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Traversing The Doctorate: Which Little Piggy Are You?

Susan Carter

University of Southern Queensland

Abstract

Traversing the doctorate from start to completion can be stressful, with some students never reaching completion. This autoethnographic study explored how one researcher completed a Doctor of Philosophy and maintained their subjective wellbeing through 'self-introspection', using the analogy of 'The Three Little Pigs'. Data was generated through autoethnographic accounts. A four-step iterative process frames data analysis. There were four key findings. Self-talk with internal dialogue was a strategy used to move thinking to a more optimistic state of mind. Relational connectivity was effective in deliberately shifting negative affect states. Organisational skills enabled dealing with cognitive complexity. The author, a full-time working mother of three, a wife, and an experienced higher education student having previously completed two Master's Degrees, seeks to give voice to personal experience, the hardships, self-doubt, key learnings and rewards of study. Using a Researcher Journal guided self-regulation and self-control in self-reflection, contributing to the positive maintenance of this researcher's subjective wellbeing. This autoethnographic account highlights ways of working that could be beneficial to help other researchers balance their subjective wellbeing while successfully completing the doctoral journey.

Key words

Drama; self-talk; wellbeing; PhD student wellbeing; autoethnographic case study

Introduction

A doctoral journey and a child's book, what do they have in common? Indeed, there appears to be so much to learn from both. As a child gazes upon a picture book, so too can a student gaze upon a doctoral journey. Expectant faces … the pages turn … and the journey begins.

> Little Pig! Little Pig! Let me in!
>
> … Not by the hair of my chinny, chin, chin!
>
> I'll huff, and I'll puff, and I will blow your house in…
>
> (Adapted from Joseph Jacobs 1890, 'The Three Little Pigs')

This paper explores student subjective wellbeing during doctoral study. The successful completion of this journey is an important purpose of most tertiary educational institutions (Jones, 2013), termed by some as the pinnacle of educational achievement (Jairam & Kahl Jr, 2012). Doctoral success can be evidenced by satisfaction with the overall trajectory and completion of the Doctoral journey. By growing our knowledge about factors imperative in the journey, we can improve the quality of doctoral education and improve completion rates and student satisfaction (van Rooij et al., 2021).

Doctoral students play a vital role as mediators of an interchange of ideas between universities, business (Liu et al., 2020), educational systems (Davis et al., 2006), commerce and industry (Liu et al., 2020), and as a component of Higher Education quality research outputs, they provide information to the public (Beerkens, 2015). Furthermore, one in every two university students engaged in a doctoral study reports psychological distress that impacts their wellbeing (Levecque et al., 2017). Therefore, understanding the doctoral journey from the student's perspective is crucial. Academics can respond to changing demands with a commitment to academic values (D'Andrea & Gosling, 2005) while contributing to implementing caring quality mechanisms (Harvey, 2023) in the doctoral space.

During my PhD journey, a familiar story from my childhood resonated with me in a new way. As a child, my mother often read 'The Three Little Pigs' to me, which is part of my earliest memories. In my early childhood, I engaged with the cartoon 'The Three Little Pigs' on Australian television, and it was even part of the storybooks we read in Queensland state primary schools in Australia, where teachers linked to the importance of thinking strategically. The third little pig, initially underestimated for not being as strong or brave as the wolf, became a character I identified with deeply. Like the third pig, I didn't always feel powerful like the wolf, but I knew I could think strategically and could live through the study experience. Reflecting on this story, I realised its lessons closely mirrored my journey through the PhD. Perhaps, too, the inweaving of the story will resonate with readers who in their childhood may have engaged with 'The Three Little Pigs' story, which was sold worldwide (Flegar, 2015) in print copy and what Kirby (2009) terms as digimodernism where new technologies adapt and reconfigure popular fairy tale and stories, distributing on the world web, in cartoons, YouTube clips, and other animations (Flegar, 2015). The Joseph Jacobs 1890 story describes how three little pigs decided to live by themselves and build a house they thought would be safe and secure from the big wolf that roams around, wanting to eat them. Each little pig made decisions about building materials for their house, but only the third little pig survived because he built a secure house. He also outsmarts the wolf and, in the end, kills the wolf.

The paper presents an alternative view of the journey of obtaining a Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) degree through the analogy of the house that a little pig chooses to build. It stands to reason that consideration must be given to the design and building method of the little pig's house (i.e., the student's subjective wellbeing) and that the intelligent little pig must guard against the wolf (the destructive forces impacting on a PhD student's subjective wellbeing) to be successful for their own goals and contribute to overall university research outcomes. This study arose from being regularly questioned by other doctoral students (or those who had left the program without finishing): 'How did you study, work, and stay sane?'. I reflected that I may have knowledge worthy of contribution to this space. As an adult learner, it is suggested (Jopp & Cohen, 2020) that building knowledge through flexible and innovative educational experiences makes learning authentic, and this resonated for the journey into the concept of wellbeing through autoethnography.

Writing an autoethnographic paper "lets you use yourself to get to culture" (Pelias, 2003, p. 372). My personal struggles and conclusions reflect the complexities of immersion in a study culture. In undertaking a Doctor of Philosophy, I lived the experience of struggling to balance family responsibilities as a mother, the daughter of an elderly parent living some hours away, work tasks as a full-time academic, and juggling higher education research requirements within specified timeframes. So much of what I did could be described as living and coping under extreme stress and frequent self-doubt, yet there were many moments of joy and fun, some deliberately created and others unique gifts of living positively within the family and the broader community.

The Landscape Captured in The Doctoral Journey

Imagine the beginning of 'The Three Little Pigs' story with the first pages setting the scene, all glossy and steeped with the multi-coloured ink of excitement. As the pages turn, the landscape colours change, just like the doctoral journey. Research shows that graduate students undergo significant stress during the doctoral journey (Hish et al., 2019). Moreover, stress is often associated with mounting financial, relationship, employment, and academic obligations (Wyatt & Oswalt, 2013), combined with the overall stress university students report in finding work-life balance (Berry & Hughes, 2020; Suresh et al., 2020). Within the literature, themes emerge regarding the potential prevalence of high levels of ongoing stress (Wisker & Robinson, 2018) and mental health disorders like anxiety and depression among doctoral students (Jones-White et al., 2020). For example, one study sample of 3659 PhD students in Flanders, Belgium, revealed that over 51% of doctoral students experienced psychological distress, and nearly 32% of students remained at risk of either having or developing a psychiatric disorder (such as depression) (Levecque et al., 2017). In other words, every second PhD student in that large sample showed psychological distress, and one-third were at risk of a psychiatric disorder. Levecque et al. (2017) demonstrated that the pervasiveness of mental health problems is more significant in PhD students than in other highly educated students, the general population, and well-educated employees. On top of this, the suicide rate in this group is about 20 times higher than the population average (Karamouzian & Rostami, 2019). Alarmingly, research also suggests that intellectual insecurity and loneliness are key causes for the heightened suicide risk among doctoral researchers, with research indicating that it is generally preventable and currently 'a critical global public health issue' (Moutier, 2021, p.1).

