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Pressure: Students use qualitative methods to explore the meaning of pressure among graduate students here at the University of Pennsylvania

SWRK 781: Qualitative Research
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Please also see our PennWIC blog post for more description and photos.
PRESSURE: STUDENTS USE QUALITATIVE METHODS TO EXPLORE THE MEANING OF PRESSURE AMONG GRADUATE STUDENTS HERE AT THE UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA

RESEARCH TEAM
Members of the Qualitative Methods Research Class (SW781). Each student investigator (n=14) recruited a study participant (graduate students from across the university) and trained them in the appropriate and ethical use of photography in this context. Study participants were asked to define and explore the concept of pressure in their daily lives and were instructed to use their smart phones or digital cameras to document their exploration over one week. Using participant-generated photographs each member of the research team conducted a photo-elicitation interview with a participant. Additionally each student investigator recruited between 3 and 5 members of the Penn community (n=75) and asked them to answer 2 freelisting questions designed to help us explore the meaning of pressure.

SELECT PRELIMINARY FINDINGS
Preliminary review of the audio recordings from the interviews resulted in the identification of several themes. Examples include time, health, money, depression, sleep, and self-care. Here, we share with you a sample of these themes through participant generated photos and associated quotes. Additionally, we share the preliminary analysis of freelist data.

NEXT STEPS
All interviews will be transcribed verbatim and analyzed using Nvivo10 software. Using common coding techniques described by Strauss and Corbin (1990) members of the research team will complete the steps at right. Additionally, the team will collaborate to identify the connections between the freelist data and the interview data to identify salient themes, summarize findings and prepare an abstract for presentation and a manuscript for publication.

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1) Open Coding: The process of breaking down, examining, comparing, conceptualizing, and categorizing data

2) Axial Coding: A set of procedures whereby data are put back together in new ways after open coding, by making connections between categories.

3) Selective Coding: The process of selecting the core category, systematically relating it to other categories, validating those relationships, and filling in categories that need further refinement and development.
WHY EXAMINE PRESSURE?
Nominal (meaning in name only) group technique (NGT) is a structured variation of a small-group discussion employed to reach consensus. NGT gathers information by asking individuals to respond to questions posed by a moderator; in this case, the moderator was the professor and the goal was to determine a topic of study for the class. Once potential topics were shared with the group each member of the class was asked to prioritize the ideas suggested by all group members. The process prevents the domination of the discussion by a single person, encourages all group members to participate, and results in a set of prioritized topics representing the group’s preferences. The class, by way of NGT, decided to investigate what graduate students think about “pressure” at Penn.

FREELISTING
Freelisting is a qualitative methodology in which individuals list terms that come to mind to describe a topic or issue. The frequency and order of these terms is used to calculate the saliency of the term (Borgatti, 1998). Conceptually, freelisting is based on the idea that those with shared experiences (e.g. being a graduate student at Penn) or shared cultural values will have a common understanding of a particular domain (e.g. pressure). We asked graduate students two questions and analyzed their responses with Anthropac 4.98 software. The most salient responses are shared below.

What comes to mind when I ask you to think about “pressure” at the University of Pennsylvania?

STRESS
LACK of TIME
WORKLOAD
FUTURE CAREER
COMPETITION
EXPECTATIONS
CULTURE

What words come to mind when you think about how students at UPenn deal with Pressure?

ALCOHOL
EXERCISE
TALKING WITH FRIENDS
DRUGS
STRESS
COUNSELING
COPING MECHANISMS
PROCRASTINATE
Pressure would mean the need to meet certain expectations that are not always the ones you put on yourself but are put on you externally. Like the expectation to do well in school. In my view, being a good city planner would mean that I have seen every part of the city and understand the fabric of the city, but the expectations of the program are that I understand the theoretical stuff first….

What I wanted to take a picture of was the city skyline, because I am a City Planner, but I feel like I haven't really explored the city because there is so much work. I think it's an interesting contradiction between having to learn about how to run a city but not given enough time to explore. So I just took a picture from my building that points towards Center City.

