

Sharing Space

Earning a PhD in Prenatal and Perinatal Psychology

Jeane Rhodes

Abstract: This article balances reflections on the author's experience of earning a PhD in prenatal and perinatal psychology with information about current opportunities for others interested in pursuing such a degree. The article also explores why one might want to pursue such a degree and why it is important for our field to be represented by many individuals with advanced degrees in prenatal and perinatal psychology.

Keywords: prenatal and perinatal psychology, post-graduate programs, individualized degree plans

In this article, I want to share with you my own process of completing a PhD in prenatal and perinatal psychology (PPNP) and discuss why we need many more individuals with PhDs in this field. At the time I began my process (in 1992), I did not realize no one else had done this. I only knew I wanted to follow up on what I had learned in self-designed BA and MA coursework. While working on my BA in 1987, I discovered Thomas Verny's book (1981), *The Secret Life of the Unborn Child*, and immediately became fascinated. I contacted Dr. Verny through his publisher and he urged me to come to the next PPPANA Congress (Pre- and Perinatal Psychology Association of North America—APPPAH's predecessor), which would be in Amherst, Massachusetts that year.

My advisor for a class in preparation for childbirth was requiring a research paper, so following my meeting with Dr. Verny, I chose to research and write about the birth memories of 2 ½-to-3 ½ -year-old children. The results of that study were published in the sharing space

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section in *JOPPPAH* (then called *Pre- and Peri-natal Psychology Journal*) in Fall, 1991 (Rhodes, 1991). That interview with Dr. Verny also led to my burning desire to learn more about prenatal and perinatal psychology (PPNP) and I soon discovered David Chamberlain's book *Babies Remember Birth* (1988), later reissued as *The Mind of Your Newborn Baby* (1998). The 1987 Congress further fueled the flame and led to my attending every PPPANA/APPPAH congress since, with one exception in 2013.

Back to the PhD. It wasn't a plan from the beginning of my higher education, which was in 1986. I received my BA dual degree in health and wellness and business in 1988, 30 years after I had graduated from high school. My interest in PPNP continued to grow from that first encounter with Dr. Verny through earning my MA from Antioch University in counseling psychology, utilizing their Individualized master's program. Included in that MA degree plan was a self-designed course in PPNP. The more I learned about PPNP, the more I wanted to learn, so upon completing that MA, I immediately begin thinking about more in-depth study. My advisor at Antioch told me about a program with The Union Institute that allowed one to self-design an entire PhD program. As there were no courses in PPNP, much less entire graduate programs, available anywhere in the world, this seemed like the perfect way to continue my adventures in learning. Little did I realize the extent of personal growth and challenges that would result from that decision. Following are brief excerpts from my personal journals over the next five years, 1992 through 1997, to give you some feeling for the journey.

Personal Journal Entries

November 21, 1992: The PhD title is for others. It may be necessary for me in order to be recognized as a scholar and share the learning, but it is not the learning. The flame, the essence, is the learning itself. If the emphasis gets shifted entirely to the goal, the flame will be neglected and remain all-consuming. In order for it not to be all-consuming, it needs to know its true purpose. "Watch and Be."

December 28, 1992: It's interesting that my degree committee turned out to be all female, yet these two male course advisors (Drs. Verny and Chamberlain) are providing the most concrete input. Is that a particularly male thing—sort of providing fertilization for the process?

January 3, 1993: (After being inspired by the Nov/Dec '92 issue of *Pilgrimage*.)

I am letting go of a part of myself
Allowing that part to die brings tears
I will miss her
She was innocent and very brave
although not very aware
She was very sincere and caring
But unsure and vaguely guilty
She leaves a void to be filled by unknown challenges.

January 19, 1993: I asked of the Universe, “Where is the key to yoga poses as prenatal experience?” The answer: “In the myth of Matsendriya—the teaching of the postures from the mouth of a fish—our own prenatal experience in the amniotic sea. The answer is within, in our own body experience.”

March 9, 1993: *Touch the Earth. Touch the Sky. Greet the Moon. Greet the Sun. Greet all Beings of the earth, of which I am one.* This mantra, which has evolved out of my practice of daily greeting the four directions, led to a realization this morning that such symbols and symbolic language (i.e. mother earth, father sky) is rather like a transitional object for spiritual development. One eventually comes back to the real and “sees the place for the first time.”

