

Basil Cahusac de Caux  
Lynette Pretorius  
Luke Macaulay *Editors*

# Research and Teaching in a Pandemic World

The Challenges of Establishing Academic  
Identities During Times of Crisis

 Springer

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*This work is dedicated to Huda, Jasmine, and my newborn child.*

*Basil*

*I dedicate this book to my parents who had the incredible courage and wisdom to leave their homeland in order to build a brighter future for their children.*

*Lynette*

*I dedicate this book to Anna, who always supports and helps me make sense of my ideas.*

*Luke*

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# Editors and Contributors

## About the Editors

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**Dr. Lynette Pretorius** is an award-winning educator and researcher in the fields of academic language, literacy, research skills, and research methodologies. She currently works as the Academic Language and Literacy Advisor for the Faculty of Education at Monash University in Australia, teaching undergraduate, postgraduate, and graduate research students. Lynette is the author of multiple journal articles and an academic book focused on the experiences of graduate research students in academia. She has qualifications in Medicine, Science, Education, as well as Counselling, and her research interests include doctoral education, well-being, experiential learning, reflective practice, and autoethnography. Lynette is a Senior Fellow of the Higher Education Academy—an international honour awarded to educators who demonstrate a thorough understanding of, and strong commitment to, teaching and learning approaches which foster high quality student learning.

**Dr. Luke Macaulay** is a Research Fellow at Deakin University's Centre for Refugee Employment, Advocacy, Training, and Education (CREATE). As an interdisciplinary researcher, Luke has worked in a number of areas including higher education, educational leadership, inclusive education, refugee and migration studies, as well as cultural studies. Luke's current research explores cultural experiences of becoming an adult and the social/political belonging of a refugee background youth.

## Contributors

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**Associate Professor Kelly-Ann Allen** Ph.D. FAPS, is an Educational and Developmental Psychologist, an Associate Professor in the Faculty of Education, Monash University, and a Principal Honorary Fellow at the Centre for Wellbeing Science, University of Melbourne. Her research underscores the importance of a sense of belonging as a universal human need and she has built an international reputation for her work in the area of school belonging. She is the Lead-Director and Founder of the international consortium the Global Belonging Collaborative and is the current and founding Co-Editor-in-Chief of the Journal of Belonging and Human Connection. The quality of her research has been acknowledged through several awards, including recognition by The Australian's data-science partner The League of Scholars, and she is independently ranked as Best In Field for her research contributions. Dr. Allen is a Fellow of the Australian Psychological Society, an honour of esteemed senior psychologists who have made a significant contribution to the profession over a significant period of time.

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**Dr. Emily-Marie Pacheco** is a Social Psychologist interested in social integration, identity, and psychological wellbeing. Pacheco achieved her Ph.D. from the University of Glasgow based on research which explored the lived experiences of UK-based international students from abroad for study during a time of armed conflict in their home countries. She has extensive research experience exploring large-scale adversity across life stages and cultures. Pacheco's recent publications are based in resilience Psychology and empowering communities affected by natural hazards through co-created psychosocial interventions. Pacheco currently teaches and conducts research in Psychology at University of Glasgow, University College London, and University of Edinburgh.

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**Part I**  
**An Introduction to Research and Teaching**  
**in a Pandemic World**

# Chapter 1

## Preface: Research and Teaching in a Pandemic World



Lynette Pretorius , Basil Cahusac de Caux , and Luke Macaulay 

**Abstract** *Research and Teaching in a Pandemic World* explores how the academic identities of students and staff were impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. This chapter outlines the main motivation for writing this book and provides a brief overview of the chapters that follow. This book was initiated to allow the chapter authors to narrate their emotional journeys during a time of significant upheaval. We believe that stories matter; individual experiences matter. The stories in this book are of trauma, grief, and loss, but also highlight moments of resilience and growth. As the editors, we encourage the reader to explore these stories with us. In this book, you will discover stories which either resonate with, or differ significantly from, your own experience. As you read these stories, then, we encourage you to reflect on your own journey during the COVID-19 pandemic—you may be surprised at the response this reflection evokes. In this way, we can all bear collective witness to the often-times idiosyncratic ways in which the pandemic has affected us all. It is only through this collective witnessing that we can learn to move forward into a post-pandemic society.

**Keywords** Academic identity · Autoethnography · Reflection · Reflective practice · COVID-19

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## 1.1 Seeking Catharsis

Since the start of 2020, the world has collectively been bearing witness to an unfolding global disaster. The COVID-19 pandemic has wreaked havoc worldwide; hospitals have been over-run, people died *en masse* around the world, and those fortunate enough to not contract the virus have experienced trauma by witnessing, in real time, the continuing unfolding disaster. The pandemic has also impacted different parts of the world in different ways. Some countries have been left relatively untouched, while others have seen immeasurable loss of life. There have also been markedly different approaches from political leaders worldwide, leading to vastly different outcomes in different countries. With borders shut, and lockdowns, school closures, as well as job losses becoming the norm in many places, people and industries had to find multiple ways to adapt in order to survive.

Academia is no different. As a result of the pandemic, higher education institutions have had to rapidly change their approaches to teaching and research. Many institutions moved to a *new normal* of entirely online teaching, with work-from-home the norm for students and staff. In this book, the terms *online teaching* or *online learning* are used to refer to emergency remote teaching and learning, where material normally presented in a face-to-face setting was suddenly converted into an online modality. This sudden change left many staff with the challenge of adapting to an unfamiliar environment, rapidly trying to create a myriad of online resources and virtual classrooms which at least attempted to foster a sense of community among students. Similarly, students were forced to change their approaches to learning. Many students were not even able to enter the countries in which they were supposed to be studying, leading to additional challenges for both students and staff. At the same time, students and staff also had to manage feelings of *impending doom*, with constant reminders of the pandemic all around them. We may never fully know the effects the pandemic has had on higher education but, as the rest of this book makes clear, the effects have been profound and far-reaching. Indeed, recent data suggest that there is now a “great resignation” occurring in academia, highlighting “widespread discontent [...] in part owing to increasing teaching demands and pressure to win grants amid lip-service-level support during the COVID-19 pandemic” (Gewin, 2022, p. 211). This is further discussed in Chap. 2 (Cahusac de Caux, 2022b). It is also important to note that factors such as globalisation, neoliberalism, and managerialism had already changed the education landscape pre-pandemic and that this likely further contributed to the impact of the pandemic on academia. Further detail regarding the impact of these changes to academia, both pre- and post-pandemic, can be found in a recent review by Parker et al. (2021).

We write this chapter from a space of relative safety, though our experiences have not been without trauma. We have spent the past 24 months working from home. We recognise that this opportunity was a privilege; we were fortunate to be in a position where we could do our teaching and research from the safety and security of our homes. However, this privilege did not mean that we were safe. Lynette’s experience reflects this.

As someone who was considered at high risk were I to contract COVID-19, my workplace felt it was a safer choice for me to remain at home until the pandemic was either over or I was fully vaccinated. At the same time, however, I was living with an ever-present fear of being infected; since I was considered high-risk, infection meant a significant chance of hospitalisation and even death. To make matters worse, I had a family member who worked in a COVID-19 ward in a hospital. Seeing the toll this work had on my family member's physical and emotional health had a profound effect on my own wellbeing. Additionally, many of my students were studying in places around the world that were being ravaged by the pandemic, with several getting sick themselves or losing loved ones. I wanted to support my students, but I also knew that there was not much that I could do. I wondered how I could expect students to care about something as seemingly trivial as academic writing when I knew they were fighting merely to survive. This sense of triviality compounded my own feelings of trauma, at times making my work feel pointless. I realise now that I was not only experiencing my own trauma but I was also starting to feel the effects of vicarious trauma.

Vicarious trauma can be defined as “a process of change resulting from empathetic engagement with trauma survivors” (British Medical Association, 2020, para. 1). Signs of vicarious trauma include lingering feelings of anger, rage, or sadness, experiencing bystander guilt, shame, or self-doubt, the inability to focus on present events due to a preoccupation with the events others are experiencing, over-identifying with others' experiences, and distancing or detachment from others (British Medical Association, 2020). As Lynette notes,

In my case, I experienced all of the signs above at one point or another during the last 24 months. I am also sure I am not alone; many others I spoke to felt the same. This is why, when I was approached by my fellow editors to start this book project, I knew I had to be involved. I wanted to voice my experience and allow others to do the same.

Currently, we find ourselves in what some consider to be a *post*-pandemic world; however, this is most assuredly not the case. When we initially started this chapter (14 March, 2022), 1,338,650 new daily cases were reported worldwide, with 4,164 deaths (World Health Organization, 2022). Experts were concerned that the newly identified Omicron sub-variant would markedly increase daily case numbers, particularly given the approaching Southern hemisphere winter (Barracough, 2022). There were also calls for the reintroduction of low-level restrictions such as the wearing of face masks (see, for example, Barracough, 2022). Now (1 September, 2022), the Omicron variant is indeed the dominant strain of the virus (Ghebreyesus, 2022b), with the Director General of the World Health Organization noting that the world had reached the grim milestone of 1 million deaths from COVID-19 in 2022 alone (Ghebreyesus, 2022a). *The pandemic is not over and it will not be over for quite a while.*

Despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary, however, some believe, and act, as if the pandemic is over. This can be seen by a marked drop in even the most basic health measures such as physical distancing and wearing face masks. This is certainly Lynette's experience, who writes:

Indeed, I recently found myself in a crowd of people with someone who asked me why I even bothered to still wear a face mask. There are contradictions in advice and uncertainty all around me. As someone who is more vulnerable, this supposed post-pandemic society significantly increases my stress and sense of anxiety. I feel unsafe and I feel like I need to constantly remind others of the need to protect themselves and those around them. I feel that

the casual attitudes of those around me trivialise my experience over the last two years and minimise the losses experienced by so many across the world.

We believe that it is through the sharing of our experiences that change happens. Consequently, we know that we need to use our voices as catalysts for change; by sharing our experiences, we will not only help each other find catharsis, but we will also offer hope and insight for those who may have experienced similar circumstances. Catharsis, as a psychological concept, refers to the affective benefits of either relieving or resolving emotional problems often through the act of sharing that emotion with others (Goode, 2022). It is important to note that the process of catharsis is highly individualised; how a person achieves catharsis differs (Goode, 2022). At the same time though, catharsis can also be considered social, especially when an individual may feel that other individuals in a group understand their problem or experience (Goode, 2022). Lynette has found relief by expressing her emotions through the sharing of her story in this chapter but also on social media. She notes,

I also regularly find catharsis through my actions. I still wear my mask everywhere, but now I also tell people why whenever they try to get me to take it off. Yes, I am triple-vaccinated, but this does not mean I am immune from being infected with the virus. Yes, I have a smaller chance of ending up in the intensive care unit of my local hospital, but I can still contract the virus and develop significant health concerns or suffer the effects of so-called long COVID. Yes, I am relatively young, but I want to protect others around me. I regularly share the data about the risks of COVID-19 as well as the stories of others who also feel forgotten by those trying to push for a post-pandemic society where everything should just go back to normal.

Therefore, we believe that it is crucial for us to reflect on our own experiences and those of others. By telling our stories and listening to those of others, we will discover that the pandemic affected people in a myriad of different ways. The idiosyncratic nature of people's experiences reflects the global nature of the pandemic. While one virus circulated around the world, people perceived it through their own lived experience in their socioeconomic and sociocultural context. For example, there were different experiences for people from the Global North and the Global South. Certain groups experienced additional marginalisation, including people of colour and those from the LGBTQIA+ community. Consequently, the stories you read in this book may resonate with your own or may in fact be significantly different. In sharing these stories, we do not intend to create a comprehensive catalogue or summary of how all people responded to the pandemic. Indeed, we do not think such a task can ever be fully accomplished. Rather, we believe that *stories matter. Individual experiences matter*. As such, this book aims to share vivid "windows to the [worlds of the authors], through which they interpret how their selves are connected to their sociocultural contexts" (Chang et al., 2013, pp. 18–19).

*Research and Teaching in a Pandemic World* presents the reflections of students and staff within higher education. Drawing on the insider knowledge of the authors, the reflections presented in our book offer insights for other students and staff, as well as academic policy makers regarding the experiences of those within academia. Through this collective witnessing of how the pandemic has impacted people globally, this book hopes to offer insights and practical suggestions as to how we as a

global community can move forward when we do finally reach that post-pandemic society.

We understand that our experiences are intersectional and, as such, our home lives impact our educational experiences. Consequently, it was important to ensure that the authors of this book represented diverse perspectives. There are authors from a wide array of cultures, representing both the Global North and the Global South, as well as a range of ethnicities. A variety of religious and political affiliations are represented, as well as people with different gender identities and sexual orientations. This book also includes the perspectives of some who are neurodiverse or have long term medical or mental health concerns. We do acknowledge that the authors are all highly educated, but we have included the perspectives of authors representing different postgraduate student experiences (i.e., Master's, Graduate Certificate, and PhD students), as well as those of early career researchers, and established educators and researchers.

## 1.2 Academic Identity Development in Times of Change

This book is specifically concerned with the academic identity development of the authors during this time of significant change. Given our focus on the importance of stories, we consider identity to be the stories we tell others about who we are, who we are not, and who we would like to or should be (Yuval-Davis, 2010). Identity is complex, multiple, and fluid, constantly being constructed and reconstructed (Gee, 2000; Hoang & Pretorius, 2019; Pretorius & Macaulay, 2021). Academic identity, as a part of our identity, is shaped in the context we find ourselves and therefore refers to the stories we tell ourselves about who we are, who we are not, and who we would like to or should be in academia (Hoang & Pretorius, 2019; Pretorius & Macaulay, 2021).

While this book focuses on the changes to our academic identities as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is important to acknowledge other major events during this time which have also had a profound impact on the authors' experiences, identity, and sense of belonging. Firstly, many of the authors in this book found themselves experiencing several other natural disasters as a result of climate change during the time of the pandemic. These disasters included heatwaves, floods, droughts, and fires, and have affected billions of people globally (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2022). For example, in Australia there were major fires in March 2020, which burned more than 12.6 million hectares of countryside (Werner & Lyons, 2020). The resulting thick smoke led to significantly hazardous air quality over several days and physically affected 11.3 million Australians – a staggering 57% of the adult Australian population (Werner & Lyons, 2020). Indeed, in the weeks leading up to the declaration of the global pandemic, many Australians were already searching for particle filtration masks as a consequence of these bushfires. There have also recently been significant floods in large areas of Australia (see, for example, Hirst, 2022; Richards, 2022).



Secondly, this book was written in a time of significant societal turmoil, particularly for Black and First Nations peoples. Racialised trauma and systemic oppression were exacerbated by, and also received more global attention due to, the COVID-19 pandemic and associated lockdowns (Addo, 2020; Devakumar et al., 2020). As noted by Devakumar et al. (2020), for example, “rather than being an equaliser, given its ability to affect anyone, COVID-19 policy responses have disproportionately affected people of colour and migrants—people who are over-represented in lower socioeconomic groups, have limited health-care access, or work in precarious jobs” (p. 1194). Furthermore, outcry against the murder of George Floyd by police in the United States during the early months of the pandemic led to protests around the world in support of the Black Lives Matter movement (Kirby, 2020). These experiences had a profound impact on some of the authors in this book, as eloquently described in Chap. 7 (Grant-Skiba, 2022).

Finally, and perhaps most strikingly, at the time of writing, several of the chapter authors were either directly or indirectly affected by the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This meant that many of the authors of this book experienced not only the trauma of seeing war on their news, but also of knowing people in warzones. Some had family and friends who had to flee their homes and it is likely that some will lose loved ones in the conflict. Even those without any seeming connection to either Ukraine or Russia have felt the effects of the war through a rise in the cost of living (United Nations, 2022).

The editors express their unconditional support for those authors who have suffered distress as a result of the aforementioned traumas. At the same time we strongly condemn actions by leaders and governments seeking to disrupt peace and harmony, whether those actions pertain to intolerance, denial of climate change, or the instigation of war. While heartened by the many compassionate actions of people worldwide who have accepted and welcomed those displaced from their homelands, we strongly encourage governments and individuals to urgently provide safe-havens for displaced people.

### 1.3 Book Outline

In the next two chapters of *Research and Teaching in a Pandemic World*, we explore the background and context of the COVID-19 pandemic (see Chap. 2, Cahusac de Caux, 2022b) and outline the autoethnographic approach used in conducting this research study (see Chap. 3, Pretorius, 2022). In Chaps. 4, 5, 6, and 7, we go on a journey to better understand the emotional turmoil experienced by five different PhD students as they navigated pandemic-induced loss, trauma, and grief (Grant-Skiba, 2022; Mokbul, 2022; Patel, 2022; Rangarajan & Daneshfar, 2022). We then take a turn to understand how context shaped various authors’ responses to the pandemic; these are stories of positivity despite adversity highlighting how the academic identities of students and staff were developed as a result of unexpected experiences during the pandemic (see Chaps. 8, 9, 10, and 11; Cutler et al., 2022; Li &

Zhang, 2022; Lin & Xu, 2022; Power et al., 2022). We then delve deeper into different ways in which resilience and growth during the pandemic helped shape the authors' academic identities (see Chaps. 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, and 23; Adams et al., 2022; Cutri & Lau, 2022; Jiang & Li, 2022; Kalenjuk, 2022; Lee, 2022; Macaulay, 2022; Senewiratne, 2022; Sheridan et al., 2022; Umarova, 2022; Utami, 2022; Yip & Maestre, 2022; Yu, 2022). While experiences outside of our academic sphere shaped our academic identities, it was also important to understand that the changes to research methodology that were necessitated by the pandemic significantly impacted authors' academic identity development. This is explored in Chaps. 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, and 29 (Cahusac de Caux, 2022a; Duran, 2022; Hradsky, 2022; Karlina, 2022; Maulana, 2022; Qureshi, 2022), showcasing how changing research methodologies helped the authors better understand their projects and their roles as researchers. Finally, we explore teaching and learning practices that were used during the pandemic to encourage academic identity development and wellbeing (see Chaps. 30, 31, 32, 33, 34, and 35, Aiusheeva, 2022; Elliot et al., 2022; Freya & Cutri, 2022; Karakas & Webster, 2022; Kisworo et al., 2022; White, 2022). The book ends with a coda which summarises the far-reaching insights contained within the various chapters (see Cahusac de Caux et al., 2022).

## 1.4 Conclusion

Given the various factors affecting the authors of the chapters in this book, it should not come as a surprise that the stories these writers share are at times very emotional or confronting. The editors believe, however, that it is through this collective sharing of difficult experiences that we will be able to move forward into a hopefully brighter future. The stories in this book are of trauma, grief, and loss, but also highlight moments of resilience and growth. As you read these stories, then, we encourage you to reflect on your own journey during the COVID-19 pandemic—you may be surprised at the response this reflection evokes. In this way, we can all bear collective witness to the often-times idiosyncratic ways in which the pandemic affected us. It is only through this collective witnessing that we can learn to move forward into a post-pandemic world.

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# Chapter 2

## Introduction to the COVID-19 Pandemic and Its Impact on Higher Education



Basil Cahusac de Caux 

**Abstract** This chapter investigates the wide-reaching impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on higher education. It collates surveys conducted by large organizations to assess the effects of the pandemic on academia. The chapter then discusses changes in academic workload among academic staff and their consequences for retention and burnout. It then turns to the perspectives of academics and students in relation to remote learning and research collaboration. Finally, the chapter touches on the long-term ramifications that pandemic-related restrictions may have for academic identity and higher education.

**Keywords** COVID-19 · Pandemic · Higher education · Academic identity · Research · Teaching · Learning

### 2.1 Introduction

Few expected the start of a new decade as momentous as this. Higher education, its institutions, and bedrock foundations were shaken by the rapid spread of SARS-CoV-2, a virus that triggered a global health crisis which precipitated monumental changes in public policy. Places of research and learning were shuttered almost overnight, and curfews and lockdowns became commonplace in many countries. What the World Health Organization (2020) declared as a *Public Health Emergency of International Concern* on 30 January 2020 soon became known in mainstream and social media as the COVID-19 or coronavirus pandemic.

Coronavirus disease (termed COVID-19 throughout this book) is a highly contagious respiratory illness that spread around the world within a matter of weeks in the early months of 2020. Individuals infected with COVID-19 experience a range of mild to severe symptoms, including loss of smell and taste, coughing, headache, fever, chest pain, shortness of breath, and fatigue (Centers for Disease Control & Prevention, 2022b; World Health Organization, 2022b). Severe illness can result in significant

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difficulty breathing, persistent chest pain, loss of speech or mobility, confusion, and ultimately death (World Health Organization, 2022b). There are also indications of significant post-COVID complications that can occur for weeks, months, or even years post-infection; a condition which has been termed long-COVID (Centers for Disease Control & Prevention, 2022a).

In order to slow the spread of COVID-19, the World Health Organization recommended that individuals adhere to a variety of health precautions, including the wearing of masks and social distancing (World Health Organization, 2022a). Many of these suggestions were adopted by governments and health authorities around the world, and resulted in the introduction of mandates on mask-wearing and travel restrictions. International travel was heavily restricted, and domestic mobility was heavily affected through the introduction of lockdowns and partial curfews.

The COVID-19 pandemic sparked a major crisis in higher education. It raised many questions about the viability of universities and research institutions in their pre-pandemic form. What roles do brick-and-mortar universities play if learning is to take place remotely? Why should taxpayers fund research institutions if research can be conducted virtually? Are academic faculty and staff an essential part of higher education—or can individuals acquire the skills and literacy they need without input from educators (e.g., via pre-recorded online courses)? Just as questions like these were being asked, institutions of higher education began mounting their own response to the COVID-19 pandemic. This came in the form of a rapid shift to remote learning, work from home schemes, and an increasingly flexible and accommodating attitude towards learners of all kinds (e.g., domestic and international, undergraduate and graduate, and those with or without caring responsibilities).

Some individuals within higher education may argue that universities were already in a state of crisis long before the pandemic rendered campuses inaccessible for large numbers of academics and students. Processes such as casualisation were affecting academia and its ability to produce meaningful research while simultaneously providing financial security to those engaged in knowledge-production (Loveday, 2018). The literature on higher education extensively explores issues such as the casualisation of academic staff and other academic labour-related issues (e.g., see chapter nine in Toutkoushian & Paulsen, 2016). However, the current pandemic disrupted the state and structural integrity of higher education in ways which could not have been anticipated. This chapter explores the ways in which the pandemic affected higher education around the world.



## 2.2 Surveying the Damage: The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Higher Education

Pandemic-related restrictions have hampered teaching, research, and international student enrolments and exchange programmes at the majority of universities around the world. Given the forecasted scale of pandemic-related disruptions to higher education, organizations such as the International Association of Universities, UNESCO, the OECD, and European University Association conducted global and regional surveys to track the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on higher education. At the onset of the global pandemic, a survey of university and college presidents' and chancellors' opinions on the state of higher education identified two key issues: student mental health and financial stability (Inside Higher Ed & Hanover Research, 2020). A year into the pandemic, Jensen et al. (2022) note how 71% of academic staff were unable to travel to conferences and meetings, while over half of academic staff did not have access to laboratories and equipment. A shift to remote learning was accompanied by an increase in workload for academic staff around the world (Jensen et al., 2022), which potentially meant a decrease in time and resources spent on research output and activities.

Simultaneously, restricted mobility due to border closures necessitated the continuation of research in small groups or through exclusively virtual means. It is still unclear how beneficial virtual conferences, research collaborations, and training are in terms of maintaining research output and ensuring the quality of research (OECD, 2021). In the life sciences, non-COVID-19-related research publications decreased by approximately 10% (Riccaboni & Verginer, 2022). There is also pessimism among university leaders around the world concerning research funding after the pandemic ends (Jump, 2021; UNESCO, 2021).

Another area of significance is the financial impact of the drop in international student enrolments at universities in the United States of America, Canada, United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand. In the United States of America, universities experienced a 15% decrease in international student enrolment between the years 2020 and 2021 (Open Doors, 2022). Thatcher et al. (2020) indicate that Australian universities witnessed a decrease in international student enrolment from a pre-pandemic level of 4.5 million to under one million students in May 2020. On average, a 60% drop in international student enrolment and exchange was seen across universities in Africa, Europe, the Americas, and Asia (Jensen et al., 2022). In the case of European universities, the decrease in international student enrolment and mobility is corroborated by the European University Association (Gaebel & Stoeber, 2021). This tremendous drop in enrolment figures signifies the deleterious effect that pandemic-related changes in student mobility can have on the financial health of higher education institutions in high-income nations. The financial impact of such sudden changes in student enrolment can also affect other areas and activities within such universities, including research funding and output, faculty recruitment, and student support mechanisms (Woolston, 2020).

A similarly devastating outcome is described in Rashid and Yadav (2020), which explores issues of accessibility and affordability in middle- and low-income nations. A significant imbalance exists between universities in high-income and non-high-income nations in terms of digital literacy and access to online resources (e.g., access to the internet, virtual classrooms, and e-learning platforms). This disparity has been exacerbated along economic lines during the pandemic. For instance, universities whose students had limited internet access halted their learning activities during lockdown (Marinoni et al., 2020). Despite such concerns, a survey of university leaders conducted in 2021 indicates that fully online degree programmes will become more common over the coming five years, though only a minority believe that online learning will fully replace in-person lectures (Jump, 2021).

Another significant effect of the pandemic on academia is the toll it has had on the mental health of faculty, staff, and students in academic institutions. The pandemic and related events (e.g., lockdowns, restrictions on movement, and misinformation), as well as the loss of life and health, resulted in students reporting significantly higher levels of anxiety and depressive disorders (Savage et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2020). A UNESCO survey estimates that the education of “more than 220 million tertiary students” was disrupted by the pandemic (UNESCO, 2021, p. 1). The mental health of academics was also affected adversely, as highlighted in surveys and interviews conducted by Dinu et al. (2021). Teaching academics complained about a host of pandemic-related issues: securing a quiet and private space at home from which to teach, increased grading, and an inability to connect with students who are taught online (Dinu et al., 2021). Teaching academics also report difficulties assessing student work and identifying students who are under-privileged (e.g., in terms of internet access) and therefore in need of extra assistance (Cutri et al., 2020). Gendered discussions of the impact of COVID-19 on female academics are also beginning to be published around the world (see, for example, Deryugina et al., 2021; Gouws & Ezeobi, 2021).

### ***2.2.1 Retention and Turnover of Academic Staff***

Due to the pressures placed on academics during the pandemic, many decided to resign indefinitely or find work in other sectors of the economy. In some cases, universities furloughed and fired academic staff in order to maintain financial solvency (The Chronicle of Higher Education, 2020a). This severely affected retention and turnover rates at universities around the world. For instance, in the United Kingdom, 60% of academics reported that they were likely to leave academia within the next five years due to pay-related issues and working conditions; figures are even higher for younger academic staff under thirty years of age (University & College Union, 2022). While the duties and responsibilities associated with academic work have been described as taxing in the past, the pandemic heaped additional pressure on academics who in some cases were already overworked and exhausted (University & College Union, 2022). Two waves of economy-wide resignations were recorded in the United

States, Canada, and Europe during the years 2020 and 2021. What would come to be called the *great resignation* is also observed in higher education, as faculty members are significantly more likely to consider changing careers or retiring early (Gewin, 2022; The Chronicle of Higher Education, 2020b). This makes it harder for institutions to retain talent, as many academics, especially those with children, prefer to leave academia than work under conditions of heightened and chronic stress and unpredictability (Metulevicius et al., 2021).

Early career researchers, particularly, doctoral candidates, struggled to remain in higher education due to the disruptions caused by the pandemic. For instance, many doctoral candidates rely on universities not only for financial support but also for a stable income through employment at university libraries, laboratories, and research centres. With the closure of campuses, these income streams were severely disrupted or completely cut, leading to doctoral candidates reconsidering their prospects in higher education (Delgado, 2021). It is becoming clear, though, that many aspiring academics (i.e., doctoral candidates) have adapted to the new norm of conducting research and, in some cases, teaching during a global pandemic. Examples of this can be seen throughout this book. Whether such resilience will translate into a decrease in turnover rates in academia is yet to be seen. What is clear from a recent survey of the impact on employment stability and hiring during the pandemic, however, is that universities' hiring practices have not changed substantially (Jensen et al., 2022).

### 2.3 Attitudes Toward Remote Learning and Research

Academics and students perceive pandemic-associated changes in learning and research differently. The majority of early career researchers consider the shift to remote learning as challenging, anxiety-inducing, yet potentially rewarding. Students view remote learning as problematic but also liberating.

Academics at universities in the Middle East were somewhat reluctant to transition to remote learning, opting to delay the transition in order to both assess the endurance of pandemic-related restrictions and guarantee the overall quality of remote offerings (Al-Taweel et al., 2020). A survey of faculty members at 69 institutions across the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia identified blended learning (i.e., conventional lectures coupled with remote/online learning) as the preferred method of learning (Alqah-tani & Rajkhan, 2020). Hesitance to rapidly switching to remote learning may stem from a number of factors: technical competence (among faculty and students), access, and prejudice concerning the quality of remote learning.

While research publications have decreased during the pandemic, academics have had time to reflect on the quality and quantity of research they produce. This has allowed for the emergence of new directions in research in academia. The communication of research findings changed, as academics flocked to social media platforms such as Twitter in order to inform a global audience of the intellectual work they are doing (Carpenter et al., 2021). Though academics have been using social media platforms to communicate research for many years, the scale of social media usage for

this purpose is unprecedented. A new wave of online academic activity has allowed the public to reap the benefits of direct access to research findings that may be socially impactful. This shift in research communication may even play a role in inspiring future generations of researchers and academics.

Student perspectives of remote learning vary. A study conducted at an Indonesian university highlights how students prefer in-person learning as it offers them more opportunities to communicate with instructors and peers (Amir et al., 2020). However, the study also indicates that students perceive benefits in remote learning: it is more efficient and provides students with additional time to study and review learning materials (Amir et al., 2020). In a longitudinal study of over 450 undergraduate students at a North American university, Ramachandran and Rodriguez (2020) found that over 60% of students indicated that a lack of motivation and access to a quiet space to attend classes and exams was hindering their learning. Means and Neisler (2021) found that student satisfaction with learning was correlated with effective online teaching practices. The study also identifies motivation as a major concern among undergraduate students (Means & Neisler, 2021).

University and college students in Malaysia identified rigid assignment deadlines and unstable internet connections as barriers to effective remote learning (Mathew & Chung, 2021). At two large Romanian universities, for example, nearly 70% of students complained about technical issues related to university learning platforms (Coman et al., 2020). There was also dissatisfaction with the technical expertise of instructors, as over 85% of students claimed that instructors used a “limited number of tools provided by the E-learning platform” (Coman et al., 2020, p. 9). Students were, therefore, concerned with technical issues and instructor competence as the pandemic unfolded.

## **2.4 Academic Identity: How the Pandemic Changes What It Means to Be an Academic**

GEE (2000) notes how academic identity consists of natural (defined by our genes and physiology), institutional (defined in relation to our occupation and profession), and discursive (defined in relation to our interaction with others) elements. The COVID-19 pandemic poses a threat to all three elements. While other challenges to academics such as casualisation of the labour force may be viewed as antithetical to the development of academia, they tend to only pose a threat to one or two elements of academic identity (i.e., institutional and discursive). The all-encompassing nature of pandemic-related illnesses and restrictions is one reason why COVID-19 is treated as a major challenge to higher education. It threatens to destabilise and debilitate higher education and academic identity.

We are fortunate that higher education did not come to a complete halt during the pandemic, even though at times it seemed like it could have. Lectures were given. Research was conducted. Colleagues co-authored papers. However, it would be naïve

to argue that academic identities remained unchanged. Many academics reflected on their duties and responsibilities. Many thought about their relationship with their institutions. Numerous academics contemplated new modes of interaction and cooperation with peers and students. At some point amidst the hectic unpredictability of the situation, academic identity shifted and transformed in myriad ways.

Prior to the pandemic, I was a staunch believer in the bricks-and-mortar university: a place where students and researchers/academics can learn and socialise in a meaningful and productive manner. The in-person university is where intellectual synergies between academics and students flourish. However, since the onset of the pandemic, I have re-evaluated my own preconceived notions of the university. Instead of it simply being a physical location where minds meet, I have come to view the university as an institution that can occupy multiple realms: the physical, virtual, and hybrid. While teaching and conducting research during the pandemic, I have spent many hours considering the endless possibilities of virtual and augmented reality and the ways in which they can be seamlessly incorporated into academic life. I look forward to the day in which the so-called “metaversity” exists alongside bricks-and-mortar establishments. Through the pandemic we have started to understand how we will adapt our academic identities to fit future developments in higher education and knowledge production.

## 2.5 Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a deleterious effect on higher education. The mental health, learning experiences, and financial stability of university and college students have been adversely impacted by pandemic-related restrictions and measures. Similarly, academics and researchers have experienced increasing workloads and financial pressure, which resulted in many academic staff reconsidering their future prospects in higher education. Attitudes toward remote learning, while varied, have been cautious and sceptical, though students argue that it provides them with more time to revise and engage with learning materials—an important facet of university education.

The pandemic has also undoubtedly shaped academic identities in novel and unpredictable ways. An academics’ relationship with their peers, their research and teaching, and their institution will continue to undergo numerous changes as individuals begin to reflect on the toll of the pandemic on their health and the health of those around them. While the overall portrayal of the impact of the pandemic on higher education has been grim, there may be hidden opportunities to improve the way in which we learn and conduct research. The application of augmented and virtual reality in learning has yet to reach its full potential. Similarly, the ways in which research is conducted and communicated may present new opportunities for collaboration between higher education and the public and private sectors.

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# Chapter 3

## A Harmony of Voices: The Value of Collaborative Autoethnography as Collective Witnessing During a Pandemic



Lynette Pretorius 

**Abstract** In this chapter, I describe collaborative autoethnography—the methodology which was chosen for this book. In order to clearly explain this methodology, I explore my own journey as I moved into social science research, discovered autoethnography, and subsequently encountered collaborative autoethnography. Through my reflections, I highlight the knowledge which can be gained through purposeful exploration of personal experience. I also demonstrate how, when multiple autoethnographers work together, the resulting collaboration creates a profound synergy and harmony of voices which cannot be achieved by an individual alone. Finally, I present the specific framework used to apply the collaborative autoethnography methodology in this book.

**Keywords** Autoethnography · Collaborative autoethnography · Reflective practice · Reflection · COVID-19 · Qualitative research · Research methods

### 3.1 Introduction

As outlined in the Preface (see Pretorius et al., 2022), *Research and Teaching in a Pandemic World* is written as a form of collective witnessing to explore how the academic identities of students and staff were impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. In order to achieve this, we adopted collaborative autoethnography as the methodology of the book. As detailed in the rest of this chapter, *Research and Teaching in a Pandemic World* provides space for individuals to explore their own experiences and what they have learnt through the process. At the same time, the book as a whole can be considered a collaborative autoethnography of students and staff within academia bearing witness to the changes brought about by the pandemic. It is a collection of stories which provides windows into the worlds of the authors and highlights the idiosyncratic impacts of the pandemic on those in academia. The rest of this chapter provides an outline of the history of autoethnography to show

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how the methodology developed. This is then followed by a detailed explanation of collaborative autoethnography as a type of autoethnography. Finally, I describe the reflective prompts the chapter authors were provided with to show how collaborative autoethnography was achieved in this book.

## 3.2 Autoethnography

As I sit here writing this chapter, I am amused by the irony that a researcher who was initially trained as a medical scientist would be writing a chapter expounding the virtues of the purposely subjective and often-times emotionally-laden methodology of autoethnography. For more than a decade, I studied and conducted research in a scientific environment which sought objective answers to specific scientific problems. My research was focused on examining a gene activated in the hearts of athletes to see whether it could be used as a treatment for heart failure (see, for example, Pretorius, 2010; Pretorius et al., 2009). In this environment, I acknowledged that I could have an influence on how the research was conducted, so I worked to remove myself from the equation—I needed to be objective if I was going to find a treatment for a disease.

After completing my PhD research, I moved into the humanities and social sciences and quickly came to realise that my previous research approach would not work. My new field sought to understand individuals' experiences and, by nature, these experiences were subjective. This journey into qualitative research did not happen overnight; it was a stepwise process which spanned several years. Initially, I took my first hesitant steps into qualitative research by conducting mixed methods research which combined my medical and educational expertise (see Ford et al., 2015; Pretorius et al., 2013). I then expanded my mixed methods research repertoire by relying more on my educational and counselling expertise (see Ford & Pretorius, 2017; Pretorius & Ford, 2016, 2017; Pretorius et al., 2017). It was during these mixed methods research projects that I discovered the value of exploring individual experiences in-depth through qualitative research methodologies. Consequently, in 2019, I published what would be my first fully qualitative pieces of research (see Lam et al., 2019; Pretorius et al., 2019). It was through these pieces of research that I came to appreciate the value of *stories*. As I moved into this more subjective environment, I discovered a range of valuable research methodologies and used many of them. However, no methodology has had such an impact on me as autoethnography; indeed I have become enamoured with this methodology and now regularly recommend it to others.

I discovered autoethnography only a few years ago as part of another research project. However, autoethnography has been around since the late 1970s (Douglas & Carless, 2016), initially based within the field of anthropology (see, for example, Goldschmidt, 1977). It was not until two decades later, though, that researchers began to more deeply value the power and praxis of personal experiences and reflexivity as a reliable way of conducting social research (Douglas & Carless, 2016; Ellis et al., 2011; Pretorius & Cutri, 2019). Holman Jones et al. (2016) note that

there were four historical trends which led to the creation of the methodology now known as autoethnography. Firstly, researchers began to realise the limits of a strictly scientific approach and started to value qualitative research as a methodology which provides a better insight into the nuances of social life (Holman Jones et al., 2016). Secondly, researchers and society more broadly became more concerned about the ethics and politics of research (Holman Jones et al., 2016). Thirdly, researchers started to recognise and appreciate the value of story-telling, emotions and lived experience, as well as embodiment and aesthetics (Holman Jones et al., 2016). Finally, there has been an increased understanding of the influences of identity on how research is conducted and findings are interpreted, emphasising the importance of reflexivity in research (Holman Jones et al., 2016). Together, these four historical trends created a space where social science was reformed and reconceived to allow for the exploration of complex experiences or societies through personal narratives (Holman Jones et al., 2016). Given that autoethnography is a methodology which “acknowledges and accommodates subjectivity, emotionality, and the researcher’s influence on research” (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 274), this type of research began to gain prominence in the literature, particularly within the humanities and social sciences.

As a methodology, autoethnography provides researchers with the opportunity “to learn about the general—the social, cultural and political—through an exploration of the personal” (Douglas & Carless, 2016, pp. 84–85). It is an “approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze (graphy) personal experience (auto) in order to understand cultural experience (ethno)” (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 273). Autoethnographers, therefore, use their personal experiences as data sources and interpret these experiences through the narration of evocative stories combined with a reflexive interpretation of what these stories mean for the topic under investigation (Ellis et al., 2011; Pretorius & Cutri, 2019). For example, through purposeful reflection of the intersections of her past experiences, Ngunjiri (2016) was able to demonstrate how she was able to find “an academic home” for her research (p. 190). Frequently, the stories which are told take the form of epiphanies; they narrate and explore transformative experiences which have significantly influenced the author’s view of the world or the rest of their life (Ellis et al., 2011). For example, I have previously used autoethnography to showcase how epiphanies in my past have changed the way I saw the world, leading to a permanent transformation of my approach to teaching (Pretorius, 2019, 2022). Since these stories are written in hindsight, the author often consults other sources of information such as diaries or journals, notes or photographs, as well as knowledgeable others from the author’s past (e.g., family members or friends, Ellis et al., 2011).

Autoethnographic approaches are on a continuum from autobiography to ethnography; some researchers focus more on self-narration while others focus more on cultural interpretation (Chang et al., 2013). It is important to note, though, that autoethnography is more than simply telling a story. As Chang et al. (2013) note, “autoethnographers use personal stories as windows to the world, through which they *interpret* how their selves are connected to their sociocultural contexts and how the contexts give meanings to their experiences and perspectives” (pp. 18–19, emphasis

in original). In other words, autoethnographers do not merely narrate their experience, they analyse and interpret their experience; they use their insider knowledge to explore how the cultural context has influenced them and how they have influenced the context (Ellis et al., 2011). This can be done by comparing and contrasting experiences to the existing literature in the field, interviewing others, and/or examining artefacts (Ellis et al., 2011). Through this purposeful exploration, therefore, autoethnographers make certain parts of the cultural context familiar to the reader (Ellis et al., 2011).

There are five key factors which I feel make autoethnography such a particularly compelling methodology.

1. Autoethnography highlights why experiences are important in research, thereby illustrating why the personal is important when trying to understand a culture or society (Holman Jones et al., 2016). In this way, autoethnographers are able to purposefully comment on and critique cultural practices (Holman Jones et al., 2016). For example, I was recently able to explore an individual PhD student's journey with mental illness and link this with my own experience of being a PhD student and later a higher education teacher (Pretorius, 2022). By valuing my insider knowledge of the doctoral education environment, as well as my participant's insider knowledge of mental illness, I was able to highlight nuanced cultural phenomena in academia which contributed to my participant's experience (Pretorius, 2022). Using autoethnography, therefore, helped me to provide suggestions for academic policy makers in order to improve academia.
2. As noted in the example above, autoethnography values insider knowledge (Holman Jones et al., 2016; Pretorius & Cutri, 2019). Autoethnographers, therefore, are both participants and researchers in their studies. To achieve this, autoethnographers create vivid and detailed descriptions and interpretations of personal experiences. This gives deeper and more meaningful insights into complex and nuanced experiences and phenomena than more traditional objective or detached observational methodologies (Holman Jones et al., 2016).
3. Autoethnography allows researchers to write through difficult and emotionally charged experiences. This type of cathartic or therapeutic writing is not only for the researcher individually; rather the researcher writes for others to offer insight and hope for those who have endured similar experiences (Ellis et al., 2011; Holman Jones et al., 2016; Pretorius & Cutri, 2019). This was clear in our previous book, where several PhD students explored significantly emotionally challenging experiences and provided strategies for success for future students and academic policy makers (see Pretorius et al., 2019).
4. Autoethnography allows researchers to break the silences embedded in traditional research methodologies by embracing emotionality and uncertainty (Holman Jones et al., 2016). Autoethnography also highlights understudied, hidden, or taboo topics, thereby reclaiming the voices of those who feel marginalised and writing to right a perceived wrong within society (Holman Jones et al., 2016). For example, while remaining anonymous, one autoethnographer was recently able to showcase the stigma they experienced as both a PhD student and later as an

academic researcher because of their field of research – sex work (Dr Anonymous, 2021). Through this reflection, the author was able to privilege their voice and those of their participants, thereby embracing emotionality and trying to right the wrongs they had experienced within academia (Dr Anonymous, 2021).

5. Finally, autoethnography makes academic research accessible; it provides an engaging way for a variety of audiences to access, know, share, and relate to the research being conducted (Holman Jones et al., 2016). Autoethnographers write not only to communicate their findings, but also to engage their readers in the conversation – they seek to provoke a response from their audience (Holman Jones et al., 2016). In this way, autoethnographers produce “meaningful, accessible, and evocative research grounded in personal experience, research that would sensitize readers to issues of identity politics, to experiences shrouded in silence, and to forms of representation that deepen our capacity to empathize with people who are different from us” (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 274). I believe research should be done to achieve a common good and build everyone’s knowledge and understanding. Communicating the research in a way that others can understand and engage with, therefore, will be of significant benefit to society.

As with all methodologies, autoethnography has its detractors. In the literature, autoethnography tends to be critiqued as either “too artful and not scientific, or too scientific and not sufficiently artful” (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 283). Detractors note that autoethnographers are too aesthetic, emotional, or self-indulgent and therefore lack scientific rigour, theory, or analysis (Ellis et al., 2011). Others say that autoethnographic writing is not sufficiently artistic or literary, because it includes too much theoretical analysis (Ellis et al., 2011). However, as Ellis et al. (2011) highlight, these critiques rely on a view that art and science are in opposition to each other. Autoethnographers, by contrast, try to avoid this binary, seeking to unify the beauty of both fields by believing that “research can be rigorous, theoretical, and analytical and emotional, therapeutic, and inclusive of personal and social phenomena” (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 283). I believe this is the reason that autoethnography speaks to me as a methodology. I can see the value and beauty of both approaches to research; finding a methodology which seeks to unite the strengths of both has helped me to see research and writing as a way of communicating findings which change both the individual researcher and the world in which they live.

### 3.3 Collaborative Autoethnography

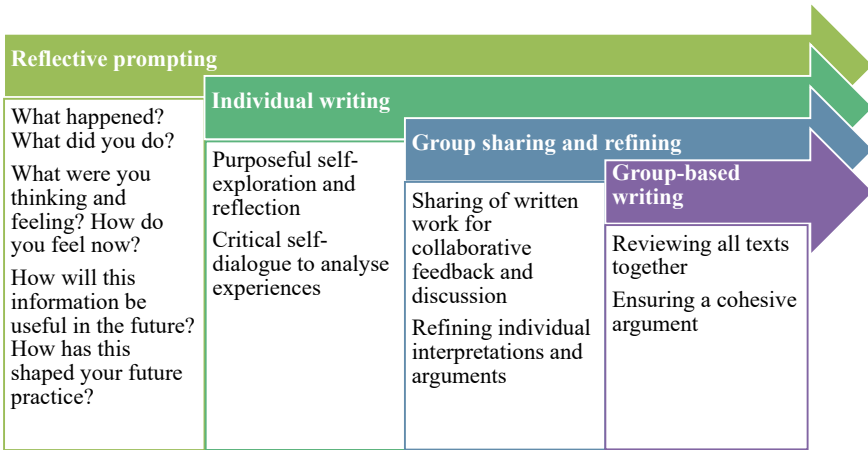
Given that autoethnography is, at its core, the study of the self, it may seem counter-intuitive that autoethnography could involve collaboration. This was certainly what I thought when I first heard about this particular type of autoethnography. However, as I learnt more about it, I discovered that collaborative autoethnography was a very powerful way to highlight a particular phenomenon or issue because it worked by

using different independent voices to create a “synergy and harmony that autoethnographers cannot attain in isolation” (Chang et al., 2013, p. 24). In collaborative autoethnography, researchers work together to explore a common phenomenon or issue through purposeful exploration of their own experiences (see, for example, Hradsky et al., 2022; Patel et al., 2022). As Chang et al. (2013) note, collaborative autoethnography is “simultaneously collaborative, autobiographical, and ethnographic” (p. 17). Similar to traditional autoethnography, collaborative autoethnography also focuses on the self, makes the researcher visible in the research, is conscious of the larger social context, and engages in critical analysis and internal dialogue (Chang et al., 2013). Consequently, you will find that each chapter in this book is written in a distinct voice, as each author explores their own experiences. Through collaboration, individual autoethnographers also gain further insights from sharing their thoughts and understandings within the group as they explore a common topic of interest (Chang et al., 2013; Hradsky et al., 2022). Together, therefore, the chapters in this book create a synergy of voices; the individual voices in the stories become a choir in harmony to illuminate common themes highlighted by the authors’ experiences of academia as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

To apply collaborative autoethnography in this book, we used the following steps. Each chapter’s author(s) was given the same reflective prompts (see the first column in Fig. 3.1) which were based on the framework proposed by Pretorius and Cutri (2019). This framework is informed by the minimalistic model of reflection (Rolfe et al., 2001) and the concept of reflection for learning (Pretorius & Ford, 2016). Each chapter was then written individually through self-exploration and reflection. During this process, individual texts were shared with the editors and within authors’ writing groups for feedback and discussion. Chapter authors then returned to their text to review and refine their interpretations. Finally, once all the chapters were complete, the book as a whole was reviewed by the three editors and further group-based writing was conducted to ensure a cohesive document.

### **3.4 Conclusion**

Through collaborative autoethnography, this book acts as a collective witness to the challenges students and staff in higher education faced as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. At times, the stories within the chapters present a sobering insight into the depths of despair felt by the authors. At other times, these stories provide hope and insight for the future. By bearing witness to the chapter authors’ individual journeys, we hope that you will be taken on a voyage of discovery and that it will help you find catharsis for your own pandemic experience.



**Fig. 3.1** Collaborative autoethnography approach applied in this book

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**Part II**  
**Academic Identity Development Amidst**  
**Pandemic-Induced Loss, Trauma,**  
**and Grief**

# Chapter 4

## Processing Uncertainty During COVID-19: A Collaborative Autoethnography of Two Stranded International Ph.D. Students



Rashmi Rangarajan and Samran Daneshfar

**Abstract** COVID-19 has transformed the world in diverse ways, presenting ongoing challenges. One of these challenges has been a profound sense of uncertainty. In this chapter, the authors from India/France and Iran explore their experiences of uncertainty as international students working on their Ph.D.s away from their Australian university. The authors engaged in collaborative autoethnography to present their stories as research poems. Interspersed with interpretations, the poems attempt to unravel the shared and diverse ways in which the authors contextually processed uncertainty. Finally, the authors underscore ways in which university and government actors can further support international Ph.D. students to address their specific needs during and post-pandemic periods.

**Keywords** Uncertainty · Collaborative autoethnography · International Ph.D. students · Research poetry · Australia · COVID-19

### 4.1 Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has shaken up lives across the globe in a myriad of ways (Karabchuk, 2020). While everyone has in some way suffered from COVID-19, experiences have varied in degree and extent (Adorjan, 2020). Recent research with Ph.D. students has revealed that the pandemic has been disproportionately affecting Black, Indigenous, disabled, coloured, and international students (Blake et al., 2021; Dodd et al., 2021). Ph.D. students already face multiple challenges pertaining to their mental health and wellbeing (Lau & Pretorius, 2019). With COVID-19, these challenges have been exacerbated, unveiling a profound and ubiquitous yet evasive pandemic uncertainty (see, for example, Lyon, 2020). Additionally, it has been pointed out that international Ph.D. students are in far greater vulnerable situations

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with the pandemic revealing inherently inequitable university systems, immigration policies, and subtle dynamics within supervisory relationships (see, for example, Blake et al., 2021).

On 20 March 2020, Australia closed its borders to all non-resident travellers (Grozinger & Parsons, 2020) and announced that international students would only be allowed to return in December 2021. During this 21-month period, several reports were published on the impact of the travel ban on Australia's economy and its universities (see, for example, Hurley, 2020). This dominant discourse of the effect of decreased international student enrolments on Australia's economy reduced international students to being objects of the university-system. Current literature lacks the voices of international Ph.D. students who were stranded overseas due to the COVID-19 travel restrictions. Consequently, in this chapter, we attempt to bridge this gap by recounting our experiences of uncertainty as stranded international Ph.D. students.

## 4.2 Understanding Uncertainty

Despite considerable literature on uncertainty in anthropology (see, for example, Calkins, 2019), philosophy (see, for example, Dewey, 1925), and medical sciences (see, for example, Mishel, 1988, 1990), it continues to be an elusive notion requiring more attention (Vavrus, 2021). For Dewey (1925), uncertainty is unavoidable due to the “fundamentally hazardous character of the world” (p. 44) despite our belief in the power of prediction and control. Uncertainty is the opposite of stability and predictability of the unknown(s) (Calkins, 2019). The inability to form meanings about events like the COVID-19 pandemic is a cognitive state in which an individual is unable to assign clear values and/or accurately predict outcomes (Mishel, 1988). Uncertainty can thus be conceptualised as a human condition that is multidimensional and subjective, varying with source, duration, and the degree and extent to which it is experienced (Calkins, 2019; Sharma et al., 2020).

Processing “the experience of uncertainty is both daunting and contextual” demanding an engagement in situated and diverse ways (Calkins, 2019, p. 234). We may perceive uncertainty as a danger to be avoided or confronted and/or as an opportunity to reimagine possibilities, question established order, and initiate change (Calkins, 2019; Mishel, 1988). Exploring the experiences of uncertainty can help us learn about what enables and limits our agency during critical events (Calkins, 2019). Additionally, dealing with uncertainty is a process of growth that occurs because of shifting perspectives through trial and error, such as initially appraising uncertainty as a danger but later as an opportunity (Mishel, 1990). Calkins' (2019) ethnographic work in North-Eastern Sudan helped develop the idea of *anticipatory knowledge production* in which individuals engage in breaking down uncertainties into smaller and more manageable unknowns to make the future more calculable. Thus, even though uncertainties cause discomfort and psychological distress, they can usually

be translated into manageable goals depending on diverse social, political, economic, and institutional factors (Calkins, 2019; Mishel, 1990).

### 4.3 Uncertainty in Academia and Resilience

Kotthaus et al. (2021) consider the risk of uncertainty within academia for early career researchers as a central and pervasive condition. Importantly, uncertainty is subjectively experienced and caused most significantly by structural processes of higher education, extreme competition, hidden rules regarding promotion, and insecure working conditions (Ortlieb & Weiss, 2018). During COVID-19, uncertainty in academia became even more profound in light of sudden changes, such as online teaching and learning (see, for example, Jung et al., 2021), suspension of fieldwork and funding (see, for example, Arnold & Woolston, 2020), and inaccessibility of university resources for professional development. Indeed, for Ph.D. students, the pandemic brought unforeseen changes to the very nature of doing research (see, for example, Chaps. 21–25 of this book) without the complementary structural changes, including high performance expectations (Arnold & Woolston, 2020; Jung et al., 2021). Consequently, this chapter considers the concept of resilience and the main factors influencing doctoral journeys and academic identities in light of the uncertainty pervading academia.

Resilience is a dynamic construct involving processes and actions that enable individuals to overcome potentially detrimental effects through the interplay of various factors (McCray & Joseph-Richard, 2020). Smart (2014) cites the work of Gilligan (1997) to frame the role of resilience in early career academics as based on three core building blocks: a secure base (i.e., sense of belonging and security), positive self-esteem (i.e., high sense of worth and competence), and self-efficacy (i.e., mastery and sense of control). Irrespective of the diversity of Ph.D. students, the most important and interrelated factors that build resilience to face academic uncertainties are self-belief, family and social connections including the supervisory relationship, institutional contexts like infrastructure and culture, and quality and access to university services like trainings (McCray & Joseph-Richard, 2020; Singh, 2021). Importantly, doing a Ph.D. is a complex and lengthy process in which students' resilience significantly determines how they progress (McCray & Joseph-Richard, 2020).

A Ph.D. student's sense of belonging, self-esteem, and self-efficacy are tied to their sense of identity. In this chapter, we consider identity to be the "stories that people tell themselves and others about who they are, and who they are not, as well as who and how they would like to/should be" (Yuval-Davis, 2010, p. 266). In the case of the Ph.D. student, their academic identity is particularly important. We have adopted Pretorius and Macaulay's (2021) definition of academic identity: "that which is reflected in the narratives people use to describe themselves within the context of academia" (p. 624). A significant way in which Ph.D. students develop their academic identities is through the act of engaging in research (Hoang & Pretorius,

2019; Pretorius & Macaulay, 2021). Pretorius and Macaulay (2021) note that Ph.D. students' academic identity development is a continual process of constructing a sense of *self* by negotiating and navigating the values and practices of academia. Indeed, socio-cultural practices within universities significantly contribute to the development of identity, agency, and community among Ph.D. students (Pretorius & Macaulay, 2021; Smart, 2014), which is important in order to confront and overcome uncertainties.

## 4.4 Chapter Design

In this chapter, we attempt to unravel our shared and divergent experiences of processing uncertainty during the pandemic. Both Rashmi (working from India and France) and Samran (working from Iran) are international full-time Ph.D. students enrolled at an Australian university, but were required to study from international locations due to the border closures mentioned earlier. We first outline the use of collaborative autoethnography (see Chang et al., 2013; Hradsky et al., 2022; Patel et al., 2022; Pretorius, 2022a) as our overarching methodology coupled with the use of research poetry (see Cutts, 2020; Faulkner, 2007; Glesne, 1997; Görlich, 2016; West & Bloomquist, 2015). We then take our readers through the beginnings of our Ph.D. journeys and focus on our experiences between March 2020, when global travel restrictions were introduced, and December 2021, when Australia announced that they would allow international students to return. Subsequently, we elaborate on our experiences of processing uncertainty under four themes:

1. Hopes, Dreams, and Adventures: When Everything Seemed To Be On Track,
2. Boom! A Pandemic is Here: Questions and Fears Envelope,
3. Disillusionments, Loss, and Anger, and
4. Creating and Finding Opportunities in Isolation.

We present our stories in the form of individual research poems followed by brief interpretations corresponding to our generated themes. Finally, we conclude this chapter with a discussion on managing uncertainty as international Ph.D. students.

Our goal in this chapter is not to provide a list of suggestions or advice for other fellow international Ph.D. students. There is already a plethora of helpful information for Ph.D. students regarding what we can do on our research journeys (see, for example, Boynton, 2021; Mewburn, 2017; Pretorius et al., 2019). Rather, we offer insight into our personal experiences with the hope that structural changes can be envisaged for the benefit of all international Ph.D. students who may be in similar contexts. We believe that our experiences during the pandemic will contribute to the current literature and bring insight into the processing of uncertainty. These understandings could lead government and university actors to implement alternative policies and practices directed towards international Ph.D. students' specific needs during the rest of the pandemic, as well as into the future post-pandemic world.

## 4.5 Engaging in Collaborative Autoethnography (CAE)

When we initially met online to determine how best we could reflexively engage in learning about our shared and divergent experiences of uncertainty during the current pandemic, we decided on using CAE as our overarching methodological approach. CAE is a qualitative method that allowed us, as researchers, to collect, as well as collaboratively analyse and interpret our autobiographical materials in order to generate meaningful understandings (see Chang et al., 2013; Hradsky et al., 2022; Patel et al., 2022; Pretorius, 2022a). We engaged in a concurrent collaborative and iterative process of alternating between the individual and dual work to add rich texture to our narratives (see Chang et al., 2013; Hradsky et al., 2022; Pretorius, 2022a). Our first step involved preliminary data generation individually and then collaboratively over online meetings. We were able to do this by developing three main guiding questions to individually reflect and write:

1. Before the pandemic, what led us to pursue our Ph.D.s in Australia?
2. How have we experienced uncertainty during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic as international Ph.D. students away from our host university?
3. How has the experience of uncertainty influenced our identities and experiences of doing our Ph.D. as international students working overseas?

There were four major data types which helped us answer these guiding questions, as outlined below:

1. Our personal memory recollection of our experiences during the pandemic,
2. Archival material like emails that we had exchanged with our supervisors and the university,
3. Our own discussions during our collaborative online meetings, and
4. Our self-reflections recorded in our reflexive journals.

Upon individually consolidating our reflections with the help of the three guiding questions, we also used the framework by Pretorius and Cutri (2019) to focus our collaborative reflections. This framework involved reflexive work at three levels (cf. Pretorius & Cutri, 2019; Pretorius & Ford, 2016; Rolfe et al., 2001):

1. The *What* or the description of our experiences,
2. The *So What* or the analysis of our experiences, and
3. The *Now What* or creating a plan to initiate change.

The second step, following this preliminary data generation, involved preliminary meaning-making in which we re-read and reviewed our reflections individually and then collaboratively. We reviewed and coded our reflections individually and then collaboratively. During this step of collaborative coding, we engaged in theme-generation as part of our analysis. Finally, we outlined and wrote our interpretations.

At this final stage, we employed the method of research poetry (see Faulkner, 2007; Glesne, 1997; Görlich, 2016; West & Bloomquist, 2015) to re-present our

written reflections as poems followed by collaboratively developing interpretations. Engaging in research poetry became an essential process for our CAE work to highlight the more nuanced dimensions of our experiences, to evoke emotions and empathy in us and our readers, and to find the spiritual in our work that would help us heal while reimagining hope (Cutts, 2020; Glesne, 1997; West & Bloomquist, 2015). We re-presented our reflections by selecting coded extracts from our individual texts under each theme and then transforming the words into poetry.

Drawing inspiration from Glesne’s (1997) poetic transcription process, our research poetry process is demonstrated in Table 4.1. Within our narratives, we highlighted key words in bold that communicated our messages. Following this, we created the first and final versions of our poems along with their titles. Since we were both, the *researcher* and the *researched*, we took the liberty of retaining words from our texts, as well as adding and modifying words and punctuations (see underlined words and punctuations in Table 4.1) to illuminate the essential and the interconnections in our stories.

Cutts’ (2020) *ars spirituality* and Faulkner’s (2007) *ars poetica* further informed our research poetry process. While *ars poetica* helped in shaping our poems as an artistic craft (Faulkner, 2007), *ars spirituality* aided in framing our motivations for

**Table 4.1** Research poetry process

	Narratives	Poems Version 1	Poems Final Version
Rashmi	<b>Doing a Ph.D. has always been my dream. I witnessed my father doing his Ph.D. as a child.</b> My mother worked as a special educator who <b>encouraged me a lot</b> , as I <b>grew up learning disabled</b> with Dyscalculia. These encounters brought me into <b>the world of inclusive education</b> , research, and advocacy	<b>Title:</b> My Ph.D. dreams Doing a Ph.D. has always been my dream <u>A child watching her father do his Ph.D.</u> <u>A child growing up learning disabled with her mother for company</u> <u>A rebirth into the world of Inclusive Education it must be</u>	<b>Title:</b> I dream of a Ph.D. Doing a Ph.D. has always been my dream <u>A child watching her father do his Ph.D.</u> <u>A child growing up learning disabled</u> <u>With her mother’s steadfast encouragement</u> <u>A rebirth into the world of Inclusive Education</u>
Samran	A person with my background plans <b>to study abroad with many different expectations.</b> It was <b>my long-term enthusiasm to do research</b> where it will shape a bright and successful future. <b>I was searching for a cocoon to get protection and safety on the outside which results in the transformation inside</b>	<b>Title:</b> Beginning with hope With many expectations For my long-term enthusiasm in research I was searching for a cocoon <u>Which results in internal transformation</u>	<b>Title:</b> Dreams! <u>I had a big dream</u> <u>To translate my love of research into a Ph.D.</u> <u>I was in pursuit of a cocoon</u> <u>Which could transform me, from the inside</u>



engaging in research poetry not just as *researchers* but *poet researchers* (Cutts, 2020) from the Global South, through the spiritual process of healing from difficult encounters during the pandemic. In the subsequent sections, we present our research poems under each theme along with their brief analyses. We also invite our readers to engage in their own meaning-making of our poems and possibly draw connections with their own experiences.

### **Collaborative Discoveries.**

#### ***Theme 1. Hopes, Dreams, and Adventures: When Everything Seemed To Be On Track.***

*Poems of hopes, dreams, and adventures.*

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Rashmi  
I DREAM OF A PH.D.

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Doing a Ph.D. has always been my dream.  
A child watching her father do his Ph.D.,  
A child growing up learning disabled,  
With her mother's steadfast encouragement,  
A rebirth into the world of Inclusive Education.

It is 2013.  
I discovered a love for doing research,  
I decided I wanted a Ph.D.  
Applying to foreign universities,  
Each one rejected me  
I quit my job,  
So I could care for my suddenly disabled mother.

It is 2016.  
I embarked on a second Master's Degree,  
at Paris in France,  
An education loan to pay for university,  
A good enough investment,  
I figured it would be.

Two doctoral programmes I believe,  
One in the UK and the other in Australia.  
No application fees, reputations, supervisors and funding is the key,  
Our bags are packed for Australia!

