

Tales of 'the Outcasts': Mental wellbeing experiences of International Women Doctoral Researchers from the Global South

Thirsha de Silva

University of Portsmouth, Portsmouth, United Kingdom

Research Domains

Postgraduate scholarship and practice (PGSP)

Abstract

Research exploring the mental wellbeing of doctoral researchers have highlighted the mental health struggles of this cohort in the neoliberal university. Due to systemic inequalities prevalent in higher education (HE), racialised and minoritised doctoral researchers may be at a higher risk of experiencing mental wellbeing challenges. Therefore, this paper focusses on the mental wellbeing experiences of international women doctoral researchers of colour from the Global South. Preliminary findings from 11 narrative interviews reveal the challenge of navigating life amidst shifting priorities between work, life and the PhD, effects of living on the periphery of the UK HE landscape and being Othered due to exclusionary practices aimed at non-UK nationals. These emerging findings suggest that the doctoral education experience is significantly impacted by the structural marginalisation inherent in HE. Therefore, this poses an invitation for universities to consider a more compassionate and comprehensive approach to addressing international doctoral researcher wellbeing.

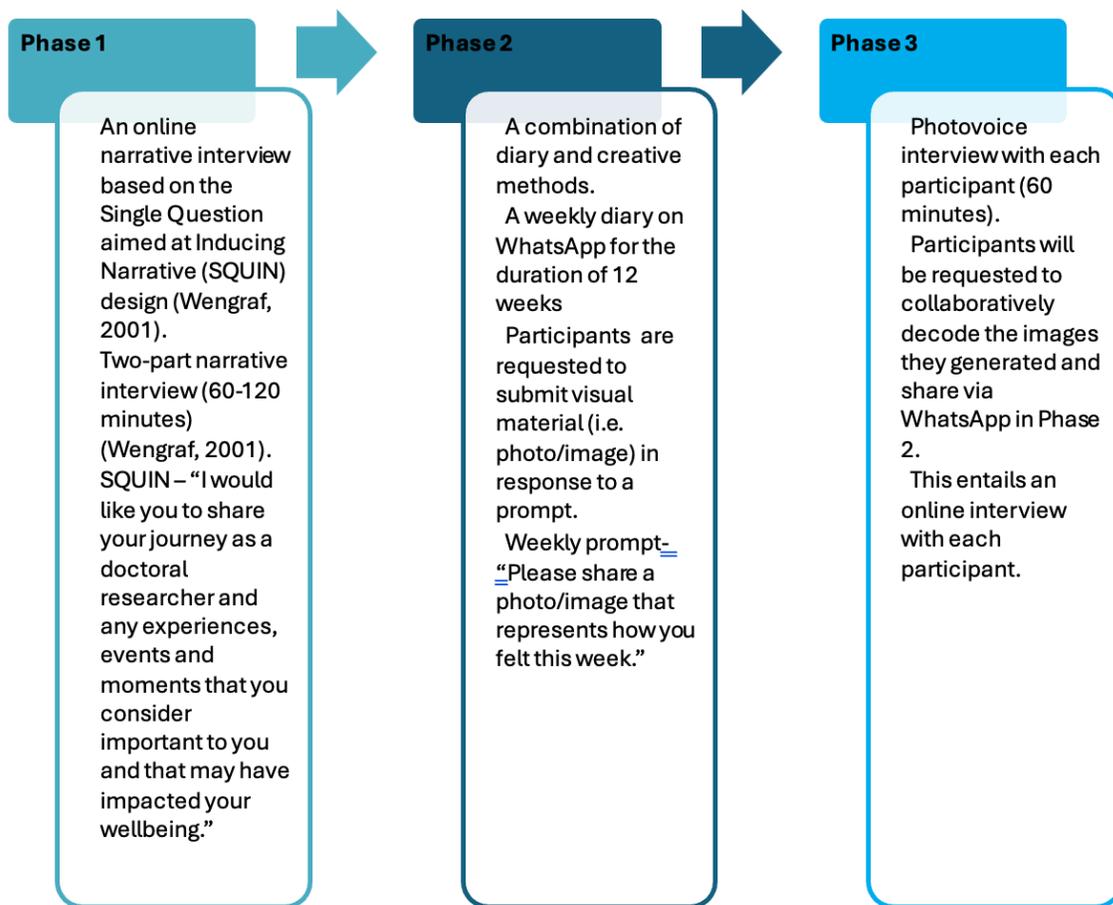
Full paper

The prevalent narrative in doctoral education research appears to be that of a journey of isolation, stress, burnout and mental health problems (Crook et al., 2021; Hazell et al., 2020; Metcalfe et al., 2018; Pyhälto et al., 2023; Sverdlik et al., 2021). Yet, even in the face of such compelling evidence, doctoral researchers have become “the great forgotten” in the higher education (HE) system (Crook et al., 2021, p. 123; Grant et al., 2022). Furthermore, Postgraduate researcher (PGR) cohorts such as international PGRs may be at a higher risk of experiencing mental health challenges than others due to systemic inequalities prevalent in HE (Hazell et al., 2020; Metcalfe et al., 2018). Often, members of minoritised ethnic groups refer to feeling as an ‘outsider-within’ (Hill Collins, 1998) in academia which is still a predominantly white space (Bhopal et al., 2018). Research on minoritised groups in HE has brought to light experiences of isolation, exclusionary and discriminatory practices resulting from systemic racism, microaggressions and misrecognition (Arday, 2017; Bhopal

et al., 2018; Burke, 2018; Yeebo et al., 2024). In addition, women in HE report higher levels of ill-being (Hazell et al., 2020; Milicev et al., 2023). Therefore, this paper aims to provide an insight into the wellbeing experiences of international women doctoral researchers as they navigate life and their doctoral education. The paper is based on a PhD study exploring mental wellbeing experiences of the afore-mentioned cohort as well as their conceptualisations of wellbeing which would allow to make recommendations for creating a 'care-full' university for international doctoral researchers.

