



El rol de las relaciones sociales en la producción de tesis doctorales

The role of social relations in the making of a doctoral thesis

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RESUMEN.

Escribir una tesis doctoral es un proceso desafiante para la mayoría de los estudiantes de posgrado. Desde el enfoque del aprendizaje situado, hacerlo implica algo más que la mera internalización de un conocimiento objetivo del lenguaje, sino que implica el desarrollo de una identidad a través de la participación en y transformación de comunidades de práctica disciplinares. Varios trabajos han analizado el rol de las relaciones del ámbito académico, prestando especial atención a la relación entre tesis y supervisores o directores de tesis. Sin embargo, las relaciones del ámbito personal casi no han sido exploradas. Esta investigación cualitativa explora si y cómo los lazos sociales del ámbito personal influyen de manera positiva el proceso de tesis. El análisis de entrevistas en profundidad, con estudiantes de doctorado y recientes graduados de diferentes programas argentinos en el área de Lingüística y Educación, indica que este tipo de relaciones efectivamente ayudan a avanzar el trabajo de tesis. La caracterización de diferentes tipos de ayudas ofrecida en este trabajo puede servir de base para la elaboración de iniciativas institucionales dirigidas a andamiar el proceso de tesis y, por tanto, mejorar el apoyo ofrecido a los doctorandos desde las universidades.

PALABRAS CLAVE.

Escritura tesis, educación doctoral, apoyo familiar, apoyo institucional, escritura científica.

ABSTRACT.

Writing a doctoral thesis is a challenging process for most doctoral students. From a situated learning perspective, it involves more than just internalizing some objective knowledge about language, but entails developing an identity through participation and transformation of disciplinary communities of practice. Several research works have analyzed the function that social relationships from the academic realm play in the dissertation process, paying special attention to the supervisor/candidate dyad. However, research on domestic or personal ties is rather scarce. This qualitative study explores if social ties from the personal sphere influence the dissertation writing process. Analysis of in-depth interviews, with students and recent graduates from different Argentine PhD programs in the field of Linguistics and Education, indicate that these social relations do facilitate different types of support. These results can lead to create institutional initiatives aimed at scaffolding the dissertation research and writing process, which would improve the support offered to doctoral students from the academic realm.



**KEY WORDS.**

Dissertation writing, doctoral education, familial support, institutional support, research writing.

1. Introduction.

The number of postgraduate programs offered in Argentina grew exponentially during the 1990s. However, graduation rates are very low (Barsky & Dávila, 2004; De la Fare & Lenz, 2012; Jeppesen, Nelson, & Guerrini, 2004) and every year more students are part of what has been called the ABD (All But Dissertation) phenomenon: those who finish their course work, but never get to present their doctoral thesis². This has been related with the lack of support that students experience when facing the dissertation writing process (Brunner & Ferrada Hurtado, 2011; Carlino, 2005, 2008, 2012).

This study is based on the assumption that writing a postgraduate thesis entails much more than the mere acquisition of a set of general writing skills (Carlino, 2012; Russell, 1995). On the contrary, it is conceived as an enculturation process through which students acquire the ways of doing and being in their disciplines (Bazerman & Prior, 2004; Prior, 1998). From a situated learning perspective (Lave & Wenger, 1991), it can be stated that students learn the disciplinary writing practices by gradually participating in the social practices of a community. Thus, writing is a result of certain social practice but it is a social practice itself and it cannot be divorced from the cultural and social contexts in which is enacted (Barton & Hamilton, 1998). Authoring a dissertation, then, does not imply “internalizing” some objective knowledge about academic writing, but developing a writer identity in relation with disciplinary communities of practice (Colombo, 2012a; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998).

Based on the aforementioned ideas, studies on the acquisition of literacy practices at the postgraduate level have started focusing on social relations (Angelova & Riazantseva, 1999; Caffarella & Barnett, 2000; Casanave, 1995; Colombo, 2011; Ferenz, 2005; McAlpine & Amundsen, 2012; Prior, 1997; Seloni, 2011, among others). Since writing a dissertation implies a process where social meanings as well as the students’ identities are negotiated (Barnacle & Mewburn, 2010; Cadman, 1997; Carlino, 2011; Ivanič, 1998), we must analyze not only the texts people write but also their literacy practices as ways of participating in disciplinary communities.