Female, 26 years old, City and Regional Planning

Yeah, exactly. [The Step 1 Exam] is a scale from... I don't know what the bottom is... passing is 188. The national average is 220 and the PENN average is 240. Basically the more competitive specialties, so plastic surgery, dermatology, you have to have a really high score... You want to do as well as you can, but you don't necessarily know how well you're going to do. In addition to fighting like...the book is like that big, I want to make sure I know everything in it; you're also like, "I want to make sure I don't do poorly." And poorly is a relative term, because poorly at Penn is the national average.

Male, 29 years old, Perelman School of Medicine

I downloaded this app from a recommendation from a friend because I was feeling super tired during the day. Feeling like I wasn't getting really good sleep... it just confirmed [my thoughts]. I get like 43% sleep quality and she [my friend] is getting 95%. The highest I've ever gotten is like 80%, so I think I get really poor quality sleep. This particular night I only got three hours, so that's why I took a picture of it. This week I had a big paper due, so I just stayed up until 4:30. This particular night was especially bad because I was thinking about this essay, and I still hadn't even finished it. I stopped writing at 4:30 and then woke up at 8:30 and kept writing. I was thinking about what I still needed to do, so it was just a bad night's sleep.

Male, 26 years old, Environmental Science

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Female, 25 years old, City and Regional Planning

You give the speech and you're up there on an island by yourself.

Male, 27 years old, Wharton
And at the end of the day, when I sat down and thought about it, it was like, "Oh, I put pressure on myself." Like, out of any circumstance in my life right now, I think that I'm the one who places pressure on myself. Like academics, okay, they're there, they're concrete rules and you follow them and it's fine, and because my work is so independent, if I don't put the pressure on myself, nothing will happen. And so, there isn't like a situation or person that I felt like caused pressure other than me. I felt like I was the facilitator of that.

I think that a lot of grad students, or at least the ones that I know, are the people who put pressure on themselves the most. And don't like to admit that in public settings that are not— or settings that they don't feel comfortable in, per se. I think that feelings like that come out in private spaces like people's houses.

Female, 25 years old, MSW-MPH student

My desk looked like that, with printed papers, because I was working on a revision of a manuscript. ...it's always on my mind. Of course, the level of intensity varies at times. Sometimes there's a lot more going on and it's higher and I feel a lot more stressed and then there are times when it obviously is slightly less. I mean, I guess with other programs, there are fixed requirements. There are tests and you have fixed dates, so there are things you can cross off your list. But I guess with science, because it's so competitive to get a job in academia, you can always be doing more. It's not that you have to do three research projects and your dissertation, you can have a fourth and a fifth. Everyone's projects are very unique to what they're doing but you can always have more. If you're not collecting more data then you should be analyzing the data or writing for publication, and if for some reason you are caught up on that, then you should just be sitting and reading the scientific journals that come out weekly, or monthly, so that you're still on top of what everyone else is doing.... there just isn't any down time. You should always be doing something.

Female, 26 years old, PhD student, Biology

I always feel very pressured by my emails. I feel like I can't keep up with them and then I get stressed out. I have people who are asking me for things or reaching out to me, and that I need to reach back out to them, and doing that can sometimes feel overwhelming... it's hard to give myself structure and also be accountable just to myself. One thing is that it's never over. With classes, you could be like, "I'm done with this class," and you could have your summer and be like, "okay, I don't need to concentrate on that until the semester starts up again." It was much more compartmentalized, whereas I feel my dissertation has just taken over all parts of my psyche, so I'm just always nervous about it, which actually makes it hard for me to work on it.

Female, 25 years old, City and Regional Planning

This is a clock that ran out of battery the second month of school and I just haven't had time to change the battery. I think it relates to pressure because you always feel like you're going to run out of time.

Female, 28 years old, PhD student, Ecology & Evolutionary Biology
My eye doctor’s a family friend, and is out in the suburbs. So [this] makes me go out there twice, so it disrupts my normal week... And then plus, pay an additional whatever the eye exam costs, so I don’t have to wear glasses with a prescription that is way out of date. So it’s just stress because, it’s like one of those things that I have to do and the time that I have to do it in.

Male, 27 years old, Perelman School of Medicine

Well, I think it’s usually because I never feel like I have enough time to do all of the things that I would like to do, or not without sacrificing something, like sleep or other fun things. Whether it’s like, watching TV or hanging out with my girlfriend, there’s always a sacrifice that is required for the number of things that I have to do and the time that I have to do it in.

