INVESTIGATING THE EFFECT OF SITUATIONAL AWARENESS
ON PERSISTENCE OF DOCTORAL DISTANCE LEARNERS

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Abstract

This quantitative study sought to identify the effect of heightened situational awareness (SA) on persistence of doctoral distance learners. Factors in the distance learners’ micro-environment, vis-à-vis Urie Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecology theory of human development, were the focus. Study participants included new doctoral candidates continuing their studies in the fall 2012 and spring 2013 semesters at a large private university located in the southeastern United States. A posttest-only control group experimental design was used. Quantitative experimental results were supplemented by qualitative survey results. The experimental treatment consisted of two instruments hypothesized to elevate the SA of distance learners, the Woodman (2001) Analysis, and Grover’s (2007) Doctoral Checklist. The research question was: Is there a difference in persistence behavior among doctoral-level distance learners based on level of situational awareness? The principal statistical analysis was a chi-square ($\chi^2$) test for independence. Quantitative results showed no significant association between the learners’ persistence decisions and the heightened SA of micro-environmental factors created by their exposure to various levels of the study treatment at the inception of their doctoral candidacy. Qualitative results, however, showed evidence of participants’ perceived valuation of SA to support their persistence. The study suggested the utility of a doctoral program orientation to establish SA at the outset and the value of mentorship to maintain SA throughout the program as means to positively influence the persistence of doctoral distance learners.