March 20, 1993: The reality of what I am doing is really sinking in. I feel a coming together of my-self and who I have been with my-self who is going to do this work.

April 2, 1993: I can trust the process. Life will gestate and complete according to its natural rhythms. I need only to participate and appreciate the beauty of it.

April 30, 1993: Although I’ve never consciously contemplated taking my own life, I am aware that I have sacrificed myself—my intrinsic self—whatever that may turn out to be—to an idealized self, one who exists only in feedback from others. As I move through and this tiny flame of self continues to grow, maybe I will be able to separate and look at the world, at others, in a more objective manner.

May 1, 1993: I pause frequently in writing to look around the room—grounding myself in the present. Even writing that down has an emotional charge. Learning to “be in the present” seems to be a prerequisite for exploring the past. As I look at my books, I know that “being present” will be key to the reading and learning that is necessary, so that I will *know* when the most important pieces present themselves.

May 15, 1993: I am sitting here watching the clouds envelop the mountains. Lightning splits the sky and the thunder resonates with my body. I am becoming alive. All previous transitions have been mere lightning bugs in the night. This is a storm to shake me to my core.

May 16, 1993: I want to write—that is where my real personal growth lies. When did this desire to write go to sleep—this need to express in words the movements of the soul? It tried to awaken briefly when I was a teen, but there was no nurturing and the words that came out were so stilted by the overlay of what I should be and feel that it was difficult to reach real feeling. I had to write all that biographical stuff about my brother (who died at age 11 of lymphoma), rather than write about the desire to let him live—to let me take his place. He had seen so little of life. I felt that blond, blue-eyed boy deserved to live, while this troubled, guilt-ridden teen felt life was over because a certain Italian boy no longer wanted to marry her. Maybe—probably—he never really did. He only wanted to play. I did enjoy the play, although I had to deny what it really was.

May 17, 1993: I was just thinking about recently dancing to Janis Joplin—then thought, “I should do that again,” which was immediately replaced with the thought, “I will do that again or, if not, perhaps it has served its purpose. Each day brings its own necessities. ... Never try to recreate a past success.” Each day has its own special contribution, its own challenges that are different from yesterday’s and will be different from tomorrow’s. The connecting thread is the essence of life exploring itself. That exploration doesn’t need “should,” it has its own integrity. Trust the process.

June 23, 1993: One cannot develop reliable new theories without becoming aware of previously developed and tested theories. One needs awareness of other’s thoughts and theories in order to contrast and compare. Also, one needs awareness of the possibility—probability—that one’s own theories are biased. I feel the secret may be not in trying to eliminate that bias, but to be aware of it and transparent about it when sharing with others, not discounting one’s own thought and experience, nor elevating them, but putting them into context.

June 23, 1993: I walked over to Harvard Square for breakfast and found my quote for today in *Bits and Pieces*. “Today’s work is the down payment on your future.” (Note: I was on the Harvard campus for a workshop that was part of my degree plan.)

June 30, 1993: One’s perception of others is always clouded by one’s own experience. I am constantly reminded of my mother’s urging, “Judge not.”

August 14, 1993: Life moves on. I need to stay in the moment more often. “Life is what happens while you are busy making other plans.”

August 24, 1993: My recognition over the past few days of my overriding research question, “When does life begin?,” and even the more basic, “What is life?,” seems to be inviting ever-larger challenges. My notes from this summer are going to be very important to process, on more levels than simply for mental refreshment.

October 31, 1993: The clearer a channel I can become, the more efficiently life energy can work through me. So all the therapy to remove blocks to that clarity is not only important, it is essential. I can no longer attempt to contain or control the movement of energy. My purpose is to provide that clear channel. Tools to accomplish that purpose include: yoga, meditation, bodywork, psychotherapy, journaling, dream-work, and the support and love of my family.

December 24, 1993: When I am faced with the judgment of others, I lose touch with what I really think and feel and begin fumbling around for what is “expected.” That seems to be the core lesson. Awareness of that tendency brings the gift of choice.

