How Not to Do a Phenomenology Interview

INTERVIEWER: Hi. How are you doing?

DR. CAROL WATSON: I'm fine. How are you?

INTERVIEWER: Oh, pretty good. Listen, I know it's an imposition but I needed to have an old person in my sample, so I really appreciate you coming to do this. Most of my people will have been a lot younger, they've just gotten their degrees, but it's nice to have an old person in the group. So thank you so much for agreeing to come. Let's just get started. What was it like to be a doctoral student?

DR. CAROL WATSON: Well, you know I was older than most of my peers but I really enjoyed it. I thought I had a lot of good mentorship and I loved the courses. I didn't feel excluded from study groups or anything like that. It was a lot of hard work but I had a lot of good support, so I felt like overall it was okay.

INTERVIEWER: Oh, cool. All right, well, listen, I never had any time to do anything I really wanted to do. Has that been your experience, did you have that, too?

DR. CAROL WATSON: Well, I mean when you go to school to get a degree, that's – isn't that what you want to do, I mean isn't that why you're there. So I guess I don't really understand the question.

INTERVIEWER: Well, let's just go to the next one, then. Did you ever think of giving up?

DR. CAROL WATSON: No, not really. I mean it's a lot of hard work and you certainly get discouraged but I don't think I really ever thought of quitting or packing it in, if that's what you mean.

INTERVIEWER: You never found that you just wanted to throw in the towel and just stomp and throw your hands in the air?

DR. CAROL WATSON: No. Sometimes I was frustrated and I did throw my hands in the air. But you know a degree was something I really wanted, it was something that I was really committed to working towards. So I guess no I never did really want to quit.

INTERVIEWER: It must have been just you then. So, how was your love life while you were in school?

DR. CAROL WATSON: Excuse me?

INTERVIEWER: Oh, you know what, I can tell I made you uncomfortable but listen I really need to have 10 interviews and you did agree. So let's just go to the next question. When you thought of quitting, what stopped you?

DR. CAROL WATSON: No. Sometimes I was frustrated and I did throw my hands in the air. But you know a degree was something I really wanted, it was something that I was really committed to working towards. So I guess no I never did really want to quit.

INTERVIEWER: It must have been just you then. So, how was your love life while you were in school?

DR. CAROL WATSON: No. Sometimes I was frustrated and I did throw my hands in the air. But you know a degree was something I really wanted, it was something that I was really committed to working towards. So I guess no I never did really want to quit.

INTERVIEWER: You know what, I just realized what time it is. I have to go. Listen, I'll call you later and we can reschedule for another time, okay?

DR. CAROL WATSON: Okay, thank you.
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INTERVIEWER: It's nice to see you, Dr. C. How are things going?

DR. CAROL WATSON: They're going pretty well. I'm really glad to help.

INTERVIEWER: Well, I really do appreciate you coming. I know that it's been a couple of years since you've been in school but a doctoral experience is something that I'm sure no one ever really forgets, so I think you have a lot to share.

DR. CAROL WATSON: Thank you.

INTERVIEWER: Let me ask you, when you had your doctoral experience, what was your goal in getting your PhD to begin with?

DR. CAROL WATSON: Well, honestly, I never intended to get a PhD, but after my master's, I couldn't find a job and I kept taking courses and one day, my faculty mentor sat me down and said you're almost ready to take your qualifying exams. Why don't you just press on and finish your degree. And I thought, yeah, I could see myself doing that and I love to teach and I could see myself teaching. So that really gave me the motivation to continue on. Also I hung around because I really did enjoy taking classes. I really found coursework stimulating. It was exciting to me to learn new things. And so you know I had a lot of motivation to stay and not a lot of motivation to leave unless I could find that perfect job.

INTERVIEWER: Let me ask you how much time did you end up spending on your studies? Was it what you had anticipated or did you find you spent more time?

DR. CAROL WATSON: It was pretty much what I anticipated, although probably if I had more time, I would have spent more time. I think studying is a little like filling a glass of water, you know. I had children, so I had to take care of them first. And so my studying kind of filled up the remaining time but I didn't feel like I lacked and I felt like I was more focused in my studies than some students that had more time.

INTERVIEWER: How much time would you say you put into studying each week?

DR. CAROL WATSON: Probably I put somewhere around 15 hours into just my studying – reading and studying. There's a lot of reading.

INTERVIEWER: Wow, 15 hours, that's pretty impressive. Tell me how much time did you anticipate having for a social life? You say you had children. Did you end up feeling like you had enough time with them, and how much time did you really have with them every week?

DR. CAROL WATSON: Well, I had a lot of time with them because I kind of tried to construct my schedule so I could get them out the door to school and then I would focus my energies between 9 and about 3 on just teaching and studying and doing coursework. And then I usually was home for dinner. I hardly ever left them alone for dinner. And in terms of free time, I tried to make time on the weekends and definitely in the summer. Usually, I wouldn't take classes between mid June and mid August. So that gave me a lot of time one-on-one with the kids and as a group, we could do things as a family. So that helped.

