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A Therapist Does a Ph.D.: On the Experience of Doctoral Study[1]

Counsellor/therapist **Dr Jay Beichman** in conversation with Richard House

Richard House [**RH**]: Jay, I know you've recently gained a Ph.D. degree in psychotherapy – anyone who's ever done doctoral-level research will know what a feat that is! Can you tell us something, first, about what led you down the path of doing a doctorate – and whether it was connected with your professional work as a therapist, or something quite distinct from your practice?

Jay Beichmam [**JB**]: I think, really, it was mostly because it was part of my family culture. My father – who killed himself when I was 13 and he was 38 – completed a Ph.D. in 1969 in the field of French Literature about Cyrano de Bergerac and Fontenelle. Although there was obviously anger in me towards my father because of my bereavement, there was and is also a lot of deep love and respect. I have wonderful memories of fun adventures he took me on – travelling in a van across the USA and things like that – that most small boys don't get to experience. So in the way that sons sometimes like to imitate their fathers or achieve as much as them, I was motivated to one day have a go at studying for a Ph.D. on those grounds alone.

In addition, quite a few other members of my family have got Ph.D.'s or are on the verge of getting them. My aunt (my father's sister) has one in Japanese literature, and her daughter has one in Korean literature, my uncle in astrophysics, another aunt in English Literature, their daughter in Maths, and another cousin is on the verge of completing a Ph.D. in Marine Biology. I didn't want to be left out!

Last but not least, my grandfather also had a Ph.D. in Political Science, and he was almost like a 'fan' of education, and especially the Ph.D. as something to attain. Whenever anyone was struggling in life on a material level, a common refrain he had was to encourage them 'Back to school!'. So over the years, many long years – he died aged 96 – he would perennially encourage me to do a Ph.D. and espouse the benefits of doing so. When he died he left me a small amount of money and I thought it would be the best tribute to him to use it in the pursuit of a Ph.D. Foolishly I thought the amount would cover it – it didn't – but I'm sure he wouldn't have wanted a penny to go on anything else.

In addition to the family influence I've noticed that a lot of the people I admire and respect in the world have trodden this path themselves. I thought that there must have been good reasons for them doing so, or the fact that they had done so led to them writing something or talking about something that had impressed me. I'm thinking of relatively conventional people who write books about therapy and other subjects, but also those a bit on the wild side, like Timothy Leary, Terence McKenna and Robert Anton Wilson, to name just a few. So as well as the Ph.D. having 'straight' connotations, a lot of counter-cultural icons have also taken that route, and I wondered what was down that road that they found so interesting.

In terms of my practice I realised that it would not influence that in any direct way, but indirectly through researching my topic and setting that topic in its social and historical context I think that I do have a better 'helicopter view' of the field of therapy than I ever did before. And because of that I think I have a much better sense of what I'm doing in relation to everything else, even though the Ph.D. teaches no practical therapy skills at all.

RH: One of the great things about doing these interviews, Jay, is that one's continually, and often deliciously, being taken by surprise by the answers my questions evoke. A whole *family culture* of Ph.D.'s… – that's quite something, that I don't think I've ever come across before. So perhaps there's a kind 'family belonginess' to your doing the Ph.D. – that's a motivation I'd never have considered – and it just shows how unique everyone's path is on these life journeys. And the connection with your dad is deeply moving – thank you for sharing that.

Your answer also left me wondering about the specifically emotional aspects of doing a doctorate. The conventional view is that doctoral study is an intellectual/analytical type experience – but I think there's perhaps far more 'emotionality' in doing a doctorate than is commonly realised.

Did you start out with expectations of what the experience would be like? – and if so, to what extent did the reality of it all match any preconceptions you started with?

JB: Yes, a 'family belongingess' is definitely there, although quite centrally my father – if he hadn't have done one I might not have done it – and the fact that he ultimately dropped out of the academic life and it didn't seem to do him any favours in terms of overall happiness, was an internal argument against doing the Ph.D. that I had on the way to going for it in the end.