Male, 27 years old, Perelman School of Medicine

That black line, that kind of black spotty area is where they laser-glued the retina back on to the back of the eye wall. So this is an internal view. And then this thing, that white part right there, is this silicone belt they sewed on to the back of the eye to cinch the retina in place as well. It’s something that I’m constantly having to deal with; it’s sort of like this medical problem. I have a really trusted doctor in New York, so I refuse to get anything done here in Philly. So I always have to go back to New York to deal with that. It’s just pressure, but in a different sense. Another kind of pressure. It’s time consuming. It’s me being super freaked out that I’m going to lose vision in my right eye or that it’s gotten worse or it’s gotten better.

Male, 26 years old, Environmental Science

Usually these seats are full of my classmates and my classmates happen to be a ridiculous number of smart people, so they tend to make me feel very inadequate because they’re all like, or they all seem, super smart – and they all are super smart. That’s not shown here but that’s sort of another pressure; it’s sort of like peer pressure because everyone is doing really well, so you don’t want to be the bottom of the class.

Male, 27 years old, Perelman School of Medicine

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Male, 27 years old, Perelman School of Medicine
It's just mostly making sure that I create a project that's sound and good. Cause I'm dealing with patient information so of course making sure that everything is kept confidential. But, the only thing is to get to graduation. To finish, and get a job to pay back the loans. It's not an overwhelming pressure, but I definitely think I've stuck toward my goal of two years to finish and I'd like to be done by that timeline. I think if it came to a point where my Capstone wouldn't be finished, I would feel devastated. I don't feel that way, but I'm definitely making sure I make every Monday and Friday count.

Female, 26 years old, MPH Program

There's definitely just a lot of pressure to perform, and pressure to advance and jump through the hoops to stay here. Which that's something I have to say for my... the faculty I'm working with is, pretty much all of them, I think, want us to succeed.

Male, 26 years old, PhD student, Biomedical Sciences

Yeah, I just like feel pressure, well, even getting into Penn is pressure, because people are like, "oh wow, you're so smart, good for you," and "oh you're going to change the world, you're going to do so well..." And it's like, ok, I'm not even there yet, but I definitely feel like there's pressure to do well in your job because you're signing with the MSW, where if you get that MSW, you get it from Penn, and so it's like pressure to do well financially, pressure to do well on your career, pressure to continue giving to Penn, and continue to be a part of the Penn community, in whatever facet that means for you.

Like, you are expected after you graduate to give money and support the university still, and I think that’s just another form of pressure. Like, after you're not even here, I mean I get emails from my undergrad like four times a week asking me to give money and it's like, I don't even have money, I'm a student. So I think that's just another form of pressure, that's visible and present at Penn, whether you feel it now or not, but just from a future perspective I think there's pressure there to, you know, succeed after you leave Penn and do the Penn name proud, I mean I felt that at my undergrad and I feel that here definitely.

Female, 23 years old, Social Policy & Practice

So, I took a picture of my phone because it represents to me a lot of pressure because we manage our own patients. I get patient phone calls all the time. Technically we're not supposed to give out our cell phone numbers but it's kind of like one of those understood things that you do because otherwise you can't be in touch with your patients and they can't get in touch with you. We do have like a voice message system through the school, so they can call a generic number and leave a message on a voice message system. They used to have pagers, but they don't do that anymore, but we're expected to like call our patients back and I don't have a landline, so sometimes this is the easiest way to communicate with our patients, especially for me. I work with a lot of patients who don't speak English and um, I speak Mandarin, so even if they call the automated voice message machine they don't know how to navigate the system -- it's all in English -- so they really have no way to get in contact with me unless I give them my personal number. So they call me on my number and even though I try to set boundaries and tell them when to call me, they call me all the time, so that can get very stressful.

Female, 28 years old, School of Dental Medicine
So the way I looked at this is pressure is just more of the unexpected. You know, people in general are comfortable with certainty and patterns and muscle memory and habits and now it’s just something that I honestly, any additional pressure was more just something that I was not expecting and it threw me off a little.