April 3, 1994: I feel as if I’m holding on to reality by a very thin rope. ... Are there really people out there who know what is “real” and who don’t have to pretend? If I let go of the rope, I feel as if I will drown in ultimate confusion.

May 5, 1994: My feelings of being pressured seem very old and might not be just the current situation.

May 11, 1994: I contain a lot of messages about protecting others by withholding my truth.

May 13, 1994: I was thinking earlier about my need to learn the rules of any activity in which I engage, then very carefully playing by those rules. If I cannot accept the rules, then I don’t play. How much better might it be to endeavor to change the rules?

May 22, 1994: I think the Conservative movement is an effort to keep the world black and white so as not to be overwhelmed by the grey areas.

June 9, 1994: For my life to continue its evolution, I need to build on past work, to again bring together the threads so that there is a progression. ... I have begun to ponder more deeply my questions for research: What is birth trauma? How does it manifest in yoga postures? Do different personality types handle this manifestation differently? ... Bringing a fresh perspective to an experience may be an advantage of what I have previously perceived as a disadvantage, that of having minimal

background in culture, i.e., classical music, art, and literature. I feel like I have so much catching up to do. However, on the positive side, I have not learned what is “good,” so am free to be open to what is there. Bringing openness and innocence to experience may be a help in seeing and appreciating another level of what is “good.”

August 3, 1994: In reflecting on my earlier comparison of undergoing psychotherapy to the assembly of a jigsaw puzzle¹, I realized I am ready for the next step in that metaphor. I have become accepting of the disorganized state when my old ways of putting the puzzle together no longer work, having learned to accept that the puzzle need not be reassembled, but that we can live the questions. However, that is still not the final phase. Flow is necessary. What comes to mind is a Kaleidoscope, which is a beautiful flow—one never knows exactly what the next pattern will be. A jigsaw puzzle is predetermined by someone else, so always comes back to the same picture (role). The Kaleidoscope is unpredictable, not predetermined by the self or other. There may be fixed underlying pieces, but the pattern is affected by each nuance of movement, so it is very responsive to life as it is happening.

August 30, 1994: In thinking about creating the syllabus for the prenatal development course at Red Rocks Community College, I feel a certain heaviness descend. I believe it is the enormous responsibility involved in “birthing” something new.

September 1, 1994: I am just getting into the mythology section of Otto Rank’s *Trauma of Birth* (1924), and it is getting quite interesting. Just think, he wrote this 70 years ago [now almost 100 years], yet still has so much to teach us.

December 4, 1994: There is a delicate balance between being too goal-oriented and being too process-oriented. It seems that one can get stuck in any process and that seems to be just as detrimental to growth in life

¹ At the time of my divorce from my children’s father in 1972, I used the metaphor of a jigsaw puzzle to explain to them why things were so disrupted and confusing in our life at that time, saying, “It’s like when you are a child and trying to figure out what life is about and who you are, you get a lot of help from others; parents, teachers, family, and friends, who give you pieces of the puzzle. Once you have it all “together,” you live with the resulting “way of life” you have assembled. Sometimes, maybe years later, you discover it is not working well and may seek help from someone to figure out why it’s not working. This might be a therapist or counselor who is trained to offer this kind of help. The first thing they do is help you take the puzzle apart, questioning why each piece is there. That’s where I am right now, the picture is totally destroyed and I will need to figure out how to put things together again. But we will be okay. I will be here for you while I work this out.”

as being so goal-oriented that process is shortchanged or even totally neglected.

January 21, 1995: I'm reading Kindler's (1987) *Historical Foundations of Modern Psychology* and thinking about my teaching. It becomes more and more clear that opposing theories aren't necessarily right or wrong. They are just looking at different parts of the whole. When we reach a place beyond right and wrong, maybe we will really begin to learn what being human is all about.

February 12, 1995: A dream about having to "air" dirty laundry. There was something about its having to be rotated in the large box it was in—sort of like rotating compost. It just occurred to me that rotating compost results in rich soil—so the analogy is very optimistic. In the dream, I wondered about the effort of rotating the clothes and questioned whether it wouldn't be better to just wash them rather than periodically rearrange them. But, the thought of it's being like compost brings the possibility of providing for new growth with proper care and attention, rather than just "white washing" what is there.

