

Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (Included Submissions)

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A Qualitative Investigation into Chinese International Doctoral Students' Navigation of a Disrupted Study Trajectory During COVID-19

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Research Domain: Student experiences (SE)

Abstract: This study delves into emic perceptions of Chinese international doctoral students' navigation of a disrupted study trajectory during the COVID-19 pandemic. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with students and the conceptual framework of bioecological systems theory and needs-response agency, the article reveals a nuanced picture of how activities, relations and roles nested in a PhD study trajectory are impacted by and respond to the crisis. Specifically, the pandemic has instigated a ripple effect upon PhD study that is embedded within a complex system of person-environment factors in the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem and macrosystem. Confronting these changes and challenges, the students enact needs-response agency to cope with these impacts so as to restore stability. The study concludes with some practical implications for related stakeholders in the bioecological system to generate conditions and support for students to harness possibilities for growth amidst and beyond the health crisis.

Paper:

Introduction

Despite an insightful scholarship about how the pernicious health crisis of COVID-19 has disrupted HE, there remains a scarcity of a nuanced probe into how international students perceive their navigation of an overseas study journey in the new context. It is not yet clear whether and how this cohort enacts agency during this navigation. Bearing these gaps in mind, this study recruited a group of international Chinese doctoral students (ICDS) to share their emic perceptions, focusing on unpacking two research questions: 1. How has the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the PhD study trajectory that is embedded within a complex system of person-environment factors? 2. How have the ICDS coped with these impacts?

Conceptual Framework

To facilitate data analysis, this study brought together two theories—bioecological systems theory and needs-response agency. The first theory is suitable for probing into how the COVID-19 breakout as a global risk has a ripple effect on a doctoral student's study trajectory that is constructed within a constellation of persons, settings, relations and objects, all of which are subject to change due to the pandemic. The second theory is of particular relevance to investigate how international students perceive and respond to situated needs arising out of the unprecedented context. Combining these two branches of theoretical underpinnings into the conceptual framework (Figure 1), this study teased out a full picture of international doctoral students' navigation of a disrupted

study trajectory at the interface of person-environment factors.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative methodology. The recruitment was circulated with a purposive snowballing strategy to target ICDS who were either overseas or in China when the interview was conducted between the late September 2020 and February 2021. The researchers stopped recruiting more participants when the recruitment secured 16 participants, reaching a point of qualitative saturation in relation to the key research questions (Hu, Xu, & Tu, 2020). To overcome physical constraints, online one-on-one semi-structured interview was conducted, each lasting approximately 30 to 60 minutes. During this time, they were encouraged to share their lived experiences around open-ended questions about how they navigated a disrupted PhD trajectory since the outbreak of pandemic. All transcripts were transported into NVivo 12 for a thematic analysis informed by the data and the theoretical underpinnings adopted by the study.