I definitely had expectations of what doing the Ph.D. would be like. I knew it would involve a lot of reading about my subject, which I looked forward to – I always feel like I could and 'should' know more, especially when it comes to being a therapist – as we can really never know enough to help our clients; and I am continually astounded by how much therapists/writers in our field seem to have absorbed, not just therapy ideas but philosophy, literature and science. I always feel very behind the leading figures in our field in terms of knowledge and reading. So I hoped that I would at least be a little more 'well-read' by the time I finished. I also knew that it would involve research, and of course I looked forward to that. As a writer I also anticipated it as a kind of very committed writing exercise, and at least on one level that's exactly what it was.

I didn't anticipate how it would be difficult in other ways. For instance, before starting I remember reading in a book called *How to Get a PhD* (Phillips & Pugh, 2000) that sometimes candidates had difficulties with their supervisors. I skipped through that bit, thinking, 'Well, that's not me I get on with people okay'. And then I was surprised that we did have some challenges along the way, although everything worked out fine in the end.

I also didn't anticipate how much the bureaucracy of a university could really unnecessarily impede progress. For instance, the research proposal needs to be approved to ensure that the research project is ethically sound; so there was no point arranging interviews until this had been formally passed. It was months before it was passed because one academic was arguing a political point with me which had nothing to do with ethics, and then he got ill so there was even more delay. I know who this academic was and he's a really nice guy, but at the time and retrospectively, I think that was just a big waste of time and energy. There were also some processes that were very disempowering, almost infantilizing, which I also felt were a waste of time and difficult to stomach as a man in my 50s.

Another thing I didn't anticipate was how resistant counsellors, therapists, training institutions and the people who are the gatekeepers of those institutions are to research and researchers. There's a lot of talk about how great research is etc., but when it actually comes to it, a lot of therapists aren't interested in supporting it. I can understand that, in a way, because so much of it isn't that interesting or relevant; but I was surprised at how strong that resistance was. To be fair, though, this was when I was wanting to work with recorded

sessions, which is different to how I ended up researching my topic –but in part I didn't go that route precisely because of that resistance. There is a call in the field for more research about clients and less about therapists, but unless you're attached to a research centre which makes it easy to record sessions or you have access to recorded sessions (with all the necessary ethical safeguards) you're going to make it more difficult for yourself. There's a reason why so much research is about therapists, and I think if the field wants more research about clients they have to help researchers make that happen.

Also, I never thought I'd enjoy research conferences so much! There's definitely a kind of buzz at them that you don't get at other kinds of conferences. But I've had my fill of them for at least a bit now!

If you do a Ph.D. part-time, which is the only way you can if you want or need to continue seeing clients, then it's also a very long drawn-out process: it literally takes years. In theory, five years; but most people will go to six, and in my case it took seven (for various reasons). That's a long time to endure and/or keep motivated about it all.

At the beginning of 2016 my best friend died and intensified my 'death awareness'. I thought my death awareness was already pretty high because of early parental deaths but that shot it to another level. It was sometimes hard to keep going after that, not because the work was any more difficult, but because if it was a sunny day or evening it could be quite hard to convince myself that working on my thesis was actually the best thing I could be doing with my life. But because I was relatively near the end it would have seemed even more pointless to chuck it all in so I was determined to finish the course.

RH: There's so much to pick up on there, Jay. Your loss of your best friend brings home to me how, on such an academic journey (of three years at the absolute minimum, and for most quite a bit longer), life issues are almost bound to impinge on, and possibly disrupt, the process. And then there's the 'stuff' most if not all of us have about studying and learning (e.g. Britzman, 2009; Davou, 2002; Mayes, 2012; Salzberger et al., 1983) – and in institutional contexts, to boot! – that are bound to give the doctoral journey all manner of emotional dimensions, shadings and challenges – and maybe joys too! So adding the latter to the sheer grind of all the work involved, and the professional relationships and their vicissitudes that are part of the scene too, perhaps the doctoral experience both requires, and helps one to develop, one's will (power) and resilience.

I wonder if you could say more about what you call 'the bureaucracy of the university' (that sounded all too familiar to me). To what extent do you feel the bureaucracy is unnecessary and inappropriate? And do you think it discourages, even penalizes, those of a more creative, innovative style and sensibility? (here I'm thinking of psychologist Michael Kirton's useful distinction between 'innovators' and 'adaptors' – Kirton, 1994). And if so, I wonder what could be done about that, whilst not compromising the necessary quality and rigour of doctoral work?

