

# **Mission Impossible: Doing a Part Time PhD, (or Getting 200% out of 20%) – Is it Really Worth it?**

## **Caroline Gatrell**

*Caroline combines motherhood with her post as a Teaching Fellow and part-time PhD studies*

At the beginning of the year 2000, I read my horoscope for the forthcoming twelve months. It was predicted that I would be working on an important project, to which I would 'give 200%'. While, in general, I don't take the stars too much to heart, there was a ring of truth in these words. I thought immediately of my PhD. I am someone who takes commitment very seriously. I have always worked hard. The problem for me, however, as for all part-time students, is that I am currently combining several important projects, each of which seems to require 200% of my time and energy.

## **The Balancing Act**

Where do I start? Well, firstly, I have an infant daughter (the main priority), to whom I try and give 200 percent. I combine motherhood with my work as a Teaching Fellow. Although my (part-time) paid work is undoubtedly interesting and fulfilling, there is always pressure to 'give greater' than the 60% for which I am contracted. This is in some respects self-imposed because, like all my colleagues, I try to provide as much support as possible to the students, who are themselves working under considerable pressure. Like me, most of them stand firmly in the middle of a balancing act between children, classes and careers.

My weekdays are shared between my daughter, my paid work and my PhD, to which I devote every Thursday. It does not take a genius to work out that this equates to only 20% of the working week, (leaving me 180% short if I need to give it 200%.) I am in my second year of study and have quite a way to go before completion. A '*how to juggle everything successfully and do a part-time PhD before breakfast...*' account would sound smug as I still have a long stretch ahead before I can trudge to the finish-line. However, I've had my ups and downs and learned some serious lessons along the way. These are worth sharing.

## **The Beginnings**

When I registered as a PhD student, I was perhaps more complacent than I might have been about combining study with work and motherhood. I had already completed a part-time MBA, and gained a Distinction. I assumed that this would be an advantage – and in many ways it has proved to be an ideal foundation. Starting with the confidence that success brings, I discovered that the discipline imposed by the MBA deadlines had become a habit, and the concept of late-night study so familiar that it was almost routine. The MBA had

honed my writing and research skills, and drastically improved my reading speeds. The more you read, the more quickly you digest the required information. In spite of my somewhat disciplinarian training, there have been still been aspects of PhD study for which I was not prepared in the slightest.

## **The Differences of a PhD**

Doing a PhD is completely different from working through a taught degree programme. Defined 'stepping stones' are laid out in the latter for you to follow and you can skip through your journey with relative focus and direction. However, the flexibility of a PhD can be advantageous for part-time students. Those who combine study with families and careers will know that there are times when life throws out problems. Part-time students have the invaluable option to put their research 'on hold', returning at a later (and indeed quieter) date without having missed important course work and feeling behind in comparison with their colleagues.

However, tackling a major piece of research, for which you are solely responsible, is undeniably intimidating. On beginning my PhD, I felt daunted by the sheer scale of the work I was undertaking. Questions zipped through my mind: Where should I begin? How would I know when I had done enough? Would I ever settle on a suitable research question? My first three months as a PhD student were spent reading everything in sight. I had to decide upon that question. Anxiety brewed as the time slipped by – what good was the ability to read quickly, when I hadn't a clue what I was reading *for*? I had ideas, but I was torn between them. What I really craved to do was some original research on combining motherhood with career.

## **The Big Question**

However, more self contained, straightforward (and less controversial) topics were on offer and my mind was awash with the intricacies of each. Phillips and Pugh (1994) in '*How to Get A PhD*' state that Einstein did not formulate the theory of relativity in his PhD, but made '*a sensible contribution to Brownian motion theory*'. This advice left me despondent. The self contained topics, which may have been sensible, remained totally uninspiring. It was at this point that I had an influential meeting with a senior, female academic. She argued that, particularly for the part-time students, it is important to choose a subject that 'burns you up' in order to 'keep you going'. In the end, I chose this route. And, I have no regrets (though there has been a price to pay).