This study looked at the journey of one researcher who reflected upon how her subjective wellbeing was maintained during her PhD study at a University in Queensland, Australia. The paper has five sections, beginning with the literature review. The research design, the author's autoethnographic accounts of the PhD journey and subjective wellbeing, the analysis of those accounts, and the concluding implications of the analysis. In presenting this account, several voices are present: my academic voice, the storyteller, my PhD student voice captured in the journal reflections I share, and the data voice of participants from my actual PhD study.

Literature Review

This literature review explores mental health pressures on students engaged in a PhD and wellbeing and its reported components: life satisfaction, positive affect, low levels of negative emotions and mood, and the relationship between the components.

Mental Health Pressures

A considerable body of research suggests that the prevalence of mental health issues is increasing among students in higher education (Hish et al., 2019). Rising mental health concerns in students have implications for student wellbeing (Weitzman, 2004), academic success (Kadison, 2004) and relationships and employment (Kessler et al., 1998). Health research applies to the implications of the PhD study journey on the wellbeing of students, with Nunbogu and Elliott (2023) suggesting that health is produced in place and by place. Mental health problems may be exacerbated by stressors arising from engaging in higher education studies (Kadison, 2004). Furthermore, Mowbray et al. (2006) suggest that universities are well-positioned to proactively promote positive wellbeing and mental health, as health promotion is critical to reducing the significant burden of chronic disease (Robson et al., 2021).

Scholars have generally suggested that social support networks (Jairam, 2012) and positive relationships with doctoral supervisors help mitigate psychological distress (Hish et al., 2019). Interestingly, a Jones-White et al. (2020) study conducted in 2017–2018 involving 2,582 graduate student participants from five research universities in the United States reported that there was no data supporting positive interaction with faculty members contributing to lower clinically significant major depressive disorder symptoms and, generalised anxiety disorder symptoms. Researchers pose that overall sociopsychological wellbeing influences graduate students' long-term wellbeing, which may, in turn, impact on their motivation to complete their dissertations in a timely manner, resulting in further financial impositions as employment outcomes are affected (Wyatt & Oswalt, 2013). Furthermore, a negative impact on their long-term wellbeing can disrupt their contributions to industry research, communities, and the economy, nationally and globally (Stubb et al., 2011). The mental health of our doctoral students matters. Firstly, quality of life is essential from an ethical and moral perspective. Secondly, doctoral students contribute new ideas, which can lead to improvements, new scholarships, and advancements across fields, and this is crucial to enriching the economy (Jones-White et al., 2020).

Wellbeing Defined

While the literature suggests there is no standard definition of wellbeing (Maggino et al., 2021). Zacher and Rudolph (2020) pose that the constructs identified by Diener (2000) seem to appear commonly with consensus regarding utility (Al Nima et al., 2024), where wellbeing is seen as subjective, involving the cognitive appraisal of overall satisfaction with life satisfaction. In the field of subjective wellbeing, Diener is recognised as one of the lead researchers (Larsen et al., 1985; Al Nima et al., 2024). Diener has made notable contributions to the theory in numerous areas, including the refinement of theoretical models of subjective wellbeing; temperament and personality influences on subjective wellbeing; objective benefits of subjective wellbeing; development and application measurements for assessing; the optimum level of subjective wellbeing; the adaptation of wellbeing and set point change; income and subjective wellbeing; and culture influences on subjective wellbeing (Larsen & Eid, 2008). Due to his comprehensive understanding and contributions to the field of subjective wellbeing research, Diener's definition was used as the theoretical basis for this study.

Diener's (2006; 2009) definition of subjective wellbeing consists of three components: *cognitive appraisal* of overall quality of life. The three components are:

- life satisfaction – where one has cognitively appraised that one's life was good;
- high levels of pleasant emotions; and
- relatively low levels of negative moods.

Life satisfaction is considered a cognitive domain, given that it is based on evaluative beliefs and attitudes about one's life (Zacher & Rudolph, 2020). In contrast, positive and negative affect comprise the affective domain of subjective wellbeing (Diener, 2006; 2009). Each of these components will now be explored in more detail.

Life Satisfaction

Diener's (2009) definition of subjective wellbeing can arguably be simplified to judging life positively (life satisfaction) and feeling good (Al Nima et al., 2024).

> 'Thus, a person is said to have high (subjective wellbeing) if they experience life satisfaction and frequent joy and only infrequently experience unpleasant emotions such as sadness or anger. Contrariwise, a person is said to have low joy and affection and frequently feels negative emotions such as anger or anxiety (Diener et al., 1997, p.25).

Life satisfaction is the cognitive aspect of subjective wellbeing. Various studies have explored life satisfaction, and there is a noticeable correlation between high life satisfaction and the absence of social problems such as depression (Lewinsohn et al., 1991).

Positive Affect

Moods and emotions, labelled as 'affect' (Diener, 2006; 2009; Joseph et al., 2020), represent people's evaluations of events that occur in their lives. Positive affect (Joseph et al., 2020), broadly describes the positive emotions one experiences, is the second component of subjective wellbeing. Positive affect is in direct contrast to negative emotions. Research also links

happiness as a component of positive affect (Al Nima et al., 2024). For example, Lacey (2007) asserts that happiness is derived from two factors – challenge and control, and when both are desirably obtained, the result is positive affect. Challenge is viewed as the ability to see change as opening up new and fulfilling pathways, and control is the ability to continually endeavour to influence outcomes (Lacey, 2007) positively. Lacey argued that satisfaction is derived from the ability to meet and balance personal, professional, and organisational goals and that high self-esteem comes from successfully taking up challenges and wellness in four spheres – mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual.