Also, re '…how much therapists/writers in our field seem to have absorbed, not just therapy ideas but philosophy, literature and science'. This got me thinking that, following Jim Hansen (2018), perhaps the humanities are at least as important as, if not more important than, psychological theory and clinical practice when it comes to being a good therapist. Would you agree with that?

Lots there for you to pick up on, as you wish.

JB: I think the reward/punishment dynamic is still very much there, and the supervisor system is of course explicitly hierarchical and can parallel all the usual pitfalls of Parent–Child dynamics in adult relationships. And I think some of that happened to me in the early stages. My doctoral experience certainly became one of will power and resilience, but not just that. If that was all it was, I would not have finished it – I think choosing a topic that was very interesting to me is what kept me going.

When I think of the bureaucracy of the university it just seemed like I was often waiting for other people to look at bits of paper or my writing or my research proposals that they needed to do something with before I could get on to the next

thing – and that's still happening, even though I've more or less finished because I'm waiting for just a few corrections to be okayed. I appreciate academics are busy, but it felt like there was a lot of waiting on other people to do things. I've blocked a lot of it out because it was just too depressing so the 'research proposal' is really the one that I've saved in my mind as a prime example. My thoughts on that is that ethics are important, but in my case it seemed like it lost sight of it being about ethics and became an excuse for a senior academic to become preoccupied with his own agenda. What's the point of that? That stuff can wait for internal presentations or conferences.

Then there was a bureaucratic process in which I was asked to write a chapter about methodology before I'd even done a thorough literature review. That didn't make sense to me, and then at a meeting about it when it was all okayed, a senior academic asked me: 'Just one question: why did you write a chapter about methodology before writing your literature review?'. I could have screamed; but in the end my methodology chapter was particularly praised by my examiners, so maybe in the scheme of things it all did work out okay.

I think the bureaucracy is important for doctoral students who are going on to be researchers, because of course that stuff is all part of being a researcher – filling in forms to get funding and permissions etc. I'm glad I didn't have to deal with the NHS, which is worse than any university, so I hear! For me it was a pain because I don't expect to do this kind of thing as a researcher again. If I did something like this again it would be as a writer or a journalist.

I think it does discourage those of a more creative, innovative style and sensibility. Certainly in the social sciences it seems to me the desire to be seen as rigorous as the natural sciences has led to an obsession with methodology, which could put people off. As a former student of literature I kind of wanted to write more of a critique than something that mirrored the scientific method. I was able to do that to a certain extent, but not as freely as I might have done if I hadn't been constrained by how the Ph.D. is meant to be structured/researched, unless you have very good reasons not to do it that way.

I really don't know what can be done about that; and what I'm suggesting could probably make it more difficult, since the good thing about the Ph.D. as it stands is that there's a kind of 'formula' to it – in terms of how the research is meant to be done and how you are meant to write it up; so that if you follow that with a certain amount of effort, you should get to the end okay.

I definitely think the humanities are as important as psychological theory and clinical practice when it comes to being a good therapist. I think some clients and practitioners are okay working within a medical model. In fact, not just okay – enthusiastic about it. In other words, some clients come along and say 'I've got depression' and that's all I'm concerned with and help me deal with that. For that kind of client there's a way of working that is more 'psychological' and 'medical'. Other clients I think understand that these symptoms are just part of the story, and struggles aren't just about symptoms or 'disorders' or 'illnesses', but deep down are about meaning or feeling lack of meaning. That's philosophy, literature, drama – a good understanding of *One Who Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* has to be worth as much as an Irvin Yalom or Carl Rogers book, in my view.

RH: It sounds like for you, Jay, choice of a topic that really interested you was essential in order for you to find the motivation to complete the research process. I'd strongly agree with that – with the proviso that something that interests one at a point in time may not endure once you've spent 3–4 years (at least) critiquing and thinking and writing about it! And yes, academics are under enormous amounts of pressure, and if they're not good at organizing their time (as some aren't), then I'm sure that can contribute to a less-than-satisfactory experience for students.