In Argentina, some scholars have explored the role that some social ties play in the dissertation writing process in postgraduate studies. Carlino (2004b) claims that unstructured supervision practices and the lack of institutional support go against program completion. Additionally, Reisin and Carlino (2009) showed that participation in a research team and a high level of involvement on part of the supervisor are factors that help finishing dissertations together with family, work and institutional support. These authors started to bring attention to postgraduate writing practices, inciting theoretical discussions as well as practical initiatives. Nevertheless, research on academic literacies at the postgraduate level is still rather scarce in Latin American countries (Carlino, 2004a; Martín Torres, 2012) and most works are centered on the academic realm. Therefore, this research explores the role that social relations play in the dissertation writing process focusing on the social ties from students’ personal-sphere.





2. Methods.

This exploratory study combines different data collection methods. Electronic questionnaires and in-depth interviews were conducted with doctoral students and recent graduates from a variety of PhD programs in the area of Education and Linguistics offered by public and private universities located in Buenos Aires, Argentina. In addition, data was completed with official online and printed documents with information about program structure and dissertation-writing requirements.

To form the convenience sample (Creswell, 2007), potential participants were first contacted via email with a brief presentation of the research and a questionnaire including the following open-ended questions: a) What was the biggest challenge you faced while doing your thesis?; b) Who influenced your thesis process and how?; c) What type of help would have been useful while doing your thesis?; d) Write three words that describe how you felt when you were doing your thesis; d) Did you defend your thesis? If yes, when?: e) Did you have a scholarship?; f) You can add anything that you consider worth mentioning. Those who answered the first contact email, were re-contacted and asked for a face-to-face interview. In order to increase the sample, snowball sampling was used and participants were contacted by word of mouth.

The in-depth personal interview guide was designed based on the themes and patterns found in the electronic-questionnaires answers and it was piloted with two doctoral students from Education and Linguistics. The interview prompted participants to narrate their dissertation process, people that influenced it, difficulties that they found, and the role writing practices played in it. Most of the questions were open and probes were used to clarify and increase the information gathered (Lofland, Snow, Anderson, & Lofland, 2006). Audio recordings were transcribed. This paper presents preliminary results based on 12 face-to-face interviews conducted with doctoral students and recent graduates from different postgraduate programs in Education and Linguistics. Data analysis was conducted combining inductive and deductive processes and using categorizing and contextualizing strategies (Maxwell & Miller, 2008).

Table 1 presents the profile of the 12 interviewees; seven of them were enrolled in PhD programs in Education and five in Linguistics. Most of the participants were women (8 of 12). Four of them (2 women and 2 men) had recently finished their PhD (2 in Linguistics and 2 in Education). All of those coming from the Education area had a Master's, while no one from the Linguistics field had previous postgraduate degrees. Their average age was 36.6 and the majority had held or was holding a scholarship for their doctoral studies, excepting two people in Education and two in Linguistics.





Table 1. Interviewees' profiles.

Name	Age	Disciplinary field		PhD		Master's studies	Scholarship
		Education	Linguistics	Incomplete	Finished		
Ernest	28		X	2nd year		No	Yes
Kevin	29	X		2nd year		Yes	Yes
Fiona	31	X		2nd year		Yes	Yes
Lucy	32	X		2nd year		Yes	No/Yes*
Kathy	32		X	3rd year		No	Yes
Thomas	33		X	5th year		No	Yes
Ann	33	X			In 2010	Yes	Yes
Mary	34	X		2nd year		Yes	Yes
Juliet	45		X		In 2010	No	No
Carmen	44	X			In 2010	Yes	No
Amy	48		X		In 2012	No	No
Mark	50	X		2nd year		Yes	No

Note. * Scholarship starting on the 3rd year of her PhD.

3. Results.

Analysis of the interviews indicated that certain social ties could facilitate or hinder the dissertation writing process so they were categorized as negative or positive. These social relations, that according to the interviewees influenced their thesis process, belonged not only to their academic environment, but also to the personal sphere. This section describes the personal-sphere social ties that have a positive influence in the thesis process and details the different types of support that doctoral students mentioned.

Almost all interviewees (11 of 12) mentioned that social relations from their personal sphere, at some point in time, influenced in a good way their thesis writing process. More than half of them (8 of 12) declared that the support given by their family allowed them to pursue or finish their postgraduate studies. Among these, all of them mentioned one or both, their father and mother. The totality of interviewees who were parents (4 of 12) mentioned their children. In addition, more than half of the participants indicated that they received help from previous or current couples and friends. Five named people with whom they held some type of counselling activity. The following section details the different types of support that, according to the participants, these social ties offered during the dissertation writing process.