Male, 27 years old, Wharton

First name, last name, program like hospital and then specialty. So it might be like [my name], Pediatrics, CHOP. So this is all of them. So this is pressure in the literal sense almost because it’s like everyone went to these amazing programs, what are you going to do next year? And then always with Match you hear sort of horror stories about people—like I have a friend who didn’t match and had to scramble into another spot, but he was the guy who honored everything, amazing grades, amazing board scores, no one would have thought that he would not match, so things like that sort of scare you because you’re like, “if he didn’t match, if he can’t match, I don’t have his grades, I don’t have his step one scores, so how am I going to find a way to get the program that I want and not have to find a place at the very last minute....” Yeah. It’s like, “hey, look what everybody did, what are you going to do?”

Male, 27 years old, Perelman School of Medicine

I struggle with depression, and that’s an issue that really has, unfortunately, defined the last couple years of my life as its flared up. It’s pretty well under control now, but it’s just something that... it’s a daily reminder of “you need to keep your health in mind.” It’s interesting because a lot of my peers I have talked to have similar stories. I think it’s probably their self-selection [as graduate students] that they are people who are perfectionists and people who are very intelligent and tend to suffer from anxiety or depression or other issues associated therein. I feel that that’s somewhat of a universal thing with the people that I talk to.

Male, 26 years old, PhD student, Biomedical Sciences

So this is [my cat], and he’s sitting on my stomach as I’m trying to do homework, and he’s like “why aren’t you paying attention to me?”... I never really get time because I’m never really home that often, so I felt like “alright I’ll use you as the distraction right now.

Male, 27 years old, Social Policy & Practice
So, I saw this this morning as well, and it kind of just, my heart went out to the juniors who were reading this sign. Because as a junior in college, you’re not thinking about a graduate fellowship, or at least I wasn’t, and it just feels way too early for juniors to be thinking about this kind of stuff. Like, I didn’t figure out what I was doing after undergraduate till like the last semester of undergraduate, so it just made me think if I saw this sign as a junior and I wanted a graduate fellowship, I think I’d have a panic attack, be like, “oh my god, what do I do? Have other people started?” I think, I know they’re trying to be helpful, but this almost does more damage than good I think in some ways, because then it also makes people worried about what other people are doing, and that kind of puts on this competition, like the competitive aspect that doesn’t really need to be there.

Female, 23 years old, Social Policy & Practice

I joined rowing as a fun stress release but now that I’ve gotten more involved, what was supposed to be a fun outlet has become a new source of pressure. One of the cakes that I made last fall was selected as the “photo of the day” on Row 2K. So now people talk about it so much and there are these expectations. And for this upcoming Regatta, people started putting in requests [for cakes] and, it’s a fun creative outlet, but now that people have these expectations, it does add stress. It’s silly. These few things I’ve done for fun are turning into pressure too.

Female, 26 years old, Biology

It just to me, kind of from a more artistic perspective, kind of represented the never ending, you know, academia here at Penn. Like it just seemed like this stack of rows and rows of books just went on forever, and it almost was creepy and scared me a little...

... [Penn] has all these resources, am I taking advantage of them? Am I really living up to the expectations that the university has for me as a master’s student? Yeah, and it just kind of was like this huge hallway. It’s like, I think it’s very easy to get lost, just like I think it’s very easy to get lost in the graduate program. It feels like you’re just kind of, I feel a bit like I’m just like trekking along getting by day by day, almost like I’m not really truly living the experiences, that I’m just trying to get through them.

Female, 23 years old, Social Policy & Practice

One thing that I’m realizing and people told me before I came to business school is “you’re going to be busier than ever,” and I heard it but I didn’t... I kind of took it with a grain of salt.

Male, 27 years old, Wharton

It sort of, just shows me I guess the different pressures that people put on themselves and, sort of, these expectations. So, maybe even the pressure that incoming students put on Penn. And I know that in choosing Penn from the schools that I was accepted to, and was considering, I put a lot of weight on what Penn could do for me, as well as what I could do whilst at Penn. To me [this image] shows the different pressures that people put on themselves and these expectations.

