

## Advances in Nursing Science

Issue: Volume 23(3), March 2001, pp 88-103

Copyright: Copyright © 2001 by Aspen Publishers, Inc.

Publication Type: [Teaching and Learning]

ISSN: 0161-9268

Accession: 00012272-200103000-00008

Keywords: cooperative research, doctoral education, feminist process, nursing education, scholarly identity, scholarship, women's issues

[Teaching and Learning]

[Previous Article](#) | [Table of Contents](#)

# Doctoral Women as Passionate Scholars: An Exploratory Inquiry of Passionate Dissertation Scholarship

Heinrich, Kathleen T. PhD, RN

## ▼ Author Information

Associate Professor; University of Hartford; West Hartford, Connecticut

The author is grateful to Ann Taylor for conducting the initial focus group; to Drs. Nancy Coffin-Romig and Susan Bennett and the passionate dissertation scholars who participated in the second focus group, the ongoing data analysis, and the conference paper review; and to Dr. Dorothy Kleffel for editing this manuscript.

[Back to Top](#)

## ▼ Abstract











Advancement in knowledge development comes from novel perspectives and new visions, not from maintaining the status quo. Doctoral programs are mandated to develop nurse scholar-researchers who contribute to the discipline's body of knowledge. Although it stands to reason that doctoral students who are passionate about their dissertation research are more likely to make innovative contributions, there is little written about passionate scholarship in the nursing literature. This article describes an exploratory inquiry involving two focus groups of self-described passionate dissertation scholars. Underlining the passion, participants called passionate scholarship exciting and risky, personally meaningful and socially relevant life's work.

What is passionate dissertation scholarship? How can we as nurse educators best foster the development of passionate dissertation scholars? Because no systematic inquiry was reported in the literature, we asked a group of self-identified passionate dissertation scholars these questions. This article describes a feminist, cooperative, and exploratory inquiry of doctoral women's lived experiences with conducting passionate dissertation scholarship. It is hoped that by deepening doctoral educators' understanding of the challenges involved in conducting passionate research, they will mentor women doctoral students to become passionate scholars.

[Back to Top](#)

STUDY BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE REVIEW

## Article Tools

-  [Abstract Reference](#)
-  [Complete Reference](#)
- .....
-  [Print Preview](#)
-  [Email Jumpstart](#)
-  [Email Article Text](#)
-  [Save Article Text](#)
-  [Add to My Projects](#)
-  [Export All Images to PowerPoint](#)
-  [+Annotate](#)
-  [Snag Snippet](#)

 [Find Citing Articles](#)

[About this Journal](#)

[Full Text](#)

[Request Permissions](#)

## Outline

- [Abstract](#)
  - [STUDY BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE REVIEW](#)
  - [METHOD](#)
  - [FINDINGS](#)
    - [Naming a topic close to the heart](#)
    - [Committing—a risky business](#)
    - [Initiating passionate life's work](#)
  - [DISCUSSION](#)
  - [RECOMMENDATIONS](#)
    - [Introducing passionate scholarship into doctoral programs](#)
    - [Identifying passionate faculty scholars](#)
    - [Mentoring passionate scholars](#)
  - [IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION](#)
- [REFERENCES](#)
- [IMAGE GALLERY](#)

As is fitting in feminist educational research, the background for this study is linked intimately with the background of the researcher. I am a woman who entered doctoral study at 35 years of age with a strong sense of personal and professional self, and I graduated 4 years later with my professional identity shaken. After my doctoral program, it took several years for me to recover from completing a dissertation with a conflicted committee and to develop my scholarly voice. Many women told me, a doctoral educator and a researcher, stories about being diverted from pursuing dissertation topics about which they felt passionate. These incidents often resulted in a silencing that prevented them from studying these topics after obtaining their degrees.

The literature on how best to socialize women doctoral students into the identities of scholar and researcher is sparse.<sup>1-3</sup> Authors recommend that doctoral programs encourage the development of scholars engaged in "passionate scholarship"<sup>3</sup> by fostering a community of scholars immersed in a "culture of scholarly caring."<sup>4</sup> But these recommendations were neither tested empirically nor evaluated.<sup>5</sup>

Based on my personal experience, the stories of women who lost their identities in doctoral programs, and the dearth of extant research, I initiated the first longitudinal study to trace the development of scholarly identity in a group of women during their doctoral years.<sup>6</sup> A feminist, esthetic, and cooperative inquiry, this 18-month project entitled "Doctoral Study as Heroic Journey" involved an experiential workshop and four reunions grounded in feminist pedagogy and expressive methods. For these participants, scholarly identity development began with reclaiming personal identities made tenuous by midlife travails. After recovering personal identities during the workshop/reunion experience through journal writing, artwork, and group dialogue, a number of participants developed scholarly identity by pursuing dissertation topics about which they felt passionate.