Low Levels of Negative Emotions and Mood

The third component of subjective wellbeing proposed by Diener (2006; 2009) is low-level negative emotions or moods. 'When people feel a sad mood or a joyful emotion, it is because they evaluate something in their lives as going well or badly' (Diener & Chan, 2011, p.3). These feelings or moods can range from anger to happiness and include a diverse range of phenomena (Diener et al., 2018). The presence of a positive mood and the absence of a negative mood are summarised together as happiness (Ryan & Deci, 2001) or psychological balance and harmony (Al Nima et al., 2024). Diener and Chan (2011) also note that a positive attitude (i.e., low level of negative emotion) can enrich a person's quality of life when suffering from a fatal disease. However, no amount of subjective wellbeing will cure the disease.

Relationships of the Components

Research suggests that the typical force with which people experience their affective states (Diener & Ryan, 2009) has seemingly no effect on overall subjective wellbeing (Diener et al., 1985). The best predictor of overall subjective wellbeing is the frequency of positive states compared to negative states in an individual's life over time (Diener et al., 1985). Research shows that life satisfaction judgments can be inconsistent with the affective component (Larsen & Eid, 2008). For example, a financially poor nun who experiences a great deal of negative affect and little positive affect may nevertheless judge her life to be worthwhile and satisfying. Usually, the life satisfaction component and the affective component of subjective wellbeing are moderately to highly correlated (Diener, 2000).

Stone and Mackie (2014) articulate that there are increases and decreases in wellbeing (evidenced in the scales used to measure wellbeing). The terms 'positive' and 'negative' are often used in the literature to describe these changes (Diener et al., 2018). Considerable research has been focused on depression and stress, which, at high levels, can be viewed as part of the negative pole of wellbeing or also described in terms of a concept that is linked to a decrease in subjective wellbeing or in some areas of the literature would be described as the negative affect dimension of subjective wellbeing (Kercher, 1992). Boekaerts (2002) suggests there is a general consensus among researchers of stress that individuals use two basic approaches to dealing with stress: problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping (also coined 'avoidance'). Researchers have grouped problem-focused strategies that relate to how an individual approaches stress to remodel the situation or context (Caroll, 2020), seeking to change or lessen the stress and potentially increase positive subjective wellbeing levels (Munroe et. al., 2022). Emotion-focused coping is a strategy that individuals utilise to avoid stress. This avoidance is inclusive of both mental and physical evasion strategies (Boekaerts,

2002), which often result in decreasing levels of subjective wellbeing as there is a feeling of having less control over the outcome of the situation (Lacey, 2007).

There are several indications of experiencing high levels of stress, including failure to competently function in various environments such as a work context, family context, and various multiple generally in society, which may contribute to depression. Consequently, it is beneficial to the individual and to society that individuals learn to deal with and cope with stress (Caroll, 2020). According to McGuigan (1999) and Boekaerts (2002), emotional and social support appears to buff the stressful effects of life events and adequate emotional support may strengthen resistance to stress and lessen depression. If we acknowledge that social influences and support are important in coping with stress and depression, then establishing social connectivity both within the work environment and beyond - would seem of paramount importance.

Resilience and positive relationships have also been linked to the positive poles of wellbeing (Diener, 2006; 2009; Diener et al., 2003). Increasing research has supported the importance of warm, trusting, and supportive interpersonal relationships for subjective wellbeing (Diener, 2009; Diener et al., 2018; Al Nima et al., 2024). Relatedness is so important that some theorists have defined it as a basic human need that is essential for wellbeing (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Others have suggested that stable, satisfying relationships are a general resilience factor across the lifespan (Mikulincer & Florian, 1998). According to Diener and Emmons (1984), trait measures of positive affect (PA) and negative affect (NA) are essentially uncorrelated, denoting that how much of one affect a person managed to experience had no actual influence on how much of the other they experienced (i.e., a person could be very upset following a PhD meeting with a supervisor and simultaneously very content and happy in other roles such as wife; sporting team member). In summary, the understanding of wellbeing applied in this study is that it is subjective and consists of what Diener (2006; 2008) defined as the cognitive appraisal of life satisfaction – where one has cognitively appraised that one's life was good, with high levels of pleasant emotions, and relatively low levels of negative moods.

Research Design

The strength of qualitative research is its ability to provide complex textual descriptions of how people in a local and specific context experience a given phenomenon (Creswell, 2009). An autoethnographic case study has been selected as 'it provides a unique example of people in real situations, enabling readers to understand ideas more clearly than simply by representing them with abstract theories or principles' (Cohen *et al*., 2000, p.181). A universal assumption embraced by auto ethnographers and qualitative researchers is that reality is neither set nor exclusively external. Rather, it is created by and moves together with witnesses' shifting perceptions and beliefs as they explore their lifeworld (Duncan, 2004).

Given the nature of the research problem, a qualitative autoethnographic case study was chosen as the most suitable method to answer the overarching research question: *How did I maintain my subjective wellbeing whilst completing a PhD?* It is acknowledged that autoethnography has been criticised for being individualised with only one source of data and for being self-indulgent (Holt, 2003). In this case, however, it was the only method that could have answered the research question (Duncan, 2001) and as Tierney (1998) asserted, 'autoethnography confronts dominant forms of representation and power in an attempt to reclaim, through self-

reflective response, representational spaces that have marginalised those of us at the borders' (p. 66). As the researcher, I recounted my lived experiences through cultural reflexivity, focusing on what Holt (2003) terms as the auto (i.e., self), ethnos (i.e., culture), and graphy (i.e., the research process). Having lost a family friend and fellow PhD candidate to suicide prompted me to action and the need to share how I maintained my subjective wellbeing whilst completing a PhD. This paper is not intended as a story of success but rather as a critical reflection that may provide hope and direction for others.

I used ethnography to explore and analyse context, culture, self, and self-other communications in introspective and reflexive stories to illustrate thoughts, feelings, and lived experiences (Bochner & Ellis, 2016). I acknowledge that a limitation of this study is an underlying assumption that readers will identify with the story of 'The Three Little Pigs', which has had worldwide dissemination since being written by Joseph Jacobs in 1890. I hope readers unfamiliar with the story will have been provided adequate details here to understand the storyline and are inspired to read it.

