

Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (Included Submissions)

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Mothers Undertaking Part-Time Doctoral Study: Experiences and Implications

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Abstract: This paper draws on 35 in-depth interviews conducted across the North West of England to explore the experience of working student mothers undertaking part-time PhDs. Whilst the focus on PGRs is becoming more prominent in higher education literature, there has been little exploration of this particular cohort. There are strong social expectations about how women should behave (Smiler & Kubotera 2010; Stout 2018), these reflect constructions of traditional femininity (Leathwood & Read 2009) and the expectations laid on the role of mother (Rizzo, Schiffrin, & Liss, 2012; Chae 2014). It is within the confines of these expectations that working mothers in the UK embark on part-time PhDs. The role conflict, marginalisation and lack of support experienced by the women in this study caused feelings of guilt, anxiety and isolation. The paper explores the effect of these issues on the women's well-being and concludes with a number of recommendations.

Paper:

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This research explored the lived experience of 35 working mothers undertaking part-time doctoral study and considered the challenges and conflicts that arise from what Brown & Watson (2010) describe as 'dual lives', managing the doctoral student role with the role of mother. The research aimed to consider extant conceptualisations so that alternative discourses could emerge, viewing the part-time doctoral experience through the lens of mothers. It is argued that academic institutions hold values that privilege a masculine world view (Wolf-Wendel & Ward 2006). This study challenges the current framework to allow an alternate discourse to emerge. These marginalized voices provide a new perspective on the 'non-traditional' PhD student experience, allowing a deeper understanding of the challenges facing this group.

Semi-structured interviews were used in this study to gain an interpretivist perspective on the women's experiences, it allowed the women to talk about the phenomena they felt important to them. The use of both thematic narrative analysis (Bryman & Bell 2015) and template analysis (King & Horrocks 2010), allowed the researcher to explore the possibility that the women's experiences demonstrate similarities with key themes linking the individual experiences and narratives.

There are strong social ideals about how women should behave (Stout 2018) which can impact the view women have of themselves, and the expectations laid on the role of mother (Chae 2014). It is within the confines of these expectations that working mothers in the UK embark on part-time PhDs. A term frequently used by the women was 'should'. The word 'should' reinforces the belief that they could be doing more to fulfill the ideal mother role. This sense of obligation puts incredible strain on the women as they juggle not only their multiple roles and caring responsibilities but the guilt to which the juggling gives rise.

***'I find it hard to still be" Mum", but then be a student, be these other things as well. Because that's what takes the priority, it always will.'* (Heather)**

The additional demands faced by a part-time student, including familial care and employment can impede a smooth transition through the PhD process, as a result, they are seen by many as 'transient' members of the research community (McCulloch & Stokes 2008). The women's circumstances left them on the periphery, they described their experience as lonely, an existence that distanced them from those around them. It wasn't a physical loneliness, they lived with other people, the feelings of loneliness came from the lack of understanding of what they were going through. No-one around them fully understood what it was to study for a PhD whilst managing the numerous other demands placed on them. This led to feelings of disconnectedness (McCulloch & Stokes 2008) and lack of support.

***'It's difficult working on your own, not having people to bounce your ideas off. I'd be talking about it at home and nobody would have a clue what I was talking about, and my husband would say," Oh, that's nice."'* (Patricia)**

Many of the women described situations that demonstrated the emotional turmoil and anxiety caused by the conflicting demands of studying for a part-time PhD. They highlighted issues that affected them more because they had less time to prepare and deal with them, examples such as children's problems in school, delayed fertility treatment, family illness and strained marital relationships were discussed by the women.

'I think there's times where I just feel physically worn down with it, I can't breathe' (Heather)

'It only takes one nudge then everything goes belly up. I'm always on that tightrope of 'something's going to go in a minute'. You're under pressure all the time'. (Laura)

The difficulties faced by the women in this study came about not because they were disorganized, not intellectually capable enough or just did not work hard enough. They were because the respondents were working and also responsible for the welfare and upbringing of children, an aspect of their lives that was generally not acknowledged by the HE institutions at which they were studying. The role of mother played a large part in first causing and then perpetuating the peripherality of the women as their experience of being a PhD student was marginalised by the concurrent demands of their mother identity. Tension between roles, expectations around motherhood, a fractured student experience and the management of their own guilt provided a very different reality of part-time PhD study. Recommendations include online platforms for virtual research participation, peer mentoring, and online training, in an effort to provide a more inclusive experience for PGR students with caring responsibilities.

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