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Challenges in doctoral socialisation: A researcher's reflective experience

Atif Khalil

Editors: Laura Gurney, Hossein Hosseini, Nicolina Newcombe and Kerry Earl Rinehart

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Atif Khalil
The University of Waikato
New Zealand

Abstract

Socialisation in doctoral education is a multifaceted process through which students acquire the knowledge, skills and values required to perform in a scholarly community. The literature reports numerous experiences of doctoral students, but socialisation and the challenges faced by international students has received limited attention. As an international student, I have used a self-study approach to develop a personal narrative about some of the unexpected intellectual, emotional and cultural challenges I have faced during my doctoral study. I encountered those challenges through extending my social interactions, which is one of the key elements of socialisation. I argue that doctoral students need to take a reflective and proactive stance towards extending their social interactions to manage unexpected challenges and for a smooth transition to become active members in a scholarly community.

Keywords

Doctoral socialisation; doctoral challenges; social interactions

Introduction

Doctoral socialisation is a multifaceted process by which students gain the knowledge, skills and values required for successful entry into the scholarly community (Weidman et al., 2001). Previous research has reported a range of complementary factors, which are simultaneously psychological and social, which contribute to doctoral socialisation (Jazvac-Martek, 2009; McAlpine & Amundsen, 2011). Considerable research has also identified the challenges faced by doctoral students which included a lack of knowledge and understanding, insufficient research skills, relevant literature, appropriate methodology and writing ability (Jones, 2013; Shin et al., 2018), anxiety, exhaustion/stress, loneliness and negative relationships (Baker & Pifer, 2011; Hunter & Devine, 2016), cultural differences, language barriers and building social networks (Jibreel, 2015; Newsome & Cooper, 2016).

Moreover, research has indicated concerns and challenges of international doctoral students because of the growing number of students pursuing degrees in developed countries. Baba and Hosoda

(2014) reported that these students might feel social disconnectedness, homesickness and culture shock, which negatively affects their socio-cultural adaptation. It is still important to understand the diverse challenges they may face in their institution, support they receive and the sense of belonging during their socialisation.

Self-study is a systematic approach by which researchers can examine their own research practices and experiences through continuous reflections (Samaras & Freese, 2009). Engaging in self-study is a learning and developmental process in which a researcher reflects on his own research experiences and to critically evaluate them to improve research practice. However, relatively little has been discussed on researchers' reflections on their own socialisation processes and dealing with unexpected challenges. Therefore, I reported aspects of my ongoing critical reflection into my learning, challenges and adopting ways of support as an international doctoral student.

Research methodology

Being an international student in a university in New Zealand, I considered myself as a case and used a self-study approach to examine my own research practices and identify the socialisation challenges I faced while studying my PhD. When embarking on my PhD, I was aware of the sensitivity of my research and my own position as a doctoral student researching doctoral student socialisation. Throughout my study, I have made sure to compile ongoing reflections about my actions and research decisions. I have generated two sources of data as part of my self-study: (i) a reflexive journal/diary, which contains details of my everyday research activities, understandings and reasons for research decisions, and (ii) notes on the meetings with supervisors. I extracted three categories of unexpected challenges and the social interactions that were important for managing these challenges. In what follows I set out the intellectual, emotional and cultural challenges I faced and the social interaction approaches I took to ameliorate these.

Intellectual challenges

Doctoral study in my home country follows the American model of course work followed by a thesis. While studying in a different model of doctoral education, it was quite hard to decide where to start and what area of focus would make a valuable contribution, thereby ensuring that my research would be sufficiently original to meet the requirements of a PhD. I was not very confident in my qualitative research skills because my background was in quantitative methods, and so I wondered if I would be capable of making a new knowledge claim using this approach. Despite limited knowledge on researcher reflexivity, I identified that I needed to monitor and document my position as an insider researcher given I was researching doctoral education as a doctoral student (Berger, 2015). As a doctoral student, it was challenging to keep my personal responses and reflections separate from the research findings, which were based on my interviews with doctoral students studying in Pakistan. I also faced a challenge in deciding how to present the experiences of the doctoral students I interviewed in a manner that maintained the integrity of their individual experiences and allowed me to contribute to the literature.

Managing intellectual challenges through social interactions

Social interactions have been central to my managing the intellectual challenges I have faced during my PhD. Supervisors, peers and academic experts are the main social agents who have supported me in learning about and meeting the requirements of PhD research. My supervisor supported me to understand the requirements of the PhD and provided literature, which helped me to select an area to research. Regular meetings with and feedback from my supervisor has helped me in synthesising ideas, connecting storylines and improving my academic writing, thus ensuring my progress. During the

critical phase of data analysis, I used to read the literature and then meet my supervisor to discuss what and how I could organise my data. My supervisor also supported me to write and present some research papers that helped me clarify my thinking.

