, 1993; Williamson & Fenske, 1998).

Implications

In this study, participants' significant statements on their negative experiences during doctoral degree admission process indicated that the process could be difficult for the doctoral degree applicants. Also, doctoral degree admission committees may not be aware what difficulties and negative experiences applicants could have. Therefore, in the following section implications for both doctoral program applicants and admission committees are given.

First, results from this study suggest doctoral degree applicants should get high scores in all required exams for doctoral programs before their applications. Since many doctoral programs firstly look at applicants' exam results and make a pre-decision in the admission process, high scores will help applicants most likely to be considered for further admission consideration. In addition, for international students, it is important to have proficient language skills and satisfactory exam scores from the required language exams. If an international student at a master's degree program in a foreign country plan to continue in the same department as a doctoral degree student, having good language skills could help expressing to admission committees better and result in free negative experience during the admission process.

Second, clear communication between a doctoral degree applicant and her/his master's degree advisor regarding her/his intention to stay in the same department for a doctoral degree is critical. Talking early with advisors in the program regarding the intention to remain in the department and getting early ideas from advisors could reduce applicants' negative experiences. In the case of any negative response from the advisors about their interests to continue working or not with the applicants, learning the advisors' negative response in advance could give a sufficient time for applicants to apply other programs. Applicants can talk to other faculties to work with and make early connections to find appropriate people in the same department or other doctoral programs. Finding an advisor who is interested in working with a doctoral degree applicant can make the admission process easier and less stressful for the applicant.

Third, doctoral degree applicants should be psychologically ready for any additional requirements during admission process in a doctoral program application. At the beginning of the



process, a mental preparation of applicants about possibilities could help applicants to deal with the additional requirements much easier. The applicants should keep in mind that some doctoral program admission committees can be very picky in selecting their students and require additional requirements. Also, the admission committees may get a high number of well-qualified applications, and they may require additional requirements to select the best-qualified applicants, so this makes them more careful and picky in making their decisions. Even though it is not fair to ask additional requirements after the application requirements are set, this would still happen in some admission process.

Fourth, to make the admission process easier for applicants, it is crucial for doctoral programs to clearly state their requirements, procedures, and deadlines for the entire process of the admission. When there are no clear requirements, well-explained procedures, and specific time frames, the doctoral program applicants can be upset, stressful, and the process can be very oppressive for them. Therefore, it is necessary to clearly define admission requirements, explain procedures, and set specific deadlines for the admission process to reduce the possibility of any negative experience of applicants. Also, the requirements should be same and fair for all the candidates. The requirements should not differ applicant to applicant, and all admission committee members should consider the applications within the same criteria. In addition, informing the applicants about the admission process steps and timely decisions are crucial for the applicants. Some master's students, who are in their last semester of master's degree and planning to study in a doctoral program, need to learn decisions timely so they may still have the chance to apply for other doctoral programs. However, if the decision process takes longer than settled deadlines, the applicants may miss other doctoral programs' application deadlines, and this may result in more negative experiences. Finally, the admission committees should not allow any personal conflicts among admission committee members or any other people in the program during the admission consideration. The personal conflicts may result in missing well-qualified applicants into the doctoral programs and negative experiences on applicants.

In conclusion, there are multiple factors, which would make admission process more difficult, struggling, and stressful for doctoral program applicants. These factors include higher expectations and additional requirements, admission committees' unclear decision process, and people's negative behaviors towards applicants. To cope with these factors, some precautions for



potential doctoral program applicants and responsibilities for admission committees need to be taken into consideration as mentioned throughout the paper.

Limitations

In this study, the researcher identified three limitations. First, the limited number of participants (i.e., three) was one of these limitations. Including more participants into the study would give a better sense to understand doctoral program applicants' negative experiences. Second, all those involved in this study were international students in the US. Including demographically more diverse group of participants would reflect different perspectives of doctoral program applicants' feelings. Third, the context of the study was limited to the US context; therefore, the findings of the study may not apply to other countries or other different contexts.



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Appendix

Interview Protocol:

Time of interview:

Date:

Place:

Interviewer:

Interviewee:

Position of Interviewee:

The purpose of this study is to understand doctoral program applicants' negative experiences of doctoral program admission process at the college of education. I would like to hear about your experiences of doctoral program admission process.

Questions:

- 1- What have you experienced during your doctoral program admission process?
- 2- What situations have typically influenced your oppressive experiences?
- 3- How do you feel about your experiences in your doctoral program admission process?
- 4- What kind of things made you unhappy during your doctoral program admission process?