3.1. Emotional support.

Almost all of the participants (11 of 12) declared to receive support and encouragement from their relatives as Carmen's³ interview excerpt illustrates: *"both of them, my brother, he also wrote his Master's dissertation, and my sister was doing her Master's as well. So there was a time when we were all talking about our dissertations. So imagine, on Sundays, the topics during our family lunch revolved around our dissertation . . . And we would try to support each other. They did not finish their dissertations, but it was very energizing, let's say, at that time. Then, Tony. Tony is my partner since 2006 . . . they [her family and her couple]⁴ were accompanying me all the time [with the dissertation process]."* As this quote illustrates, not only family members but also couples would accompany doctoral students along the





way. Similar to Carmen, Fiona mentioned that being able to talk with her boyfriend about her research was a factor of wellness “because sometimes you feel anguish, and things happen, and you need someone to interact with, to connect with”.

Couples, then, also seem to offer emotional support, especially when doctoral students feel overwhelmed and frustrated with their dissertation process. Kevin, for example, declared that his wife was the one who could “bear” with his “craziness” and deal with him being in a bad mood because of his research. Meanwhile, in his work place (since he holds a full-time scholarship his work is at the same time his dissertation research) he had to “suck it up” and pretend that everything was great, hiding any bad feelings. Partners, as declared by most participants, offered emotional support at specific times, such as those when the dissertation-writing process made them feel in distress.

Results also evidence that the emotional support that doctoral students get from the personal sphere is not always directly related with the thesis work. Many of them declared sharing their dissertation process with friends and family. Nevertheless, a big majority also declared that they felt that people that did not know much about their dissertations or with whom they did not talk about their research project still offered them support to finish it. For example, in the interview Fiona affirmed that her mother did not understand her research but she felt she was there for her. Similarly, Lucy did not “discuss it [her dissertation]” with her family and they actually did not know what she was researching. However, she felt that “they share the feeling” associated with the path of her dissertation road. Similarly, Ann mentioned that her friends “do not understand” how things work in her academic environment but they still “back her up”. Therefore, friends, family and couples can offer doctoral students emotional support even without knowing what their dissertation is about or what doing it implies.

Another type of social tie that according to half of the participants influenced in a positive way their dissertation process was the one established with counsellors such as psychologists. As Juliet explains, the fact that she was devoting most of the time of her counselling sessions to talk about her dissertation, prompted her to start making real efforts to finish it. In this process, counselling sessions “helped a lot” and offered her “tons of emotional containment.” In a parallel manner, Amy declared that the group and individual sessions she attended helped her to “face the change” when she quitted her full time job and started to work more regularly on her dissertation. In addition, Mary, Carmen, Ann, and Kevin declared to discuss with their counsellors the tensions they found between being a researcher and other aspects of their lives.

These results show that the emotional help offered by social relations associated with the personal sphere is not always directly linked to the dissertation work. As a matter of fact, separating the personal sphere seems to be a key strategy used by candidates to keep a healthy balance and avoid feeling overwhelmed by the dissertation process. This separation, then, would not be showing a lack of support, but giving place to some type of emotional help that, despite not being directly involved with the dissertation process, facilitates it. While family ties clearly offer emotional support on a regular basis or in a specific moment in time, counsellors, additionally, offer a space to discuss and reflect on matters related to future jobs and career issues.





3.2. Financial support.

Financial or monetary help is another type of support provided by the social ties from students' personal-sphere. Postgraduate studies demand a considerable amount of time and monetary resources. Although more than half of the interviewees (8 out of 12) declared to have or have had a scholarship, a recurrent theme in the interviews was the monetary support facilitated by relatives and couples.

Four out of twelve interviewees mentioned having received monetary help from their parents at some point during their postgraduate studies. This type of support can have direct or indirect impact (for example, money to cover life expenses) on postgraduate studies and, therefore, on the dissertation process. This impact is depicted by the opposite scenario described by Amy. According to her, the death of her mother and the consequent lack of financial help pushed her to get a full time position as a State employee. This situation affected the course of her academic career since she finished her undergraduate studies later than expected due to her busy work schedule. Furthermore, when she started her postgraduate studies, the possibility of applying for a scholarship was null since it was incompatible with her State job. Years later, she got married for the second time. Thanks to the financial support of her husband, she could resign her job and finish the PhD program she had started 12 years ago.

It is worth noticing that all the interviewees that mentioned receiving financial help from their personal ties also talked about fellowships or scholarships provided by national and/or private organizations. Unlike other countries, student loans are not common in Argentina, reason why social ties might play a key role in the absence of monetary help from institutions.