Carol Christ was the first and only author to address passionate scholars' depth of personal investment in their topics. She believed passionate scholarship emanated from an ethos of eros and empathy rather than from the ethos of logos. In describing the first "moment" or phase in passionate scholarship, Christ <sup>7</sup> spoke of recognizing "the desire to understand, to preserve, or change the world that inspires the research."<sup>(p60)</sup> DuBois <sup>8</sup> believed that passionate dissertation scholarship was "driven by a passion for substance to answer questions central to the discipline and to social and humanitarian goals of society."<sup>(p46)</sup> Expanding on this idea, Meleis and colleagues <sup>4</sup> called for doctoral education for passionate scholarship "that is sensitive to cultural diversity and global collaboration."<sup>(p333)</sup> Not built on traditional scholarship, passionate scholarship "nurtures and encourages a diversity of methodologies and epistemologies."<sup>4 (p333)</sup> The authors recommended that doctoral educators foster communities of scholarly caring among faculty and students to support passionate scholars in their work.<sup>4</sup>

Although passionate scholarship is described by a small number of authors,<sup>4,7,8</sup> no systematic study of passionate dissertation scholarship has been reported in the literature. The need for such a study is supported both by the findings of the longitudinal study of scholarly identity development <sup>6</sup> and by the review of literature; therefore, an exploratory inquiry of passionate dissertation scholarship was initiated.

[Back to Top](#)

## METHOD

Because focus groups are particularly useful when little is known about the lived experience of a particular group of people,<sup>9-11</sup> two focus groups were used to study passionate dissertation scholarship. The question that guided this inquiry was, "What is/was your experience with conducting passionate dissertation research during your doctoral program?" As this was an exploratory study, the research design was qualitative and emergent. This inquiry combined feminism as the epistemology, cooperative inquiry as the methodology, and hermeneutic

evaluation as the method. The decision to study the phenomenon of doctoral women's lived experiences with passionate dissertation scholarship grew out of our feminist perspective.<sup>12</sup> Like feminism, cooperative inquiry emanates from a participative world view,<sup>13</sup> and all involved in the research endeavor become co-researchers and coparticipants whose dialogue and decision making set the course for the emergent design and the evolving group process.<sup>14</sup> The method of hermeneutic evaluation involves facilitators and a group of participants in the exploration of a particular lived experience. This egalitarian, evaluative process surfaces divergent points of view, and the negotiation of salient themes is educative and empowering for both the facilitators and participants.

I asked two other passionate dissertation scholars, Nancy Coffin-Romig and Susan Bennett, to explore this phenomenon with me. Susan Bennett has found that when researchers and participants share the same lived experience, it is particularly important for researchers to share their own stories prior to initiating data collection. This process both deepens the researchers' reflexivity and reduces the impulse to share their own stories in subsequent focus groups. A trusted colleague facilitated an initial focus group with the co-researchers in this study, asking us the same questions we would later ask focus group participants. After this focus group, we were able to dialogue about our experiences, as well as refine the questions in our interview schedule. Researchers may, and in this case we did, include the analyzed transcript of this initial focus group interview as part of the data set. We have come to call this procedure the Bennett method and recommend its use for qualitative researchers conducting individual or group interviews exploring a lived experience they share in common with the participants.<sup>15</sup>

Given that the ideal focus group size ranges from six to nine participants,<sup>16</sup> six participants ranging in age from 38 to 65 years formed the second focus group. Following a review by the university's Human Subjects Committee, participants were drawn from a purposeful convenience sample of doctoral candidates and recently graduated doctoral recipients who defined their dissertation research as passionate scholarship. They hailed from doctoral programs in three professional schools—education, psychology, and nursing—within two private universities in the southwestern United States. Of the nine participants in the two focus groups, seven women were Caucasian, one was Hispanic, and one was Filipino. After signing consent forms indicating that neither names nor identifying information would be reported with the findings, study participants met for one 2-hour focus group session centered around their experiences of conducting passionate dissertation research. Energized by speaking with other passionate scholars, participants agreed to meet a second time for a hermeneutic dialectic, a surfacing of all opinions and a negotiation of common themes that emerged from the data analysis.

Krueger's <sup>10</sup> outline of systematic steps was used to organize the data-gathering and analysis phases: (1) sequencing questions to allow maximum insight, (2) capturing and handling the data on audiotape, (3) coding data and salient emergent themes, (4) verifying written reports of findings with participants after the focus group, and (5) sharing of all reports by all researchers. Both focus group sessions were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were read multiple times by each researcher, the data were coded, and emergent themes were identified. After reviewing the transcripts individually, the co-researchers discussed and together negotiated the most salient ideas and emergent themes from the two focus groups.

When it was not possible to reconvene the group, participants agreed to respond in writing to five questions that surfaced from the preliminary data analysis:

1. How did it feel to do passionate scholarship?
2. Who/what helped me to do passionate scholarship?

3. What obstacles have I had to overcome in doing passionate scholarship?
4. What are the benefits to me personally and to others?
5. As a group you represented four "generations" of passionate scholars, those who were: initiating passionate scholarship; in the midst of data collection and analysis; at the dissertation defense stage; and, from one to several years following graduation from doctoral study. Where would you place yourself in this schema? What did you notice about the other three "generations" of passionate scholars represented in our focus group?