March 10, 1996: What is it that emerges but myself from these meanderings of the mind?

August 7, 1996: I am now firmly into research mode. This morning I thought of the cave at Lake Powell and how such a small opening could be entry into such vastness. Indeed the small "windows" provided by the postures open into the child's vast inner world. There are clues enough in each of them to last a lifetime.

January 16, 1997: I started working on the program summary yesterday. I really am going to finish this PhD. There have been times when I doubted it. I am pleased with the PDE (dissertation) (Rhodes, 1997), but do have some doubts that it is academic enough. I'll be anxious to get Willson's (my committee chair) reaction.

March 12, 1997: [A powerful regression experience during which I experienced my mother's birth—from both her perspective and my grandmother's perspective.] I felt a flash of being held upside down by the doctor, then placed on the floor. My breathing then suspended. I was aware of being dead, then aware that it was Mom, not me, having this experience. I was in her infant body, revived—no, not yet. I switched to Grandmother's body and felt the pain of my first-born child dying. Although Mom was later revived, something died there, something was lost that affected their relationship and has kept Mom somewhat disconnected since. My living fully is a gift to all of them, my ancestors—

to Life and to the particular series of embodiments that resulted in my birth.

June 6, 1997: It is time to celebrate completion of my PhD, officially completed as of May 31st. It's interesting that this weekend I will be seeing people from YTOC (Yoga Teachers of Colorado) and CSTA (Colorado Sandplay Therapy Association), two organizations that have contributed so much to my learning and research and that will continue to be important in future work. I have had cards printed with my new credentials. This feels like a very important step. It's nice that this completion is a process. My joy at reaching this stage is experienced in small steps—manifesting over a period of time, rather than in one burst. I am looking forward to the official ceremony in the fall. It will be the culmination of a summer of celebration. Just the fact that I have completed this doesn't seem to have people on the doorstep waiting to see me. I guess I have to continue to make my place in the world—to irritate the oyster.

Continuing the learning in private practice

June 27, 1997: [Reflecting on work with a client.] Re-patterning doesn't really replace the original happening—it just adds a new way of experiencing/remembering an event. This is very important to keep in mind. Healing comes in accepting the original experience and the repatterned experience and having them available so that when one is faced with a triggering situation, both possibilities arise and provide a choice in how to respond.

June 27, 1997: Reading the material on dissociative identity disorder was very challenging. I really began to wonder about my own lapses in memory. Then the whole question of diagnoses arose. Is it a good thing to give someone a label, or does that then become a self-fulfilling prophecy? So many questions.

June 28, 1997: [Reflections on a dream.] The dream was somehow connected with my education and how I will use it. It seemed to be related to focus—too many rooms—too many possibilities, followed by the thought that I don't need to impress anyone. An important contribution doesn't depend upon how big and impressive it is.

July 2, 1997: [Reflections on the review of my Sandplay© process.] We got to the centered tray (self tray) yesterday, where I depicted the drawing together of prenatal and perinatal psychology, yoga, and Sandplay©. [My therapist] referred to the yoga section as spirituality. That feels accurate, but it is a spirituality grounded in my body through the realization that the postures serve to create the body. First in the womb, as movement

creates and nurtures form, which then nurtures movement in an on-going spiral. Then, in later life, the postures maintain bodily health, while facilitating spiritual reflection and connection.

Practical Results of Earning a PhD

The process of reading my journal entries from 1992-1997 was a powerful reminder of how much inner growth took place during those years. The entries I selected to share with you were, for the most part, those that reflected what was taking place within, rather than on the concrete work and process involved. The many hours of reading, writing papers, intensive workshops, and doing personal therapy processes (including Sandplay©, birthwork, authentic movement, and other modalities), as well as the completion and writing of my research into body language and birth memory, contributed so much to my life. I gave little thought during those years to what I was going to do once I had completed the PhD. It was all very process-oriented, rather than goal-oriented.

Once it was complete, however, the need to share what I had learned with others and put the learning to work in the world became apparent. Perhaps also, there was a need to begin earning back some of the thousands of dollars spent on this adventure. Needless to say, there wasn't much in the way of guidance for someone with a degree in a specialty area few had ever heard of.

