

## Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (All Submissions)

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Space, Time and Everyday Life and the Mental Health and Well-Being of Postgraduate Researchers

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**Research Domain:** Postgraduate Scholarship and Practice (PGSP)

**Abstract:** This paper presents results from a recently completed research examining mental health and well being of doctoral students at Birmingham City University. Employing the theoretical models of Rhythmanalysis (2004) and the Power, Threat Meaning Framework, coupled with primary data from doctoral students and supervisors, it is found that space, time and everyday life is experienced in 'waves' or 'rhythms'. These are embodied physically to affect mental health and well-being. The paper concludes with recommendations ensuring that Doctoral students' position in the HEI is valued particularly in relation to their everyday life that is not part of the 'institutional context' (Bagaka's et al.,2015), but is essential to their personal and professional security.

**Bagaka's, J. G., Badillo, N., Bransteter, I., & Rispinto, S. (2015). Exploring student success in a doctoral program: The power of mentorship and research engagement. *International Journal of Doctoral Studies*, 10(2015), 323-342.**

**Lefebvre, H. (2004) *Rhythmanalysis*, London: Continuum**

**Paper:** This paper presents data from a recently completed research project investigating the mental health and well being of doctoral students at Birmingham City University (BCU). BCU is a contemporary 'post-1992' teaching intensive university, which has seen its doctoral student provision increase by 300% in the past three years. This brings difficulties to students, supervisors, systems and the institution in ensuring that the Doctoral experience is as central to the values of the University as Undergraduates. Nevertheless, it is expected that the findings presented in the study will be of use to many institutions operating in the Higher Education Sector, in the UK and abroad.

To address the concerns and challenges caused by this expansion, the project positioned itself in a

theoretically and methodologically original position. Following the British Psychological Society's radical rejection of the traditional medical model of mental health and well-being, this research employs the Power, Threat, Meaning Framework (Johnstone and Boyle, 2018) to explore the rhythms evident in the space, time and everyday life (Lefebvre, 2004) of doctoral students at BCU. While it is found that traditional 'stressor points' (Ali and Kohun, 2006) are apparent in the life course of doctoral study, which include milestones such as enrolment and progress reviews, the experience of students is closer to 'waves' or 'rhythms', where power and threat work fluctuate in complicated and nuanced ways to alter the perceptions and conceptions of students' mental health and well-being. While these rhythms are particularly apparent in the 'institutional context' (Bagaka's, Badillo, Bransteter, and Rispinto, 2015), which are influenced primarily by the Higher Education Institution where the student attends, the influence of rhythms external to the institution, found in everyday life parallel to the doctorate are equally important, a position reflected in Sverldik et al (2018).

Following from previous work in this area (Dakka and Wade, 2019), the data gathered in the present project provides an opportunity for doctoral researchers and those who are institutionally close to them to explore the rhythms of doctoral study. Initial data for the study was captured through a Likert questionnaire which was distributed to all doctoral students at BCU (n=544). With a response rate of 34% (n=186), indicative data demonstrated that the meaning attributed to the traditional stressor points of deadlines or milestones were experienced in rhythms which were not always contingent on time pressure, but on how threats were perceived and negotiated. This was closely tied to the everyday life which ran parallel to doctoral study. Focussing on these themes of interest, there were three focus groups held with two groups of students (total six FG, with fifteen participants total) exploring different elements related to the doctoral experience. A fourth and final FG was held with supervisors to feed back experiences of doctoral researchers and explore their own challenges in doctoral supervision.

Each FG employed different methods to ensure that as wide a number of voices were heard. In the first FG, pictorial exploration, in the form of mind mapping, was used to explore the power, threat and meaning experienced in the everyday life of doctoral researchers. The second FG used a vlog of a doctoral student's experience of mental health and well being (Valeix, 2019) to investigate the feelings surrounding doctoral study. While some responses were expected, especially connected to writing and the fear of 'not doing enough', it became clear that the stress related to study was exhibited in relation to the body, with one participant normalising this as 'conventional feelings when stressed, nervousness and not being able to sleep . . . made worse by doctoral study'. The third FG drew data together from the previous FGs and asked participants to identify areas of intervention at an individual, supervisory and institutional level. Following the literature, relationships with supervisors were seen as absolutely central to the well-being of students and students identified supervisors manifest as the 'icon' of the institution. Often, however, supervisors did not have the capacity or the capability to address the challenges of students, especially where mental health was concerned. Of equal importance was the access to a communal space for students where they invest their own rhythms and everyday life by coming and going as they saw fit to their study such as 24 hour access to office space and the library; have the opportunity to personalise their space and have social events supported by students and staff. The final focus group attended by supervisors highlighted that while they are placed in positions of power, this is a default position created by the institution and often there is a feeling of helplessness when they cannot provide a solution to the pastoral and emotional challenges presented by the student, especially where they are technically

and emotionally ill-equipped to address them.

In drawing on the twin theories seen in the BPS's power, threat and meaning framework and Lefebvre's rhythmanalysis, coupled with extensive qualitative and quantitative data from across four faculties, this research provides a unique insight into the relationships between the space, time and everyday life of doctoral researchers and their mental health and well-being. It was found that a considerable number of individuals had already experienced poor mental health and this was exacerbated by the idiosyncratic demands of doctoral work. This is a primary concern given that doctoral students are more likely to experience psychological distress (Leveque et al., 2017), even if the participants in the present project saw themselves as resourceful in approaching incumbent and potential problems by accessing University specific and mental health services.

This paper concludes by making recommendations that institutions can implement in conjunction with their doctoral students. These include: dedicated and protected space for student study; attendance at key decision-making activities at School/Departmental, Faculty and University level; a dedicated pastoral worker for the doctoral community; support services specifically tailored to doctoral study; training for supervisors on information, advice and guidance and institutional awareness of the importance of doctoral researchers to the culture of the HEI within the context of a knowledge/information economy which increasingly draws on individuals with highly specialised skill sets.

**Ali, A., Kohun, F. (2006) 'Dealing with Isolation Feelings in IS Doctoral Programs' *International Journal of Doctoral Studies*1(2006) 21-33**

**Bagaka's, J. G., Badillo, N., Bransteter, I., & Ris Pinto, S. (2015). Exploring student success in a doctoral program: The power of mentorship and research engagement. *International Journal of Doctoral Studies*, 10(2015), 323-342.**

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**Johnstone, L. & Boyle, M. with Cromby, J., Dillon, J., Harper, D., Kinderman, P., Longden, E., Pilgrim, D. & Read, J. (2018) 'The Power Threat Meaning Framework: Towards the identification of patterns in emotional distress, unusual experiences and troubled or troubling behaviour, as an alternative to functional psychiatric diagnosis'. Leicester: British Psychological Society.**

**Lefebvre, H. (2004) *Rhythmanalysis*, London: Continuum**

**Levecque, K., Anseel, F., De Beucklaer, A., Van der Hayden, J., Gisle, L. (2017) 'Work organization and mental health problems in PhD students', *Research Policy*, 46(4): 868-879**

**Sverdlik, A., Hall, N.C., McAlpine, L., Hubbard, K. (2018) The PhD Experience: A review of the factors influencing doctoral students completion, achievement and well-being, *International Journal of***

*Doctoral Studies*, 13(2018): 361-388

Valeix, S. (2019) '70 Days Trailer' retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pXoalwmGfMI&t=63s> 16<sup>th</sup> June 2019