Given the depth and richness of the written responses and the number of participants who expressed their appreciation at having the opportunity to respond in writing to questions, the co-researchers decided to send out a second mailing that summarized the findings from the two focus groups and participants' responses to the five questions in the first mailing. In the second mailing, participants were asked to respond to three new questions that surfaced from the second analysis of the data:

1. What about your dissertation scholarship is close to your heart?
2. Did you ever/do you now consider your dissertation scholarship risky? If you answered yes, what were the risks to you? What were the benefits? What were the costs?
3. Did you use the Bennett method—having a colleague interview you using your own interview schedule or interviewing yourself by recording your responses to your own interview questions? If so, how did this experience help you conduct passionate scholarship?

An iterative process that engaged both facilitators and participants as co-researchers, the written responses to questions allowed for deep exploration of the lived experiences of individual participants in a way that the focus group had not. In order to establish trustworthiness, the qualitative equivalent of reliability and validity, participants responded to a summary of their responses to the initial focus group and the two sets of questions. Later they responded to a draft copy of a conference presentation highlighting the salient themes to participants to ensure that their experiences were faithfully represented. An expert qualitative researcher skilled in analyzing focus group data from a qualitative perspective also reviewed the findings from the focus group, the questions, the conference presentation draft, and this article.

[Back to Top](#)

## FINDINGS

Participants in this study underlined the *passion* in passionate scholarship. For them, passionate dissertation scholarship is exciting and risky, personally meaningful and socially relevant life's work. For some participants, recognition that they were passionate scholars was immediate. "When I first heard the term passionate scholarship, I knew I had it." For others, the fact that they were conducting passionate scholarship was a dawning awareness. Upon being asked if she was a passionate scholar, one participant remembered asking herself:

Do I think I'm doing passionate scholarship? My first response was, "Well, am I passionate about my scholarship? Yes. I'm passionate about this. It's about women, it's about nursing, and what we need to do." If you talk to me on a one-to-one basis, you would probably get an hour and a half discourse on what my findings are and what the implications are. So that, to me, is passionate scholarship.

In relation to passionate scholarship being personally meaningful, participants said, "[My topic is] something I was so energized by and fascinated with. It's like nothing else exists. And that's how it stays. For me, it's something I'm intensely

passionate about, that I really believe in." In regard to passionate scholarship being socially meaningful, one participant spoke of "wanting to make a change for a particular group of people who you have a lot of compassion for or care very deeply about through whatever personal experience you've had. And wanting to do something that would benefit that group."

One of the characteristics of participants from both focus groups was that they represented passionate scholars at four different phases. They were: initiating passionate scholarship, in the midst of data collection and analysis, at the defense stage, or one to several years following graduation from doctoral programs. One participant in reflecting on these phases observed:

There seems to be a definite process of evolution, from starting out starry-eyed and innocent to encountering barriers in the study development. Completion of a [dissertation] brings exhaustion and, for some, cynicism. Those people 6 months or more out from graduation seemed more settled, comfortable with themselves, confident. It was refreshing to see that those who were somewhat cynical were able to regenerate passion for their topics in renewed ways. Hearing their voices was most encouraging to me since I feared becoming burnt out. It's okay to rest. With time and patience comes renewed vigor-passion.

Another participant, who completed doctoral study a year prior to the focus group, spoke with the "somewhat cynical" tone alluded to by the first participant:

Those of us who completed the doctoral program acted like Jo, the tomboy in *Little Women*. We were independent, energetic, happy, cracking silly jokes and unable to stay serious longer than 10 minutes. Those who were in the middle of the process reminded me of Dorothy when she first landed in Oz. They seemed to have the slightly distracted, occasionally overwhelmed, temporarily confused, and frequently discouraged frame of mind that seems endemic to the process. The one or two who hadn't begun yet were sweet and smiley and naive. Little Red Riding Hoods, skipping merrily along the path clutching their little baskets of dissertation dreams and ideas, not knowing they are entering a forest full of mean, hungry wolves eager to take large and perhaps fatal bites out of their resolve and their goals.

Those initiating passionate scholarship raised concerns about the personal and professional risks of choosing their topics, the feasibility of transforming a topic into a dissertation, and selecting a dissertation committee that would support their passionate scholarship. Those in the midst of data collection expressed concern about giving voice to the participants in a way that faithfully conveyed their lived experiences. And those who graduated were concerned with how to disseminate their findings to academic and popular audiences. The concerns of participants at each phase offered a longitudinal perspective on the stages of conducting passionate dissertation scholarship.

Three dimensions of passionate scholarship that emerged from the data are discussed separately below: naming a topic close to the heart, committing—a risky business, and initiating a passionate life's work.

## [Back to Top](#)

### Naming a topic close to the heart

In describing what makes scholarship passionate, one participant said:

It strikes an emotional response. You could say it's a globally valuable piece, or you could say it gives voice to someone else. But that's not what makes it passionate. *What makes it passionate is that it comes from your heart.* I believe that anything you feel passionate about, there's got to be something in your soul

that causes you to have that deep commitment, emotional reaction, desire to pursue it beyond any other interesting topic.