INTERVIEWER: Let me ask you – are there any moments that kind of stand out as times when you knew that your children suddenly realized that you were a doctoral student or things that stuck out with you, times when you just knew that things would be a lot different in your life with them if you weren't a doctoral student?

DR. CAROL WATSON: Yeah, actually I have good and bad. I had a daughter once who was angry at me and said, "Why are you taking classes, you should be having a job and supporting us." And it gave me an opportunity to explain that this was kind of a long-term investment and that this kind of support I would be able to provide would be better when I was done. On the other hand, my youngest daughter, who was the only one left at home when I finished, when I did my dissertation defense, she came with me and ran my slide show.

INTERVIEWER: Oh, fantastic.
DR. CAROL WATSON: She was 12 and she thought it was very cool.

INTERVIEWER: Oh, fantastic, a family affair.

DR. CAROL WATSON: Indeed.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think that affected how they view their education, have they kind of absorbed the same bug to learn that you had?

DR. CAROL WATSON: I think so, yes. Although most of them are raising families now, so they're not in school. But I think they appreciate that it takes a lot of work. I think they value study more than they ever would have otherwise and are more motivated to learn on their own. So we all share books, for example we pass books around our family. But I don't think it would have been quite that way if I hadn't been a student while they were growing up.

INTERVIEWER: Oh, wow. Let me ask you – what did you find most challenging in the process?

DR. CAROL WATSON: The most challenging part for me was always the fear of failure. Every time you would have to write a paper or take a test or walk into a new class, I always had this fear that I wasn't as good as the other students. And so for me, I always had to get over this idea that I wasn't as smart as all the rest of those younger students. But it proved not to be the case and it did give me a lot of self-confidence.

INTERVIEWER: Were there a lot of other students who were considerably younger or at a different stage. I don't want to say considerably younger but who were you know finishing college and going straight into their PhD's?

DR. CAROL WATSON: Yeah, actually, there were quite a number of students in my program and there were only – I think at the time, there were only maybe five or six of us that were even married. And of those who were married, there were only two of us that were quote/unquote older students. And the woman who was the other older student and I have been fast friends ever since.

INTERVIEWER: Oh, that's fantastic. So you were actually interested in the same topics as well?

DR. CAROL WATSON: Yeah.

INTERVIEWER: Wow. Have you done research together since?

DR. CAROL WATSON: We have not. She's gone to East Carolina University and we still stay in touch but she's in a school of business now actually, so doing business learning. And so that's not really my expertise. So we keep in touch but we haven't done research.

INTERVIEWER: But lifelong friends, that's really good.

DR. CAROL WATSON: Lifelong friends.

INTERVIEWER: Fantastic. Well, let me ask you then – and this is kind of my last question for you – what did you find most rewarding in the process?

DR. CAROL WATSON: I think most rewarding was the friendships, the confidence, the realization that I love to learn. So it gave me kind of an impetus to keep learning post-degree, that I could read those studies that I thought were so difficult at first, that I would sometimes not think I'd even understood a word. But I realized I can, I can do those things. But I think also it's a level of respect that people give you when you can introduce yourself as doctor. I think that's really a cool thing.

INTERVIEWER: Building on that – and I know I just told you that this is the last question but I just have to ask you – can you share a story of the first time that someone who was significant to you realized that you had your PhD?

DR. CAROL WATSON: Yeah. I actually was in a group of women and I remember introducing myself and these women had just known me just as a woman, another woman. And when I introduced myself and told my story, there were several of them who just hadn't realized. I guess they thought I just was – I don't know, a stay-at-home mom or something or didn't realize what I had been doing with all my time. And there was
both shock and amazement. And that was a little bit gratifying to see that they finally realized that yeah I had been working really hard.

INTERVIEWER: So it was noticeably different from your experience while you were a doctoral student?

DR. CAROL WATSON: In some ways yeah.

INTERVIEWER: When you told people you were a doctoral student, how did they react then?

DR. CAROL WATSON: Mostly with surprise. You don't see a lot of doctoral students who are older; they tend to be younger. But I think that could change in the future, certainly as more women with families seek higher degrees. I hope so.

INTERVIEWER: I hope so, too. Thank you so much. Let me ask you – is there anything that you would like to share on your doctoral process – what it was like, how it changed your life or the experiences that you had that I haven't really asked about?

DR. CAROL WATSON: I guess I just want to say that basically I think every doctoral experience is similar in some ways but very different. And each student needs to find a schedule and a process of studying that works for them. But the reward is worth it.

INTERVIEWER: Well, thank you very much, Dr. C. I really appreciate you coming today.

DR. CAROL WATSON: You're welcome. Thank you.

INTERVIEWER: And I hope we have a chance to speak again.

DR. CAROL WATSON: Thank you.

INTERVIEWER: Thank you.