Exploring the lifeworld of international doctoral students

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There are relatively few studies focussing on PhD students compared to their undergraduate peers, even fewer focussing on international PhD students studying on the UK campus (Evans and Stevenson, 2010) and almost none utilising phenomenological approaches. The absence of such phenomenological studies is an important omission to the higher education research literature: illuminating the ways in which PhD students experience the meaningful phenomena of their lifeworlds is essential since, without such elucidation, we have inadequate information on which to make claims about these students' needs.

The purpose of this study was, therefore, to illuminate the world 'in its appearing' for international PhD students. The study comprised in-depth interviews with eight students from different countries (China, Libya, Brazil, America, India, Canada, Oman, Mauritius), at different points in their PhD journeys (first year through to post-submission of thesis) and from diverse gendered, age and religious backgrounds (five women and three men; mid-20s to early-50s; Christian and Muslim). The focus of the interview was to elucidate the lifeworld and lived experience of being an international research student at the research site university. I use the concept of the lifeworld as Ashworth (2006, p. 215) describes it, that: *'all experience whatsoever is ''within a world'', which is for each of us ''my subjective world'', nevertheless with certain ever-present characteristics. This is designated the ''lifeworld'''*. As only international students were included this precludes the research from being a 'pure' phenomenological study since the assumption was made that international students' experiences could be phenomenologically different from those of UK PhD students. In all other aspects, however, the approach was phenomenological: the interviews were as non directive as possible with the open question being 'what is it like being an international student here at [research site] university?'Participants were then encouraged to give as full as description as possible of their experience.

Following transcription the analysis comprised detailed reading of the individual transcript as a whole, with the experience(s) explored through Merleau-Pony's lifeworld dimensions as developed by Ashworth (2006): selfhood (what the situation means for the person's social identity or sense of agency); sociality (how the situation affects relations with others); embodiment. (how the situation may relate to feelings about the student's own body); temporality (how the meaning of time, duration, and biography may be intrinsic to the student's situation); spatiality (the importance and meaning of place and space); project (how experiences relate to the student's ability to carry out activities regarded as central to their life and the emotions engendered in the pursuance of such projects); discourse (the sorts of terms employed to describe the situation); and mood-as-atmosphere or 'moodedness' (the feeling-tone that is an essential element of the student's situation).

'When I was on the plane flying from China to London, I saw loads of people – young people like me – Chinese people, Chinese students, and then from their conversation ... I [realised] they were just throwing their parents money around and then I felt really sad about it, because in China, before I go out, I didn't know that there are groups of people like them, like just real rich people, rich generation, but not really paying attention to what they should be doing, like studying. Before, my understanding of the world was so narrow, so limited, and then it was suddenly broadened'.

The theoretical framework used in the paper is that of belonging, drawing on May's (2013) helpful work on 'connecting self to society'. The concept of belonging lends itself well to phenomenological understanding since, at the individual level, belonging relates to feelings of connectedness, and affective interactions with others; belongingness is also rooted in time, place and space; such 'ontological belonging' is *'a sense of ease or accord with who we are in ourselves [and] a sense of accord with the various physical and social contexts in which our lives are lived out'* (Miller, p. 220).

In the paper, detailed attention is given to the lifeworlds, as narrated, of just two students in order to capture the distinctiveness of individual meaning-making (Clegg and Flint, 2006). The research shows the complexities of the students' lives and the struggles they face in attempting to survive as PhD students in unfamiliar social milieu:

'They have to understand that we are coming from completely different backgrounds... so they can't deal with us like 'Yeah, you are PhD and we're going to deal with you like you are English student.' You can't do this, because I'm a person who is used to being told what I have to do, not to think, not to decide. I had no clue what I'm doing, and nobody asked me at that point'.

In particular the narratives highlight the ways in which the students experience the everyday world as problematic, the power relationships they experience and how they work to manage relationships with others, the loneliness and isolation they experience as part of their lifeworlds, the places and people which become significant to them in their doctoral student journey, and how they think about their present in relationship to their past experiences and future hopes.

I'm sponsored from [X] university, so if I give up and go back I have to pay back, and I can't pay them. You know, that was as well a nightmare, it's not something I can decide and do it, because I have to pay back and I would lose my job there, that's the contract, I would lose my job, lose my life. It's like saying, 'yeah, she's going to England to do PhD' and just, you know, 'Yes she failed, she came back, she couldn't do it.' It would have destroyed me, my life.

Since doctoral completion rates are low across both the UK and international higher education sector the paper concludes by making recommendations for changes to practice which might increase feelings of belonging on campus and thus, potentially, enhance the completion rates of international PhD students.

References

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