It is 2018.  
Exciting a country where we know nobody,  
Building our lives with my partner eagerly  
Hunting down furniture at Op-Shops, new friends... a life of university,  
A year full of possibilities,  
Closer than ever to realising that Ph.D. dream!

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Samran  
DREAMS!

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From the highlands of Kurdistan  
To the bush of Melbourne,  
I had a big dream  
To translate my love of research into a Ph.D.

I was in pursuit of a cocoon,  
Which could transform me, from the inside  
It was a decision for a complete change,  
To start a new life and a new career,  
To accomplish the wishes of growing knowledge,  
I started with fervent hope to achieve goals.

Everything was going to be on the right track,  
Expectations aligned with reality,  
Relief lay on the path towards a secured future,  
Beyond all the setbacks and disappointments,  
I faced during the application process.

A transition happened that  
Allowed me to see a new path.

Early 2019, my journey commenced,  
I stepped on the land I had dreamed about,  
Life in an English-speaking country,  
New people, new life, everything new.

A year of achievement, ups and downs,  
But mostly ups,  
All my deadlines met,  
The Ph.D. milestone, a conference for the first time,  
A solid network made,  
To be part of Education Research Community,  
A writing group and managing a reading group,  
Along with learning the culture and exploring a new city,  
I was on track.

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The poems, 'I DREAM OF A PH.D.' and 'DREAMS!' introduce our stories about the desire to pursue research and the beginnings of our Ph.D. journeys that we perceived as being more achievable in the Australian context. Our poems highlight the common strands of struggles in applying to Ph.D. programmes as international students from the Global South. For Rashmi, "Applying to foreign universities, Each one rejected me. I quit my job, So I could care for my suddenly disabled mother", show how multiple rejections and playing the role of a caregiver required persistence in transforming her dream into reality. Evidently, numerous steps went into applying to Ph.D. programmes with diverse factors contributing to successful Ph.D. applications. These were the support of family members, accessing a second master's degree at a foreign university with the help of an education loan, and prior research experiences, among others. Samran's goal of pursuing a Ph.D., "To accomplish the

wishes of growing knowledge, I started with fervent hope to achieve goals”, meant that he could expand his knowledge and love for doing research following a period of teaching in Iran. Rashmi’s personal, childhood and academic experiences in India and France pushed-pulled her towards a Ph.D. in Inclusive Education. While we both sought more security in obtaining Ph.D.s abroad, it was certainly more marked for Samran who “[...] was in pursuit of a cocoon”, owing to the socio-educational situation in his home country. Importantly, uncertainties were always present (Dewey, 1925) while applying to Ph.D. programmes.

We began experiencing some certainty at the beginning of our Ph.D. journeys during our first year in Australia through a series of achievements (e.g., building a network, successfully completing milestones, acquiring research assistantships, and academic growth). These led to the development of a sense of belonging, self-efficacy, and self-belief (Smart, 2014). Simultaneously, we worked on managing the uncertainties of moving to a new country with the support of friends and significant others (McCray & Joseph-Richard, 2020). Additionally, access to university resources such as a research community, workspace, library, and writing groups played a significant role in us experiencing early success and developing our self-confidence as novice researchers (Singh, 2021).

***Theme 2. Boom! A Pandemic is Here: Questions and Fears Envelope.***

*Poems of questions and fears.*

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Rashmi  
A GAME OF DICE

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*Roll the dice...*  
10 March 2020, India.  
I have returned from fieldwork,  
For an uncle’s funeral,  
To recover from a loss familial.  
My fiancé’s flight is cancelled,  
His visa has been suspended.  
How long will we be separated?

*Roll the dice...*  
13 March 2020, India.  
Schools are closed,  
A close relationship with schoolteachers I must continue to build.  
Egregious violations of children’s rights,  
Inadequate and unable.  
Where went the promise of an *Education for All*, tell me?

*Roll the dice...*  
22 March 2020, India.  
A 14-h curfew is here suddenly,  
Rumours like wildfire of a lockdown imminently.  
Stock-up on food and toiletries,  
Helter-skelter for medicines please.  
Chronic health conditions like Diabetes,

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No doctors to consult indefinitely.  
 Can we, the immunocompromised, survive this calamity?

*Roll the dice...*

24 March 2020, India.

A strict lockdown is here to stay,  
 To keep the Coronavirus at bay.  
 While us privileged are sheltered away,  
 The oppressed castes and classes are made to walk the green mile every day.  
 Fleeing cities, chaos and unemployment,  
 Our brothers and sisters are expendable.  
 Are these inequalities forever here to stay?

*Roll the dice...*

An apocalypse is unfolding,  
 A relative privilege is revealing  
 No Internet connection in the villages,  
 So, one must be forgotten at the edges  
 A life of university is fading away,  
 Shall I rest my tools, pray?

*Roll the dice...*

3 October 2020, France.  
 Our wedding without my Indian family,  
 Our wedding on Zoom, a humble affair visibly.  
 Can we make this a happily ever after to be?

*Roll the dice...*

March 2021, India.  
 A second COVID-19 wave is undone,  
 This time a deadly one.  
 A mourning of 3.2 million lives is choking humanity,  
 A cloak of fear and sadness to be worn inevitably.

*Roll the dice... endlessly.*

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Samran

THE HIDDEN MONSTER

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17 January 2020,  
 I went back to Iran,  
 To do fieldwork and visit family,  
 Full of joy, full of energy,  
 I was a researcher,

Amidst the joyful trip,  
 The monster lurked

BOOM!

All of a sudden COVID-19 was spreading,

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At breakneck speed,  
Killing people all around the world,  
Contradictory news flew,  
And left no place for a single wise thought.

March 2020,  
Before I could get back to Melbourne,  
Australia closed its doors,  
Sadly, my country was at the top of the list,  
Flights cancelled,  
Restrictions were set!  
For two weeks, I thought  
The world shut down!  
It seemed the peak of turmoil and drama!

Some universities abandoned international students,  
By cancelling their studies,  
Or cutting off their funds.

Scary thoughts swirled in my head:  
What would happen to my study?  
Were my plans and aims in vain?  
How was I going to manage it?  
The monster spread like cancer.

Beyond my study and aims  
There was a fear of disease,  
Concerns about my family's health,  
Terrified for my mother, with heart issues,  
It was too much to bear!

The monster grew and grew

The pandemic was announced early in Iran,  
People did not take it seriously,  
And the first death in my town,  
Brought the city to silence,  
A deadly silence.

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The poems, 'A GAME OF DICE' and 'THE HIDDEN MONSTER' illumine our experiences of concentrated uncertainty during critical moments of the pandemic. Our poems re-present how we experienced a flood of (mis/dis)information, governments' (mis)handling of the pandemic, marked inequalities, and increased helplessness. For Samran, "Scary thoughts swirled in my head: What would happen to my study? Were my plans and aims in vain?", re-present the struggle of the pandemic as being internal with respect to sustaining his academic identity. For Rashmi, who is diabetic, the concerns were more external to the Ph.D. and existential in nature: "While us privileged are sheltered away [...] Our brothers and sisters are expendable. Are these inequalities forever here to stay?". Further, we felt disconnected from Australia, both physically and psychologically. Events related to university policies

in the U.S.A.<sup>1</sup> additionally introduced new fears about whether it would influence Australian policies and the subsequent withdrawal of our scholarships.

We also experienced heightened fear with respect to our family and community's wellbeing as the "hidden monster", in light of chronic health conditions, separations, and access to essential resources. The pandemic also raised many questions about our immediate future, new beginnings like marriage, and a general lack of understanding about the pandemic itself and its trajectory. We overwhelmingly felt a lack of control as if those in positions of power were playing with our lives. This was particularly marked for Rashmi in what she describes as a "game of dice" along with the context-specific experiences of personal and collective loss and grief in India: "A mourning of 3.2 million lives is choking humanity, A cloak of fear and sadness to be worn inevitably". Indeed, this period highlighted the recognition of our relative privileges vis-a-vis our home countries and Australia.

### ***Theme 3. Disillusionments, Loss, and Anger.***

#### *Poems of disillusionments, loss, and anger.*

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Rashmi

WALKING THE TIGHTROPE

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*Sway to the left...* continuing to work on my Ph.D., still renting an apartment in Australia, leaving behind belongings and memories. *Sway to the right...* a year of border closures, it is now clear, the gates have been sealed to Australia. *Body's rotation, holding the balancing pole...* Theo, Penny and Ella have come scratching and sniffing. I must get up. A stiffness, a bend, a stretch and off to rolling the boulder again. A storm last night washed the floor, now check the water tanks and look over. The beauty of the mountains up ahead, amid the blaring noise of a temple's loudspeaker, a merciless event. Mending the house and a family's health, sweat streaming down my face. Tired as Sisyphus to no end, the days must continue, I comprehend. *Another sway to the left...* The Ph.D. journey is more uncertain, a lot of effort to try and feel some connection. I am out of sight, out of mind, I don't belong, a special COVID status is given for me to go on. A three-month renewal to which I am now betrothen, the plans I submit get pushed with delay after delay. *The balancing pole slips, I peer down into the abyss...* An utter failure I think to myself, seeing others' successes has magnified my unrest. Disillusionment clouds my eyes, Academia doesn't care, the role of Sisyphus I am condemned to play. *Body's rotation, the balancing pole is maintained...* "Connard", the machines whizz. Footsteps on the ceiling, a mobile phone's ringing, water flushing, I must be waking. How frustrating the pomodoro technique can get, when all I can feel is an impending dread. Back-to-back rejections and an unforgiving pain, a glance at the post-it note that ascertains: seeing doctors is the only way. *Another sway to the right...* I feel a disconnect, my anger turns to terrible sadness, perhaps for the best. Advisors bound by limits and worlds apart, the thought of quitting my Ph.D. is inescapable. My brother-in-law, who had started his Ph.D. around the same time as me, is now being conferred his doctoral degree. I smile, I am calm but then I float out of me, I am actually scared and ashamed, I don't know if I will have my Ph.D.

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<sup>1</sup> On 6 July 2020, Donald Trump, then President of the U.S.A., introduced an immigration policy to revoke international students' visas in light of the move to online-only classes in U.S. universities. This policy was eventually rescinded in light of widespread protests and lawsuits. For more see, New York Times article, 'U.S. Rescinds Plan to Strip Visas From International Students in Online Classes' by Miriam Jordan and Anemona Hartocollis: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/14/us/coronavirus-international-foreign-student-visas.html>.

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Samran

DISILLUSIONMENT

I tried to work, to be focused, on my research and work, the more I tried the less I could, there was too much. I had no idea how long it would take, two weeks stretched into a month. Being stuck overseas, isolated in my house, I looked up possible options, to amend the situation, to save my study. No choice—except a leave of absence, an option I didn't want, but was forced to take, at least to pause to see what would happen, at least to give my mind some power. I took the leave, a leave from my goals, a break from my aims. Questions bombarded me, Was it going to be a temporary break? How would I deal with it? Who am I without my goals? My hopes were dashed! I had no trust in the future, took [away] joy from life, everything was uncertain, Disillusionment overwhelmed me!

My cocoon was torn. But ... I was still on the battlefield, I tried to distract myself from negativity, I pondered over and over. Always looking for options, study from overseas. Study from overseas, or 'Double the loneliness'! In Iran, I felt my community evaporate, I strived to keep the connection, but it broke. The big time difference, the great physical distance, made it worse, everyone had their challenges, everyone in a different way, connecting felt impossible, so far from my community, of peers, colleagues and friends, this absence of belonging was painful.

The news exacerbated the situation, no promise came across the borders, no commitment for our return, the news was murky, the news was gloomy, the news was disappointing, Everything was in flux, It was a roller-coaster journey!

Stress and negativity surrounded me, they literally made me sick, I had problems with my kidneys, my liver, my teeth, even my hair fell out. Anxiety and depression made me more isolated, alone in my room, with only my thoughts for company, everything felt lost, broken and impossible, I was stuck in 'the valley of shit'. Motivation and confidence in my work were aliens to me, my research once my passion, had no meaning.

The prose poems, 'WALKING THE TIGHTROPE' and 'DISILLUSIONMENT' re-present the magnified uncertainties we faced during the pandemic. While our earlier poems were more lyrical in form, the prose poems under this theme try to elucidate, more dramatically, the relationship between poetry and our lived experiences of disillusionment, loss, and anger during the pandemic. The magnified uncertainties we experienced included financial difficulties and practical challenges like accessing stable Internet connections. For Rashmi, additional care-work took precedence over her Ph.D. and affected her overall sense of wellbeing: "Mending the house and a family's health, sweat streaming down my face. Tired as Sisyphus to no end, the days must continue, I comprehend". We also experienced profound disappointments with travel restrictions, unclear information, and no assurances for our return to Australia. The analogies of "walking a tightrope" and "battlefield" reflect our struggle to survive in academia, while hanging on to the hope of being able to continue working amid the future anxiety of obtaining our Ph.D.s.

Our poems also highlight the experiences of disconnection with the university, resulting in increased loneliness, not belonging, and self-doubt. For instance, Samran talks about being forced to take a lengthy leave of absence, "No choice—except a leave of absence, an option I didn't want, but was forced to take" and Rashmi recounts renewing her research status as another enforced alternative, "a special COVID status is given for me to go on. A three-month renewal to which I am now betrothen, the

plans I submit get pushed with delay after delay”. Both of these choices further exacerbated our feelings of disengagement and inadequacy.

Importantly, our poems examine disillusionment as one of the most debilitating conditions during this period, resulting from publication rejections, lack of meaningful communication from the university, as well as adapting to various time zones and contexts. The consequences of this profound disillusionment were having intermittent thoughts about quitting our Ph.D. programmes (similar to research by Larcombe et al., 2021), losing our academic identity (similar to research by Pretorius & Macaulay, 2021), experiencing significant mental and physical health concerns (similar to research by Lau & Pretorius, 2019, 2022b), and reduced trust in university and government actors. For example, policies regarding research and teaching opportunities for international students blocked overseas remained unchanged, with universities having little to no control over government-related decisions regarding the return of international students.

#### ***Theme 4. Creating and Finding Opportunities in Isolation***

*Poems of creating and finding opportunities in isolation.*

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Rashmi

RISING LIKE A PHOENIX

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Through the burnt ashes of disillusionment, loss and anger,  
 I am learning to rise again  
 Finding another purpose can change the direction of the wind in my way,  
 Looking all around me, there is so much to be done and for so many to care  
 A community’s love is unlike any, solutions can be found and created

Learning to bide a distance and choosing to navigate,  
 Accepting that I have no control, can help me sustain  
 Having access to help and asking will allay,  
 And if I can share that bounty, it would multiply anyway

When feelings of doom seem infinite,  
 Bigger picture and relationships shall be my anchorage  
 Embracing each day,  
 In these moments of reflection,  
 I feel the need to be more conscientious,  
 Lest my relative privilege make me pretentious

Adapting to different time zones,  
 Making the best of limited opportunities,  
 I can create a semblance of certainty  
 Moments of vicarious celebrations,  
 Learning the language of music,  
 Can all be experiences of wellness,  
 However, momentarily

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Samran

THERE SHOULD BE A WAY

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During this dramatic time,  
 I searched for a way,  
 To start again,  
 To get back on track,  
 My supervisors (who never abandoned me) suggested an option,  
 For a return to study,  
 From overseas then

Communications through emails,  
 I asked university for the return,  
 Making plans for study from Iran,  
 The agreement was a beam of light,  
 In the dark days  
 June 2020,  
 Three months research from overseas was granted,  
 Stranded, thousands of miles away,  
 This repeated and repeated,  
 Every three months,  
 A bonus to continue with my goals

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There were moments that,  
 The feeling of disconnection was amended,  
 Through social media and internet,  
 Though it was weird,  
 I continued to manage the reading group,  
 Meetings at 4:00 am didn't stop me,  
 To keep in my mind my wishes,

Leadership at Research Community,  
 Was another way to stick to the community,  
 Organising the conference,  
 Although very limited work

During the 'valley of shit',  
 When change to the outside was impossible,  
 I tried Emotion-Focused Coping,  
 I shifted my inner perspective,  
 I blocked news about Australia,  
 To protect me and my study!

Engagement in social media,  
 Making connection with academics and their research,

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Twitter and LinkedIn,  
 Immersed me in academia once more,  
 Reading their work and talking about my work,  
 Through the virtual world  
 My supervisors  
 Plus  
 The incredible support of the family,  
 Never decreased in pushing me ahead,  
 As I was navigating the challenges of remote research

When the gym was impossible,  
 And my mental health was in crisis,  
 My brother provided a chance,  
 To plant a new walnut orchard,  
 For me physical and mental salvation

Taking care of little trees,  
 Pruning, watering and preparing the soil,  
 The farm, a place for contemplation  
 A place to ponder the situation,  
 To remain on the track,  
 And all were the essential

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The poems, ‘**RISING LIKE A PHOENIX**’ and ‘**THERE SHOULD BE A WAY**’ highlight the approaches we used to manage some of the uncertainties we described in our earlier poems. Our foremost understanding has been our resourcefulness (see Calkins, 2019) and the enormous role personal factors have played in sustaining our academic identities during the pandemic (see McCray & Joseph-Richard, 2020; Smart, 2014). For example, Rashmi took on a part-time online job and started learning to play the cello (a string music instrument): “Finding another purpose can change the direction of the wind in my way, [...] Learning the language of music, Can all be experiences of wellness”. Samran also worked on creating a Walnut-tree orchard with his sibling: “Taking care of little trees, Pruning, watering and preparing the soil, The farm, a place for contemplation [...] were the essential”. Indeed, we sought purpose within and outside the Ph.D. to renew our resolve. Accepting the situation and our lack of control further helped in transforming our perspectives to refocus on what mattered in our Ph.D. journeys. For example, what initially felt like a burden to renew the research from overseas status, shifted to becoming a privilege to be able to continue working on our Ph.D.s.

Being surrounded with the love of our family and communities (including, non-humans), engaging in mentoring others, connecting with other academics on social media, accessing our network to find part-time jobs, seeking help from supervisors, having an additional supervisor, and accessing university online counselling services were also significant factors that helped in managing our uncertainties (similar to research by McCray & Joseph-Richard, 2020; Singh, 2021). Moreover, we took the opportunity to work together to write this chapter as a critical way of recognising and processing our own vulnerabilities, privileges, and accomplishments while thinking of more sustainable solutions.

## 4.6 Looking Back to Look Ahead: Change is Necessary

Having explained our theoretical understanding of uncertainty and resilience, we outlined our experiences of processing uncertainty during the current COVID-19 pandemic as international Ph.D. students from the Global South. We were able to do this by engaging in CAE (Chang et al., 2013; Hradsky et al., 2022; Patel et al., 2022; Pretorius, 2022a) and the process of research poetry (Cutts, 2020; Faulkner, 2007; Glesne, 1997; Görlich, 2016; West & Bloomquist, 2015). Consequently, we generated four themes to represent our experiences of pandemic uncertainty:

1. Hopes, Dreams, and Adventures: When Everything Seemed To Be On Track,
2. Boom! A Pandemic is Here: Questions and Fears Envelope,
3. Disillusionments, Loss, and Anger,
4. Creating and Finding Opportunities in Isolation.

Uncertainty is indeed a human condition (Calkins, 2019) that is inescapable (Dewey, 1925). For us, experiencing uncertainty during the pandemic has been a complex and distressing process (Mishel, 1988, 1990) but also manageable (Calkins, 2019). At the beginning, the uncertainties that came with the pandemic were heightened (Mishel, 1988, 1990). We responded to this concentrated uncertainty in shared and divergent ways. For example, in our poems, 'A GAME OF DICE' and 'THE HIDDEN MONSTER' we showed how we experienced a deluge of questions, doubts, and fears. While Samran predominantly faced concerns related to his academic identity, Rashmi confronted existential concerns pertaining to events unfolding around her. Thus, we experienced uncertainties subjectively and contextually (Calkins, 2019; Sharma et al., 2020).

As the pandemic progressed, our poems, 'WALKING A TIGHTROPE' and 'DISILLUSIONMENT' underscored our struggles to continue working on our Ph.D.s in light of additional care-work and the disconnection, disillusionment, and mental and physical health concerns we experienced (similar to research by Larcombe et al., 2021). Indeed, in a paper on gender equity in academia during the pandemic, Malisch et al. (2020) called attention to the fact that women are more likely to be called on to perform household tasks and care for family members. Thus, women are less likely to succeed in academia with the increase in workload owing to COVID-19 (Malisch et al., 2020). This was certainly true for Rashmi as care-work took precedence.

Despite the myriad of difficulties we faced, we were also able to manage some of the uncertainties we were experiencing as re-presented in our poems, 'RISING LIKE A PHOENIX' and 'THERE SHOULD BE A WAY'. Our positive, pre-pandemic experiences during the first year of our Ph.D. journeys in Australia helped us build academic resilience that allowed us to push through the challenges (see also McCray & Joseph-Richard, 2020). Other factors like the support of our family and social network, research from overseas status to continue working on our Ph.D.s, and university online counselling services also aided us considerably. However, more than anything, our ability to be resourceful and systematically face adversities allowed us

to anticipate our needs and plan for the immediate future (see also Calkins, 2019). We also experienced complex shifts in our perspectives (see also Mishel, 1990), viewing uncertainty as an opportunity to question the current order of things, exploring our own vulnerabilities, and thinking about possible solutions to our problems (see also Calkins, 2019). We, thus, concur that change is necessary.

First, we agree with Malisch et al. (2020) about engaging in research to understand how women in academia have been affected by the pandemic in order to really transform academia into an equitable space. We additionally want to highlight that universities need to recognise international Ph.D. students as also having been disproportionately affected by COVID-19. A concerted effort is needed to invest in ensuring equity in academia by engaging in research within universities to understand how the pandemic has affected all marginalised groups of students and staff members. Once we are equipped with the knowledge of the kinds of concerns and needs different marginalised students face, universities can work on providing adequate institutional support.

Secondly, as international Ph.D. students, we are diverse and capable as can be clearly seen through our poems that highlighted not only our experiences but also our strengths (Singh, 2021). The burden to cope with adverse events should not be on individual Ph.D. students alone. Instead, the focus needs to shift to institutional contexts where reconstructing relational spaces of community instead of competition, both physically and virtually, must become the priority (McCray & Joseph-Richard, 2020). University policies regarding supervision will also need to change from a transactional approach to being more emotionally supportive. This is needed, especially in light of the loss of scaffolding international Ph.D. students may be experiencing because of reduced access to mentorship outside of their supervisory relationship.

Thirdly, universities need to ensure direct, regular, and open communication with their international Ph.D. students by creating a system of regular check-ins (Sharma et al., 2020). The lack of meaningful and direct communication as described in our prose poems, under the theme of 'Disillusionments, Loss, and Anger' resulted in us feeling highly undervalued in academia. Universities should value our voices (see Pretorius & Macaulay, 2021) to not only understand our concerns but also to implement relevant policy changes to adequately adapt to the changing scenario owing to the pandemic. In particular, teaching and research assistantships need to be expanded to allow students who have been stranded overseas to access these opportunities. This will help these students experience reduced financial strain while continuing to develop and acquire crucial skills (Larcombe et al., 2021). Moreover, extensions pertaining to thesis submissions and scholarships need to be streamlined to reduce unnecessary bureaucratic processes. Importantly, academic accommodations will need to reflect the types, degrees, and durations of the challenges faced during the pandemic by implementing a case-by-case evaluative method instead of a *one-way-works-for-all* policy (Malisch et al., 2020).

Finally, governments need to recognise universities as partners in the process of overcoming the current pandemic. In our experience of witnessing the very uncertain nature of decision-making, we inferred that governments had excluded universities

from strategic pandemic planning. Unfortunately, scores of Ph.D. students like us, who were left feeling powerless and voiceless, have ultimately faced the consequence of the disjointed pandemic response vis-a-vis international students. If governments are able to put in concerted efforts to liaise with universities, it can help all international students access accurate and updated information and resources. Indeed, international Ph.D. students are not just important to governments in terms of the national economies but we are an end in ourselves and contribute to communities in diverse, invaluable ways.

Our attempt at demonstrating how we experienced and processed uncertainty as stranded international Ph.D. students through CAE and research poetry has been a transformative process for us. As tempting as it can be to present a list of *know-hows* for international Ph.D. students who may be in similar situations, we instead focused on the critical role that universities and governments play in ensuring enabling conditions within academia. Even though uncertainty is an unavoidable experience (see, for example, Kotthaus et al., 2021), institutional structures and conditions greatly influence the way uncertainty is individually and collectively processed (see, for example, Ortlieb & Weiss, 2018). We hope that by engaging with our reflections, our readers are further catalysed into reimagining a more equitable and enriching academia, both during the COVID-19 pandemic and also when we eventually reach a post-pandemic society.

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# Chapter 5

## Balancing Growth and Grief: Narratives of an Immigrant Doctoral Student Navigating Academia During the COVID-19 Pandemic



Sweta Vijaykumar Patel 

**Abstract** This autoethnographic chapter explores the complex experiences of an immigrant doctoral student during the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly one who juggles multiple roles in everyday life. Personal narratives offer insights into how I balanced my duties to work as an immigrant early childhood (EC) educator, support remote schooling for two children, manage household chores, continue with my aspirations to pursue a doctoral degree, and maintain personal emotional-mental health challenges. To reflect on my lived experiences, visual images are used as provocations to facilitate the self-inquiry process. Drawing upon Appadurai's theory helped me examine factors influencing my decision-making capacity, wellbeing and identity as an immigrant EC educator, researcher, and mother during the pandemic. My story demonstrates the role of aspirations and imaginations on my wellbeing and identity, particularly as a source of motivation to overcome grief and depression. The purpose is to raise awareness about the unbalanced journeys of immigrant doctoral students and create a research community that is supportive, avoids judgement, and privileges open discussions of immigrant doctoral students' wellbeing.

**Keywords** Immigrants · Doctoral student · Wellbeing · Autoethnography · Imaginations · Aspirations · COVID-19

### 5.1 Introduction

My mind has drifted miles away to be with my parents who are suffering because of the COVID-19 pandemic. The pain of being separated from family has been traumatising and makes everything appear worthless, even the existence of my own life.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had an unprecedented impact on individuals and communities around the world (Rahmandoust & Ranaei-Siadat, 2021). This highlights the urgent need to investigate the experiences of people during the pandemic

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and its effect on their wellbeing to identify the possible repercussions on their physical, mental, and emotional health (Byrom, 2020; Geambaşu et al., 2020; Guy & Arthur, 2020; Wasdani, 2021). In this autoethnographic chapter, I respond to this urgent crisis by highlighting my complex experiences as an immigrant doctoral student during the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly who juggles multiple roles in everyday life. When the State Government of Victoria (in Australia) implemented COVID-19 lockdown restrictions in 2020, I was a full-time doctoral student, working part-time as an immigrant early childhood (EC) educator and the primary caregiver of two children under the age of seven. My aim here is to offer insight into how I balanced my duties to work as an immigrant EC educator, support remote schooling for two children, manage household chores, continue with my aspirations to pursue a doctoral degree, and maintain personal emotional-mental health challenges.

Describing the complexities of globalisation and intercultural experiences, Appadurai (1996) claims that people may conceptualise ideas, notions, and visions of their new future life which he refers to as “imagined worlds” (p. 5). The imagined worlds are powerful conceptual images that influence people’s motivation in pursuing their desired future life goals and aspirations. Appadurai (1996, 2013) argues that, if a person’s reality and lived experiences vary, these imagined worlds have the potential to create varying degrees of challenges and problems. Given the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, Appadurai’s (1996) theoretical understanding offers possibilities to explore the influence of my own shifting imagined world and the complexities it creates for my academic, professional, and personal identity.

This chapter makes two distinct contributions to literature related to the wellbeing and identity of immigrant doctoral students. Firstly, my experiences offer insight into the frustrations experienced by immigrant doctoral students during the pandemic. Secondly, the narratives shared contribute to the growing body of literature highlighting the challenges experienced by doctoral students with parental responsibilities during their candidature (see, for example, Ghosh & Chaudhuri, 2022; Schmidt & Hansson, 2018; Utami, 2019). Finally, this chapter raises awareness about the fragile mental and emotional state of immigrant doctoral students, particularly those who have been separated from their families, are fighting depression or anxiety, and managing the grief of losing their loved ones. My story highlights the need for institutions to intervene and support the trajectories of immigrant doctoral students, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic disruptions.

## **5.2 Being an Immigrant Doctoral Student and an EC Educator**

In this globalised world, people migrate to a new country with hopes and in search of new opportunities (Appadurai, 1996; Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001). In 2020, it was reported that over 7.6 million migrants lived in Australia (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021). This indicates that many immigrants prefer to shift to

this country to accomplish their personal and professional aspirations. However, in their journeys immigrants experience diverse accommodation and adaptation issues due to the differences in the social and cultural structures and systems in Australia (Green & Power, 2010; Patel et al., 2022; Payton & Varnava, 2019). Research shows that the process of settling into the new country has an impact on immigrants' sense of identity and belonging because they experience conflict between their typical images of 'others' and 'self' (Appadurai, 1996; Grzymala-Kazlowska, 2016). Although a complex concept, identity can be understood as an ongoing process of change and transformation in which people construct and reconstruct their notions of 'who they are' through the stories they tell themselves and others (Gee, 2000; Hall, 1997; Hoang & Pretorius, 2019; Pretorius & Macaulay, 2021). Research exploring immigrants' adjustment experiences in Australia reveal that they encounter diverse adjustment problems which creates tensions and conflicts within themselves (Green & Power, 2010; Payton & Varnava, 2019). The uncertainties appear to influence immigrants' perception of themselves which often causes additional problems in their personal and professional life.

Literature exploring the experiences of immigrants, particularly EC educators and doctoral students, have reported concerns related to their pedagogical and professional identity (Ahmed, 2018; Arndt et al., 2018; Kim et al., 2018; Patel et al., 2022; Schmidt & Hansson, 2018). In the Australian context, research asserts that immigrant EC educators' challenges can often be attributed to a lack of understanding, training, and preparedness for the diverse pedagogical approaches and cultural knowledge which exists in the educational systems (Bense, 2016; Bonner et al., 2018). Most recently, Patel et al. (2022) found that immigrant EC educators shift and negotiate their pedagogical practices to embrace new ways of teaching and learning in Australian EC settings. These findings suggest that immigrant EC educators face barriers as they participate in the Australian educational settings, however, these challenges may accelerate for professionals pursuing further education such as a doctoral degree.

As doctoral students, immigrant EC educators face a myriad of challenges in their academic journey. To understand doctoral students' identity and wellbeing issues, Schmidt and Hansson (2018) conducted a systematic literature review on 17 studies and found that they experience stress, burnout, mental fatigue, or a combination of physical, mental, and emotional problems during their candidature. Factors such as deadlines, supervisory relationships, time pressures, caring responsibilities, family commitments, and limited financial support appear to force candidates to undertake additional employment, causing varied degrees of stress and mental issues amongst doctoral students (Lau & Martinez et al., 2013; Pretorius, 2019; Pretorius et al., 2019; Schmidt & Hansson, 2018). Literature showcases that generally mothers who are doctoral students feel guilty, stressed, isolated or/and depressed as they struggle to balance their competing responsibilities (Guy & Arthur, 2020; Utami, 2019). For example, it was recently found that female doctoral students experience higher levels of stress, anxiety, and depression than their male counterparts because of their caring responsibilities (Dodd et al., 2021). Given these concerns, immigrant EC educators pursuing their doctoral degree could experience a combination or all of the above

identified issues. This highlights the need to examine the problems experienced by immigrant doctoral students with multiple identities like me, in order to understand the impact on their wellbeing, identity, and candidature, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic.

### 5.3 Methodology

I used autoethnography as my methodological approach to reflect on my lived experiences and explore the factors impacting my identity and wellbeing as an immigrant EC educator, doctoral student, and parent. As a qualitative research method, autoethnography enables the researcher to systematically approach and methodologically examine personal experiences (Ellis et al., 2011; Pretorius & Cutri, 2019). By employing autoethnography, I was able to develop a better understanding of myself and my lived experiences (see Ellis et al., 2011), particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, which facilitated examining and authentically expressing my emotions. When I was descriptively unfolding my stories, autoethnography presented opportunities to share my dilemmas, grief, and moments of hope within my experiences (see Ellis & Bochner, 2000).

I employed a *photo-elicitation* technique (see Boucher, 2018; Shaw, 2021) as part of my autoethnographic approach in order to intricately reflect on my lived experiences during the pandemic and understand the effect the pandemic had on my identity as an immigrant EC educator, researcher, and mother. The photo-elicitation method uses participant-generated images to evoke emotions and memories so that the different layers of meaning in a person's story can be explored (Bates & Taylor, 2021; Boucher, 2018). The process of photo-elicitation offered opportunities to recollect moments, explore my feelings, and identify tensions in my story. By repeatedly looking at the images, I needed to reflect on the moments as a form of self-inquiry, which enhanced dilemmas, frustrations, and gratitude (Boucher, 2018; Shaw, 2021). This process enabled me to authentically share the narratives elicited from my lived experiences as an immigrant EC educator, doctoral student, and parent during the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, images were chosen based on their significance rather than the aesthetic value to provoke raw emotions (Shaw, 2021). The process of selecting visual images was underpinned by Appadurai's (1996) theoretical understanding that our future imagined worlds are informed by our past and present cultural experiences. Therefore, visual images that best represented my past, present, and future life were selected as outlined in Table 5.1.

**Table 5.1** Timeline of visual images

Image	Time representation	Place and date	Significance
1	Past	September, 2018, Victoria	Beginning of a new journey as a doctoral student
2	Present	March, 2020, Victoria	Shifting work environment
3	Present	June, 2020, Victoria	Hoping for a rescue mission
4	Future	May, 2019, India	My source of motivation

## 5.4 Storying My Journey

### 5.4.1 *Past: Beginning a New Journey as an Immigrant Doctoral Student*

The image I chose to reflect on my past is shown in Fig. 5.1. Looking at this figure reminds me of the drastic shift in my aspirations as a child and now as an immigrant EC educator. Growing up as a farmer's daughter on the fields of a remote village in India; I never envisioned pursuing a doctoral degree in an unknown country such as Australia. The idea of higher education was like an unimaginable thought or as my sister remarks, "a hopeless distant dream". Indeed, being the first person in my family or even in my extended family to dare live the life of a doctoral student, particularly after marriage and with two children is daunting. Reflecting on my bittersweet experiences as an immigrant EC educator, now living and working in an EC setting in Victoria, I am reminded of the several pedagogical challenges in adjusting and adapting to the new cultural and educational systems. In fact, I recently wrote a paper to explore how immigrant EC educators such as me interpret and understand their cultural and pedagogical experiences (Patel et al., 2022). Captured in Fig. 5.1 is the excitement yet nervousness that I experienced as I began my new journey as an immigrant doctoral student at one of the top-ranked universities in the world.

Aspirations can be understood as "the capacity to imagine futures" (Sellar & Gale, 2011, p. 122). Appadurai (1996) claims that the aspirations of an individual can be beyond materialistic goods, economics, or power, and are often culturally influenced. Likewise, as an immigrant, my choice to achieve social status by earning a doctoral degree was reflected in my aspirations. Appadurai (2004) argues that, "it is in culture that ideas of the future, as much as of those about the past, are embedded and nurtured" (p. 59). In this way, culture plays a vital role in our decision-making capacity. Similarly, driving my decision to pursue a doctoral degree are my pedagogical and cultural experiences as an immigrant EC educator which has impacted my aspiration and notions of my future life.

Extending my identity as an immigrant EC educator, mother, and homemaker to a doctoral student required significant learning, lifestyle, and financial adjustments. To accommodate these additional responsibilities as an immigrant doctoral student into



**Fig. 5.1** Embracing my role as an immigrant EC educator and doctoral student

my life required me to negotiate my time and professional commitments as I had no family support. The shift in balancing my work as an immigrant EC educator, duties as a parent and household duties without feeling guilty was demanding. Moreover, embracing new ways of learning and researching as an immigrant doctoral student is difficult and often made me wonder,

Do I even belong here? The expectations and learning demands between Indian and Australian education systems are tremendously different. At times, I feel lost and seeking help is difficult because the culture and conversations in the academic space are unfamiliar. My self-doubt in my capabilities often comes from not comparing myself to others, rather comparing myself to what I imagine about myself as an immigrant EC educator and researcher. Yet, I make efforts to progress because imagining failure is not an option. This could be because of the values instilled in me as I grew up in a house, society, and culture that does not recognise quitting.

Reflecting on my nervousness, I reviewed literature to understand first-generation doctoral students' trajectories. Evidence shows that first-generation doctoral students who are "from families where neither parent has completed a college degree or beyond" (Gardner, 2013, p. 43), particularly women like me, experience additional barriers as their awareness related to institutional resources and knowledge is limited (Eitel & Martin, 2009; Gardner, 2013). A recent study by Bahack and Addi-Racchah (2022) found that first-generation doctoral students "perceived their academic path

as an obstacle course” (p. 6) due to the multifaceted learning challenges, financial pressures, and cultural shock. The study emphasised that personal motivation and aspirations were pivotal in supporting doctoral students’ candidature (Bahack & Addi-Raccah, 2022). These findings align with Appadurai’s (1996) theoretical underpinnings that people find motivation from their aspirations and notions of their future imagined worlds. This was true in my case, with my aspiration fuelling my efforts to survive my challenges as an immigrant doctoral student. The hope that my research shall contribute towards understanding the pedagogical trajectories of other immigrant EC educators constantly fuels my passion and encourages me to continue.

#### ***5.4.2 Present: Feeling the Chaos Inside and Outside as My Roles Intersect***

Forever enshrined in my memory is the image of my husband and myself holding our two boys while nervously waiting for the Prime Minister’s live press conference about Australia’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic. I remember a sense of numbness overtaking me upon hearing the announcements about the lockdown, school closures, and most importantly an international travel ban. As an immigrant, this meant I would be separated from our family residing in India.

This pandemic is changing how I live, study, and work in ways I had never imagined. On one hand, the uncertainty in working from home and protecting my children due to the virus is creating stress. On the other hand, the unwanted thoughts about my family’s wellbeing in India are growing, specifically for my mother who suffers from immuno-compromised health complications.

Despite being completely shaken, I made the effort to control my tears with the intention of not frightening my boys with my reaction. Remembering my responsibilities as a parent helped to overcome my nervousness. After kissing my children good night, I initiated a conversation with my husband to manage living with the newly imposed strict home-confined lockdown restrictions in Victoria.

Adeep: To imagine working from our small two-bedroom house with no desk or extra room is difficult. How will I manage my office meetings?

Me: Earlier my manager called to inform that I must teach my class as scheduled. For this, I need to design sessions conducive to virtual learning. Plus, my PhD milestone report is due next month.

Adeep: If we are hoping that our children would entertain themselves, sit without making noise, or avoid having arguments then we are being unrealistic. Rather, they would be relying on our composure during these uncertain times.

Me: This is my worry too but I’m unsure how we will adjust during these unprecedented times? We are not prepared and do not have the resources?

Adeep: The shops are closed and even if we do online purchase of a desk, where will we put it? We are crunched with space. It is hard to accept the shift but one of us will have to step back from our commitments.

I instantly knew the person compromising would be me. The sad reality is that passion for one's work and dedication for doctoral studies without a scholarship would not allow me to pay the mortgage or buy groceries. Tossing in bed, I worried about the possible idea of either deferring my candidature as a doctoral student or pausing my working as an EC educator. To gain control over my thoughts, I made the effort to embrace my new reality where, "I must prepare myself to study from my kitchen table with two young children either playing or remote schooling next to me instead of my quiet desk at the university campus.

Figure 5.2 shows the reality of my everyday learning space from where I worked during the lockdowns, including writing this manuscript. Repeatedly looking at Fig. 5.2 reminds me of the sad shift in our conversations around the kitchen table. The interruptions caused by everyone's keyboard clicks, mixed sounds of videos, and multiple questions being fired by my children were affecting my ability to focus. For instance, I would be engaged in the writing process or reviewing literature and, in the middle of this research inquiry, would come an abrupt request to either give my younger son strawberries or support my elder son to access remote schooling resources. After numerous such disruptive incidents, I realised that distinguishing between my identity as an immigrant doctoral student, EC educator, and parent was difficult.



**Fig. 5.2** Shifting work environment

My experience reiterates that doctoral students with parental responsibilities encounter numerous difficulties as they make efforts in caring for their children and meeting doctoral degree demands (see, for example, Guy & Arthur, 2020; Utami, 2019). The self-induced guilt and stress that I was experiencing has been recognised in previous studies exploring doctoral students' experiences (Brown & Watson, 2010; Dodd et al., 2021; Schmidt & Hansson, 2018). For example, a study conducted by Craig and Churchill (2020) examining how working parents responded to the COVID-19 pandemic working from home directives in Australia found that although males and females workload increased, it was mothers who shouldered the additional burden in caring and household work. Moreover, literature related to female doctoral students, and specifically mothers, confirm the prevalence of a patriarchal culture, inequality in institutions, and gender-biased systems in society (Eitel & Martin, 2009; Gardner & Holley, 2011). My story demonstrates that the traditional and culturally driven societal perspective that parenting is generally a mother's responsibility is deeply engraved within my being.

Amid these rollercoaster times, my struggle in juggling my commitments was overshadowed by the news of the fast-growing COVID-19 cases in India. I received news of my loved ones either being infected or hospitalised as they had contracted the virus. The travel ban prevented me from visiting my family, even as numerous members' health declined.

The separation from my family is crippling my heart. The unforeseen reality of watching my loved ones suffer and saying final goodbyes through a technological screen is difficult. The subsequent grief of losing my loved ones and participating in their last rites virtually is heartbreaking.

The distance between my family and the loss of my loved ones was a harsh reality that could not be changed. Being so emotionally connected to my family, my mourning would be accompanied by uncontrollable cries and intense sadness. However, the perception of not having seen my loved one right before their untimely death made it difficult for me to comprehend or rationalise the loss. A sense of disbelief overtook me and made the process of coming to terms with reality difficult. Rather, I was shocked and numb.

At the time though, I was oblivious to my pain. I knew I had to be strong for my family and my PhD deadlines were approaching. I made efforts to focus my attention on writing my PhD milestone report with my children playing next to me. Figure 5.3 represents a typical day in my household during the lockdown restrictions, but it lacks the ability to share the noise levels, pitching sounds from toys, and constant chaos surrounding me. Busy in their imaginative play, my children were rescuing animals from the COVID-19 virus infected floods. At this point, *I felt I needed to be rescued too*. Figure 5.3 also reminds me of my introduction to anxiety attacks at this time. I remember feeling excruciating pain: discomfort in my chest, heaviness in my head, and difficulty in breathing. Shockingly, it felt like my body was hesitating to respond and stop this choking sensation. Over the next few days, I noticed these feelings continued to arrive unannounced and grew in intensity. Observing my deteriorating health, my husband urged me to see our doctor.





**Fig. 5.3** Hoping for a rescue mission

Upon visiting my doctor, I was asked to complete a self-assessment form about anxiety and depression called the K10. My immediate reaction was denial, “How can an independent woman like me possibly be considered for depression?”. This was followed by a string of uncomfortable questions about my current behaviour. After assessing my health, the doctor concluded that I was experiencing acute depression and the uncomfortable feelings were episodes of anxiety attacks. My doctor strongly recommended seeking fortnightly therapy from a clinical psychologist and taking medication to recover from depression. Although completely shocked, I chose to accept my doctor’s professional diagnosis because I knew I was suffering.

Research confirms that mental illness and psychological distress amongst doctoral students is not uncommon (Evans et al., 2018; Lau, 2019; Lau & Pretorius, 2019; Levecque et al., 2017; Pretorius, 2022). Indeed, it is increasingly recognised that

there is a mental health crisis in academia (Lau & Pretorius, 2019, 2022). Shockingly, Woolston (2017) found that 25% of the 5700 surveyed PhD students worldwide experienced substantial mental health concerns. Supporting this claim is a study conducted by Levecque et al. (2017) which reported that 51% of doctoral students experienced symptoms of depression, mental illness, and psychiatric disorders. Interestingly, the study found that the risk of depression amongst female doctoral students was 34% higher denoting increased family-work pressures on them (Levecque et al., 2017). As demonstrated in my narratives, my depression, grief, and frequent anxiety attacks occurred together and adversely impacted my wellbeing and research output. This indicates the risks and prevalence of mental health problems amongst doctoral students which needs urgent attention.

### ***5.4.3 Future: Reimagining Motivation and Fighting Positive Toxicity***

Coping with the uncertainties was not as smooth as I envisioned. Welcoming me in a brightly lit room, my psychologist asked me to sit on the purple chair with freshly scented flowers next to it. After completing an informal check about my past medical history, my psychologist requested me to share my current feelings.

Me: The past few weeks have tested me immensely. To accept the bitter reality of being separated from family during these difficult times is hard. The pain is accelerating but my feelings have begun to get numb as if it is questioning the worth of feelings itself? I am realising my passion for almost everything is disappearing like spending time with my children, pursuing my studies, or at times in living itself.

Psychologist: The COVID-19 pandemic is making our feelings have feelings. This novel experience is promoting the emergence of a new disruptive mob inside us that thrives on our fear, panic, and loves to play with our mixed emotions. This self-inflecting movement is probably making us feel like victims and causing unimaginable suffering. Fighting it does not help as it will result in burnout. It is absurd to deny any emotions such as grief, depression, or anxiety because your body is producing the feeling; rather live the feelings, allow it to unfold naturally, and it will empower you.

This conversation helped me to recognise the role of the toxic positivity on my wellbeing. In our conversation, I was made to confront my feelings, fear, and growing anger with the COVID-19 pandemic. For instance, I would repeatedly tell myself, “the situation could be worse so try to think about happy thoughts”. Rather, my psychologist’s advice guided me to replace these notions of imagination with real supportive thoughts like, “this is hard. It is ok to cry and feel miserable”. This exercise of validating my feelings rather than fighting emotions helped shift my energy towards the healing process.

To stay focused on the recovery path, I remember searching for an image that would offer me the strength to accept reality. I chose Fig. 5.4, as it captures the peace and happiness I felt almost two years ago when I was visiting my family in India. The image is a symbol of hope that someday in the near future I would be united

with my family. This gives me the power to acknowledge the chaos whirling inside me.

Appadurai (2013) argues that “imagination is a vital resource in all social processes and projects, and needs to be seen as a quotidian energy, not visible only in dreams” (p. 287). Based on this understanding, my story demonstrates the power of my imagination in motivating my efforts. However, my experience also highlights how my imagined worlds about my future self as an immigrant EC educator, doctoral student, and parent created additional barriers and tensions. Here, Appadurai (2013) offers caution that any discrepancy between the imagined world and reality can cause tensions. For example, from the stories I heard or read about living and studying in Australia, I had visualised distinct images of my life as an immigrant EC educator, doctoral student and parent that made up my *imagined world*. This facilitated me to envision an imaginary world about my life as an immigrant doctoral student, however the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions and challenges disrupted my reality causing stress. To accept this change was difficult, hence it was imperative for me to seek professional help and support my wellbeing. This transition helped me to realise that *surviving a pandemic is an accomplishment in itself*.

Battling depression and experiencing frequent anxiety attacks was impacting my capacity to learn, study, and grow. With some courage, I shared my vulnerable self with my supervisors and had an open communication about my depression. There was no judgement from my supervisors, rather they encouraged me to re-consider my study load and guided me towards prioritising my emotional and mental wellbeing.



**Fig. 5.4** My source of motivation

Therefore, I shifted my full-time candidature to part-time, an option that I recognise should be treated as a privilege.

The next step required me to create boundaries for my multiple identities. Fulfilling my parental responsibilities was non-negotiable, hence my mornings were spent completing my children's remote schooling activities. This dramatically helped settle my self-inflicted parental guilt. The satisfaction of supporting my children's learning and emotions cleared the path to re-organise my responsibilities and focus on my wellbeing. To start, I incorporated daily walks without technological distractions. Getting close to nature and walking in the direction of birds chirping or my favourite colour flowers enabled me to pause and understand my evolving feelings. The self-realisation process helped significantly to navigate my energy away from fighting the urge to control my emotions and recognise my mental and emotional health challenges. Gradually, I started shifting my energy towards tasks that helped renew my passion towards life. Almost automatically, I found myself working on my doctoral studies and reading literature related to immigrant EC educators' pedagogies. In this way, my research rescued me and offered me hope to survive the pandemic.

To date, many studies have highlighted that similar mental health crises are experienced by doctoral students (see, for example, Evans et al., 2018; Lau & Pretorius, 2019; Levecque et al., 2017). My story reiterates that the invisible barriers created by the intersection of immigrant doctoral students' multiple identities causes significant stress, depression, and anxiety. Previous studies note that there are multiple factors impacting the wellbeing of immigrant doctoral students such as financial concerns, procrastination, time pressure, caring responsibilities, and work commitments (Martinez et al., 2013; Pretorius et al., 2019; Schmidt & Hansson, 2018). Furthermore, I found that immigrant doctoral students' experiences may be similar to international students in the context of the adjustment needed to adapt to the different cultural and educational contexts (see, for example, Ai, 2017; Utami, 2019). My experience shows that, for immigrant doctoral students, one of the key contributors of depression is the distance and lack of family support, particularly during the pandemic.

## 5.5 Concluding Remarks

In sharing my narratives, my aim is to contribute to the growing body of literature focused on raising awareness and addressing the mental and emotional health issues faced by immigrant doctoral students (Levecque et al., 2017; Pretorius et al., 2019; Schmidt & Hansson, 2018). Engaging with my story, I found that imagined worlds and aspirations can potentially change attitudes towards accepting depression and grief. This is supported by literature that proposes first-generation doctoral students appear to find motivation from internal factors such as passion, determination to succeed, and self-efficacy to successfully progress in their candidature (Gardner, 2013; Naumann et al., 2003). This was true in my case, although it was a difficult process; shifting my focus on renegotiating my image of future life as an immigrant

doctoral student, EC educator, and parent helped in accepting challenges with my mental and emotional problems during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Critically reflecting on my experiences helped me understand that immigrant doctoral students' journeys are unbalanced and differ significantly. Given the anticipated disruptions and uncertainty caused by the global COVID-19 pandemic (see, for example, Blake et al., 2021; Byrom, 2020; Rahmandoust & Ranaei-Siadat, 2021), my story highlights the problems experienced by immigrant doctoral students as they negotiate and balance their multiple identities. The concerns raised in this chapter also join the discussions about how immigrant doctoral students, particularly females, experience dilemmas and difficulties in segregating between their roles as an immigrant EC educator, homemaker, mother, and researcher (see, for example, Dodd et al., 2021; Utami, 2019). It is vital to recognise that this inequality exists amongst immigrant doctoral students, particularly since they are already struggling to cope with the challenges of adjusting to a new country without family support. Yet, research exploring the diverse journeys of doctoral students, especially regarding the unequal access and distribution of resources and responsibilities amongst immigrant doctoral students, remains scarce (Schmidt & Hansson, 2018).

I propose designing a perhaps unconventional, but definitely more inclusive approach to support doctoral students' wellbeing and candidature progression. This chapter offers evidence to policymakers, institutions, and governments about the varied problems experienced by immigrant doctoral students, particularly those juggling many roles. This should enable these stakeholders to offer more targeted and appropriate financial, educational, and counselling support for the diverse cohort of doctoral students in Australian universities. In times of crisis during the pandemic, when the health measures and dialogues are constantly shifting and updating, I also urge the key stakeholders to adapt to living with COVID-19 in a manner which recognises the needs of those with families overseas. It is essential that governments and higher education institutions follow health advice (for example, the wearing of face masks where required), but this can be done while also accommodating unrestricted travel to visit family and friends. Allowing immigrant and international doctoral students to reconnect with their support networks overseas will immensely benefit their wellbeing. By acting upon these issues, the hope is that institutions, staff, and students will actively work towards creating a research community that avoids judgments, normalises the seeking of professional help when necessary, and privileges open discussions of immigrant doctoral students' wellbeing.

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# Chapter 6

## Rediscovering Myself Through Fear of Failure: My Journey as an International Doctoral Student During a Pandemic



Mansura Mokbul

**Abstract** COVID-19 impacted the world's population irrespective of race, sex, gender, and culture, but did so with varying intensities. People experienced difficulties and uncertainties in different aspects of life; difficulties in aspects that may not have been given the same attention pre-pandemic, especially the area of mental health. Pursuing a Ph.D. itself is a stressful journey and the pandemic made it even more difficult for me, a laboratory-based researcher, due to limited lab access. Self-isolation due to COVID-19 and further unexpected events made the journey even more challenging, more than anyone could have ever expected. In this chapter, I share my experience as an international Ph.D. candidate during the pandemic. I explore my experiences through a process of self-discovery and acceptance of my new self with empathy in connection with mental health associated theories. My experience provides insight to other Ph.D. candidates as they may be able to relate to my journey by reflecting on their own experiences. This chapter also provides some strategies to help future Ph.D. candidates thrive in their research journeys.

**Keywords** COVID-19 · Pandemic · Fear of failure · Stress · International Ph.D. student

### 6.1 Introduction

Sometimes people start a new chapter of their life with preconceived ideas or even fantasies of what the future may hold. Individuals' childhood and social interactions influence their perceptions (Hunt et al., 2018). As noted in an earlier chapter (see Patel, 2022), people create "imagined worlds" for themselves (see Appadurai, 1996, p. 5), which can powerfully influence their motivation, goals, and future aspirations. This was certainly true for me. I spent my childhood in a small town where I was

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not exposed to a lot of things. While growing up, I always felt excited and motivated to learn and explore new ideas, food, culture, knowledge, people, and adventures. Therefore, despite being a bit sad to leave my family and friends back home, I was equally excited and thrilled to explore this new Pandora's box which was my Ph.D. journey. I understood a Ph.D. as a tertiary degree that would give me recognition as someone who has gained in-depth knowledge and gone on to become an expert in a specific field (Bernstein, 1999; Cahusac de Caux, 2019). I have since realised that pursuing a Ph.D. is far more than merely attaining a degree and in-depth knowledge; rather it is a journey of self-contemplation and discovery.

Prior to enrolling, most students experience the thrill of excitement when contemplating their Ph.D. journey. This Ph.D. journey was a new door to me, a part of my life adventure which I eagerly awaited. I started my Ph.D. programme at Monash University at their Malaysia campus in 2019, so my Ph.D. journey began a few months before the pandemic hit the world. However, once Ph.D. students enrol, they may find that learning more and becoming an expert in their chosen field is more of a challenge than they initially thought. In Malaysia, I am an international student. Therefore, besides starting a new programme, the culture, the place, and the environment were all new to me. Before the pandemic, during the initial days of my Ph.D. enrolment, the thrill of starting a new chapter of life was exciting. Without warning, COVID-19 revealed itself as a nightmare and other subsequent events in my lab and personal life began to fill the journey with doubt and concern.

Research has shown that there is a mental health crisis in Ph.D. student cohorts, with a prevalence of mental illness significantly higher than the general population (Evans et al., 2018; Lau & Pretorius, 2019; Levecque et al., 2017). This high incidence is associated with a variety of factors, including isolation, a lack of support systems, poor work-life balance, and pressures associated with work, publishing, and obtaining grant funding (Lau & Pretorius, 2019). Hazell et al. (2020) note that among various factors, some of the strongest risk factors for mental stress are isolation and being female. In addition to these factors, unexpected life events can also have a profound impact on a person's wellbeing. This was certainly the case for me: the combination of isolation due to COVID-19 lockdowns and an unexpected laboratory accident worked together to cause me an inordinate amount of distress. Below, I outline these experiences.

In this chapter, I try to describe my journey during the pandemic. I went through a lot of ups and downs. Throughout my journey, though, I rediscovered myself in a new state of mind which I never knew before. As this is a personal experience, the chapter is designed in the format of interweaving consecutive life experiences and related mental health theories. The theories I utilise in this chapter are focused on self-worth, fear of failure, and a depressed state of mind induced by the negative events of life. Throughout the process, I identified a few questions which shaped my reflections:

1. Am I competent enough to continue this Ph.D.?
2. Am I able to adjust to this new culture and environment?
3. Is it worth carrying on this journey?
4. What take home messages do my story reveal for others?

## **6.2 COVID-19's Impact on a Lab-Based Ph.D. Candidate's Life**

COVID-19 was an entirely new experience to me like everyone else. Before this, I had only watched pandemics in movies or read stories about them. After the Malaysian government declared movement control order (MCO) 1.0 in March 2020 to control the spread of COVID-19, my lifestyle as a lab-based Ph.D. student suddenly changed. As I had only finished my initial progress review by that time, I did not have enough data to write any manuscripts to occupy my time. My only option was to work on my literature review. My supervisor and I started having our supervision meetings via Zoom rather than face-to-face once MCO 1.0 started. All the physical workshops and courses were also changed to an online mode. I tried to finish the compulsory Monash Doctoral Programme (MDP) workshops and several courses. Initially, participating in online courses gave me an inner boost and a feeling of fulfilment, so I registered for more. With that passion and enthusiasm, I finished all the course requirements for my MDP hours in 3–4 months. While I was unable to do lab work, I was much more successful than expected with my other commitments. I was optimistic about my future work.

However, due to the restrictions imposed by MCO 1.0, no one was allowed to go out except for grocery shopping or emergencies. Human interaction suddenly declined, and was replaced by self-isolation. I am a person who loves to have lunch with friends and colleagues, discuss life events with them, and listen to exciting stories about new things. My daily life collapsed, and I was confined to the four walls of my small room all alone, where only my thoughts were louder than my surroundings. Rogers et al. (2020) mentioned that anxiety, fear, obsessive compulsive syndrome, digestive problems, insomnia, and post-traumatic stress are common psychological disorders associated with COVID-19. Mental health is also known to be related to physical health (Kitchener et al., 2017). Prolonged social isolation limited the opportunity to move, which has been shown to directly hamper the physical health and nutritional status of individuals (de Sousa Moreira et al., 2021; Pietrabissa & Simpson, 2020). After a while, this long episode of social isolation (about 4 months) started affecting my physical and mental health negatively. I became paranoid about getting infected and, as an immune-compromised asthma patient, fear got the best of me. I got stuck in a loop (waking up, eating, watching Netflix, and sleeping). It was killing me from the inside. That was the first time when I felt lonely, isolated, and hollow after coming to a new country.

### 6.3 How an Unexpected Event Led to Significant Mental Distress

When MCO 1.0 was over, I got permission to go back on campus and resume lab work. I was quite happy that I was back in my regular life and exploring new things regularly in the lab. I started getting some results for my experiments, although the pace was slower than I had expected. However, my happiness was wiped out with one unexpected event. One day I received a call from one of my lab mates telling me that he had accidentally broken my sample vials. It had taken me many days and nights of hard work to obtain these samples and seeing those vials on the floor in a bunch, I lost my words. I did not know how to react. I did not know to whom I should report or complain. I went back home. I could not eat, sleep, or cry for the whole night. I called home and talked to my family, and they suggested that I should talk to my supervisor. With a blocked mind and numb head, I did so. My supervisor listened to me with patience and asked me to rethink the project and how it could be modified.

In the meantime, I was also worried about my country where I left my family and friends. During that traumatic time, I lost one of my relatives, and also a mentor who was a very close friend of mine. I started feeling like a selfish and unworthy person who was unable to support her friends and family in their time of need. On top of that, I was also worried about continuing to take study leave from my job. I am bound to return to my work after I complete my Ph.D. and my leave is only for a certain period of time so that clock was ticking. As achievements and completion of goals are counted as a benchmark of a person's competency, I became fearful of not being able to complete my Ph.D. on time. My mind was occupied with all these thoughts and I could not work on my plan B; instead, I procrastinated and grieved.

My supervisor had suggested that I think about a plan B. However, I was not able to do so as my mind was revolving around this event every single moment. I became more introverted, finding it difficult to share my thoughts and emotions. The only people with whom I felt safe and comfortable to share my thoughts were my husband and a close friend back home. However, none of them were physically present with me and I became overwhelmed.

At that time, I did not anticipate that I was descending into a form of depression and that this event would haunt me in later days. I was starting to experience something akin to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), a condition where reliving experiences is a common symptom (Brewin & Holmes, 2003). I started having flashbacks; I kept seeing broken glass vials on the floor and kept avoiding the lab for days. My lab mates had good intentions and tried to console me. However, going over the event again and again made it hard for me to focus on the next steps. Although I appreciated their efforts to support me, they were making my situation worse. It has been shown that self-trust and beliefs can be shattered by traumatic events and negative thoughts take control over an individual (Dunmore et al., 1999). I was broken apart and I lost the ability to think and to trust myself. This lost and lonely feeling was a first-time experience; I had not met this version of myself before. I started to believe that I was

not competent enough to pursue a Ph.D., that my project was not good enough to have a plan B, and that nothing was going right. I also became paranoid, wondering if my research had in fact been purposely sabotaged by my lab mate. Deep inside I became angry and helpless.

Achievement goal theory relates to fear of failure which influences one's behaviour and orientation. Performance avoidance, feeling of shame, self-handicapping and learned helplessness are different associated dimensions of fear of failure (Choi, 2021). According to this need achievement model of motivation, there are three different types of people: success oriented, failure avoidant, and failure acceptant (Atkinson, 1957; Coving, 1984). I discovered a new self who started avoiding colleagues and the lab; I became an avoidant person. I started procrastinating and felt unworthy of doing a Ph.D. This behaviour can be aligned with self-worth theory. Self-worth theory describes that ability and effort affect performance which determines personal worth (Coving, 1984). I felt stuck in a loop and could not figure out a solution. Now, the self-worth theory has helped me understand that, as I started feeling down and overwhelmed all the time, I was not able to give enough effort. This made me think that I may not have the ability to perform well, which ultimately translated to a negative self-worth feeling. As a result, my self-esteem went downwards every day when I procrastinated, and pending work started to pile up.

Eventually, my husband suggested that I seek professional help. I was exhausted with all my negative thoughts and emotions, and he felt that he was unable to help. I grew up in a society and culture where seeking professional mental health support is not a common practice. There is a lot of stigma associated with mental illness in my culture; the person is treated negatively, as if they have gone mad. As a result, I was unsure of seeking help from my institution as the story involved one of my lab mates. I was confused whether to speak my mind or not. Would it be confidential? What if my supervisor and panel members came to know about the conversation I was having? Would that affect my Ph.D. programme? What if some fellows found out about my mental health issue and made fun of me? I was confused with a lot of thoughts and questions and could not decide if I should seek mental health support.

Stress and anxiety happen when a person finds some stressor as a danger which may exceed the coping strategy of that individual's mental, physical, or spiritual well-being (Lau, 2019). If the stress continues, then it can be associated with depression, PTSD, and other diseases (Hassan et al., 2016). During the pandemic, the anxiety and depression stressors were significantly affecting everyone's daily life regardless of age, sex, and other variables. However, studies reported religion and spirituality as widely used coping strategies followed by more acceptance of the situation, self-distraction, and confrontation (Baloch et al., 2021; Patias et al., 2021; Wasil et al., 2021). As I am not a very religious person, religious salvation did not work well for me. I was also unable to accept the situation. Rather, I kept myself locked in my room and started reading my favourite books without any breaks. That kept my brain busy, helping me to avoid thinking about the lab, my study leave, and the impact of COVID-19. I started reading Paulo Coelho's *The Alchemist* (Coelho, 2014). I chose this book because I thought it would take less energy to grasp since I had read it before. Suddenly, that popular quote from the book "and, when you want something,

all the universe conspires in helping you to achieve it” hit me. I stopped reading for a while, and I thought “Does it mean I don’t want to finish my degree just because I am afraid to fail? Or am I too afraid to face the reality where people might not welcome me wholeheartedly? Am I too weak to fight back?” I thought over and over, and finally I decided to fight back. I told myself that I should try with all I have as that is what I had done my entire life. I realised I was becoming a failure acceptant person and started over to solve my problems. Life has never been easy for me. This time the only difference was that the people closest to me were not there. However, that did not mean I was out of support. I decided to ask for any kind of help that I could get and I immediately sent an email to book a slot for mental health support.