Data Collection and Analysis

While autoethnographic reports are offered as personal narratives, this research practice does more than just express stories (Duncan, 2004). Instead, it opens opportunities to explore thoughts about the complex relationship between subjectivity, experience, and knowledge (Bracke, 2017). Duncan (2004) purports that autoethnography surfaces scholarly and credible interpretations, and in this case, I am providing the 'insider' reality. Furthermore, I embrace the epistemological stance outlined by Bracke, seeking to understand how consciousness and knowledge are interwoven with historical and social conditions, 'grounded in lived experiences and the body' (2017, p. 390).

Methods of collecting data include reflective writing and comments from participants involved in the PhD study that the researcher was conducting (ethics approval H12REA108). To avoid researcher bias, I began analysing my own position as a researcher and reflecting upon what bias I bring to the research. Eliminating the actual influence of the researcher is considered impossible (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995), and the goal of a qualitative study is not to eliminate this influence but to understand it and use it productively (Maxwell, 2009). Eisenhardt and Graebner (2007) advise that an important approach to limit bias is to utilise highly knowledgeable informants who view the central phenomena from different perspectives. Whilst I am the only person involved in this study, I have completed my PhD in subjective wellbeing, so I felt I was somewhat knowledgeable.

Maxwell (2012) asserts that important strategies can be utilised in a qualitative study to work with specific validity threats, thereby increasing the credibility of the conclusions drawn by the researcher. These strategies included the use of 'rich' data, searching for discrepant evidence, and cross-referencing and comparing data sets. Data from the participants involved in the PhD study I conducted was utilised to cross reference my reflections in my Researcher Journal. To reduce the likelihood of misinterpretation, I utilised two data sources within the same study and cross-validated the data (Maxwell, 2009). The data comprised my Researcher Journal and responses from the eleven participants in my PhD research.

My Researcher Journal served four primary purposes. Firstly, it provided a means by which I acknowledged and externalised my assumptions and reactions to people and events involved in my PhD study. This was done through detailed annotations before and after interviewing a participant for my PhD study. Secondly, it captured my thinking at regular intervals to see the progress and linkages made as themes emerged. Third, the writing gave me a way of voicing inner conflict, often through diagrammatic representation, which allowed me to talk my thinking aloud. Fourthly, it provided snapshots of my previous thinking that could input and guide my current thinking in the maturation of ideas and an explanatory theory. During the analysis process, I adhered to four specific steps (referred to by Cohen *et al*., 2007). I:

1. Generated units of meaning;
2. Classified, categorised, and ordered these units of meaning;
3. Structured narratives to describe the interview contents; and
4. Interpreted the data.

I adopted the four-step iterative process for data analysis described by Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2000, p.282) as 'the reactive interaction between the researcher and the decontextualisation of the data that are already interpretations of a social encounter'. I rigorously investigated empirical evidence to generate units of meaning and accurately describe the emerging themes. I then represented the account by reporting the findings. Miles and Huberman (1994) suggest that the analysis of qualitative research notes starts in the field, at the time of observation, as the researcher identifies problems and concepts that seem likely to help understand the situation. This iterative process shaped my study whilst interviewing eleven participants concerning how they maintained their subjective wellbeing. I was continually reflective of my own subjective wellbeing. I chronicled this in my Researcher Journal, often reflecting upon data provided in the interviews I conducted and then critically self-evaluating, 'What does this mean for me and my subjective wellbeing as a PhD student?'

Scholars have highlighted the role of metaphor in the explanation of data (Thibodeau, et al., 2017) as central to scientific thought (Gentner & Jeziorski, 1993). Numerous researchers highlight the potential power of metaphors and analogies as explanatory devices, enabling audiences to represent, reason and understand knowledge structures (Gentner et al., 2001; Glucksberg & Keysar, 1990; Thibodeau & Boroditsky, 2011; Thibodeau et al., 2017). Here, I use metaphor (i.e., 'The Three Little Pigs') to represent abstract concepts and highlight the communicative and explanatory links emerging within the data set. 'The Three Little Pigs' story has a personal connection to my childhood stories and understandings of strategic thinking and perseverance, and this commonly known story may well resonate with readers, and for this reason, was chosen as an explanatory tool.

Findings

The 'Three Little Pigs' story will be incorporated into the autoethnographic narrative – the analysis of context, culture, self, and self-other communications. 'The Three Little Pigs' can be seen as a story about the doctoral journey at university. For ease of reading my narrative, I have indented and italicised my Researcher Journal entries and utilised a different font to show the data from participants in my PhD study. In reflecting upon what subjective wellbeing is, I own that I have spent several years considering this subjective wellbeing and conducted my PhD in the area. I perceive subjective wellbeing in the same manner as presented by Diener

(2006), in that it is seen to consist of the cognitive appraisal of life satisfaction – where one has cognitively appraised that one's life was good, high levels of pleasant emotions and relatively low levels of negative moods.

In considering what factors contributed to the maintenance of subjective wellbeing whilst completing a PhD, I looked back into my research journal, which provided not only a staged memory of the process as I reflect but, at the time, provided the organisational structure of the actual study as I planned out my study through to completion. The Researcher Journal provided a window, especially when I was experiencing heightened low-level moods. I look back at how this affected me and what I did to maintain my subjective wellbeing. In looking at this data, the main theme that emerged was how to cope with the negative forces of extreme stress and self-doubt. In reflecting upon the data, the best way to share what unfolded was through the analogy of '*The Three Little Pigs'*, with high levels of stress and self-doubt being encapsulated in the character of the big bad wolf. The story of the little pigs will be told in bold text, the journal entry data will be italicised, and the voices of the participants from my PhD study will be presented in a different text type to enable the reader to identify the voices more easily.

Once upon a time, there were three little pigs (see Figure 1).

> Journal entry 16th of April: Today, I felt as if a weight was shared. I met with a group of other PhD students and particularly linked well with two other students. Both were mothers, working part-time and studying. We have decided to meet monthly and share the journey together, learning from each other and perhaps lessening the stress of it all.