One participant remembered, "Although I had never heard of the term 'passionate scholarship' when I began the program, I did know whatever I chose to write my dissertation on would be a topic that sparked my mind and sang to my heart." Another participant observed, "Think about all the topics that are represented [in this focus group]. They are all fascinating and they have to come from some place deep within each individual." The emphasis participants placed on passion is explained by only one author, Carol Christ, who wrote about the deep attraction scholars feel toward their topics.

Passionate scholars were powerfully attracted to study a particular topic because of some profound, personal experience, whether or not the research topic or population bore a social stigma. When asked, "What drew you to your topic?" one participant reported:

My own mystical experience. About 10 years ago I had an opening to the spiritual world and that was the first time I knew other people had those kinds of experience. I saw just how really difficult it was for those people. Part of it for me has been trying to find a language to use in talking about this phenomenon that is acceptable to people who haven't had the experience.

This passionate scholar was dedicated to giving voice both to her own and to others' experiences. She wanted her research to serve a hermeneutic function so the general population would better understand and appreciate the lived experience of those with similar experiences.

Some were drawn by personal experiences to their dissertation topics, for example, feeling deeply for a parent's experience.

Still others were drawn by professional experiences, for example, those who worked in clinical settings with patients and families who sparked nurses' interest in their topics:

I was passionate about that [topic] because it grew out of my clinical practice. And it grew out of some very uncomfortable encounters with parents who would tell me that they would want their children's diagnosis kept a secret from the children, and I had no idea how to respond to that or how to advise them. All I knew was that it was a very uncomfortable feeling, not having the parents' permission to acknowledge to the children.

So that felt pretty passionate, and that I think sustains all the highs and lows of taking course work. That is really what drove me to go back for my doctorate because there was no research out there that offered any guidelines. I thought, "To hell with it, I'll do the research." So I feel more grounded now having done the research. I do have a much better sense about how to approach parents and how to approach people in general with bad news and how you work through that process.

Passionate scholarship "signifies a tremendous leap of personal growth" where the rewards come as much from the process as from the outcome. Not only did participants find "joy in doing something that interested [them]," but they gained a "deeper understanding of the value of gaining knowledge in and of itself."

Participants believed a strong sense of self was an important factor that supported passionate scholarship. "I was lucky to grow up with a very strong sense

of confidence. I was a tomboy; I was an athlete. I think that sustained me well when I got to points in the dissertation when I felt unclear. I had this innate sense if I gave it a little time and maybe step back from it a bit, I'd find some clarity." Because passionate scholarship was close to the heart, participants deeply appreciated those persons and experiences that supported them and struggled with obstacles along the way. Supporters included faculty members, dissertation committee members, other passionate scholars, family, and friends. In speaking of supportive advisors, one participant remembered:

[A passionate faculty-scholar] came to a doctoral candidacy workshop when I was early in the program and said choose a dissertation topic that makes your eyes glitter. That's very true. Otherwise you just burn out, you just get sick of it. So [a dissertation topic] has to be something more than just an academically interesting question.

Another underscored the importance of supportive advisors:

It's important to have that supportive network around you. One of my committee members really cares very deeply about [my culture]. And without her I wouldn't have done it simply because she shares that passion that I have and she appreciated me in terms of my cultural identity. She was probably the first person to validate my cultural identity, and that was incredibly pivotal to me. And to say, that research is really needed. Having a supportive person on your committee is extremely important.

Hearing about others' passionate work helped:

What struck me when I heard [a passionate scholar present her dissertation research] study for the first time was, "How the heck did she do something that she was so close to? How is she doing that because that's such an emotional thing?" [A doctoral student colleague] who was conducting passionate dissertation scholarship was a very pivotal person too. When she shared her topic and her experience, then I began to think, "There are things that really mean a lot to me and could I do that?" So having some knowledge or connection to somebody who was doing that type of scholarship had an impact and made me stop and think, oh, [my dissertation] doesn't have to be this intellectually, totally quantitative, doctoral-ly type thing. That it could be something that would have meaning. That it could be intimate and personal.

Participants identified supportive academic experiences, including specific courses, an experiential doctoral program orientation, a student-faculty qualitative research interest group, and a workshop that prepared students to write qualifying examination papers. Some participants identified particular courses that were helpful, "Taking the feminist course the first year of my doctoral study rekindled the passion of wanting to have a voice as a woman and how that would inform my research and my life's choices." A number of those who were at the dissertation phase mentioned that they participated in this focus group project to get support to continue their own passionate scholarship:

I don't have to be in class and I'm kind of free flowing out there. And today was coming for reaffirmation. Coming to get connected again now that the structure isn't there to tell me, you've got to get up today and get passionate about what you're going to do. This will be 2 hours well-spent. Having some semistructure and some sense of support will get me focused back on track. The structure helps.