A study from Poland among university students showed that acceptance, planning, and seeking mental health support helped students to cope during COVID-19 pandemic (Babicka-Wirkus et al., 2021). They also reported that the strategy choice was dependent on the age, sex, and the place of residence of the person (Babicka-Wirkus et al., 2021). Initially, it was not easy to open up in front of an unknown person (counsellor) about my lab mates, my Ph.D. project and personal issues. I was afraid of being judged, confused about where to start and how to adequately express my feelings at that moment in coherent English. That feeling was the combination of my fear of failure, confusion, overthinking, depression, and my withdrawal syndromes from every activity. Fortunately, I met the counsellor who was nice enough to create a soothing and safe environment for me. I took a chance in trusting her and opened up. After several sessions, she told me to figure out exactly how I felt and what things I was interested in at that moment. That thing could be inside the realm of my project, lab mates, and study, or it could be something else. I started looking for something, but my brain was foggy, and I was too depressed to think clearly. I love travelling around and meeting new people. As COVID-19 resulted in travel restrictions, I had to find new things to do. I tried painting, music, journaling, working out, meditation, yoga, and cooking to figure out what makes me happy.

According to Lazarus and Folkman’s transactional model of stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), a person uses cognitive and behavioural appraisal to handle stressors. This process can be problem focused or emotion focused coping (Biggs et al., 2017; Lau, 2019). Problem focused and emotion focused coping strategies are more effective compared with dysfunctional coping strategies such as venting, denial, and substance use (El-Monshed et al., 2022). My coping was emotion focused coping as that event hurt my emotion very badly and I lost the ability to focus and think clearly. I felt hopeless. In the hopelessness theory of depression by Abramson et al. (1989), some individuals demonstrate a more depressogenic attitude when they encounter negative life events. The three different types of inferences people can make are causal inferences (why the event occurred), inferred consequences (the effects of the event), and inferences about self (negative characteristics of the self that contributed to the event, see Abramson et al., 1989). All these inferences together can make someone hopeless and that can lead to depression (Abramson et al., 1989; Lakdawalla et al., 2007).

I was not only feeling hopeless, but I also felt worthless. A person’s overall feeling of self-worth, self-respect, and self-esteem are influenced by their perceived failure

or success in areas where self-worth is contingent (Crocker et al., 2004). Therefore, success or failure in a specific domain affects self-worth. Additionally, domains such as academic performance, virtue, family support, physical appearance, and others' approval can have an effect on self-worth (Crocker et al., 2003). My fear of failure was causing me to feel like I might not be good enough to pursue the Ph.D. journey and that I was worthless. I thought that I was not performing to the expected standard academically, making me depressed. Realising and accepting that state helped me to take necessary steps to move on.

I went back to the counsellor and pointed out that meditation, music, and journaling helped me to calm down and release my frustration. At the same time, I reduced my social media engagement. Studies mention that social media usage during the pandemic impacted negatively on peoples' mental health (Prowse et al., 2021). I started learning to play the piano as a new skill. Practicing meditation almost every morning after waking up helped me to have more positive energy for a day. Along with these, I started giving myself more time and stopped blaming myself for small mistakes. For example, I love tea, so I started making my morning tea with time and love and spent enough time to have a good breakfast every morning while listening to TED talks or audio books. I love listening to TED talks, which might sound funny or somewhat nerdy, but I like it. Rather than rushing to the lab every morning at 7 am, I started to go in by 8 am and spent that extra hour taking time for myself. This one hour helped me to find the will to get through the rest of the day.

During the counselling sessions, we mostly discussed how I felt or thought about my life events and surroundings. I started to feel much lighter and more comfortable. After I came back to the lab, I started making friends with other lab mates as well. Now, I have friends on campus with whom I can hang out and have coffee or lunch. On the days where my experiments fail or the results are not good, I can share it with my friends and get their feedback on ways to solve the problem or to improve. I extend my support to my friends and colleagues as well, when they have gloomy days. I also joined a writing group. Research has shown that writing groups can act not only as spaces where academic writing skills are improved, but also as a space for pastoral support (Hradsky et al., 2022). In my writing group, I met a lot of peers who are amazing and very helpful souls. They are from different backgrounds and cultures, and I have learnt a lot from them. My group works as a motivator for me, encouraging me to write on regular basis. The members give me constructive feedback to improve my writing skills, which is an important component of a successful writing group (Chakraborty et al., 2021). Importantly, I also hear of other students' struggles, helping me to understand that I am not alone. In this way, the writing group fosters a sense of belonging (Hradsky et al., 2022).

## 6.4 Conclusion

Throughout this bumpy journey, I discovered a new version of myself, one who did not know how to handle failure by herself. I learnt how to communicate with people from various backgrounds and cultures. To me, this Ph.D. training has become a journey of self-discovery or rediscovery. I am enjoying the journey, accepting who I am without fear. I am pushing my limits, but doing so with patience and empathy. I have become more mature, which I believe will help in my daily life to solve other problems in more efficient ways. I have not finished the journey yet, but I have discovered some treasures inside myself, and some good souls in my surroundings. This has helped me to become a better version of me, and I will cherish it for the rest of my life.

## 6.5 Take Home Messages

1. Try to make friends inside and out of the lab, especially with those who are different to you. It is important to understand different cultures, surroundings, food, and beliefs. Different perspectives can also help you understand yourself better.
2. Do not take every failure on yourself; it hurts personally and your own self-worth can collapse. Rather, when you fail, give yourself time to process your feelings and then return to the task.
3. Failure is a normal part of life, but you should not let it cause you to stop believing in your abilities. If you start to struggle, do not hesitate to ask for support from friends, professionals, or others with whom you are comfortable talking.
4. Take the time to discover what you enjoy and try to allocate time for that. Self-care is important, not just as part of the Ph.D., but as part of life.
5. The Ph.D. is just another tertiary degree and it does not define who you are. Therefore, enjoy the journey and discover that better version of yourself along the way.

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# Chapter 7

## My PhD Saved My Sanity and My Life



Dawn Grant-Skiba 

**Abstract** In this chapter, I explore my experience with psychological stress during the first year of my doctoral candidature that resulted from the intersection of the COVID-19 pandemic and global Black Lives Matter protests. As a qualitative researcher, I draw on my own autoethnographic vignettes (Ellis. *The ethnographic I: A methodological novel about autoethnography*. AltaMira Press, 2004) to provide an account of the personal challenges which may be generalizable to minoritised doctoral students during crisis situations. I use the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping (Lazarus and Folkman. *Stress, appraisal and coping*. Springer, 1984) to identify with and understand the stressors I faced as an insider—a Black, female doctoral student—and share the adaptive coping strategies that I used to be able to focus on my PhD. As a result, I prove the claim that the PhD became my saviour.

**Keywords** Psychological distress · Coping strategies · Transactional model of stress and coping · Autoethnography · Black feminist autoethnography · COVID-19 · Black Lives Matter protests · Doctoral students · Minoritised groups

### 7.1 Introduction

When 2020 began, I was eagerly awaiting confirmation that I had been accepted into the doctoral programme at my chosen university. By the time the email arrived, with a fee-waiver confirmation attached, I had already completed a year's worth of literature review about my proposed project. The ability to focus on my research without concern about my finances was relieving. My excitement knew no bounds, and I was soon immersed in stress-free hours and hours of reading articles and published PhD dissertations, as well as listening to podcasts. My supervisors were pleased with my positive attitude and response to early feedback and guidance. This journey was going to be fun! Unfortunately, two global events—the COVID-19

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pandemic and the global Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests—would interrupt my peace and expose me to stressors that were severe, unexpected, and unwelcome.

It is not unusual for doctoral students to experience a range of challenges while pursuing their degree (Byers et al., 2014; Evans et al., 2018; Lau & Pretorius, 2019; Owens et al., 2020; Sparkman & Doran, 2019). Mental health disorders are one such difficulty that has a deleterious impact on higher degree researchers (Evans et al., 2018; Lau & Pretorius, 2019; Pretorius, 2022). Prior to 2020, mental health issues were reported to be six times more prevalent among graduate students than within the general population (Evans et al., 2018), with some candidates considering exiting their programmes early as a result of psychological distress. In an international survey of nearly 14,000 students from eight countries, including the United States and Germany, Australian first-year undergraduate students were found to have one of the highest rates of mental disorders (Auerbach et al., 2018). The study indicated that the issue is not isolated to Australia or graduate students. In fact, a mixed-methods systematic review, meta-analysis, and meta-synthesis of 52 articles demonstrated the important role universities can play in establishing prevention and intervention programmes to reduce the incidence of poor mental health among doctoral students (Hazell et al., 2020). Those doctoral researchers reported significantly higher levels of stress when compared with the general population (Hazell et al., 2020). “Being isolated and being female” were discovered to be risk factors for stress while “a positive [doctoral researcher]-supervisor relationship and engaging in self-care” were protective factors (Hazell et al., 2020, p. 28). Therefore, it may be concluded that female doctoral students who exist in isolated environments seem to be more prone to distress that may lead to psychological issues which can be mitigated through self-care practices and a positive relationship with their supervisors.

A qualitative study of newly enrolled PhD students at a university in New Zealand found nine key sources of stress that could understandably lead to mental strain (Cornwall et al., 2019). The most prevalent stressors include time pressure (both personal and academic), uncertainty about doctoral processes (lack of structure and direction), and the absence of a sense of belonging in scholarly communities (forming supportive relationships) (Cornwall et al., 2019). The authors concluded that “the themes identified clearly indicate areas where universities could start to address issues and explore options for student support” (Cornwall et al., 2019, p. 376). The suggestion is that universities should hold some responsibility to address the mental wellbeing needs of their postgraduate researchers during candidature. This finding is consistent with Charles et al. (2021, p. 8) who advised that “universities need information about targets of intervention that may be most effective to reduce levels of distress among graduate students”. When done well, university programmes designed for prevention and intervention may contribute to redirection or mitigation of stressors and act as a saviour for PhD students.

In this chapter, I reflect on how two world events that eventuated during the first year of my doctoral research journey caused me severe psychological distress. I discuss how the genesis of the COVID-19 pandemic and its restrictions of movement allowed a larger number of people the opportunity to truly confront social issues as promoted by advocates and allies of the BLM movement. I analyse how the

psychological distress I suffered during this time was tempered by my ability and the opportunity to focus on my doctoral research. Using an autoethnographic approach, I claim that my PhD saved my sanity and my life, highlighting both the uniqueness and commonality of my experience with those of other PhD students.

It is imperative to point out here the added complexity and uniqueness of the experiences of female doctoral students who racially identify as Black. Therefore, as an insider, throughout the chapter, I predicated my experiences as a Black woman in the academe specifically through the lens of Black feminist autoethnography (Griffin, 2012). Black feminist autoethnography values the lived experiences of Black women, giving them a perspective through which to theorise the interconnection of race and gender (Griffin, 2012). It is a dimension of autoethnography that gives space and opportunity to engage in self-reflexivity, to “raise social consciousness regarding the everyday struggles common to Black womanhood; ... [and to humanise] Black women at the intersections of multiple forms of oppression” (Griffin, 2012, p. 12). It is important to be aware of how Black feminist epistemology (Collins, 2000) may explain the Black woman’s thoughts and actions, help to appreciate the complexity of the struggles as well as the choices they make in academic spaces (Boveda & McCray, 2021; Wallace et al., 2020). Therefore, in the way I interpret and describe my experiences, what I choose to include and exclude, I provide insights into how Black doctoral students, though not a monolithic group, navigate the intersections of race and gender in the spaces we occupy, especially when faced with crisis situations.

## 7.2 The COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic connected the world in collective pain, suffering and “a unique set of educational challenges” (Calco et al., 2021, p. 1). Many universities in Australia reacted to the new challenges by moving classes online; this was especially supportive of international students who had been advised to return to their home countries (Gibson & Moran, 2020) or who were unable to return due to travel bans (cf. Rangarajan & Daneshfar, 2022). Online learning also brought along further challenges, particularly in terms of ensuring faculty members’ competence in transitioning to online learning platforms as well as student engagement and performance with the modality shift (Kerr-Sims & Baker, 2021). Research showed largely positive faculty expectations regarding their ability to teach virtually (Lobos Peña et al., 2021). However, there was a decline in faculty perception of student engagement during the pandemic (Kerr-Sims & Baker, 2021).

While some PhD scholars faced disruptions (Donohue et al., 2021), such as the need to adjust data collection methods or limited access to on-site spaces such as archives, other findings run contrary. One study carried out among nearly 1400 veterinary medical students and researchers from 92 countries found that the academic performance of a significant number of participants (96.7%) was affected by the pandemic lockdown (Mahdy, 2020). Conversely, doctoral researchers in a Swedish study reported that “the quality of their supervision was either improved or

un-affected” (Börgeson et al., 2021, p. 293) during the pandemic although more emotional support from supervisors would have been beneficial. These findings demonstrate that the impact of the pandemic differed depending on a variety of factors.

Additional challenges brought on by the advent of COVID-19 included heightened financial concerns around funding, the ability to afford basic expenses such as rent and medication, and adverse effects on the completion of PhD research projects (Paula, 2020; Woolston, 2020). Experienced researchers also shared the effect of the pandemic on their own mental health, making a distinction between enforced isolation and voluntary isolation (Velho, 2020). For those universities which were already employing virtual classrooms, the disruption caused by the pandemic was less chaotic and the transition smoother (Johnston, 2020). Nonetheless, the Australian government’s travel restrictions for international students had an adverse impact on student numbers (Ferguson & Love, 2020; Hurley, 2020).

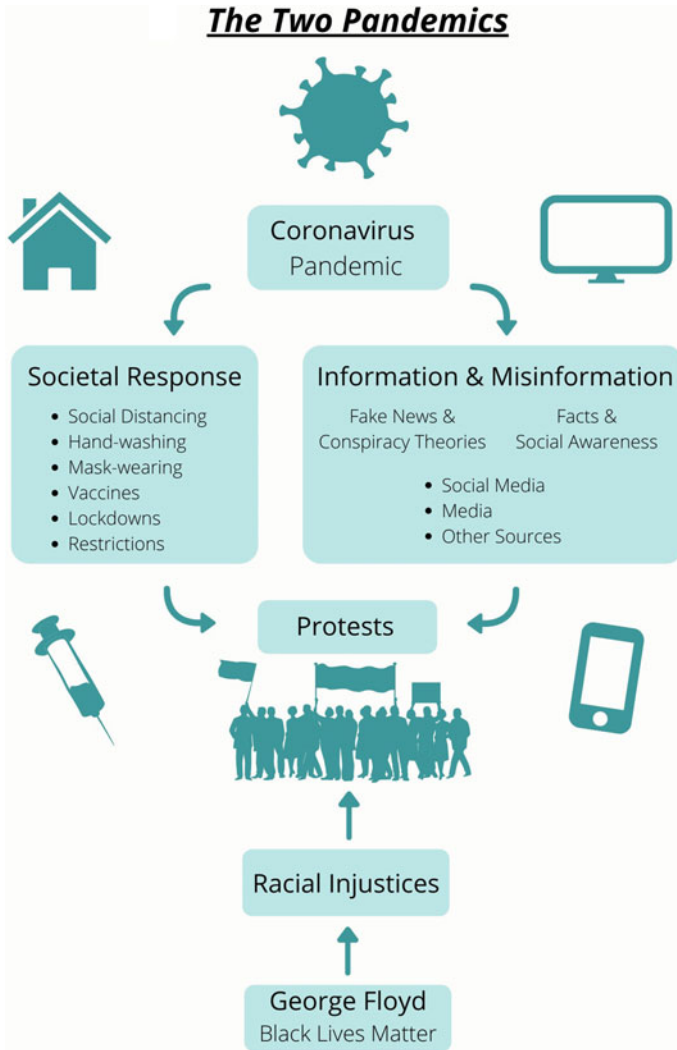
During this turbulent time, another virulent occurrence, also of pandemic proportion, was about to become prominent. COVID-19 had somehow managed to make racial injustices in the United States and around the world more visible and was being labelled “a pandemic on a pandemic for Black people” (Laurencin & Walker, 2020, p. 10). For many Black people, the threat and reality of the COVID-19 pandemic both heightened and mirrored the racial injustices that they had been experiencing for centuries, wherever they existed as minorities. From police brutality in the streets to microaggression in the workplace, many Black people felt hijacked and confronted by the actions, behaviours, and thoughts of dominant others without an impending cure. However, despite silence in some spaces (Addo, 2020), the COVID-19 pandemic was highlighting the disparities among African descended people when compared with other citizens, and the world was beginning to take notice.

### 7.3 Black Lives Matter During the Pandemic

It was during this already unsettling time that I awoke one morning in late May 2020 to gruesome video footage of the death of a man I had never heard of, whose existence had not been known to me, and whose death would matter to me more than I could have imagined. His name was George Floyd and he had been killed in public view by a uniformed police officer named Derek Chauvin (Hill et al., 2020). The convergence of the two events would lead to pernicious consequences. Anticipated restrictions caused by the dreaded and deadly virus had already caused irrational behaviours in people (Voyer, 2020), such as toilet paper brawls in supermarkets (Hill et al., 2020), and a pervasive disregard for social distancing advice from the government (McMahon, 2020). Like everyone else, I was confused and fearful of the virus’ real and perceived threat. George’s death added its own layer of trauma and became the catalyst for deeper psychological stress. As depicted in my infographic (see Fig. 7.1), the level of misinformation in social media, media, and other sources compounded the fear that people were already harbouring. Government officials

working with public health organisations struggled to convince the populace that social distancing, handwashing, and mask-wearing were not violations of their human rights but necessary measures to curb the rising infection and death rates (Australian Human Rights Commission, n.d.; Bell, 2020). The impending mandated vaccinations and temporary lockdown restrictions led to protests and riots resulting in dozens of citizens being arrested and law enforcement officers injured (BBC News, 2020a).

With these enforced worldwide COVID-19 lockdowns and social distancing measures, screen consumption increased (BBC News, 2020b; Truong & Dove, 2020).



**Fig. 7.1** Infographic showing a visual representation of the chaos of the pandemic and protests

People also had more time to consider social injustices such as the treatment of Black citizens by the police. As stated in *The Conversation* newspaper: “when people have discretionary time, they are more likely to participate in social movements to effect change. Prior to COVID-19, the cycle of work and life limited extra time for taking to the streets to demonstrate for a cause, particularly when a choice had to be made between protesting for a better tomorrow and earning a paycheck” (Nakhaie & Nakhaie, 2020, para. 18). It is within this atmosphere that the two pandemics would intersect and be inextricably linked (Addo, 2020), interrupting my peace and exposing me to stressors that were severe, unexpected, and unwelcome.

The night before the incident, I had stayed up until 3 am creating annotated bibliographies of articles on the learning theories of different philosophers. Even at such an early stage of my research, I had come to realise that meticulous, high-quality notetaking would make my PhD writing experience more manageable; it was an excellent way of “future-proofing [my] future career” (Brabazon, 2016, 10:35). Despite the upheaval caused, in a way I was too ashamed to confess out loud, the COVID-19 pandemic-related restrictions had credited me with more time than I otherwise would have had to spend on my research, and I was grateful for that opportunity. Perhaps somewhere deep inside I felt obliged to occupy the time and make this adversity work for me. I certainly experienced the pangs of isolation and resented the restrictions like everyone else, but I did not spend time bemoaning the situation. Instead, I immersed myself in my project until that fateful American event.

The images of George Floyd being murdered left me perplexed. I was unable to ignore the blatant injustice. In skin tone and height, Floyd reminded me of my youngest brother. Whenever I closed my eyes, my brother Andrew’s face replaced George’s and I would wake up in a cold sweat, heaving. For reasons I could not yet explain, the incident had disturbed me so much that I struggled to get out of bed and was constantly tearful. Days and weeks later I would have vivid flashbacks that left me physically sick. I am a mother of four boys who are hypervisible in dominant spaces. I became almost paralysed with fear and worry about them and how they are perceived by strangers. I agonised about how to approach the subject with them in a way that would leave their loving, caring, White father their hero. At that moment, I felt entirely incapable of having such a discussion with them. While I had been able to face the coronavirus as a temporary disruption to my life and my studies, this experience brought on racial trauma that caused me profound psychological distress.

## 7.4 Psychological Distress

Lazarus and Folkman (1984) defined psychological stress as “a particular relationship between the person and the environment that is appraised by the person as taxing or exceeding his or her resources and endangering his or her well-being” (p. 19). This definition acknowledges that stress is personal and subjective and therefore the perception of its existence and depth will differ from person to person (Lau, 2019). Lazarus (1991) emphasised this transactional model of psychological stress



and the appraisal and coping processes that mediate the stress relationship. In this model, when a person experiences a stressful event or situation that they perceive as beyond their capacity, they appraise it primarily as harm, threat, or challenge (Lazarus, 1991; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). The next step is a secondary appraisal based on the individual's perceived ability to cope on their own or utilise coping options or resources available to them to deal with the stressful situation (Lazarus, 1991; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). These coping mechanisms may be internal or external (Lazarus, 1991; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Following the appraisal, either problem-focused or emotion-focused coping mechanisms are activated to deal with the stressor (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

The Transactional Model of Stress and Coping has been used successfully in several studies, with and without modifications. For instance, Obbarius et al. (2021) found the model highly effective to predict the stressor in their study of patients with psychosomatic health conditions, after making small modifications to exclude coping strategies. Similarly, a recent study of nearly 1300 people aged 64 years and older proved the model successful in identifying challenges they faced during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic (Heid et al., 2021). In another study, modifications made were described as necessary "refinements" (Berjot & Gillet, 2011) after keeping "all the different phases of the model (antecedents, appraisal, and coping)" (p. 3). The experience outlined in this chapter corresponds with the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping which views coping as behavioural and cognitive responses that a person employs to deal with stressors within their environment that overwhelms them. There are varying causes of psychological distress for doctoral researchers, as mentioned earlier in the chapter. Some, such as financial and pandemic related, are universal and shared by most of the student population. However, racial trauma is unique to a particular group of students and is experienced in addition to the other universal traumas that their counterparts from the dominant group face.

## 7.5 Racial/Race-Based Trauma

Villines (2020) defined racial trauma as "the ongoing result of racism, racist bias, and exposure to racist abuse in the media" (para. 1). It can be experienced directly or vicariously by individuals with unintended victims being children (Heard-Garris et al., 2018). Its intensity may also vary throughout a person's lifespan and may affect every facet of a person's life and relationships. Perceived or real racial discrimination can leave racial minorities vulnerable to racial trauma. Villines (2020) explained that "witnessing members of a person's group receiving abuse" (para. 20) can lead to trauma or even re-traumatization of the minority group members. Although they might not have been previously exposed to direct trauma themselves nor witnessed the racial stressor first-hand, members of these groups undergo collective trauma, where they identify with the pain and loss of the abused. The stressor becomes the catalyst for psychological distress that leaves them mentally overwhelmed, and the

constant exposure to the stressor, such as via the media, can cause them to become more susceptible to further long-term trauma.

In a phenomenological study of five Black American doctoral students, Peters (2020) shared findings that supported existing literature regarding the negative effects of race-based trauma on that historically marginalised group. The study recognised the various forms of coping mechanisms being utilised by these students to deal with the race-based trauma experienced during their studies (Peters, 2020). Peters (2020) recommended a proactive approach to attending to the psychological needs of such students, beginning with an evaluation of the “racial climate of their [programmes] to gauge the experience of their current students” (p. 136). Additionally, Harper and Neubauer (2021) proposed a salient trauma-informed approach to teaching and administration during a pandemic. Their model encompasses four essential elements: acceptance that trauma exists and is extensive, recognition of how trauma presents itself, responding through programmes, policies and practices, and taking appropriate measures to prevent re-traumatization (Harper & Neubauer, 2021). Furthermore, Truong and Museus (2012) provide some excellent coping strategies which can be helpful for students experiencing the trauma as well as university providers aiming to create a supportive environment. I identify the adaptive coping strategies that I found particularly useful later in the chapter.

## 7.6 Coping with Psychological Distress

After situating my own experience of psychological distress caused by the pandemic and the protests within Lazarus and Folkman’s Transactional Model of Stress and Coping (1984), I realised that what I was experiencing resulted from my perception that the stressors were endangering my wellbeing, and I was ill-equipped to deal with them. I refer to stressors here as it pertains to the negative experiences I faced as a newly enrolled Black doctoral student but where the stressors were external to my PhD and did not result from my studies. Focusing on my research was part of my coping mechanism, a type of saviour, which I will explore in the next section.

I was a full-time secondary school teacher, a middle leader, and a wife and mother when I became a part-time PhD student. The constant worry that I would catch COVID-19 at work and pass it on to my family added to my growing stress levels. Many of my colleagues took a casual approach to the pandemic, espousing beliefs I did not share. Except for a part-time Aboriginal colleague, my work colleagues avoided discussing Floyd’s killing around me, which left me feeling completely invisible despite my obvious hypervisibility. I felt loneliness like I never had before, and my workplace became an emotionally unsafe place for me. I yearned for someone to see that I was not doing well. I would also ridicule myself for having these expectations when I had not verbalised what was happening internally. The truth is, I determined it was too risky to tell my colleagues for fear they would not support me or, worse yet, continue to ignore me. Some of the Black students were confiding their distress in me, and I felt incapable of helping them because I knew I was suffering

too. I felt I had failed them. If only I was brave enough to tell them that I was too psychologically distraught to even begin discussing the topic with my own children. I welcomed my days off which I spent immersed in my research.

I appraised the helplessness I was facing because of the COVID-19 and BLM events as harmful to my own existence. I can recall struggling to describe how the symptoms had manifested themselves.

Most days, I have no energy to even get out of bed. But I know I must. There's a pain in the pit of my stomach, and I feel like if I could fit my fist inside of it, it might stop hurting, but it doesn't. I eat to fill the void, but it's always there. Sometimes, it gets so bad that I can't breathe. I just curl up in a foetal position and I don't want to be with anyone – not my children, not my husband, no one. I find myself crying when I least expect to and hold frequent pity parties by myself. I feel empty and drained. But I have responsibilities and so every day I do what I must. I get ready for work and plaster a smile on my face. I am so glad that the pandemic comes with a mask requirement and social distancing so that I can keep some of my emotions to myself. I am so exhausted, most days I don't have the energy to do the simplest tasks. Except for my doctoral research. That still excites me. When things get bad, my husband usually says, 'go work on your PhD' and I instantly feel better.

On an intellectual level, I knew there was nothing I could have done to prevent or even singlehandedly rectify the unfortunate situations, yet my emotions flickered between feelings of guilt, sadness, frustration, isolation, rage, and helplessness. The incidence of social isolation, the constant reporting in the media of coronavirus deaths and racialised violence exacerbated the effects of the events. Understandably, other people were also experiencing “intensified anxiety symptoms, lower mental well-being and lower capabilities” (Simon et al., 2021, p. 8). These findings are consistent with a study conducted using Gallup and Census data (Eichstaedt et al., 2021) on the traumatic effects of Floyd's death which revealed that Black Americans experienced great psychological distress with heightened levels of anger, sadness, and depression after the killing. There had already been growing concern about the increase in the number of Americans, including Black Americans, experiencing anxiety, sadness, and depression (Alyssa & William, 2020). However, what of Black people outside of the United States of America? More intimately, what were the effects on a Black doctoral student living 14,484 kms away in Sydney, Australia?

The collective trauma was evident on a global scale with protests being organised in diverse countries on all seven continents (Kirby, 2020). Despite the uncertainty surrounding the legality of large gatherings during the pandemic (Martin, 2021), authorised and unauthorised protests were held by various anti-racism organisations. People of minoritised groups in countries like New Zealand (Block et al., 2020; Radio New Zealand, 2020) and Australia (Ashton & Makay, 2020; Cunningham, 2020) ignored public health orders and joined the marches in calling out injustices also levelled against their Indigenous populations. The constant media exposure to what I perceived as bad news about the pandemic and the protests meant that there was no respite from the effects and overstimulation of negativity.

## 7.7 How the PhD Became a Saviour

For several months, the only sustainable respite I had from emotional pain was when I was buried in the pages of my research. My mind did not wander, I did not feel any panic or pangs of anxiety, and I was truly excited about the things I was discovering.

When things get really bad, my husband usually says, ‘go work on your PhD’ and I instantly feel better.

This statement correlates with Enzor’s (2017) findings that PhD students who were able to find meaning in their research used it to cope with and overcome difficulties they were experiencing in their personal lives. In this understanding, the PhD acts as a saviour that forces the doctoral researcher to transcend their difficulties and focus on an area of interest—the research—that aligns with their values and passions.

While looking through the lens of the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping, I was able to understand my subsequent choices more clearly. I did not choose a problem-based coping approach because the stress brought on by both the pandemic and the race-based trauma were beyond my control. Instead, emotion-based coping was the favoured alternative as this involved gaining strategies for regulating emotional distress caused by the named stressors. Through the lens of the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping, I was able to identify the distinct types of internal and external responses I drew upon for coping with the psychological distress from the pandemic and global protests during the first year of my doctoral candidature. Like all coping strategies, this repertoire of strategies (see the summary in Table 7.1) is subjective and non-exhaustive but may act as an example for other doctoral students who experience psychological stress during the early stages of their research journey.

**Reflection.** Writing became one of the first activities I used as stress relief. I wrote poems about my experience.

You fear the virus  
 And I fear you  
 Hate is the real pandemic  
 That lives inside a few  
 Let. Us. Breathe

However, I only wrote poems when I needed to expel feelings of anger or despair because at other times, I found writing on the topic too confronting and stressful.

My tears go unnoticed  
 I cry out to God  
 Is he deaf  
 Is he sleeping  
 Does he care  
 ...  
 Four sons  
 A lifetime of worry

**Table 7.1** Summary of the different adaptable coping mechanisms that proved helpful

Coping mechanism	Example
Reflection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Writing poetry</li> <li>- Hosting a podcast</li> </ul>
Family and friends' support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Encouragement</li> <li>- Pause on home duties</li> <li>- Prayer</li> <li>- Phone calls and text messages</li> </ul>
University support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Hangouts with fellow graduate research students</li> <li>- Networking</li> <li>- Access to a chaplain and counsellor</li> <li>- A positive doctoral-supervisor relationship</li> </ul>
Community support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Women of colour with shared experiences</li> <li>- Online group trauma therapy session</li> <li>- Language to describe the traumatic experience</li> <li>- Monthly zoom with black graduate research students</li> </ul>
Individual therapy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Trauma-informed therapy</li> </ul>

Will  
It  
Happen  
To  
Them  
Too

By contrast, when I was writing for my PhD, it was the perfect distraction from what I was experiencing. Similarly, I began to host a podcast to maintain my focus on my doctoral research and found that a great stress relief.

**Support from family and friends.** My husband provided significant support from the outset. Not only did he constantly encourage me to focus on my research, but he took on my home duties including caring for our children and gave me the time and space I needed to process my feelings. My mother prayed for me every day, and I was in daily meaningful contact with one of my sisters. Also, several of my friends provided adequate care and attention through calls and text messages with encouragement that led me to focus on my PhD project.

**University support.** I engaged in several of the supportive PhD activities organised by my university and especially benefited from the Higher Degree by Research Hangout sessions with other new and established PhD students and supervisors. These online sessions were helpful to understand the expectations and changes of the programme, and for networking. There were regular discussions in these forums

about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic as well as frequent communication from the university. These activities informed students about processes and procedures of measures taken to support students during the pandemic, including access to a chaplain and counsellor. In addition, my doctoral supervisors offered open access and were very encouraging and supportive at every milestone of my research. I perceived these measures as proactive and stress-relieving. These encounters provided more reason for me to focus on my research and I did not feel my research was in any jeopardy.

Conspicuously, there was no reference to Floyd's death or the BLM protests and no one ever asked about my wellbeing. Consequently, I did not feel comfortable confiding in the group about my experiences with stressful situations for fear it would result in awkwardness, silence or rejection. Instead, I was always pleased to share about the progress of my research project and looked forward to hearing from other participants.

**Community support.** Finding a community of other women of colour and sharing stories about our collective experiences was very healing. I participated in an online group trauma therapy session (Gatwiri, 2020) which provided an outlet for participants following Floyd's death. It provided explanations and validation for my feelings and introduced language, such as racial battle fatigue and race-based trauma which I could use to describe my experiences. Although the participants were mostly strangers to me, I felt a connection with them that came from collective trauma, which was both sad and comforting.

Similarly, I found solace in a group of Black women who were higher degree researchers themselves. The initial monthly Zoom calls were a great outlet for attendees to discuss how the events had impacted their mental health and research. We were able to be vulnerable with and supportive of each other because of our collective experience with the trauma. For me, the sessions were a great source of stress relief and they helped me to focus on my research.

**Seeking treatment.** I eventually decided to seek professional treatment from a trauma-informed therapist when it became clear that I still had unresolved trauma. By then, focusing on my studies had already helped me through some of the toughest moments of my life and I shudder to think how things might have turned out if I had not taken this road less travelled.

## 7.8 Conclusion

COVID-19 has put a spotlight on the challenges faced by marginalized groups of people in society, including how they experience higher education during uncertain times. As a first-year Black PhD student, I experienced profound psychological

distress when two global events, the COVID-19 pandemic and BLM protests, coincided to disrupt how life and research operate. In this chapter, I explored the challenges I faced at an individual level and examined some of the literature around how psychological distress and racialised trauma impact doctoral students. I offered Black feminist autoethnography (Griffin, 2012) as the frame through which I interrogated and explained those challenges. I also reflected on how the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) provided the lens through which I could understand my own experience and outline the internal and external responses I successfully utilised to cope with the psychological stress I endured during this time.

In sharing my experience, I provided insights into how minoritised doctoral students may cope when crisis situations arise during their studies. Doctoral candidates and early career researchers will find that they can take both proactive and reactive steps to confront crisis situations that occur to avoid becoming consumed by them. These strategies may include self-care practices such as reflection through writing, or they may seek support from others such as family, friends, university, community, or a qualified therapist. Importantly, the message is that something can and should be done. I also suggested educational institutions take proactive approaches to protect the wellbeing of doctoral researchers and other minoritised academic staff in traumatic situations.

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**Part III**  
**Locality and Internationality in Shaping  
Academic Identities During a Pandemic**

# Chapter 8

## “Locked Down, But Inspired”: Beginning Our Research Studies During COVID-19



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**Abstract** This chapter presents a collaborative autoethnography of our experiences as beginning researchers during the COVID-19 lockdowns of 2020. Specifically, it explores how completing our doctoral preparation degrees during these unsettled times positively influenced the development of our academic identities. By drawing on transformative learning as a conceptual metaphor, we consider how we connected with our researcher voices online, reimaged our understanding of a virtual research community, and transformed the limitations imposed on our research as an impetus for creativity. We argue that just as we redefined our research and academic identities in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, it is important for academia as a whole to recognise and harness the potential for transformation as it responds to the *new COVID-normal*.

**Keywords** Graduate research · Transformative learning · Collaborative autoethnography · Academic identity · Online learning · Pandemic · COVID-19

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## 8.1 Introduction

If everything has stopped, and all cards can be put on the table, they can be turned, selected, triaged, rejected for ever, or indeed, accelerated forwards. [. . .] When common sense asks us to ‘start production up again as quickly as possible’, we have to shout back, ‘Absolutely not!’ The last thing to do is repeat the exact same thing we were doing before. (Latour, 2020, p. 2)

As we write this chapter—in yet, another lockdown—we are acutely aware of how COVID-19 has shifted how established scholars, graduate research students and indeed, academia as a whole, must engage in their work. In July 2020, we enrolled in a six-month doctoral preparatory degree, the Graduate Certificate of Educational Research (GCER), which was designed to provide us with the foundational skills and knowledge for our future academic endeavours. With many of us being practicing teachers, we entered the GCER excited to conduct fieldwork in schools. However, a few days into the course, Melbourne entered an extended lockdown and school systems imposed bans on all external research. We were faced with the *disorienting dilemma* (Mezirow, 2000) of having to quickly reimagine our scholarly work or potentially put our future aspirations for doctoral studies at risk.

We are concerned about how shifts like these negatively impact the experiences of higher education students. A rapidly growing body of literature, both in Australia and internationally, has begun to investigate the adverse effect of COVID-19 on students’ psychological wellbeing (Chen et al., 2020), including how the lack of social connection (Berezhna & Prokopenko, 2020) and readiness for digital learning have greatly impacted students’ mental health (Händel et al., 2022). There is also evidence that the COVID-19 pandemic has adversely impacted students’ sleep quality (Zhang et al., 2020) and physical wellbeing (Gallè et al., 2020; Gallo et al., 2020). More broadly, Grubic et al. (2020) argue how COVID-19 has exacerbated already heightened stress levels for higher education students, calling for immediate action to address the “unprecedented mental health burden” (p. 517).

However, we do not believe that focusing purely on the negative impacts provides a complete picture, especially in relation to potential flow-on effects for the development of our academic identities. In a recent essay, Latour (2020) wrote that if we view the pandemic, not as a crisis, but an ongoing ecological development, “then it is easy to imagine the power of transformation” in these changing times (p. 3). In response to this provocation, we engaged in collaborative autoethnography (Chang et al., 2013; Coia & Taylor, 2009; Pretorius, 2022a). We used the reflective prompts outlined in Chap. 2 (see Pretorius, 2022a) to explore our experiences during the GCER. Through this process, we engaged in a collective research endeavour that cycled between writing and sharing our experiences through narratives, talking and discussing, reflecting and responding, engaging with theory, discussing some more, and collaboratively analysing the data we generated (Coia & Taylor, 2009). Having now completed the GCER course, this chapter explores our narratives through the lens of transformative learning (Mezirow, 1991) to consider how the COVID-19

pandemic is “woven into the fabric” of our academic experiences and emerging academic identities (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 735).

The chapter is structured into three sections. First, we set the scene by sketching how we position transformative learning as a conceptual metaphor for understanding our experiences (Howie & Bagnall, 2013). We follow this with our narratives organised around three themes: (i) finding our researcher voice, (ii) community and collaboration, and (iii) transforming our research. Finally, we consider the implications of our narratives within the wider context of teaching and researching in these so-called post-pandemic times.

## 8.2 Transformative Learning as a Conceptual Metaphor

Since first being presented in the late 1970s, transformative learning theory has been hailed as the “definitive framework for describing how adults learn best” (Kitchenham, 2008, p. 120). The theory is underpinned by the understanding that everyone has a frame of reference of the world which is informed by epistemic assumptions from their upbringing, life experiences, and education. Thus, transformative learning begins when a disorienting dilemma causes such a level of disruption that it transforms a person’s frame of reference of the world, providing a new “context for meaning making” (Mezirow, 2000, p. 16). In turn, this leads to deeper worldviews and more insightful ways of understanding our experiences and the experiences of others.

Although transformative learning theory was originally developed in collaboration with women returning to study after a hiatus (Mezirow, 1978), it has since been applied to varied research contexts to make sense of personal narratives and lived experiences. For example, Watkins et al. (2018) used transformative learning to map the identity transformation of clinical therapists under supervision. In another instance, Welch et al. (2020) explored the stories of transformation from five panelists at an International Transformative Learning Conference. The theory of transformative learning, however, is not without critique. For instance, Newman (2012) questions whether transformative learning “only exists in the realm of theory” (p. 40). In this chapter, we do not aim to provide empirical evidence for the existence of transformative learning, rather we position it as a conceptual metaphor to help make sense of our collective experience (Howie & Bagnall, 2013). We believe that viewing the COVID-19 pandemic as a disorienting dilemma allows us to move beyond examinations of our experience as “simply a learning of skills or ideas” to reveal the “new learning that otherwise would not have occurred” or might have occurred differently in pre-pandemic times (Howie & Bagnall, 2013, p. 822).

Indeed, we are not the first to reflect on COVID-19 as a transformative experience. Eschenbacher and Fleming (2020) highlight that transformative learning can help us to “deal with contradictions, ambivalence and meaning-making in a world where *not-knowing* is the new normal” (p. 657, emphasis in original). To adapt Latour’s (2020) provocation and consider our research work as a metaphorical card game, we see

transformative learning as the process of responding to the pandemic by looking at the cards we turned, how we played them, and the ones we (even reluctantly) rejected. Furthermore, looking at the cards that were initially on the table, our narratives also provide insight into the “embedded social, cultural norms and assumptions that shape and sustain systems” within academia (Welch et al., 2020, p. 861). In light of COVID-19 transforming our perspectives about research, we aim to emphasise the importance of academia continuing to transform itself to cope with further ambiguity, uncertainty and change.

### 8.3 Sharing Our Personal Journeys

This section shares personal narratives about our experiences of learning how to undertake research during the COVID-19 pandemic. These narratives are interwoven with the literature and theory to consider how we, as detailed by Minoli below, found resilience and a new sense of direction to overcome the challenges we faced.

My new sense of direction came from within, as a result of the values I held as a person. Quitting or stopping something I had started wasn't an option. I had to do this for myself and for my children, to show them anything was possible if you don't give up. I was determined to overcome the challenges of the new course and all the changes to an online medium. (Minoli)

We discuss three specific transformations in how we found our voices as researchers, established a sense of community, and reimaged the research that we produced.

#### 8.3.1 “You’re on Mute”: Finding Our Researcher Voice

The most commonly uttered phrase of the past 24 months, “you’re on mute”, provides a poignant commentary on the importance of finding our voices during the pandemic. While the phrase refers more specifically to the click of a button, or lack thereof, during video conferencing, it also symbolises the challenge of finding your own voice within online conversations. Drawing on Mezirow’s (1991) work, Eschenbacher and Fleming (2020) discuss transformative learning through a Habermasian concept of discourse where individuals can critically assess their assumptions through “others serv[ing] as critical mirrors” (p. 665). They are referring to a change in perspective through global and individual discourses that are heightened during times of crisis. Viewing transformation through a Habermasian discourse lens, this theme helps us to understand how *finding our voice* in the virtual environment supported our identity formation as researchers (Eschenbacher & Fleming, 2020; Gee, 2000).

The potentially disruptive pivot away from the more traditional in-person format of learning provided Natalie with new ways of communicating and sharing ideas, and an opportunity for reinvention through engaging on a more equal footing:



Many of us students were older and were coming from established careers and in some ways, because we hadn't been students ourselves for so long, we may have presented more fragile and hesitant. I felt that the younger students provided a much-needed mentorship in confidence. In fact, because the interactions were often written or filtered through technology, the age discrepancy became invisible and inconsequential.

While Natalie felt timid about returning to studies after so long, the experience of participating online on her own terms supported her transformation into a “confident-outward-reaching, I-can-do-this persona”. Specifically, the Zoom room provided the option to hide the self-view, while still participating and remaining visible to others. Without seeing her own face on the screen, Natalie no longer noticed the age discrepancy with her peers and felt less intimidated to engage with the group. When she later chose to include herself in her “Zoom tableau”, she saw herself as though in “a movie of her own life” and was able to play/act herself as a developing academic. That is, the opportunity for varied communication with the group and recognition of her emerging status as a researcher, supported Natalie’s transformation through “discourse and dialogue” (Gee, 2000, p. 102).

While Natalie preferred the written component of the course to *use her voice*, Minoli was more comfortable speaking during live sessions, Rebecca was more comfortable during unrecorded sessions, and Oskar’s uncertainty was compounded by English being an additional language to his native tongue. By adjusting to the potential limits and opportunities of the virtual space, each of us found ways to support our “inclusion in [the] discourse” (Mezirow, 2000, p. 11):

Sometimes asking questions triggered feelings of embarrassment. Studying research was new to me. I held back at the start from asking questions via online chat platforms as I usually prefer speaking directly. However, I overcame this quite easily, especially when I felt that everyone else was in the same situation. (Minoli)

I did realise over time, the importance of asking questions rather than being hesitant and timid, and speaking up when needed. It was my responsibility to ask and keep asking questions if required. The online platform taught me the importance of asking questions and if I did not receive a response, or I received a response that I needed further clarification with, then I ought to keep asking. (Rebecca)

Recognising the collective similarities within the group allowed us to understand how, as an online cohort, we developed “a set of common endeavours [and] practices” (Gee, 2000, p. 105). These acts of participating, sharing and being vulnerable together through a variety of discourse formats—whether they be spoken or written, synchronous or asynchronous—provided alternative mirrors for critical reflection with our peers. This allowed us to make sense of our new experiences and supported a “perspective transformation” (Eschenbacher & Fleming, 2020, p. 660).

Overcoming previously held perceptions is also an important aspect of transformative learning (Mezirow, 2000). Examples of this were experienced by some of our group members who had earlier negative experiences around sharing and having their voices heard in online spaces:

[Previously] I felt no connection to anyone in my course [...] one person created a substantial feeling of unease for me because of their poor attitude. [...] How would a large number of

people be able to interact at the same time? Would there be another outspoken negative voice throughout the entire experience? (Melissa)

One of the aspects of my previous experiences of working remotely was the lack of equal access I had to the lecturers and other networking opportunities. There was never an opportunity to have those incidental conversations that lead to moments of insight. I was worried that once again, I was losing that opportunity. (Mandy)

However, the discourses and multiple modalities for speaking up eroded the uncertainty we felt:

Although online delivery limited our interactions to either the main session or in smaller break out groups often with strict time limits, as we progressed, collaborations developed among peers outside of scheduled classes allowing for more robust engagement to continue. (Gitaa)

The answers to the questions I had were joyous! The Zoom screen was filled with like-minded people, all positive in their expectations and eager to learn. Instant relief. (Melissa)

Our lecturers provided many opportunities to talk with them in small groups and in one-to-one sessions. I felt heard, seen and encouraged. (Mandy)

Finding our voice to advocate for a *preferred position* was also important within the disorienting space created by COVID-19. Power is an important aspect of developing one's identity. Discourses reflect "wider patterns of relationship and power" (Mezirow, 2000, p. 11), which Gee (2000) highlights can be exercised in institutions through rules, expectations, or traditions. Blake capitalised on the uncertainty surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic and a shift in the traditional institutional power of the university, to pursue his preferred research methodology. Initially, Blake felt the power of *tradition* when he was told prior to the course that his preferred option of autoethnographic research would not "demonstrate [his] 'real' research skills if [he] wanted to progress to a PhD". However, with a shift to online data collection and the challenges of engaging school students and staff in that process, autoethnography was now "a viable option for 'real' research—perhaps because it was one of the only options!". The shift in institutional power and practices within the student group enabled Blake to speak up for his chosen research option:

I unmuted myself. 'Sorry to interrupt, but you're saying that we can do autoethnography? As in, that's an option for the course?'

Further, the group discourses and experiences of *being in this together* helped us identify more strongly with our voices as researchers. Important to transformative learning when working alongside peers is the equalisation of power, the promotion of autonomy, the development of authentic relationships, and the building of trust (Eisen, 2001). Melissa's words provided a powerful summary of the affinity we found through sharing our voices, and the autonomy this provided in finding our own researcher voices during uncertain times:

The lecturers, too, were finding their way in this new world of working from home and remote teaching. We were all learning these new skills together, and there was always a friendly face to offer help if someone was having technical issues. Three words we will never forget are "you're on mute". The catchphrase in Melbourne at the time was "we're all in this together" and it honestly felt like we were.

We each have experienced a transformation in our researcher voices as a result of embarking on a collective research journey during a very disruptive time. These stories of transformation have been explained in relation to the socially constructed discourse (Eschenbacher & Fleming, 2020; Gee, 2000), which Mezirow (2000) argues “is the forum in which ‘finding one’s voice’ becomes a prerequisite for free full participation” (p. 11). However, as we discuss how we learnt to unmute ourselves, to speak up, and to explore our emerging identities, we must also recognise the importance of how we did so as a supportive community of emerging academics.

### 8.3.2 *“Together and on Our Own, All at the Same Time”: Community and Collaboration*

As the pandemic took hold and studies moved online, there was pessimism among us. After all, studying remotely meant that valuable opportunities that are commonplace in face-to-face workshops such as collaboration, networking, and socialising, were seemingly taken away from us. This theme discusses how we found a sense of community and belonging with one another as well as how our understanding of ‘community’ was transformed in light of the pandemic.

The novelty of a remote learning model led to feelings of hesitation as we navigated through uncharted waters, feelings that were perhaps also experienced by our lecturers as they had to rapidly implement online learning (Adams & Vanderleeuw, 2020). Oskar recalls his initial experience on Zoom as daunting:

Seeing the Zoom room full of unfamiliar faces was initially a little daunting too, very much like walking into an actual lecture. However, it was soon evident that we were all there from a variety of backgrounds and experiences and with a common goal. Before long, connections were established, and contact details were exchanged to stay in touch outside of workshop hours.

For Natalie, receiving the email informing her that both units of the GCER had been moved to a remote learning model was when “the reality of lockdown settled in”:

The idea of studying online seemed so lonely and impersonal. It would be just me and my computer. In my mind’s ear I imagined the lecturers speaking with a computer-simulated voice. I had nothing to wrap my imaginings around except for science fiction movies.

This sentiment was echoed by Gitaa who had previously completed one of the GCER units in-person and expected an online version of the course to be inferior. Although these thoughts resonate with preconceived ideas about online studies and how they affect opportunities for social interactions (see, for example, Novikov, 2020; Phirangee & Malec, 2017), they were not always justified.

Rather, the remote learning mode helped to equalise the field (similar to previous research by Verdinelli & Kutner, 2016) and foster a sense of community (similar to previous research by Chakma et al., 2021; Hradsky et al., 2022). Studying together

from within our own homes gave an intimate look into each other's lives, something that on-campus learning lacked. We saw each other in our places of comfort and safety. Yet, at the same time, the option of turning our cameras and microphones off offered the opportunity to participate from a less vulnerable vantage point, while still maintaining membership within the online community. This newfound community enhanced Rebecca's confidence and sense of self as an academic, as she would not have connected in the same way if she had attended the workshops face-to-face. Similarly, Mandy's academic identity was strengthened when the workshop leaders collectively referred to the online group as *researchers*.

In a sense, we found comfort in the collective persistence, strength and companionship needed to persevere and finish the course. There was a sense of solidarity in our discomfort. For Mezirow (2000), these "feelings of trust, solidarity, security, and empathy" are a necessity for transformation (p. 12). This communal feeling helped to shape our collective identity as a community of early-career researchers, transforming how judgement and action were envisaged, and how the sharing of stories and ideas were key to navigating change and supporting our wellbeing (Kilgore & Bloom, 2002). Moreover, while it is true that a lot of the work on our projects was undertaken independently, it is equally true that it was also a collective endeavour. This community, established via technology, provided a platform for us to participate in the content taught and interact with each other, thus minimising feelings of isolation and disconnection.

As an example, Melissa looked forward to the weekly workshops as she got to see everyone and hear about their progress. These catch-up opportunities consisted of three workshop sub-groups which aligned students of similar ontologies, epistemologies, and research designs. Oskar found that participating in these smaller groups allowed him to establish connections more easily, and the similarity of the projects within each group enabled rich conversation and discussion. Though, it was not just within these sub-groups that we benefited from discussing and sharing our ideas and progress (see, for example, Yu, 2009). As connections strengthened, friendships formed, and small research communities were founded with like-minded peers who would catch up regularly.

Rebecca, Minoli, and Oskar were each members of a small research community which further facilitated their discussion and collaboration. Oskar noted, "We would work on our respective projects while being in each other's company on Zoom", indicating that the collaboration that took place was not with peers but alongside them, something he had not experienced before. For Minoli, this platform allowed her to tell her own story through research as well as discuss her thinking and progress with peers. As a result, she was able to make sense of the "new space of not knowing" to find answers and solutions. Central to each of these collective experiences of transforming identity and knowledge within a digital space was a social presence (Phirangee & Malec, 2017).

Similarly, Blake and Mandy connected outside of workshops to share reflections, readings, and drafts of their work. As Blake noted:

Although we were all locked down separately, the sense of connection and community was wonderful, and we made the most of the online medium. Mandy and I would often email back and forth as ‘critical friends’. We didn’t always talk face-to-face, but just knowing someone was there and was reading my efforts, it was a great driver and source of motivation.

These various groups reinforced the notion that our individual writing was still a *social practice* (see Chakraborty et al., 2021) in the times of COVID-19, and that the feelings of connection, support, and trust within these groups functioned as positive coping mechanisms (similar to previous research by Chakma et al., 2021; Hradsky et al., 2022). In turn, these mechanisms helped us all to face the challenges of the immediate and future unknowns as we transformed our research in response to the pandemic.

### 8.3.3 “The Restrictions Gave Us More Freedom”: *Transforming Our Research*

Entwined in the identity experiences of finding our voices and collegial belonging, we also underwent an intellectual transformation in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. This theme explores how, as we grappled with the changing environment, we were also concerned about the changes that were occurring to our research. At the beginning, we felt that we had lost control of our research. However, as we confronted our concerns, we came to realise that the limited options did not necessarily limit our capacity. According to Watkins et al. (2018), this represents “one of the most simply stated, yet profoundly powerful personal reconstructions, [...] when the shift from ‘No, I can’t’ to ‘Yes, I can’ takes pervasive hold” (p. 262). For instance, Melissa, whose earlier narrative highlighted her concern of negative voices dominating the virtual space, shared that “hesitation soon turned to happiness, and [she] looked forward to seeing [her] classmates and hearing about their investigations each week”.

We initially felt restricted in what we could do with our research because we were hesitant to deviate from the well-established approaches in our field. For example, Gitaa had planned to undertake in-person interviews for his project and was concerned that moving to online interviews risked rendering the process stilted:

As a mode of data collection, interviews using virtual platforms have inherent challenges to overcome and this informed my initial reservations about this mode of data collection. My biggest concern in using a virtual platform was that I had no control of how smoothly the interviews were going to go as this depended on many factors including participants’ familiarity with the use of virtual platforms and access to a reliable internet connection.

However, once Gitaa began to carefully explore online-based interviews, he appreciated the opportunity to interview participants from the comfort of his home. He also remarked how his interviewees shared the same experience, where the virtual space afforded them a power-levelling position of joining from a safe environment—their *home ground* (similar to previous research by Meho, 2006). Our initial frames of

reference were limiting our ability to respond to the challenges of the pandemic. By mistaking methodological rigour for methodological rigidity (Sandelowski, 1993), we began to see how our “pre-pandemic mindsets [were] dysfunctional” (Eschenbacher & Fleming, 2020, p. 660). This realisation afforded us new perspectives about what it meant to be flexible and agile researchers. We had to “[let] go of the myth of control” and accept the risk of operating in a new situation (Watkins et al., 2018, p. 262).

Natalie discovered similar benefits by using email discussions as her data collection method and found that the interviewees were able to immerse themselves in the experience more freely:

My participants could take their time devising answers to the questions and would only submit what they felt represented them. This was particularly useful because English was not their first language. The email format also allowed for a few back-and-forth replies digging deeper into the memory of their experiences.

Alongside the benefits for her interviewees, Natalie appreciated the flexibility to respond over a period of time because it also enabled her to carefully consider her responses. At the outset, Natalie and Gitaa were concerned about the challenges associated with digitally mediated interviews, including collecting less rich data because of the impersonal format. However, as we shifted towards a more flexible and agile mindset, we not only felt more proficient as researchers, but also strengthened our data collection by facilitating more comfortable, welcoming, and empowering experiences for our interviewees. This is similar to research by Pretorius and Macaulay (2021) and Pretorius (2022b) who demonstrated the depth of data which could be collected through electronic email-based conversations.

Several of us also recognised that the online approach opened up the possibility of engaging with interviewees from diverse geographical locations and lived experiences. Oskar found that the online setting allowed him to experiment and be creative, while also engaging with participants from beyond his immediate context. Creativity became a reflex where we took stock of the limited resources available and imagined different ways of arriving at an academically viable and data-rich solution. This had a profound impact on how Oskar viewed his research:

Working remotely on my project changed my perspective of what research is and how it is carried out. The limitations imposed on us brought out the creativity in us too, which may benefit us in the future. Although conducting interviews through Zoom required me to read more into people’s body language than ever, it would enable us to collect data and learn from contributors who are interstate or even overseas.

The emotional connection and relational importance derived from reaching beyond a limited frame helped to transform the impact of our studies (Walton, 2014). For instance, philosophical, theoretical, and methodological connections were made between Mandy’s study of teachers’ research use in metropolitan Queensland and Blake’s autoethnography in rural New South Wales (see Cutler, 2022 for the published study), as well as with studies about children’s literature in China and teachers’ professional development in Chile. Suddenly, because we were no longer limited to learning about research within our immediate geographical contexts, we developed

our understanding of research alongside peers across a number of countries around the world.

While international students had previously undertaken the course on-campus, the online approach offered new perspectives. For example, in comparison to his experience of the in-person GCER unit, Gitaa viewed the remote learning model as an enabler for collaboration on a wider global scale. By engaging in these virtual international conversations, a culturally expanded way of seeing research began to emerge that incorporated different ways of thinking and communicating. These interactions facilitated transformative possibilities as we each critically reflected by way of narrative on how our research, ethics, theoretical positionings, and goals were all makings of our own research worldviews (Denzin, 2018). In this light, Melissa remarked:

The fact we were able to collaborate and engage on an international level was quite extraordinary. We can learn so much from our fellow educators all over the world, and in these current times of instability of technology and ability, why wouldn't we?

In these examples, the pandemic brought on shifts in what we expected from, learnt about, and viewed as valuable research in preparation for doctoral studies. As highlighted earlier, Blake entered the course with a desire to undertake autoethnography to make sense of his experience as a teacher but was dissuaded by perceived institutional pressures. However, as he began to design a school-based project, the pandemic provided an opportunity for him to transform this frame of reference about which research was valued within academia:

When exploring alternative options for our projects, I floated the idea of autoethnography, but expected to be discouraged much like previous discussions. To my surprise, I was encouraged to explore this approach and I've not looked back since! If the need to 'pivot' hadn't arisen, I don't think I would have plucked up the courage to ask...

Common to each of these vignettes is how the pandemic enabled the exploration of different research options, lenses, and opportunities that perhaps might not have been on the table. In a non-COVID world, each of us might still have delivered projects that opened the door to our doctoral studies. However, Natalie and Gitaa would not have discovered the benefits of asynchronous emailing or online interviews for their participants. Oskar and Melissa would likely not have directly engaged with research worldviews beyond those in their immediate context. Blake would not have challenged his perceptions about how autoethnography would be received. Through engaging in discourse with an open mind and “weighing the supporting evidence and arguments and by examining alternative perspectives” (Mezirow, 2000, p. 11), we were able to broaden our understanding that there is *no one right way* to be a researcher.

## 8.4 Continuing to Research in Times of Significant Change

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted our sense of normality in every way—how we stepped out the front door with a face mask on (if we stepped out the front door at all) and how we interacted with our students, lecturers, and research participants. For many graduate research students, these changes may have had negative impacts on their wellbeing, academic identities, and experiences of learning to conduct research. However, in this chapter, we considered Latour’s (2020) provocation to “imagine the power of transformation” (p. 3) of the pandemic in relation to our experiences as beginning researchers. Thus, we drew on transformative learning as a conceptual metaphor (Howie & Bagnall, 2013) to ponder how the pandemic may have positively influenced the development of our academic identities.

Indeed, there was always potential for transformative learning in the GCER. However, this chapter highlighted how the pandemic fuelled the disruptive nature of transformation by destabilising our perceptions of our *current* self, while creating a heightened stronger *other* within. As we learned to unmute ourselves and speak up in the virtual environment, we found and began to identify with our researcher voices in different ways. Although we were initially concerned about lost opportunities for collaboration, we transformed our understanding of a research *community* to value our collective persistence, strength, and companionship. Finally, entwined with these experiences, we also underwent an intellectual transformation in how we understood the limitations imposed on our research as an impetus for creativity.

As we reflect on how this experience joined us in solidarity, it has also highlighted how—much like social distancing, or the lack thereof—we are simultaneously integral to the problem and the solution (Eschenbacher & Fleming, 2020). In light of Latour (2020) urging us not to “repeat the exact same thing we were doing before” (p. 2), this chapter explored how responding to the pandemic allowed us to make our research more accessible and empowering for us and our participants. Just as we redefined our research and academic identities, academia too, will have to transform to maintain its impact and relevance in times of further ambiguity, uncertainty, and change. We argue that recognising and harnessing the potential for transformation will be essential for responding to our new reality – *COVID-normal*.

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# Chapter 9

## Establishing Academic Identities Through Professional Socialisation During the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Doctoral Student, Institutional Member, or Early Career Researcher?



Jiaqi Li and Jing Zhang

**Abstract** While higher education institutions promptly responded to the transition to online or blended practices as a result of COVID-19, there is limited current understanding of how first-year PhD students committed themselves to various online networking experiences during their initial stage of professional development. By drawing on Kolb's experiential learning cycle, this chapter elicits two first-year international PhD students' professional trajectories of forming our professional identities in academia during the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite engaging with different professional socialisation activities, we both underwent three transformative stages which we classify as acquiring knowledge, establishing networks, and gaining validation. Our findings indicate that our dynamic and consecutive professional identity formation transitioned through three stages: a doctoral student, an institutional member, and an early career researcher. This chapter reveals how this linear three-stage process respectively unfolds for different international doctoral students. In this regard, relevant implications are proposed for current and prospective international doctoral students and their institutions to refer to in better facilitating international doctoral students' professional identity development during and beyond COVID-19 pandemic.

**Keywords** International students · Doctoral students · PhD students · Professional socialisation · Professional identity · Experiential learning cycle · COVID-19

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## 9.1 Introduction

For commencing PhD students, proactive engagement with academia is significant in order to acquire specific knowledge and skills. This process of legitimating PhD students as members of the academic community, as a part of their career trajectories, is an example of professional socialisation (Langrehr et al., 2017). Professional socialisation in this study refers to various socialising practices students engage in where they observe and follow faculty practices to internalise social and professional norms of the academic profession (Langrehr et al., 2017; Weng, 2020). Such professional socialisation can be further divided into formal and informal socialisation (Price et al., 2021). Formal professional socialisation includes obtaining rules of conduct through academic workshops or supervision, while informal socialisation involves interacting with peers within and beyond the faculty (Garcia & Yao, 2019; Kuzhabekova & Temerbayeva, 2018). These forms of socialisation are designed to boost PhD students' connections with colleagues and increase their knowledge of professional norms (Liddell et al., 2014). It should also be noted that hereafter in this chapter, professional socialisation and socialisation are interchangeably used.