Female, 26 years old, MPH Program
This is a self-sustaining plant that you only have to water once a month. My boyfriend got it for me because he said I am too busy to keep a plant alive. I really value little things in life and I feel like doing little things you enjoy on a daily helps to keep your mood high. And I don’t have time for any of that. It bothers me because the pressure from school takes away from the things that make me the happiest.

Female, 25 years old, City and Regional Planning

Especially for the initial phase when I was doing Capstone and I was trying to get it off the ground and moving. It was, “can I do this later? Can I read this later in the semester? Will this even come up? Is this something that interests me and has value? Or is this something I need to know for now?” That’s the jist of what I feel on a weekly basis when I come to the assignments.

Female, 26 years old, MPH Program

[This is] a text message conversation between me and two friends about going to dinner together, and that stresses me out because I’ve been depressed…I haven’t been doing the best job of hanging out with my friends, and then there’ll be times when I’m feeling like, “great, I’m fine! Yeah, I can definitely do this!” But then I just can’t predict when I’m gonna start feeling bad and then it really stresses me out to do anything – even hanging out with my good friends. I haven’t really sat and talked to them in a long time, and that makes me feel sad and bad. And I’m obviously really excited to go have dinner and to see them… but the idea of getting on the train, going there…

Female, 28 years old, PhD student, Ecology & Evolutionary Biology

In taking every other picture, that was the way that I defined it, like, what makes me feel like I’m like hitting the edges of things and trying to find a way out.

I mean, I think that people do let themselves get to that point of explosion, and again I think that maybe there should be better mechanisms to help people not get to that point, and sort of mitigate the feelings of like hitting the sides and trying to explode, but I think that a healthy amount of pressure is always good, so I’m not....

Female, 25 years old, MSW-MPH student
I don't know, it's a pressure that I didn't expect to feel at Penn. I'm not sure if it's just my program or if it's in different programs, or if it's just my age range. I'm twenty six I guess a lot of people are at that place in their lives, and every now and then I just feel like I just want to push it away and be like “I'm just here to learn, I'm not here to get my 'MRS,' I'm not here to meet a romantic partner.” Sometimes I just wish that it wasn't playing as much of a factor.

Female, 26 years old, MPH Program

I equated pressure with stress and I took pictures of situations where I feel very stressed-out in, and the clinic is definitely a place where I feel a lot of stress while I'm there. I mean, in this photo there are no people and so it's quiet, it's calm, but when there are people in there it's crazy. I mean there are faculty, students, patients, first and second year dental students come and assist us, third and fourth years are in there. So it can get really crazy on any given work day, but this was taken after hours so there are no people. To me, even being in there with no people in it and I didn't have to see any patients, it still evokes a lot of just stress. I feel stressed out in there even when there are no people.

Female, 28 years old, School of Dental Medicine

I sort of judge myself against my peers who are spending lots and lots of time in the lab and that's, I mean, that's an issue that I've had personally for longer than graduate school: always feeling like I need to compare myself to the people around me, and always feeling like I can't measure up because inherently, the people who I am looking at are the ones who are better at the specific thing that I am comparing myself to them on. I believe the term “imposter syndrome” comes up a lot…. I think it's something that, again, a lot of my peers, and I know at least I deal with, just feeling like “I'm at Penn, an Ivy League School,” you know? I never thought that I would be in this sort of high performing environment. I feel like somebody made a mistake.

Male, 26 years old, PhD student, Biomedical Sciences

We wake up every day and we get ready and we leave the house, and then I don't know, some days I walk out of my apartment and I’m like, “Oh yeah, what day is it? Where am I supposed to be right now?” And I'm still in the process of starting my day until I get to the point of where I'm supposed to be, and some days when I get to work, I just like stand outside for a minute, and I’m like, “Okay, got to do this,” and I take a deep breath. And I love where I work a lot, but still it’s that moment of slight panic and pressure of like, all the things have to be done and how urgent they seem.

Female, 25 years old, MSW-MPH student

Yeah it’s the mouth, the fake mouth we practice on. So that’s just another close up of what we have to work with for this exam. It’s just a really small space, but the good thing about using this versus a real person is there’s no tongue, there’s no saliva, there’s no person attached to it, no anxiety from the patient. But I just took a picture of this because it’s a small, small space and a lot has to happen in that small space.

Female, 28 years old, School of Dental Medicine