Re 'in the social sciences it seems to me the desire to be seen as rigorous as the natural sciences has led to an obsession with methodology, which could put people off'; and 'the good thing about the Ph.D. as it stands is that there's a kind of "formula" to it'. For me this raises core questions about the very nature and *idea* of research in late modernity

(House, 2010): e.g. to what extent is doctoral research just one more manifestation of what David Harvey calls ‘status-quo theory’, if one has to shoe-horn one’s research into culturally legitimated methodological templates? I wonder what such a system would have done to Einstein and his revolutionary discoveries about relativity!

I’m wondering whether your view of the whole doctoral research process may have changed over time, Jay, as you got some distance from the intensity of it all – and if so, how your perception of the process might have changed with time. Also, I was wondering whether you might like to draw on your experience of successfully negotiating the doctoral journey to come up with a succinct bullet-point list of “do’s and don’t’s” for those considering embarking on this most challenging of academic journeys.

JB: I think choice of topic is essential if you have that choice. Some doctoral students, if they are attached to a bigger project, will be constrained by the aims of that project in terms of choice.

Re: methodology in the social sciences as perpetuating status quos of various kinds. I think, yes, to a certain extent. It has become quite 'regulated' in that sense. At the time of Blumer (very influential for my work) the methods and methodology of the social sciences seemed a lot looser. I think it would have been possible to focus on what interested you without necessarily choosing your lens first. Whereas now to get your research proposal accepted you need to work all that out (in theory at least) before you even have your first interview.

I remember one of our methodology lecturers spoke about how when she was at Oxford doing her doctorate she said to her supervisor that she wanted to do a study of prostitution in Barcelona. The supervisor said, 'Okay, sounds interesting, get on with it' – no ethical procedures, nothing – whilst our contemporary academic culture might gasp, we might have gone too far the other way to a culture in which there is so much concern about how the research might negatively affect others that a lot of research is probably just dumped, or not even proposed in the first place.

That's a bit of an aside to your main question about methodological 'purism' (you might say) sustaining the status quo. There is still room in Ph.D. research to challenge rigid methodologies: in fact, you can claim originality on that basis – I found Kovo-Ljungberg's (2015) *Reconceptualizing Qualitative Research: Methodologies without Methodology* essential reading for my take on it; and not doing IPA (Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis) which is often used as a 'safe' option was for me absolutely the right decision.

I think that now some months have passed since I submitted, was examined, did minor corrections, had those minor corrections okayed and finally was conferred the Ph.D. a month or so ago, I am taking up a calmer position in relation to the process of the whole thing. I also heard a story from another therapy Ph.D. student that is unfortunately confidential (for now at least) that made my problems fade into insignificance, and which has also helped me count my blessings! If you want or need a Ph.D. qualification I think the process is fair enough. If you don't want or need that qualification there are other non-academic routes into research and/or just exploring issues via journalism or non-fiction writing.

For anyone thinking of undertaking a Ph.D., here are five Do’s and one Don’t that occur to me, just off the top of my head:

- Do look into the possibility of joining an existing research team and the possibility of a 'studentship' or other forms of funding.
- Do think about whom you want as supervisors in relation to your topic; this is more important than the university you choose.
- Do budget for the possibility of the whole process lasting longer than they say it will or you anticipate it will.
- Do guard your time.
- Do expect that researching and writing the Ph.D. over a 5–7 year period will inevitably impact your relationships (you won't have the same amount of 'free time' as you did before), and be prepared to negotiate that.

- Don't overdo it; take days off here and there – go on holiday – watch a box set.

RH: Thank you so much, Jay – errr, ***Dr Beichman***! Your openness, honesty and insight in recounting your doctoral research experience will be of considerable interest and value to our members and readers.

Note

1 This interview took place over a number of months, so it reflects an unfolding process, rather than a snap-shot taken at one point in time.

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Richard House, Ph.D., is the editor of this AHP online magazine and a former editor of Self & Society journal. He counts his lucky stars that he did his Ph.D. in the pre-Audit Culture 1970s and 80s, when there was still considerable freedom, self-determination and autonomy around the whole doctoral research process.