Both formal and informal professional socialisation are supported by official regulations and literature in the Australian higher education context. Formal socialisation is officially regulated by the Australian Government Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA), which is an authoritative institution that ensures the quality of Australian higher education (TEQSA, 2021). Under the Higher Education Standards Framework established by TEQSA (2021), doctoral students should be provided with research training “in a supervisory and study environment of research activity or other creative endeavour, inquiry and scholarship, and the supervision and resources required for their project are available” (Sect. 4.2, para 2). Moreover, as doctoral education in Australia is predominantly research based (The Group of Eight, 2013), Australian universities have become aware of the loneliness PhD students experience while undertaking the PhD (Lau & Pretorius, 2019). Noticeably, first-year international doctoral students are particularly positioned as vulnerable in both formal and informal socialisation because of the linguistic and cultural barriers they may encounter. Given the importance of professional socialisation, the experience of first-year international doctoral students' professional socialisation during their sojourns of the PhD programme should be investigated.

The significance of professional socialisation is further highlighted when PhD programmes are increasingly featuring national and international mobility. First-year international doctoral students are transient migrants in Australia who temporarily—and sometimes permanently—cross borders out of voluntary or forced choices (Gomes, 2018). As Gomes (2018) described, when transient migrants move from sender countries—their original nations—to receiver countries, they often undergo different experiences compared with local residents. Physical presence is often one of the prerequisites for first-year international doctoral students considering practical factors (including lab-based research, differences in culture, and collaboration/communication convenience). Ideally, first-year international doctoral students

could obtain and internalise the norms of their academic community through the socialisation process such as participating in academic programmes in the faculty (Weng, 2020).

When first-year international doctoral students continually explore brand-new events in their PhD journey, they formulate and embrace their professional identities as growing scholars (Leshem, 2020). However, considered as transient migrants, these students often experience social, cultural, and language obstacles while studying and residing in local Australian society (Gomes, 2018). Academia is thus challenging for first-year international doctoral students in multiple dimensions, including cross-cultural awareness, multilingual communications, and professional norms in research (Son & Park, 2014). For instance, first-year international doctoral students might feel exceptionally marginalised and insecure when they lack appropriate academic-based networking support (Weng, 2020). This sense of marginalisation and insecurity might undermine their professional identities as growing scholars. Thus, it is worthwhile to unpack their professional identity formation processes by investigating their socialisation behaviours.

The first year into a PhD programme is crucial for international doctoral students in Australia, especially in terms of integrating into the academic community. First-year international doctoral students can only be enrolled as full-time students, giving them a shorter time frame (usually, three to four years) to complete their PhDs. This means the first year would be particularly valuable for international doctoral students to establish their professional identities by identifying their constraints and opportunities. COVID-19 complicated their professional identity formation due to physical locations and enrolment statuses. Before the pandemic, international doctoral students were all enrolled onshore and completed their first year on Australian campuses. As mentioned in Chap. 4 (Rangarajan & Daneshfar, 2022), however, the Australian borders were shut down in March 2020 and remained closed to international students until mid-December 2021. Adapting to the situation, the Australian university that hosts the authors of this chapter implemented flexible policies in early 2021 to support doctoral students who resided outside of Australia. These students were temporarily allowed to conduct remote research or apply for remote enrolments before Australian border restrictions were lifted. Given that, this chapter explores how we, as two international doctoral students, navigated our identities academically and professionally throughout our first-year doctoral journeys under COVID-19.

Although physical presence in socialisation events is crucial for first-year international doctoral students, international travel restrictions and the closure of university campuses imposed under COVID-19 have significantly affected these students' presence possibilities. Complying with the COVID-19 containment restrictions, many essential traditional networking channels for PhD students' professional socialisation were cancelled from early 2020 onwards, such as face-to-face seminars and conferences (Department of Education Skills & Employment, 2021). In the context of Victoria, Australia, these networking opportunities were mostly transferred to online platforms, which also intensified the vulnerabilities of first-year international doctoral students. Since these students may be used to learning practices with less

opportunities to foster proficient digital literacy in their home countries, they might find the new networking mode daunting (Lin & Nguyen, 2021).

Commencing a doctoral journey in the pandemic is particularly challenging for international doctoral students who completed a master's degree on campus pre-COVID-19 in Australia. They had become accustomed to the traditional in-person teaching and learning in their master's degree, which could have greatly facilitated their PhD orientation in a similar Australian context. Consequently, the disruptive switch to remote training might entail extra time adjusting to the online networking experiences (Lin & Nguyen, 2021). Therefore, their new mode of networking experiences might further negatively affect their first-year professional socialisation. Moreover, their unfamiliarity of virtual working environments and loneliness of conducting independent research might create excessive mental distress (Lau & Pretorius, 2019; Wilson & Cutri, 2019). Hence, how these first-year international doctoral students' networking experiences have been affected during and beyond COVID-19 times should be studied.

Considering COVID-19 disruptions on first-year international doctoral students' professional socialisation, this chapter investigates two international doctoral students' first-year doctoral journey regarding their respective professional identity developments. This chapter begins by reviewing the literature on international doctoral students' professional identity development. Then, the concept of experiential learning is adapted to analyse our professional identity formation situated in our exploratory professional socialisation experiences. Underpinned by this framework, our first-year doctoral socialisation endeavours are critically examined with a focus on how our professional identities evolved. Relevant implications and recommendations are also discussed.

## **9.2 Conceptualising International PhD Students' Professional Identities**

The notion of professional identity has been well-documented in the literature of professional socialisation in doctoral education. Specifically, communities of practice and situated learning (Anderson, 2017), as well as the positioning theory (Phillips & Hayes, 2006), have been extensively applied to conceptualise professional identities. While these studies empirically allude to the formation of a professional identity, the research focus is primarily placed on the meso-level to explore variables that help formulate professional identity, including academic conferences (Kuzhabekova & Temerbayeva, 2018), online first-year seminars (Garcia & Yao, 2019), and university tea rooms (Fotovatian & Miller, 2014). By contrast, there appears to be a paucity of studies investigating the dynamic process of professional identity formation at the micro-level.

In doctoral journeys, individual students shape their professional identities through engaging in formal and informal socialisation. A growing body of literature has highlighted formal socialisation events such as first-year seminars and informal socialisation opportunities, including conferences, writing groups, and casual interactions with fellow doctoral students are important for professional identity development (Garcia & Yao, 2019; Hradsky et al., 2022; Kuzhabekova & Temerbayeva, 2018). Indeed, networking serves an essential role in PhD students' professional socialisation where professional identities are negotiated. Kuzhabekova and Temerbayeva (2018) revealed that PhD students' academic identities as scholars and researchers are developed through attending conferences. Garcia and Yao (2019) found that PhD students' scholarly identities are shaped by participating in first-year seminars where instructors and supervisors play a gate-keeping role in constructing learning communities for these students. Hradsky et al. (2022) showcased that writing group environments allowed doctoral students to construct their academic identities by allowing them to discover the tacit norms of academia. Hence, PhD students' academic and scholarly identities are shaped by their participation in their disciplinary learning communities and the broader academy through the establishment of formal and informal networks.

In the process of developing their professional identities, the first-year stage is critical to doctoral students' professional socialisation. Arguably, the first year in a PhD journey could be seen as a period of infancy in the development of doctoral students' professional identities. Scholars have indicated that the early stage of doctoral education enables doctoral students to foster their professional identities as a doctoral-level learner, academic writer, researcher, or new-born disciplinary member (Pifer & Baker, 2016; Zeivots, 2021). Importantly, the first year of doctoral education serves as an induction to the doctoral scholar role in a specific discipline (Leshem, 2020). When becoming doctoral scholars, contemporary doctoral students also need to gain recognition from their institutions and larger academic communities to foster institutional or academic identities (Gee, 2000). Unlike part-time PhD students who might have work-related socialisation or more opportunities to attend annual conferences, full-time PhD students tend to rely more heavily on first-year professional socialisation in exploring their professional identities. This might be intensified for first-year international doctoral students by their lack of connections to the network of unfamiliar academic communities in a foreign culture.

The insufficient networking experience is particularly challenging for international doctoral students in the first year of their doctoral journey. These students are viewed as transient migrants whose multiple identities are reflected by crossing cultures between sender and receiver countries (Gomes, 2018). Son and Park (2014) stated that the most relevant factors affecting international doctoral students' experiences are adjustment to cross-cultural communication and understanding of academic culture. Research has revealed that these students might find it challenging to enter the disciplinary, institutional, and departmental cultures in doctoral education due to differences in academic expectations (Agustin, 2019; Leshem, 2020; Moharami, 2019; Muhalim, 2019; Soong et al., 2015; Zheng et al., 2019). Hence, when international doctoral students enter academia in their receiver countries, cross-cultural

differences and inadequate preparedness of academic standards become potential obstacles to developing their institutional identities within the faculty. The nurturing of an institutional identity is highly interactional and dynamic, which is intertwined with the sense of recognition that international doctoral students gain from the faculty (Gee, 2000). Moreover, their personal identities as second language learners might constrain their academic identities as academic writers whose writing capacities are developed during their PhD training (see, for example, Moharami, 2019). In this respect, their personal identities and cross-cultural institutional identities might complicate the establishment of an academic identity. This might rarely also be the case for international doctoral students who had postgraduate study experience in the same receiver countries where they are registered for PhD studies. These students might seldom encounter cultural and linguistic barriers in verbal communications while networking, benefiting from cross-cultural relationships they previously built. This is attributed to their development of cultural awareness upon commencing their PhD journeys. Cross-cultural differences might not constraint the shaping of their institutional identities.

Furthermore, as PhD education can be lonely and isolated (Pretorius et al., 2019), first-year international doctoral students might be severely burdened with mental stress in their academic pursuits. It is well documented that first-year international doctoral students experience loneliness and unfamiliarity with the institutional culture in academia (Garcia & Yao, 2019). In this case, the formation of their professional identities as doctoral academics might be affected. Fortunately, researchers found that international doctoral students' negative emotions could be mitigated by enhancing networking engagements (Garcia & Yao, 2019; Kuzhabekova & Temerbayeva, 2018). Gee (2000) also highlighted the significance of understanding how recognition, at a given time and space, is constantly negotiated in the moment-to-moment interaction and how that relates to the formation of one's identities. However, sparse attention has been paid to understanding the influences of international doctoral students' networking experiences on their professional identity formation.

### **9.3 International Doctoral Students' Professional Identities Formation During COVID-19**

As illustrated in Chaps. 4–6 (Mokbul, 2022; Patel, 2022; Rangarajan & Daneshfar, 2022), COVID-19 disruptions have intensified excessive academic and mental pressure on international doctoral students in Australia. International doctoral students were confronted with unexpected challenges owing to border closures, travel restrictions, and public health procedures imposed during the COVID-19 pandemic. For the authors of this chapter, for example, the immediate transition to an online learning environment was especially bewildering. Meanwhile, working from home under lockdowns or a remote enrolment deprived us of the traditionally essential networking



opportunities for professional socialisation. In addition to orienting ourselves to develop professional identities as early career researchers, we needed to integrate agilely to engaging in virtual communities and to identify or occasionally create potential socialising opportunities. Therefore, we were afflicted by excessive stress as a result of trying to integrate into a new academic environment while developing our professional identities under isolation in the pandemic. Given that, it is worth conducting an in-depth examination of how our professional identities were negotiated through professional socialisation during COVID-19.

It is also significant to note that investigating our professional identity should not be interpreted with a deficit understanding of international doctoral students, particularly their struggles with how to establish networks in academia (Zeivots, 2021). Instead, the differences of struggles arising from language and cultural heritage emerge at an individual level, thus not reflecting a specific culture in general. It is impossible for first-year international doctoral students to return to the pre-COVID-19 face-to-face presence in professional socialisation. Therefore, evaluating in-the-moment experiences to explore new ways of socialisation is of great significance. Moreover, investigating this cohort's professional socialisation through networking experiences is a pivotal step to identify first-year international doctoral students' struggles and opportunities.

## 9.4 Analytical Framework: Experiential Learning Cycle

Kolb's (2015) experiential learning cycle has been used in discussing doctoral students' professional socialisation (see, for example, Lam et al., 2019). This stepwise cycle is composed of four stages (Kolb, 2015): "concrete experience (experiencing), abstract conceptualisation (thinking), reflective observation (reflecting), and active experimentation (acting)" (Lam et al., 2019, p. 114). In the present chapter, these four stages are used to interpret the constraints and opportunities relevant to our learning experiences throughout our first-year professional socialisation. By definition, concrete experience refers to learners' knowledge acquisition when they engage in the learning environment (Kolb, 2015). This is represented in the different forms of knowledge we used to gain an initial understanding of socialisation approaches in this chapter. Reflective observation highlights students' reflection process based on their acquired knowledge (Kolb, 2015). For example, we reflected on choosing different socialisation means when absorbing various forms of knowledge in different ways. Such reflection promotes abstract conceptualisation of thinking locally about conceptual knowledge (Kolb, 2015). Active experimentation emphasises learners' application of learning (Kolb, 2015).

Kolb's (2015) concept of experiential learning represents that personal knowledge is created and recreated through learning experiences, from which these four stages subsequently emerge. This study combines different stages of the experiential learning cycle with different forms of professional identities to describe and analyse real-life first-year international doctoral students' professional socialisation under

COVID-19 disruptions. This study also considers such professional socialisation as an experiential learning process, thereby developing first-year international doctoral students' professional identities.

## 9.5 Method

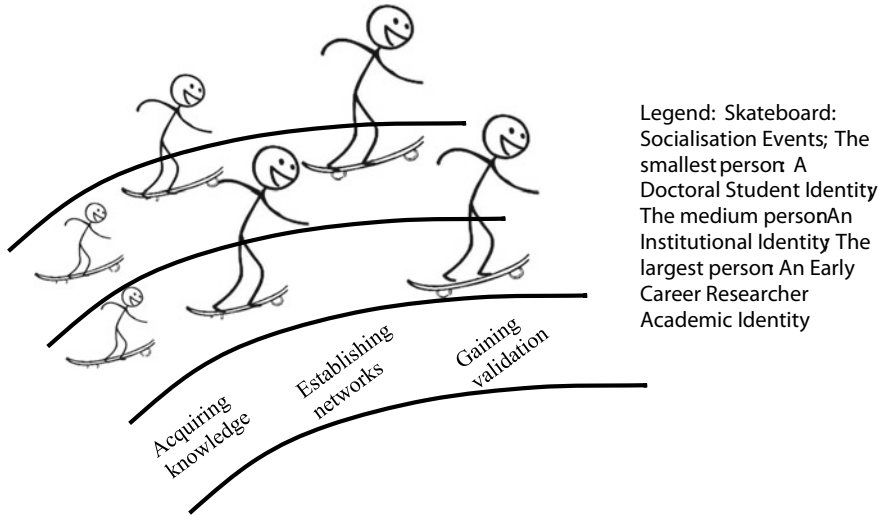
To identify and elicit our varied onshore and offshore networking experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic, we used collaborative autoethnography (see Chang et al., 2013; Hradsky et al., 2022; Pretorius, 2022) as our methodological approach. We conducted 3 phases of data collection and analysis between October and December 2021. In the first phase, we collected individual data sources of the two authors. Jiaqi's reflective journals and Jing's weekly summaries comprised the primary data sources, which had been written on an ongoing basis from the beginning of their PhD journey. A few relevant tweets of authors were also retrieved to reflect further on some specific networking experiences. After collecting the individual data sets, we drafted autobiographical essays about our personal backgrounds and reflected on our networking experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. Then, we shared the essays and responded to each other's stories by inserting comments and questions. As such, the essays were revised, and new reflections were added to increase the richness of the data.

## 9.6 Authors' Context

Both authors have been PhD students at an Australian university since February 2021. Jiaqi attained her master's degree in Australia in July 2020 and the last semester of her course was transitioned to online teaching. She commenced her doctoral journey in Australia where national lockdowns and campus reopening alternated during her first year. Jing completed postgraduate studies on campus in a different Australian university and returned to China in early 2020. She had to postpone her PhD journey due to border closures until February 2021 when she could be enrolled remotely.

## 9.7 Findings and Discussion

In this section, our professional identity formation will be illustrated and critically reflected in three transformative stages which we have represented in Fig. 9.1. We identify these three stages as acquiring knowledge, establishing networks, and gaining validation. As depicted in our figure, we unfolded our professional development journey by starting as a learner (the smallest people in the figure). We absorbed



**Fig. 9.1** Three transformative stages of international doctoral students’ professional identity formation through professional socialisation

professional, institutional, and academic knowledge from formal and informal socialisation and, by doing so, continually practiced and experimented with new perceptions of our identities. In this way, we were able to formulate linear identities as a doctoral student, an institutional member (the medium-sized people in the figure), and an early career researcher (the largest people in the figure).

### 9.8 Acquiring Knowledge: A Doctoral Student Identity

The first stage of international doctoral students’ professional socialisation which we identified in our findings has been termed *acquiring knowledge*. At this anticipatory stage described by Liddell et al. (2014), as both apprentices and newcomers, first-year international doctoral students attempt to seek the necessary information to enter the doctoral programme. Obtaining different forms of knowledge from various socialisation means that first-year international students create their own personal meaning and identity within the academic practice (as highlighted by Leshem, 2020). In this sense, their personal values and beliefs determine their self-perceived identities at the beginning stages of their doctoral candidature.

Following the first stage of the experiential learning cycle, namely concrete experience, we commenced our new doctoral journey. Upon the commencement of our studies, a strong sense of bewilderment occupied both of our minds.

While the enrolment date was approaching, I was at a loss of what to do and how to start my PhD journey. (Jiaqi)

Although I am thrilled to finally be able to start my PhD, I am now clueless. I have not touched anything academic in the past year and my formerly proposed project might have missed its time window. (Jing)

The above accounts show that both of us experienced a high level of disorientation when conceptualising our personal values and beliefs towards an unknown doctoral journey. Additionally, due to COVID-19 disruptions, we were expected to be well-prepared for spontaneous and ongoing changes in learning and research environments. While Jiaqi needed to adjust quickly to a mixed online and offline learning mode, Jing had to develop a completely new system of working remotely from home.

As some of the master's degree tutorials shifted to online sessions in 2020, I took it for granted to accept to work from home without tangible networking experiences. Soon I realised it was a huge challenge for me. (Jiaqi)

Remote learning and working from home were both brand new. I used to be an old-school who preferred studying in brick-and-mortar libraries and communicating with people in person. (Jing)

As highlighted in our reflections, we held serious concerns regarding the online delivery and work from home scenarios in a foreign culture. This might be attributed to our insufficient digital literacy as neither of us was immersed in technology-intensive learning environments in early 2000s when China was in the infancy of e-learning practices (Lin & Nguyen, 2021). In particular, Jiaqi's shifting attitudes from acceptance to hesitation and Jing's sceptical attitude demonstrate personal values and beliefs concerning the daunting and demanding nature of our unfolding PhD journey.

Fortunately, to alleviate our anxiety, we took advantage of our previous learning experiences in Australia to seek possible solutions. Specifically, Jiaqi engaged in informal socialisation seeking advice from an experienced doctoral student in the faculty.

Attempting to mitigate this agitation of lacking social networking in the faculty, I sent an email to one of the senior PhD students who posted comments in the faculty forum. (Jiaqi)

In contrast, Jing accessed formal socialisation channels such as webinars to gather information on professional duties and responsibilities as a commencing PhD student.

Following induction procedures, I started checking relevant websites for useful information and upcoming online events. [...] figuring out features of a new learning management system. (Jing)

As shown in the reflections, both of us proactively attempted to absorb knowledge from more experienced stakeholders via digital connections. Our actions counter the notion that international students find it difficult to integrate into the Western online learning environment, which emphasises collaborative and self-directed learning (Kang & Chang, 2016). Instead, our actions indicated that international doctoral students can adapt well into the Western online learning environment. Both of us creatively blended collaborative learning with self-directed learning as we effectively drew lessons from our former academic experiences in Australia. Both of us also mindfully practiced our accumulated professional knowledge.

When the lockdown ended, I started working in the PhD hub on campus daily to establish social connections with peers. (Jiaqi)

I then proactively engaged myself in webinars and livestreaming symposiums. Such engagements opened the first door to me towards making my PhD. (Jing)

Consistent with Weng (2020), both of our behaviours of knowledge acquisition can be ascribed to our initial ambiguity derived from a limited understanding of the institutional culture. Through the acquisition of knowledge and the integration of this knowledge with our personal values and beliefs, our doctoral student identities were gradually formed. Specifically, Jiaqi started perceiving herself as an active member in the faculty interconnected with other members and Jing began positioning herself as an apprentice in academia who embraced professional learning.

Our growth shows that acquiring professional norms concerning the academy at this early stage should be prioritised. Previous research has demonstrated that the tacit nature of academic norms can marginalise doctoral students, hindering the development of their academic identity (Pretorius & Macaulay, 2021). Thus, this chapter argues that the first step of international doctoral students' professional identity development is to help them understand professional norms. More relevant informal and formal orientation programmes could be provided to simplify and illuminate the often-times tacit norms of the institution, which in turn can help inculcate them into the academy.

## 9.9 Establishing Networks: An Institutional Identity

The second stage of international doctoral students' professional socialisation which we identified in our findings has been termed *establishing networks*. In this stage, networking functions as an effective professional socialisation means to create reflexive practices for these students. Through these practices, first-year international doctoral students test and experiment the acquired knowledge in institutional practice (i.e., the faculty of the university) to construct their professional learning community. In this case, their professional identities transition from perceived to institutional identities through reflection and experimentation with personal values and beliefs. However, our findings suggest that in the second stage, we chose different networking methods to formulate our institutional identities. After clarifying our personal values and beliefs towards our institutional identities, we embarked on different paths: in-depth exploration of socialisation methods (Jiaqi) and enhancement of a sense of belonging (Jing). Our various paths are closely correlated to our physical locations.

After a few months of initial exploration, we recognised the importance of developing professional connections within our institution. However, we indicated different experiences and experimentations that affected our individual reflections. An evident example was an online PhD mentoring programme in which we both participated. In this programme, each senior mentor, an experienced PhD candidate, was assigned several first-year PhD students as mentees. Below, we reflected on

our new professional learning experience of proactively networking with colleagues within the institution.

I was excited to build close relationships with the mentor and other mentees online on a regular basis. We shared our experiences about not only academic writing but also scheduling strategies, which indeed helped me recharge my battery. (Jiaqi)

It is often surprising how much one can learn from fellow research students. Sharing is the best way to establish positive relationships with colleagues, which then may generate valuable insights and mutual support along the PhD journey (Jing).

As exemplified in these narratives, Jiaqi and Jing gained similar mental and academic support from fellow doctoral students. As such, our mental distress associated with conducting independent research was alleviated in this learning community through connecting with fellow doctoral students. Trusting peer networks reduced the isolation we experienced as a result of conducting independent research in our first-year PhD education. By constructing such networks, we subsequently developed institutional identities as doctoral students in the faculty. Therefore, this chapter recommends that first-year PhD students as well as their institutions create, maintain, and promote innovative socialisation opportunities utilising digital technologies.

Interestingly, our foci, purposes, and expectations of our new networking approaches appeared to be totally different, influenced by our different physical locations. Specifically, we were inclined to select different socialisation means to reflect and extend our institutional identities. Jiaqi actively engaged with doctoral students in the faculty.

After long-time deliberation, I realised that daily chatting about research-based concerns among faculty peers was not deep enough to satisfy my eagerness to be formally acknowledged in academia. This inspired me to pursue a brand-new networking mode. (Jiaqi)

As Jiaqi's reflection indicated, her expectation was to be acknowledged and admitted into a broader academic community. Such extension implied her understanding of being a doctoral student was extended through diverse networking experiences in both online and in-person formats. In particular, her aspiration of extending her institutional identities might be attributed to her renewed personal belief of being a doctoral academic researcher in the faculty. In this regard, her aspiration of exploring more in-depth socialisation formats indicates her integration of an institutional identity as a doctoral student in the faculty and personal belief as an academic researcher in the broader academic community.

Comparatively, Jing tried to expand her informal networking channels in hope of deepening her connections to the faculty.

Although I attended diverse professional development sessions, I find it hard to establish close relationships with colleagues under these formal online occasions. I need more informal encounters with peers. (Jing)

Jing's reflection implies a lingering sense of alienation. Despite gaining knowledge of professional norms and the institutional culture, formal online socialisation

alone seemed ineffective in developing her sense of belonging to the institute. Ironically, a sense of belonging to the institutional community occupies an indispensable position for online learners (Garcia & Yao, 2019). To regain such belonging, Jing subsequently applied more of her accumulated knowledge to better integrate her digitally-mediated self into the institute.

After a while's using Twitter and LinkedIn to connect with colleagues and engage in academic conversations, I start reimagining what really matters when we are talking about 'presence'.  
(Jing)

At this point, Jing appeared to be continuously bothered by a sense of isolation from her institute. However, she developed critical reflections once she experimented with virtual socialisation alternatives. Indeed, her reimagination of *presence* in her doctoral programme suggest that her preconceived belief as an isolated doctoral student from her institute started changing, which indicates that her institutional identity had been reshaped. This resulted from mutual reinforcement between her previous formal networking encounters and her informal association with peers on social media. In this way, she began nurturing informal social connections with colleagues in the faculty, which activated her sense of belonging and enhanced her institutional identity.

## 9.10 Gaining Validation: An Early Career Researcher Identity

The third stage of international doctoral students' professional socialisation which we identified in our findings has been termed *gaining validation*. In this stage, the joint effect of being a doctoral student at the institutional level and becoming an early career researcher at the individual level allow international doctoral students to formulate their early career researcher identities to gain validation from the broader academic community. This aligns well with Gee's (2000) acknowledgement of the combined recognition from members of a certain institution. Gee (2000) argues that such recognition matters to newcomers who would like to achieve a certain individual identity affiliated to the institution. After testing and experimenting with our personal beliefs and values through interacting with members in our institute, our altering understandings of ourselves shaped individualised networking behaviours. We gained recognition within and beyond our institution, which significantly validated our forming academic identities as early career researchers.

Our networking approaches seemingly further diverged due to disparate perceptions of our professional development trajectories. Jiaqi underscored the importance of concrete learning through the informal socialisation of co-authoring.

I am keen on improving my professional skills in addition to writing skills. This co-authoring must be a valuable experience to strengthen my knowledge of conducting a research project and to enhance teamwork skills as well as networking experiences simultaneously. (Jiaqi)

As the account explained, Jiaqi's recognition of co-authoring represents her anticipated extension of professional knowledge through participating in this formal learning opportunity. Concurrently, her personal beliefs of enhancing both disciplinary and professional skills could be interpreted as an ideally transformative process from a doctoral student's institutional identity in the faculty to an academic identity in the broader academia by extensively deepening her professional knowledge. In particular, her conceptual understanding of becoming an early career researcher moved beyond her sole pursuit of an end product of a publication. This is congruent with Pretorius and Macaulay's (2021) study which showed that doctoral students engage in professional learning opportunities in order to build their professional skills and enhance their professional brand as academics.

While tentatively practising her perceived identity as an academic identity, Jiaqi encountered various frustrations.

I experienced challenges throughout the collaborative process, including the complexity of the project beyond my imagination and inadequate proficiency in organising the manuscript. These miserable moments all transformed into my self-doubt on whether I have the talent to become a beginning scholar and academic writer. (Jiaqi)

As mentioned earlier, Jiaqi's inadequate professional skills in managing the project, shattered her faith in her professional capacity of becoming an early career researcher. Her negative response might derive from the imposter phenomenon or the need to be perfect as a scholar (Cutri et al., 2021; Wilson & Cutri, 2019).

Fortunately, Jiaqi gradually readjusted her outlook to reposition herself within the larger academy community.

This collaborative learning has facilitated me to become more than an academic writer but a consistent learner. The acceptance of collaborative manuscript means a stimulus for me, and I developed my resilience to embrace the uncertain external challenges. (Jiaqi)

The above narrative suggested that obtaining her manuscript's acceptance from the academic community could be seen as an academic-related validation and positive feedback mechanism in Jiaqi's academic journey. By practising acquired knowledge and adjusted perceived identity, Jiaqi's academic behaviours and perceptions of her own evolving academic identity was formulated as an early career researcher.

For Jing, regular small-group informal meetings were her primary source of socialisation and volunteering opportunities became the main sites for her professional development.

The STEM group catch-up was super heart-warming as we shared our respective struggles, progress, and reflections. We are all in the same pandemic gloom no matter how different every individual experience might be. ... The faculty writing group is such a great place to sharpen one's academic writing skills and a safe space to share PhD struggles. (Jing)

Through this growing sense of connectedness, Jing's isolated feelings were gradually changed. Attending regular gatherings in small groups, she could finally develop deep connections with faculty colleagues. In addition to ongoing social media interactions, Jing began identifying herself as an integrated member of the institution where members collaboratively make sense of academic routines.



Simultaneously, she faced the urgency to experiment with more academia-related roles to test the professional knowledge she had gathered. Jing began actively volunteering in events such as institutional workshops and domestic or international academic conferences.

My work as a mentor and session chair was highly appreciated by all my mentee presenters from multiple countries. My work and performances were well acknowledged by my mentees and the conference organisation committee. (Jing)

Recognised by various stakeholders from other institutions, Jing generated positive feelings through experiencing professional roles. This indicates she gained some validation in the larger academic community as an early career academic.

On this basis, Jing stepped further into experiencing more academic roles such as being a guest presenter in doctoral workshops and a research project presenter at an academic conference.

My first presentation at a PhD workshop went way more intimidating than I expected. Luckily, the feedback from colleagues was encouraging. [...] I was super nervous when presenting at the conference, yet the following heated discussion surprised my main supervisor and me. Also, I never thought I could gain dozens of new connections by attending an online conference. (Jing)

As shown above, Jing gained validation while presenting on academic-related occasions by sharing her scholarly understandings to be tested and commented on by the academic audiences. During the final stage, Jing strengthened her sense of belonging to the institution and built a portfolio of professional skills at the same time. These all contributed to eventually obtaining various forms of validation that encouraged her to develop her emerging academic identity. In these processes, Jing's academic identity was constructed by experimenting with her acquired knowledge of fulfilling versatile professional roles and responsibilities.

## 9.11 Implications and Conclusion

This chapter has explored two first-year international doctoral students' professional socialisation experiences in an Australian higher education institution with a focus on their professional identity formation during the COVID-19 pandemic. In summary, first-year international doctoral students' professional identity formation is promoted by physically or virtually engaging in professional socialisation, where they simultaneously test newly acquired knowledge and individualised emerging perceptions. This chapter has illustrated different trajectories of how two first-year international doctoral students, when unfolding their PhD journey together in the same institution, formulated their professional identities. Despite sharing similar academic and cultural backgrounds, their behaviours of choosing divergent socialisation approaches were largely influenced by their different physical locations due to COVID-19 disruptions. In our study, we have been able to highlight that COVID-19 disruptions created opportunities for Jiaqi to become more introspective towards her

learning behaviours, especially in academic writing, which facilitated the development of her academic identity. By comparison, Jing was inclined to gain a sense of belonging through establishing networks within the institution due to remote enrolment. In this sense, the early career researcher identities are constructed through the joint effect of being a doctoral student at the institutional level, being an academic writer at the individual level, and gaining validation from the academic community.

Our findings suggest that first-year professional identity development of international doctoral students evolves in three transformative stages: acquiring knowledge, establishing networks, and gaining validation. Specifically, first-year international doctoral students' perceived professional identities are repetitively negotiated and reconstructed through a dynamic process when they ongoingly apply acquired knowledge as well as personal values and beliefs into praxis at different stages. Approaching the end of three stages, they form individualised professional identities respectively as a doctoral student, an institutional member, and an early career researcher. First-year international doctoral students' personal values and beliefs are arguably shaped by acquired knowledge. Such a phenomenon could be viewed as a reflection of the first stage of the cycle, namely concrete experience, where first year international doctoral students seek the necessary information and gain new knowledge of the institutional culture. In this sense, international doctoral students' perceived identities are constructed and reconstructed through their experiences. By testing and experimenting with their acquired knowledge in institutional practice, first-year international doctoral students begin to establish their professional learning community, thereby promoting their institutional identities.

This chapter proposed an innovative perspective to unpack first-year international doctoral students' professional identity formation. It innovates Kolb's experiential learning cycle as an analytical framework by adding experiencing, thinking, reflecting, and acting to consider each transitional stage of professional identity formation. In elaborating this framework, this study engages with various types of socialisation events and different possibilities of understanding presence in a doctoral environment. Different ways of socialisation may lead to different paces of developing the three professional identities, transforming from an initial doctoral student into an institutional member and ultimately to an early career researcher. Hence, this chapter highlights the meaningfulness of enabling relevant informal socialisation channels within the institution and encouraging first-year international doctoral students to actively utilise these channels.

It is evident that during and post COVID-19, shifting to a mode of blended, online, or remote PhD education might become normalised, making it significant for higher education institutions to nurture their students' sense of belonging. During the past two years, struggling with various unforeseen COVID-19 disruptions, first-year international doctoral students were expected to swiftly integrate into an unfamiliar institutional culture and unknown academic norms. This struggle with navigating the norms of academia will continue, even when the disruptions associated with COVID-19 are removed. Consequently, we advocate for more research related to appropriate socialisation opportunities for international doctoral students both in face-to-face and online or blended modalities. We also urge fellow scholars and research supervisors

to acknowledge the value international doctoral students bring to PhD programmes in order to create a more inclusive environment for all future researchers.

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# Chapter 10

## An International Student, a Researcher, or a Work-Ready Graduate? Exploring the Self-formation of International Students in Coursework Master's Programmes



Yuqi Lin  and Yue Xu 

**Abstract** Providing research pathways for coursework master's programme (CMP) students is a feature in the Australian higher education system. While a burgeoning number of international students in Australian CMPs participate in research units, it is constraining to rigidly categorise international students as belonging to either research or coursework streams. Acknowledging that, this chapter explores the detailed experiences of international students who have recently completed the research pathway in their CMP. Combining the concepts of self-formation and positioning theory, it investigates international students' interactions with social actors, negotiations with the self and external rules, such as social codes and educational structures. Through collaborative autoethnography, this chapter identifies four stages of self-formation, namely pre-positioning, positioning, performing, and transformation, and highlights the influences of COVID-19 on these four stages. This chapter suggests that collective efforts on an institutional level are required to improve the wellbeing of international students in four main areas, namely developing agency, resolving career anxiety, addressing financial difficulties, and handling mental issues.

**Keywords** Coursework master's · Research pathway programmes · Agency · Self-formation · Positioning · International student experience · Identity · COVID-19

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## 10.1 Introduction

Since the early 1990s, coursework master's programmes (hereinafter CMPs) have grown rapidly in the Australian higher education sector (Kiley & Cumming, 2014). In 2018, it was estimated that over 420,000 students were enrolled in CMPs, with around 217,000 being international students (Department of Education Skills & Employment, 2020). It is predicted that the number of CMPs will continue to increase (Elliot et al., 2016). In Australia, undertaking a CMP requires students to pay tuition fees and fund their living expenses (Kiley & Cumming, 2015). There has been a fundamental change in the student cohort of CMP; according to the findings, the 20–29 age group makes up a significant majority of the CMP population, and those students are likely to be from overseas (Kiley & Cumming, 2014).

While CMPs are receiving enthusiastic endorsement by international students, there has been an ongoing discussion over the value of undertaking a CMP (Drennan & Clarke, 2009; Elliot et al., 2016). As McInnis et al. (1995) point out, a tension between “traditional academic goals and professional ...[and] vocational needs” frequently occurs in CMPs (p. 4). In the current programmes, such a tension has led to debate around the need to complete a thesis in the CMP (Drennan & Clarke, 2009). Some scholars espouse de-emphasising the role of master's theses (Drennan & Clarke, 2009). Indeed, it is questionable to assume that all CMP graduates need to obtain research expertise that could be used in their later chosen careers (Guo et al., 2019). In this regard, providing work-integrated learning programmes and problem-based learning in CMP might be an effective way to enhance graduate employability thereby benefiting CMP students (Drennan & Clarke, 2009). On the other hand, developing the understanding of research methodologies and practising research skills through accomplishing a master's thesis are highly valued by students (Elliot et al., 2016). Indeed, in one survey, 39 per cent of students from CMP expressed that they had often or very often considered undertaking a research degree (Kiley & Cumming, 2014). As Kiley and Cumming (2014) suggest, it is likely that international students come to Australia to undertake a CMP yet subsequently find their passion in research.

Providing a research pathway for master-by-coursework students who aspire to explore their research potential is of great significance (Kiley & Cumming, 2015; McCulloch & Thomas, 2013). This action is supported by the Tertiary Education Qualification and Standards Agency (TEQSA, 2021), an institution that regulates the quality of Australian higher education. Under the Australian Qualification Framework (AQF). The master's degree is specified into three types, namely research, coursework, and extended, and is arranged as a Level 9 qualification (TEQSA, 2021). In 2011, the AQF listed “the specialised knowledge and skills for research and/or professional practice and/or further learning ability” (TEQSA, 2021, p. 17) as one of the education outcomes of CMPs. In addition, the AQF includes the essential objective of supporting and developing the pathway of offering master-by-coursework students access to a more advanced degree, such as the Level 10 qualification—a doctoral degree (TEQSA, 2021).

Given the trend in Australian policy related to higher education, this chapter investigates the experiences of two international students who have undertaken a CMP in Australia. Both students participated in research units during COVID-19, in which they designed and conducted a small-scale research project and completed a master's thesis. While they both have the required academic capabilities to move into Level 10, they chose different paths after graduation—returning to their home country and pursuing a doctoral degree at an Australian university, respectively. In the following section, relevant literature around international students' experience of COVID-19 is reviewed. The concept of self-formation is explored for its potential to conceptualise the experiences of master-level international students. The chapter then presents two narratives that illustrate the two master-level Chinese students' respective experiences and argues that self-formation comprises complex, never-ending practices that constitute a three-stage positioning in the development of identity.

## 10.2 Conceptualising the International Student Experience

The international student experience has been theoretically interpreted in the literature. In particular, the theory of neoliberalism (Arkoudis et al., 2019), the concept of capital (Blackmore et al., 2017; Chattopadhyay, 2014; Kaufmann et al., 2004), and the framework of international student mobility (Collins et al., 2017) are widely applied to conceptualise international students' experiences. While these studies have provided an avenue to meaningfully explore the issue, the emphasis is predominantly placed on the macro level to examine the rationale for international education (Arkoudis et al., 2019). There is, therefore, a need to shift attention to also study international student experience on the micro-level. Such an acknowledgement is particularly required when studying students whose international experiences have been influenced by the circumstances surrounding COVID-19.

This chapter draws on the concept of self-formation to analyse the experience of international students. This concept was initially proposed by Mezirow (1978) in the field of adult education to describe learning as a practice of constructing or reconstructing meaning. It is over the course of this process that one's personal growth is achieved, self-consciousness developed, and a better understanding of the environment garnered (Dirkx, 2012). At the heart of self-formation is the acknowledgement of students' capacity to control and direct their behaviours on their own, termed student agency (Jääskelä et al., 2021). In this regard, a student can make and introduce changes, take decisions based on their values and objectives, rather than following "some external criteria" (Sen, 2000, p. 19).

Marginson (2014) pointed out the interconnection between agency and self-formation and later applied the concept in the field of international education. In previous perceptions in cross-cultural psychology, the international student experience was understood as "a process of adjustment and acculturation" (Marginson, 2014, p. 8). Following the adjustment paradigm, international students were expected to abandon their acquired knowledge in order to culturally "fit into" their host country



(Marginson, 2014). However, such a notion denies student-centredness and overlooks the complexity and diversity of human development (Marginson, 2014). Instead of considering the international student experience as an attempt to assimilate to the host country, this chapter adopts the view that international students are primarily self-formed creators who have an already robust agency to regulate their behaviours and make decisions regarding their development.

Acknowledging the capacity of international students regarding self-regulated practices, the re-conceptualisation of the international student experience is thus necessary. Following the thought of human capital theory, participating in international education is an act of self-cultivation and self-improvement to obtain economic benefits from the labour market (Tomlinson, 2012; Yu, 2020). By the same token, it could also be seen as a well-designed practice of social and cultural capital transformation (Bahna, 2017; Carlo, 2006). For example, studying overseas can expand individuals' social networks, thereby creating future opportunities and other tangible benefits (Field, 2017). While the concept of self-formation has potential theoretical value in the field, more research needs to be conducted to establish detailed arguments.

In response to such a need, this chapter innovates the concept of self-formation by linking it to positioning theory—a theory that enables investigators to explore the conversation between self and others. It has been noted that, for individuals, the definition of position is a “discursive construction of personal stories that make a person's actions intelligible” (Harré & Van Langenhove, 1999, p. 16). Hence, determining the located position is a performance in which individuals actively react to, engage in, and communicate with the social environment and other actors. Following Harré and Dedaić's (2012) suggestion, the act of positioning contains three stages, namely pre-positioning, positioning, and performing.

In accordance with these stages, before making connections in a social context, individual learners will pre-position themselves, meaning that they will have a self-identified image of themselves as a particular type of learner and will have self-evaluated their academic potential and their positions among general learners (Huang & Wang, 2021). Through interactions, individual learners will examine and adjust their self-determined positions based on perceived influences from the social contexts and actors (Harré et al., 2009). This process is defined as positioning, where individual learners negotiate with the self, environment, and others (Harré & Dedaić, 2012). During the positioning process, individuals are likely to gain a more sophisticated understanding of themselves and a clearer goal (Huang & Wang, 2021). With these preparations, they will work out new strategies to enable them to perform and thrive in the environment in which they are located (Huang & Wang, 2021).

In line with the concept of self-formation, positioning theory highlights the role of agency in directing human behaviours and acknowledges the everchanging nature of identity (Harré & Dedaić, 2012; Marginson, 2014). By weaving positioning theory into our understanding of self-formation, this chapter aims to offer some insights into the Australian experiences of two international students in master-by-coursework (containing research units) programmes. In doing so, it intends to further progress the scholarly discussion of self-formation in the field of international education.

### 10.3 International Student Experience of COVID-19

Since the spread of COVID-19, dramatic changes have arisen for international students in learning and living in their host country. In Australia, fair measures were implemented to contain the virus. Since March 2020, on-campus learning activities have been restricted, university events postponed, and facilities closed. Under such circumstances, university courses and programmes have been swiftly transitioned to the online space to ensure the continuity of education practices. In the existing literature, a number of academics have both prioritised and problematised different aspects of the changing higher education context and the ensuing educational and social issues (Dodd et al., 2021; Erdem-Aydin, 2021; Kawasaki et al., 2021). Generally, such discussion around international students' experience falls into two main categories: academic experiences and personal wellbeing.

With regard to the academic experiences of international students, the transition of emergency remote teaching (ERT) is arguably the predominant theme during the period thus far. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, mainstream studies were often conducted to compare conventional face-to-face classes (FFC) with distance learning regarding academic performance, learning satisfaction, and experiences (Loh et al., 2016). In such a situation, little time has been offered for learners to prepare and acquire the necessary skills of remote learning (Loh et al., 2016; Nikou & Maslov, 2021). Consequently, the quality of note-taking could drop (El Said, 2021) and the motivation for learning might decline (Lin & Nguyen, 2021). Moreover, the practices of e-teaching can intensify the existing vulnerabilities of certain groups, including international students (Coffey et al., 2021).

International students are more inclined to feel insecure, lack confidence, and experience discomfort and isolation when receiving ERT during the pandemic (Kawasaki et al., 2021). While the academic performance of ERT may be similar to FFC, international students tend to perceive themselves as being further marginalised in the classrooms and universities due to language, digital, and cultural barriers (Lin & Nguyen, 2021). They are also exposed to extreme social and personal situations, including racial discrimination, policy changes, and unstable incomes (Blackmore, 2020; Coffey et al., 2021). Hence, they can perceive themselves as being unwelcome in the host country (Coffey et al., 2021; Doidge & Doyle; Kumar & Gaztambide-Fernández, 2020). Situated in these precarious positions, the personal wellbeing of many international students is arguably in peril.

Within the context of these academic discourses, more scholarly contributions are required to understand the real-life experiences of international students during these trying times. Little attention has been paid to international students who are undertaking research pathways in their CMPs. Widening student participation in research can be achieved by “improving the standard and relevance of research training programmes [...], enhancing the attractiveness of research careers, facilitating research workforce mobility and increasing participation in the research workforce” (Kiley & Cumming, 2014, p. 104). Meanwhile, international students constitute a considerable percentage of skilled labour for the Australian society (Hawthorne,

2010). This highlights the significance of obtaining an in-depth understanding of these high potential talents to better support them in their journeys in Australia. The starting point of this chapter is the striking tension between the considerable impact of COVID-19 on individual international students, including their mental and physical wellbeing, their practices of self-formation, and their perceptions of international education in Australian universities. Drawing on self-formation and positioning theories, this chapter aims to provide a more comprehensive understanding of international student experiences.

## **10.4 Methodology**

### ***10.4.1 Collaborative Autoethnography***

In the present chapter, collaborative autoethnography is employed as a method to explore the authentic experiences of international students. Autoethnographic studies have been widely used to connect the researcher's self-reflection on personal experiences with their broader sociocultural meanings and interpretation (Chang et al., 2016; Hradsky et al., 2022; Pretorius, 2022; Pretorius & Cutri, 2019). Collaborative autoethnography is seen as a pragmatic application of autoethnography that collects and analyses more than one researcher's data (Chang et al., 2016; Hradsky et al., 2022; Pretorius, 2022). This study adopts collaborative autoethnography to better make sense of the authors' collective experiences, specifically, those of participating in CMPs with research components as international students. Through using collaborative autoethnography, apart from retaining the main functions of autoethnography, both authors were empowered to contribute their unique independent voices, which were then studied to create "a unique synergy and harmony that autoethnographers cannot attain in isolation" (Chang et al., 2016, p. 24).

### ***10.4.2 Authors' Context***

Author 1 (Yuqi) is in the process of transitioning from a master-by-coursework student to her doctoral studies. In June 2019, she attained her bachelor's degree in English Education and enrolled in the CMP, entitled Educational Leadership and Policy, at an Australian university. Her course was transformed to an online environment in her second semester in February 2020. Author 2 (Yue) is currently working full-time as an educator in her home country; she started a CMP in education in February 2019 and spent one year doing online learning due to COVID-19. Both authors completed a research pathway in their fourth semester of CMP.

### **10.4.3 Data Collection and Analysis**

The process of collective reflection on our experiences in Australia as international students in CMP programmes began mid-year in 2020—by this time we had both completed our research pathway courses. This practice enabled us to recognise and examine the critical events, core motivations, and social and personal impacts of our international experiences as well as our similarities and differences as international students. We started by drafting our personal stories, which illustrate our expectations for ourselves as international students, our achievements in CMP and the tensions we experienced with social actors and systems. This was followed by collective reflection, in which the commonalities and distinctions between our stories emerged. Through regular meetings, we clarified and refined our draft to present our voices clearly. Reflexive thematic analysis was applied to interpret the collected data presented in this chapter. We familiarised ourselves with the data during the team meetings and generated initial codes according to the framework (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019). These practices enabled us to identify the themes, as well as define and name the themes in the following meetings (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019).

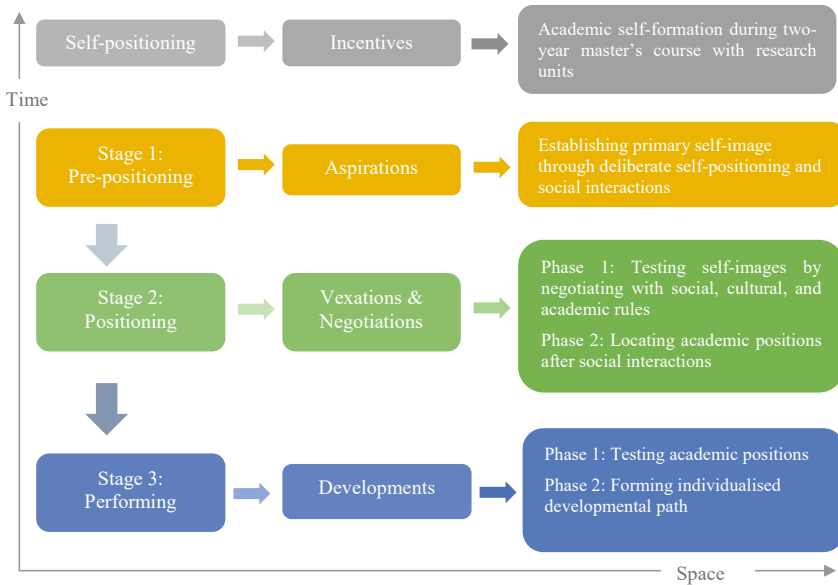
### **10.4.4 Practical Considerations**

Considering the uniqueness of data collection and analysis in collaborative autoethnography, special attention was paid to ensure ethical research practices. Firstly, any harm would be mindfully minimised. When we as authors discussed our experiences during international education, a friendly environment was established to provide emotional support. Meanwhile, our academic advisers offered support services, including a COVID-19 support line and Lifeline, to assist us if we were to have difficulties. Secondly, confidentiality was highly regarded by us regarding what is reported in this chapter. Hence, pseudonyms were used in our individual stories to anonymise people other than ourselves. All documents—meeting minutes, recordings, chat logs—were saved on a password-protected computer.

## **10.5 Findings and Discussion**

Our narratives generated understandings about what experiences and challenges we two international students in CMP had as we navigated our academic journeys and made our life/career choices. Following the theoretical guideline, three intersecting stages of self-formation were identified (see Fig. 10.1), namely pre-positioning, positioning, and performing.

As shown in Fig. 8, international students' practices of self-formation in CMP are considered behaviours grounded in a specific time-space, where they exercise



**Fig. 10.1** Process of international student self-formation

their agencies to negotiate with the environment actively. To illustrate international students' transitional stages, this chapter recognises the need to specify the concept of time and space, as they are critical in understanding the constraints on international students. The former concept, time, is an umbrella term that includes both objective and subjective meanings (Macaulay & Davies, 2019). In this sense, time, in this chapter, refers both to the universal meaning, which is purely objective (Bardon & Dyke, 2013), and psychological time, which is based on human cognition and may be thus regarded as subjective (Bardon & Dyke, 2013). The latter concept, space, is perceived as a term to contain both geographic and sociocultural aspects (Jackson, 2000). As such, the chapter advocates a fluid, flexible, and contextual view toward the international student experience.

### 10.5.1 *Pre-positioning: Establishing Academic Interests*

Pre-positioning is the first stage of international student self-formation (Harré & Dedaić, 2012; Marginson, 2014). At this stage, international students establish their primary self-image academically and personally by practising deliberated self-positioning (Harré & Dedaić, 2012). Their behaviours are enabled by the agency and motivated by the aspirations of achieving professional development and personal growth (see Fig. 10.1). Before commencing CMP, both of us had certain personal and career aspirations:

With no pre-set route of my career and life, I came to Australia as an international student. I hoped that a two-year CMP could hone my professional skills and offer me a chance to experience a different lifestyle. (Yuqi)

I intended to study overseas in a more academically diverse environment with the initial expectation of furthering my understanding of myself and the external world in more depth. (Yue)

The above accounts show that participating in Australian CMP was driven by both of our expectations of enhancing our professional proficiency and exploring the self. Such behaviour was enabled by our already-emerged agency, which directed our thoughts and led us to make life decisions (Jääskelä et al., 2021). The decision of studying abroad reflected our individual values and objectives. In the stage of pre-positioning, our self-identified images were as non-academic students, despite having had positive experiences in doing research.

It had never occurred to me that I was capable of writing in an academic manner until I embarked on my bachelor's thesis, which allowed me to get a glimpse of what the whole process of completing a research project should entail. (Yue)

These thoughts of growing academic potential were strengthened by our social interactions during our CMP. For instance, Yuqi noticed her inclination towards expanding her expertise by engaging herself in intellectual dialogue.

I enjoyed conversing with different people about things that might go beyond my knowledge zone. These interactions encouraged me to explore my life possibilities without limitations. (Yuqi)

Similarly, Yue perceived a desire to deepen her comprehension of herself due to the positive regard she received from her important others:

The confidence and self-esteem that I gained through academic writing were later entrenched by the recognition of my work from my supervisor, which kindled my passion for furthering my research. (Yue)

Following Harré and Dedaić (2012) findings, we were both practising deliberate self-positioning as we demonstrated the initiative to form our own identity. Through social interactions, Yuqi located her interest in knowledge while Yue found her passion in research. These realisations were then enhanced in social interactions, where we strove to express our identity in conversations (Harré & Dedaić, 2012). In this regard, Yuqi described herself as an “open person”, whereas Yue considered herself as a “critical thinker”. As such, our primary academic self-images were created and developed in the stage of pre-positioning. Meanwhile, we presented strong agency in regulating our behaviours (Marginson, 2014). As shown in the narrative, we managed to search and locate our interests during social interactions. These actions counter the notion that international students try to adjust to the environment (Marginson, 2014). This chapter, therefore, argues that a number of international students are likely to seek out and engage with activities that match their own interests. In this regard, such international students may consciously perform self-formation as they exercise their agency to explore the environment and conduct self-cultivation.

### 10.5.2 *Positioning: Exploiting Academic Potentials*

Positioning is the second stage of international student self-formation. In this stage, negotiation with the inner self and external rules in sociocultural and academic fields is conducted. Through these practices, international students can test their self-image, which is primarily formed in the stage of pre-positioning, and then locate their positions in a situated academic field. The findings suggest that there are two modes of positioning, which, in this chapter, are defined as outside-in negotiation and inside-out negotiation. The former model is well-presented in Yuqi's case, as the prevailing theme in her narrative is negotiation with external rules. By interacting with different social actors, her self-image was driven to shift over the period of her course in CMP. At the outset:

I received positive feedback from my lecturers, who encouraged me to transform the work to the level of publication; I was excited and started to be confident in my academic performance. (Yuqi)

Receiving positive feedback from the lecturer—one of the significant others—Yuqi affirmed her academic potential and considered herself an academically capable student. Thus, she:

...started to take baby steps to venture into academia. However, the more I learnt, the more doubtful I became ... my infant-like academic and personal skills, my embarrassing mistakes made me question myself... However, these most challenging moments were mainly perceived by myself—my sense of insecurity. (Yuqi)

In this process, Yuqi re-tested her self-image and found it challenging to achieve her self-expectations. Consequently, she struggled to relocate herself and suffered from negative emotions. She said, “I was disappointed and felt powerless”. This situation worsened during COVID-19 when all activities were transformed online:

I was clueless about online learning and unfamiliar with digital tools, even simple things such as accepting e-invitations and reading the calendar. (Yuqi)

Yuqi's reactions align with Coffey et al.'s (2021) argument that international students had been feeling insecure and lacking confidence when receiving ERT during COVID-19. This phenomenon may be attributed to Yuqi's limited digital literacy (see also Lin & Nguyen, 2021). As Yuqi said, she was “clueless” and “confused about using digital tools”. As a result, her academic performance was compromised due to her ineffective online learning as also shown in Lin and Nguyen's (2021) accounts of students' experiences. During this time, she was “anxious” about not being able to act properly in online classes (Harré & Dedaić, 2012). Meanwhile, her mental wellbeing was in peril, as she felt the positive influences from prior social interactions slipping away. In the stage of positioning, Yuqi's self-image was significantly influenced by the contexts and social actors (Harré & Dedaić, 2012). She shaped her self-perception of her academic ability during social interactions, which implies that she had not yet developed self-consciousness regarding her academic capability. During COVID-19, she found herself constantly making mistakes in online learning, which made her feel

insecure. These negative feelings from social interactions severely undermined her motivation in academic development, resulting in her problematic self-positioning as an “infant-like academic”.

For Yue, the negotiation with the inner self stands out as a main form of positioning. In this regard, she practiced positioning through insider-out negotiation.

I constantly pushed my limits by engaging in a variety of challenging units and enjoyed investigating topics that intrigued me... Thus, I decided to further push my limits and enrolled myself in the research units as part of my master's course. (Yue)

In this second stage of self-formation, Yue examined her academic self-image in the CMP's units, where she affirmed her personal interests. Her academic positioning was further reinforced by the research pathway. In this regard, she said:

I was able to conquer my own fears to re-examine the values that underpin how I had been used to perceiving the world. (Yue)

Yue's behaviours in the second stage of self-formation exemplified some international students' self-regulation and self-cultivation during CMP. Through inside-out negotiation, she utilised her agency to decide on enrolment in particular units, developed self-consciousness in professional skills, and achieved personal growth academically. While Yuqi was struggling to locate herself in an appropriate academic position, Yue managed to finalise her self-image and created an individualised developmental path to conduct self-cultivation.

### ***10.5.3 Performing: Choosing One's Own Path***

Performing is the third stage of international student self-formation. After negotiating with external actors and the self, the individual is expected to perform their position accordingly (Harré & Dedaić, 2012). However, based on our experiences, constant adjustments were being made in the third stage to refine positioning. This process was not linear, but complicated. After completing the research pathway, we embarked on two different paths—pursuing a doctoral degree in the host country (Yuqi) and returning to their home country for employment (Yue). Our performances were closely linked to the context. For example, Yuqi undertook a research pathway in February 2021, when international students were told to go home by the Prime Minister of Australia. Thus, she said:

... I wanted to find better ways to treat international students like me... All I wanted was to join them and add my contribution to this field. I could sense that my motivation had been generated, and my goal became explicit after completing the research pathway. (Yuqi)

In this regard, Yuqi showed her unwillingness to be positioned by the authorities. Differing from the prior stage, where she had accepted forced positioning, she was empowered after taking the research pathway. In this sense, her capability of carrying out her expectation was boosted in the research course, where she received systematic training in research skills.



In Yue's case, she decided to return to her home country after the CMP, mainly due to the lack of institutional funding and parental support. She lamented:

The news my parents constantly saw worried them ... For fear of my safety, they did not support me to pursue a doctoral degree overseas and wanted me to go back to my homeland.  
(Yue)

It can be seen that Yue was negotiating with the external world, including her situated environments and social actors. These behaviours are not typical in the stage of performing, where individuals enact their self-positioning. This chapter suggests that there may be a stage of in-betweenness in the international student self-formation process. As shown in Yue's case, she is in-between the stage of positioning and performing. After the transition, Yue arrived at the performing stage, where she realised her academic self was moving beyond conducting pure research to include her self-formation in professional development:

While I relinquished further studies after graduation, my search for self-actualisation has never ceased. (Yue)

Given our findings, this chapter argues that self-formation is an ever changing task for individuals. In this regard, positioning should be understood as a dynamic process that involves the never-ending negotiation with social actors, self, and environments. While the two authors performed differently after graduation, their practices of self-formation will be carried on in their next life courses. For example, Yue found herself determined to "keep sharpening and transforming my professional knowledge of education" in the workplace. Thus, self-formation is never a linear process where international students experience three-stage positioning. Instead, it is a complex process that contains individual actions, such as self-cultivation, self-doubt, and self-actualisation.

## 10.6 Implications and Conclusion

This chapter has explored two international students' experiences in Australian CMP, focusing on their self-perception of academic capability. The findings have indicated that international students may actively shape their academic self-image by negotiating with social actors and external rules in three stages: pre-positioning, positioning, and performing. These practices are considerably influenced by international students' physical time and their lifetime, as well as their living spaces, which constitute the critical layers in understanding international student experiences. For example, physical time imposes limitations on the valid period of the student visa, which is usually two years for studying a CMP. The lifetime is understood in a socio-cultural context, where individual students hold specific meanings in accordance with their age, such as Yuqi's belief that one needs to develop their professional skills by their 20s. These understandings, which emphasise diversity within the processes of development, lay the foundation for exploring the international student experience.

International student self-formation is facilitated (or not) by their positioning, which is the reflection of self-understanding and the result of social interactions. This chapter identifies two distinctive modes—inside-out and outside-in—through which the two international students used to negotiate with self, social actors, and their environments. By exercising agency, these international students conducted self-cultivation and achieved self-development with the assistance of significant others, such as lecturers and parents. However, it is notable that in the time of COVID-19, positive interactions became very difficult, making it critical for international students to be self-motivated. The changing situations in the labour market and higher education admissions require international students to renegotiate the rules, which may create considerable stress and lead to unrelenting pressure. In this regard, more research is needed to produce effective and workable solutions to offer proper guidance for international students during trying times.

This chapter highlights the complexities of the international student experience, especially the transformations from and among international students, student researchers, or work-ready graduates. While allowing academically capable students in CMPs to enrol in a research pathway offers them chances to sharpen their research skills, the current practices overlook the wellbeing of these students in terms of academic identity construction, career anxiety, financial difficulties, and mental health issues. Moreover, it is worthwhile questioning the aim of participating in the research pathway. As Yue's case suggests, being an academically capable student is not equal to becoming a doctoral student but is just as helpful in becoming a transformable learner who is able to self-cultivate in professional settings. As such, this chapter advocates innovating CMPs with research components by taking a more comprehensive and flexible stance towards students' and academics' objectives in learning research skills.

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# Chapter 11

## Adaptation of Environmental and Sustainability Education During the COVID-19 Pandemic



Kerry Power , Sylvia Christine Almeida , and Nicole Cowan 

**Abstract** The delivery of environment and sustainability education in pre-service teacher programmes was challenged due to the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown conditions. In this chapter, we examine our histories and experiences as three academics adapting environment and sustainability education during forced remote learning. While there is research regarding remote learning, an examination of the unique circumstances that transpired when shifting to forced remote learning conditions during a pandemic is necessary. Using collaborative autoethnography, we explore meaning making and how we adapted our thinking and delivery from outdoor experiential activities to remote learning activities whilst trying to create meaningful experiences for our students who were restricted in their environments. Drawing on Yuval-Davis' theory of situated intersectionality, we recognise that adapting to forced remote learning gave us an opportunity to lean on each other for support despite the various academic stages we occupied. Our diverse histories and experiences re-emerged in a collective and yet different learning space. The situated intersectionality of our collaboration and the physicality of our present locations enhanced how we learnt and worked together by deepening our own understanding and practices.

**Keywords** COVID-19 · Pandemic · ESE · Adaptation · Remote learning · Situated intersectionality

### 11.1 Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has altered the functioning of education sectors, with an estimate of 1.5 billion students' learning impacted due to global school closures

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(UNESCO, 2020). In the higher education sector, this meant rapidly adopting a remote learning environment at the beginning of 2020. This shift seemed temporary when the pandemic first began, but it has been normalised over the last two years, with remote learning and blended learning approaches now an integral aspect of learning and teaching. Hodges et al. (2020) clarify that the difference between remote teaching and the shift to remote learning as a requirement is that remote learning was not made by choice. Further, they address the subordinate view of the shift to remote learning as a substitute for the “real” thing (Hodges et al., 2020). This brings to light questions of compromise and adaptation that did not feature in the conversation around enforced remote learning.

## 11.2 COVID-19 Conditions and Remote Learning of ESE

While there is precedence for successful remote learning delivery of Environment and Sustainability Education (ESE) units before the COVID-19 pandemic, there are studies that indicate that issues experienced by educators because of forced remote learning are yet to be addressed. Barrett (2007) established that students responded favourably to remote learning ESE delivery with high levels of motivation and achievement. Likewise, Azeiteiro et al. (2015) claim that many students pursued further environmental studies, which is supported by Sibbel (2014), suggesting that ESE can be effectively delivered via remote learning by encouraging collaboration through interactive means. However, these studies do not align with recent research into remote delivery due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The Commission for Children and Young People (CCYP) (2021) in Victoria, Australia, found that generally, students were becoming less motivated during remote learning classes as lockdown conditions continued into 2021. It demonstrated that extended lockdowns have negatively impacted education overall (CCYP, 2021). The CCYP (2021) reported that 50% of the 312-student sample population felt “bad” or “terrible” during the fourth lockdown enforced in Victoria in May 2021, compared to 38% in the previous lockdown.