Based on my MA in counseling psychology, I had already begun teaching in local community colleges. I managed to convince my department head at Red Rocks Community College to allow me to offer an introductory course in PPNP. Of course, it was with the caveat that they could not pay me for this "experiment." It lasted two semesters and was enthusiastically engaged in by the students who found the topic fascinating. The students, however, were concerned about the credits being transferable to four-year colleges. So, driven by my own enthusiasm, I contacted several four-year colleges in my area about this and was greeted with incredulity and disdain, questioning how anyone would dare to offer this course in a reputable school. This came as a shock to me, as everything I had learned about PPNP seemed to make such clear sense. It hadn't occurred to me that not everyone would see it in a similar light. With this verdict, my department head regretfully informed me that they could no longer provide me a classroom for offering this course.

I continued to teach many other courses in psychology and incorporated lectures on PPNP in many of them. In addition to teaching, I had begun my own psychotherapy practice and was working as a counselor for children in foster care through a local agency. These pursuits provided some income and kept me very busy but didn't fully tap into the resources provided by my learning. I also published several papers in *JOPPPAH* and presented at congresses, which was the result, at least in

part, from the PhD now accompanying my name. My efforts came to more complete realization when I became associate editor of *JOPPPAH* in 2002. Yes, the investment in time, energy, and money was well worth it.

Should you consider a PhD in PPNP?

Now we come to some very important questions, and my primary motivation for sharing my own experience with you. Why should anyone in this decade consider earning a PhD in PPNP? What has changed in the past 23 years that might impact this decision? Does earning a PhD have relevance for society at large, beyond the personal quest and accomplishment?

Why a PhD in PPNP?

Many of you have established careers in this field without a PhD, having received specialized training as a prenatal and perinatal educator through APPPAH's excellent online program—or, specialized training in other related areas—and have no interest in this academic pursuit. However, for those whose primary interest is in the “psychology” part of PPNP, consideration of a PhD begs attention. Perhaps you have considered it but found the challenges that still persist due to lack of available courses or programs too daunting. Let me propose one possibility for why this is true. Could it be because there are so few individuals who have selected this specialty area for post-graduate study that no programs have been developed? The world needs many individuals doing graduate-level work in this specialty and doing the research in the field to establish the academic integrity required for this to become a respected specialty in psychology.

One of the major difficulties in establishing PPNP as an academic discipline has been that it is unlike other specialties in psychology in that it is so basic to everything. It's not like social psychology, for example, which is one particular lens through which to observe human behavior. Or transpersonal psychology, another important perspective, revealing a different aspect of what it is to be human. PPNP studies the very foundation, the beginning for every human being. Those womb and birth experiences impact everything that comes after. So, rather than being a specialty area that takes a closer look at a particular aspect of human psychology, PPNP is the foundation. It is very difficult to build the foundation after the major structure is in place.

In spite of these difficulties, we must continue efforts to bring PPNP into the academic world. This is where the research is done. While there have been sporadic successful attempts to do this research in related disciplines, how much better will it be when there are academic departments totally devoted to PPNP?

What has changed in the past 23 years?

When we look at how much life has changed in other ways, it is tempting to think not much has changed in PPNP in the past 23 years. The idea that babies are conscious, learning beings has still not become “common knowledge.” We are still hesitant to emphasize the consciousness of the baby because of the polarizing issue of abortion. Maybe that particular knot will need to be untangled before an academic discipline studying the consciousness of the baby can truly develop.

There is much hope, however. Two papers dealing with PPNP have recently been shared by Academia.edu, an American commercial social networking website for academics. Web searches uncover reams of data on PPNP and related topics, information that was not readily available 23 years ago.

Santa Barbara Graduate Institute was a huge step forward. SBGI offered MA and PhD programs in PPNP from 2000 to 2010. Some of you may have earned degrees through those programs and know the inspired nature of what Wendy Anne McCarty and Marti Glenn developed there. Unfortunately, the challenges of achieving accreditation for the programs ultimately led to the end for SBGI and to the programs that were sold to The Chicago School of Professional Psychology. Which means that today there are still no courses, much less programs in PPNP, for those wishing to pursue an academic path in this field.