Impediments were the flip side of support. As one participant observed, "Passionate scholarship is a journey with obstacles and dragons along the way. But knowing that if you want to do that and if you're studying something close to the

bone, you may anticipate there's going to be some problems." For these passionate scholars, internal obstacles ranged from their own fears in "overcoming a lack of self-confidence" to conquering "timidity to stand up and fight for my beliefs." One participant said, "My own fear. I never saw myself [with a PhD]. I think I internally have the concept that I can't do it and I don't fit." External obstacles included not having a mentor, not being treated respectfully as an adult, not having the right advisor or a supportive committee, and inhibiting school regulations, for example, no qualitative research allowed. A potential pitfall specifically linked to passionate scholarship was becoming "too passionate," in the sense that the dissertation took over one's life:

I guess the biggest impediment is the fact that I was doing research in an area in which I was working, and I recognized that I was going to have to cut back in my work to do the analysis of the data because working in [that world] ... takes a lot of energy. Something I had to negotiate with my husband was the financial implications of cutting back on my salary so I could do the analysis. ... Once I made that decision that helped me to go forward.

Those participants who used the Bennett method found it a useful way "to gain distance from my own experience and the experience of others." For passionate scholars whose work is deeply personal, this method effectively operationalized the notion of bracketing: "When you've had a personal experience, you bring a really rich dimension to it because you're in it, you've lived it, you know it more intimately." The Bennett method allowed passionate scholars to "listen to somebody else's experience without listening through my own experience." One participant summed it up by saying that the Bennett method "validated me, validated the process, and validated the responses."

During the focus group, participants spoke to how they transformed obstacles into challenges: "Not having one mentor or solid advisor or an individual I can single out and say, 'Okay I'm having this or that problem, what do you think about this?' So you have to pick and choose the best out of a whole bunch of people to try to piece together some mentoring and support."

Participants who had graduated could look back and see that their most formidable obstacles were themselves. One stated:

These turned out not to be obstacles but opportunities! They tested my resolve and let me know that this was *my* project and I could do it without support. Indeed, I had to do it on my own. Once I'd picked a supportive committee, I knew the biggest obstacle had been overcome—my own early timidity to stand up and fight for my beliefs. Once I figured that out, and took control of my own work, all other "obstacles" were blown away.

In summary, for these participants, picking topics close to their hearts was the first step in their courageous journey toward passionate scholarship.

[Back to Top](#)

### Committing—a risky business

The choice to commit to a personally meaningful topic was "risky business" because passionate scholarship often explores: (1) a phenomenon that is "controversial," "weird," "unusual," "on the edge," or "politically sensitive;" (2) the lived experience of a stigmatized group the participant is not a member of; or (3) the lived experience of a stigmatized group the participant is a member of.

Given the risks, commitment to a passionate topic was commonly preceded by an initial period of ambivalence and questioning that could last for years. During this time participants weighed the "costs" and consequences against the "benefits."



Participants spoke of the risks attached to passionate research because it was personally and socially meaningful. This dialogue among participants reflects how this decision process is related to the cost-benefit ratio (PS stands for passionate scholar):

PS1: Cost-benefit. The whole idea of what drives the research in terms of the benefit for us personally versus the benefit for the group we are doing research about.

PS2: The personal cost to you to do it for the benefit of others.

PS1: Exactly, and what risks you are willing to take to do that.

PS2: And each of us is willing to take pretty serious risks for ourselves in doing this.

PS1: Because of our personal belief or personal commitment to the research ultimately benefiting that group. We have a tremendous investment in that group because of our experience with that group.

PS2: To me there was a lot of risk.

PS1: Are there different kinds of risks? [Research] might be risky in one setting and not in another.

PS3: Is passionate scholarship risky by its very nature?

The perception of risk was closely associated with the implicit and explicit mores of participants' doctoral programs. Several participants had taken the political risk of changing the chairpersons of their dissertation committees in order to conduct their passionate scholarship, and one of these participants said, "I'm not sure how I would define passion except for booting your chair[person], sticking to your topic, just being willing to not let someone else take away your dream." For other participants the risk was related to the nature of their topics and the political effect within the school. One stated, "My dissertation had an edge to it. I was studying what dissertation advisors do. Mine was risky for political reasons. I didn't have support to do that. I was scared. But I came to a point where I had to do that work."

A number of participants spoke of "coming out of the closet" to describe the vulnerability they felt about studying a topic in which they were so personally invested.

I did finish last summer and this week I presented my dissertation findings for the first time. I went public with it at a regional conference. There really wasn't anybody that I could share this experience with that really understood except for a couple of faculty colleagues who knew I was going to do this. Nobody else in my life really understood what this meant. *For me it was like coming out.* I just felt like this is my life's work. Just having to go through that process of trying to articulate it to an audience that didn't have much background in what I was talking about.

The process of "coming out of the closet" is a conscious and thoughtful one. Those who studied stigmatized groups of which they were members felt most vulnerable and had the most to lose in "coming out." Giving voice to their

participants was, in essence, giving voice to themselves. These women had to make a decision that other passionate scholars did not—whether to tell their dissertation committee members or acknowledge in the dissertation that they personally had experienced the same phenomena as their subjects. For some, the risks centered around self-disclosure and weighing how much to share about their own lived experiences.

One participant who revealed to her committee that she was a member of the stigmatized population she studied found her research helped her personally:

Interviewing others has increased my confidence level in being open because I can see that other people's experiences have been similar to my own and to what is reported by scholars. Learning how respected thinkers viewed this phenomenon has given me an "acceptable language" and framework to validate my own experience.