These results support similar research on educators and remote learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic. When investigating how COVID-19 and lockdown conditions impacted the delivery of sustainable development units, Leal Filho et al. (2021) found that an increased workload for educators was identified as a crucial issue. Kulikowski et al. (2021) further demonstrated that educator motivation, job satisfaction and work engagement were negatively impacted, leading them to conclude that remote learning is a *double-edged sword* whereby teaching remotely paves the way for continuous education regardless of mitigating factors. They found that educators perceived remote learning as less conducive to student motivation, which Ferri et al. (2020) further supported, claiming that social and technological aspects of teaching remotely were challenging. Ferri et al. (2020) described these challenges as a lack of technology, internet connectivity, teachers’ digital skills, and social presence.

Hadzigeorgiou (2021) highlights the ESE curriculum and advocates for the need to focus on global awareness, ecological thinking, and the role of science in decision-making by promoting the idea of sustainability in an ever increasingly complex future. Further, Corbera et al. (2020) argue that remote learning initiated by COVID-19 conditions offers educators an opportunity to adapt their practice by holistically focusing on an ethics of care. This requires redefining what excellence in teaching means and how environments, including how we coexist with each other, including non-human species, require adaptation (Corbera et al., 2020). Our experience of the sudden and different delivery of ESE aligned with the key issues in the aforementioned studies and prompted us to ask: *How do ESE academics adapt and experience remote learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic?* We address this question by providing insight into the experiences, perceptions, and adaptations of three academics involved in making swift changes to ESE units initially designed with outdoor experiential learning modules.

### 11.3 Collaborative Autoethnography

Approaching how we adapted all ESE units to remote learning and why it was necessary to document our histories, experiences, and challenges resulted in collaborative autoethnography. Or was it the other way around? Collaborative autoethnography espouses an ethical approach when collecting and analysing participant data (Lapadat, 2017). The historical aspects of autoethnography are grounded in the work of Ellis (2004, 2007, 2009), Ellis and Bochner (2006) and Ellis et al. (2011) and consequently produce data to capture the rawness of experience as presented by authors. As described in Chap. 3 (Pretorius, 2022), autoethnography as a methodology is fraught with theoretical issues of representation and a perceived lack of scientific rigour, which provides fodder for criticism (Ellis, 2009; Holman Jones et al., 2016). Issues surround objectivity, particularly as the author is the subject, and therefore, objectivity and perspective are challenged (Holman Jones et al., 2016; Pretorius, 2022). As noted earlier (Pretorius, 2022), though, these objections fail to recognise the value of subjective experience. Autoethnographers believe that “research can be rigorous, theoretical, and analytical and emotional, therapeutic, and inclusive of personal and social phenomena” (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 283). Importantly, we believe autoethnography is an ethical approach to creating data, particularly regarding social justice issues, hierarchical and patriarchal histories, and the de-commodification of knowledge. We use this methodology with these issues in mind as they are interwoven throughout our presentation and data analysis by illuminating how and why our stories matter regarding educational adaptation in response to COVID-19.

As we situate our story as a collective experience, with various histories, needs, and challenges, we draw on Yuval-Davis’ (2015) theory of situated intersectionality which addresses non-linear transculturality that procure group relations and meaning making. Yuval-Davis (2015) uses the term *transculturality* to discern social divisions and the varied meanings and power relations attributed. We use this term to elucidate



the existence of power dynamics in higher education and to understand how we, as three academics at various stages in our careers, were able to support ESE adaptation to remote learning in a swift manner. This process required an adaptation of the social and professional dynamics that existed between us. Adaptation is often championed in education, however, adaptation can repress personal and professional aspects of how and why we respond to challenges. We found that our stories were necessary to tell alongside COVID-19 pandemic conditions. Our stories kept us afloat and they were a significant part of how we related to each other and supported each other.

It is important to refrain from presenting our experience as representative of how things should be done when teaching ESE remotely. Barad (2003) argues that rather than “descriptions of reality,” the “matter of practices” attributes “important questions of ontology, materiality, and agency” (pp. 802–803). Our remote learning adaptation occurred alongside student experience and was not simply our experience as educators to describe, so we acknowledge the intra-active possibilities that potentially built knowledge now and for future remote learning ESE iterations. Intra-action is not the same as interaction (Barad, 2010). Interaction implies two separate objects connecting. Intra-action, on the other hand, is dynamic, as the exchange between objects is inseparable and creates a phenomenon (Barad, 2010).

The educational events that occurred while teaching ESE under lockdown were not only generated by learning outcomes and our hopeful intentions but were active, agential, and vibrant intra-actions. These perspectives embrace ethico-political awareness, requiring and instigating change that develops, for example, from an acknowledgement of and a challenge to power relations. Further, Clarke and Mcphie (2020) elucidate the political nature of “challenging the normative dominance of gendered environmental binaries”, which posits openness to change as political and credence afforded to separate, fixed, or opposite states, as fiction (p. 1238). Change in the way we delivered ESE was needed, but not necessarily a complete departure from what had preceded. To analyse the adaptation of ESE under lockdown, we argue the need to acknowledge personal and professional challenges that were faced when lockdown orders turned our physical classrooms into virtual ones. The exchange of our stories and various backgrounds instigated change. Sonu and Snaza (2015) suggest that meaningful human relationships bring to light the entangled nature of interactions, and in our case, the entangled nature of physical and remote teaching and learning experiences.

To build a relationship with students and to encourage online interactivity, we asked students to document their interaction with the outdoors in photographs. Students looked outside and saw what was in view and what was changing. The documentation needed to be made over time so that subtle or overt changes became visible when multiple photos were posted side by side in remote learning forums. Haraway (2016) suggests that, when responding in disturbing times, it is important to not only stir things up, but seek to “rebuild quiet places” (p. 1). Haraway’s (2016) potent suggestion requires balance ranging from protest and action to introspection. We wanted to see what students were seeing and ignite curiosity about what was happening outside. *Rebuilding quiet places* was framed on our digital screens, as materials were uploaded to the forum space and we became acquainted with student

imagery and perception. Perspectives were often intimate as glimpses of backyards appeared and trees tapped on windows next to desktops. The outside wanted in; memories surfaced, and we remembered the outdoors beyond present lockdown conditions.

The data used in this chapter are the conversations we shared to address ongoing personal and professional shifts. The narratives offer insightful accounts of our experiences and centre notions of adaptation to showcase meaning making as individuals and as members of a group. As each of us brought in varied life and educational experiences, the precarious state of ongoing lockdowns encouraged a camaraderie and an adaptable support system. Our study guides us towards a better understanding of the complex meaning-making activated by COVID-19 pandemic experiences and where we and ESE may locate in remote learning spaces.

Our stories began in Melbourne, Australia, in 2020, as three ESE educators, who had known each other for only a brief period of time, needed to shift our perceptions of teaching. Our thinking was not necessarily aligned, and therefore we focused on significant areas: lived experiences that informed our ESE thinking, ESE adaptation, and situated intersectionality to interweave our present location. Our conversations weave through time as we analyse how we became ESE educators and how our individual perspectives assisted adaptation. Geographical, personal, educational, and historical issues circle our conversations and eventually become central to navigating our way during lockdowns, including our ability to inter-relate our histories, needs and our ongoing imaginings of ESE.

## 11.4 Lived Experiences that Informed Our ESE Thinking

It is important to note that our lived experiences informed our thinking around ESE, as illustrated by our conversations below.

Sylvia: I lived and worked across different states in India and then lived in Africa right by the sea. I then went to study in the United States (US) in a joint programme between the National Science Foundation and the Faculty of Education, funded by NASA as part of a global project aimed to encourage young children to research biodiversity. Cleveland was considered one of the largest networks of parks within an urban city in the US so as part of that research project, I used to go to parks and collect biodiversity data and just fell in love. I had not had a close experience with nature before that. Growing up in Bombay, well, there were only three trees from the bus stop to my home. However, my environmental awareness and my connection with nature grew. Every time I came home to India from being away, it was like time lapse photography; it just wasn't the same place. I was lost in my own city and was heartbroken. There were two incidents that stand out to me, one was the floods in 2005 where my sister and niece nearly lost their lives, and the other was a visit to one of my favourite beaches. After nearly 10 years, I went with my son who was two or three at the time, and I cried. It was full of rubbish, and I thought, you know, money is not everything in life, there must be more meaning to what I do.

Nicole: My parents did not care much about the garden or being outside. We would go outside a lot because my dad would take me bike riding or play sports or hang out with friends. I grew up in a family with little spare money, so it was free entertainment. Dad found bikes

either at the tip or off the front of people's nature strips when it was time for hard rubbish and then painted them and gave them to us for Christmas. They looked new and fantastic. However, I am fascinated by the biological world; I just love it. I ended up completing a zoology degree, teaching science and biology at secondary school, and then I continued to study ESE. When it rains, I go and listen to frogs in the wetlands.

Kerry: My old neighbour said he could tell when it was going to rain by the sound of the frogs in his backyard. I grew up in the outskirts of South-East Melbourne before there was a suburban sprawl. Like you Nicole, we would ride our bikes in the morning and Mum wouldn't see us back until lunch or dinner. We would ride off in little packs travelling through bush and semi-constructed houses. I had this fearlessness when experiencing new things. One of my memories was falling off a bike. I knew it was happening and just resigned to the inevitability of it. I slid off in slow motion and saw my blurry friends watching me as I fell to the gravel. I always feel as if I need to recount memories in vivid detail. I went on to study art, art education and now researching art and ESE.

Alongside our growing acquaintance at the beginning of 2020, news reports featured confusion in overcrowded hospital emergency wards in Wuhan, China. A desperate few from the region were sending Tweets and YouTube messages documenting the swift and brutal nature of a new virus which compromised respiratory systems. Ben Kavanagh was an English teacher in Wuhan and became a daily source of insider views from an English-speaking perspective on YouTube (Channel 4 News, 2020). The early days of January 2020 depicted vlogs of a cheery natured Ben wearing double masks, gloves, and swimming goggles walking to the local supermarket with an empty suitcase for supplies. It was noticeable that the five lane roads were silent and dark, and the self-serve only supermarket with masked people seemed dystopian. At the time, it was a unique perspective far away from Melbourne and a premonition of what we all were to endure in the months and years ahead. From the safety of our digital screens, a crisis unfolded as streets were sprayed with disinfectant and terms such as deep cleaning, swabs, masks, and social distancing became the vernacular of everyday life. The image of the virus was a three-dimensional ball with knobby attachments, a spiky invader that hovered the air. It played on our minds and activated a domino effect of new social rules, particularly regarding health and safety. The very essence of what we thought was important about ESE was under threat, as a predator had infiltrated our plans.

Political speculation downplayed and confused many things about the virus. Meanwhile, we needed to provide ways to communicate ESE to students experiencing many changes to their own circumstances and prioritise the building of relationships to connect through a digital screen. What does building relationships through a screen mean? The established structure of a teacher and student relationship was already there, although it was not a reciprocal relationship, at least not yet. The different spaces we were inhabiting were personal, global, and power related. Breaking these down meant recognising social and physical divisions that were in place. We, as educators, were just developing our relationship with the news of the pandemic; how were we to build cohesion and acceptance to connect with students now?

## 11.5 ESE Adaptation

ESE is an umbrella acronym that in many ways combines a range of understandings and perspectives of environmental education and education for sustainability. Depending on the place, space, and context this can be taught in a range of ways, however, learning about the environment and sustainability centres nature as a starting point for students to build a relationship with these issues. Our approach as a team of academics working with ESE has been enthused by the need to go beyond the four walls of the classroom and develop a range of experiences for students to walk, ask questions, look, smell, and feel what is happening outside. We draw on experiential (Goralnik et al., 2012) and place-based (Harrison & Greenfield, 2011) approaches and consider Sobel's (2008) argument that children require learning experiences with nature due to a developing alienation from the natural world. This alienation can reach far and wide. How we learn and make meaningful connections and ethical decisions has implications for our planet.

Kerry: It's important how you raise the global aspects of where we live and the diversity Sylvia, because I have noticed that many students seem to have a vision of who they are and what they might accept based solely on their own experience, and I find that worrisome.

Sylvia: Well, also consider that it's difficult, nearly impossible, to take out your values when you're teaching about the environment. However, when you start saying don't do this, don't do that it can have the opposite effect, and some students just turn off.

Nicole: I can relate to that. I had a conversation with my daughter, and I think it might be a generational thing, but I think there is confusion between awareness, guilt, and shame. We discussed one of her purchases, and she must have gone away and thought about it and said weeks later that she felt I was shaming her. I was just making her aware that the product was not ethically sustainable.

Due to forced remote conditions, we felt apprehensive and pre-empted a disconnected student experience before the semester had begun. We attempted to encourage students to experience nature and consider environmental issues by challenging them to bring their thoughts online. Their thoughts and feelings, located in the physicality of their bodies, were diverted through a series of digital inputs and outputs that needed to be uploaded to a remote learning environment. The power dynamic of asking students to do what we were struggling to do ourselves needed much more thought (Yuval-Davis, 2015). We were beginning to understand that an abrupt change to remote learning would impact us all differently. We wondered what was travelling alongside our feelings of adaptation.

Nicole: I feel like Zoom is a barrier to the way that I normally behave in person. I'm very upbeat, energetic and I really love to get to know the students. We can have lots of conversations, but it's generally in the breakout rooms, and you're really limited with time. In a classroom, I feel like I make good connections and get to know my students really well. When teaching at secondary school, a parent came to parent-teacher interviews. I taught his son maths, and he said, "I've only come to the interview to tell you what a fantastic job you're doing" and I said, "oh what, why is that?" He replied, "my son's in your year 8 math class, and I coach five of the boys in that class for basketball, and all they talk about is your math class, and it's the first time they've ever enjoyed maths." I was amazed he went out of

his way to come and tell me this, but I don't feel like I would get that sort of feedback for my online teaching.

Sylvia: I have a hot and cold relationship with remote learning. Sometimes I like remote learning functionality, for example, doing a poll, or Nicole's favourite Mentimeter. The learning opportunities are great, but I have really been struggling with encouraging interaction. There is a whole spectrum of students and when we are face to face it's a bit easier to draw in shy students. When you're in a classroom you radiate energy and students radiate energy and that exchange of energy is important. If I'm struggling with something in class because we are all human, students will kind of rally around and say something that is positive to keep me going. That doesn't happen in a remote learning class as it is much easier to disassociate yourself from each other. The personal connection is lost when cameras are off, and they are on mute.

Kerry: I'm wondering whether we assume that because they're studying to be teachers, they are willing to turn on their camera and communicate freely online.

Barrett (2007) asserts the "rhetoric–reality gap in environmental education" is a dominant discourse that constrains environmental educators (p. 209). This might be applied to the precarious position of students learning ESE for the first time, as opportunities for writing their thoughts online may conjure feelings of uncertainty or shame if they are not compliant with a dominant narrative. The continuum of student engagement on asynchronous remote learning forums seemed to dissipate from the beginning weeks of the course toward the end of the twelve-week units. Contrary to this, engagement in synchronous remote learning tutorials intensified over time which opens speculation of how and why social connections may occur in potentially smaller or closed remote learning forums. As Kerry observed,

I was aware that group work and self-directed learning were effective, but I didn't realise how well it would go in breakout rooms.

Returning to consider Haraway's (2016) point to "rebuild quiet places" (p. 1), we noticed that students communicated more freely in Zoom breakout rooms that contained five or six occupants and kept their cameras on. Once visible, within a breakout room, personal conversations interweaved with the tutorial directives to form social connections. We also noticed visual cues or even background imagery may have enhanced the connections made, which was evident in the first observational task. As the weeks moved on, conversations and familiar imagery provided continuity, as the relevance of the personal became embedded in the remote learning ESE context. The remote learning tutorials encouraged learning about the outside, a world that was compartmentalised by restrictive activity. Malone (2007) stresses the experience of children and nature is conceptualised by looking through the window of a car or in spaces allocated in backyards, schools, and sporting venues. This allocation further distinguishes the outside as a human construct, fenced in to ward off nature as wild and dangerous (Malone, 2007). Sylvia noted the importance of this:

It is easy to create fear. We may remember our connection with the outside but feel conflicted about joining in. These mixed messages can burrow deep as we grow up negotiating a world bordered, controlled and at times, feared. So, what sort of outside were we asking to bring inside?

In the week two tutorials, we asked about accessibility. What sort of access to outside, in any form or manner, were students able to have? There was inequitable access to outdoor areas. Some students were in dormitories and unable to interact with other students in student housing and some did not have a backyard. The five-kilometre circumference that became a mandatory perimeter for Melbourne residents added to enclosed feelings of lockdown. Phrases emerged in the media such as “the ring of steel”, “pandemic induced recession”, and “leaving a restricted area” (Boseley, 2020). Inside was a place to imagine what was outside, a restricted area due to a highly contagious and deadly virus.

## 11.6 Situated Intersectionality

Intersectionality, as theorised by Yuval-Davis (2006, 2012, 2015), is a framework that recognises equality and human rights, particularly in the field of feminist studies. Yuval-Davis (2015) recognises that this theoretical framework has many iterations and defines her version as “situated intersectionality” which is applicable “to all people and not just to marginalised and racialised women, with whom the rise of intersectionality theory is historically linked” (p. 93). The reason for this distinction is based on Yuval-Davis’ (2015) critique of essentialism, particularly when categorising social divisions. We found that adhering to changes in social and political dynamics was necessary to acknowledge how educational spaces were adapted, including acknowledging the perceived divisions. The mechanisms put in place to convert education to remote learning were punctuated by need and caution; we needed to lean on each other regardless of experience and academic position for support.

We asked students to share their observations of what was outside. We noticed that the comments made under the photos were of surprise. Living inside and leaving outside to travel somewhere else had built a wall of complacency. Some things had become invisible or unnoticed and consequently forgotten. Close observation opened an appreciation of what was outside. Focusing on up and down and sideway flying insects stopped time. Time also shifted when skies amassed clouds, puddles protracted, and foliage that had been there for many years suddenly popped up in view. Students were documenting their relationship with nature which was not static or easily defined.

Reluctance or even fear of going outside, as Malone (2007) argued, can be very real and is instilled in children as they grow. The lockdown conditions provided further reasons to fear an invisible foe manifested in various COVID-19 symptoms. When experiencing the observational learning task, it seemed as if the constraints of physical encounters were superseded by the force of memory and perception when seeing, hearing, smelling, and feeling. While we encouraged these sensory encounters in our face-to-face tutorials, we were encouraged by the student led signs of lost and found relationships with nature in remote learning. Memory played a part in this process, as students wrote about being in nature, when they were children. While we actively searched for positive remote learning experiences, there were some students who did

not communicate their experiences while in the main remote learning tutorial room or turn their cameras on. We wondered if it was lack of compliance with digital etiquette such as students turning on cameras or part of the complex process of participating in remote learning?

Nicole: My own children will not turn the cameras on for anybody. One of their poor art teachers was begging them to turn the cameras on; “I’m pretty lonely on my own, can you please turn the cameras on?” and not one student did. My daughter explained that it is to do with wearing pyjamas and not looking their best.

Jickling (1992) warns of educational abstractions that describe perception or provide concrete definitions that do not encourage critical thinking. Our presumptions and expectations of student engagement and indications of a deep relationship with nature needed to change to reflect the lockdown conditions we were currently experiencing. When uploading sensory connections with the *outside*, the means with which to locate these connections may have been more of an abstraction than ever before. However, we did find that provocations encouraged an “epistemic community” whereby conversations, arguments, queries, thinking, remembering, and engagement produced synergistic encounters (Yuval-Davis, 2012, p. 49).

Sylvia: I had not realised before this, the value of having a sounding board that I can speak to without any fear of judgment.

A beach in India riddled with rubbish was remembered, bikes that were upcycled were cherished and fearlessness was longed for. In some instances, students recognised that their relationship with materialistic concerns such as purchasing clothes to participate in a life outside of lockdown (e.g., “if I get this one more thing, I will be happy”) was changing. Students wondered about how busy their life was before lockdown, as continuous work, study, social life, and connecting online seemed too much or overwhelming and needed to slow down. Pressure to be part of the neoliberal hamster wheel, turning and running to keep up with a consumerist minefield of competition and outward appearance was recognised. We wonder if as van der Tuin (2014) attests that interference or recognising difference, in this case, is how meaning was made.

Although Wals (2011) clarifies that even when classroom experiences do not supplement the process of caring about ESE issues, they can prompt questions about what a relationship with ESE might be. Authentic experiences are preferred, but how do you instigate learning so that educational abstractions that Jickling (1992) clarifies create meaningful encounters? We can turn to Wals and Benavot (2017) and recognise that our remote learning ESE experiences that initially seemed bereft of the natural world and social opportunity encouraged reciprocity and agency despite physical limitations. The intra-actions that were afforded by forced remote learning conditions directly spoke to our histories and our ability to adapt (Barad, 2010).

## 11.7 Our Present Location

Zooming in, we saw faces and heard responses to a pandemic framed by our ESE intentions. We attempted remote learning engagement to traverse a perceived binary between what was happening outside of our screens and what was happening inside of them, our relationship with each other, the wellbeing of students, and our changing environments. Learning about our environment and sustainability in a time of lockdown was not learning about something that was happening out there, but something that was part of our materiality. Our remote learning ESE adaptation provided opportunities to challenge our perception and connect. This is helpful considering that not only was change initiated by a pandemic and delivering remote learning ESE units but the distribution of power between the educators had changed as well. This further emphasises the ethical premises of how and why pre-service teachers need to challenge prevailing structures.

## 11.8 Conclusion

A sudden shift to remote learning meant adapting to a new way of teaching. This was challenging given the need to reorient an outdoor set of learning experiences to an indoor learning mode. This was compounded by the fact that the teaching team was new to each other and did not have a pre-established comfort of collegiality. Given the severity of the lockdown, asking students to step outside and bring in outdoor and nature-based activities required adaptive thinking. Our diverse histories and experiences re-emerged in a collective and yet different learning space. The situated intersectionality of our collaboration and the physicality of our present location enhanced how we learnt and worked together by providing meaningful learning experiences for our students and deepening our own understanding and practices of ESE. We recommend further research into how ESE educators implement remote learning, particularly considering the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent implications for education.

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**Part IV**  
**Resilience and Growth—Features**  
**of Academic Identity Development During**  
**a Pandemic**

# Chapter 12

## Hajime! はじめ! Karate as Academic Salvation



Elvira Kalenjuk 

**Abstract** In March 2020, an official international declaration of a global pandemic resulted in worldwide uncertainty as our everyday experiences, including those within academia, were being hijacked by a contagion. Herein, I merge a philosophy of phenomenology with the methodology of autoethnography to elicit my personal story by recounting my academic experiences throughout the pandemic. This chapter describes how the first lockdown compelled a swift resignation from my revered, yet altered, academic position followed by an enrolment in PhD studies while simultaneously registering for Karate. Unexpectedly, training in Karate has proven to be a key ally in sculpting my academic identity, presenting as academic salvation during a time of professional crisis and global despondency.

**Keywords** Autoethnography · Academic identity · Phenomenology · Karate · COVID-19

### 12.1 Introduction

This narrative begins during my employment as a lecturer and subject developer within the Bachelor of Education (Early Years) programme and Master of Teaching (Internship), when a COVID-19 outbreak in my hometown of Melbourne forced a strict lockdown for several months. The threat of the pandemic demanded new ways of working and, like my colleagues, I initially rose to these challenges by successfully redesigning and delivering my subjects online (see, for example, Lindstrom et al., 2021; Nandy et al., 2021). However, I felt under immense pressure to sustain these alternate ways of operating as the lockdown lingered with little signs of lifting. Similarly, my co-workers also started to feel the strain, with Bebbington (2021) capturing the reverberating sentiment that even “after six months of pandemic restrictions, the mood in Australian university communities has never been so bleak” (p. 158). Faced

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with an uncertain future, I listened to my colleagues over Zoom holding on to hope about “returning to the classroom next semester” as I peered into the darkness.

## 12.2 Background

Working from home meant that we missed our open offices, the intellectual repartee that filled the air, the rendezvous in the kitchen at morning tea, and the gossip over lunch. Small, incidental moments that padded out the workday with flickers of delight. Instead, we had our faces crammed onto a time-restricted screen as staff meetings were forced online. There was little chance for a sneaky side chat as we focused on the business at hand. The bachelor programme hosted many international students, who had been blindsided and trapped either in or outside of Australia due to border closures. We had to address and meet their needs as the window of opportunity to travel passed by and we watched the world shut down. Our students felt hopeless and depressed, and they cried about their loss and displacement, with some students losing loved ones abroad due to COVID-19-outbreaks at home. The staff were heartbroken, and we scrambled to reduce the students’ workload, so they felt less burdened, and to keep them enrolled so as not to risk their futures.

For me, the novelty of online lectures began to diminish as my job had now morphed into something new. Instead of the busy open office environment, I was working at home in an isolated way. Dulled by the lack of welcomed staff interruptions, my energy and enthusiasm for online teaching had dwindled. So, rather than being called on for intellectual banter, I was asked to help with adverbs, biodiversity, and algebra as my children experienced remote learning misery. My job had changed from a dynamic and social space to solitary work with intermittent online classes that were more aligned with student counselling. With my new and unexpected role description, coupled with managing my own children’s remote schooling, I vacillated between agitation and melancholy.

The pandemic not only cheated the joy of face-to-face classes and collaborative staff engagement, but it also changed the historical rhythms of my everyday practices. These were the routines that prepared me for my teaching role like the performativity of dressing in professional clothing (Heffernan & Thomson, 2020). Instead, I rolled out of bed and into a pair of leggings, tee-shirt, and joggers with a top-tail bun that defined the mornings. My work was now two metres away and I lost the symbolic demarcation of time and space hosted by the drive to work. My employment and private worlds were now blurred into one boundary-less mess. This left me in a space similarly articulated by Lindstrom et al. (2021) where I was “showing up for life but living without purpose and aim” (p. 150), a concept which has since been termed *languishing*. Languishing seemed to capture the global mood of the pandemic as it was bandied about in media circles, psychologically describing how individuals might be feeling in a time of significant disruption. For Melbournians, this was compounded by a five-kilometre radius travel restriction, as well as the imposition

of night curfews, which offered little mental reprieve and options for rejuvenation. My changed reality compelled a generalised feeling of resignation and despondency.

Overall, academia was experiencing significant challenges and this sentiment echoed around parts of the world (Creely et al., 2021; Jung et al., 2021; Nandy et al., 2021; Thatcher et al., 2020). Jung et al. (2021) depicted these new circumstances that reflected the realities of my own workspaces where “students were faced with scenarios in which the learning experience was not what they expected; numerous university employees experienced heightened workloads, disrupted work routines, and job insecurity; and many students and faculty members felt under duress due to psychological issues caused by social isolation, insecurity, and anxiety” (p. 108). The broader academic backdrop was uninspiring and this, combined with months of stay-at-home orders and unrelenting responsibilities, prompted me to search for a way to reclaim the narrative of my own life. I began thinking about applying for the Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) programme as I recognised how forced confinement might be an excellent training ground for doctoral work. Consequently, I resigned from my once loved, and highly sought-after academic position to commit to full time PhD study, a road I had always intended to eventually traverse, and which enabled me to stay connected to an academic space. This was not an easy decision as I felt guilty to abandon my students who were deeply suffering. Furthermore, as I was an integral part of a small team within higher education programmes, I knew I would also be leaving a heavier load for my colleagues to carry. However, the dissatisfaction of online teaching and remote-school-parenting during the global pandemic was simply unsustainable.

As with all new endeavours, I was looking forward to PhD study. Nevertheless, I was tired as feelings of demoralisation and exhaustion, ever pervasive, were still lingering especially with online, deskbound classes and supervision. So, once governmental restrictions had been eased, I enrolled in Karate classes. Karate is a martial art, with origins tracing back to India and China (Urban, 1967) as well as Japan (Frigout et al., 2020; Urban, 1967). The word, “Karate” means “empty hand” as it is a style of fighting without weapons (Urban, 1967, p. 11). Karate has been described as a way of life (Haines, 2011; Urban, 1967) and its therapeutic quality, which appealed to me, have been previously explored (Oulanova, 2009). I had always wanted to learn a martial art and considered this a chance to equipose the imbalance within my mind and body (Jansen et al., 2017; Manik, 2020).

I imagined that amid a pandemic, engaging in physical activity could support this more balanced lifestyle. Researchers have studied the advantages of exercise for students across a spectrum of ages from early years to adulthood (Álvarez-Bueno et al., 2020; Lipošek et al., 2018). The benefits of physical activity include improved health outcomes, for example, reducing the risk of disease, having a positive effect on perception and concentration, improved self-esteem, and reduction of stress and anxiety (Australian Government, 2021; Lipošek et al., 2018). Some researchers have also shown a correlation between exercise and cognitive or scholastic improvement (Álvarez-Bueno et al., 2020). Specifically, the advantages of Karate training have been examined in a one-year school-based Karate intervention that “resulted in improved academic achievement, cardiorespiratory fitness, and balance, as well as

reduced conduct problems” (Pinto-Escalona et al., 2021, p. 5). Thus, there was sufficient evidence to expect that enrolment in Karate might improve not only my physical health but also my mental and emotional wellbeing and may even boost academic performance (Moore et al., 2020).

There is a notable absence of research related to the benefits of exercise specifically for doctoral students. Nevertheless, the Australian government recommends that adults should be active most days with at least two and a half to five hours of physical activity a week (Australian Government, 2021). Keeping this in mind, a noteworthy study explored the reasons that higher education students participated in exercise (Quenneville & Carnegie, 2014). The motivations included wellness, improved sleep, increased energy, decreased stress, improved performance, as well as disease prevention (Quenneville & Carnegie, 2014). However, others highlighted the barriers to exercise, which included the expense, not having an exercise companion, an excessive study load, having a part time job, exam commitments, and not being able to find the right service (Quenneville & Carnegie, 2014). Thus, in order to undertake physical activity, this may require prioritisation when one is enrolled as a higher education student (Lipošek et al., 2018). Being physically fit was a motivating force for engaging in Karate. Even though I maintained a brisk, daily walk, I felt my body stiffen and ache from the hours of sitting that focused work entailed. I was also worried about maintaining a healthy weight with the ongoing sedentary lifestyle of deskwork.

Karate also offered a space for me to take a break from this “invisible, boundaryless and enduring” force (Dean et al., 2022, p. 2). Dean et al. (2022) have called out the “mental load” women and mothers experience, defined as “the combination of the cognitive labor of family life – the thinking, planning, scheduling and organising of family members – and the emotional labor associated with this work” (p. 1). The authors describe the mental load as “boundaryless” and which encapsulated part of the over-exhaustion I was feeling. To my amazement, Karate has been an excellent PhD companion, as it offers women self-protection, including metaphorically as potential academic salvation. For example, women have reported feeling an increased level of “self-efficacy, assertiveness, self-esteem, and reduced fear and anxiety” as a result of Karate training (Angleman et al., 2009, p. 89). This surprisingly meditative practice has kept me buoyant and has had the unintentional benefit of deepening self-awareness and shaping my academic identity. By academic identity, I mean the multifaceted aspects of belonging, boundaries, and self-understanding within the context of scholarship (Pretorius & Macaulay, 2021; Yuval-Davis, 2010). This chapter explores my lived experiences of Karate as a portal to self-understanding within academia, specifically in my new role as a doctoral student.

### 12.3 Philosophy

I share my lived experiences through the guiding philosophy of phenomenology, which embraces subjectivity as a legitimate source of knowledge and meaning-making endeavour (Moran, 2000). Phenomenology asserts that lived experiences can provide qualitative knowledge about reality through the lenses of first-person perspectives, primarily based on descriptions (Kupers, 2011; Seamon, 2000). Therefore, phenomenology is the study of phenomena as it appears in consciousness (Betensky, 1995; Moran, 2000). These conscious thoughts can be accessed by a process of reflexivity, or bending back (Finlay, 2002; Vagle, 2021), for example, through journaling. In later iterations of phenomenology, Heidegger (1962) asserted that these externalised thoughts, actions, or feelings which described an authentic reality could then be probed for their ascribed meanings (Kupers, 2011; Pascal et al., 2011; Vagle, 2021; van Manen & van Manen, 2021).

Since its inception, phenomenology has diverged into differing traditions (Sloan & Bowe, 2014). In 1901, Husserl established phenomenology, which took shape as a descriptive phenomenological tradition (Moran, 2000). However, this chapter has been primarily framed by an interpretive or hermeneutic lens that was originally founded by his protégé (Heidegger, 1962). Modern iterations of phenomenology accept a degree of overlap between the differing traditions (Shosha, 2012). A hermeneutic method values the acquisition of lived experiences to gain an ontological examination to, for example, find meaning within the world (Sloan & Bowe, 2014). Many scholars have advanced the philosophy of phenomenology since its inception, including Merleau-Ponty (1962b), who posited the theory of embodiment, with van Manen (1997) extending this concept (Kupers, 2011; Seamon, 2000; Sloan & Bowe, 2014). The idea of embodiment solidifies the subjective nature of being that views the world from one's own vantage point (Kupers, 2011). The concept also highlights the active role of the body, which is intimately connected to the world, termed being-in-the-world, through its sensory and situated physicality (Kupers, 2011; Seamon, 2000; Sloan & Bowe, 2014). Thus, a direct engagement with both doctoral studies and Karate were perceived and filtered through my own embodiment as a sensorial and situated experience of being-in-the-world, fully immersed in an historical, social, intersectional, and contextual space (Seamon, 2000).

One of the more recent hermeneutic phenomenologists includes Vagle (2021) who has attempted to generate a modern version of phenomenology that straddles the post-qualitative notion whilst maintaining an essence of the traditional posture. Vagle (2021) has proposed a new idea that he has termed “post-intentional phenomenology” (p. 201). Vagle's vision embraces the complexity of the human condition with an appreciation of the way individuals share a symbiotic relationship with their environment. He asserts that “post-intentional phenomenology [...] is not to refuse the personal but to entangle the personal with the social, the conceptual, the theoretical, the human, the non-human, and other phenomenological material” (Vagle, 2021, p. 201). Thus, my involvement in Karate will highlight, for example, the ways in which my personal self is entangled within my professional life.



The phenomenon under investigation within this chapter is my experience as an academic during the COVID-19 pandemic as I consciously bring this to light for exploration. I attempt to do this by finding analogies between the fields of Karate and doctoral studies to help elucidate academia. Through the lens of phenomenology, I have been able to appreciate the embodied experience of both doctoral studies and karate. The act of engaging in both processes has afforded insights that would have otherwise not been born into existence (van Manen & van Manen, 2021). In this way, the hermeneutical phenomenological tradition “allows seeing the world in a fresh way, allowing to wonder and to see opportunities and possibilities that were not available otherwise, disclosing or opening up new ways of being” (Kupers, 2011, p. 104). Karate has offered me insights into processes that were previously hidden from my view, but which became obvious as I immersed myself in my training. For example, I was able to locate parallels between the doctoral timeline and Karate’s stratified, long term 3–5-year process from entry to black belt. The stratification helped me to realise the value of pacing, grading, and milestones. These epiphanies contribute to my evolving scholarly identity as I navigate and negotiate my way forward within academia.

## 12.4 Methodology

Personal autoethnography also falls within the framework of interrogating lived experience to find meaning as both intrapersonal discovery and to reveal cultural phenomena (see Ellis et al., 2011; Ellis & Bochner, 1996; Pretorius, 2022; Pretorius & Cutri, 2019). Thus, autoethnography was the methodology implemented in this chapter to frame and explore the ideas from my first-person perspective. To apply autoethnography, I have used excerpts from my journals which detail my experiences of doctoral study and Karate training.

## 12.5 Findings

Figure 12.1 summarises the overlapping characteristics I have found between Karate training and my PhD journey. The essential characteristics identified included: ritual, place, tradition, movement, foundations, decelerating, strength, energy, dynamics, performance, challenges, breath, and danger. I discuss each of these in detail in the rest of this section of the chapter.

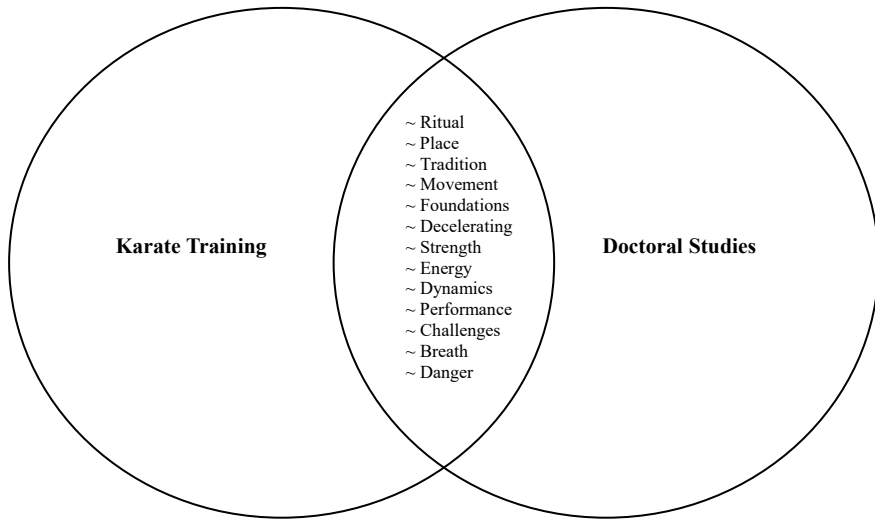


Fig. 12.1 Overlapping characteristics between Karate and the doctoral journey

### 12.5.1 *Ritual*

The place where Karate is practiced is known as the dojo (道場) (Oulanova, 2009; Urban, 1967) and is framed by rules: (1) everybody works, (2) nothing is free and (3) all start at the bottom (Urban, 1967). It is also an environment that fosters growth and learning through ritualistic practices (Oulanova, 2009). For example, it is customary to bow in and out of the dojo upon entry and exit. Also, at the commencement of class, the Karate instructor or Sensei, signifying “honourable teacher” (Urban, 1967, p. 14), will expect everyone to line up in belt order: white (10th Kyu), yellow, orange, green, blue, red, brown to black (1st Kyu to 4th Dan) (GKR Karate, 2021). The word Sensei, literally meaning “person born before another”, is also reserved for scholars or teachers (Kyokushin World Union, 2021), connecting it to the doctoral student as well as to their supervising professors as a symbol of respect and mastery. After students line up according to belt ranking, we must fall silent and adhere to the tradition of kneeling, seiza (正座) or “proper sitting” (Kyokushin World Union, 2021), and with eyes closed upon the command, mokuso (黙想) meaning “silent thinking” (Enkamp, 2021). This helps to quiet the mind, to connect with the dojo, and to prepare for the practice of Karate. Rules and rituals have shaped my connection and confidence in navigating the dojo.

I experienced similar ritualistic practices upon enrolment within the PhD programme through the presentation of a research proposal and administrative tasks that evidence my qualifications and professional experiences. Once accepted, I was inducted into the programme, received documentation related to processes, policies, and contracts akin to the rules of the dojo. These processes established clear

expectations, formal tones, and boundaries. I was also expected to complete compulsory learning modules about the fundamental aspects of thesis composition and PhD studies. Additionally, supervision sessions commenced and were held fortnightly to mark a patterned process. The attachment of rituals to “place” increased my sense of wellbeing.

### ***12.5.2 Place***

I had underestimated and taken for granted the importance of “place”, its spatial quality, and potential to shape and hold oneself. Merleau-Ponty (1962a) accentuated the importance of place as a central ontological construct as it underpins the situatedness of the physical body in a temporal sphere (Seamon, 2000). When I attend the dojo, I know my place there because these have been defined for me, for example, through observing bowing ceremonies or belt rankings. However, during the pandemic, it became evident how the limits on movement, and thus disconnection with everyday places, may have contributed to my feelings of demoralisation and anxiety.

In between lengthy lockdowns, I worked on one of my final lectures onsite. It was the first time I had left the house in months, and I recount my reminiscence of place within the regularity of my everyday:

As I step outside to head to work, a cool breeze kisses my cheek and I burst into tears. A pang of nostalgia hits me, and I remember how much I miss the chilled morning air and the joy of going somewhere - and of being someone. On my way to Carlton, waves of grief wash over me as I miss myself, my confidence, my family, and friends. I pass by well-known alleyways where favourite cafes lurk that hold memories long past. In class, I reconnect with my students surrounded by the familiarity and ubiquity of the cream walls, the office furniture, the fluorescent lighting, and a waft of coffee that swept up through the crevasses from the downstairs cafeteria (Personal Journal, 6 July 2021).

Due to the consistent lockdowns, higher education classes, including doctoral activities, were performed online (Bebbington, 2021; Jung et al., 2021). While there have been benefits to online learning as a short-term pandemic response, Jung et al. (2021) describe how “online learning is not a panacea” and face-to-face teaching will continue to be a crucial mode of learning (p. 112). Thus far, my connection to the PhD space has been limited to the virtual realm that has been accessed via my home office. Consequently, I do not feel a connection to the onsite campus as my “place of study” because this has not been nurtured. Although, in some respects, an online space has been advantageous as I have been able to control the conditions of my home environment and, accordingly, increased my sense of agency.

### 12.5.3 Tradition

The significance of place can be accentuated by other practices, including the tradition of donning a Karate uniform or Gi that symbolises unity and membership. Oulanova (2009) states that it is important to be wearing “a karate uniform and observing the dojo etiquette. While to an outsider these rituals may appear inconsequential [...] by upholding these practices, karate students partake in a particular way of being” (p. 50). The Gi is a white garment with a long-sleeved wrap-around top and lengthy pants and fitted with the ranking belt. The Gi reflects a students’ current ability status, the achievements in skill development and the expected next steps. As I adorn my white garb, I feel ready for training and I inhabit my physical self, as described in the following extract:

I focus on my physical movements, and I notice my body, the stiffness and tension, as well as the comfort, and delight. I want to know where these emotions live as I discover new parts of myself (Karate Journal, 3 September 2021).

Karate has taught me the value of being embellished in clothing that expresses my identity, whether as a reflection of my current mood or as a utopian state of being. Professional dress, wearing make-up, styling my hair, or sporting a pair of heels was missing from my daily routine. Moreover, professional dress can be associated with symbolism and social coding with each stylistic choice, for example wearing a suit as a sign of intelligence (Cutts et al., 2015). The burden is described by Cutts et al. (2015) as “aesthetic labour” (p. 273) as it can cause some degree of depletion to source, trend, and sport attire that communicates the right message or “career image” (p. 279). For me, these acts could be defined as expressions of myself, or the way I wanted to be seen, with my shield of confidence (Heffernan & Thomson, 2020). I lost my “uniform” when my working conditions changed, and I grew aware of my stylistic choices and the power of clothing beyond its practical purpose. For example, I became more aware of the way the right clothing could offer me a degree of self-confidence.

### 12.5.4 Movement

Grading from one belt to another happens approximately every three to six months and these events mark an important and formal transition from one stage of training to the next. Wrapped around my Karate uniform is an orange belt as I progress towards green belt ranking, which will be awarded at the next grading. Grading routines become increasingly complex and mentally taxing as the student develops proficiency. For me, grading symbolises movement, progress, and growth, which, juxtaposed against pandemic stagnation, feels liberating.

In doctoral study, these transitions occur through milestone events. Each milestone, like the belt grading, indicates the next step and therefore the path forward.

Officially presenting to an external panel for a PhD milestone event, or to high-ranking Sensei for a belt grading award affords opportunities to pause and reflect on one's achievement and status in each process. Milestone and grading events have inspired forward movement and I feel empowered when I can overcome these hurdles. For example, upon the confirmation milestone after the first year of PhD study, I felt validated and proud as my position within academia was affirmed by an external panel.

### ***12.5.5 Foundations***

The basic skills of punching, kicking, and blocking are the building blocks of all Karate movements. Therefore, it is important to master the correct techniques to establish a solid foundation (Pothupitiya & Vithanage, 2019). Initially, these are taught through single, repetitive movements from very slow to rapid execution so that muscle memory is consolidated. In more advanced classes, each move is connected to create simple to complex combinations. Some examples of such combinations are a long stance that steps forward with a stomach-level punch, head-level block, and reverse punch all in one count. All movement sequences are initiated by the Sensei's command, Hajime! (はじめ), which means "begin!". It has taken time for me to master basic skills, but I recognise that they are worth learning properly through daily training as reflected in my journal entry:

Later, we had to practice a range of kicking drills and my thighs began to shake. It was hard to keep up the stamina. My body, like my mind, was tired. I need to keep up with the training every day because the practice leads to strength, stamina, and momentum. Time away involved some degree of re-adjustment, disconnection, and pain. Consistent training will build my endurance and where I find the flow and proficiency that comes with ongoing investment of time (Karate Journal, 12 July 2021).

As I reflect on the doctoral process, I realise that academic enculturation also involves basic skill building to lay strong foundations for the work ahead. For example, it was necessary to navigate the library database systems and to manage the enormous data sets that would be extracted from these portals. So, I followed the Karate path by learning to build my skill set in a slow and meticulous way until I could work at pace and with some level of fluency and autonomy. I attended several library workshops and met with expert librarians to learn how to conduct proficient searches using tight protocols, truncations, and other techniques. Concurrently, I attended professional development sessions on EndNote® and NVivo® to master data storage, management, and access. Every day I worked on professional development, sparing no time for breaks as I understood my own processes through my Karate training.

### 12.5.6 *Decelerating*

The slow and meticulous skill development is reinforced in class through basic counting, from one to ten, as the Sensei calls, “*ichi (いち) 一, ni (に) 二, san (さん) 三!*” and students move in time with the count. The universal language of Karate is Japanese and is spoken in every class and it adds to the challenge of the task as demonstrated in this extract:

Some days I can seamlessly perform the combinations as I hear the words, *gedan uke* (下段受け) or “sweeping block” and my body responds accordingly. Other days I am so confused and feel humiliated that I can’t keep up since I am feeling overwhelmed, not only in my Karate class but in all other pockets of my life. Karate has taught me to slow down rather than stop - and then to accelerate only when I regain my energy and confidence (Online Class, Karate Journal, 30 August 2021).

The academic culture can feel overwhelming and intimidating as different words and scholarly discourse are bandied about, for example “paradigms,” “epistemologies,” and “metrics”. I credit my prior experience in academia for preparing me for this level of intellectual engagement but some days I still feel unprepared, saturated in self-doubt and drowning in my own exhaustive state of disillusionment. During these times, it is easy to lack momentum and I have learnt to slow down to regain my energy and tempo, rather than to stop, or wallow in self-pity, or to render myself unable to get off the couch. I am better at recognising when my body needs to rebalance to achieve homeostasis and I am learning to show self-compassion.

### 12.5.7 *Strength*

Decelerating supports the management of difficult tasks, however, marking transitions can assist with task preparation. A way to support switching attention in Karate is through the establishment of the natural stance or *Hachiji-dachi* (八字立ち). This is a strong standing pose that prepares the student for impending movements. Returning to this stance is also grounding and highlights the value of finding a way to “open and close” intensive work. Additionally, it is an aggressive posture that actively encourages students to wield their own force for tactical advantage (Turelli et al., 2020). Embodying the stances and movements of a warrior has had the unintentional benefit of boosting my confidence as reflected in this journal entry:

It felt good to have grasped these sequences of movements as I executed them with automaticity. I no longer feel so clumsy and disorientated, and this has boosted my confidence. *Hachiji-dachi* is unwavering, and I embody this posture in a full expression of determination and will. I am here and ready to face this moment (Karate Journal, 7 July 2021).

In my doctoral study, I only plan for one or two tasks a day and I undertake the most difficult one first as my strongest stance is posed in the morning. I always break when there is a transition and I mark this with a brisk walk in the middle of my day or whenever the first task has been completed. I symbolically disconnect as I mentally

prepare for the task ahead. The walk accelerates my breath and I feel energised. These actions protect me from the insidious feelings of self-doubt that lurk in ubiquitous ways as I navigate the PhD space.

### ***12.5.8 Energy***

When I return to the dojo, I use my breath to wield power as basic moves are often punctuated by an audible and vocalised vowel shout, “Ei!” or “Ya!” upon the command, *kiai* 気合! Researchers have described the exhalation of *kiai* as a force of energy that gives each move its power (Masic, 1987; Webb, 1984). The aggressive breath can also channel negative stress into a formidable force that moves energy in a positive way. During training, this practice is part of every skill building activity. For example, the Sensei might command, “Kiai!” on the tenth count of a stomach level block. The moves which are punctuated by breath are more powerful and have guided me to capitalise on momentum.

As my own levels of stress and anxiety build up, I direct this energy towards my doctoral work. In other words, the pent-up emotion motivates me to get on top of my current projects, which can paradoxically help to release the energy that is locked up. Understanding the system for energy release has helped me understand my workflow. This can be seen in this journal entry:

It's 10pm and I can barely see the computer screen. I started writing at 7am but when I first looked up it was suddenly 4pm. Some days, my capacity for hyper focus both frightens and astounds me. I feel frightened because I know the time gets away, but I am astounded that I can work for hours on end in blissful flow. Yet, I know that tomorrow I will be depleted, unfocused and unable to concentrate as if I turned into a zombie overnight, hardly able to string two words together (Personal Journal, 2 September 2021).

### ***12.5.9 Dynamics***

The feelings of depletion and unproductivity, especially in the afternoons and evenings inspired me to enrol in Karate to give me the opportunity to engage in a dynamic and enjoyable activity. Phenomenology appreciates the present-centredness of experience, where moments are met by the past and future (van Manen & van Manen, 2021). Each moment can move quickly or slowly depending on the task as the concept of time is measured by subjectivity and not by objectivity (Starks & Trinidad, 2007). The experience of accelerated time depicted in the previous extract has evoked feelings that have led to actions. For example, I now incorporate forward planning to build in recovery periods from the exhaustion where time could be experienced as slow. These actions, along with evening Karate sessions improved my productivity.

In my first few weeks as a white belt, I was so enthusiastic about starting the Karate journey that I attended every class, sometimes two or three in a day. What surprised

me about Karate was the dynamic and ever-changing focus of each class. For instance, some training sessions focused on basic or complex movements designed to enhance attack and defence repertoire, while other classes centred on training in Kata (choreographed Karate moves) or Kumite (sparring), women's self-defence, or as preparation for grading.

When I commenced doctoral study, I found that there were also many dimensions to the work, including supervision, professional development, writing clubs, research communities, and conference presentations. Karate training has helped me to appreciate the ways in which doctoral study offers new experiences, opportunities for growth, and can be a dynamic space, even though my experience has been confined to a virtual realm.

### ***12.5.10 Performance***

Being immersed in differing experiences has helped me appreciate the aspects of work or training that also offer fulfillment. In Karate, each Kata (型) meaning “form” is a sequence of choreographed movements, usually performed solo, that are a necessary component of the grading programme (Emad et al., 2020). Katas begin with the execution of blocks, punches, and kicks as simple combinations, and increase in length and complexity at the higher grades. The Kata becomes progressively more challenging as the Karate student develops more experience. Learning the movements can be a frustrating process, especially if the conditions are constricting, as described in my journal entry:

Our bare feet pounded the hard wooden floorboards. The impact was jarring. We practised 1st and 2nd Kata repeatedly. I felt constrained in the smaller room with so many participants. It was hard to fully stretch out and complete the moves with proper execution (Karate Journal, 07 July 2021).

However, I noticed that when I focused on only one part of the movement sequence at a time, I would eventually master the entire routine.

The Kata is akin to the publication process, which can be an overwhelming and anxiety-provoking experience, but also immensely satisfying when successful. Eventually, a piece of writing can be submitted to a journal, but it involves mastering one or two small steps at a time to attain a quality output at a publishable standard. Each part of the writing process (such as planning, researching, drafting, editing, and formatting) is akin to a Kata move, and the final product will be judged as a public performance. Once submitted, the anticipation feels aligned with the protracted tension that is experienced in the lead up to a Karate tournament, where an external verdict about whether the Kata routine was successful or not will be decided.



### **12.5.11 Challenges**

Karate tournaments are opportunities for students to participate in healthy competition and to challenge themselves by showcasing their Kata choreography and Kumite skill development. Sometimes this effort leads to disappointment as expectations are challenged. For example, in a practice session leading up to a tournament, I was sparring with an opponent who I thought I could defeat as I had felt confident in my defensive skills. However, my challenger had been able to find my defensive weakness to land several blows that scored easy points. This was a deflating experience as I realised that I was not good enough to defeat my opposition, especially when I thought I would prevail.

I have recognised that facing challenges is also a necessary part of the doctoral journey. An example of this is when I realised I had to achieve higher standards in my writing:

Scrapping my first publication was devastating. I knew I was angry because I had my hopes up and believed, maybe for the first time, that I could write – or that I was an excellent writer. But that soon dissipated, and I am left feeling low with a destroyed sense of confidence. Can I write? Or more to the point, am I good enough? (Doctoral Journal, 8 December 2020).

Facing challenges can be a humbling and necessary experience to regain realistic expectations. In these moments, I gain new insights into my own self, understand my own limitations, and identify growth opportunities. As I make improvements over time, I recall the starting point and I become increasingly aware of my own evolution. This often leads to a reversal of the narratives that centre on low self-confidence and self-doubt. Instead, I focus my attention on working harder in the lead up to tournaments and I appreciate the value of quality writing and the lengthy process that underpins it.

### **12.5.12 Breath**

I have found that training with students who have higher belt levels can accelerate my own growth process. For example, I had the opportunity to train with higher belts for an upcoming tournament where three of us were scheduled to perform a group Kata in a competition setting. I had to quickly learn the third Kata, Saifa (碎破) by watching videos and attending specialist classes. One of the important aspects of group Kata is performing with synchronicity (Emad et al., 2020). During rehearsal, we achieved this by marking certain movements through inhaling and exhaling in audible, rhythmical patterns. The experience of listening and responding to breath has been a feature of my Karate training.

I liken this with the value of attunement to one's own rhythms and breaths during PhD study. I have found that, for me, there has been a distinct ebb and flow about my own processes at different pressure points. Sometimes this has manifested as anxiety, which will crescendo during peak periods, for example, whilst awaiting a response

about a publication that is under review, or the few weeks before a milestone event, or during the lead up to a conference presentation. On occasion, I find the night before a supervision session that my breath is shallow and my sleep is light as these can be confronting occasions, so I ruminate. Karate has taught me to notice my own patterns and to be sensitive as well as proactive in learning when these pressures tend to build and recede.

### ***12.5.13 Danger***

Karate tournaments are also an opportunity to showcase and practice sparring technique or Kumite (Petri et al., 2017). Kumite (組手) is focused on the skill of combat by attacking, defending, and anticipating (Petri et al., 2017). During class, Kumite is fraught with danger as sparring can be unpredictable and cause injury. Kumite is the culmination of training across all classes of basic and complex movements, defence and attack strategy, and spatial awareness, yet in a high stakes and hazardous environment. Specialised equipment, including gloves, shin pads, breast plates, and mouth guards are needed to engage in safe fighting.

Metaphorically, supervision sessions can represent Kumite practice. This is a place where ideas are wrestled, and basic skills are practiced and tested with the supervisory relationship a determining factor for doctoral success (Al Makhmreh & Stockley, 2020). Supervision might also be conceived as a culmination of basic skill that is presented for tussle. Furthermore, as the doctoral journey can feel isolating, it can be a largely solo endeavour and a place where psychological boundaries can be pushed to their limits. A spotlight on one's own progress through supervision can add to the already self-imposed stressors and pressures that exist. Whilst my supervisors are supportive and constructive in their feedback, the emotional toll and exhaustion that can surface before and after these formalised and scheduled meetings cannot be underestimated (Golde, 2000). I have found ways to "armour" myself by writing minutes so there is a clear agenda, knowing when to lead and when to follow, and practicing deep listening. Clear and open communication works well, and this is more aligned with the group Kata where synchronicity and attunement can be a powerful ally in navigating this space.

## **12.6 Discussion**

### ***12.6.1 Academic Identity***

Karate has been a fitting analogy for doctoral studies, as both disciplines require a reliance on one's own self through self-trust and self-awareness, however, these qualities are also significant features of my academic identity. Seamon (2000) emphasises

the importance of phenomenology to “point toward more general qualities and characteristics that accurately describe the essential nature of the phenomenon” (para. 7). Therefore, I have attempted to elucidate the essential structure as overlapping characteristics identified between Karate and doctoral studies (see Fig. 12.2). These can be summarised by four key ideas of (1) ritual, (2) place, (3) movement, and (4) strength that frame my academic identity:

1. Ritual: tradition and performance;
2. Place: foundations;
3. Movement: decelerating, dynamics, energy, and breath; and.
4. Strength: challenges and danger.

To overlay these characteristics, van Manen (1997) has proposed four existential themes of the lifeworld as (1) temporality; (2) spatiality; (3) corporality; and (4) relationality. In my experiences, “ritual” expresses “corporeality”, “place” symbolises “spatiality”, “movement” denotes “temporality”, and “strength” described within the findings as an aspect of “relationality”.

**Fig. 12.2** The academic warrior is reflected back at me. *Note* This figure [(H)17 cm and (W)15 cm] was drawn with pen on paper with digital enhancements by Elvira Kalenjuk in 2021



### 12.6.2 *Self-Doubt*

Karate has saved me from leaving doctoral studies by providing some perspective so that I might better understand and negotiate my own processes for survival when self-doubt and anxiety manifest. Moore et al. (2020) report on the positive mental health impacts of martial arts training, including reduced anxiety and depression and higher levels of self-esteem, confidence, and optimism. The many pressures that doctoral students face have been well documented with significant attrition rates due high levels of stress (Douglas, 2021). Thus, facing considerable challenges was not unexpected when entering the research field. For me, the first few months of enrolment were plagued by self-doubt and the feeling of being overwhelmed, which led me to question whether I was capable of undertaking studies at this level. Further, the feeling of being overwhelmed played into the negative emotions that were already present as I was worried about my own capacity to graduate with a PhD. Even with extensive work experience, suitable qualifications, and several awards under my belt, the complexity and depth of the work seemed beyond me. However, Karate has awakened dormant parts of myself and provided both a lens and frame of reference to gain new perspectives and a renewed sense of self-confidence as well as joy in recalibrating my emotions. Thus, as I continue to adjust to my new role within academia, I have found a way forward. Karate has provided guidance for leading me through doctoral studies in a step-by-step, systematic fashion with its prescriptive approach to scaffolding skill, ability, and stamina, which has provided a state of calm and an illusion of certainty.

This understanding roots my academic identity in a post qualitative phenomenological framework as I find myself “entangled” in the world (Vagle, 2021, p. 205). The concept of entanglement travels the fringes of phenomenology, where ideas about phenomena change from definitive essences to locating meanings that are in flux and dependent on context and history (Vagle & Hofsess, 2016). Vagle (2021) argues that “phenomena are not stable and discoverable [...] phenomena provoke and produce things” (p. 201). By recounting the parallels between Karate training and doctoral studies, I have been able to unearth the deep-rooted symbiosis of my personal and professional worlds. I have noticed that I am deeply connected to the world and heavily invested in all facets, not only through time, intellect, and financial resourcing but also emotionally. This may be an unsurprising result as Yuval-Davis (2010) asserts that identity is both “reflective and constitutive [and] involves both in an in-between perpetual state of ‘becoming’” (p. 271). The blending of my personal and professional identities is a high-stakes and exhausting state of being as all parts of myself must maintain emotional homeostasis or risk pulling all parts down. This self-awareness underscores the necessity of creating artificial boundaries to reinstate some compartmentalisation necessary for self-preservation.

### ***12.6.3 Self-Preservation***

The existential theme of corporality has been a major feature of my Karate training, doctoral studies, and thus academic identity. By corporeality I mean, “lived body” as a way in which “humans experience the world” (Sloan & Bowe, 2014, p. 14; van Manen, 1997). This might include a sensory experience through kinaesthetic, vibration, touch, olfactory sensations, or mood, as well as from a gaze of intersectional points of bias (Yuval-Davis, 2010). From wearing a Gi to enacting Kata, each ritualistic and performative act has been a pathway towards experiencing my own embodiment as I develop a deeper sense of my own corporeality (Kupers, 2011; Merleau-Ponty, 1962a; Seamon, 2000; Sloan & Bowe, 2014; van Manen, 1997). This understanding leads to an appreciation of the relational aspect of being-in-the-world as I influence, and am shaped by, internal and external factors. This dynamic interplay between the self, others, space, and time underpins the relationality that marks the engagement of a phenomenological entanglement (Vagle, 2021).

Defining the space that overlaps Karate with doctoral studies has created parameters around my academic identity. These artificial boundaries symbolise the existential theme of lifeworld spatiality and will perform a self-preserving function for my success within scholarly activity (van Manen, 1997). As a direct result of the pandemic, I experienced the world through an embodied kaleidoscope of heavy emotions and states of being, including “pressure”; “strain”; “resignation”; “despondency”; and “exhaustion”. These emotions were apparent in both my personal and professional lives characterising both my mood and a sign of the time. Many of these feelings were evoked by the conditions of lockdowns and school closures, which led to a further blurring of the boundaries between my work and home spheres, causing great distress. These were the boundaries previously demarcated by time or space as a tram or bike ride from one place to another that have now disappeared, albeit temporarily. The concept of time marked by ritualistic acts, transitional moments, and clear boundaries is far from traditional notions of time as dictated by a chronologically linear and objective measure, for example, a clock. Rather, time is an expression of existential temporality (Starks & Trinidad, 2007; van Manen, 1997). Transitional periods had symbolically opened and closed parts of my life, creating a wedge or separation as an act of self-preservation. Therefore, Karate has offered a space to re-establish a division, of sorts, so that an integrative self-process could be maintained as an act of salvation.

### ***12.6.4 Academic Salvation***

Karate has offered me academic salvation in providing a semblance of delineation, and paradoxically self-integration, between my personal and professional spheres. Douglas (2021) asserts that it is important to note how internal and external factors influence doctoral students’ performance. As I continue to orbit between the worlds

of martial arts and academia, I confront myself time and time again. As I progress and touch milestones, I find my place and my power. The dojo walls are lined with mirrors and now I see an academic warrior reflected back at me (see Fig. 12.2).

## 12.7 Conclusion

By looking through the lens of phenomenology, Karate has presented a point of comparison in expounding the PhD trajectory and my own practices as an academic. Locating parallels between the doctoral process and Karate has helped me to better understand my academic identity. For example, by mastering the basic techniques, choreographed moves (Kata) and sparring (Kumite), I understand the dynamic quality, dangers, and rhythms of academic culture as well as the parts of myself I see reflected in this work. Furthermore, the routine of sporting a traditional uniform (Gi) alongside bowing in and out of the training space (dojo) have taught me how to mentally prepare for focused work as they provide the structures and order that meet my needs. Training in Japanese, Karate's universal language, has also helped me to step outside of myself to gain new perspectives about myself and others. Karate has taught me that my personal and professional parts of myself are intimately connected.

Combining Karate with doctoral studies has changed me in positive ways as I step ahead with more self-awareness, self-compassion, and a better sense of my academic identity. Through my training, I notice the intersecting parts of myself coexisting in harmony, but they demand order, control, routine, and boundaries for both safety and protection. To thrive in academia, I recognise the need for parameters, a sense of order and control as something on which to focus and to redirect my energy. I am equipped with the practical measures of building structure and order through planning, pacing, and routine. As I gravitate towards the rhythms and breaths that characterise my own patterns, the peaks and troughs that will surely appear, I find myself better situated within the field of academia ready to meet these moments with self-confidence and resilience.