Choosing something significant has meant that my research is like a good novel – impossible to put down. Throughout the past twelve months, when dropping with tiredness after my daytime responsibilities, I have gathered the energy to return to my office. Even at night, I can move forward with my PhD.

## **Part-Time Problems**

On reflection, I can't help but to wonder whether the challenges of starting out would have been less daunting had I chosen to study full-time. Most full time graduate students, even PhDs (especially those funded by ESRC), are obliged to undertake taught courses during their first year. These commitments take up a big chunk of time. Some students resent them. But major advantages can be gained from attending research training programmes. A good deal of practical, 'how to do research' material is offered to full time students in a neat package. Part-timers, on the other hand, often have no choice but to plough through the relevant texts by themselves. Elements they do not understand can remain blurry until their next supervision meeting. More importantly, those students who *are* able to attend research-training courses have a ready-made circle of colleagues, all struggling with the same concepts at the same time.

## **Supervision**

Courses are designed so students can discuss their own work within the context of the general research topic. Therefore, making sure you choose a good supervisor is absolutely crucial. I am jointly supervised by two academics who both provide excellent support. We meet regularly (about once a month) and both are prepared to talk to me outside the official sessions if I need advice.

I have, however, learned that no matter how closely you work with your supervisors, there is no substitute for establishing a network of other students – even setting up regular meetings from time to time, if you can find people who are near enough geographically. In this respect, I obviously have an advantage as I am both a student and an employee within the same establishment, but even so, I was well into my first year of study before

a) I realised the benefits

b) That other students welcome the opportunity to discuss their research and the problems of doing a part-time PhD.

Recently, I joined a 'PhD Pressure Group' established by women doing part-time PhDs. I have also become friends with two women who have just finished their (full-time) doctorates. Both have offered support, encouragement and advice. I also have the authority of those who have done it.

## **The Lows**

Having experienced a mostly happy and successful first year, I suffered my first serious low during the second. It was other students, in addition to my supervisors, who encouraged me to resolve the situation and get back on track. My low was the most recent in a series of similar encounters, all of which relate to my choice of a controversial, contemporary subject.

Here's what happened.

So far, I have presented my work in public on three occasions audiences have responded emotionally, and occasionally with aggression. My first presentation consisted of a formal progress talk to a group of twenty other interdisciplinary PhD students My presentation was the last of four, all of which had been followed by polite and constructive debate. My turn came, and it was as though, to quote one of the participants, I had 'lit the blue touch paper'. Two male students began shouting. The women in the room began shouting at them. Questioning the legitimacy of pieces of research about women's issues, they argued: "Why should there be a department of Women's Studies anyway?" This angered the women. One said "I feel sorry for you because you cannot undergo the experience of bearing children and you hate that." The PhD itself became irrelevant. Arguments ensued about whether career women should have babies at all, and whether Women's Studies is a legitimate subject.

On the second occasion, the reaction was similar. I was in Bradford, speaking to a group of fifteen new academics from all over UK. One male lecturer responded with the (serious) comment that mothers of small children ought not to work because they should be at home, breast-feeding. The validity of the research was questioned again by a female academic – she felt excluded, due to having no children of her own. While this may have been a legitimate point, I did wonder whether her feelings would have been so strong had the PhD been about rocket science. Another man compiled a list of words that he claimed were used in the presentation. He criticised them, because they were too 'emotive. I had read from a typescript and was able to compare his list of 'emotive' words against my notes. They were not there. I can only surmise that the man *himself* felt so emotional about the subject, that he imagined the existence of words I had never used.

I was shaken after these experiences, but I carried on with my PhD in private and put off presenting the work in public again until recently. The PhD is now more advanced with an initial 30,000 words written, and a pilot study of interviews with mothers and fathers successfully completed.

In October 1999, I presented some preliminary findings to a small group of senior academics, one of whom 'went off at the deep end'. This individual, whom I shall call Professor Smith, let it be known that he did not believe that women over 35 should give birth at all, and explained that he felt personally 'violated' by the area of concern. At one point in the discussion, Professor Smith actually asked whether I was pregnant myself. Although the others present were constructive and encouraging, Professor Smith's response to the PhD really 'got me down' and for the first time since I started, I stopped working on it altogether, and seriously wondered whether to give it up. My despondency was caused by the fact that as a part-time student, I am already trying to give 200% to each of a variety of commitments, without the added complication of attempting a PhD under such difficult circumstances.