Interactions with senior fellows have been important. From them I have been able to access help to understand the requirements of research work and garner different opinions on the choice of appropriate research methodology. When I was struggling with reflexivity, one of my senior fellows provided me with his notes on research reflexivity and tried to guide me, which was helpful, especially in research proposal development. I also appreciated another fellow who invited me to his home and guided me in research methodology design. I have also interacted with some academic staff in the staff room. They shared their research experiences which helped me to see my research from a different perspective. During data analysis, I located and worked with staff who could teach me NVivo for qualitative data.

Emotional challenges

I have faced many emotional highs and lows during my PhD study, including anxiety, stress, isolation, uncertainty and depression. The internal world of worries about not being able to complete the PhD often caused distraction from my research work. I experienced fear of not knowing where I fit in the field and fear of failure like the "imposter syndrome" (Sverdlik et al., 2020). I experienced stress and anxiety about meeting writing expectations, especially at the research proposal stage. I was overwhelmed with uncertainty when I needed to change direction in my data collection approach due to Covid-19. I struggled to make contact with potential interview participants. I appreciated they were also experiencing the pandemic but it was frustrating to not receive a response to an invitation to be interviewed. This situation wasted a lot of time, which caused depression due to my PhD being delayed. It was challenging and sometimes awkward to conduct online interviews of my participants at midnight because of the different time zone in Pakistan. Nonetheless, I was able to publish a paper on conducting online Zoom interviews which has been well received (Khalil & Cowie, 2020).

Managing emotional challenges through social interactions

My social interaction with the supervisors, peers and friends has been important in countering the emotional challenges I have faced. During the research proposal phase, the regular meetings with my supervisor kept my motivation and confidence up to get through the oral confirmation. The regular and positive feedback from my supervisor boosted my self-confidence and self-belief in this critical time. My supervisor encouraged and acknowledged my achievements. For instance, when I passed my oral confirmation, my supervisor appreciated my efforts and asked me to take a break so I could start the research with a fresh mind. This enhanced my enthusiasm towards the next steps. Moreover, my supervisor helped me to persist and remain positive even amid the pandemic, and I continued my research work steadily. She used to interact with me through Zoom and check on how I was doing and that minimised the anxiety and uncertainty around my research work.

I also received motivation from my fellows when I saw them working. The sharing and interaction with fellows helped me realise that everyone was going through emotional phases, which gave me courage to manage my feelings of frustration and isolation. In addition, friends have helped minimise my emotional challenges. Whenever I was feeling down they made some plan to hang or dine out which relieved my feelings of loneliness and depression.

Cultural challenges

Being an international student, I have faced cultural challenges, including coming to understand the contextual/institutional culture, social behaviours and norms, and language. While every university has

its own socio-cultural norms and values, my immediate challenge was to start a PhD within a United Kingdom model of doctoral education (Spronken-Smith, 2018). This contrasts with the doctoral model in Pakistan where one year of coursework is compulsory and must be completed before the research proposal stage. Another significant cultural challenge was the need to meet the demands of speaking and writing English in formal and informal contexts. It was hard to understand different accents, quick speech and the slang or idiomatic expressions used by those inside and outside the institution.

I used to think that I had lost my identity because there were not many people who knew me or about me. When I started my PhD, I quickly realised that only my supervisors knew my name. I also found it was quite hard to make connections or relationships with people of different backgrounds. I needed to transition into a new societal culture, one where people like to live their individual lives, which contrasted with how people are used to living together with supportive people around them in my home country.

Managing cultural challenges through social interactions

A range of interactions helped me to adapt to a new institutional and societal culture. My supervisors played a supportive role in helping me manage the cultural challenges. For example, my co-supervisor helped me connect with the library, student centre, gymnasium, student health, bank and so on. The library liaison person helped me to locate and use the library resources. I sought out opportunities to participate in curricular and co-curricular activities such as educational conferences and study tours with the aim of understanding the culture and interacting with teachers and fellows. I loved sharing PhD experiences with fellows with different cultural backgrounds. This helped me to adjust to the diverse culture of the institution.

I also joined a conversation circle, which helped me to understand the accent and slang used by native speakers and enhanced my ability to listen and speak English. I joined recreational and student clubs including the gymnasium, cricket, international students' network, and postgraduate students' association. These clubs provided me an opportunity to extend my interactions, and I built a friendship circle where people knew about me. In addition, I managed to interact with students who had the same cultural background as me. They held a small gathering every week, having dinner together and sharing concerns with each other.

Concluding thoughts

I adopted a self-study approach as part of my research into doctoral students' views of their own progress and development. I have reflected on my own experience of doctoral study as an international student studying in a country that employs a different approach to doctoral education than my home country. I have highlighted the kinds of intellectual, emotional and cultural challenges I have faced, and hence other PhD students might face in a new learning environment. I have particularly focused on the value of social interaction and developing a supportive network as a means of ameliorating these challenges. Interaction with my supervisor and fellows has been crucial to managing these challenges. My proactive and active participation in institutional activities has extended my opportunities for social interaction and helped expand my supportive network. My advice to other PhD students is to interact regularly with their supervisors and build their social networks within the institution and more widely. I recommend that doctoral supervisors engage with their students in a way that supports them to optimise their social interactions so they can make a successful transition into a scholarly community.

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