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# Chapter 13

## Uncertainty and Autism: How Changing with the Times is Harder for Some



Kayla Sheridan, Kelly-Ann Allen , Rebecca Vine Foggo, Aida Hurem, Erin Leif, and Nerelie Freeman

**Abstract** COVID-19 has brought about major changes to the lives of people around the world. How people engaged in their daily routines, worked, shopped, socialised, and spent time with family shifted. Changes in nearly every aspect of daily life became the norm with no time to adapt. Face-to-face appointments were swapped for online consultations, face masks and physical distancing requirements were standard, and nuanced social interactions changed. People stopped shaking hands and kissing cheeks. They touched elbows or waved from a distance. People fanned out candles on birthday cakes. Sometimes people did not leave the house. With COVID-19, life has become unmistakably different, and adjusting to these changes has required a degree of cognitive flexibility, adaptability, and resilience. But what happens when, as an autistic person, tolerating change is your least favourite thing to do? This chapter has been co-authored by a young adult with autism who struggles with lockdowns, an autistic academic with a quirky sense of humour, an educational and developmental psychologist who loves staying in her pyjamas all day, a therapist who works with autistic individuals (and appreciates her children just a little bit more when they can physically attend school), another educational and developmental psychologist

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who has been taught a lot about autism from the young people she has assessed and counselled (“How can you sit and listen to people talking at you all day?”), and an inclusive education researcher and behaviour analyst who has the lived experience of psychosocial disability and prefers the company of her dogs. Together we explore the experiences of lockdown through the lived experiences of autistic people leveraging research to create a new and novel perspective. The chapter presents a unique way of integrating research evidence to shed light on the experiences recalled. Living life during a global pandemic calls for a need to deal with unpredictability and change. But what happens when you wish COVID-19 would be quickly eradicated? This chapter will address this question and more.

**Keywords** Autism · Autistic · Wellbeing · Pandemic · COVID-19

### **13.1 Uncertainty and Autism: How Changing with the Times is Harder for Some**

Research that has examined COVID-19 highlights that it has been a time of disruption for many people. However, research that has focused on autistic individuals has demonstrated unique concerns around sensory issues, facemasks, social lives, gender differences, and autism-related myths. People with autism are assumed to dislike socialising and, as a result, it may have been presumed that lockdown was favourable and welcomed. But the reality is that autism is a heterogeneous condition that each individual experiences uniquely. Consequently, autistic responses to the pandemic have been varied. This chapter pivots around the direct lived experiences of people with autism (our co-authors!) and uses collaborative autoethnography (Pretorius, 2022) combined with empirical insights as a foundation to critically review the research. We explore conceptualisations of autism, how some autistic people have coped during COVID, as well as mental health and wellbeing, and social support. Our review of the central experiences of COVID-19 for people with autism demonstrates individual differences that can be identified and lead to clear implications for researchers, consumers of research, policymakers, and educators. Autistic individuals are heterogeneous; the way we should best support them should be as well.

### **13.2 Defining Autism**

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a neurodevelopmental condition. The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual 5th Edition (DSM-5, American Psychiatric Association, 2013), commonly used to diagnose autism, outlines criteria for diagnosis related to two specific areas of difficulties (i.e., social communication and repetitive and restrictive behaviour). However, this is just the formal criteria and research has shown that

there are many more characteristics that autistic people experience (Chamak et al., 2008). Kayla expands on this based on her lived experience:

To me, having autism is definitely a definition of beauty and having autism is a part of who I am. Autism means a lot to me because no matter what goes through, I try my best to stay happy most of the time. Being born with autism is not a bad thing, it's a good thing. We (autistic people) are still normal people, we make and learn from mistakes, but also we are happy, funny and we also live our lives to the fullest.

It is important to note, autism is a highly heterogeneous condition, and as the famous quote by Dr. Stephen Shore goes, “If you’ve met one person with autism, you’ve met one person with autism” (as cited in Desire, 2021). Whilst autistic people share common characteristics related to social communication or repetitive or restrictive behaviours, there is no single specific way in which the characteristics of autism are expressed. The external presentation of autism can vary markedly between individuals. The responses presented in this chapter reflect the perceptions and experiences of two autistic women. One is a young adult working in an educational context supporting children with varying disabilities and the other is a married woman with children who works in academia.

Psychologists—in avoiding deficit language—will refer to “an individual with autism”; however, this is contended by a number of people in the autism community who prefer to be called “autistic”. In deference to the autism community’s preference for identity-first language (Kenny et al., 2016) and in consideration of our co-authors, we will use both terms interchangeably and recognise that, for many, autism provides a sense of identity and community (Botha et al., 2022). As Aida highlights:

To me, I like to use first-person language and say I am autistic, rather than I have autism. I see autism as who I am, not as a condition. While for me, there are some challenges that come with being autistic, such as sensory issues and being literal (which can sometimes get me in trouble with neurotypicals as I can appear to be too blunt), I absolutely love who I am and embrace my difference. Autism allows me to see the world in a very different and colourful way. For example, I have an incredible way to see gaps where others do not, especially in research. I am incredibly inventive and imaginative and have a passion and hyper-focus that is so strong that it cannot be extinguished, even when I am told that something is impossible and that I should give up. For me, I absolutely love being autistic and I would not wish to change that. So, to me, autism is not something I have. It is my identity; it is who I am. It makes me unique in the most amazing way.

### 13.3 What Are the Distinguishing Features of Autism?

As noted earlier, the DSM-5 sets out the criteria for a diagnosis of autism. These include difficulties in social communication, such as social-emotional reciprocity, challenges in recognising and understanding nonverbal communication, and difficulty developing and maintaining peer relationships (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Furthermore, the criteria state that autistic individuals experience restricted, repetitive patterns of behaviour, interests, or activities (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). This can include inflexibility and challenges with hyper- or hypo-reactivity to sensory input.

However, personal reflections from autistic individuals suggest that not all of the characteristics of autism that impact functioning are described in the DSM-5. Understanding how autism impacts an individual, beyond what the DSM-5 states, aids in the understanding of how events such as COVID can impact them. Examples of other characteristics of autism which should be considered are listed below.

- Whilst inflexibility is noted in the DSM, a lack of predictability can trigger anxiety in autistic individuals (Jiujias et al., 2017) resulting in meltdowns.
- Co-occurring conditions, such as anxiety and depression, are commonly reported in individuals with autism (Lai et al., 2019).
- Sensory issues are associated with autism but have only been included in the latest edition of the DSM.
- Externalising behaviours that range from physical meltdowns to self-injurious behaviour are often a coping response for individuals with autism. Such behaviours may alleviate anxiety in the individual (Williams et al., 2018).
- Whilst the DSM focuses on the dyad of impairments, autistic individuals have reported they feel altered perception and challenges with emotional regulation to be primary challenges associated with autism (Chamak, 2008).
- Autistic individuals have reported difficulties with executive functioning (Baldwin & Costley, 2016).
- Social communication can be challenging for people with ASD (Allen et al., 2013; McGregor & Hadden, 2020).
- Emotional terms like fear, anxiety, and paranoia were found to be tweeted in greater proportion by people with ASD (Hswen et al., 2019).
- Despite the myth that autistic people prefer solitude or are *loners*, autistic people often desire social relationships with peers (Head et al., 2014; Pellicano et al., 2020; Vine Foggo & Webster, 2017).
- Differences in cognitive functioning or thinking styles are considered hallmarks of autism and should not be misconstrued as incompetence (Ashby & Causton-Theoharis, 2009):

Kayla adds:

I believe that people with autism are different, but they are still normal human beings. People who have autism are very clever and smart, just like everyone else. If I see someone with autism, I would definitely know that they would have autism because I don't see it as a disability, I would see it as a different ability. I also believe that people with autism should be treated the way you want to be treated with love, respect and dignity.

Aida also suggests:

Being autistic myself, I find I often gravitate towards other autistic individuals even before I learn they are autistic. Upon reflection, I find they stand out to me for being funny, interesting, and contrary to stereotypes, for being empathic and very understanding and non-judgmental.

## 13.4 How Have People with Autism Coped Since COVID-19?

There has been limited research examining the coping strategies employed by autistic individuals when faced with challenging situations (Khor et al., 2014). The findings from a recent study of adolescents and adult females with autism suggest they were more likely to use coping strategies such as spending time alone when they felt overwhelmed (Vine Foggo & Webster, 2017) and used camouflaging to disguise difficulties during social interactions (Milner et al., 2019). Recent editorials and position papers have highlighted clinicians' and researchers' concerns regarding the experiences of autistic individuals, with varying support needs, during the COVID-19 lockdown (Nollace et al., 2020; Yahya & Khawaja, 2020). Although engaging in educational and social activities at home or even having home-based health interventions might not be an issue for some people, responses and preferences can vary wildly from individual to individual (Cahapay, 2022). Kayla and Aida talk about how COVID affected their life:

Covid-19 has affected me in so many ways, when we got put into lockdown for the first time, my whole routine of life changed completely. When I first found out that I couldn't see my friends and family, and doing the activities I enjoy doing, it totally broke my heart into a million pieces, staying home the whole time at times, it felt like prison, it was a horrible feeling. It got very boring, staying at home for a very long time. After a whole month of April till the first half of May 2020 in lockdown, I thought my life was coming back to normal, but then in July to late October 2020, we went back into our 2nd lockdown and we were in the Victorian lockdown for 3 months and a half, I was so frustrated, and I was like "NOT AGAIN PLEASE!" and then we were told that we had to wear face masks. At the end of the year, we were able to spend Christmas and New Years with my family and friends. But at least I'm fully vaccinated and it'll protect me from getting Covid-19. (Kayla)

COVID has made my life harder as it has created a lot of uncertainty. And I love routines! Each day, we wait to hear the news and to see if another lockdown will be announced, or if a latest outbreak will affect our jobs and our lives in general. However, I also like the fact that I am no longer expected to hug someone or shake hands. It is something I find most uncomfortable, so now, I no longer need to feel awkward. It has become the norm to just wave! I also don't mind mask wearing as I am very sensitive to smells. So, if I am faced with a strong and uncomfortable scent, my mask helps a lot! (Aida)

Aida found that lockdowns made her feel very constrained.

I find lockdowns extremely uncomfortable. As someone who suffers from anxiety, I find comfort in seeing friends and doing things I love. Lockdowns prevent me from being able to do this and so my anxiety issues become worse when in lockdown. Having also survived a war, they trigger my PTSD, and that is something that is very hard to deal with, especially when being autistic.

Kayla's *hit list of most annoying things* about lockdown included:

- I hated not being able to socialise with my family and friends, it made me feel isolated and lonely, like I was in prison.
- I hate that lockdowns feel never-ending, it just feels like it is gonna keep going forever. It gives me anxiety not knowing when the next lockdown is going to hit.

- I hate that wherever I look and wherever I listen, whether that be the radio or TV, or my phone, COVID is just everywhere.
- I hate how restricted I feel, I hate the lack of freedom, I'm a 21-year-old woman, I should be able to go out and do fun things.
- I hated that we were forced to wear face masks and check-in everywhere we go. Wearing the mask makes me feel anxious, suffocated and like I can't breathe. I just want to be able to breathe in the fresh air and move around freely.

## 13.5 Mental Health and Wellbeing

In the face of uncertainty, considering that autistic people are more prone to anxiety (South & Rodgers, 2017), it is not surprising that sudden restrictions were seen to cause an increase in reported depression, stress, and other mental health issues in individuals with neurodevelopmental conditions (Chung, 2020), contributing to feelings of social detachment (Oomen et al., 2021). Unpredictable changes in daily routines might have contributed to poor mental health (Cassidy et al., 2020). Changes to routine and predictability, especially around lockdowns, created challenges for autistic individuals in respect to their daily lives (Dimitriou et al., 2020). In fact, it is even possible that autistic individuals faced more difficulties in coping with the lockdown than the COVID-19 disease itself (Ameis et al., 2020).

Since, to a large extent, a lot of environmental factors have been changed as a result of the pandemic, supporting autistic people in this *new environment* could be useful to counter potential negative outcomes (Crowell et al., 2019). This was highlighted by Kayla and Aida.

My wellbeing and mental health is 100% very important to me, I need to focus on doing the things that would help me feel happier each day (like getting some sun if the weather's nice and go on some walks at least once a day, and drink plenty of water). I'm also very grateful to live in a world with technology so that I can talk to people and check in with them to see how they're going. It's very important to look after ourselves every day and have some relaxing days, taking the time to have some self-care is also definitely a number one priority in our daily lives. It's very important to have a good set of routines knowing what's happening and getting out of the house for a bit is so good for my mental health and wellbeing. (Kayla)

Wellbeing is a broad construct and can mean many different things. However, for me, it means I feel socially supported, I have good physical and mental health, I am treated fairly by others, I do not experience discrimination and feel a strong sense of belonging, and I get to enjoy my freedoms of simply being who I am. Not being required to mask and being able to stim [self-stimulate] or not being able to look someone in the eyes when talking to them when it becomes uncomfortable. (Aida)

## 13.6 Social Lives

The pandemic had a major impact on the social lives of autistic people. Indeed, over the past two years, total lockdowns, movement restrictions, and social distancing requirements due to COVID-19 were common around the world, and it was expected that such disruptions would be particularly challenging for autistic people since their daily activities and social lives would be inevitably affected (Davidson et al., 2021).

A common myth associated with autism is that autistic individuals shun social interaction, instead preferring solitude. As such, autistic individuals were once thought to have an inability to feel empathy (Meyer et al., 2006). However, research has consistently found that many autistic individuals are often motivated by social interactions (Head et al., 2014) and desire friendships with their peers (Vine Foggo & Webster, 2017). This was highlighted by Kayla and Aida.

Socialising with people is very important to me because I love to spend time and talk to people. I'm a very outgoing person, interacting with others and being a part of the group is one of the best things ever in my life. Being included in a group makes me feel very happy and excited because I feel like I belong to a special group with people I enjoy spending time with. (Kayla)

I love spending time with my friends! I find our discussions very stimulating, and it provides me with a sense of belonging that is not often afforded within the wider society, especially for those of us who are perceived as 'quirky' or 'different'. Of course, there are times when I love being by myself and just escape in my own thoughts, but most often than not, I utterly thrive when I socialise. I love humour and being surrounded with friends with a good sense of humour makes me so happy! (Aida)

The difficulties associated with recognising and contributing to social exchanges, though, can leave autistic individuals feeling physically and mentally exhausted (Bargiela et al., 2016; Hull et al., 2017; Vine Foggo & Webster, 2017). It is, therefore, not surprising that this can lead to the mistaken perception that autistic individuals do not feel empathy. In reality, however, autistic individuals express empathy differently, and the ability to do this can be diminished when they feel exhausted given that recognising social cues can take much of their energy. The desire for reduced social interaction should not be presumed for autistic people. The double empathy theory posits that social interaction is bi-directional and that breakdowns in communication between autistic and non-autistic people create a shared problem rather than an inherent problem with the communication abilities of autistic people (Milner et al., 2019). Non-autistic people can and should adapt their communication styles to meet the needs and preferences of autistic people. When this occurs, autistic people can enjoy rich social interactions with others and thrive in social settings.



### 13.7 Support Networks and Medical Support Challenged

During COVID-19, support networks were disrupted. For individuals with autism who require different forms of assistance, research findings revealed that autism-specific support and cooperation were particularly lacking during lockdown periods (Canal-Bedia, 2020). While it may have been expected that individuals with autism would be among the first in line to receive support and attention during this period, a number of previous reports suggested that medical and mental health support were not properly addressed or provided during the pandemic (Narzisi, 2020). The pandemic was difficult for Kayla and Aida.

Sometimes people with autism don't really understand what the pandemic is and sometimes they can get really stressed out, so they may need some help to have things explained again and they need to take some deep breaths to calm down. The change in the routines can be very hard to deal with for people with autism, especially when they are not allowed to do their favourite activities, or not allowed to see friends and family, it can totally affect their mental health and wellbeing. The pandemic can also take a toll on our lives, and when people get very emotional and are not coping very well during the pandemic, there is some counselling or social workers that they can talk to and help us to use some strategies that can help us to try and stay calm and relax. (Kayla)

I panic at the thought of ever having to get a COVID test. I wish there was something the government can do to help those of us who are autistic when we need to get one. My anxiety around this is due to sensory issues. I feel anxious just thinking about it. (Aida)

The current health support system is not adequate to meet the various needs of autistic people. Therefore, adapting the current system, especially the increasingly common remote healthcare services, to develop an autistic-friendly system would clearly be of benefit (Ameis et al., 2020). The increased pressure on the healthcare system due to COVID-19 cases and the enforcement of physical distancing measures caused remote healthcare services to become increasingly popular. As a result, not only were services for autistic people disrupted, but the ability of individuals to receive an autism diagnosis, which is often based on in-person assessment and behavioural observations, was severely impacted. As a result, young children with developmental delays may have missed out on early intervention over the past two years (Dow et al., 2020). At the same time, some people in regional and remote communities may have had more opportunities to access more services during the lockdown periods given some interventions/sessions were run online. As a result, more health professionals will likely feel more comfortable using telehealth moving forward, which may be of benefit to some autistic people in the future.

## 13.8 Diet and Food Preferences

Restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic also impacted access to certain foods, hence leading to reduced food intake, constipation, or even poor nutrition for some autistic people who may prefer specific types of foods or diets (Curtin et al., 2015). As Kayla and Aida note,

There are some people with autism that have their own preferences for the foods they like, some of them only like to eat gluten, dairy, or etc... It can be very tricky to not go out and sit in their favourite restaurants to eat there and take away orders are not exactly the same as eating out publicly. Sometimes in lockdowns after I go for a short walk, I have been trying some new foods as they are open for takeaway, if I eat the same thing every day during lockdown, it gets a bit boring and I'm just sick of having the same meal over and over again. Definitely trying new foods has made my day feel a lot better and enjoyable. I have never ever experienced food shortage because my parents do most of the grocery shopping, but luckily for my family, we buy a lot of different meals and foods, so we have plenty to eat at home. COVID and the lockdowns has affected me and others with autism because sometimes we can't go outside of our 5km radius from home just to go and eat at our favourite places which it feels so unfair. But I'm feeling so grateful that my parents buy me and my family the different meals that each of us like when they do grocery shopping and that way, it'll be easier to eat together as a family with love, peace and harmony. (Kayla)

I love my routine and getting food from certain places. If a shop is outside of the allowed radius and I can't get a particular product, I feel extremely anxious. (Aida)

## 13.9 Sleep and Screen Time

Due to an inability to access public places, some autistic people spent more time on screens at home and engaged in diminished outdoor activities—both factors likely to have contributed to obesity which is already a major concern amongst the autistic population (Must et al., 2017; Slobodin et al., 2019). These negative effects may be even more significant for autistic individuals who already suffered from sleep dysregulation, anxiety, and depression in their routine lives (Hedley et al., 2017). Both Kayla's and Aida's experiences with technology changed due to COVID-19.

COVID has definitely impacted my use of screen time because sometimes the media posts stuff like, COVID, vaccines, etc... that I really do not want to see or think about it 24/7. There were times that I've been using my technology differently than normal because I really miss my family and friends and I've been spending more time on screen just to talk to them. It hasn't been a huge effect for me to have the ability to exercise because I can still exercise and go for some walks a lot more days than I normally would. Sometimes the social media apps have helped me during lockdowns because I really want to talk to my family and friends and sometimes they have caused me more time on screens. I haven't looked up on the autistic community on social media, but I have started my own autistic account on my Instagram page called 'sunshines\_n\_happiness' to show the world how to spread the awareness of supporting people living with autism spectrum disorder and how can they be happy and inclusive to show the positive vibes of having autism. (Kayla)

I think COVID-19 has definitely changed the way I engage with technology and social media. For example, most meetings started running online, and this includes meetings for

certain committees I am involved in. Even after lockdowns ended, many of these meetings are still running online. Juggling a family while studying and working can be challenging, so this has been quite useful for me. However, I do miss the face-to-face interaction with my colleagues. So, as much as I like that technology use has increased, I am also wishing that some face-to-face meetings would resume. In terms of use of social media, I am not very active in that regard as I only have two accounts. However, my use of Twitter has increased during COVID-19 as I was not able to attend conferences, so connecting with the academic community through Twitter has been fantastic! I have met many excellent researchers this way from all over the world. (Aida)

## 13.10 The Educational Experience

Under normal conditions, attending school or further education can already be challenging for autistic individuals, with an increased likelihood that they will be victims of bullying (Lebrun-Harris et al., 2019) and experience high levels of anxiety and depression based on teacher reports (Kaat et al., 2013). However, the closure of educational institutions during the pandemic and the subsequent shift to online courses made it particularly difficult for certain autistic individuals to adapt to the new delivery method, to meet the new expectations or even simply to work in the absence of disability resources which would normally be available (Cassidy et al., 2020). The COVID-19 lockdowns impacted the educational experiences of both Kayla and Aida.

It can definitely be a lot of pressure for the students to study during lockdown because everything happens to be online or Zoom, which is very tricky. I believe that some people who find it easier are feeling better to study in lockdown because they don't have any distractions and they have a quiet space to do it. For others, it can be a lot more challenging because sometimes the subjects/worksheets can be very confusing. I have recently been working at a school in Dromana called Peninsula Specialist College, I work there as an admin 2 days a week and not being able to go to work was very hard to deal with because most staff and students had to do remote learning from home. To be honest, it can get a bit boring not being able to study at campuses because we honestly don't know when we can come back to work, uni or TAFE. It's definitely not the same thing as studying at uni or TAFE because it's so not normal. (Kayla)

I was completing a PhD during COVID-19 and it has significantly impacted upon my study experience. For example, during lockdowns, with my kids learning from home, I found little time to focus on my own work. Being autistic and liking some sort of routine has certainly made this harder for me. I had many days of severe anxiety, and this is not something I would want to experience again. For my daughter, however, (undiagnosed but we suspect is autistic), shifting to an online learning environment has been fantastic! For the first time since starting school, she said she enjoyed learning. She particularly enjoyed the self-paced nature of online learning and the freedom to have breaks when she needed them. (Aida)

### 13.11 The Benefits of COVID-19

For many autistic students, shifting to online classes proved to be useful in reducing stress and anxiety (Holden et al., 2020). A study based in Australia reported a positive experience of COVID-19 lockdowns for autistic people due to higher flexibility as well as more time and space since, despite the disruptions, they could easily engage in their favourite hobbies (Pellicano et al., 2020). Another study reported that autistic people felt less stress because they had nowhere to go while some individuals enjoyed reduced social contact (den Houting, 2020). Kayla and Aida reflected on their top five advantages about lockdown:

Kayla:

1. I've been saving a lot of money during the lockdown because I haven't been going out to places much.
2. I'm very fortunate to live in an area with such beautiful coastlines in my 5kms radius. I was able to go on walks every day.
3. I'm very fortunate to talk to my family and friends online, FaceTime and Zoom have helped me stay connected.
4. Lockdown has allowed me to do more of my art and music.
5. Lockdown has allowed me to take my time to get things done, instead of having to rush all the time.

Aida:

1. Life seemed to slow down, and I really enjoyed that. The fast pace of modern-day living can be extremely daunting for me as an autistic who gets extreme sensory overload.
2. As a family, we saved a lot of money as we were not shopping or eating out. It was great!
3. I got to spend more time with my family, and I really enjoyed that.
4. I started connecting more with friends and family I would not otherwise have time to talk to. Shifting online made this more possible.
5. I enjoyed having more time to work around the house and complete projects I usually didn't have time for. Overall, quality of life improved.

While there is an underrepresentation of people with a disability in research (see, for example, Emery et al., 2022) paired with a focus on the negative impacts of COVID-19 in most research fields (see, for example, Waters et al., 2021), another recent study with autistic adults did offer some further insights (Oomen et al., 2021). In their study of 1044 adults (58.7% with autism) across three European countries, Oomen et al. (2021) found that autistic adults felt more relieved from social stress but paradoxically also found the loss of social contact to be a challenge. They also emphasised the benefits of reduced sensory and social overloads related to going out less (e.g., less noise pollution and the social acceptability of staying at home), and felt an increase in solidarity with their family, friends, and community through the shared experience of everyone being in lockdown.

### 13.12 Masking

Some autistic people tend to hide their autistic behaviours in order to be considered more socially acceptable by neurotypical individuals, a concept termed *masking* (Mandy, 2019). This can result in feelings of exhaustion after social interactions and/or a need to isolate oneself to decompress (Hull et al., 2017). Adults with autism who engage in masking on a regular basis also report high levels of anxiety and stress (Cage & Troxell-Whitman, 2019; Hull et al., 2017). Some research findings have concluded that during the pandemic, however, changes in social requirements due to movement restrictions positively reduced the need to hide (Mosquera et al., 2021). Kayla and Aida note,

Some people with autism spectrum disorder are hiding their true colours because sometimes they're worried about others making fun of people, or mimicking people with autism who can't really help making noises and that can be very uncomfortable. In some public places, the full spectrum of neurodiversity is not understood or welcomed. People with autism often feel the need to present or perform social behaviours that can be considered neurotypical. Sometimes they may also feel that they must hide neurodiverse behaviours in order to be accepted by others. Sometimes masking autism can sometimes help protect autistic people from being 'outed' or harassed at school or work. Sometimes the behaviour is not always intentional which can lead to confusion about everyone's identity. Masking can also lead to serious health consequences; it's important to understand the behaviour and the effects on people who regularly camouflage their neurodivergent behaviours. It can definitely be very exhausting to hide your personality from others so it's important to never hide your personality away from others and always remember to be yourself. (Kayla)

After receiving a diagnosis in my mid-30s, I tried to mask less. But each time I do, I find it affects me in so many ways as people start to judge me. For example, if I don't maintain eye contact when talking to someone, they do judge and start to treat me differently. I find this aspect of being autistic the most difficult. There are days when I am tired and can't mask as well as usual. On those days, I often found myself wishing I could live on an 'all autistic' planet so I could just be myself and not have to mask. I find masking is so damaging. I wish a day would come when we would not be judged for just being ourselves. (Aida)

### 13.13 Differences Between Men and Women

The DSM-5 does not currently distinguish gender differences in autism spectrum disorder, and research in infants and toddlers supports the notion that social-communication behaviours are similar across genders (Barbaro & Freeman, 2021). Considerable research over the last 10 years, however, has reported differences in how autism presents across genders in later childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. Research suggests that autistic females may be less likely to have a significant language impairment compared to males with a comparative diagnosis (Hiller et al., 2014). It has also been suggested that females with autism have greater motivation and ability to form friendships compared with males (Head et al., 2014). Autistic females tend to display fewer behavioural difficulties and may not exhibit the intense fascination with specific interests or objects to the same degree as autistic males (Frazier

et al., 2014; Volkens, 2018). Females with autism also experience more internalising symptoms such as anxiety or depression (Oswald et al., 2016; Solomon et al., 2012) whereas autistic males are more likely to externalise their feelings, often mistaken as inappropriate behaviour (Haney, 2016). When Kayla and Aida reflect on this, they note:

I believe that there is a difference between boys and girls with autism because everyone has so many different characteristics. Each individual with autism has their own belief in regard to their wellbeing and mental health; sometimes people with autism can definitely understand what's going on and sometimes people with autism don't understand what's happening and find it extremely hard to cope with change of routine. People with autism are not the same, and some are different, and that's totally understandable to accept and understand people's differences. I believe that the boys and girls have coped differently in lockdown because sometimes they're happy and enjoy staying home whilst others won't cope with change, like sometimes missing out on freedom, and having their normal routines being taken away. It can be a huge toll on people's mental health, and it can be very hard on their wellbeing. There are days where people are relaxed and there are days where people are down in the dumps, feeling sad, angry, or having anxieties. Sometimes people can find something to do in the home and sometimes people can get bored very easily, if that ever happens, just take some deep breaths and calm down. (Kayla)

I believe there are perceived gender differences, however this is due to socialisation and gender stereotypes. (Aida)

### 13.14 Myths About Autistic People

Arguably, myths about autistic people exist, and these myths may have been perpetuated through the pandemic. Some studies recognise that autistic people are heterogeneous (see Masi et al., 2017 for a review), with some scholars even suggesting that autism should be referred to as the autisms to consider the diversity of presentations within this condition (Geschwind & Levitt, 2007). Kayla and Aida highlight that this understanding is yet to be adopted widely by the general public.

Some people would think that people with autism might enjoy lockdown. Others might not. I think people with autism have different needs with each to their own, like some people might deal with things differently. People with autism have different characteristics, for example, some people might be very good with academics, while others are very creative, like they are talented with things they're good at. And some people with autism can remember things well (e.g., such as people's names, remembering birthdays, and their plans and daily schedules during the day). Everyone with autism is different people, not the same as everyone else. (Kayla)

We are all so very different, just like neurotypical individuals are different. So, in my opinion, to assume that we all have the same needs and traits can be very damaging and can perpetuate stereotypes. As an autistic and a researcher who believes in the importance of individual voices, I think it is extremely important that we listen to individual needs, rather than try and assume that everyone is the same. That way, individualised support services can be provided that are going to help a person, rather than perpetuate stereotypes. As an autistic, I found lockdowns petrifying and very constricting, but at the same time, I enjoyed the many benefits it brought, such as the ability to spend more time with my family and the fact that life finally slowed down so I was less overwhelmed with sensory input. However, even then, for me, all

these experiences varied with each lockdown and how exhausted I was. When I felt more relaxed, I didn't mind socialising and a fast-paced lifestyle. However, when I felt more tired, I enjoyed the lockdowns. And for me, each day can be very different. So just like we are all so different, even each day can be different for us and can make a difference in terms of our needs. (Aida)

### 13.15 Conclusion

The experience of lockdown and COVID-19 varies from individual to individual, and there are no exceptions for autistic individuals. Research on so-called special populations can create a homogenising effect and it can impact how we might consider or perceive how one particular group might have experienced a particular situation or event. It might bias our thinking or influence how we might engage in our interactions or work with autistic individuals. This chapter represents a collaboration between co-authors who hold different perspectives on autism and highlights the importance of co-participatory research to contextualise findings and challenge assumptions within real-world settings (Fletcher-Watson et al., 2019). This chapter demonstrates the tensions that may exist between research and lived experiences and emphasises the understanding that all individuals with autism are different. Autistic people may have had unique experiences during COVID-19 and the associated lockdowns, but like all people who have lived through the recent pandemic, there are many extenuating circumstances to consider. Listening to the people around us, including those with autism, is the first step towards gaining a greater understanding of people's experiences, challenges, and needs, which can help ensure that greater support systems are put in place.

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# Chapter 14

## Academic Motherhood in Times of Pandemic: Finding Silver Linings



Sun Yee Yip and Jacky-Lou Maestre

**Abstract** This chapter reflects our experiences as PhD students and mothers of adolescents during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. We describe how our positionality as mothers has shaped our socialisation experience in graduate school and how the impact of our positionality has been exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic. Our experiences highlight a disparate graduate school experience for students managing motherhood, family responsibility, and research commitment during the pandemic. We reflect on the disruptions that the pandemic has had on the different aspects of our personal and professional life priorities, including transitioning to online supervision meetings, the solitude of doing research from home, the juggling of family and children's needs, study and work commitments, and physical and mental health concerns. While these may seem like disruptions and distractions to our research, we have discovered new insights through these experiences, and we have found some silver linings. These include seeing our research work and family life as complementary instead of in competition, the opportunity to share our research with our family members, a renewed sense of confidence to deviate from the norm in graduate school, and newfound meaning about academia, learning, and research. Finally, we provide recommendations for policy and practice including the review of graduate school expectations and support systems for students, particularly students who do not fit in the mould of young, single students who devote most of their waking hours to research. In this way, we believe academia can harness the experience and untapped potential of mature students and reimagine the graduate student experience.

**Keywords** Academic motherhood · Pandemic · Teaching · Research · Education · Positionality · Reflexivity · COVID-19

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## 14.1 Introduction

The challenges of working mothers have been widely studied (Castañeda & Isgro, 2013; Huopalainen & Satama, 2019; Kulp, 2016; Kuperberg, 2009; McKee, 2018; Minello et al., 2021; Sharma & Dhir, 2022; Webber & Dismore, 2021). It is common to see working mothers juggling their roles as primary caregivers to their children while fulfilling their work commitments. This delicate balancing act becomes more precarious when the working mums take on the additional role of being PhD students. Often, this involves skilful time management and purposeful planning of competing demands to the PhD student mother's time, juggling time to focus on PhD study, work commitments, and family responsibility (see, for example, Utami, 2019). Amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, navigating motherhood, work, and PhD research has taken on an entirely new meaning. Now that a worldwide pandemic is upon us, working mothers, particularly those studying, are struggling more in their attempts to juggle their commitments, as our experiences in this chapter highlight.

This chapter examines our experiences as two working mothers who are also PhD students pursuing their doctoral education at a large university in Australia. We call ourselves PhD student-working mothers as we are graduate students who combine academic study, work, and motherhood. We describe how our positionality as mothers has shaped our socialisation experience in graduate school and how the impact of our positionality has been exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic. Our experiences highlight PhD student-working mothers' disparate graduate school experience managing motherhood, research, and work commitment during the pandemic.

## 14.2 Challenges of PhD Student-Working Mothers During the Pandemic

Studies have revealed that during the pandemic, PhD student-working mothers have faced unique challenges and pressures as a result of their multiple identities as PhD students, aspiring academics, and working mothers (see, for example, Abdellatif & Gatto, 2020; Anonymous, 2020; Beech et al., 2021; Bowyer et al., 2020; Eigege & Kennedy, 2021; Tan, 2020). Some student-mothers faced challenges in navigating multiple roles. For example, Amal, a second-year international PhD student in the United Kingdom, an associate lecturer, and a single mother to two children, aged three and 13, through her reflective accounts, revealed that she had competing identities as a PhD student, a single parent, a foreigner, and a woman (Abdellatif & Gatto, 2020). Sharing her story helped her learn more about her identity and how she came to the aid of her family during this challenging time (Abdellatif & Gatto, 2020). Beech et al. (2021) highlighted their experiences as mothers and academicians during the COVID-19 pandemic as they had faced new challenges and opportunities both personally and professionally. Bowyer et al. (2020) also found that undergraduate and postgraduate student-mothers' multiple identities (student, mother, wife, partner,

carer, and employee) often clashed and exacerbated life stresses. Furthermore, participants noted that their dual identities as mothers and students affected how they were perceived by their peers and their tutors and lecturers (Bowyer et al., 2020). Similarly, Tan (2020) expressed that when the university closed, she found herself balancing the roles of a mother, researcher, and educator, which were once well-defined by time and place. Before the pandemic, her role as a mother was not apparent to her colleagues during her research, and her role as a researcher was not visible during mothering time (Tan, 2020). However, her roles as a mother, researcher, and educator converged and were apparent to her colleagues when the pandemic struck (Tan, 2020).

Recent literature continues to emphasise the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on PhD student-mothers' wellbeing, especially their mental health. This was clearly demonstrated in the earlier chapter by Patel (2022). Eigege and Kennedy (2021) shared their personal and professional experiences related to the pandemic, such as continually worrying about getting ill, mental health concerns, and other distractions. In their study, Bowyer et al. (2020) demonstrated that a significant number of participants experienced social isolation at the university due to being a student-mother or because of their mature age. As a result, the participants felt "very out of place" (Bowyer et al., 2020, p. 10). Additionally, online learning and home-schooling put a mental strain on student-mothers, many of whom lacked the privacy and space to study and participate in online activities effectively. Consequently, their mental health deteriorated considerably due to increased levels of stress, anxiety, and depression, as well as exhaustion and decreased overall fitness.

These studies illustrate the considerable impact of the pandemic on PhD student-mothers. Research on issues concerning wellbeing continues to emerge, and the findings of these studies are valuable because they contribute to understanding the experiences of PhD student-mothers during the pandemic. While many of the accounts are based on personal experiences, anecdotal stories, and surveys, there seems to be little evidence highlighting how positionality as mothers has been exacerbated at the height of the pandemic. Thus, research needs to explore the challenges experienced by PhD student-mothers and explain their positionality. Consequently, in this chapter, we focus on how our positionalities have shaped our socialisation experience in graduate school in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. This focus promises to produce a more complete and balanced picture of PhD student-mothers' experiences during the pandemic from which to draw the implications for postgraduate education.

### 14.3 Authors' Positionalities

Positionality is the broader historical, political, economic, religious, social, and intellectual contexts that affect interpersonal relations and qualitative research processes (Temple & Edwards, 2002). It refers to where a researcher stands in relation to their researched participants (Merriam et al., 2001). A researcher's positioning may include personal characteristics, such as age, race, gender, sexual orientation, immigration status, affiliation, personal experiences, preferences, cultures, traditions,

ideological stances, biases, and beliefs (Berger, 2015; Bradbury-Jones, 2007; Finlay, 2002b; Hamzeh & Oliver, 2010; Horsburgh, 2003; Kosygina, 2005; Padgett, 2008; Primeau, 2003). As noted by Ozano and Khatri (2018), “part of a researchers’ positionality is also how they view themselves and are viewed by others: as an insider or outsider, someone with power or who feels powerless or coming from a privileged or disadvantaged situation” (p. 191). The researchers’ positionality, therefore, informs their assumptions and biases, what questions they ask, and how they interpret the data (Patton, 2015).

While “no research is free of the researcher’s biases, assumptions, and personality” (Sword, 1999, p. 277), the qualitative researcher tends to address them through the practice of reflexivity. Birks and Mills (2011) define reflexivity as “an active process of systematically developing insight into your work as a researcher to guide your future actions” (p. 52). When researchers acknowledge their positionalities and practice reflexivity, they can think critically about how they view themselves and how they are viewed by others (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Those aware of their views and positionality and their influence on the research can produce a more trustworthy, transparent, and honest account of their experience (Finlay & Gough, 2003; Finlay, 2002a). Doing this necessitates that the researcher is aware of their cultural, political, and social context (Bryman, 2016), as these influence how they view the world (Bourke, 2014; Greenbank, 2003). The researcher also needs to identify preconceptions brought into the research due to previous personal and professional experiences and beliefs (Holmes, 2020). In writing this chapter, our positionalities and reflexivity are critical as we reflect on our identities as PhD students and working mums and set up our perspectives on life during the COVID-19 pandemic.

*Sun Yee:* I am a third-year PhD student using qualitative research to explore the professional transition of Asian immigrant teachers who teach in Australia. Before starting my PhD study, I worked as an educator in Singapore for 17 years. My spouse, three children and I emigrated to Australia in 2018. We wanted to try a different lifestyle and offer a different educational experience for the children. In the same year that we arrived, I commenced my PhD study. Soon after, I was fortunate to be offered a sessional teaching position in the university where I study.

Working, studying and living in a new, unfamiliar country is challenging. I spent a significant part of my initial years at the university familiarising myself with the academic system, work culture, and practices. I went through substantial adjustments at home, learning to cook, manage the housework, and caregiving duties without external help. Not having my extended family with us means that my spouse and I no longer have the privilege of putting the kids with the grandparents when we have to meet work deadlines and other commitments. Being one who values efficiency, I soon devise[d] a strategy to cope with my multiple roles. I adhere[d] to a strict timetable, with blocks of time each day dedicated to my PhD study, teaching, and motherhood commitment. It was not ideal, although I did manage the roles satisfactorily. This is until March 2020, when Melbourne went into lockdown.

The disruption that followed was unprecedented. The university was closed, and all activities were moved online. The adjustment to a new life was unparalleled. Home is now the main activity hub as we scrambled to put together the furniture and equipment to create a home office for work and the children’s remote learning.

*Jacky:* I am a third-year PhD international student from the Philippines. I arrived in Melbourne [in the] last week of March 2018 with my spouse, and I commenced my PhD

in April. Had I not received tuition and stipend scholarships from the university, I would not be here to research multilingual Filipino adolescents' everyday digital literacy practices. In 2015, I graduated with a Master in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) from the same university through the Australia Awards Scholarship. I have worked as a primary school teacher for 15 years and then as a National Service Training Program instructor for five years in the Philippines. I decided to do a PhD because I felt that I was not growing in all aspects. Although I loved teaching primary school students, I did not want to be stuck in my comfort zone. I wanted to advance my knowledge, meet other brilliant minds, and find my purpose.

Like any other PhD student, even under scholarship, I also wanted to find a job for additional income for the family and experience in academia. However, I could not find any job opportunity at that time. Although I was not offered a sessional teaching position like Sun Yee, I was elected president of the Filipino-Australian Student Council of Victoria. I also joined the Faculty of Education student ambassador programme. Later on, I joined a team of facilitators who helped students improve communication skills and confidence in public speaking.

My PhD journey seemed smooth initially until accommodation issues hit us. I got distracted by cleanliness issues. I am a student who could study well in a spic-and-span environment with fewer distractions. Hence, we had to find another accommodation through flatmates.com.au. This website is an online listing service specialising in helping people find shared apartments or flatmates.

Meanwhile, my son was in the Philippines and later on, we decided to bring him here to Melbourne. Before my son arrived in January 2020, we had already looked for new accommodation since three people were not allowed to stay in the room we were renting. We decided to rent a two-bedroom unit to have peace of mind, with no distractions, and just the three of us. Little did I know that the pandemic would exacerbate our family's pre-existing challenges.

Sun Yee and Jacky: As PhD scholarship recipients, both Jacky and myself recognise that we are in a privileged position and that we continue to receive stipends throughout the pandemic and need not worry about our financial situation as much as our peers whose PhD studies are self-funded. We are also grateful to have working spouses who supported us financially and emotionally. We are fortunate to retain our job and work remotely during this crisis. Therefore, we are not generalising our experiences but simply hoping that by sharing our stories and opening up our vulnerability, we can help illuminate the struggles of many PhD students who are also working mums like us. In other words, we hope to share our experience to give a voice to women who are balancing motherhood and academic success. Moreover, we believe it is essential to call attention to the need for women to have easier access to educational opportunities and services.

## 14.4 Methodology

In this chapter, we utilised an autoethnographic approach to explore our stories as PhD student-working mothers during the pandemic. Bochner and Ellis (2016, p. 76) state that “we depend on stories almost as much as we depend on the air we breathe. Air keeps us alive; stories give meaning to our existence.” Autoethnographic stories situate individuals in circumstances where they confront their challenges in search of the emotional truth and epiphany from the experiences that they have lived through (Bochner & Ellis, 2016). According to Custer (2014), “autoethnography can radically



alter an individual's perception of the past, inform their present, and reshape their future if they are aware and open to the transformative effects" (p. 2). We acknowledge that the stories we share in this chapter are subjective, influenced by our experiences and emotions (Ellis et al., 2011). We also note that sharing personal stories and illuminations can be "both humbling and courageous because this process opens the door to conversation and controversy" (Barley & Southcott, 2019, p. 2610).

In autoethnography, the researchers are also the research participants (Reid et al., 2005). The investigation commences with the researchers/participants recollecting events that significantly impact their lives. As the researchers reflect on their written recounts, they form fresh insights into themselves and how they developed into who they are through time and space (Adams et al., 2015; Custer, 2014). By engaging in autoethnographic research, we explored the deeper issues associated with our experiences as PhD students working mothers. While these experiences may be unique to us, it also raises the issue of applicability to other cases (Bresler, 1995). In other words, our research prompted us to reflect on the significance of our recounts and how our experiences inform others in the field.

By examining our experiences, we hope to understand better the larger phenomenon of working mothers pursuing PhDs in education research. Allen and Piercy (2005) observed that such autoethnography research requires the authors to be reflexive and intentional in developing their narrative and voice. Through reflection, we find meaning in our experiences and share how we cope with adversities. We hope that the lessons uncovered from this investigation can provide PhD student-working mums with coping skills, courage, and strength in their personal and professional pursuits in times of adversities.

## 14.5 Academic Motherhood

### 14.5.1 *Navigating Multiple Identities*

As she reflected on her experiences, Sun Yee realised that she had juggled multiple roles since the birth of her first child.

Since my first child was born 17 years ago, I have juggled multiple roles as a working mum. This balancing act intensifies when more children come along and work commitment increases. It was challenging but not unexpected. The decision to pursue PhD study threw another element to this balancing act, not to mention that I am now in a foreign country with no immediate family support. I managed my roles by having a schedule that was as regular as a clockwork. Weekday mornings are filled with preparing breakfast, school lunch, and doing school drop-offs. PhD research takes three to four days a week, while the remaining two days are spent teaching. The evenings are filled with after school pick-ups, enrichment, meals preparation and washing up. The weekends are spent catching up on housework and the occasional family outings. By compartmentalising my day, I was able to get most of what I needed to do. But this also means not having time to engage in social interaction with friends beyond the PhD peers. Going for medical appointments and running errands

are seen as stressors as they disrupt the schedule and encroach into precious time doing PhD research.

My highly structured schedule also means that multiple roles as a mum, a PhD student, and a sessional academic are highly compartmentalised, both into different times and spaces. The lockdown that follow[ed] after the pandemic mean[t] doing all these activities in the same area in the same house and often at the same or overlapping times.

Similar to Sun Yee's pandemic experience, Jacky's juggling of her multiple identities became more and more difficult during the pandemic.

I am a PhD student, a wife, and the heart of the home. These are the roles that I try to navigate in my everyday life, 24/7. When I stayed at the PhD hub, I was completely immersed in my role as a PhD student; however, I messed up with these competing roles during the lockdowns. The first few months were all nightmares, as I had to wear three hats simultaneously – student, wife, and mother. Yes, I was doing multiple things simultaneously – cooking food, reading an article, and waiting for the laundry.

Doing these things simultaneously did not always work for me. What made it worse and more challenging was that we did not have a refrigerator, washing machine, microwave, study tables, extra bed, or other appliances during the first few months of the first lockdown because we had to move to an unfurnished unit. I had to go to the market every day to buy fresh meat or fish. I tried to cook dishes that would last for a couple of days. This means that the role of being the heart of the home dominated most of the time. There were days that I would complain and wish I were an octopus, so I would use eight tentacles at the same time to do all these things, but, hey, I signed up for this. I needed to do my part because my spouse worked in a factory and always went home late because of overtime work. By the time he got home, he was already tired and hungry and needed to sleep early to wake up at four in the morning and prepare for the next day. People would tell me, 'your son is old enough to do the chores, or you only have a son'. Yes, I know, but it is not just the chores we talk about. More important here is the multiple identities that PhD student-mothers negotiate in their everyday lives during the pandemic, regardless of the number and age of children. For me, there was no definite time, such as being a PhD student from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. or a wife or a mother after 5 p.m. They are non-negotiable, 24/7 roles.

Navigating multiple identities simultaneously at the height of the pandemic allowed me to know myself more and reflect on what I needed to improve as a PhD student, as a wife, and as the heart of the home. I proved that despite these challenges, I could be a better version of myself. I also realised that even with these competing roles, I was able to manage things because there were people who helped me along the way.

### ***14.5.2 Doing Research from Home***

Before the pandemic, Sun Yee made it a point to do her study only in the PhD hub that the university has allocated to PhD students. The space is well-lit, the furniture is ergonomic. It was a quiet space that was highly conducive to research. It provided her the much-needed quiet space to momentarily forget about other commitments and focus entirely on reading and writing. This was her quiet space where she would read, write, and develop a sense of camaraderie with other PhD peers through sharing of anxieties, excitement, and joy. All this came to an abrupt end when the pandemic hit.

With the university closure, PhD research is now done at home. I remember lugging a large monitor home on the last day before the hub closed and setting up my workstation at home using an old dining table. The dining room and its surrounding space is now our study hub. My three children are now my study mates as they sit next to me engaged in remote learning while I focus on my PhD research. We become a lot more aware of what each other is learning during remote lessons while they are suddenly more interested in what I am reading and typing away on the screen.

I hear them talk to their teachers while they listen to me stammering as I try to explain to my PhD supervisors why I couldn't submit my draft thesis chapters on time. At times, my youngest one glanced over my screen and asked me why I was still writing the same paragraph after two days. I got my older ones to proofread my writing and find myself explaining to the children my research.

Due to the extended lockdown in Melbourne, Jacky had to spend considerable time at home doing her research along with her son who was doing online classes. Home-schooling, as a result of the lockdown, had inevitably impacted her research progress.

The space constraint did not help me execute my work effectively. I had no designated workspace. Sometimes, I had to study in the kitchen, living room, or on the bed, prioritising my son to use the bedroom as he was in critical, stressful years 11 and 12 during the lockdowns, not to mention I had important milestones as well. I could not provide emotional support to my son because I was also emotionally drained. I even recorded myself crying in front of my laptop because I could not write even a single word. I told myself not to watch that video again unless I get my degree. Moreover, I had no resources at home, which affected my progress. I only had my laptop. I had no printer, no extra monitor, no ergonomic chair. When I worked on my thesis or needed to print reading materials, I usually went to the PhD hub. Having a lack of resources impacted my work immensely, due to which the amount of work that I would usually finish in two weeks took me a month or more. As such, I felt that things were quite beyond my control. I felt anxious about my lack of progress and life in general.

Yet, in the midst of all of these, I tried to find the silver lining, seeing this pandemic in a different light. While silver linings can vary for each PhD student-mother, it can be an opportunity for other things. I had the chance to attend a conference that otherwise would be costly. I learned to find more meaning in my work, although I often would tell myself, 'I should have done this topic or research on these groups of people.'

### ***14.5.3 Working from Home***

It was not only studying from home that posed challenges. Both Sun Yee and Jacky had to learn how to work from home as well, teaching in online spaces which were new to them.

Sun Yee: Teaching remotely is new to me. I grew up with some knowledge of Skype, but it was for social purposes. Learning to use a new virtual communication platform was daunting. I remember spending hours testing out my lessons with my children to ensure that my online classes run smoothly and exploring the different functions such as breakout rooms and interactive discussion forums to make my lessons more engaging. Still, the first zoom lesson was nerve-wracking. It took me close to an entire semester before I started to feel comfortable talking to students online. Working from home also seems to blur the

lines between home and work hours. I find myself attending to my work the first thing I wake up in the morning till late at night, just because of how much my day is broken up with cooking, cleaning, washing and attending to the children's needs. It became tough to demarcate between work and home.

Jacky: Facilitating sessions online was quite challenging. Zoom was never a part of my apps, not even my daily use of the internet. However, this was one of my most valued platforms during the lockdown. I had to learn how to use its features, together with lockdown-friendly teaching strategies. I had to ask my son what could hook him to a lesson so that I could apply it in my sessions. While it took me a few weeks to learn about Zoom, motivating students and keeping them focused was challenging. I liked this job because it allowed me to meet other students and learn from them. This offered a break from my PhD research and helped maintain my sanity.

#### ***14.5.4 Physical and Emotional Wellbeing***

Jacky's reflections also highlighted that the pandemic had a lasting impact on her physical and emotional wellbeing.

My family took the COVID-19 test twice. The first one, I had a sore throat and was feeling sick. Then, another one because two of my husband's workmates whom he closely worked with tested positive, so we needed to get tested. Since we do not own a car, we could not go to a drive-through COVID-19 testing site. We had to go to a walk-in testing centre and queued for more than two hours. Although it was a relief that the results were negative, COVID-19 testing meant days of anxious waiting.

At the same time, the Philippines was also not doing well in terms of COVID-19. Increased cases and higher death rates in the Philippines constantly made me worry about my family's health and safety. Vaccines were yet to be rolled out at that time, so there was a risk of them catching the virus. The deaths of relatives and friends also added to my stress and anxiety. All of these may have contributed to my health problems. Before 2020 ended, I had a general physical check-up because I felt tired all the time, and I had back pains. I found out that I had low iron levels, low Vitamin D, and low white blood cell count. I had to do weekly iron injections for two months and an additional round of iron injections for five weeks. X-rays indicated that I have scoliosis and spondylosis, causing me back pain.

Aside from physical and mental challenges, I also faced financial stress when asked to pay for my son's Year 12 tuition fees, amounting to almost \$14,000. He was not considered a domestic fee-paying student anymore. It was unexpected because I thought his status would be the same as in Year 11. This bothered me so much, which led to having sleeplessness, anxiety, and mood swings. It also took me time to seek help from a counsellor because I was afraid to share my problems. As much as possible, I wanted to keep these problems to myself so as not to bother anyone. Constant emotional support from my family and friends helped me overcome these challenges. My supervisors' support, empathy, patience, and open communication also played a role in overcoming these struggles. Reflecting on myself, I also journaled my challenges and triumphs as a mother and a PhD student during the lockdown. My journal helped me release my feelings and frustrations during the lockdown.

While restrictions [did start] to loosen by the end of last year, the multiple lockdowns have had lingering effects on my end. The lack of progress has exacerbated my social anxiety. There were times when I was anxious to meet academic peers and colleagues given my research progress. I avoided PhD colleagues who constantly compared themselves with my progress, asking how many articles I had published, attended, and presented in prestigious online conferences. I always felt this pressure, even the best of times during the pandemic. I

even deactivated my other social media accounts to avoid colleagues' comments about my thesis and competing against me. I did not want to compete with them. I wanted to compete with myself. Uncertainties related to on and off lockdowns and vaccination rollout have exacerbated my anxiety, along with the pressures associated with the looming thesis submission deadline (given that I was already in my third year). These have had me feeling overwhelmed and unable to concentrate on many occasions. Despite these challenges, health, personal and family issues, I am trying to persevere and be resilient. I have access to mental health support services via the university's counselling and psychological services and consulted my GP. I intend to do so over the coming months continuously.

My experiences may be different from yours. You may have a smooth ride or a turbulent one during the pandemic. I may see things differently the way you do, but one thing is for sure, we can learn from these challenges. First and foremost, you need to know that there are no exact solutions suitable for everyone. Every PhD journey is different, and every PhD student is treated differently by people. Life seems unfair, but you can do something so you will not be disadvantaged.

### ***14.5.5 Finding Silver Linings***

Sun Yee also experienced significant challenges during the pandemic, leading to significant stress. However, as she highlights in her reflection, she has managed to find silver linings in her experiences.

My PhD final year is highly stressful as I wrote my thesis. The effects of the lockdown, which gave rise to a change of routines that requires significant adjustment, compound this stress. While the stress of completing the final year of my PhD thesis during the lockdown has taken a toll on my physical and mental health, the experience has allowed me to grow in strength and gratitude and illuminated many aspects that I would not have seen had it not been because of the pandemic. Below are the silver linings to my experience in this pandemic:

First, the experience of the pandemic, the lockdown that followed, and writing this chapter have made me more cognizant of my privileged position, which has, in many ways, helped mitigate the disruption to my research journey due to the pandemic. Having worked for several years and accumulated some savings, I purchased a house not long after arriving in Melbourne. While it is a small house given my limited budget, it is nevertheless a comfortable and cosy one that provided us with a sense of security and stability, particularly during the pandemic. Both my husband and I are lucky that we retained our jobs during this crisis when many people have lost theirs. My husband is considered an essential worker during the pandemic and is busier than usual at work. I am incredibly grateful that the university has extended my work contract and allowed me to work from home in a safe environment.

Second, another silver lining to this pandemic is that we grew much closer as a family. My kids and I get to see what each other are learning and working on, and we discuss these often at home. When one of the kids faced difficulty with a learning task, the rest chipped in to help. Our work desks are placed in different corners of the dining and family room, and the dining table becomes the hub where we come together to seek help, work out a solution to school assignments, interact, and simply take a break from the screen and have a snack. Talking about the concerns and anxiety we experience during the lockdown, and online working and learning have made us grow closer as a family as we resolve these challenges together.

Having my children work in close proximity means they often glance over my shoulder to see what I write. This has triggered their interest in my research topic and the research process. I found myself learning to explain my research in non-academic language to them, which

they can understand. I hope that through these conversations, they are motivated to go into research. Having the children in close proximity as I work also means that they often listen to my online classes. Not only did they pick up new information, but they also regularly gave me feedback on my lesson and suggestion on how to make my lessons more interactive and engaging. Seeing how I organise my time around work and research, I hope to be a positive role model for tenacity and grit. I believe that this period of lockdown and pandemic has strengthened our bond as a family as we live and work together and learn from each other.

Despite the challenging nature of Jacky's experiences, she also managed to look for the silver linings during the pandemic.

One of these silver linings was the chance to have more bonding activities with my family. The lockdown was our opportunity to compensate for the two years we were not able to spend time with our son since he was in the Philippines when I started my PhD. Our weekend bonding activities included cleaning the house together, watching movies on Netflix, baking pastries, going for walks, or simply having heart-to-heart conversations about overcoming our challenges.

Not only did our family spend more time together, but we were also able to save money on public transportation expenses. Thanks to the travel restrictions. My son and I stayed at home but my husband continued working on-site during the lockdown; hence, we were able to set money aside for food or emergencies. Furthermore, as a result of the 5 km and 10km radius rules, we discovered nearby walking areas that we had never explored before.

Another silver lining that I experienced during the pandemic was having more time to pause and reflect. I have never reflected this much in my life. It was like a spiritual retreat for me. Despite not being able to attend masses in the church, I watched online masses which really helped strengthen my faith during those difficult times when I thought giving up was the only solution. I realised that despite the challenges, there were so many things to be thankful for. For example, I got to spend more time to stay in touch with my family overseas through the use of Zoom. My sisters and I have different time zones so moments like these were treasured the most during the lockdown.

## 14.6 Conclusion and Recommendations

These reflections show our authenticity and vulnerabilities as PhD student-mothers trying to endure this pandemic and find silver linings even in the darkest clouds. Although this sounds cliché, it is true. Despite the difficulties that COVID-19 has brought to many of us, it has ultimately given us the time to reflect and take a closer look at ourselves and what matters to us. COVID-19 has wreaked havoc on almost everyone, but it has taught us 'six Rs'—resilience, responsibility, relationships, routines, resourcefulness, and responsiveness. Our stories have highlighted that despite our privileges, such as receiving scholarships, we still encountered tremendous obstacles during our PhD journey.

Although we had different challenges, we were able to overcome those hardships with the help and strength from our family members, supervisors, friends, writing groups, and colleagues. Indeed, it takes a village to do and finish a PhD. We learned that we have a responsibility not only for the family but to everyone around us. Our experiences have strengthened some relationships, while some other relationships were broken. We highlight that it is important to have routines to help make

research tasks more manageable. There is also a need to be resourceful during the pandemic and improvise whatever we have in times of crisis. Finally, we have to be responsive not only to our needs but also to the needs of others. We hope that more PhD student-mothers will pursue this challenging but rewarding journey with or without the pandemic. We also emphasise that PhD student-mothers should be treated equally with other graduate students. Let us not wait for another pandemic to happen to realise how much support some PhD student-mothers need. The following are some tips for mothers who plan to pursue a PhD:

1. Set boundaries. Working from home can blur the lines between home hours and work hours. Try to set boundaries by ensuring that home and work hours do not overlap.
2. Prioritise. Be a 'to-do list' or 'checklist' person. Every Monday morning, write a to-do list for the week and aim to work through them for the rest of the week. It includes everything, big projects and small administrative tasks such as paying bills, registering the children for online programmes, attending medical appointments, etcetera. This helps to visualise what things are needed for the week and feel a sense of achievement as each item is removed from the list. It helps to knock out those pesky five-minutes-or-less tasks; the earlier, the better, which leaves more time to focus on bigger projects. Scheduling apps can also help.
3. Chunking. In the current state, it is impossible to sit down for three, four hours at a time and power through a big project. Devote your most productive hours to the most critical work for the day. Spend this time writing. For us, the morning is the quietest time of the day as the rest of the family are still asleep. If you are lucky, you can get three hours of work done before everybody wakes up. As far as possible, we try to schedule the less brain-intensive work in the afternoon, which we can usually only focus on for two hours. This may include proof-reading written drafts in the morning, doing database searches, updating the reference list for articles, attending online meetings and student consultations, and sometimes running errands. Try to schedule medical appointments in the late afternoon, usually as the last patient for the day.
4. Prepare ahead. We prefer spending my evenings completing tasks that tap into the other side of my brain. This includes doing grocery shopping in the evening and cook ahead for two days each time. Such meal preparation arrangement helps to minimise the cooking time in the day. The evenings are also sometimes spent on laundry, housework, and other matters.
5. Communicate openly with family members. There should be full support and understanding to surpass all challenges. Try to find another family member to step in when your schedule is overwhelmed.
6. Talk to your supervisors. They are our guideposts. They must know what you are going through because they can help you. There are important things we have learned from this pandemic: honesty, mutual trust, being authentic and open, even if you are separated by distance and screens. If you are struggling and the

pandemic has affected you and your research, talk with your supervisors. Talk to them with an open mind.

7. Connect with others by joining writing groups. Research clearly demonstrates that these spaces can be of great benefit not only in terms of your academic writing and other transferable skills, but also in terms of providing pastoral support (Cahusac de Caux et al., 2017; Chakraborty et al., 2021; Hradsky et al., 2022; Lam et al., 2019). Find ways to share space with others, even virtually. Create a group chat to brainstorm with others and support one another. Chat groups quickly became a place to share our authentic selves and our struggles with the *new normal*. This became a space where we could feel seen and show empathy to others. We quickly recognised this connection was something we were all craving, so we went further and added check-in meetings and virtual lunches to our weekly schedule to carve out time for fellowship.
8. Focus. Try to put the phone on silent mode and put it away from face down. Unfollow some groups and people on your social media accounts to avoid distraction or deactivate other social media accounts.
9. Be positive. Look for the beauty of each negativity. As they say, *every cloud has a silver lining*. There is always a reason for everything.
10. Be ready for some surprise challenges along the way. The PhD journey is not always a bed of roses, but it is an exciting adventure. Pick up a new hobby. Try something unique. Reward yourself with something you have wanted to eat or buy for the last couple of months. Be kind to yourself.
11. Ask for help when needed. Consult your doctor and counsellor. As demonstrated earlier in this book (see Mokbul, 2022; Patel, 2022), seeking appropriate professional support can lead to personal discoveries and epiphanies which can help you overcome challenges you are experiencing. Talk to your genuine friends. Some people are willing to help. However, be careful whom you trust.
12. Pray. Have faith. All shall be well.

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# Chapter 15

## Lockdown, Online Learning, and Sense of Coherence: How I Managed to Finish My Master's Degree During the COVID-19 Pandemic



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**Abstract** In this chapter, I explore how I managed to finish my study course during a rapid shift from offline to online mode due to the COVID-19 lockdown. With the help of an autoethnographic method, I analyse the issues I encountered and my responses to the stressors. To self-reflect on my experience, I draw upon the salutogenic framework with the focus on its key construct, sense of coherence (SOC). Firstly, I describe the theoretical underpinnings of SOC and its three components: comprehensibility, manageability, and meaningfulness. Secondly, I define resistance resources and their role in coping with stressful stimuli. Finally, with the help of the 13-item scale, I measure my level of SOC and self-analyse my experience based on the domains of this construct.