Passionate scholars who shared the same lived experience as their participants found interviews deeply moving.

Several of the participants who studied a group of which they were a member included their own story in the database and analyzed it as another case study, "because there are so few people who could give good accounts of what that experience is like." For some participants, gaining the courage to conduct passionate scholarship meant finding a safe place and supportive faculty and student colleagues.

Over time participants moved from asking themselves, "Should I go safe, or should I go risky and do what I really want to do?" to the awareness that, "I am willing to pay whatever price I have to to do the research." The resolution of this conflict between going safe and going risky occurred when the desire to do the research became greater than the fear of repercussions. These women became so committed to their passionate dissertation topics that they chose to proceed regardless of personal or professional risk and cost. "There came a point where I didn't care what the repercussions were. I couldn't. I just needed to do this research, and I didn't know what they'd be but I knew I'd get through them." The commitment of time, effort, and personal resources suggests that passionate scholarship is the compelling attraction to a topic, as described by Carol Christ.<sup>11</sup> The payoff for such deep commitment is "*giving voice* to people who have not spoken for themselves" and "*translating* people's lived experience or the import of a phenomenon to the general public."

In summary, for these participants, fully committing to a passionate topic was fraught with potential dangers, involved reflection time to weigh the costs and benefits, and, once embarked upon, proved to be well worth the struggle.

[Back to Top](#)

### Initiating passionate life's work

After committing to their topics, participants "couldn't get enough" and felt that studying "anything else would be pointless." "Willing to work long and deep into the nights," they were endlessly "energized and fascinated" by their research. These participants described passionate scholarship as a "long journey" that transformed them through both personal and academic challenges. They discovered that passionate scholarship was "fun." Given their intense interest in their dissertation research, "play and work boundaries now seem overlapping. This seems like play to me even though it's work." Those who had been playing/working at their passionate research for years noted that their passion for their topic had sustained itself over time. "I get all excited about it all over again. It lasted me 6 years in school and several years out of school and I'm still excited about the [topic]. And all my other research comes off of that." One woman said:

My topic truly fascinated me. The more I learned, the more I realized I'd found something no one else had written about. [This topic] struck a chord deep within me which is a vital component if one is to remain enthusiastic after 1000 hours of interviewing, recording, transcribing, coding, matching, selecting themes, and writing it all up. The rigid academic process almost demands boredom but a passionate topic turns the work into fun.

Passionate scholarship begot passionate scholarship. One participant spoke of "the personal sense of accomplishment and the desire to go on with this research and writing." Sustained over time, passionate dissertation scholarship spawned the "energy to continue to follow my heart" and laid the foundation for a "lifelong pursuit" of scholarship that is passionate. Inspired by their own experiences, some participants "encouraged [other] students and colleagues to do passionate scholarship."

When asked how a doctoral student would recognize a passionate topic, one participant responded:

You'll know. You'll find out by the passion that going to the library and reading about that topic does to you. For me, it's like I can't get enough. I cannot read enough about it. I read and read and read everything I can find. That's what tells me. When I get passionate about something, I get totally immersed in it. There is something very exciting about the topic that drives you back to it over and over again.

Once doctoral students find passionate topics, participants recommended:

Go for it! Your passion is the fuel that drives you. Dream big, passionate dreams. Expect humps and be resilient. Don't let anyone stop you. If someone tries to stop you, find someone who won't. You do need other people who understand. Create a supportive network. Participate in formal and informal meetings with fellow passionate scholars to discuss your work. Choose dissertation committee members who validate you and the value of your passionate scholarship. Get your priorities straight whether this means "firing" unsupportive committee members, ending old relationships that are dying on the vine, saying "no to families, this is my time to work, to be uninterrupted" or balancing work, family, and play time.

In summary, for these participants, initiating passionate dissertation scholarship focused their academic pursuits, set the stage for their programs of research, and gave direction to future scholarly endeavors.

[Back to Top](#)

## DISCUSSION

Although nursing scholarship began a century ago with Florence Nightingale's reflections on nursing practice, it is only within the past decade that the definition of scholarship is being revisioned. Since Boyer's [17](#) groundbreaking work was published in 1990, schools of nursing across the country are recognizing that scholarship can emerge from teaching and learning, practice and engagement, and integration and synthesis across disciplines, as well as from discovery research. According to Parse,[18](#) the three processes involved in scholarly activity are "a perpetual curiosity, a focused commitment, and a willingness to risk challenge."<sup>(p143)</sup>

Moving beyond intellectual definitions of scholarship by studying the lived experiences of nurse scholars, researchers are finding that scholarly identity

emerges from relationships. Diekelmann and Ironside 19 uncovered four practices essential to doctoral women becoming scholars—reading, writing, thinking, and dialogue. Inseparable, these four practices are best done within a community of scholarly caring of faculty and student colleagues. Gray and colleagues 20 suggest that doctoral women in nursing programs experience a "spiraling process of being that includes self-confidence and self-doubt; the presence and absence of support; and trade-offs, sacrifices and self-discovery." (p60) Their research underlines the importance of connected relationships with doctoral colleagues during this process. In a similar vein, Bunkers 21 maintains that nurse scholars in the 21st century must be learned, be mentored by communities of faculty and student scholars, and advance scholarship by merging the scholarship of practice with the academic science of theory building. When she suggests that nurse scholars must be educated to "believe in the imagination as a source of knowledge; understand community as a process; and acknowledge mystery," she moves into the realm of passionate scholarship. (p118)

Adding the dimension of passion to the study of scholarship extends the analysis beyond the intellectual and relational into unexplored territory. When passionate scholarship is defined as work of head and heart, it becomes a subversive act of courage in an academy that defines scholarship as a purely intellectual endeavor.

