

Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (Included Submissions)

0499

Prosperity and Precariousness, Liminality and Growth: Post-graduate Researchers' Wellbeing from a Social Identity Perspective

Sanja Djerasic¹

¹*University of Exeter, Exeter, United Kingdom*

Research Domain: Student experiences (SE)

Abstract: In the years leading to the Covid-19 pandemic, which often served to accentuate existing problems, doctoral students' mental health emerged as a point of concern and a topic of fast-proliferating research and practical interventions, aiming to address a previously neglected issue. The oversight was attributed to previous reliance on services and findings created around the undergraduate student (and rarely, staff) populations, thus failing to understand the contexts in which doctoral students are battling very specific problems, one of them being precisely the lack of clearly defined social identity in the context of graduate study/academic research. This paper will report on the findings of an inter-disciplinary, co-produced research event designed to investigate the issue of doctoral students' wellbeing specifically in relation to their social identities – professional and otherwise – and spaces of belonging, and open a discussion that will feed into the development of a whole-person approach to researching doctoral students' wellbeing.

Paper: Even before the Covid-19 pandemic, which, according to Vitae's 2020 survey, caused mental distress in four out of five academic researchers, with levels significantly higher in doctoral students, post-graduate researchers' (PGRs') mental health emerged as an important topic internationally. Studies highlighted that doctoral students appeared significantly more susceptible to ill mental health (particularly anxiety and depression) (Levecque et al., 2017; Mackie and Bates, 2019), with recent UK-based surveys further highlighting that neither the existing research nor wellbeing services built on the needs of undergraduate and post-graduate taught students are adequate for the PGR community (Metcalf et al, 2018; Vitae 2020). Multiple intersecting causes were identified: worry about the future (particularly in view of precariousness); financial situation; supervisor relationship; unclear expectations; role conflict (Grady et al. 2014); impostor syndrome; and isolation or lack of belonging to the (scholarly) community (Stubb et al. 2011). Part-time, international, mature students, students with disabilities, caring responsibilities, and students working in isolation are found to be at higher risk (Levecque et al. 2017, Metcalfe et al., 2018; Vitae 2020). Further, it was suggested that the research culture of competitiveness and performativity increase the feeling of isolation (Rogler, 2019; Wellcome Trust, 2020).

Many of these stressors: isolation, role conflict, impostor syndrome, self-confidence, supervisor relationships, work control and uncertainty (Vitae 2018; 2020; Byrom et al., 2020) can relate to the (lack of) social identification and belonging. These emerge in a social environment in which

individuals exist in a state of liminality, often at odds with their life stage (43% of the UK PGR population are 30+), which is often all-consuming, extremely competitive, and conducive to life-work imbalance. And while the sector is rapidly addressing the issue, there is paucity of research and initiatives that take a whole-person approach (McAlpine et al., 2020; Metcalfe et al. 2020), and rather than identifying social and institutional stressors and isolating ‘correct’ responses to them, aim to understand how PGRs’ backgrounds, motivations, and social spaces of identification and belonging – both professional/academic and otherwise – bear on their wellbeing.

In my contribution, I will deliver insights from an event on PGR mental health and wellbeing from a social identities perspective, organised in collaboration with PhD students and colleagues working in neuro- and social psychology. The event, taking place in September 2021, will open a conversation about helpful and harmful social and professional identifications among doctoral researchers. It will bring PhD students (N~40) across humanities and social science disciplines (who, due to the nature of their work, may experience higher levels of isolation than their traditionally team-based STEM colleagues) in conversation with each other, and with their senior colleagues, about their mental health and wellbeing and the ways in which it is linked to their various social identifications and spaces of community and belonging (both inside and outside of academia). The event will use creative small-group workshops and focus group discussions, and will be of exploratory nature in asking the question about the experience of wellbeing or distress and its links to salient positive or negative social identification (i.e. an intersection between a positive and clear sense of belonging – identification with, and acceptance by – a group that is inherently positively perceived (Vignoles et al. 2006; Smith et al. 2017; Makanju et al. 2020). Notes from these discussions and the post-event survey data will be thematically analysed to deliver initial qualitative insights, that will be first shared at the conference, and used to inform an inter-disciplinary project aimed at understanding these links on a larger scale.