**Keywords** Sense of coherence · Salutogenesis · Resistance resources · Wellbeing · Postgraduate coursework students · COVID-19

### 15.1 Introduction

Concerns about students' mental health and wellbeing are prominent in current higher education scholarship. In consideration of this substantial challenge, study experiences of both undergraduate students (see, for example, Berger & Malaney, 2003; Li & Hasson, 2020) and higher degree by research students (see, for example, Pretorius et al., 2019; Schmidt & Hansson, 2018; Waight & Giordano, 2018) have been widely explored. It is acknowledged that during their study time, university students frequently experience stress, poor mental health, fatigue (Ribeiro et al., 2018), as well as depression, eating disorders, self-harm, and anxiety (Storrie et al., 2010). The literature typically reports that students' emotional wellbeing impacts on their grades, and the ability to deal with stress and stay emotionally healthy is a significant determinant of students' success (Storrie et al., 2010). However, postgraduate

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coursework students are often overlooked in this discussion and this cohort remains the most under-researched (Bamber et al., 2019; Morgan, 2015; Pollard et al., 2016; Wakeling & Laurison, 2017). Moreover, postgraduate coursework students are often considered as *learning experts* as they have a degree already which puts more pressure on them (Coneyworth et al., 2020). For postgraduate coursework students, an additional challenge is that they are involved “in considerable levels of isolated and challenging independent study” compared to undergraduates (McLaughlin & Sillence, 2018, p. 3). As White and Ingram (2021) note, postgraduate coursework students face multiple stressors during their study which makes their wellbeing crucial for a positive experience.

The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in unprecedented uncertainty for most university students. A rapid transition to fully online learning and a strict lockdown that was imposed to prevent the spread of the coronavirus caused a lot of frustration, especially among vulnerable cohorts, such as international students. This was illustrated earlier in this book (see Rangarajan & Daneshfar, 2022). It was even more challenging for students who were graduating during this time and were supposed to enter the labour force in the near future. Another factor to be taken into account is family duties. As Dodd et al. (2021) state, female students have an overall higher level of stress, anxiety, and depression than males, and caring responsibilities are likely to affect women more than men. Several chapters in this book highlight the competing demands mothers faced due to the COVID-19 pandemic-induced caring responsibilities (see Adams et al., 2022; Patel, 2022; Yip & Maestre, 2022). During the pandemic the level of anxiety and depression increased (Kaparounaki et al., 2020). However, a very small proportion of students seek help for mental health concerns. Stigma is named as one of the common strains that prevents students from looking for mental support (Storrie et al., 2010).

When the pandemic started, I was in the final semester of my Master of Education in Digital Learning course at Monash University, Australia. As a mother of two children, who moved to remote learning, I felt responsible for their wellbeing. Balancing between family responsibilities and university assignments was probably the biggest challenge during that time. The status of a female international student encompasses many hurdles itself but with the lockdown measures in place, my university life has almost become a demolition derby.

Many studies drew their attention to students' wellbeing during the COVID-19 pandemic (see, for example, Chakladar et al., 2022; Dodd et al., 2021; Prasath et al., 2021; Van de Velde et al., 2021). In this autoethnographic study, I reflect on how I was dealing with the situation of being a mother and a full-time postgraduate coursework student during the first wave of COVID-19. I draw on Antonovsky's sense of coherence (SOC) construct (Antonovsky, 1993), which is discussed in detail in the next section. Having originated from the medical field, SOC was initially used to explain why some people consider themselves sick under stress while others rate themselves healthy. SOC is directly linked to the level of stress, anxiety, and depression and at high levels is associated with enhanced psychological and physical wellbeing (Pallant & Lae, 2002). I measured my SOC using the 13-item SOC scale and self-reflected on what helped me to successfully finish my study. The aim of this chapter is to identify what my level of SOC in the first wave of COVID-19 was

and which resources I used to handle the prevailing situation. In revealing tensions around studying online and fulfilling motherly duties, this chapter explores what lessons, if any, I learned from my academic life during the pandemic.

## 15.2 Salutogenesis and Sense of Coherence

What makes people healthy? That question was raised by Aaron Antonovsky, an Israeli-American sociologist and academic, in the late 1960s (Mittelmark & Bauer, 2017). That simple question has led to a major philosophical change and the development of the salutogenic model which focuses not on why one is sick but on why one is healthy. The idea of the salutogenic theory has arisen from Antonovsky's observations of his parents, Jewish immigrants from Russia who successfully managed to get through the Great Depression in the 1930s. Thereafter in one of his studies, Antonovsky had as respondents women who survived the concentration camps of the Second World War (Antonovsky, 1987b). The researcher noticed that a good proportion of the participants were in overall good mental and physical health despite all the horrors that they had experienced in the past (Antonovsky, 1987b). This led him first to the idea of generalised resistance resources and then SOC (Flensburg-Madsen et al., 2005) that formed the basis of the salutogenic theory. The term salutogenesis was derived from the words *origins* (genesis) of *health* (saluto) (Antonovsky, 1979), so the key issue of this concept is about the origins of health. The main argument of the salutogenic approach is that stress research (pathogenic approach) puts too much emphasis on negative aspects while the salutogenic model highlights positive facets of stress (Collins, 2015). Having started in the medical field, Antonovsky realised that he was not interested in particular diseases but in psychological stressors that cause them (Vinje et al., 2017). After fifteen years of work, Antonovsky (1979) offered an answer: "the origins of health are to be found in a sense of coherence" (p. vii).

SOC is the core construct of the salutogenic theoretical model and is referred to as "a global orientation that expresses the extent to which one has a pervasive, enduring though dynamic feeling of confidence that (1) the stimuli deriving from one's internal and external environments in the course of living are structured, predictable, and explicable; (2) the resources are available to one to meet the demands posed by these stimuli; and (3) these demands are challenges, worthy of investment and engagement" (Antonovsky, 1987b, p. 19). Antonovsky (1987b) argued that SOC is not a coping mechanism per se, but high SOC helps to adjust to a stressful situation by choosing the best available resources in order to deal with a stressor. As Barni et al. (2020) put it, this is "a major individual resilience resource" (p. 2). Antonovsky (1996) claims that a strong SOC helps a person in stressful circumstances stay motivated (meaningfulness), understand the challenges (comprehensibility), and believe that these challenges can be overcome (manageability). Overall, the major assumption of Antonovsky's theory is that strong SOC leads to a better quality of life (Eriksson & Lindström, 2007).

SOC is constituted of three components: comprehensibility, manageability, and meaningfulness (Antonovsky, 1987a, b). Comprehensibility is defined as the ability to understand stressful situations in order to overcome them (Antonovsky, 1987b). When comprehensibility is high, the information from confronting a stimulus (stressor) is “ordered, consistent, structured, and clear” (predictable) as opposed to “disquieting, chaotic, disordered, random, or accidental” (unpredictable) (Antonovsky, 1987b, p. 156). Eriksson and Mittelmark (2017) remark that “what one comprehends is easier to manage” (p. 97).

Despite being necessary, this single component is not enough for a strong SOC. The second dimension is manageability, which is the perception of available resources to handle the situation. These resources are divided into two groups. The first one comprises the characteristics of an individual, a group, or a community that contribute to people’s abilities to cope with external stressors and to strengthen SOC (Antonovsky, 1979). Antonovsky (1987a) calls them generalised resistance resources (GRRs) and refers to them as “phenomena that provide one with sets of life experiences characterised by consistency, participation in shaping outcomes and an underload-overload balance” (p. 19). In simple terms, GRRs are a *baggage* of life experiences that are gathered over the lifespan from the cultural, social and environmental conditions of living (Idan et al., 2017). The instances of these resources are cultural stability, social support, and ego identity (Antonovsky, 1987a). The latter often has different definitions (Bourne, 1978). I adhere to the definition of Levesque (2011) who refers to ego identity as “the sense of identity that provides individuals with the ability to experience their sense of who they are, and also act on that sense, in a way that has continuity and sameness” (p. 813). One of the main proponents of this concept is Erikson (1956) who argues that a strong ego identity facilitates inner coherence and sameness. The second group of resistance resources, called specific resistance resources (SPRs), represents the resources that are relevant in a particular situation such as knowing the emergency phone number during a holiday in a foreign country (Antonovsky, 1987a). GRRs and SRRs are not mutually exclusive or exchangeable, GRRs rather enable the use of SRRs (Mittelmark et al., 2017). Overall, resistance resources include formal resources (e.g., social services or money) and informal resources (e.g., family, friends, colleagues, classmates, self-esteem, and cultural capital) (Eriksson & Lindström, 2006). Antonovsky (1987a) repeatedly highlights that SOC is not a coping style as such. A person with a strong SOC is rather able to choose from a range of available resistance resources and utilise them in a particular situation. Since stressors being confronted are diverse, it is pivotal to select a combination of generalised and specific resources, appropriate for the situation. Of great importance is to stay motivated to cope with the issues and to understand why it is important to deal with a stressful situation and why it is necessary to mobilise certain resistance resources. That leads to the third pillar of the SOC: meaningfulness. Meaningfulness is about seeing life as sensemaking and problems as challenges and not only obstacles (Antonovsky, 1993).

### 15.3 Sense of Coherence and Autoethnography

Various routes to explain and explore the phenomenon of stress coping have been taken. These include a focus on self-efficacy and resilience (Konaszewski et al., 2021), challenge appraisal (Collins, 2015; Lau, 2019; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), and control (Dollard et al., 2003; Liu et al., 2011). Storrie et al. (2010) emphasise that in the studies that deal with students' mental health issues, the prevalent research design takes the form of a questionnaire. A notable exception which uses autoethnography and challenge appraisal is the study by Lau (2019).

In this chapter, to self-reflect on my experience of coping with a stressful situation, I draw upon the salutogenic framework with the focus on its key construct, SOC (Antonovsky, 1979, 1987a, b). Several studies explore the relation between SOC and COVID-19 (see, for example, Barni et al., 2020; Schäfer et al., 2020). In general, literature reports that people with a strong SOC can manage social and psychological stressors more successfully and channel their emotions in the right direction compared to ones with a weak SOC (Volanen et al., 2007). It also has been documented that students with a high level of SOC have fewer difficulties in their everyday lives (Hochwälder & Saied, 2018). Moreover, they consider the troubles that they encounter as less stressful than students with a lower SOC (Hochwälder & Saied, 2018). Eriksson and Lindström (2006), in their systematic review of research on the salutogenic model published from 1992 to 2003, found a strong negative correlation between SOC and anxiety and depression.

At the outset, it must be pointed out that it is not the intent of this chapter to dive deep into the salutogenic model and consider, for example, the stability of SOC. Research on this received contrasting results with some authors claiming that SOC is unstable (Smith et al., 2003; Volanen et al., 2007). In contrast, Antonovsky (1979, 1987b) himself argues that by the age of 30 people's SOC is evolved and stays stable until retirement when it starts to weaken. Other authors critique the SOC scale due to its insufficient reliability in terms of linking physical health and the level of SOC (Flensburg-Madsen et al., 2005) or lack of emotional dimension (Flensburg-Madsen et al., 2006; Korotkov, 1993). In this chapter, I try to connect the salutogenic model to my wellbeing to clarify whether the successful study outcomes were linked to my SOC amidst being exposed to stressful factors (lockdown, online learning) that I experienced while finishing my Master's degree. This theory helped me to structure my own experience. I did not attempt to find the reasons for my level of the SOC, nor seek to discover any patterns between SOC and the ability to cope with stressful situations which goes beyond the scope of this chapter. For the purposes of this study, I harnessed the salutogenic theory as a guide.

For this chapter, I adopted the autoethnographic method, which is defined as "an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyse personal experience in order to understand cultural experience" (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 273). This research type suits the purposes of this chapter as I reflected on my coping with the challenges of studying during the lockdown and linked it to research literature. I did not attempt to stay completely objective as autoethnography as a



research method acknowledges subjectivity and emotionality (Ellis et al., 2011). However, although I write about “epiphanies” (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 275), I used my personal experience to create a broader picture of dealing with stressful circumstances. In writing this chapter, I utilised the technique of “layered accounts” (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 278), that is I focused not only on my personal story but also approached literature to synthesise my experience. As Rambo (2005) argues, this writing style enables the writer “to incorporate multiple voices including theory, subjective experience, fantasy, and more” (p. 563). In structuring the chapter, I harnessed Pretorius and Cutri’s (2019) reflective practice model which incorporates elements of the minimalistic model of reflection (Rolfe et al., 2001) and the concept of reflection for learning (Pretorius & Ford, 2016). I briefly describe my experience with the help of vignettes, analyse this experience with the help of the salutogenic framework, then draw conclusions. This autoethnographic study addresses the following questions: “What was my level of SOC while finishing my Master’s degree?” and “What resistance resources did I use to cope with the stressful circumstances?”.

To open up my autoethnographic analysis, I share three events from the time when the pandemic began, and I was forced to switch to an online modality. I added them to the chapter to showcase the real situations that I encountered during the lockdown. They serve as examples of joyful and stressful moments I experienced during the first lockdown in Melbourne.

## 15.4 My Sense of Coherence

### 15.4.1 *Vignette 1*

22/03/2020. It was my son’s 11th birthday party and the last day before the lockdown. We were joking with the parents: See you around September. How wrong we were. At that time, we could not even imagine that Melbourne would become the city with the longest cumulative lockdown in the world (Boaz, 2021). In March 2020, I was in my final semester of the Master’s degree and was undertaking the research pathway which implied writing a mini-thesis. An extended study time and more thorough academic writing put more pressure on postgraduate coursework students who were not familiar with the field of research like me. While it was more demanding for the students in lockdown to do this online, I had an extra challenge, even two extra challenges. My two children, eleven and four, found themselves stuck in the house with me. As an essential worker, my husband was working on-site, so most of the time I was alone with my children.

### 15.4.2 *Vignette 2*

I met the first lockdown positively. I felt quite optimistic, sometimes even a bit excited as it was a new experience for everyone. Despite all the hassles with homeschooling, my own study and household duties, I enjoyed the time at home. We had picnics in the front yard, rode

scooters within the allowed five kilometres radius, read books, baked cakes and biscuits. My and my husband's birthdays, we celebrated virtually with our friends by using funny filters during the call.

### 15.4.3 *Vignette 3*

8:50 pm. It has been almost three hours since I closed the door to my room to attend a virtual seminar. My daughter could not wait outside any longer, so she entered the room and joined me while I was discussing my theoretical framework with my tutor and classmates. Although it was quite late, she was waiting for my seminar to finish as she wanted me to read her a bedtime story. The next several weeks I spent doing my assignments mainly late at night or early in the morning when the children were asleep. Many people asked me even before the lockdown how I was doing this, studying and taking care of the kids. I would say that my inner responsibility was a major factor that helped me to do the right thing. I felt responsible for the wellbeing of my family so I just could not afford for it to fall apart.

There is considerable literature which explores the relationships between SOC and university students (Dadaczynski et al., 2022). In general, a high SOC is associated with less difficulties at dealing with stressful situations (Grayson, 2007). A strong SOC underpins good health and helps a person in managing anxiety, depression, and burnout (Salamonson et al., 2016). However, in terms of affecting academic performance, research evidence provides contradicting results (Salamonson et al., 2016). Whilst the medical dimension of SOC in physical health and coping strategies is widely explored, fewer studies focus on the connections between SOC and academic performance (Salamonson et al., 2016).

To measure my SOC, I harness the Antonovsky's 13-item short scale derived from the original 29-item Orientation to Life Questionnaire (Antonovsky, 1987b). I answered the questions on the three dimensions of SOC (comprehensibility, manageability, and meaningfulness) using a Likert scale ranging from 1 (never experienced) to 7 (always/often). The total SOC score is calculated by summing all the scores with the total score ranging from 13 to 91 points. Antonovsky (1993) highlights the value of the scales only when all the dimensions are considered together. More recent research suggests that the elements of the SOC can be explored separately (Danioni et al., 2021; Eriksson & Mittelmark, 2017; Von Bothmer & Fridlund, 2003). However, for the purposes of this chapter, I followed the initially proposed SOC as a unidimensional construct where comprehensibility, manageability, and meaningfulness are inextricably interwoven in a single whole because my aim was to evaluate my overall mental health at a particular point in time. To make the data more reliable, I completed the questionnaire three times, leaving a one-week gap between each attempt. The scores from previous weeks were hidden, so I answered the questions without knowing my previous responses. The biggest challenge that I encountered while completing the questionnaire was not to mix my current thoughts and feelings with the ones from the past when I was doing my Master's degree. When I was answering the questions, I tried to ignore the current situation reflecting only on the past. My total scores were 65, 55, 55 with a mean value of 58 which is above the

middle. The reliability of SOC is often tested with Cronbach's alpha. According to Eriksson and Mittelmark's (2017) review, the SOC scale has high internal consistency when measured by this coefficient. When using the 13-item SOC scale, Cronbach's alpha is between 0.70 and 0.92. Mine was 0.76 which is acceptable. Now I am turning to analysis of each component of SOC.

Comprehensibility, a cognitive component of SOC, implies that external stressors are considered as predictable, structured, and explicable. In my case, I acknowledged the necessity and the feasibility of all the measures undertaken by the government at that time. Despite the situation being unpredictable (restrictions were dependent on the number of cases), the world made sense to me.

I accepted the fact that my personal life was being controlled by other people. I believe I was worried about the health of my loved ones and was ready to follow the rules to keep them safe. Concern about the health of my family was one of the key things that contributed to the domain of comprehensibility. Even if I entered this open-ended situation involuntarily, I tried to make order of it. As a highly responsible person, I could not afford to panic or neglect my study.

Besides, the stressor (the start of the pandemic COVID-19 and the subsequent lockdown) caused an unfamiliar tension, issues, and emotions. Thus, I could not adopt a typical pattern of coping because I had never experienced anything comparable before.

Manageability is about the resources at my disposal and how adequately I utilised them. In terms of SRRs, there was a range of resources available to students, including but not limited to free counselling services, financial aid for those suffering financial hardship, and free food.

I lost my casual employment at the university and my husband who used to work full-time was also hit by the restrictive measures. As an international student, I was not entitled to any government support but my application for Monash University Student Compassionate and Hardship package was successful and helped to partly overcome financial pressure. With regard to GRRs, friends support played an important role. We were in the same boat and shared similar issues. Many of my friends were international students too, some of them were writing mini-thesis just like me, some students had children. We had similar issues and were facing similar circumstances. WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger groups were extremely helpful, be it sharing a useful publication for the study or a resource for entertaining children in lockdown.

Also, my ego identity provided me with the strong sense of knowing what I wanted to achieve and why. One year before the pandemic I wrote a book chapter on my professional identity where I reflected on what affected my career development trajectory (Umarova, 2020). That experience was a good foundation for defining my goals and supporting my study.

In terms of mental health support, I did not use the free counselling service available at the university as it was culturally foreign to me. I have never thought to be in need of such help. My view was: work more, sleep less, mental health support is not for me. Now I understand that this was a mistake but I faced the consequences of avoiding professional help much later when we found ourselves in one of the longest lockdowns in the world. What helped me get through that tough time in 2020 was my hyper-responsibility. The future of my family

relied on my academic results as I decided to pursue a PhD degree afterwards and needed high grades to receive a scholarship. I believed that all my efforts were meaningful.

With regard to the meaningfulness component, both lockdown and online learning made sense to me as there were many negative COVID-19 news reports from other countries (see, for example, Megna, 2020).

I believed that the time and efforts I invested in my study were worthwhile despite the lack of sleep and constant tension. I saw this as a commonplace, not as a burden. Overall, I perceived the situation as stressful but not hopeless. My attempts were aimed at reducing the potential damage to myself and most importantly to my family.

As Antonovsky (1987a) notes, a person with a strong SOC is flexible with what is meaningful for them. I am sure that if analogous restrictions were imposed on me with regard to other stressors, I would act and feel differently. The new deadly disease and associated anxiety, uncertainty, and inability to make any plans resulted in the broadening of the boundaries of my meaningfulness. On the other side, such spheres as inner feelings, personal relations, and my study were not excluded. On the contrary, they positively influenced what was meaningful to me:

Well, offline lessons on campus are not available anymore, but I can spend more time with my children.

## 15.5 Conclusion

A good number of authors (Kaparounaki et al., 2020; Pedrelli et al., 2015; Storrie et al., 2010) outline mental health issues that university students experience during their study, with female students being more inclined to such issues (Dadaczynski et al., 2022; Stallman, 2010). It has been shown that university students are a vulnerable cohort who frequently suffer from stress during their study (Singh & Bandyopadhyay, 2021). Research conducted in the last two years demonstrated that anxiety and depression symptoms are even more common during the COVID-19 pandemic (Li et al., 2021), which is not surprising as people are exposed to unprecedented developments and restrictive measures taken by governments to stop the spread of the virus.

In this chapter, I applied autoethnography to explore my experience as an international student and a mother of two children during the first wave of COVID-19. In so doing, I applied the salutogenic model. According to this theory, someone with a strong SOC is likely to generally have good physical and mental health. On the flipside, an individual who has a weak SOC generally has poorer physical and mental health. The research questions addressed were: “What was my level of SOC while finishing my Master’s degree?” and “What resistance resources did I use to cope with stressful circumstances?”. I measured my SOC using the Antonovsky’s 13-item scale. The results showed that my SOC was quite strong, with a total score of 58 out of 91. As for the resistance resources, healthy ego identity, resilience, as well as family and friends support maintained my wellbeing. Luckily, bottling up

my emotions and avoiding professional help did not influence my academic results much. However, it affected my mental health later, during the subsequent lockdowns in 2021 when I finally forced myself to approach counselling services.

Today, SOC and resistance resources do not represent the only constructs of salutogenic model (Eriksson & Mittelmark, 2017). Salutogenesis serves as an umbrella term for various assets for health and wellbeing, such as resilience, belonging, self-efficacy, inner strength, cultural capital, and learned optimism. The overall idea of salutogenesis and concentrating on positive moments is close to my personality. The quote of Antonovsky and Sagy (2017) resonates with me the most: “Salutogenesis is not limited to physical or mental health; it is a philosophy of human existence” (p. 23). The lesson I learned from the time when the pandemic COVID-19 began is quite obvious but at the same time remarkable for me: wellbeing is important. It influences not only one’s mental but also physical health. Attention should be paid to what resources you have at your disposal and which of them are the most relevant in a certain situation. Most importantly, seek help if needed.

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# Chapter 16

## Cognitive Hardiness in the Face of Uncertainty: PhD-ing from Home During a Global Pandemic



Sherrica Senewiratne 

**Abstract** Commencing a PhD is not always the easiest decision, especially amidst a global pandemic. Despite knowing this, commencing a PhD from home was a decision I chose to make when I was uncertain about my future after completing my Master's. Within this chapter, I discuss how learning the concept of cognitive hardiness proved to be useful to me during this journey. Cognitive hardiness comprises commitment, control, and challenge. I was also fortunate to have supportive supervisors and opportunities to engage in coaching, as well as formal and informal mentoring. In addition to discussing my experiences within this chapter, I also reached out to a colleague who is completing a Master's by Research to assess if there were any points of comparison in our experiences of commencing our studies from home. I hope the research and reflections from our experiences will help other early career researchers and academics develop a variety of coping mechanisms to maintain control, remain committed, and embrace challenges within the current environment, given the possibility that the world of academia has been changed forever.

**Keywords** Hardiness · Cognitive hardiness · Mentoring · Informal mentoring · Formal mentoring · Challenges · PhD from home · COVID-19

### 16.1 Introduction

The COVID-19 global pandemic has impacted individuals across various sectors, including academia. This has caused a high level of uncertainty that never previously existed, particularly around job security and the sudden instability of industry sectors due to a loss in income (Stamatis et al., 2022). These feelings of uncertainty can have negative impacts on the health and wellbeing of individuals within these sectors. Similarly, students commencing PhDs were also faced with this uncertainty as a result of not being sure of what the field of academia would look like in the years to come. When considering the recent climate of the university sector, the evidence clearly

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indicates academia has suffered due to COVID-19 (see Cahusac de Caux, 2022). For example, many scholars have lost their jobs or had to experience a reduction in their wages in order to compensate for a loss in university income (Cahusac de Caux, 2022). Thus, students commencing their doctoral studies have grown uncertain about their future, which can impact their attitude and motivation to engage in a doctoral degree (Croucher & Locke, 2020).

Given the consequences of COVID-19 related lockdowns, the environment in which PhD students commenced their studies was also quite different to what would have been expected prior to the pandemic. This involved commencing the PhD from home, which meant students were physically isolated from their supervisors, other PhD students, and potential support systems. Past researchers have also frequently highlighted the impact of doctoral studies on the mental health of these students, creating awareness of the poor wellbeing of doctoral students (see, for example, Lau & Pretorius, 2019, 2022; Levecque et al., 2017).

Thus, within this chapter I will aim to discuss my decision of choosing to commence a PhD despite my awareness of the negative impacts surrounding the current academic sector. This will be done using autoethnography (see Adams et al., 2015; Ellis et al., 2011; Holman Jones et al., 2016), to narrate my experiences and engage in self-reflection. Use of this type of methodology will assist in further understanding the effectiveness of cognitive hardiness in overcoming the challenges faced during the first year of my PhD from home. I was fully aware of the negative mental health impacts and the level of isolation and uncertainty that I was signing up for, and yet I was determined to reach my professional goals. Being offered a scholarship was an added incentive to making my decision. Moreover, with my background as a psychologist, I felt more prepared to research means of coping to help me navigate this situation. I was also interested in obtaining opinions from other research candidates and I had a brief conversation with a colleague of mine regarding their experience. Within this chapter, I provide an overview of both my experience and my colleague's and how cognitive hardiness, along with the opportunity to engage in both informal and formal mentoring proved to be beneficial to both of us. Cognitive hardiness encompasses the elements of control, commitment, and challenge that an individual can use to appraise a stressor and learn to overcome any feelings of anxiety or uncertainty (Kobasa, 1979). I came across this concept at the very beginning of my doctoral journey, and I began to understand its relevance and usefulness to help me cope more effectively with the challenges I faced. At the time of writing, I had just completed my Confirmation of Candidature which provided me with a chance to reflect on my first year as a PhD student, commencing in a virtual environment.

## 16.2 Standing at a Crossroads

Amidst the uncertainty that arose due to the global pandemic, lockdowns around the world and a sudden and foreign move towards almost everyone working and studying from home, there loomed a dark cloud above all of us in our final few months of a Master's programme.

At the start of 2020, we heard whispers about a disease that could possibly spread more than ever imagined. It seemed surreal to think that a disease could take over the entire world and change everyone's lives...but here we are now.

During the first half of 2020, as the world was thrown into chaos, we were left wondering what our futures would look like upon finishing our Master's. The excerpt below highlights my personal experience during this uncertain period of time, which also brings to light the thoughts and feelings of my fellow colleagues in the Master's programme.

Prior to commencing the Master's programme, we were told that every single person who completed the programme had found a job quite easily...but none of those people had obviously been through a pandemic before. So, there was a lot of anxiety in the room and as a result, the pressure kept building to find a job. However, one morning an email popped up in my inbox from my thesis supervisor with a link to a PhD scholarship that was being advertised. The research focus was around servant leaders, and coincidentally I had just finished a systematic review on literature focused on servant leadership during times of change. It felt like it was meant to be, as I had always dreamed of doing a PhD - but, was this the right time?

The mixed emotions that many of us felt during this period of time is reflective of research conducted by Stamatis et al. (2022). The researchers conducted a longitudinal study on a group of US college students, which revealed the existence of feelings of depression, anxiety, stress, and alcohol and substance use in reaction to the COVID-19 pandemic (Stamatis et al., 2022). One relevant finding stated students who believed the pandemic would continue to impact their daily lives into the future were more likely to experience stress (Stamatis et al., 2022). This was also heightened by the lack of confidence in the government's ability to effectively deal with the pandemic, leading to experiences of depressive symptoms (Stamatis et al., 2022). It is important to highlight that stress was more likely to occur when students felt the pandemic would continue to impact their lives (Stamatis et al., 2022). This provides a basis to understand that gaining control over a situation that appears to be beyond one's control provides the foundation to alleviate stress in students. Personally, this was something I could relate to as I found myself becoming more willing to seek out opportunities that would help me secure my future. This is further highlighted in my experience of applying for the PhD scholarship.

When the opportunity to apply for a PhD scholarship came up, I realised I had nothing left to lose either way. After having a conversation with one of the supervisors on the project, I finally took a leap of faith and applied. A few weeks (and one Zoom interview) later, I received a call with news that I had been selected! I was thrilled beyond imagination as my dream was going to come true, and the best part about it was that I was going to receive a

full scholarship. I had spent 6 years splitting my time between work and study to help my dad pay off my student debts, so this felt surreal- to be given a full scholarship to pursue a dream of mine at a time when the whole world seemed to be in turmoil.

However, the job market appeared to be crashing, especially within academia where many academics were asked to resign or take pay cuts. This made me rethink my decision as I wasn't sure if I would have a future in academia. Yet, my heart was 100% invested in saying yes to the opportunity of a lifetime, and so, I accepted my PhD offer. I felt relieved that I had my future planned out for the next 3 years amidst a time when so many of my peers were stressed about finding a full-time job. I was also fortunate to connect with many individuals who had undertaken a doctoral degree and provided me with advice that helped me make my decision. It was not an easy one, but I had always been open to a challenge and so, I was certain this was the right decision for me even though it would mean 3 more years of studying. Thus, my fate was sealed when I clicked the 'Accept' button on the university portal, making a decision that would change the rest of my personal and professional life.

Thinking back to the initial decision to apply for the PhD scholarship, I reflected on the actions I took to decide what I wanted to do. For example, prior to applying for the scholarship, I had a brief conversation with one of the academics who would be supervising the chosen candidate.

I wanted to really understand if this was the right opportunity for me, and this initial conversation helped me to gain further clarity on what was expected. We spoke about my decision to apply, my prior experience and how I could make my application stand out from the rest.

One interview, several emails, and a few weeks later, I received a call informing me I was the chosen candidate. This was the process I underwent when I had to apply for a PhD scholarship and subsequently, the PhD programme, during the pandemic.

When reflecting on the challenges I faced, the biggest contributor to my anxiety during the process of

applying for the scholarship, waiting to hear back,  
attending the interview, waiting to hear back,  
then applying for the actual PhD programme, and waiting to hear back,  
was the waiting.

Amidst the growing uncertainty in the world there was a growing uncertainty within me with regard to what the future held for me. I remember speaking to a colleague of mine who experienced the exact same emotions a few months after me when they applied for a Master's by Research, and they were extremely stressed about the process of applying and waiting to hear back, since it was taking a while to go through the entire process. Ironically, it was comforting to know it was not just me who was going through this alone. As highlighted by Stamatis et al. (2022), increasing social connection is useful to reduce feelings of loneliness which further helps to improve mental wellbeing. The presence of mental illness within research students was also highlighted by Lau and Pretorius (2019), indicating the need to identify means of reducing symptoms pertaining to mental health problems.

I realised having someone else who was in the same situation as I was, was useful to help alleviate the feelings of loneliness and anxiety I was feeling. This social connection helped me to gain comfort in knowing I was not alone, and so, I began my journey as a PhD student with a little less anxiety.

This was when I came across the concept of *cognitive hardiness*.

### 16.3 Cognitive Hardiness: The Real Gamechanger

The concept of cognitive hardiness was first proposed by Kobasa (1979) and involves three components that individuals use to assess a stressor and decide if they are able to cope and successfully overcome the stressor. Cognitive hardiness has been compared to many other concepts including resilience, grit, and tolerance to ambiguity (Georgoulas-Sherry & Kelly, 2019; Grishina & Vladimirovna, 2020; Vagni et al., 2020). However, cognitive hardiness is unique in its nature, as it is based on the 3 Cs that allow an individual to evaluate their ability to face and overcome a stressor, rather than simply reflect on whether they are able to cope. The concept of hardiness has been previously linked to Dweck's theory of academic motivation (Abdollahi et al., 2018). Dweck's (2007) theory implies the mindset can affect how an individual perceives a situation. If an individual appears to be optimistic or if the individual has a growth mindset, they may embrace the opportunity to overcome a challenging situation and engage in personal growth (Dweck, 2007).

The 3 Cs of cognitive hardiness inculcate commitment, control, and challenge, as defined below:

1. *Commitment* refers to how committed you are in terms of overcoming the stressor (Kobasa, 1979). You ask yourself, "am I really committed to overcoming the obstacle I am facing? How important is it that I get through this?" If the answer is "yes, I am very committed as it is very important for me to deal with this effectively", then you are likely to score high on commitment.
2. *Control* looks at how much control you perceive yourself to have over the stressor (Kobasa, 1979). You ask yourself, "am I able to control the situation? Is there any way I can increase my level of control?" If you find yourself feeling optimistic in terms of your level of control, then you are likely to be high on control.
3. *Challenge* incorporates a component of personal development, where you assess how challenging the situation will be and how likely it is to contribute towards your personal growth and ability to cope (Kobasa, 1979). You ask yourself, "if I overcome this stressor, will it help me grow and develop? Am I up for the challenge?" If you find yourself thinking "yes, I can do this and I want to overcome this challenge", then you are most likely to score high on the challenge component of cognitive hardiness.

As a result, if you find yourself scoring highly across all three domains, then you can be classified as a *hardy* individual, as you are high on cognitive hardiness.

Thus, you are better able to cope than a person who experiences lower levels of commitment, control, and challenge when faced with a stressor.

This belief was further investigated by Abdollahi et al. (2018), who looked at the moderating role of academic hardiness on perfectionism and test anxiety in high school students. The researchers concluded that students who were considered to be perfectionists, and possessed high academic hardiness, were less likely to experience test anxiety (Abdollahi et al., 2018). This provides evidence to support the notion that students who are hardy may possess means of increasing their levels of commitment and control when faced with a stressor, whilst also embracing the challenge that it brings. This may also be a result of gaining access to additional support and resources such as coaching and mentoring, which I was also lucky enough to experience at the start of my PhD.

## 16.4 Stepping into a New World: Commencing Coaching and Mentoring

### 16.4.1 *Commencing Coaching*

After enrolling in the PhD and starting at the end of 2020, I began searching for a suitable topic that I could focus on for the duration of my candidature. Simultaneously, I commenced coaching for the purpose of professional development, as I was interested in fostering *intrapersonal wellbeing* (see Lau & Pretorius, 2019). These sessions were part of formal mentoring that I received, in addition to having two supervisors who oversaw my candidature. Interestingly, coaching doctoral students was investigated by Godskesen and Kobayashi (2016). The researchers highlighted the use of coaching as a means of assisting doctoral students to engage in competency development so they could improve on their self-management skills (Godskesen & Kobayashi, 2016). This also helps students to feel an enhanced sense of progress and supports them to experience more positive emotions (Godskesen & Kobayashi, 2016). Also, coaching appears to be useful to have in addition to supervision, as coaching appears to help overcome the power imbalance that students may feel with their supervisors (Godskesen & Kobayashi, 2016). This presents an opportunity for students to engage in a situation where they receive guidance and teaching from a coach instead of a supervisor.

Thus, I wanted to use this opportunity to reassess the resources I had available and gauge my level of hardiness in relation to the new environment I had entered.

There was no one around me to help with any immediate questions, as I was sitting at my desk at home and not on campus. I used the developmental coaching opportunity as a chance to identify what my biggest challenges were and talk through how I could overcome them. This proved to be immensely useful in helping me ease the uncertainty that was building up inside me. I had a third party helping me talk through the problems I thought I was facing in greater detail, so I could bring myself to the realisation that the situation was actually not as challenging as I perceived it to be. However, despite having a coach to guide me, I was

given the opportunity to control the actions that I chose to take to work on my goals, and so having a greater level of control was important in giving me the self-confidence I needed to know I could overcome the stressors I faced.

This was a clear benefit that arose from engaging in coaching. Interestingly, it was my coach who introduced me to the concept of cognitive hardiness, which I found quite relevant and useful to know, and potentially research, as part of my PhD research project.

Coaching proved to be really useful for me to understand how I could navigate the challenges I felt at the start of my PhD. For instance, there were moments when I felt slightly lost in terms of my progress and next steps. My coach helped me to uncover why I felt this way and how I could alleviate those thoughts and feelings, to ensure I could approach challenges in a more positive manner and consequently, feel more optimistic about my progress. We worked through activities that helped me uncover negative thoughts and emotions, and also talked through actions I could take to overcome any stress or uncertainty I felt.

### ***16.4.2 Informal Mentoring***

In addition to formal mentoring through coaching, I also received informal mentoring. Informal mentoring is different from coaching and supervision, as the individuals involved in informal mentoring do not have a direct impact on the outcome, and they are not responsible for ensuring progress is made (Godskesen & Kobayashi, 2016). Therefore, informal mentoring is a more casual form of mentoring where the nature of the conversations are spontaneous and ad-hoc. Informal mentoring was integral to helping me commence a PhD in a virtual environment.

I was very lucky to have informal mentoring through meeting a team of researchers who were very generous in offering me constant snippets of advice, despite their busy schedules. This helped me to prepare for what was to come, as I was told the journey would be long, hard, and mentally and physically draining. As a result, I conditioned my mind to prepare well ahead of time, so I had an idea of what to expect. It was really worthwhile to have a group of individuals who were not afraid to be blunt with me and tell me exactly how challenging the PhD journey would be. They were always willing to lend a hand, offer me advice and answer all my questions to ensure that I took advantage of the opportunity to gain information that would prove to be invaluable to me.

Having the opportunity to engage in informal mentoring allowed me to gain resources and guidance that were useful to help me prepare, prior to commencing the PhD. I did not know it at the time, but later I realised I was evaluating all the stressors that I was experiencing, both before and after commencing the PhD, based on the three components of cognitive hardiness: commitment, control, and challenge.



## 16.5 Time to Reflect

In terms of the period when I applied and made the decision to enrol in the PhD, I perceived myself to be hardy as I had control over when and how I structured my application. Also, I challenged myself to apply and see what I could learn from the experience, even if I would be unsuccessful, and I was committed to putting my maximum effort in to make the most out of the experience. The addition of formal and informal mentoring was useful to help me feel more in control of the experience.

I was nervous about applying and potentially commencing the PhD within a virtual environment, where I thought support would not always be readily accessible. Yet, the ability to source protective factors, such as a support network, were integral to helping me feel a greater sense of security during the start of this journey, despite all the uncertainty around me. I was quite certain that I could overcome the situation as I had assessed the resources available to me, and so I was confident in my approach during applying and accepting my offer to enter the PhD programme.

Moreover, commencing a PhD one month after completing Master's was quite challenging, but I channelled my inner hardiness and used this to my advantage.

I was determined to be as organised as I could be and based on all my conversations with individuals who had previously completed doctoral studies, I was confident I had sufficiently prepared. This allowed me to gain adequate control despite the level of challenge, and uncertainty around the level of control I had over how the programme would run for me.

My first day as a PhD student was a very different experience to one I imagine it would have been if we had not been in the midst of a pandemic. I logged on to my computer and joined a videoconference meeting to officially 'commence' my PhD. In a pre-COVID world, I would have dressed up and travelled to the campus to meet my supervisors face to face, and so this change in the structure of a typical 'first day' was not as thrilling as I had hoped it would be. I also found it quite challenging to navigate the structure of a new university, as I had been spoiled by the opportunity to stay at the same university for almost 6 years before accepting my offer to a different university. As a result, I had to spend a few days figuring out how to use the new systems and noting down my key contacts. Regardless, my supervisors were really helpful in answering my questions and providing me with guidance on how to structure my work. They were also quite flexible in terms of how I could contact them, so that I could be certain I had the support I needed, whenever I wanted it. This is another key example of how useful it was to have a mentoring opportunity, particularly a formal one.

In order to further understand the experiences of commencing a research study programme from home, I reached out to my colleague who commenced a Master's by Research during the same period of time. My colleague notes,

I started Master's by Research in Psychology in April 2021. My degree does not have any coursework component and I've met my supervisors for my research project once a week since the start. I had face-to-face supervision meetings only for the first month and I had online meetings since then. My supervisors were the biggest support for my studies, as well as for my mental health. They always made time to talk about the challenges I faced during lockdown. One of my supervisors conducts lab meetings once a month and it was a great opportunity to meet and connect with other colleagues. He also introduced me to some of his PhD students and I received so much support from them. Also, I received IT support a few times, had a statistical consultation and had support from a librarian for my studies since I started. I had a study desk allocated just before lockdown started and was planning

to study at the desk, but I think the biggest challenge was not being able to do that. Plus, I sometimes found it hard to stay motivated at home. Secondly, I could not make many friends studying higher degree research and missed the opportunities to share knowledge, as well as to receive emotional support.

Through listening to my colleague describe their experience of commencing a Master's by Research from home, I realised there were a few similarities in our experiences. Specifically, my colleague had formed a positive relationship with their supervisors and maintained regular contact with them. They mentioned their supervisors were the biggest support for their studies and were willing to talk through any challenges they faced. Some of my colleague's challenges were also similar to mine in terms of feeling like we had missed opportunities to share knowledge and receive emotional support.

Nevertheless, thinking about the differences in our experiences, I was fortunate enough to receive emotional support through having access to coaching and mentoring opportunities, apart from the regular supervision sessions. Likewise, my colleague mentioned they had a few supervision meetings face-to-face which would have been beneficial to form an initial bond with their supervisors. This is something I did not receive, as there was no opportunity for face-to-face supervision during the first few months of my PhD, as the impact of the pandemic was still quite high and so, there were many restrictions.

However, I did not feel this had a major impact on my progress as my supervisors were still willing to always meet with me whenever needed and provide me with useful feedback. Igumbor et al. (2020) stated that successful supervision is a two-way process that requires the commitment of both the supervisor and supervisee. Börgeson et al. (2021) also mentioned it was important for supervisors to provide their students with emotional support and maintain regular contact. This was evident in my supervisory relationship:

My supervisors were fully invested in helping me progress as best as I could. Likewise, I was committed to making the maximum use of our supervision meetings, so I had sufficient feedback to be able to make changes and progress with my research. Therefore, I did not feel that the lack of face-to-face contact greatly impacted my progress, as I still had access to my supervisors whenever I needed it, even if it was simply a matter of sending an email and waiting for a response.

Moreover, having two supervisors instead of one proved to be useful in obtaining expert opinions from multiple sources. Igumbor et al. (2020) state that co-supervision is useful to ensure effective supervision, as the supervisory work can be divided between the two supervisors, and the quality of the student's work can greatly improve through obtaining feedback from multiple supervisors. This also highlights the concept of *commitment* that was discussed within cognitive hardiness, as having the autonomy to make progress on my work the way I wanted, was integral towards helping me assess my level of commitment to successfully passing my milestones. Likewise, having *control* over my progress was useful to ensure I could stay organised and take responsibility for doing the work in a timely manner. An example of this is illustrated below:

I spent my first day noting down all my deadlines, speaking to relevant administrative staff at the university and ensuring I was up to date with all the administrative processes I had to be mindful of. This ensured I took control of the initial tasks I needed to complete prior to getting started on my research. I also constantly took minutes at meetings, made lists and worked through my daily tasks to ensure I did not have to wait for instructions from my supervisors. I was conscious of taking the lead to complete my work and keep my supervisors up to date with my progress, even from the very beginning.

Therefore, the concept of cognitive hardiness proved to be useful in assisting me at the start of my doctoral journey. I believe this concept will also be beneficial to other PhD students or research students who are about to commence, or have recently commenced, their doctoral or research programme. Being able to evaluate and understand the level of commitment, control and challenge felt in relation to the stressor of commencing a new study programme, especially from home, is beneficial towards identifying gaps in resources required so that adequate support or guidance can be obtained in a timely manner.

This was further seen within the experiences of my colleague as I discussed cognitive hardiness with them, and asked them how gaining knowledge on this concept might be beneficial to their progress.

I think knowing the concept of cognitive hardiness would definitely help me in dealing with the challenges. I think I already used the ‘challenge’ component without knowing the concept and reframing challenges as ‘opportunities for growth’ helps with my resilience. For example, I think about everyday as progress towards a bigger goal even if it is a small step and that motivates me, and I focus on that. I would love to know more about the ‘control’ component because it is one of the hardest things for me to think I have control over the situation. If I knew how I could build that mindset, I believe that would definitely empower me while dealing with challenges, especially with the fear of failure and stress about deadlines.

I think being committed is the most useful strategy for me and that mostly keeps me going. I kept watching supervision videos or walked on campus every day to remind myself of the bigger picture and how committed I was. I believe that would be the most important element of the cognitive hardiness concept for me.

As evident in the excerpt above, creating awareness around cognitive hardiness is beneficial towards alleviating the stress felt when dealing with challenges, especially ones that are aligned with commencing a research or doctoral study programme. My colleague mentioned the ways in which they already used the concept without knowing what it was labelled, highlighting the idea that most of us may already be unconsciously engaged in evaluating our coping resources based on the level of commitment, control, and challenge felt when dealing with a stressor.

It is also clear that all three components of cognitive hardiness are equally important when dealing with a stressor, although each of them tackles a different part of the stressor. Thus, it is important for us as doctoral candidates and research students to be able to understand our level of commitment, control, and challenge in relation to our study programmes. For example, if we feel we are lacking commitment to the programme, we will need to explore opportunities to build our level of commitment. An example of this is when my colleague mentioned that they “watch supervision videos or walk around campus every day to remind them of the bigger picture”. Similarly, if I felt I was lacking in commitment, I would remind myself of my overarching

goals and why I chose to commence a PhD. This helps me realise what I want to achieve and how being committed to my PhD studies will help me reach my goals quicker.

## 16.6 Where We Are Now

As evident within this chapter, becoming aware of the concept of cognitive hardiness is greatly beneficial to doctoral and research candidates to cope with the stress, uncertainty, and anxiety that they face. This is also evident in my experiences, as I have recently completed my Confirmation of Candidature and I am now feeling a greater level of confidence in relation to my plan for the next few years of my candidature.

It has been 1 year and 1 month since I commenced my PhD and I feel like I have come a long way since I first started. I remember feeling anxious, uncertain and scared about the future. I wanted everything to be perfect and so, I was scared that I was not doing enough. Becoming aware of the concept of cognitive hardiness was very useful for me, as I was able to stop overthinking my actions and start evaluating them based on the 3 Cs. As a result, I was able to identify the gaps in my knowledge and resources, so I could better spend my time focusing on what I needed to do to become more effective in the way that I was doing my work.

As a result, I now feel more confident and more organised. I may not have 100% confidence in knowing what my next steps are, but I am confident that I will get to the end as I have the commitment I require to reach my goal. I also love a good challenge and so I reshaped my thinking so that I could perceive doing a PhD from home as a unique opportunity that is not presented to everyone. This would be an opportunity for me to grow and develop as a person, and so I decided to take on the challenge to become a better and more skilled version of myself. I have also maintained control over my actions, with adequate guidance from my supervisors, formal mentors and informal mentors. This has been useful to ensure I stay in control and only seek out help and advice when required.

My viewpoint has drastically changed over the past year. This has been really beneficial towards increasing my level of motivation towards reaching my goal, as I more inclined to work towards a goal when I have a greater internal locus of control. This means I am in control of my choices and actions, and so I must take responsibility for what I do to get to where I want to be.

## 16.7 Conclusion

Throughout this chapter, I explored the concept of cognitive hardiness and other concepts that are relevant towards helping doctoral and research students and candidates overcome the challenges they feel when commencing a PhD from home. The pandemic has greatly changed our lives and brought an unusual level of uncertainty to the lives of people around the world. Thus, finding a way to take control of our choices is a useful strategy to regain control of what will happen to our futures. This

helps to alleviate stress, anxiety, and uncertainty so that we will become more motivated to reach our goals and attempt to engage in building a more positive mindset. As highlighted throughout this chapter, and through the experiences of both myself and my colleague, it is vital that we maintain social contact with others as this can help to improve our mental wellbeing.

Commencing a PhD is in itself a lonely journey, so commencing a PhD from home can be even more challenging than one could ever imagine. Therefore, having a strong support network, including supportive supervisors and opportunities to engage in both formal and informal mentoring will be most beneficial towards increasing the level of cognitive hardiness an individual feels. Another tip is to make a list of everything you think you will need including support, resources, and timelines, so you can have a greater idea of what is required to ensure you maintain your level of commitment and control, in order to avoid the situation becoming overly challenging. Keeping this list up to date will ensure you can access the support you need whenever you feel it is required. This will help you to maintain control over the tasks and responsibilities expected from you. As a result, students will begin to feel more confident in successfully completing their studies, despite being surrounded by the uncertainty of the global pandemic, as they can motivate themselves to find means of increasing their *hardiness*.

### **Key Takeaways:**

- Make use of opportunities to connect with others when commencing a PhD, despite having to primarily engage in a virtual environment.
- Become aware of the concept of cognitive hardiness to assist you in navigating the stressors that you feel.
- Cognitive hardiness consists of evaluating the situation based on the level of control you have to overcome the stressor, your level of commitment to overcome the stressor and how challenging the stressor is, along with how likely it is that you can use the opportunity to grow and develop if you overcome the stressor.
- If the opportunity arises to engage in coaching or formal/informal mentoring, use it as a chance to talk through any challenges and obtain advice from experts who have been in your shoes at some point.

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# Chapter 17

## Mitigating the Challenges of Thesis Writing During the COVID-19 Pandemic: An Autoethnographic Reflection of Two Doctoral Students’ *Perezhivanie*



Jennifer Cutri and Ricky W. K. Lau

**Abstract** Undertaking a doctoral degree is a challenging but worthwhile endeavour where PhD students invest years of academic, physical, and emotional energy contributing to their specialist field. The emotional toll upon doctoral students’ well-being has been highlighted in recent years. More recently, another issue has impacted PhD students—the COVID-19 pandemic. While emerging research has highlighted doctoral students’ struggles and coping mechanisms, we offer our experience as two PhD students navigating our ways through the unknown terrain of doctoral study as a couple during a pandemic. With the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic, we were forced to retreat from our allocated offices at the university and write together within the same vicinity at home during the sudden lockdown. During this time, we found that even though writing a thesis was stressful and our future was uncertain due to the pandemic, we found comfort and solace in each other. Writing together, in isolation, has brought us together. As we are in different disciplines—Medicine and Education, we also learnt how to approach our theses from different perspectives and became more resilient in our development as researchers. We discuss how our research backgrounds influenced the way we experienced academia and what we learnt from each other. We employ Vygotsky’s term of *perezhivanie* to capture our emotional journey and academic development together to represent the unique environmental conditions experienced.

**Keywords** *Perezhivanie* · Autoethnography · Doctoral couple · Mental health · Wellbeing · COVID-19

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## 17.1 Introduction

In March 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) classified COVID-19 as a global pandemic (Ghebreyesus, 2020), which resulted in the world taking drastic, but essential measures to try to protect humanity. One necessary but essential measure was when nations across the globe entered a *lockdown*. Lockdown restrictions varied across nations and states, depending on how rampant the virus was in particular locations. For instance, the city of Melbourne in the state of Victoria, Australia experienced one of the longest lockdowns in the world (Boaz, 2021; Lockdown Stats Melbourne, 2021).

COVID-19 has caused massive research disruptions to PhD students such as laboratory closures, financial issues, and limited face-to-face supervision. A recent preprint study also reported that 75% of Australian graduate students experienced financial crisis based on a survey of 1,020 students at the University of Sydney (Johnson et al., 2020). Another study, using an open-ended questionnaire on 262 biomedical sciences graduate students, focused on the theme of overall supervision issues (Börgeson et al., 2021). Approximately one-third of participants reported “worsened supervision” across eight Swedish Universities (Börgeson et al., 2021). It is speculated that a pandemic may also lead to increased research disengagement compared to the pre-COVID level (Johnson et al., 2020). Chapters 2 and 24 discuss some of the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on graduate students and their research experiences in more detail (Cahusac de Caux, 2022a, b).

In most developed countries, pre-graduate PhD students have increasingly shifted their career aspirations away from academia upon their graduation. Poor work life balance, an increase of international PhD graduates, high competitiveness for tenure-track positions, and uncertain academic job security may contribute to this aspirational change (Etmanski, 2019; Ghaffarzadegan et al., 2014; Mason et al., 2009; Neumann & Tan, 2011). It is possible that the pandemic can further drive this career shift towards non-academic positions (Haas et al., 2022).

It is also essential that we acknowledge the pre-existing conditions of doctoral research. Recently, a breadth of research has emphasised that there is a mental health crisis within academia, especially the doctoral landscape (Byrom, 2020; Evans et al., 2018; Hradsky et al., 2022; Lau & Pretorius, 2019; Pretorius, 2022). Doctoral students have also been shown to feel marginalised in academia, which evokes feelings of disempowerment and a lack of agency (Pretorius & Macaulay, 2021). Given this landscape, it is important to understand that we see the COVID-19 pandemic as having exacerbated, as opposed to triggered, psychological distress amongst PhD students.

As two students from different disciplines, one who is in the final stages of completing her PhD and the other having recently completed his PhD during the pandemic, we argue that it is vital to actively reflect on the impact of a pandemic on personal research trajectory. Here we propose using *perezhivanie* as a conceptual tool to investigate research development. This can help PhD students identify gaps for research development and provide clarity in seeking social support within or without the institution.

## 17.2 Theoretical Positioning

### 17.2.1 *Perezhivanie*

*Perezhivanie* was first proposed in psychological literature by Vygotsky, where he described it as “a common name for direct psychological experience” (Varshava & Vygotsky, 1931, p. 128; as cited in Veresov, 2016b, p. 130). As the work was incomplete due to his death, *perezhivanie* was described as Vygotsky’s “last word” on Psychology (Iaroshevskii, 1997, p. 70). This has meant that the definition of *perezhivanie* has been interpreted very differently by many scholars which may be different to Vygotsky’s original interpretation (Blunden, 2016; Bozhovich, 2009; Ferholt, 2010; Flear et al., 2017; González Rey, 2016; Leontiev, 2005; Veresov, 2016a, b, 2019). To dissect the actual meaning, we decided that it was important to not overlook its language origin. *Perezhivanie* is a Russian lay term, so Vasilyuk (1992, p. 9) emphasised that it refers to the psychological state or feelings (“to be alarmed, worried, upset”) after an individual’s survival of traumatic experiences. Mitchell (2016) further explained that *perezhivanie* is composed of two Russian root components, where *pere* meant “through” and *zhivat* or *zhiv* represents “to live”. The same author also stressed the importance of the affective nature of *perezhivanie* (Mitchell, 2016). Therefore, we can once define the term as an emotional experience (Mitchell, 2016).

We intentionally draw on the seminal work of *The Problem of Environment*, where Vygotsky (1994) argues that the same environment does not influence all people’s development the same way. Through *perezhivanie*, particular aspects of the environment are captured that specifically impact the individual. Vygotsky (1994) refers to this as personal and situational characteristics. Therefore, *perezhivanie*, captures specific environmental conditions relevant to a person’s unique experience of the environment but in some particular settings, there will be no effect on particular people. Vygotsky’s (1994) fundamental argument that people undergo different developmental experiences in the same environment positions the notion of *perezhivanie* as a subjective entity informed by individual perceptions. Vygotsky (1994) further advocates that such experiences are grounded in a developmental perspective where the environment and an individual exist in a dialectical relationship. Over a duration, the environment remains stable but the person will gradually change, thus engaging in the process of development (Vygotsky, 1994). Through this developmental process, the individual experiences a transformation regarding how they relate to and interpret their experience of these particular social settings (Vygotsky, 1994).

Even though Vygotsky (1994) positions *perezhivanie* concerning early childhood developmental theories (i.e., studying “the role of and influence of environment on the psychological development of children” p. 343), Blunden (2021) clarifies that *perezhivanie* is associated with the critical development of both children and adults. Thus, how one experiences gradual adaptation and transformation throughout a crisis or a traumatic event reflects one’s *perezhivanie*. Highlighting the application of the

concept of perezhivanie beyond the field of early childhood development is critical, as this chapter focuses on our doctoral experience and scholarly development as adult learners. There have been several contemporary reinterpretations of perezhivanie beyond early childhood studies, such as Cross (2012), Esteban-Guitart and Moll (2014a, b), Dang (2013), and Poole and Huang (2018). Drawing from Vygotsky's (1994) definition of perezhivanie, of "how a child becomes aware of, interprets, and emotionally relates to a certain event" (pp. 340–341), in this chapter we augment the notion of a child to adults, as we noted above that adults also possess perezhivanie. Therefore, this chapter presents our individual interpretation and emotional response to the COVID-19 pandemic and how it impacted us as doctoral students. Given that our experience is grounded within the field of doctoral education, to examine our perezhivanie, it is essential to examine the particular environment in which our academic development occurs.

### ***17.2.2 Perezhivanie as an Analytical Tool to Assess Development in Times of COVID-19***

Among all definitions, we align our interpretation of perezhivanie with Veresov's (2017) argument that perezhivanie can be interpreted as observable and examinable psychological phenomena/processes. Alternatively, perezhivanie can be used as a concept or a theoretical tool for analysis of the process of development (Veresov, 2017). Therefore, we intend to examine the influence of the environmental circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic induced lockdown upon our development as novice academics by using perezhivanie as an analytical tool. To appropriately employ the concept of perezhivanie to situate our lived emotional experience and cognitive growth as novice academics during the COVID-19 pandemic, we provide the works Blunden (2021), Davis (2021), and Davis and Phillips (2020) as exemplars of how perezhivanie is theoretically applied concerning the COVID-19 pandemic.

Blunden (2021) powerfully articulates his claim that world-changing experiences represent a perezhivanie, situating the global COVID-19 pandemic as a global traumatic event that has cut across every country, social class, and ethnic group—every person in the world. Such an objective global event is illustrative of perezhivanie as each person has personal experience. Blunden (2021) highlights how world-transforming events such as the First World War, the 9/11 attacks, and the 2008 Global Financial Crisis have "produced important changes in how the world works" (p. 402). Blunden (2021, p. 402) labels such world-transforming as "world perezhivanie", arguing that the COVID-19 pandemic can be referred to as world perezhivanie as he predicts there will be an *aftermath*. As such, perezhivanie occurs over a duration that results in personal adaptation when confronted with key events, thus changing one's relation to the world.

Davis and Phillips (2020) draw on the cultural-historical theoretical perspective of perezhivanie to capture drama and performing arts teachers' experiences of

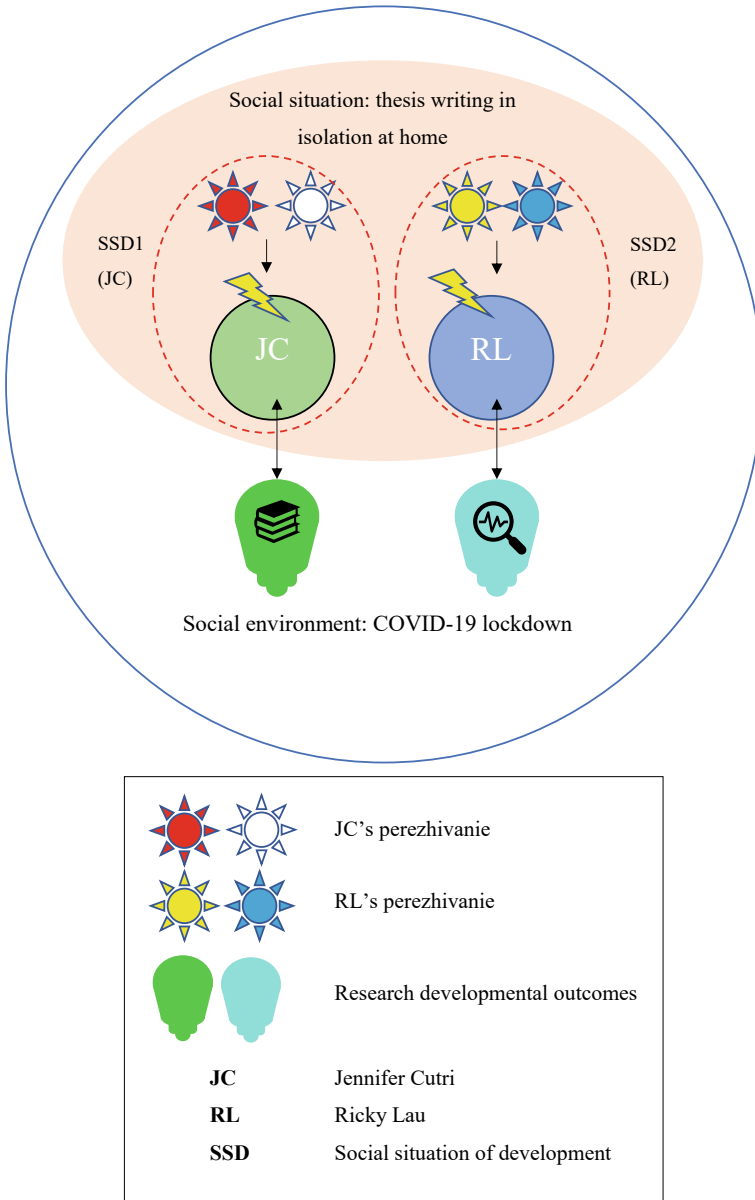
the COVID-19 pandemic. The impact of COVID-19 within educational contexts is explored by discussing how educators must adapt their practices as their emotional experiences are provided (Davis & Phillips, 2020). Davis and Phillips (2020, p. 68) highlight Kozulin's (1991) assertion that perezhivanie can represent a "spectrum of meanings from experience to emotional suffering", thus recognising the emotional and cognitive interrelationship when individuals interact with the social.

Davis (2021) provides her account of professional and personal loss and how she engaged in creative art making to process her grief. She rationalises the application of perezhivanie as a concept to articulate how she moved through her emotions while reflecting on the events experienced (Davis, 2021). Consequently, Davis (2021) provides a visual autoethnographic account of her lived emotional experience of loss as she discovers her perezhivanie brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Each of the scholars mentioned above has provided examples of a correlation between perezhivanie and the current COVID-19 pandemic. Based on the examples provided, we situate our reflections to represent the spectrum of emotions experienced during our doctoral journey within the circumstances of the pandemic. Perezhivanie is an appropriate concept as we highlight our individual responses to the circumstantial events we experience together. As two individual PhD students who experienced the same situational circumstances, our perspectives of doctoral experiences differ due to our unique perezhivanie. Through the events that we detail in the latter section of this chapter, we discuss our emotional development through supporting each other and utilising strategies to support resilience growth.

Given that our experiences and perceptions of the same environmental circumstances are different, we liken our differing perezhivanie to the Vygotsky's (1998) metaphor of a *prism that refracts different interpretations of social experience*. Vygotsky (1998) highlights how refraction represents the dialectical relationship between a social situation and one's development. To represent our particular experience, we draw on Veresov's (2019) theoretical approach for analysis. We have provided an augmentation of Veresov's (2019) original tool to represent how the three areas of social, environment, social situation, and development outcome capture our two differing perezhivanie (see Fig. 17.1).

Our approach to this model is informed by Veresov's (2019) three-step process of his social development model. Firstly, we discuss the social environment, which in this case is the COVID-19 pandemic. We frame our discussion around the global, national, and Victorian state elements that were *out of our control* and which impacted upon our emotional and academic development. The second phase involves zooming into the specific social situation in which we were immersed. We locate ourselves within the doctoral higher education space with a particular focus on our scholarly development and how it was hindered whilst we had to adapt to persevere with thesis writing. The final stage presents our development insights regarding emotional resilience and academic growth. We summarise key strategies that helped us mitigate such a traumatic event that had adverse consequences on an already difficult task of thesis writing.



**Fig. 17.1** Adaptation of Veresov's (2019) social development model to our social environment during COVID-19

### ***17.2.3 Applying the Concept of Perezhivanie to Autoethnography***

To complement our theoretical discussion, we present our perezhivanie as a reflective account of our individual experiences. Therefore, our methodological approach for this chapter is a reflective autoethnography. Utilising this approach involved us drawing on our personal experiences. This methodology was selected for two key reasons. Firstly, through autoethnography, we are able to recount the events we experienced but most significantly offer a nuanced reflexivity (Holman Jones et al., 2016). Through our narratives, we invite the reader into our world (Rafi, 2018) of how the pandemic affected our personal and professional lives as novice academics. Secondly, we deemed a reflective approach as suitable for this chapter as a reflective approach to autoethnography has been used previously to capture doctoral student experiences within higher education (see Hradsky et al., 2022; Pretorius, 2022; Pretorius & Cutri, 2019).