To summarize, the financial support coming from the personal sphere can facilitate access, consecution and completion of doctoral studies since in Argentina postgraduate programs are not free of charge (De la Fare & Lenz, 2012). Additionally, it enables doctoral students to devote a reasonable amount of time to the dissertation, especially when they do not have financial support originated on their work or academic spheres.

3.3. Economic support.

One type of help that appeared recurrently in the interviews was the one related to household work, including housekeeping, child and elder caring and feeding activities (Carrasco & Domínguez, 2003). Following Feminist Economics, these were grouped under the term "economic help": any type of support aimed at taking over doctoral students' household activities, allowing them to devote time to their dissertation.

Three of the four interviewees who were parents mentioned economic help related to child caring activities. Juliet and Amy, for example, mentioned that their husband and ex-husband respectively took care of their children while they were writing the dissertation. In Amy's words: *"And in that time [while writing the dissertation proposal] my ex-husband helped me, especially with the kids, so I could put everything together."* Similarly, Kevin counted with the help of his mother who babysat and cooked so he could *"lock himself up"* to write. It is worth noticing that all the interviewees that received help with child caring expressed that this happened in those moments where they were writing more intensively.





Another type of economic help mentioned by several interviewees (7 of 12) was related to feeding activities and house chores. Parents or couples helped in activities such as cleaning the house, grocery shopping and food preparation. This also allowed doctoral students to devote time to their dissertations.

As data shows, social relations associated with the personal realm offer economic help that frees candidates from feeding and child caring activities as well as house chores. As previously mentioned, doctoral studies entail a great demand of time: in addition to meet their course work, doctoral students are asked to produce a piece of original research. Those undertaking a PhD in the Humanities and Social Sciences, most commonly work only with the help of their supervisors and conduct research on their own (Deem & Brehony, 2000, p. 150). Therefore, they need to allocate a great amount of time and resources to advance with their doctoral research projects. In this scenario, the economic help provided by the personal-sphere social relations becomes a valuable resource.

The emotional, financial, and economic support provided by family and friends, in spite of not being directly related to the dissertation writing process, seem to facilitate it. The following section details the academic support, which is more directly linked to this process.

3.4. Academic support.

Usually, candidates receive academic support from social relations originated in the academic realm (Belcher, 1994; Colombo, 2011, 2012a; Dysthe, 2002; Prior, 1997, 1998). Nevertheless, data collected during the interviews show that ties from the personal sphere also offer this kind of help.

Proof-reading was the academic support most commonly mentioned by interviewees (7 of 12). Having relatives and couples reading the final version of the dissertation helped them improving their texts. These “external” proof-readers indicated when they did not understand something and this allowed them to further revise their writing in terms of intelligibility. Having access to proof-readers who “*knew nothing about the topic*”, as Ann mentioned, was conceived as something positive: if they understood what was written it was because the text presented it “*in such a clear way as for them to understand it.*” Contrary to people in their academic environment, relationships from the personal sphere offered this non-expert standpoint that helped doctoral students to better express themselves through writing. Along the same lines, Kevin and Fiona mentioned that in the future they planned to ask their partners to read some chapters or the complete final draft of their dissertations to have this “*external view*”, as Kevin termed it.

Participants also mentioned to receive help from people who were knowledgeable about certain aspects involved in the dissertation text. For example, Carmen’s mother “*who understands about education*” read parts of her thesis and this prompted discussions on some disciplinary notions that were presented in it. A similar situation appeared in Amy’s interview when she declared that her ex-husband feedback helped her because he would do a “*conceptual reading, in philosophical terms*” of some of the concepts she was applying in her Linguistics dissertation.





As data from the interviews show, social relations from the personal sphere offer dissertation writers access to proof-readers. The comments and feedback received from family, friends and couples were useful whether these persons were or were not familiar with the disciplinary field and/or dissertation topic. On the one hand, those with some expertise in the topic helped consolidating the presentation of disciplinary contents and concepts. On the other hand, those who were not familiar with the disciplinary field or the content of the thesis facilitated the revision process by offering feedback based on the clarity and flow of the text. These findings can be related to the “pseudo communicative nature” of the dissertation (Shaw, 1991, p. 194) that demands from doctoral students both, to explain contents to an expert audience (e.g., acknowledged authors in certain field) and to address to a non-expert audience (e.g., some committee members who belong to the discipline but do not specialize in certain topic). It is in this sense that proof-readers who do not belong to doctoral students’ academic realm can give access to the possible interpretations of a non-expert audience and thus, facilitate the revision and writing processes.