[Back to Top](#)

## RECOMMENDATIONS

In this exploratory study, participants underlined both the benefits and the risks attendant to conducting passionate dissertation research. Creating a safe environment in doctoral programs for passionate scholarship is important precisely because it carries risks. For these participants, safety translated into feeling free to share tendrils of passionate ideas without fear of judgment, to conduct passionate dissertation scholarship with support from committee members, and to write up findings without fear of repercussion. Ideally, such environments might make it less risky for passionate scholars who share the lived experiences of a stigmatized groups to share this identity with dissertation committees and make their disclosures an acknowledged part of their dissertations.

Based on these preliminary findings, doctoral educators can make passionate scholarship safe by introducing the concept of passionate scholarship explicitly, identifying faculty as passionate scholars, and mentoring passionate scholars.

[Back to Top](#)

### Introducing passionate scholarship into doctoral programs

Explicitly introducing the concept of passionate scholarship in orientation programs and early in doctoral coursework would communicate the message that such scholarship is a desirable option. A recent book entitled *Secrets for a Successful Dissertation* has a special section describing passionate scholarship that could be used to introduce the topic to doctoral students or candidates. 22 Passionate scholarship would be further legitimated by becoming an explicit outcome written into a doctoral program's philosophy and mission statement.

These findings suggest that holistic educational opportunities involving women doctoral students' heads as well as their hearts during course work (for example, journal writing and artwork) foster passionate dissertation scholarship. In keeping with this holistic approach, dissertation advisors might recommend that passionate scholars keep personal journals that record feelings, as well as ideas related to conducting research that is "so close to the bone." Given the deeply personal nature of passionate scholarship, advisors could encourage students who have personal experience with or share the lived experience of their participants to use the Bennett method to gain the necessary perspective on their own experiences before they interview participants. Dissertation preparation courses could include "thrival" techniques that encourage passionate dissertation scholars to attend to

their bodies and psyches, in addition to their heads, during the process.

[Back to Top](#)

### Identifying passionate faculty scholars

Recognizing and valuing doctoral educators who are passionate scholars is crucial in establishing doctoral programs that are safe places for passionate scholarship to flourish. Because they are passionate scholars themselves, such educators would understand both the risks and the importance of a safe environment for passionate scholarship. Therefore, they would be likely to nurture the tendrils of ideas that grow into passionate dissertation scholarship.

A checklist was formulated from these findings to help faculty and students identify themselves as passionate scholars. (See the [box entitled "Passionate Scholarship Checklist."](#)) Doctoral educators could use and refine this checklist to "diagnose" themselves, their colleagues, and their students as passionate scholars.



No caption available...

[Back to Top](#)

### Mentoring passionate scholars

Participants said mentoring makes passionate scholarship feel safer, and they described single mentor-mentee, peer mentoring, or group-as-mentor relationships. Encouraging students to work with dissertation committee members, who are themselves passionate scholars and knowledgeable about the challenges of passionate dissertation scholarship, fosters the mentoring relationships key to creating safe environments. Doctoral student colleagues often spontaneously create peer mentoring relationships with one another over the course of doctoral programs. Identifying a cadre of passionate scholars enhances the growth of a community of scholarly caring among faculty and students in doctoral programs [6](#) that offers both formal and informal forums for sharing passionate scholarship in progress. Such groups-as-mentor relationships [23](#) would allow passionate scholars to stay tethered to doctoral colleagues during the lonely dissertation phase when they are collecting and analyzing data and writing up their dissertations.

[Back to Top](#)

## IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

According to the participants in this study, passionate scholarship is exciting and risky, personally meaningful and socially relevant life's work. Three dimensions of passionate scholarship that emerged from this preliminary inquiry were naming a topic close to the heart, committing—a risky business, and initiating passionate life's work. Our profession suffers when women lose their voices during doctoral programs and do not present or publish their dissertation research after graduation.

How can doctoral programs best prepare the soil in which women's voices can flourish and passionate scholarship can flower? The findings from this study suggest that doctoral educators need to create a safe space for doctoral candidates to pursue passionate dissertation scholarship. It is hoped that nurse researchers will conduct future collaborative research projects that explore innovative ways to foster passionate scholarship to meet the challenge of advancing the discipline in the new millennium.