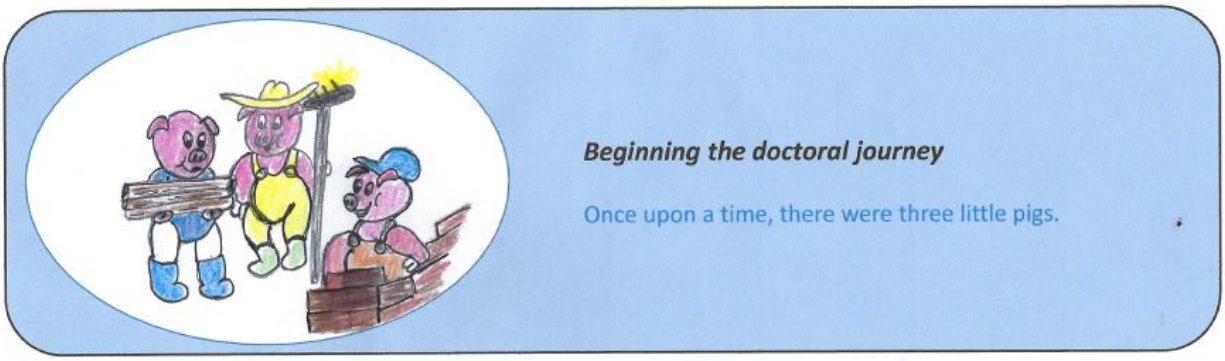

Figure 1: Beginning the doctoral journey

One pig quickly built a house of straw, while the second pig built a house with sticks. The third little pig looked around for more durable materials and built a house with bricks (see Figure 2).

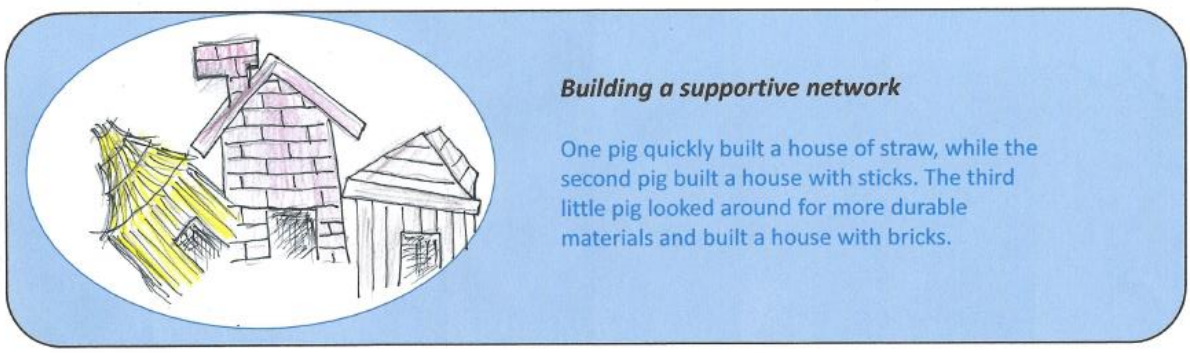

Figure 2: Building a supportive network

Along came the big bad wolf, sensing that he could eat the little pigs, and he approached the first house (see Figure 3).

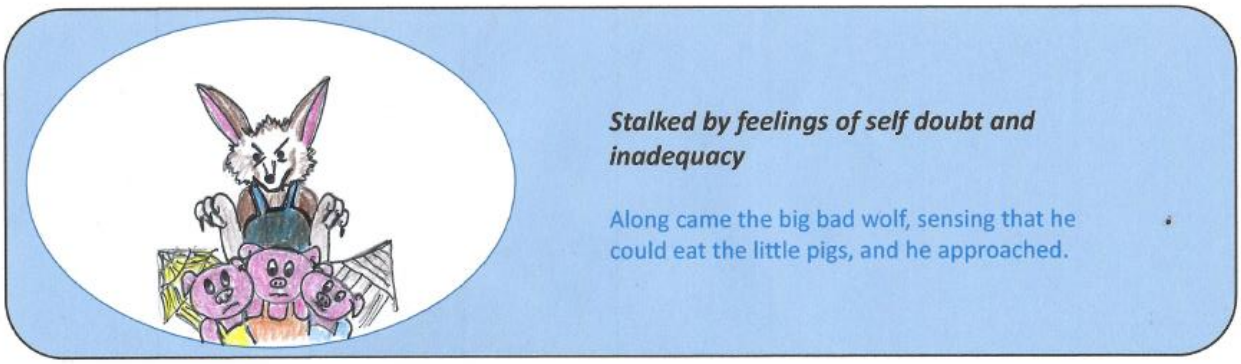

Figure 3: Stalked by feelings of self-doubt and inadequacy

'Little pig, little pig, let me in, or I'll huff, and I'll puff, and I'll blow your house in'. And he did! (See Figure 4).

> Journal entry 23rd of July: I have encouraged my student friends to come to the university's Postgraduate and Early Career network, but neither has come yet. It is a great supportive network, but they say they are pressed for time.
>
> Journal entry, 23rd of September: I feel sad. One of my PhD friends has chosen to quit the program. She does not feel she is capable of doing a PhD, saying, 'I just don't think I have what it takes!'… I wonder what it takes.

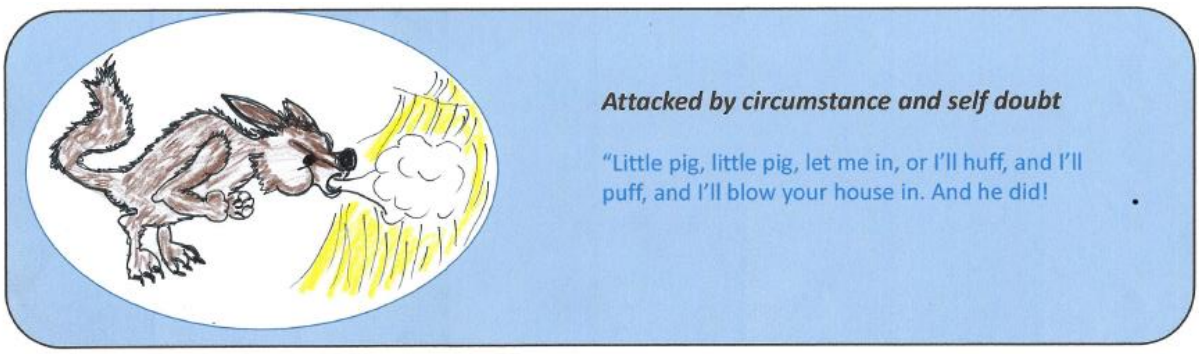

Figure 4: Attacked by circumstance and self-doubt

The big bad wolf approached the second little pig's house. 'Little pig, little pig, let me in, or I'll huff, and I'll puff, and I'll blow your house in'. And he did! (see Figure 5).