4. Discussion.

Writing a dissertation demands to gradually start participating in a disciplinary community of practice (Colombo, 2012a) and thus involves going through an identity-changing process where doctoral students assume multiple and emerging positions (Barnacle & Mewburn, 2010) to form their academic identities. Therefore, social relations play a key role in the making of a doctoral thesis (McAlpine & Amundsen, 2012; McAlpine, Paulson, Gonsalves, & Jazvac-Martek, 2012). In this paper, it was explored if relationships from the doctoral students’ personal sphere influence their dissertation process in a positive way. Results show that these social ties play a key role in the dissertation process thanks to the different types of support they offer: emotional, financial, economic and academic.

Friends, relatives and consellers help doctoral students by offering emotional support during the whole process or when they feel stressed and frustrated. When writing a dissertation, doctoral students do not only face conceptual, methodological and writing challenges; but they also have to deal with an array of feelings associated with being novice and the gradual participation and exposure to a certain academic community (Carlino, 2012; Styles & Radloff, 2000). The emotional support found in social relationships from the personal realm seems to be a valuable asset for students: despite not being familiar with their dissertation topic or directly involved with the doctoral research, these social ties help candidates by trusting them and endorsing their academic identity.

Relationships from the personal sphere also offer doctoral students financial and economic support. In the absence of financial help provided by public or private organizations, the monetary support originated in the personal sphere can be of crucial importance since in Argentina postgraduate programs are not free of charge (De la Fare & Lenz, 2012) and student loans are rare. Additionally, parents and couples give economic support by fulfilling household activities and, thus, allowing candidates to allocate time to work on their dissertation. This can be of utmost importance for those undertaking a PhD in the Humanities and Social Sciences since most commonly students work only with the help of their supervisors and conduct research on their own (Deem & Brehony, 2000, p. 150).





Finally, friends, family, and couples grant academic support when reading and commenting drafts of the thesis. Unlike the aforementioned types of support, this one is directly related to the thesis writing process and offers a valuable resource that does not seem to be readily available in the academic sphere: proof-readers. This type of help was not only provided by those who were experts in the field or with some aspects of their dissertation: proof-readers who do not belong to doctoral students' academic realm can give access to the possible interpretations of a non-expert audience and thus, facilitate the revision and writing processes. Furthermore, access to proof-readers apart from dissertation supervisors does not seem to be readily available in academic settings in Argentina, where there is a lack of institutional initiatives that encourage these practices (Carlino, 2008; Colombo & Carlino, 2015). Therefore, friends and family who read dissertation drafts and offer feedback to make arguments stronger and add clarity to the text provide candidates a valuable resource to improve their dissertation.

For the most part, the help obtained from personal ties, although necessary, might not be sufficient. As a matter of fact, the information collected in this study can be used as a basis to develop institutional initiatives aimed at facilitating the dissertation process and increasing graduation rates. In addition to financial help and given how important emotional support can be for candidates, postgraduate programs in Argentina and Latin America could devote resources to sponsor workshops or seminars where postgraduate students reflect on the experience of writing a doctoral dissertation. Learning that the dissertation process is challenging for most people would help unveiling and, thus, facing the frustration feelings often experienced while carrying doctoral research projects. The exchange of ideas and opinions with others who are also going through an enculturation process to acquire the specific ways of doing and being in their disciplines can make more explicit and thus manageable the expectations of a given scientific community (Aitchison & Lee, 2006; Chihota, 2007; Yates, 2007, among others).

Additionally, supervision practices could be better structured and uphold (Carlino, 2003, 2004b; McAlpine, 2013) as well as combined with other pedagogical devices in order to smooth the dissertation process. For example, a good alternative to support dissertation writing practices that universities could start consist on the implementation of doctoral reading and writing groups (Dysthe, Samara & Westheim, 2006). In fact, writing groups have shown not only to be effective in advancing and improving the dissertation writing process but also as a pedagogical device to teach academic writing practices (Aitchison, 2003; Aitchison & Lee, 2006; Carlino, 2012; Colombo, 2012b; Colombo & Carlino, 2015).

All things considered, the acquisition process of writing and research practices that doctoral students face when doing a dissertation should be mostly facilitated by the academic sphere instead of the personal one. This, we believe, would avoid delays and broken paths on the road to becoming a PhD.





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² The words "dissertation" and "thesis" are used interchangeably to describe the summative research text presented for examination at the doctoral level.

³ Pseudonyms are used to preserve data confidentiality.

⁴ Quotes from the interviews are marked with italics to differentiate them from author's quotes. Square brackets are used to add information implicit in participants' declarations.