[Back to Top](#)

## REFERENCES

1. Conway ME. The optimal environment for socialization of the nurse-scientist. *Nurs Educ.* 1992;17(3):24-27. [\[Context Link\]](#)

2. Johnson RA, Moorhead SA, Daly JM. Scholarship and socialization: reflections on the first year of doctoral study. *J Nurs Educ.* 1992;31(6):280-282. [Full Text](#) | [Bibliographic Links](#) | [\[Context Link\]](#)
  
3. Meleis AI. On the way to scholarship: from masters to doctorate. *J Prof Nurs.* 1992;8:328-334. [Full Text](#) | [Bibliographic Links](#) | [\[Context Link\]](#)
  
4. Meleis AI, Hall JM, Stevens PE. Scholarly caring in doctoral nursing education: promoting diversity and collaborative mentorship. *Image J Nurs Scholarship.* 1994;26:177-180. [\[Context Link\]](#)
  
5. Porter EJ. Fostering dialogical community through a learning experience. *J Nurs Educ.* 1995;34(5):228-234. [Full Text](#) | [Bibliographic Links](#) | [\[Context Link\]](#)
  
6. Heinrich KT. The passionate scholar: a mid-life woman doctoral student's quest for voice. *Int J Qual Studies Educ.* 2000;13(1):63-84. [\[Context Link\]](#)
  
7. Christ C. Toward a paradigm shift in the academy and in religious studies. In: Farnham C, ed. *The Impact of Feminist Research in the Academy*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press; 1978:53-76. [\[Context Link\]](#)
  
8. DuBois B. Passionate scholarship: notes on values, knowing and method in feminist social science. In: Bowles G, Klein RD, eds. *Theories of Women's Studies*. New York: Routledge and Kagan Press; 1983. [\[Context Link\]](#)
  
9. Morgan DL. *Focus Groups as Qualitative Research*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications; 1997. [\[Context Link\]](#)
  
10. Krueger RA. *Focus Groups: A Practical Guide for Applied Research*. 2nd edition. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications; 1994. [\[Context Link\]](#)
  
11. Stewart DW, Shamdasani PN. *Focus Groups: Theory and Practice*. *Applied Social Research Methods Series*. Vol 20. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications; 1990. [\[Context Link\]](#)
  
12. Webb C. Feminist research: definitions, methodology, methods, and evaluation. *J Adv Nurs.* 1993;18:416-423. [Full Text](#) | [Bibliographic Links](#) | [\[Context Link\]](#)
  
13. Reason P. Three approaches to participative inquiry. In: Denzin NK, Lincoln YS, eds. *Handbook of Qualitative Research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications; 1994. [\[Context Link\]](#)
  
14. Predeger E. Womanspirit: a journey into healing through art in breast cancer. *Adv Nurs Sci.* 1996;18(3):48-58. [Ovid Full Text](#) | [Request Permissions](#) | [Bibliographic Links](#) | [\[Context Link\]](#)
  
15. Heinrich KT, Coffin-Romig N, Bennett S. Mid-life doctoral women as passionate scholars: an exploratory study. Presented at the American Educational Research Association 1998 Annual Meeting; April 13-17, 1998, San Diego, CA. [\[Context Link\]](#)
  
16. Morgan DL, Krueger RA. *The Focus Group Kit*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications; 1997. [\[Context Link\]](#)

17. Boyer EL. *Scholarship Reconsidered: Priorities of the Professoriate*. Princeton, NJ: The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching; 1990. [\[Context Link\]](#)

18. Parse RR. Scholarship: three essential processes. *Nurs Sci Q*. 1994;7:143. [Full Text](#) | [Bibliographic Links](#) | [\[Context Link\]](#)

19. Diekelmann N, Ironside PM. Preserving writing in doctoral education: exploring the concernful practices of schooling learning teaching. *J Adv Nurs*. 1998;28(6):1374-1355. [Full Text](#) | [Bibliographic Links](#) | [\[Context Link\]](#)

20. Gray PD, Grams K, Kosowski M, et al. Spiral processes of becoming: women's experiences within the context of doctoral education. *J Nurs Educ*. 1997;36(2):60-66. [Full Text](#) | [Bibliographic Links](#) | [\[Context Link\]](#)

21. Bunkers SS. The nurse scholar of the 21st century. *Nurs Sci Q*. 2000;13(2):116-123. [Ovid Full Text](#) | [Full Text](#) | [Bibliographic Links](#) | [\[Context Link\]](#)

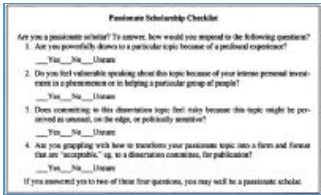
22. Fitzpatrick J, Secrist J, Wright D. *Secrets for a successful dissertation*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications; 1998. [\[Context Link\]](#)

23. Heinrich KT. Group as mentor: creating communities of scholarly caring among nursing faculty and students. In: Vance C, Olson RK, eds. *The Mentor Connection in Nursing*. New York: Springer Publishing; 1998. [\[Context Link\]](#)

Key words: cooperative research; doctoral education; feminist process; nursing education; scholarly identity; scholarship; women's issues

IMAGE GALLERY

Select All



No caption available...  
[Back to Top](#)

[Previous Article](#) | [Table of Contents](#)