> Journal entry 23rd of September: Heavy-hearted today! My other PhD friend has withdrawn from the program. Saying, 'I just can't do it! I am trying to juggle motherhood, kids, and study, and my candidature was a disaster.' So, again, I ponder what it takes to complete a PhD.

Figure 5: Battling raging destructive forces of gnawing self-doubt and work, life, and study hardships

The big bad wolf approached the third little pig's house. 'Little pig, little pig, let me in, or I'll huff, and I'll puff, and I'll blow your house in' (see Figure 6).

> Journal entry 24th of June: How much more can I take? Be here. Be there. One child is sick, and another wants me to sit and do extension work. Oh, simple, finish my work (clearly simple), finish early and take her to a music exam… a chapter due to supervisors. Husband's work dinner engagement – smile on cue. So, it is not important to me at this time! My world is swaying. Indeed, what is important? Bring on conceptual clarity; just make it at a convenient time. As if. How to see a way forward. Think. Plan. Review. Schedule.

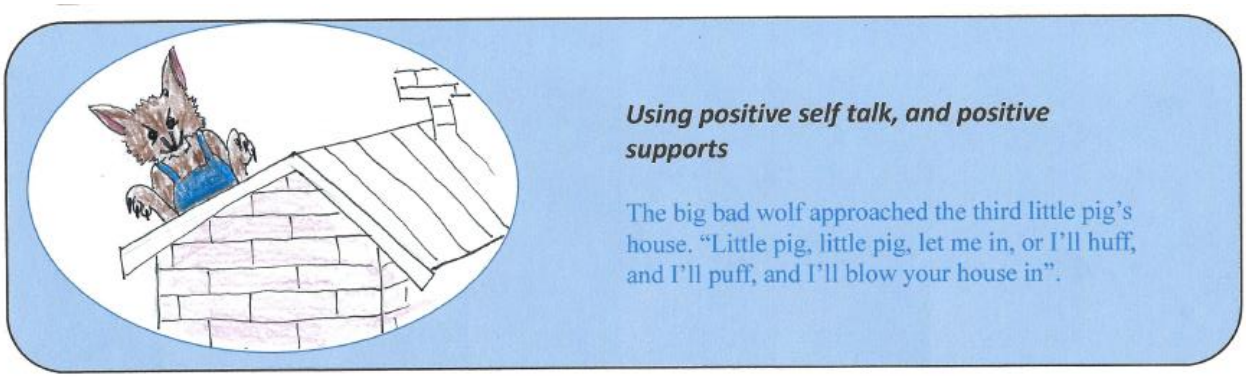

Figure 6: Using Positive self-talk and positive supports

Destructive forces raged at the house the third little pig had built (my subjective wellbeing) when I was striving to juggle full-time work, PhD study and be a wife and mother. My decision on how best to juggle this was informed by my previous experiences (having worked full time while completing two Master's degrees) and the ability to surface this knowledge in myself to inform my current decision-making (i.e., tacit knowing). When the destructive forces came charging, there was clearly a point that I made a cognitive evaluation to stop and plan and consider what I could control and reschedule. However, this was also informed by my learning from the participants in my PhD study, as many of them had families, and they were talking to me about how best to maintain subjective wellbeing. Through the regular utilisation of my researcher diary and data analysis, I was performing and reflecting regularly upon their wise words, as exemplified by one participant: 'Balance, what's important, what's not. That's not rocket science; what's important to you and what's not? Set goals and timelines, manage what is really important, and strive to achieve the goals while having some flexibility. Remember to celebrate some of the little stuff, the important stuff. Have time for the hugs'.

> Journal entry June 30th: I can feel the pressure building; my heart seems to race, and my head hurts. I know the timeline, but I feel tired; there is so much to do and so little time for sleep. I shout at myself. 'Get up! Get going! This difficulty shall pass! You can do this!' Wearily I trudge into my study for yet another 2 am start.

Reflecting on this data, through my knowledge as a participant, I needed the 2:00 am start to complete my work because, at 6:00 am, my role reverted from student to wife and mother. The focused self-talk that promoted or motivated me to choose behaviour for work completion made a difference. My four hours of uninterrupted work time were valued as important. So, the subjective appraisal informed by elements such as beliefs and attitudes helped rebalance workload pressures with goals and role expectations. This balance (homeostasis) state was achieved using systematic self-regulation and self-management of positive feelings in equilibrium. Even when continuous changes occurred, I could ensure what Cummins (2016) discourses as 'relatively uniform conditions' prevailed by cognitively reframing to positive feelings of achievement. This passage also reveals a dedication to goal setting, where my personally set writing targets were adhered to so that the PhD thesis would progress. Further analysis shows that using self-talk for self-motivational purposes and the attribute of perseverance was vital in keeping self-doubt at bay (i.e., part of the destructive force of the big bad wolf).

The big bad wolf huffed, puffed, puffed, and tried hard to blow the brick house down, but he could not (see Figure 7).

> Journal Entry 30th Oct: One says this way, the other this way, and to whom do I show alliance? What do I want? It is my study! How the hell do I, a fledgling, know how best to present my data? I am very angry and frustrated, wanting guidance yet seeing none except the differing grey presented by both! Perhaps I am not capable!
>
> Self-doubt is howling, threatening. The screaming voices of indecision and frustration claw away at me, and when night draws close, the scratching is so loud that I cannot sleep. Perhaps I am not capable! Focus, it is hard! You can do it!