An intersectional framework is at the centre of this exploration of doctoral researcher mental wellbeing. The study combines narrative research with diary methods and creative methods in order to facilitate the production of richer data (Khoo, 2024). While data collection in this longitudinal study is conducted in three phases as is indicated by Figure 1, this paper is predominantly based on data collected in Phase 1. The narrative interview in Phase 1 is based on the Single Question aimed at Inducing Narrative (SQUIN) design (Wengraf, 2001). Interviews typically ranged from approximately 60-120 minutes. The sample consists of 11 international women doctoral researchers from the Global South currently enrolled in a PhD programme in England. Participants represented a variety of nations including India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Malaysia, Jordan, Ghana, Turkey and the Philippines.

Figure 1



Preliminary findings offer an insight into the impact of the neoliberal white Academy on international doctoral researchers. Firstly, participants spoke of the multi-directional spillover between the PhD, life and work. The blurring of boundaries separating work, life and the doctoral programme as well as shifting priorities left participants feeling guilty for not living up to expectations especially those related to their personal life. A participant shared about delaying the prospect of motherhood and how she felt guilty that the “the biological clock is ticking in the same way that the PhD is also going on”. The second theme centres around the isolating nature of existing in the periphery perpetuated by a sense of disenfranchisement in their new identity as an immigrant in a relatively unfamiliar HE system. Following a transnational relocation, international doctoral researchers are required to adjust to living without their well-established support networks. Participants shared instances of non-belonging, feeling isolated and the need to create a community within the university and beyond. A participant living abroad for the first time spoke of the need for friendship, specifically someone to share the PhD journey with. Another mentioned that doctoral researchers as a cohort were ‘outcasts’ in the HE system. Finally, there was an overwhelming experience of being Othered driven by misrecognition and

exclusionary practices targeted at international students. Participants spoke of the blatant inequalities in fee structures and being treated as 'money pots' by the HE system. Many shared concerns regarding the practical implications of the current racist and xenophobic immigration policies. The precarity this posed on international students as a cohort weighed heavily on the minds of the participants.

Findings from this ongoing research suggest that structural marginalisation inherent in HE in the UK has an impact on mental wellbeing and the doctoral experience of international doctoral researchers. Furthermore, the doctoral research journey is intertwined with other spheres of the doctoral researchers' life suggesting that addressing doctoral researcher wellbeing must consider a multitude of factors. These findings could pose an invitation to HE institutions to create more care-full and compassionate practices in doctoral education which could lead to a more positive doctoral education experience.