## Personal Sacrifices

As those who are doing this particular form of study will know, the price of doing a part-time higher degree bears a heavy personal cost. Since 1995, I have spent many nights burning the midnight oil, when I know I have to be up next morning to get my daughter ready for nursery and do a day's work. I have sacrificed all the hobbies I once enjoyed, and I no longer paint, read novels or take part in amateur dramatics. Although I try not to let study encroach on weekends, there have been Sundays when I have guiltily left my family to their own devices, while I spent a day in my office, working on the PhD. I have fought to balance my research with my paid work (which also involves evening working) as well as with (most importantly) ensuring that my daughter does not suffer as a result of my wish to study. After the most recent incident, I did find myself seriously asking the question: "*Is this worth it? Is the personal cost of doing a PhD part-time really worth it, if this is how people are going to behave?*"

## The Extreme

Since I am writing this, you will guess that I decided to continue. I have considered why my research topic causes such extreme reactions. Evidence in the literature suggests that this may be because my PhD, although it does not claim to *be* a paradigm shift, probably *reflects* several, which is what makes it so contentious. The first paradigm shift may lie in the very fact that I am a woman doing a higher degree. In discussing the problems facing women PhD students, Phillips and Pugh describe academia as a traditionally male environment, which can '*allow prejudice to be manifested*' (1994:119). The second paradigm shift is the concept that women's issues have a place in what is generally recognised as 'knowledge' in the academic sense. As Tanton (1994:12–13) points out: '*The content of what is taught (in higher education) is still (apart from in Women's Studies) largely as a result of male research on male subjects....*' The third paradigm, that of the research itself, represents a major social change. The benefits or otherwise of combining motherhood and profession are debated in many arenas. Significantly, despite equal opportunities legislation, a current policy document issued by the Institute of Directors states that '*It is a biological fact that it is women who give birth to children and are best equipped to look after them in the early years.*' (Malthouse 1997).

## On the Up

Undoubtedly, a rational analysis of why my research is seen as so contentious within the public arena, has helped provide an explanation for what happened. However it must be also said that it was fellow students, as well as my supervisors, who motivated me to respond positively when I asked the question: 'Is this really worth it?'. The student networks that I have formed over the past six months were a significant influence in giving me the confidence and determination to keep going when the disadvantages of continuing threatened to outweigh the benefits. I am pleased that this is the case because on reflection, I am still convinced that my topic is an important one, which *is* worth researching – even if it is controversial.

## **And Finally**

It might be worth summing up the factors that have helped me get this far. For me, at least, it was important to choose a subject which mattered and which I believed to be important. So long as I get there in the end, it is possible that my work might make a contribution to improving the situation for career mothers. A good working relationship, and regular meetings with supervisors is central to a part-time PhD student, as is establishing networks with other students who know how you feel and who are experiencing the same pressures as you (if they can do it, so can you.) For those readers who are worried about how and where to find other students, a request for help to supervisors, or departmental administrators might prove fruitful. Finally, although this is easy to say, since I am not in a low at the moment and I cannot, like the astrologers, predict what the future may bring – my own and others' experiences suggest that the lows of doing a part-time PhD are inevitable, but temporary. They do pass, and despite the pressures we all feel when trying to deliver Mission Impossible, and give 200% to each of our commitments – work, family and the research, my view is that yes, *it is worth it after all*.

## **In Brief**

- Juggling the various demands of my life was the main part-time difficulty.
- I maintained my enthusiasm by selecting a highly interesting and emotive topic.
- The value of peer networks can never be underestimated.
- 'Highs' and 'lows' can be intensified through part time study.

## **Postscript**

I succeeded in gaining my PhD and graduated in December 2002. I have written a book based on the research findings: *Hard Labour, The Sociology of Parenthood*, which will be published with Open University Press in December 2004.

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