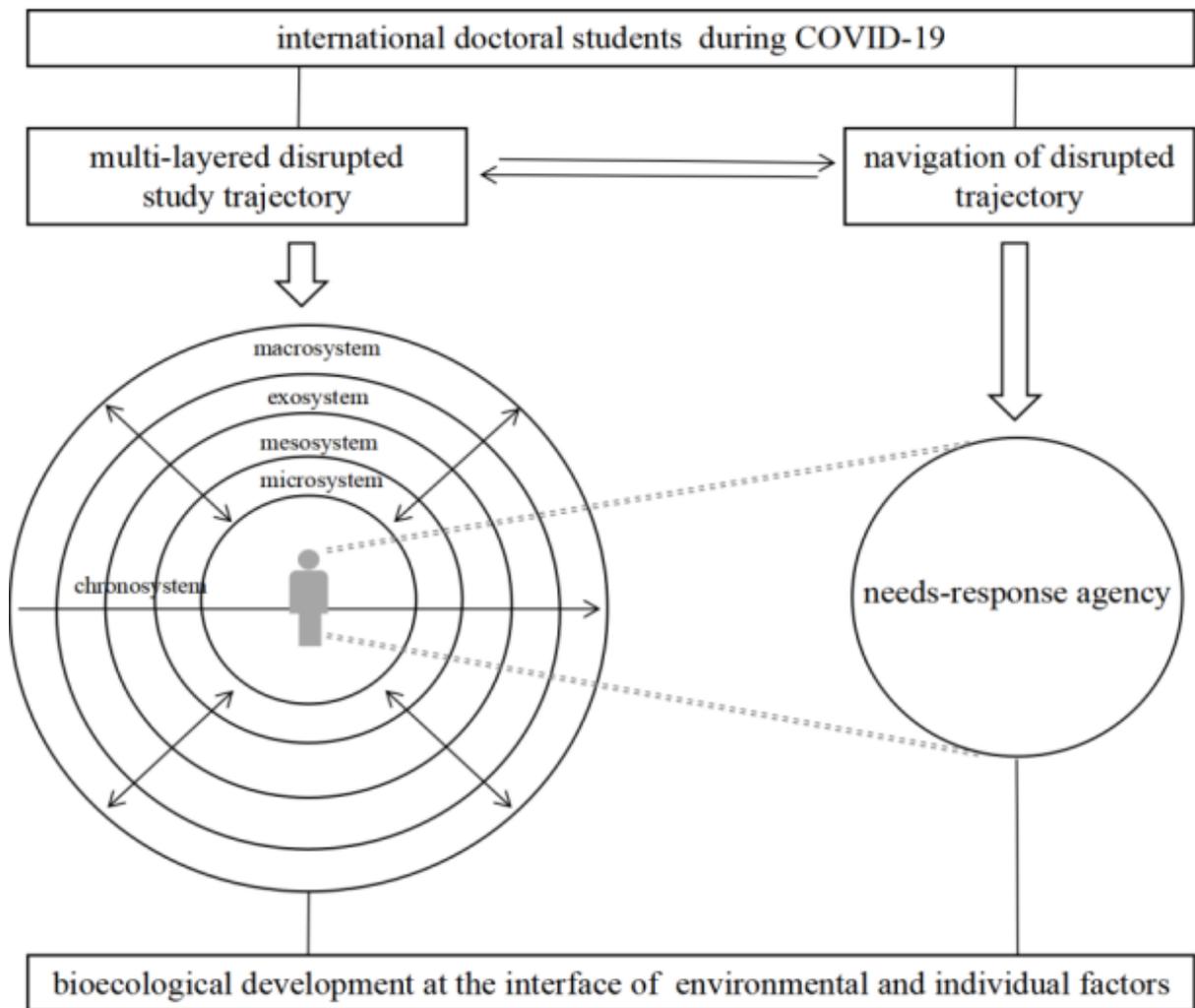
Findings and Conclusion

This study manifests that at the microsystem level, the global health risk necessitates distance PhD supervision, the perceptions of which showcase positive and negative inclinations, dependent upon the extent that the students feel impeded or facilitated by the new pedagogy in the supervisory context. As well, while the risk reinforces a family support network that assists the students in relieving stress and offering care, it foregrounds obtrusive forces such as inter-generational frictions and role conflicts that drain the students' energy investment in doctoral study. In terms of mesosystem, the pandemic dwindles, due to lockdowns, offline interpersonal and intellectual experiences and ties that used to nourish connectivity between research peers and support research productivity; concurrently, it feeds a boundless online research community that offers students a more equal and extensive access to networking. With regard to the exosystem, COVID-19 sets in motion some institutional initiatives to manage the crisis, the practical effects of which are less positively received among those who stay in China. Finally, the macrosystem deteriorates due to heightened geopolitical tensions in the wake of COVID-19, leaving students in stress and uncertainty.

Second, facing the current constraints of physical mobility, the students engage themselves in preserving virtual mobility that to a certain extent mitigates adverse impacts incurred by the deprivation of immersive educational experiences. Further, bearing in mind that structural needs necessitating response may arise in future doctoral study, they also make adaptive preparations in relation to research areas and methodologies so that doctoral research would be less vulnerable and more resistant to unexpected external events. As well, taking into account long-term impacts of COVID-19 on academia, they also display proactivity in terms of equipping themselves better for a precarious academic job market. These findings point to the notion that for the participants, the enactment of agency means more than an immediate response to meet needs "here and now" but also incorporates preparation for needs "there and then".

The study suggests some implications for facilitating a doctoral trajectory during a global health crisis. Given possibilities are high that the fallout may continue for a relatively lengthy period for international students, it requires concerted efforts from concerned parties to address these challenges and transform them into generative forces where possible.

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