As this work-in-progress approaches the issue from a novel perspective, it is unhelpful to speculate about possible conclusions, particularly in the context of the ongoing pandemic – some anecdotal evidence from the discussion with our PhD collaborators suggests, for example, that while the pandemic has exacerbated a lot of the pre-existing issues (particularly isolation and worry about the future), it had also introduced unexpected benefits, such as the creation of online communities, increased participation for distance, part-time, and mature students (as well as those with caring responsibilities or some disabilities), and re-evaluation of professional and personal priorities. We are keen to learn about these changes as much as about the enduring issues – individual, but also structural, such as access to doctoral study and academic profession for various social groups (and the ‘cultural ideal’ of an academic that might be incompatible with students’ various social identities) and the likelihood of career precariousness (OECD, 2021), and keen to discuss our emerging research programme with colleagues, to enhance its robustness, relevance, and practical implications.

References: Byrom, Nicola C., Larisa Dinu, Ann Kirkman, and Gareth Hughes. 2020. ‘Predicting Stress and Mental Wellbeing among Doctoral Researchers’. *Journal of Mental Health*, September, 1–9.

Grady, Rebecca K., Rachel La Touche, Jamie Oslawski-Lopez, Alyssa Powers, and Kristina Simacek. 2014. 'Betwixt and Between: The Social Position and Stress Experiences of Graduate Students'. *Teaching Sociology* 42 (1): 5–16. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0092055X13502182>.

Levecque, Katia, Frederik Anseel, Alain De Beuckelaer, Johan Van der Heyden, and Lydia Gisle. 2017. 'Work Organization and Mental Health Problems in PhD Students'. *Research Policy* 46 (4): 868–79. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.respol.2017.02.008>.

Mackie, Sylvia Anne, and Glen William Bates. 2019. 'Contribution of the Doctoral Education Environment to PhD Candidates' Mental Health Problems: A Scoping Review'. *Higher Education Research & Development* 38 (3): 565–78. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2018.1556620>.

Makanju, Damilola, Andrew G. Livingstone, and Joseph Sweetman. 2020. 'Testing the Effect of Historical Representations on Collective Identity and Action'. *PLOS ONE* 15 (4): e0231051. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0231051>.

McAlpine, Lynn, Isabelle Skakni, and Kirsi Pyhältö. 2020. 'PhD Experience (and Progress) Is More than Work: Life-Work Relations and Reducing Exhaustion (and Cynicism)'. *Studies in Higher Education*, March, 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2020.1744128>.

Metcalfe, Janet., Wilson, Sally and Levecque, Katia. 2018. 'Exploring wellbeing and mental health and associated support services for postgraduate researchers'. Vitae. Available at: https://www.vitae.ac.uk/doing-research/wellbeing-and-mental-health/HEFCE-Report_Exploring-PGR-Mental-health-support/view.

Rogler, Christian R. 2019. 'Insatiable Greed: Performance Pressure and Precarity in the Neoliberalised University'. *Social Anthropology* 27 (S2): 63–77. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1469-8676.12689>.

Smith, Joanne R., Winnifred R. Louis, and Mark Tarrant. 2017. 'University Students' Social Identity and Health Behaviours'. In *Self and Social Identity in Educational Contexts*, 159–75. New York, NY, US: Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315746913-ch9>.

Stubb, J., K. Pyhältö, and K. Lonka. 2011. 'Balancing between Inspiration and Exhaustion: PhD Students' Experienced Socio-Psychological Well-Being'. *Studies in Continuing Education* 33 (1): 33–50. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0158037X.2010.515572>.

Vignoles, Vivian L., Camillo Regalia, Claudia Manzi, Jen Golledge, and Eugenia Scabini. 2006. 'Beyond Self-Esteem: Influence of Multiple Motives on Identity Construction'. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 90 (2): 308–33. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.90.2.308>.

Vitae. 2020. 'Covid-19 impact on researchers'. Available at <https://www.vitae.ac.uk/impact-and-evaluation/covid-19-impact-on-researchers>

Wellcome Trust. 2020. *What researchers think about the culture they work in*. Research report. Available at: <https://wellcome.org/reports/what-researchers-think-about-research-culture>