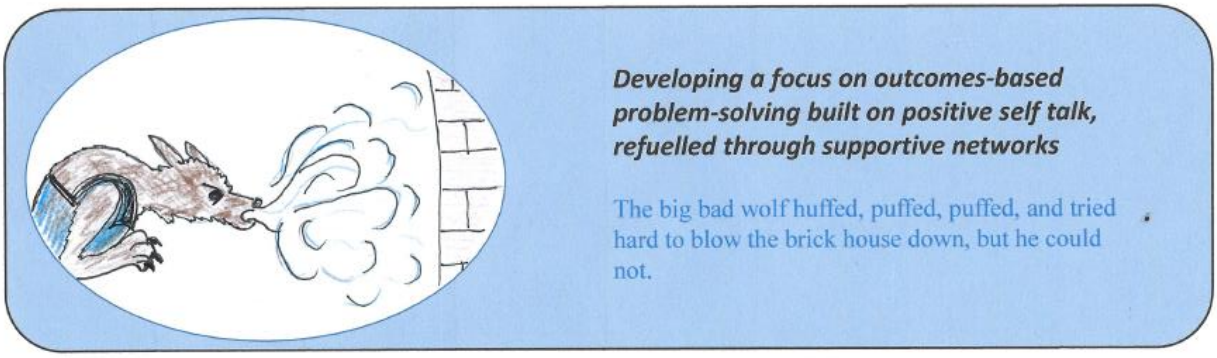

Figure 7: Developing a focus on outcomes-based problem-solving built on positive self-talk, refuelled through supportive networks

Knowing I had to move forward, the challenge was keeping the wolf at bay and changing my negative and destructive thoughts to more positive ones.

> Journal Entry 4th of November: I am not capable! I am capable! I argue with myself and draw into myself. Drawing upon his memory, I hear my father's words pound in my ear. 'If you want it bad enough, then work for it. Life was not meant to be easy. STOP! THINK! If you get knocked down, get back up stronger for the experience. What did you learn about yourself about others?'
>
> Mmm… Patch myself up first… bit of first aid (yes, I am worthwhile, yes, I am capable)… What have I learnt? What can I utilise to rework this mess? Whose expertise do I value and trust?… I shall search out …

Here, optimism and personal attributes of perseverance can be seen as I decided I could complete the PhD. Self-talk was employed to generate a feeling of competency and called upon images and memories inside my head, ones I knew would prompt me to proactive action. Moreover, the how of the action was important. I first used knowledge of myself: 'Patch myself up first… bit of first aid (yes I am worthwhile, yes I am capable)', recognising I was not travelling well and deliberately cognitively evaluated whether what I was doing was worthwhile and could competently do it. I reflected upon the situation and called forward words from my memory, words deliberately chosen to inspire me and help me problem-solve. I implemented an outcomes-based problem-solving focus. I evaluated my own performance and,

with self-knowledge, knew that I needed external expertise to inform my decision-making around data presentation competently. I then decided to network with trusted experts engaging in the formal network (Postgraduate and Early Career Researchers). Through this network, I felt supported in my time of need.

The wolf tried to enter stealthily through the chimney, but the third little pig, having become acquainted with the behaviour of the big bad wolf, anticipated a vulnerable area to attack and took countermeasures (see Figure 8).

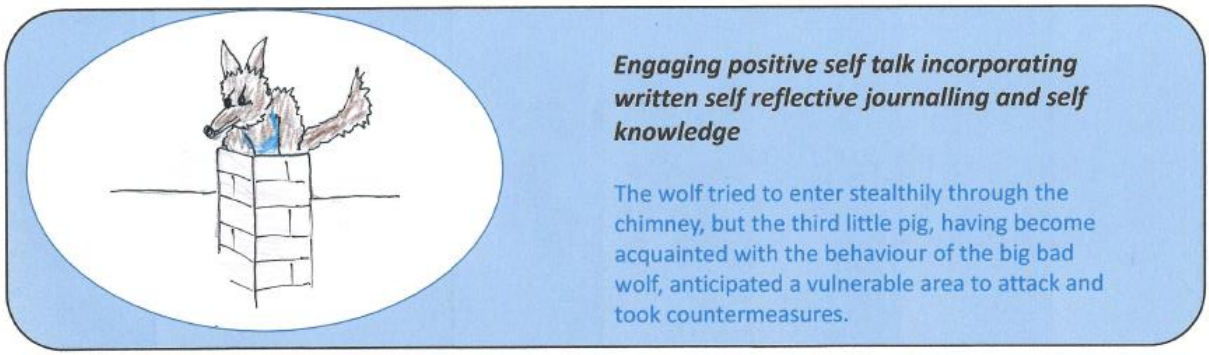

Figure 8: Engaging positive self-talk incorporating written self-reflective journalling and self-knowledge

A boiling pot of water was placed below the chimney. The wolf crept down the chimney, fell into the boiling water and died. The little piggy was a bit shaken but safe (see Figure 9).

> Journal entry 22nd of June: I am also hopeful and frustrated with how to represent my theory. There are so many drawings! How to communicate that conceptual clarity is indeed a challenge. I feel frustrated!!! The words of Evan [fictitious name given to one of the participants in my PhD study to ensure confidentiality] come to mind.

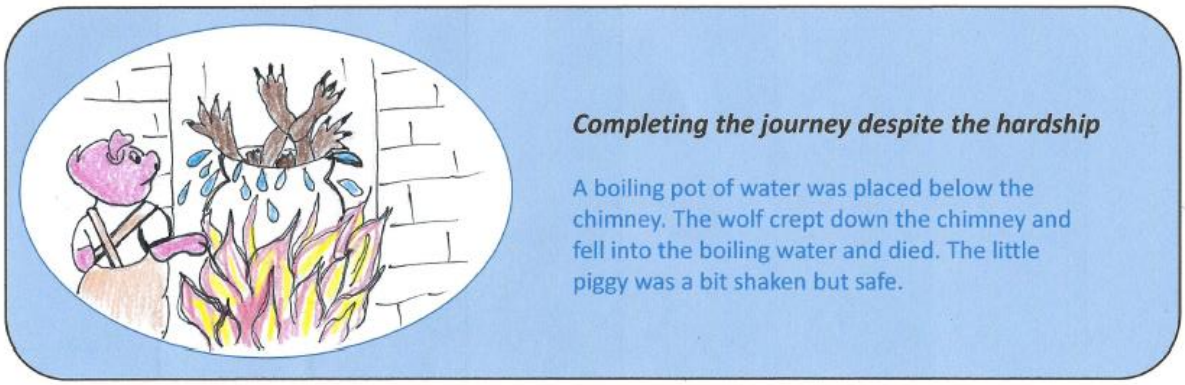

Figure 9: Completing the journey despite the hardship

There are certain tenets that I would itemise as essential in what I've found successful. One of them is to look at a problem as a potential solution - you know, turn it on its head. … If that's stressing me, turn it on its head; how can I change it? Turning it on its head is learnable. You

can look at an issue or a stressor or a problem or behaviour and say, let's turn it on its head. What would it look like if it was different? I think that it's about - the learned behaviours are about recognising it, looking for the opposite of it. Stepping back from it, thinking it through, taking the time, it doesn't have to be instant. Consider what is worthwhile.