APPPAH’s PPNE program offers a first-class training. For those who already have a PhD in psychology, anthropology, neurology, or other related fields, the PPNE program can provide a path to specialization in PPNP. Another way to utilize this resource could be a self-designed PhD program (those will be discussed further below) that incorporates the PPNE program into the degree plan. There is also work currently underway by APPPAH’s education department to have the PPNE program accepted by colleges and universities as part of their offerings. There is still a lot of discussion and confusion about what to call this discipline. Prenatal and perinatal psychology is an awkward title. My personal take on it is that this is the most accurate title, as it recognizes the lifespan period from conception to birth and early infancy as foundational to the individual’s continued development.

Even with acceptance of this title, there are questions about whether we are talking about “psychology” as it refers to the mother’s or the baby’s experience. We have a lot of work to clearly define this discipline in academic terms. I believe PPNP’s focus is on the baby’s experience. However, the mother’s experience also impacts the baby as the two cannot truly be separated. Just as in family systems studies, the lens is focused on family dynamics, while we don’t forget there are individuals involved.

Does earning a PhD in PPNP have relevance for society at large?

What benefit, if any, will having many individuals earning PhDs in PPNP have for society at large? Most of you know the benefits of getting the information about the consciousness of the baby to society at large and have devoted many years to this endeavor. “Getting the word out” is a siren call for those who find this information vital. There is no doubt that important work can be done, and is being done, by individuals without PhDs. So, why is having individuals with PhDs in PPNP important? I venture three primary reasons:

- 1) Recognition as an academic discipline;
- 2) Encouraging rigorous research into the psychology of this developmental period; and
- 3) Respect and acceptance by other professions (especially the medical field).

Accomplishing these purposes requires the foundation of respected academic programs of study.

Building the Foundation

In this article, I have proposed that PPNP is a foundational piece in psychology, not a sub-discipline. So how do we go about building this foundation? I am going to suggest that it will take many individuals creating special programs on their own and going on to introduce courses at both undergraduate and graduate levels to begin the process. Having APPPAH’s PPNE program accepted into current college and university programs will also be a huge step forward.

It will be very important that individuals who choose to do individualized degree programs assure that they are fully accredited programs in order to have significant impact. My own choice of such a program was a fortunate accident; I wasn’t aware that accreditation would be very important if I wanted to pursue a career in academics or that it would be important for licensure to engage in a private practice or contract with agencies to provide therapeutic services. While The Union Institute and University no longer offers the specific program I completed, it does offer some similar possibilities. A quick web search revealed many other programs. See Appendix A for a list of some of these.

Conclusions

Earning a PhD in prenatal and perinatal psychology is an intense undertaking with benefits for the individual and for society at large. It has the potential to impact the individual, all of humanity, and our

descendants in profound and life-changing ways. Although we cannot predict the long-term impacts, if we believe the message about the sentience of unborn children is important, we cannot neglect providing a framework for the continuing study and research that will be needed for this to become “common knowledge.” At that point, we will have come home to recognize the place for the first time.

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Appendix A
Individualized Graduate Programs

- 1) The Union Institute and University:
<https://myunion.edu/academics/doctoral>
 - Offers interdisciplinary PhD with flexibility in program design

- 2) NYU Gallatin School: gallatin.nyu.edu
 - MA only
 - Close to The Union Institute design as it was in 1992

- 3) Virginia Tech:
<https://graduateschool.vt.edu/academics/programs/interdisciplinary-graduate-education/individualized-phd-program.html>
 - Might be promising
 - Both MA and PhD offered

- 4) University of Washington: <https://grad.uw.edu/about-the-graduate-school/interdisciplinary-programs/interdisciplinary-individual-phd/>
 - Might be promising
 - Interdisciplinary Individual PhD

- 5) Washington State University:
<https://gradschool.wsu.edu/individual-interdisciplinary-doctoral-degree/>
 - Might be promising
 - Individual Interdisciplinary PhD

- 6) University of California Berkeley Graduate Division:
<https://grad.berkeley.edu/programs/interdisciplinary/>
 - Accepts proposals for individualized PhD

Note: Verify that completion of the program will earn you an accredited degree.

Search other possibilities using the search term “Individualized PhD programs.” This is a representative sample.