

Eeva Houtbeckers's PhD Dissertation: Analysis of a PhD Journey about Micro-Entrepreneurship and Sustainability

Introduction

For this article, I had the opportunity to interview Eeva Houtbeckers, a PhD student in the Department of Management Studies. Eeva's 2016 thesis, entitled 'Mundane Social Entrepreneurship - A practice perspective on the work of micro-entrepreneurs', provides valuable insights into the journey of completing a PhD. In the following discussion, I elaborate on Eeva's insightful reflections on her doctoral experience and share her personal thoughts and experiences. I've also included the perspectives of her supervisor, Minna Halme, and co-supervisor, Arno Kourula, in order to provide a comprehensive view of the doctoral process. Together, their insights shed light on various dimensions of doctoral research, including the thesis writing stages, the central research question, the pivotal role of the supervisor, external influences on their work, and the significance of peer support and academic writing assistance.

Phases of Writing the Dissertation

Eeva commenced her academic journey with the freedom to choose her research topic, ultimately focusing on the intersection of sustainability and organizations. Her research trajectory shifted toward social enterprises, which are companies dedicated to addressing societal issues. This shift highlights the fluid and evolving nature of research, where initial ideas may transform as the subject is thoroughly explored. It's important to note that Eeva maintained a consistent interest in power dynamics and social analysis within the context of sustainability and business, which served as a recurring theme throughout her research.

Eeva's research was heading in a different direction when she adopted an ethnography as a methodology, closely immersing herself in people's everyday lives to understand how discourses and entrepreneurial practices intersect. This unexpected change in methodology underlines the dynamic nature of research, which requires adaptability to seize new opportunities and meet evolving research needs. Additionally, Eeva's skill in tracing these discourses within daily routines demonstrates her dedication to a rigorous and all-encompassing examination of her subject matter.

Role of the Advisor

Minna, Eeva's supervisor, played a pivotal role in shaping the direction of her research. It was Minna who suggested incorporating the term 'mundane' to guide Eeva's approach when examining entrepreneurship in everyday life. This emphasizes the significant influence of supervisors in offering valuable guidance and aiding students in refining their research objectives and methodologies. Eeva's choice to seek input from academics outside her institution for content and discussions further highlights the importance of diversifying perspectives and tapping into different areas of expertise during the research process. Collaborating with Arno Kourula at the University of Amsterdam as a second supervisor expanded the depth of her research, providing her access to a broader array of insights and viewpoints.

Peer Support and Academic Writing

Eeva illuminates the significance of peer support throughout her doctoral studies. By engaging in ongoing dialogues with professors hailing from Europe and North America, she points out that the act of reading and deliberating over each other's research substantially advanced her intellectual growth. Eeva stressed that she actively took part in a multitude of conferences, seminars, and workshops during her academic journey, underscoring the importance of collaboration and the exchange of insights within the academic community. Furthermore, Eeva has actively taken part in writing retreats and actively advocated for the establishment of writing groups, thereby highlighting the critical role that academic writing support plays in the successful completion of a thesis.

Challenges and Determination

Eeva's doctoral journey was marked by difficulties. She openly acknowledged experiencing periods of doubt and self-questioning, while also highlighting the importance of reaching out for assistance with academic writing when needed. Her steadfast commitment to finishing her thesis received significant backing from her family and the enduring influence of her father, who remains a source of inspiration for her. This illustrates that individual motivation and support networks are pivotal factors in the realm of doctoral research.

Connecting with the Right Academic Audience

Eeva contemplates the difficulty of conveying her research effectively to diverse academic audiences. She observed that in her participation in doctoral workshops and seminars, she frequently encountered challenges in conveying the significance of her work to the attendees. This draws attention to the significance of identifying the appropriate academic audience that can grasp and actively engage with the research, subsequently offering valuable feedback. She stresses the necessity for researchers to enhance their communication abilities and adeptly connect their work to their potential academic audiences.

Practice Theory in Dissertation

Eeva elucidates her decision to employ practice theory in her research, highlighting her affiliation with a community of academics dedicated to studying optimal entrepreneurial approaches. Her work signifies the convergence of theoretical framework and practical orientation, as she methodically employs concepts to elucidate phenomena while acknowledging that results may differ based on people's actions. The use of practice theory has been assessed by Eeva to be compatible with the research objectives and the developing field of entrepreneurial practice.

Conclusion

Eeva's reflections on her PhD journey provide valuable insights into the multifaceted and dynamic nature of doctoral research. Eeva's experiences highlight the importance of adaptability, the role of supervisors and peer support, the centrality of personal determination and the need to communicate research effectively to the appropriate academic audience. The decision to adopt practice theory underlines the importance of adapting research methods in response to an ever-changing academic environment. Eeva's dissertation journey provides

insight into how researchers overcome the obstacles they face in their quest to complete a successful dissertation.

In summary, Eeva's PhD research journey demonstrates the importance of personal passion in the choice of research topics. Her innate interest in micro-entrepreneurs and social entrepreneurship led her to use ethnography and to shape her research according to her own personality and preferences.

In addition to Eeva's personal interests and passions, in this chapter I also explore the role of the supervisor and the contributions of Minna Halme and the second supervisor, Arno Kourula. Minna acted as a supportive supervisor, enabling Eeva to take responsibility for the choice of research method. Minna also emphasised the importance of strong writing skills, stressing that effective communication is an essential tool for presenting research and engaging with the academic community. Minna also emphasised the importance of striking a balance between actively seeking guidance and developing self-management skills. From her perspective, the doctoral journey signifies the transition from being a student to becoming an independent researcher, a process requiring self-reflection and decision-making. In conclusion, Minna advocated for a harmonious blend of seeking help when necessary and honing self-management skills, asserting the importance of finding a personalized balance that best suits everyone.

Arno, the co-supervisor for Eeva's dissertation, shared valuable insights regarding his role in guiding Eeva throughout her academic journey. Arno's primary focus revolved around the research process itself, rather than the specific research content. He explained that he aimed to provide Eeva with a broad perspective, especially concerning aspects like publishing and other academic requirements. He also actively engaged in discussions related to structuring the study and shaping research identity, with a specific focus on social entrepreneurship and practice-based research methods, notably ethnography.

In terms of time and resource management, both supervisors recommended seeking advice during moments of uncertainty, which are common for PhD students. They emphasized the importance of seeking guidance at critical junctures, such as when initially selecting a research topic, and highlighted the significance of peer advice and collaboration within the academic community.

In their guidance for current and prospective PhD students, Minna and Arno stress the importance of maintaining a distinction between one's personal identity and academic endeavours. They highlight the significance of effectively managing criticism and rejection, viewing them as opportunities for personal development. Furthermore, they endorse commemorating accomplishments and encourage the perspective that a PhD should be seen as a milestone rather than the ultimate goal. Striking a balance between various responsibilities and seeking assistance when needed is deemed crucial for success within the demanding realm of academia. Furthermore, the advisors' advice to seek support at specific phases of the PhD journey, particularly in the early stages and through collaboration with peers, highlights the significance of community and mentorship in the academic sphere. Their emphasis on separating personal identity from academic work and embracing criticism as a growth opportunity should be regarded as a precious advice for both current and future PhD students.