> Get away self–doubt! Come in self …. successful learner identity, come in. Look at what can be controlled, how you work on all of the multiple facets, thinking, planning, talking with myself in my head, listening to the voices, and seeking counsel. I will complete my PhD. I will!

Through a process of self-reflection, I investigated the problem and realised there was no quick solution. By writing in my journal, I acknowledged my feelings. During this writing and reflection, I recalled a memory of someone's uplifting wise words, turning my thinking to knowing my work was worthwhile. This was reinforced strongly by the actual PhD study I was engaged in, where numerous participants had highlighted the importance of my study as exemplified by:

> 'I think the lessons you are going to learn and the research that you do, I think, should really benefit a lot of people, not just principals'.

> Journal entry 8th of November: I feel blessed. I have heard several times today that I am doing well with my PhD writing. These words from friends, family, and especially fellow students warm my soul. I network with my principal colleagues, who voice the importance of my study, and my husband, who believes it is a good thing to contribute back to the profession. I pause — what about my fellow students who do not have the same networks and relationships? How do they go for support?

Further Analysis of These Accounts

The data analysis revealed that the third little piggy had numerous personal traits that contributed to maintaining subjective wellbeing, such as perseverance, resilience, optimism, and personal agency. The literature has linked these personal traits to maintaining subjective wellbeing (Diener, 2006; 2009). There was also evidence of using specific ways of working to maintain subjective wellbeing. Analysis of the data revealed there were four key ways of working.

1) Explicit Organisational skills, applied with a sense of tacit knowing and purpose, helped to facilitate dealing with cognitive complexity and rebalance subjective wellbeing.
2) Self-talk with internal dialogue was a strategy to move thinking away from negative states like anxiety linked to extreme self-doubt to a more optimistic state of mind.
3) Relational connectivity with people who appeared balanced and satisfied with their lives effectively shifted negative affect states to a more positive frame of thinking.
4) The Researcher Journal was useful for facilitating self-regulation and self-control and promoting critical self-reflection. The focused use of the Researcher Journal as a tool to promote metacognitive thinking contributed to the positive maintenance of one researcher's subjective well-being and to the successful completion of the doctoral journey. Writing, drawing, and annotating in the Researcher Journal was a specific behaviour that scaffolded the choice of positive thoughts and feelings.

The data revealed that the third little pig used numerous explicitly chosen organisational skills to facilitate dealing with cognitive complexity. This third little pig drew on self-knowledge, recognising stress and feelings of anxiety and self-doubt, tacitly working to shift this thinking into a more optimistic frame. Dearing et al. (2005) and Al Nima et al. (2024) suggest that finding healthy ways to cope with emotional stress can set support ways of working that promote effective coping and self-care. It would be very difficult to explain if asked how I did this, as it was a deliberative internal process. The literature defines tacit knowledge as acquiring knowledge through perception, creating 'knowing how' and understandings, insights, and expertise (Day, 2005; Polanyi, 1976). Tacit knowing was used to manage subjective wellbeing with explicit strategies involving personal dialogue with the self. Self-talk with internal dialogue was a strategy to move thinking away from negative states like anxiety linked to extreme self-doubt to a more optimistic state of mind (i.e., *come on, you can do this*).

The little piggy also drew upon past experience, creating words of encouragement (e.g., from her dead father) to reinforce a feeling of competency. Relational connectivity (i.e., linkage with family, friends, colleagues, and use of networking) was also used to deliberately shift negative affect states to a more positive frame of thinking. For this to occur, the third little piggy evaluated the situation and enacted strategies to ensure feelings of competency in the PhD journey. By working in this way, the third little piggy achieved a sense of achievement as a student, a sense of control over the situation and facilitated feelings of competency. These feelings (i.e., positive affect) contributed to wellbeing. Noteworthy is that using a Researcher Journal allowed the researcher to think through organisational details, reflect on the complexity of the tasks, facilitate positive critical self-reflection and self-talk through ongoing questioning, and overall contribute to the positive maintenance of one researcher's subjective wellbeing while successfully completing the doctoral journey.

The findings are significant as little is written linking tacit knowing, Self-talk, subjective wellbeing and graduate or doctoral study. For example, Google Scholar (accessed on 29th May 2024) revealed zero articles pertaining to tacit knowing, self-talk, subjective wellbeing and graduate or doctoral study (using the search strings with the four constructs, "tacit knowing" AND "self-talk" AND "subjective wellbeing" AND "postgraduate study"; "tacit knowing" AND "self-talk" AND "subjective wellbeing" AND "doctoral study") Different spelling using hyphens and capitals (e.g., subjective well-being; Self Talk) of words made no difference. Searching the literature for three of the four constructs (e.g., search string, "tacit knowing" AND "self-talk" AND "subjective wellbeing") also revealed zero articles. Several hundred (n=276) populated with two constructs of self-talk and subjective wellbeing and 136 articles (n= "self-talk" AND "subjective wellbeing" AND "Postgraduate study". The literature provides little information regarding how tacit knowing influences a person's self-talk and learning behaviours (i.e., use as the use of a Researcher Journal) to rebalance subjective wellbeing during a doctoral journey positively. Autoethnography was effectual in investigating the research question. This method surfaced opportunities to discover thoughts about the complex relationship between subjective wellbeing and doctoral study, contributing to what Bracke (2017) aver should surface: subjectivity, experience, and knowledge.

Implications

Eisner (1991) suggested that qualitative studies are useful if they inform readers by highlighting situational elements that might otherwise go unnoticed, along with whether they help readers

anticipate future scenarios and possibilities. My autoethnographic account provided such a guide, highlighting ways of working that enabled me to maintain my subjective wellbeing. These ways of working might also be useful for other adult learners engaged in post-graduate study. In conclusion, I leave you with the words of another researcher, one skilled in autoethnography: '[a]lthough risks are taken by any researcher using a personal experience autoethnography, there is a place in scholarship for shining the light of research where one stands for attempting to know one's own experience and sharing that knowledge' (Duncan, 2004, p.13).

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