Building on from the foundation set by Pretorius and Cutri (2019), we focus on the complex realm of academia. Furthermore, we intend to nuance how we, as two doctoral candidates in different faculties and different stages in our PhDs, yet in a personal relationship, mitigate the dramatic events of the COVID-19 pandemic. By recapitulating our experiences, we provide an intertwined analytical and emotional reflection, as Ellis et al. (2011) noted, serving as a therapeutic release. Through the application of reflective autoethnography, our voices are illuminated as we provide nuanced reflexivity about how the pandemic reveals our individual refractions of perezhivanie through the social development model.

## **17.3 Reflection**

### ***17.3.1 The Social Environment***

Prior to the occurrence of the world-changing COVID-19 pandemic, we were two doctoral students eagerly and nervously entering the year 2020 with both of our theses due for submission.

Towards the end of 2019, we both mapped out our individual 2020 submission plans and were ready to resume what should have been our final year of doctoral study. At this point in time, no one would have ever predicted that the world was about to enter the pandemic within a few short months, and our already highly stressful lives due to our lurking submission deadlines and living as low-income students were about to become even more chaotic.

Flashing back to our New Year's Eve celebrations of 2019, we were both confident that 2020 would be the year for thesis submission. Jennifer eagerly posted her 2020 resolution for thesis submission on one of her social media profiles (see Fig. 17.2). Unbeknownst to us, this would not be the case, and not for academic reasons.

**Fig. 17.2** 2020 resolution, thesis submission!



Following our New Year’s celebration completing a two-week study break, we were ready to resume our doctoral studies back on campus. Ricky’s doctoral research involved laboratory work, so he was required to be present in the lab daily, whereas Jennifer’s qualitative-orientated thesis did not require her to attend campus. Jennifer would work on campus to socialise with her peers during her writing breaks. However, circumstances were not smooth due to a foreign respiratory illness creating a crisis in the Northern Hemisphere. By early March 2020, the WHO had declared a global pandemic, and Victoria’s response was to impose a lockdown, which eventually became one of the world’s longest lockdowns (Boaz, 2021; Lockdown Stats Melbourne, 2021).

A consequence of the Victorian state lockdown was that higher education was moved to remote online teaching and learning. As doctoral students, we were immediately instructed to pack up and continue working from home in a *business as usual* manner. The sudden requirement to work from home was a shock, and being a PhD student close to submission, this immediate cut off from university access was troublesome, as Ricky recounts.

It immediately became one of the most significant crises for me as a PhD student who completed his pre-submission in May 2019 and had already extended his submission due date for more than six months, and a year mark was first approaching in May 2020. To know that I had one last big experiment, a few experiments for a manuscript under preparation, a complete thesis to be drafted and reviewed by my supervisor, it also needed to be edited by myself, another extension was inevitable.

With the campus closed and Ricky unable to complete his final experiment, he had no choice but to extend his candidature, which interfered with his completion plans as there was an overseas postdoctoral position waiting for him if he was able to get his PhD conferred within six months. The effects of the global pandemic crisis also affected Jennifer's candidature. Jennifer had been unsuccessful in obtaining a scholarship for her doctoral studies, even though she had applied every year throughout her candidature. Jennifer explains:

I worked three jobs throughout my candidature to survive financially: a group fitness instructor, an academic teaching associate, and a research assistant. These positions have been rewarding and I am grateful for these opportunities, as my involvement within academia has helped me navigate the academic landscape and sharpened my teaching and research skills. Unfortunately, working three occupations, seven days a week, had severely cut into my thesis hours, resulting in switching to part-time.

Jennifer's main concern was her precarious financial situation which was the source of her anxiety and mental health stress.

Knowing how close Ricky was to submission, I did not want to burden him with my anxieties, so I kept my worries to myself. However, when the pandemic induced lockdown resulted in the closure of gyms and universities across Melbourne, it was time for that difficult conversation. With a significantly reduced income, I could not afford my share of the rent and groceries and felt extremely guilty relying on Ricky's scholarship. Knowing we could not go on in such a precarious situation and the uncertainty of what will happen next, we decided to move into my mother's house until we completed our candidature.

### ***17.3.2 Our Social Situation***

While the global pandemic encompassed our social environment, living together as a PhD couple within Jennifer's mother's home is our unique social situation. Within this particular space, we endeavoured to persist with our theses while supporting each other emotionally as partners and intellectually as we could both resonate with each other's academic frustrations. Ricky's notes:

For me, completing a PhD was very difficult as it came along with a high magnitude of uncertainties and other struggles. For instance, financial insecurity, social isolation, and motivational issues were classic issues for me or potentially most other PhD students. Psychologically, I would struggle with anxiety and disappointment and often feel depressed while having doubts about whether I could reach completion after all? Whether the PhD thesis was of sufficient quality? If finishing the PhD itself would result in any prospects?

Additionally, the stress associated with a tight or already extended candidate timeline was not helpful. COVID-19 aggregated my distress and posed a full spectrum of unprecedented risks.



For example, for a short period of time, I was not physically able to conduct experiments and collect the last series of data to write my final PhD chapter and manuscript preparation. It has also affected the opportunity to meet with my team, supervisor, and collaborators. While international students were not allowed to come into the country, my sole source of income from teaching was severely impacted due to staff cut switching to online teaching.

Due to the rushed closure of the university and miscommunication, around April 2020, I encountered an incident of our laboratory's refrigerator being unplugged by accident due to electrical maintenance. It is not easy to imagine the psychological impact on me in addition to the mental stress from COVID-19. Realistically, this had led to a total loss of all essential reagents. Consequently, the incident resulted in an extra 3-month delay to my completion progress.

From here, I would focus most of my reflection from March to June 2020; this was the period that impacted me the most in terms of research progress and personal motivation. Interestingly, the experience was also unique as I was writing my literature review chapter under isolation together with my partner, whose PhD progress had also been significantly impacted, which was reflected in her section. Although completing a PhD under COVID-19 was challenging, the lived experience, while the social environment was unfixable, we had mutually supported each other in a relationship through this challenging time.

Ricky's account revealed his perspective of the lived experience of the COVID-19 social situation and the impact on our doctoral progression. It was difficult for Jennifer to watch Ricky struggle through circumstances beyond his control whilst trying to focus on her struggles of staying focused on her writing, which is extremely difficult at this stage of the PhD even in non-COVID-19 circumstances. Jennifer provides her revelations:

I found myself in a position where I was fortunate to have completed my data collection a year prior to the pandemic. Nevertheless, this thesis stage was the most difficult as I worked through my data analysis for the analytical discussion chapters. Writing is hard. Finding my research's 'so what' feels like an impossible task. Trying to write in my 'voice' is a paralysing experience because I am always self-doubting whether I am doing it 'right'. Doing these things at home, away from my social support system on campus and supervisors, is a significant challenge. I was highly fortunate to attend the Zoom meetings with my supervisors as they tried to help me through this process, but I really needed the on-campus support and face to face guidance. Expecting us to "just write" at home in a business as usual is a cruel and unrealistic expectation, especially for final year students. I am not saying this as a criticism but to highlight the reality that if we are to produce quality, timely submissions, then adequate support is essential, such as allowing us access to our allocated funding or borrowing one of the unused monitors. Such simple things can make a significant world of difference.

A significant matter that I feel compelled to discuss is how doctoral students do not qualify for student concessions. I honestly felt disgusted with myself each time Ricky would help pay for basic things such as a coffee or an Uber-eats meal for our lockdown date nights because I lost three-quarters of my income and had received another scholarship rejection during the lockdown. While I appreciate Ricky's kindness, I find it disturbing that as a 21st century Woke woman that I cannot be self-reliant; even though I have three university degrees and am completing a PhD, it seriously feels like women's independence has lost traction, and we have gone back to the 1950s. Such feelings have exacerbated my anxiety and triggered depressive moods, which impacted my ability to be productive for thesis writing.

I feel that sharing my experience with honesty is a cathartic experience. Over the last two years, I have remained silent regarding my struggles as I know there are people in worse

situations than myself. Also, I do not want to burden Ricky and I wanted to be sensitive to his struggles too. So, I felt compelled to have a ‘fake it till I make it attitude’ and was very careful in presenting further communication regarding the pandemic and my thesis, especially around friends and family, because everyone had their own personal challenges. One critical approach was engaging and creating memes as a creative outlet. I would frequently post memes on my social media as mental health coping mechanism and an outlet while processing the pandemic and PhD stress. For instance, Ricky and I loved watching *The Witcher* series on Netflix and losing ourselves in the fantasy world of Geralt, Yennefer, and Ciri was a much-needed bonding experience. One particular night, I posted a screenshot from an episode on my social media where I likened Geralt’s battle with a Striga to writing a thesis involving the same degree of struggle. There is a scene where Geralt uses a chain to restrain the Striga, but when it breaks free, Geralt’s four-letter “response” perfectly captures my thoughts when I try to write under the lockdown conditions.

### ***17.3.3 Perekhivanie Revelations of Our Developmental Outcomes***

Our accounts revealed the differing ways in which our perekhivanie within the same social situation had been refracted. Our individual perspectives revealed how mutual personal growth in research was established.

Our emotional responses elicited both positive and negative reactions regarding our situation. As a couple living and studying together 24/7, we were constantly in each other’s space, causing friction in our personal relationship, as it was difficult to find space for solitude. However, the shared commonality of struggling to write a thesis under lockdown conditions helped us comfort each other, not just as partners, but as stressed doctoral researchers cut-off from our academic peers.

We outline three development outcomes to represent our perekhivanie:

#### *The Relationship Helped but Also Created Conflicts During PhD in Isolation*

While living and writing our theses together, we naturally fed off each other’s positive and negative vibes. There were several unavoidable instances when we would get on each other’s nerves and sometimes could not comprehend what the other person was doing with their thesis. For instance, Jennifer would become frustrated when Ricky questioned why she spent so much reading when she should be writing and complained she needed more writing time.

It felt like quantitative people were from Mars and qualitative people were from Venus.

Nevertheless, we eventually learned some valuable strategies that we would have never known if we did not work within the same proximity. In the case of project management and academic writing, Ricky discusses:

Before COVID-19, I had already adopted some writing skills demonstrated by Jennifer. I would think that some strategies work while some absolutely do not. For example, writing is usually done in education more narrative and story-telling. In my experience in science, this depends on my overall purpose. One example would be that while telling a story would be

great for oral presentations, writing a scientific research article with long sentences would risk being perceived by your supervisor or readers as going on a tangent.

Another skill I have learnt from Jennifer is a different approach to project management. As a former teacher, she is very efficient in setting goals and providing structure for her day. It was helpful for her to give me a tutorial on blocking out important dates in advance on Google Calendar. However, I still could not adhere to my virtual timeline very rigorously due to personality differences, as I would feel confined and overwhelmed. However, it allowed me to juggle between online teaching and working towards completing my PhD. Witnessing each other's development while doing your PhD in lockdown has been helpful as an experience to gain extra motivation. For example, as a perceptual learner and being quite competitive in nature, seeing how much Jennifer reads and spends much time in front of the desk had positively inspired me to read just a little longer and just a little more.

While positive things were learnt, as a PhD couple we also experienced some personal space tension and conflicts. Ricky highlights one such experience:

As I have been ahead in my PhD progress and completion, I often will rush to provide my advice or trying to fix Jennifer's problems after she expressed that she had a bad day about her PhD. Although unintentional, I could still come across as being too "critical" due to applying a quantitative lens. Meanwhile, the learnt approach in science for providing feedback directly may not always be suitable for other disciplines. However, awareness and effective communication can overcome most of these issues.

### *Supporting Each Other, Improving Communication Skills to Respect Each Other's Space and Boundaries*

When confronted with an issue, we have different coping mechanisms. This has led to the gradual process of realising how our partner reacts differently to the same situation. While we have had the occasional disagreement, as any couple does, the combination of both doing a PhD and the psychological impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has led to us seeing an intense emotional turmoil side of each other. For instance,

we were doing the dishes, and suddenly Jennifer 'snapped' at Ricky for wasting too much water. Such a reaction was sudden, and this led to an unnecessary argument. Jennifer was in a pessimistic mood because earlier in the day, she had received another scholarship rejection from her faculty and was having an anxiety attack feeling that she was not worthy and a complete failure which led to questioning her self-worth and capability. However, the only thing she communicated was her anger towards the water wasted, not realising the actual source of her frustration which made Ricky feel like he did something wrong and it was his fault she was feeling this way. After taking some "me-time", Jennifer clearly articulated the source of her feelings and apologised.

From this point, to survive the lockdown and cope with disappointments within academia, we worked on our communicative strategies to not emotionally release on each other because we are in constant close proximity.

Since we were in the same space 24/7, we separated our writing time from our personal relationship. We had scheduled some time to have a fun activity together during a lockdown, while it was later found to be helpful to ease off mental stress as a form of distraction. For example, we would write during the day. Meanwhile, when we both agreed that our brains

could not function any longer, we would spend the remaining night watching Netflix series such as *Supernatural* and *The Witcher*. Overall, knowing that you are not alone is great; however, it is essential to remember that every PhD journey is unique and different. Taken together, we have learnt that we cannot impose our personal values, skills or experiences onto each other as our PhD journeys are unique.

### *Practising Self-care*

This final section discusses the importance of self-care and being kind to ourselves. One of our most important self-care strategies was exercise.

As a relaxation and stress-coping mechanism, we started practicing yoga together via YouTube videos. Practicing yoga was not only a brilliant stress relief but helped Jennifer manage her sciatica. We also began practicing Pilates to improve Jennifer's core strength for her sciatica pain management. Ricky also maintained the habit of practicing yoga both online and face-to-face after the lockdown. The COVID-19 crisis, while a traumatic event, also provided an opportunity to hone our resilience mindset. It is easier said than done. However, we learned to believe that tomorrow is another day no matter how you struggle.

Strategies that helped us with thesis writing were inspired by a professional workshop series run by Dr Hugh Kearns from iThinkWell (see <https://www.ithinkwell.com.au/> which we highly recommend). During that time, Ricky was writing his detailed literature review. A strategy he applied from the thesis completion workshop was to always mark the last sentence where he stopped writing and placed TNT in capital letters (which stands for *the next thing*) with a font size of 72 highlighted in purple. This provided him with a visual cue to continue the next day. Jennifer follows a similar technique with her writing. When she has finished for the day or needs a break away from her screen, she would write the word "here" in bold, capital font and highlight the word as her marking where to resume her writing.

Lastly, a strategy we implemented that we believe was crucial was our daily morning coffee walk.

This was important because we both suffer from anxiety and pandemic induced depression, along with the stress from the pressure of timely thesis submission. These mental health factors would leave us emotionally depleted, where early in the pandemic, we did not see the point of getting out of bed to write solely. A freshly brewed morning coffee served as the impetus for us to get out of bed, and going for a brisk walk together not only enabled us to get in some physical movement but also helped our relationship. We would discuss our research goals for the day during our morning coffee walks and probe each other about our approaches to ensure we were setting realistic standards. We also shared particular strategies and asked for suggestions to ensure we used our time efficiently. However, it was also important to discuss other things apart from the pandemic and our theses, which served as a crucial reminder that you are not your PhD and should not reflect your self-worth.

## **17.4 Conclusion**

Doing a PhD is, in itself, a challenging yet rewarding journey; however, it often comes with a myriad of struggles—for instance, financial insecurities, writing struggles, submission pressure, social isolation, self-doubt, and motivation issues. Since

2020, the global impact of COVID-19 has exacerbated the existing problems and have introduced new challenges such as laboratory shut-downs, mental health issues associated with increased isolation and working from home, as well as reduced/impacted supervision quality and time. In this chapter, as two PhD students, we integrated the theoretical concept of perezhivanie with reflective autoethnography to discuss our emotional development in our journey of PhD completion during COVID-19. Our theoretical interpretation involves Veresov's (2019) augmentation, which can be summarised into three areas: social environment, social situation, and development outcomes.

Despite the challenges, we discovered that learning from each other and from different disciplines can be very helpful in supporting each other in crisis. Using creative ways, such as making *pandemic memes* to post on social media, have been helpful to regulate and process our difficult emotions (see Freya & Cutri, 2022 for more detail about Jennifer's pandemic memes). Additionally, the reflective process helped us identify other key developments in managing relational conflicts, resilience, and self-care strategies. We encourage other PhD students to adopt perezhivanie similarly to investigate their personal research development. This can help PhD students identify gaps for research development and provide clarity in seeking social support within or without the institution.

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# Chapter 18

## PhD Candidature During the Pandemic: Hansel and Gretel's Trip Through the Woods



Queena Lee 

**Abstract** The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly influenced various educational systems on a global scale since 2020, and such impact will extend into the future. As a PhD student who started her candidature shortly after the outbreak of the pandemic, I reflect on my own experiences regarding how I struggled, persevered, and survived throughout the period. I do this through two illustrations from Hansel and Gretel's journey through the woods in the Brothers Grimm's story: (1) *Dropping breadcrumbs*—starting a PhD in lockdown: I felt a series of negative emotions and doubted my choice of PhD after starting the academia journey in social isolation. (2) *Surviving at the gingerbread house*—continuing PhD in pandemic: the unstable pandemic situation nationally and locally caused repeated lockdowns that led to a delay in my research project. Since the start of the pandemic, voluntary online networking socially and academically with other academia and the support and understanding from my supervisors were key to build my persistence. By joining volunteer organisations at the university, I benefited from social connections that supported my mental health and academic development while at the meantime helping other higher degree by research students. In doing so, I harvested academic accomplishments and developed friendships. Such reciprocal relationships in return have supported my academic identity and persistence in the PhD journey. These experiences contributed to the relocation of my original motives for undertaking my PhD research, the self-reassurance of my academic identity, and the reinforcement of my aspirations and expectations for the PhD journey. This chapter adopts the theoretical concepts from cultural-historical theory to analyse my psychological development in relation to the constantly changing social environment. Perezhivanie and the social situation of development are taken as a dyad of theoretical concepts to analyse my autoethnography. This chapter aims to encourage and empower people experiencing a similar situation. What matters is the inner attitude we hold toward the challenging environment, on which we act as agents to manage the conflict, just like Hansel and Gretel, managing to beat the witch and obtain treasures in the end.

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**Keywords** Social situation of development · Perezhivanie · PhD · Psychological development · Dramatic collision · COVID-19

## 18.1 Introduction

Mental wellbeing has been a source of increasing concern for PhD students. A significant body of research has now demonstrated that there is a mental health crisis in academia, and that this crisis is particularly pronounced in the doctoral student cohort (Evans et al., 2018; Lau & Pretorius, 2019; Levecque et al., 2017; Pretorius, 2022; Pretorius et al., 2019; Woolston, 2017). During the pandemic, students' wellbeing, especially mental health, was further negatively influenced by societal changes, such as social isolation caused by geographic lockdowns (Holmes et al., 2020; Huckins et al., 2020). Similar to the authors of Chap. 17 (Cutri & Lau, 2022), I highlight that the pandemic exacerbated the already significant mental health crisis for PhD students. Within these changed circumstances PhD candidates, whose social and personal lives were already constantly interweaved with their academic ones, had to deal with the changes under significant pressure (Chirikov et al., 2020).

As a PhD candidate who started the PhD shortly after the pandemic outbreak in 2020, my psychological growth has been through two significant stages under this newly structured sociocultural context in 2020 and 2021. I explore these two stages through the use of autoethnography, a qualitative research methodology designed to systematically explore personal experiences within a particular cultural context (Ellis et al., 2011; Pretorius & Cutri, 2019). I use a theoretical dyad (*perezhivanie* and *social situation of development*) which I have adopted from the cultural-historical theory to help me elaborate the qualitative changes I experienced during my journey. Through my autoethnography, I hope to encourage and empower people experiencing a similar situation to deal with the constantly changing new social environment brought about by COVID-19.

## 18.2 Cultural-Historical Theory as the Theoretical Framework

To analyse the trajectory of psychological growth during my PhD journey, cultural-historical theory, as a theory to study the process of individual's psychological development, has been adopted as my theoretical framework. Cultural-historical theory is based on Hegel's Dialectics as its philosophical foundation to study the development of the human mind (Vygotsky, 1997). Two concepts from the theory, *perezhivanie* and *social situation of development*, are taken as a dyad of theoretical concepts to analyse the influence of the new social environment on my psychological development. I understand *perezhivanie* in a similar way to the authors of the previous

chapter (see Cutri & Lau, 2022). In this chapter, I use the definition from Vygotsky (1994, pp. 339–340) to describe *perezhivanie*:

The emotional experience [*perezhivanie*] arising from any situation or from any aspect of his environment, determines what kind of influence this situation or this environment will have on the child. Therefore, it is not any of the factors in themselves (if taken without reference to the child) which determines how they will influence the future course of his development, but the same factors refracted through the prism of the child's emotional experience [*perezhivanie*].

*Perezhivanie*, therefore, has two layers of definition: *perezhivanie* refers to the common English translation as the *phenomenon of experience* and can be understood as a *prism* to reflect and refract the social situation into a child's development (Veresov, 2017). Consequently, *perezhivanie* explains the internalisation process of how social conflicts are projected and refracted into the child's development of psychological functions within the cultural-historical tradition (Vygotsky, 1994). Through this theoretical lens, the environment is seen not as an external influencing factor but as the source of development (Vygotsky, 1997, 1998).

To illustrate the concept of *perezhivanie*, I utilise Vygotsky's (1994) own example which demonstrated how three children who experienced the same family issues (a dramatic event) presented different developmental outcomes:

The external situation in this family is the same for all three children. The essential circumstances were very straightforward. The mother drinks and, as a result, apparently suffers from several nervous and psychological disorders. The children find themselves in a very difficult situation. When drunk, and during these breakdowns, the mother had once attempted to throw one of the children out of the window and she regularly beat them or threw them to the floor. In a word, the children are living in conditions of dread and fear due to these circumstances. The three children are brought to our clinic, but each one of them presents a completely different picture of disrupted development, caused by the same situation. The same circumstances result in an entirely different picture for the three children (Vygotsky, 1994, p. 340).

This case was further conceptualised through Veresov's model (2019). The social environment is the general environment in which individuals live, including the social situation as a component (Veresov, 2019). In Vygotsky's (1994) example noted earlier, the same social situation caused three children to develop different outcomes as the social situation was refracted by different *perezhivanie* in each child. *Perezhivanie*, therefore, makes a social situation a *social situation of development* (Vygotsky, 1998). The social situation that can be refracted by *perezhivanie* is the dramatic conflicts (Vygotsky, 1989).

As highlighted in the previous chapter, *perezhivanie* is not just applicable to children, but has been used to explore adult development as well (for more details, see Cutri & Lau, 2022). In this chapter, the pandemic influences the social environment that surrounds me. The conflicts embedded in this social situation have been refracted into my developmental process by my *perezhivanie*. In the rest of this chapter, I reflect on my own experiences regarding how I struggled, persevered, and survived throughout the COVID-19 period while doing my PhD. I do this through two illustrations from Hansel and Gretel's journey through the woods in the Brothers Grimm's story: (1) *Dropping breadcrumbs* and (2) *Surviving at the gingerbread house*.

### 18.3 Stage 1: Dropping Breadcrumbs

When the moon came [Hansel and Gretel] set out, but they found no crumbs ... Hansel said to Gretel, 'We shall soon find the way.' But they did not find it. They walked the whole night and all the next day too from morning till evening, but they did not get out of the forest, and were very hungry, for they had nothing to eat but two or three berries... And as they were so weary that their legs would carry them no longer... They began to walk again, but they always came deeper into the forest, and if help did not come soon, they must die of hunger and weariness. (Grimm & Grimm, 1812)

Like Hansel and Gretel, I experienced a combination of negative feelings, including panic, self-doubt, and disorientation, at the beginning of my PhD journey due to the unexpected isolation induced by COVID-19. In 2020, shortly after starting my first-year PhD journey, Victoria (a south-eastern state of Australia) instituted a state-wide lockdown (Andrews, 2020a, b, c). At the very start, I was filled with confidence and positive visions. However, soon my new social situation became a dramatic collision.

I had to work and study from home before making any social or professional connections to other PhD students or research colleagues. I felt disoriented and anxious in the academic phase by the overwhelming study load as a beginner-level doctoral candidate doing research in isolation. I was stressed by the intention of having productive work to discuss with my supervisor to prove that I was hardworking. In the meantime, the two-week interval between supervisory meetings did not equip me with enough time to thoroughly examine the work I came up with, which led to imperfect work for the next meeting. Such pattern kept repeating in a vicious loop, deepening my anxiety and sense of being off-track.

The same social situation can be refracted to individuals differently through perezhivanie, which makes the developmental process unique for individuals. Dhont et al.'s (2020) study demonstrated a comparatively high level of anxiety and depression among participants who conducted research in isolation due to the changed social situation. However, Abdellatif and Gatto (2020) provided a different view in their reflection on PhD life. They managed to build up a sense of belonging based on the experiences of cultural differences although they had also been through difficulties including changing roles by working from home, coping with parenting, self-care, and academic pressure at the same time (Abdellatif & Gatto, 2020). In my case, the accumulation of frustration eventually made me question my capability and choice of conducting a PhD.

In my social and personal life, I had embodied the total in-house nanny by taking on the roles of chef, carer, friend, and protector to the family as I was the one studying and working from home. I had to squeeze time in study sometimes, which made me feel guilty that I could not be fully committed to the research work I wanted to do.

The combination of anxiety, disorientation, being overwhelmed, and guilt placed an extra layer of pressure onto the academic phase of my life. Those mixed negative emotions indicated the dramatic collisions I experienced throughout 2020, which indicates that my lived experience was in motion along with my psychological ontogenesis. The dramatic collision on the social level is refracted by the prism,

perezhivanie, which drove me to seek answers and help others by participating in the online academic-related workshops and the social and academic networking.

Through online networking, I regained a sense of connectedness; I started to notice I was not the only one struggling; I realised that it is okay not to feel okay in both personal and academic life.

Despite its limitations, online networking has gained increasing expectations since the pandemic and has helped maintain the function of social relationships (Murayama & Sugawara, 2021). It helps maintain the already existing connections and further expands the scope for potential social connection, such as the research cohorts in different research fields (see, for example, Hradsky et al., 2022).

I benefited from social networking both socially (including feeling (re)connected) and academically (receiving advice regarding the academic disorientation, for instance); I had noticed that people were experiencing similar struggles as mine via the online platform. Such recognition drove me to join a volunteer organisation within the faculty for higher degree by research students. I had started to gain social and academic friendships and partnerships and build up a sense of belonging and community within the group, and later on within the faculty.

Although in Kulik's (2021) study the hybrid/virtual volunteers expressed a lower level of satisfaction and a higher level of negative affect than traditional face-to-face volunteers, I have harvested positive feelings through my online volunteering experiences.

Due to the state-wide lockdown, all the social activities our team held were online. For example, the online joint writing session is based on the Pomodoro technique to break down the 2-3-hour sessions into several small writing sessions with a shorter break in between. There were always participants expressing their appreciation of such sessions that helped them with their social and mental needs (Beasy et al., 2020) and stimulated their productivity in research work (Cahusac de Caux, 2021; Wilson & Cutri, 2019). I felt related. Receiving those heart-warming feedback brought positive energy to my mental health battery, which contributed to the motivation that supported me to persist in my first-year doctoral journey.

Vygotsky's words explain how individuals respond differently to the same social situation through perezhivanie.

The environment exerts this influence, as we have said, via the child's emotional experiences [perezhivaniya<sup>1</sup>], i.e. depending on how the child has managed to work out his [sic] inner attitude to the various aspects of the different situations occurring in the environment. The environment determines the type of development depending on the degree of awareness of this environment which the child has managed to reach (Vygotsky, 1994, p. 346).

In other words, the social situation is projected through perezhivanie, the prism, into an individual. Then it becomes the source of the individual's psychological development. In my case, among all the routine activities of the day, the online networking and volunteering activities are the situations that contributed to my development, despite there certainly existing other situations that brought me negative feelings. Those two types of feelings did not counteract each other but co-existed. The conflicts

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<sup>1</sup> The plural form of perezhivanie.

between them refracted through perezhivanie, contributing to the developmental outcome.

I perceive the impact of the pandemic as both a challenge and an opportunity for the first-year research path. It is natural to struggle during this historical pandemic, but I am never alone in the struggle; what matters more is to take the initiative and become the change agent of the current situation. Take the volunteering experience as an example. Although it takes an outstanding commitment to contribute to the community (Kulik, 2021), what I obtain is more than expected. Without the dramatic collisions within the pandemic, I may never realise the importance of networking and voluntarily helping people.

## 18.4 Stage 2: Surviving at the Gingerbread House

Then [the witch] seized Hansel with her shrivelled hand, carried him into a little stable, and locked him in behind a grated door. Scream as he might, it would not help him. Then she went to Gretel, shook her till she awoke ... Gretel began to weep bitterly, but it was all in vain, for she was forced to do what the wicked witch commanded. (Grimm & Grimm, 1812)

At the end of 2020 I passed the first milestone of my doctoral candidature and enjoyed life back to *normal* just like Hansel and Gretel fed themselves on the delicious gingerbread house. However, the repeated lockdowns throughout 2021 were caused by the unstable pandemic situation, arriving unexpectedly like the witch to the siblings. Such constant and unexpected changes created another series of difficulties in the social situation. In both scenarios, Hansel and Gretel's and mine, the social environment was dynamic and always in motion. Such dynamics leads to the qualitative changes in a social situation for individuals, which eventually results in the changes in the social situation of development through the refraction of perezhivanie. For example,

repeated lockdowns caused a delay in the ethical approval of my doctoral research and later a suspension of data collection was applied in school settings. My research life was stuck in a 'pause' mode. I started to suffer from loneliness and isolation again as I moved out to live alone due to family problems. My pet's passing away brought me tremendous grief as I always viewed him as my dearest company and family member. All of these qualitative changes in 2021, together with the lockdowns, contributed to a relatively new social situation. As a result, I experienced emotional meltdowns and could not focus on either work or study.

The Social Situation of Development created by perezhivanie had brought a destructive developmental outcome at this stage as I could not handle the series of the dramatic collisions.

Then Gretel gave her a push that drove her far into it, and shut the iron door, and fastened the bolt... and the godless witch was miserably burnt to death. Gretel, however, ran like lightning to Hansel, opened his little stable... Then Hansel sprang like a bird from its cage when the door is opened. How they did rejoice and embrace each other, and dance about and kiss each other. – The Brothers Grimm (Grimm & Grimm, 1812)

Fortunately, friendships saved me in a similar way to how Gretel beat the witch. The reciprocal relationships I had developed since 2020 and the encouragement

and understanding from my supervisors supported me during the most challenging moments. In a pandemic situation, the student-supervisor relationship plays a vital role in the PhD candidature (Hill & Conceição, 2020).

I had started counselling to face and deal with my mental health; I kept checking in with friends to share positive and negative updates with each other. These social and academic supports have scaffolded me to regain confidence in both social and academic life. Most importantly, I maintained my persistency through participating in academic activities, which is an effective distraction from negative emotions. I have undertaken teaching work in the university. I share knowledge with undergraduate and postgraduate students to prompt their thinking, which is always the biggest passion of mine as a teacher. I am always proud that I have never lost such passion. This helps me relocate the motivation to research every time I lose it.

My sense of disorientation sometimes comes back. This recently happened due to the delay in data collection of my research project, which led to a decrease in my motivation and an increase in procrastination in academic writing. In Cahusac de Caux's (2021) study of the pandemic influence of academic writing output of PhD candidates, a similar pattern appeared: the delay of research caused the decline in research motivations.

Working from home was still the case to me most of the time in 2021 and the productivity of writing was still one of the concerns. Although my productivity was boosted in the joint writing sessions I volunteered in, I was writing alone at home in most cases. Even though my doctoral research had been paused, I managed to develop professionalism in other research-related ways: I had participated in academic occasions, such as presenting in conferences and symposiums; I had joined a volunteering research committee to organise both academic and social events, which had enriched my understanding and skill kits as a PhD candidate; I had started and continued academic writings, slowly but in a progressive way.

At this moment, compared to the previous outcome in 2020, the dramatic collisions I experienced have contributed to a relatively positive developmental outcome in 2021. My inner attitudes have changed qualitatively by undertaking agentic acts in dealing with the struggles, based on my previous experience in 2020. The social situations that brought both positive and negative feelings co-existed and co-refracted through *perezhivanie* into the timeline of my psychological development, similarly to the developmental trajectory in stage 1 in 2020. By comparing the two stages in 2020 and 2021, it can be found that the social environment varied, and so did the social situations. The conflicts (i.e., the positive and negative feelings brought by social situations) in my academic and personal life eventually became the nutrition allowing my psychological growth to sprout. What was experienced and refracted in 2020 also had a significant impact on the developmental path in 2021.

## 18.5 The Treasures from the Trip

Through the analysis of my stories from stage 1 in 2020 to stage 2 in 2021 using a theoretical dyad, it is clear that different social situations can lead to different

developmental outcomes due to the different refraction through *perezhivanie*. How the social situation contributes to the individual's development depends on how the individual constructs the inner attitudes toward the conflicts in the social environment. It also explains why an individual who experiences the same or similar social situations can still develop different outcomes.

The conflicted feelings caused by various social situations in 2020 made me an agentic volunteer who values and appreciates the importance of social connections. The conflicts in 2021 also contributed to my ever-growing identity as a change agent who has learned to undertake leadership in personal and academic life.

Taking on the perspective of dialectics (the philosophical foundation of cultural-historical traditions) that sees development in motion, the social environment is ever-changing, and so do the components that constitute my psychological development, such as the social situation, the conflict, and the inner attitude. In this case, the development is a constantly moving forward process.

The pandemic has brought qualitative changes to the social environment, where every individual's social situation has been inevitably influenced. However, based on the dynamics of the social environment, the dramatic collisions happening to the individual's life make psychological development possible as it is the source of development (Vygotsky, 1998). The struggles and dramas brought about by the constantly changing social situations provide the soil for an individual's psychological growth to sprout. The social environment and the social situation may go beyond an individual's control. However, what always matters are the inner attitudes which decide the direction the social situation will be refracted and it signals what type of developmental outcome the individual is going to achieve.

And as [Hansel and Gretel] had no longer any need to fear [the witch], they went into the witch's house, and in every corner there stood chests full of pearls and jewels. (Grimm & Grimm, 1812)

## 18.6 Conclusion

Adopting the lens of the theoretical dyad originated from cultural-historical theory, individual developmental outcomes are likely to be different even if they are involved in the same social situation due to the different *perezhivanie* which creates different social situations of development. However, this chapter aims to encourage people who are experiencing a similar situation not to struggle alone. Rather, people should empower themselves so that they can continue to manage the crisis through their inner attitudes toward the social environment, despite the existence of change in the social situation that may be beyond their control.

In conclusion, starting and continuing a PhD journey was like Hansel and Gretel's trip in the woods. There was panic, struggles and happiness. I discovered five types of treasures during my trip which can provide insights to people who embark on a similar journey.



1. Social and academic networking benefited my social and emotional wellbeing as I regained social connections within the field, guiding me throughout the disoriented period as a beginner-level PhD candidate.
2. The volunteer work in which I engaged in both social and academic contexts contributed to my development of professionalism and to my mindset in understanding the multifaceted aspects of a PhD journey that were always more than academic output.
3. The partnerships and friendships I developed were one of the necessities in the pandemic social environment which kept me motivated and accompanied me during the most challenging moments of my PhD candidature.
4. The support and endorsement from my supervisors played a vital role in my PhD candidature as they were some of my strongest allies during my research journey to guide me in the direction of the trip in the woods.
5. Participating in academic/research-related activities helped me stay persistent and recharged in the field. It also helped to maintain my professional identity as a PhD candidate and a teacher, reinforcing my original motives of undertaking a PhD candidature.

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# Chapter 19

## Empowerment in the Crisis: Narratives of COVID-19 Generation Researchers



Wei qi Jiang and Bingqing Li

**Abstract** The COVID-19 pandemic influenced higher degree by research (HDR) students' academic experiences profoundly as it forced HDR students to adjust their intensive and demanding research work and studies according to unforeseeable challenges. This was particularly challenging for international HDR students as they had rather limited resources in their host countries to cope with uncertainties, and the university emergency responses gave them limited attention and support. This resulted in many international HDR students feeling disempowered. However, recent research on international HDR students' experience in their host countries during the pandemic remains sparse. From an insiders' account, this autoethnography study aims to bridge this gap, investigating two Australia-based Chinese HDR students' struggles in their research studies and their academic identity self-formation. This study presents that the international HDR students managed to empower themselves by holding on to their support systems and exercising their agency in the middle of uncertainty. The findings presented in the study add to the understanding of the importance of providing a more inclusive and supportive environment for international HDR students' development.

**Keywords** Higher education · Academic identity · International students · Graduate students · Doctoral education · Empowerment · COVID-19

### 19.1 Introduction

There has been a growing interest in PhD students' lives worldwide since 2000 (Litalien & Guay, 2015). Previous research revealed several factors that influence students' motivation to commence their PhD studies, such as career development, intrinsic motivation, and research experience (see, for example, Cahusac de Caux,

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2019; Kowalczyk-Wałędziak et al., 2017; Pretorius & Macaulay, 2021). However, the COVID-19 pandemic has significantly changed the landscape in higher education (Lee et al., 2021). This indicates that higher degree by research (HDR) students need to (re)consider these recent changes when they make academic choices. This is especially true for international HDR students, given the potential insecurity of living overseas, the closure of national borders, and the cost of enrolling in PhD studies. Consequently, international HDR students need to adapt to the emerging and ever-changing conditions of researching and learning by re-evaluating the circumstances and making optimal decisions in relation to their academic development.

There is a dearth of research on international HDR students, especially on how the COVID-19 pandemic has influenced their decision-making regarding whether or not to further pursue a PhD degree. This research aims to fill this gap by examining two Chinese HDR students' lived experiences in Australia, notably their transition in becoming PhD students during the pandemic (the so-called *COVID-19 generation researchers*). Looking at the particularity of this group of HDR students may help to understand the opportunities embedded within the challenges posed by the pandemic, particularly how they empowered themselves in the process of adaptation, negotiation, and exploration. This research answers the question: *How did the unforeseeable circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic influence two Chinese HDR students' choices of becoming PhD student-researchers in an Australian university?*

As outlined in Chap. 1 (Cahusac de Caux, 2022), COVID-19 has created a crisis for academia. By discussing the influence of COVID-19 on international HDR students, we identify some problematic issues as causal assumptions. According to Brookfield (2017), causal assumptions are “about how different parts of the world work and about the conditions under which these can be changed” (p. 7). These causal assumptions influence “what we think ought to be happening in particular situations. They’re [*sic*] the assumptions that are surfaced as we examine ... what good educational processes should look like, and what obligations students and teachers should owe to each other” (Brookfield, 2017, p. 6). That is to say, we build our knowledge of what a good education experience should look like by understanding a collection of individual experiences. With the increasing concern over retaining students and attracting more international students, this research is vital for universities to understand international HDR students' transient and fleeting thoughts, and how they survived and thrived in the face of challenges. It contributes to the literature by capturing the opportunities where international HDR students exerted their agency in a crisis, and their projections of an ideal HDR community.

## 19.2 Literature Review

### 19.2.1 Pursuing a HDR Degree

HDR includes master degrees in research and doctoral degrees. Holmes (2015) argues that with the expansion of higher education in developed and developing countries, students holding a higher education degree are the main workforce in their economies. On an individual level, people choose to study for a HDR degree for different reasons. For example, Stehlik (2011) contends that doctoral students motivate themselves through their doctoral degrees by seeing the journey as a quest for the self, an intellectual quest, and a professional quest. Similarly, Pretorius and Macaulay (2021) show that PhD students choose “to pursue doctoral studies for career success, self-discovery or personal growth, and social justice” (p. 635). Often, pursuing a HDR degree also provides resources for people from higher education to make their transition to the labour market (Pretorius & Macaulay, 2021; Tomlinson, 2017). This is discussed in more detail in Chap. 21 (Macaulay, 2022).

Research shows that there are mainly two cohorts who enter a HDR study: early career researchers who want to use this experience as their starting point of academia and mid-to-late career researchers who seek a postgraduate qualification out of vocational reasons but based on their intrinsic desire (Lee et al., 2018; Templeton, 2021). According to Lee et al., (2018, p. 29), students make their decisions based on the “interrelationships among the self, the family, cultural, and spiritual environment” to balance family expectations and societal constraints. Templeton (2021) argues that some people may choose a HDR degree merely out of their passion for life-long learning. Those mature age students do not undertake HDR research to launch their careers but to reflect on their careers, “with many experiencing transformative learning in the process” (Stehlik, 2011, p. 151). The participants from this study are early career researchers who want to launch their academic careers by gaining a doctoral degree.

After discussing the reasons for entering a HDR degree, it is noteworthy to pay attention to students’ concerns of where to study: domestic or overseas. According to Schäfer and Dali (2021), choosing a study destination can be explained by different concepts of internationalisation and national research focus. Students may prefer to study overseas based on language preferences, personal interests, country impressions, and programme quality (Lee et al., 2021; Tagg, 2014). For example, Malaysian students prefer studying in countries where English is a first language (Tagg, 2014), whereas Chinese students evaluate their study interests, institution profiles, and programme quality before they make their decision (Lee et al., 2021). Australia, where we study, is one of the most popular studying destinations for Chinese HDR students. In 2019, onshore international students constituted 23.4% of all higher education enrolment in Australia (Department of Education Skills & Employment, 2020).

## 19.2.2 COVID-19 as a Community Crisis

The COVID-19 pandemic is a health crisis as well as a community crisis because of the nature of the physical distancing protocols put in place to decrease or eliminate human-to-human transmission, which negatively influences people physically and psychologically. For example, the requirements to *stay at home* and *stay 1.5 m apart* inevitably impeded the ordinary operation of the full functions of university programmes, which normally integrate knowledge delivery with other social aspects such as student engagement in school and local communities (O’Shea et al., 2021). The quality of students’ university experience during COVID-19 decreased as they were unable to connect naturally and smoothly with others in familiar ways (Le, 2021). This is despite cloud universities opening up new channels for communication and interaction via online remote teaching (Li, 2021). Additionally, COVID-19 has created a series of stressors that affect students’ mental health by arousing anxiety, fear, anger, frustration, and helplessness. For example, Dodd et al. (2021) found out that over 60% of university students in Australia suffered from psychological distress and depressive symptoms related to COVID-19. Similar negativity in higher education was also common in research conducted internationally, such as China (Zhai & Du, 2020), Germany (Petzold et al., 2020), and the Philippines (Oducado et al., 2021). Consequently, this prevalence of distress may lead to greater drop-out rates (Litalien & Guay, 2015), higher pressure in academic writing (Cahusac de Caux, 2021), and diminished academic functioning (Noman et al., 2021).

This chapter mainly focuses on COVID-19 as a community crisis for international HDR students as they may face more challenges of this crisis. Their vulnerability may result from discrimination and racism due to being perceived as potential carriers of COVID-19 (Zhai & Du, 2020), or from financial difficulties due to job cuts and their ineligibility for governmental subsidies (Le, 2021). Such vulnerability adds to the existing challenges that they have already experienced in studying overseas in terms of higher tuition fees, physical disconnectedness with their home country, and lack of social and cultural resources in an unfamiliar foreign community. Consequently, in a survey administered among 2739 Mainland China and Hong Kong students, Mok et al. (2021) found that more than 80% of respondents revealed less interest in studying abroad after the pandemic. In this sense, COVID-19 has exacerbated the factors which predict (international) students’ decisions to leave university, for example, mental health and the perceived quality of university life. Notably, some of the disruptions triggered by COVID-19 may require international HDR students to reappraise their choice about whether to start their highly research demanding study in troubling times.

### 19.2.3 *Alternative Wisdom of Crises*

Historically, we learn to deal with crises involving widespread community impacts and uncertainties from other natural disasters such as earthquakes (Cordero-Reyes et al., 2017). In addition to practical wisdom from community crises that we can use to resist the detrimental effects (Cordero-Reyes et al., 2017), there is alternative epistemological wisdom of crisis management. Fadel and Trilling (2009) argue that uncertainties, danger, and opportunities are the “signs of our times” (p. 6). As the Chinese characters for the word *crisis* (in Chinese 危机, pronounced as wēijī, with wēi meaning danger and jī meaning opportunities) indicate “in times such as these, along with danger and despair come great opportunities for change and renewed hope” (Fadel & Trilling, 2009, p. 6). Interestingly, Mair (2009) argues that the ‘jī’ in ‘wēijī’, means “incipient moment” or “crucial point” (i.e., the beginning of something or changes) (para. 6) rather than opportunities. Nevertheless, no matter what ‘jī’ really means, the significance of crises is evident because the implications of choice-making are far-reaching. Therefore, the choices made at the times of crises, when things go awry, become critical. Embedded in our epistemologies from China, we acknowledged the signal of ‘danger (wēi)’ in the times of the global pandemic. We seized the incipient moment and made agentic choices (i.e., starting our PhD in the pandemic), awaiting the ‘danger (wēi)’ to become an opportunity for “change and renewed hope” (Fadel & Trilling, 2009, p. 6).

## 19.3 Theoretical Framework

This research adopts Kabeer’s empowerment theory (1999, 2005) to understand international HDR students’ academic experiences and decision-making in COVID-19. Empowerment entails a process of change where people exercise their strategic day-to-day decision-making to realise their goals (Kabeer, 1999). Kabeer (1999) argues that empowerment is closely connected to the idea of disempowerment. In other words, people who are empowered should be disempowered or denied choices in the first place (Kabeer, 1999). For instance, the norms of the academic community built before the pandemic were disrupted in the crisis, resulting in academics in disempowered positions. In this study, empowerment means authors re-evaluated their resources, exercised their agency, and re-embarked on the journey of realising their renewed achievements at a time when things went awry. This study adopts three critical concepts in Kabeer’s (1999, 2005) empowerment theory: resources, agency, and achievements.



### 19.3.1 Resources

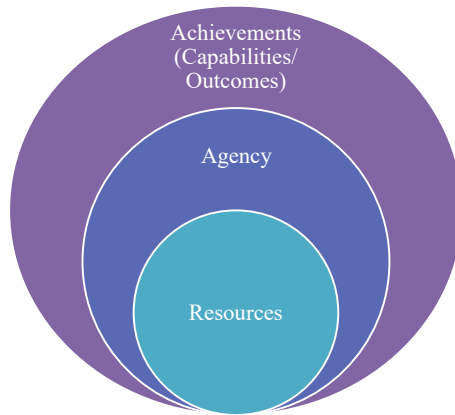
Kabeer (1999) believes resources include “material resources in the more conventional economic sense” and “the various human and social resources which serve to enhance the ability to exercise choice” (p. 437). When the pandemic hit academic communities, the resources available were greatly restricted for HDR students due to the loss of work and disconnection with tutors, peers, and families, as discussed previously. As articulated by Kabeer (1999), “access to such resources will reflect the rules and norms which govern distribution and exchange in different institutional arenas” (p. 437). Therefore, with face-to-face activities no longer valued in the pandemic, academics suffered from the consequences of the loss of financial support and community bonding.

### 19.3.2 Agency

Agency is related to “the ability to define one’s goals and the ability to act upon them” (Kabeer, 1999, p. 438). Agency can be categorised as their sense of agency (internal) and observable actions (external) (Kabeer, 1999). A sense of agency, or “power within” (Kabeer, 1999, p. 438), entails the meaning, motivation, and purpose which people bring to their observable actions. Observable actions encompass activities that are acted by individuals or collectives (Kabeer, 1999). Agency can be operationalised as decision-making, “bargaining and negotiation, deception and manipulation, subversion and resistance as well as more intangible, cognitive processes of reflection and analysis” (Kabeer, 1999, p. 438). In this case, in the light of the crisis, the notice of incipient moments and the action of making agentic personal choices to achieve personal goals are manifestations of exercising agency.

### 19.3.3 Achievements

Resources and agency together constitute a valued way of *being and doing*, which entail the capabilities that enable people to live their lives in the way they want (Kabeer, 1999, 2005). According to Kabeer (2005), achievements are the outcomes of individuals’ efforts, referring to “the extent to which this potential is realised or fails to be realised” (p. 15), including the exercised agency and its consequences (Kabeer, 2005). As advised by Kabeer (2005), achievements are more likely to be evident “in response to a new opportunity or in search of greater self-reliance” (p. 15). It has far more implications on individuals’ sense of independence than meeting survival needs (Kabeer, 2005). In this study, the achievements are the agentic choices researchers make and those positive outcomes relating to their personal development and the realisation of their renewed hopes.



**Fig. 19.1** The inter-relatedness of resources, agency, and achievements

### ***19.3.4 The Interrelatedness of Resources, Agency, and Achievements***

As Fig. 19.1 shows, resources, agency, and achievements are interrelated and their alignment can evolve into the empowerment of agency (Kabeer, 2005). Empowerment of agency involves two concepts: the greater effectiveness of agency or transformative agency (Kabeer, 2005). In this way, agency can either be exercised with greater efficiency or used to challenge the restrictive aspects of given roles and responsibilities (Kabeer, 2005). Access to education is one of the examples of empowerment and is a holistic realisation of a valued way of *being and doing* (Kabeer, 2005). Kabeer continues,

“there is considerable evidence for the claim that access to education can bring about changes in cognitive ability, which is essential to women’s capacity to question, to reflect on, and to act on the conditions of their lives and to gain access to knowledge, information, and new ideas that will help them to do so” (Kabeer, 2005, p. 15).

The notion of empowerment is originally related to gender equality issues for women in committed relationships, education, employment, and political participation in Kabeer’s (1999, 2005) studies. However, this study goes beyond this discussion to see empowerment as resembling the commitments of two international HDR students in academia during the pandemic.

## **19.4 Methodology**

This chapter adopts autoethnography to explore the two authors’ struggles and navigation amid the turbulence of COVID-19 when they reached an academic crossroad

of pursuing higher degrees or working as international HDR students. It provides insiders' accounts of how their Chinese cultural background and the perceived rules, regulations, and norms in Australia clashed to influence their decisions to pause or continue their academic pursuits. The autoethnographic methodology is consistent with the aim of the study to draw on "a self-understanding and establish the connection between the personal stories and socio-cultural contexts" (Chakma et al., 2021, p. 43). Researchers can "extend ethnographic understanding of the culture of academic life" (Li et al., 2022), in this case, particularly for those international HDR students in Australia. It helps to generate rich data about researcher-participants' "multiple layers of consciousness" (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 739), to examine their transient, nuanced, and complicated lived experiences (Pretorius, 2022; Pretorius & Cutri, 2019). Our autoethnographic narratives privilege international HDR students' voices, which are often marginalised in academic settings, so that other insiders (cultural members, e.g., supervisors, local students, and universities) and outsiders (cultural strangers, e.g., the public) can capture a better understanding of their positioning (Ellis & Bochner, 2000).

We are both Australia-based Chinese HDR students. Weiqi has been in Australia for three years, while Bingqing has spent one year in Australia. We knew each other from a research-intensive programme and have become friends who supported each other since the beginning of COVID-19. In doing so, we shared most of our academic experience during COVID-19, thereby developing an understanding of each other's situations, providing feedback by weighing the pros and cons of pursuing PhD studies in Australia, and affirming each other's choices.

We collected the data by writing personal retrospective narratives of our experiences, feelings, and influences during the COVID-19 pandemic. Particularly, the narratives were based on the following questions:

1. How do you perceive the changes in your academic life during the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. What have you experienced and how do you feel about the changes?
3. How does this experience influence your pursuit of higher education?

Based on these prompts, we created our preliminary autoethnographic narratives separately. Then, the narratives were read and examined by us together in a way that allowed us to add more details and descriptions of feelings and events together. This was possible because, as explained earlier in this section, our academic experiences during COVID-19 were co-constructed and we played important roles in each other's decision-making. In doing so, two rounds of data collection provided a thick description and analysis of our experiences and personal knowledge.

Data analysis was conducted by both researchers. We followed the steps of recursive data familiarisation, keyword identification, theme-searching, and reviewing (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The recurrent themes were further categorised, connected, and analysed with the use of the empowerment theory to make sense of them, as shown in the next section.

## 19.5 Findings and Discussion

### 19.5.1 *COVID-19: A Time of Transformation and Independence*

Pursuing PhD degrees amid COVID-19 was a time of ‘wēi’ in terms of finance and emotion, which led us to be more cautious and conservative about the decision of commencing PhD studies. For example, Weiqi experienced job losses due to the physical distancing restrictions in the waves of lockdowns, resulting in a drastic decrease in income. Meanwhile, our identity as international students made it harder to get financial support from universities, as manifested in “the higher threshold for scholarship winners” (Bingqing).

Compared to financial difficulties, the emotional energy needed to start a PhD journey during COVID-19 was also demanding. Both of us described our fear of getting infected, anxiety, depression, and homesickness.

Having seen other international students being blamed and attacked for causing the lockdown here in Australia, I felt alone, as well as I was concerned about my families in China. (Weiqi)

I don’t know whether I can make it through if I start my PhD now. I was so worried and depressed, which made me so homesick. (Bingqing)

It seems that the higher level of emotional energy needed during COVID-19 weakened our confidence in pursuing challenging PhD degrees. This negativity manifested psychologically; the amorphous uncertainties during the pandemic shook our academic determination to conduct PhD research. Bingqing mentioned her concerns as “my planned research could not be conducted considering the closure of borders” and “the transition to online data collection would influence the richness and quality of my data”.

Additionally, a deteriorating job market amid and possibly post COVID-19 (O’Shea et al., 2021), with fewer job vacancies in both host and home countries, undermined our morale to pursue a PhD, especially in terms of seeing it as a professional quest (see Stehlik, 2011). The shrinking employment market could hardly offer us secure future post-PhD employment, or as Bingqing stated: “I wasn’t sure whether trying so hard to get a PhD will be paid back by a proper job after COVID-19”.

Despite the challenges, COVID-19 provided new opportunities, or ‘jī’, allowing us to take control of our academic careers. This involved the withdrawal of family influences and the lowering of family expectations, which have been previously shown to be determinants of students’ decisions to pursue a degree (Lee et al., 2018). Bingqing explained this process as:

My parents were one of the push factors of my decision to do a PhD. They believe if I could be entitled as a Doctor someday, it wouldn’t be a problem for me to find a decent job and bring glory to my family. However, during COVID-19, I knew if I went back to China and stopped my study, my family would completely understand my choice because they were so worried about my safety and health in Australia.

In this sense, we gained more power to make decisions about our academic careers, or greater agency according to Kabeer (1999), with less impact from, for example, our families.

When passively gaining more agency by means of decreasing parental impact on our choices, we re-examined the options available in terms of whether to conduct further studies in research, locations, and time regarding when to start our PhD studies. Weiqi asked questions such as:

Should I still apply for a PhD? If I want to study for a PhD, should I change my studying university? Should I leave Australia and study in other countries? Should I do my PhD offshore or onshore? Should I postpone my PhD? All these questions lead to very different ways of doing a PhD.

By asking these types of questions, we figured out that our interests in pursuing a doctoral degree were mostly driven by an intellectual quest (see Stehlik, 2011), as Weiqi narrated:

However, there is only one reason that makes me want to insist—the reason brought me to Australia to finish a master’s degree—I want to learn more. This reason is shining like a sun for me. When the sun comes out, all the stars (difficulties) become less visible.

In this time of crises, we obtained a sense of agency, strong motivation, and a clear awareness of our academic pursuit. In this sense, we turned the commonly perceived ‘wēi’ of the pandemic into an incipient moment of ‘jī’, where we nurtured stronger identity as a PhD student and future researcher.

### ***19.5.2 Responding in Action: Hold on to the Support Systems and Personal Growth***

After having developed our sense of agency, our empowerment in responding to crises can be externalised as observable actions and achievements. In this action stage, first of all, we actively held on to our support systems to respond to the crisis (‘wēi’). Those support systems, mainly from family and peers, were our resources to use in the crisis. With the support from family, we felt more confident in following our intellectual quest for the self. As Weiqi noted,

Because my family would support whatever decisions I made, I told them my career and personal growth plan for the following five years to show them that doing a PhD degree is part of my plan. Therefore, they know doing a PhD degree is not an impulsive decision to avoid the pressure of going into the job market. I told them I would keep my part-time job to support my living, but I would rely on them for tuition fees before I get my scholarships.

Apart from family support, we also acknowledge the importance of having friends to discuss decisions together. As we previously explained, having friends to discuss strategies in responding to uncertainties was a valuable experience. In this process, we used our trusted network as our resources to resist the community crisis, which empowered our agency.

I feel that it's going to be okay because there is someone else like me, who understands me. I discuss every situation with her, including scholarship applications, research topics, research methodologies, and study modes. (Weiqi)

For me, two brains are always better than one. Mutually feeling so grateful for each other's company, I think my friend and I built an alley to adapt to the uncertainties during COVID-19. We shared information, discussed the best solutions, and made choices together to increase the chances of getting an offer/a scholarship. (Bingqing)

Using family and peer support to empower our agency was an observable action that we used to transform 'wēi' to 'jī'—an incipient opportunity to commence our academic and professional identity construction. As Kabeer (1999, p. 438) agrees that agency can reveal intangible forms of “bargaining and negotiation, deception and manipulation, subversion and resistance”, we negotiated with family and peers in order to gain our social support. This finding echoes the literature. Lee et al. (2018) emphasise the influence of social interaction in planning a PhD journey and using social resources to empower their agency. Although Lee et al. (2018) do not specify the influence of peers, we argue that friends play a similar role in the process as friends are self-chosen social relations who are not obliged by familial responsibilities.

By taking observable actions, we were able to achieve observable outcomes. First of all, both of us felt that we were effective in our agency in building our academic identity and having a sense of being able to exert our agency. Second, we acknowledged the transformative effects brought about by exerting control over our behaviours and social environments.

I managed to stay in Australia to continue my study and didn't let uncertainties jeopardise my plan. Since I am already on the track of doing a PhD, all I have to do is to make the most of it: improving academic writing, building academic networks, and building my academic identity. (Weiqi)

I tried my best to start a PhD study. I did not waste my time but made full use of it, converting my thesis into a journal article and finally succeeded in publishing it. It was such an accomplishment for me, as it is my first sole-author publication. (Bingqing)

After experiencing the ups and downs of entering academia, we felt assured about the decision we made. As Bingqing reflects, “deep down, I was super clear that this was what I wanted to do”.

Apart from our sense of effectiveness and rightness, the transformative effects on our personal growth became visible, as embedded in our epistemologies in our studies and in other life decisions.

My suggestion for the future is we need to seek support from families who understand us and good friends who have shared aims or values with us. In doing so, we can hear our inner voices and be assured about our feelings because we are not alone. (Weiqi)

I feel so proud of myself. I achieved what I wanted to do, becoming a PhD student in Australia, even during a hard time. I might not be so strong if it was not for this pandemic. (Bingqing)

Managing to make a start of our PhD in the pandemic was the first outcome of our efforts—we realised our potentials. Our determination and commitment to continue doing PhD studies have exceeded our survival needs. We now seek to keep one foot in the door for our renewed hopes of entering a career in academia.

## 19.6 Conclusion

### 19.6.1 The ‘Wēi’ and ‘Jī’ in the Crisis

This study is an autoethnographic exploration of two Chinese HDR students’ academic identity development during the COVID-19 crisis. Although COVID-19 is essentially a health crisis, this chapter focused on its social influences on the HDR community, particularly regarding the notion of ‘wēijī’. We adopted wisdom from China, viewing uncertainties and danger as the signal of a crucial moment inferring a change. To transform ‘wēi’ to ‘jī’, we used our resources and exercised our agency in the crisis, through which we reconfigured our academic identities. Two themes were highlighted in our findings: (1) our hesitation and confusion in the evaluation stage when priorities changed in the crisis, and more alternative choices become available, and (2) our personal responses to the crisis in the action stage by exercising our individual agency, socially engaging with our communities, and empowering our decision making. This study addresses the significance of understanding marginalised and disempowered international HDR students in an Australian context. The findings presented in the study add to an understanding of the importance of providing a more inclusive and supportive environment for international HDR students’ development.

This study is a small scale autoethnographic study that focuses on the negative and positive influences of the pandemic on international HDR students. However, more interesting discussions from a social lens regarding commencing a PhD degree can be conducted. Due to the word limit of this chapter, the authors have not explored the tension between their individual aspirations and social expectations (including age anxiety, career anxiety, and family obligations). As both of us were not married when we decided to join the PhD community, family obligations did not become apparent in our findings. As HDR students may have various experiences in the pandemic, it is valuable to further privilege their voices. In doing so, research will empower the whole HDR community; by understanding inclusiveness and marginalisation issues among us, we have an improved understanding of what a better HDR experience should be.

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# Chapter 20

## Turning Crisis into Opportunities: New Insights for Academic Experiences During the Pandemic Inspired from a Cultural-Historical and Activity Theory Perspective in an Autoethnography



Suxiang (Susan) Yu

**Abstract** The crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic has dramatically changed many academic practices and situations that used to be taken for granted, leaving academia in a state of shock and chaos. As an individual who tried to meet new demands brought by the changing academic environment, I also experienced a sense of crisis. However, as I tried to meet those new demands, I developed new capabilities and employable skills. In this chapter, I will present selected accounts of my personal experiences in academia, both as a Ph.D. candidate and a higher education teacher during the pandemic. Cultural-historical and activity theory concepts, such as the concept of activity and the concept of crisis, are used to provide analytical insights into my experiences. The new insights helped me shift my perception of crises as something negative to opportunities and potential for development. It is argued that the concepts of activity and crisis can be useful conceptual tools to transform our way of perceiving crises and thus find new developmental conditions for ourselves in challenging situations.

**Keywords** Crisis · Cultural-historical theory · Activity theory · Ph.D. candidate · Autoethnography · Adults' personal development · COVID-19

### 20.1 Introduction

In the past two years, the unprecedented COVID-19 situation has completely changed how we work, communicate, and live. As a female part-time Ph.D. candidate and a sessional lecturer (recently a full-time lecturer) in higher education, when COVID-19 hit the Australian higher education sector, I personally experienced a sense of panic,

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anxiety, uncertainty, and fear due to the prevailing job insecurity and challenges. Nevertheless, as a researcher who studies cultural-historical and activity theory, I soon started to perceive the crisis as an opportunity for my development. When the challenging situation was positively conceptualised, I became more focused on taking initiatives to create positive changes. As a result, the challenging COVID-19 situation turned into a highly productive two years in which I developed new competencies, established new professional relationships, and found new academic career opportunities. I want to take the writing of this autoethnographic chapter as an opportunity to reflect upon my learnings from this COVID-19 crisis. Reflection is considered a higher order thinking skill which helps to foster understanding, encourage personal growth, and enhance professional practice (Cahusac de Caux et al., 2017; Pretorius & Ford, 2016). Consequently, these kinds of reflections on our own life experiences are helpful and provide us with opportunities to learn and strengthen our personal and professional identities (Pretorius & Cutri, 2019). Yet, to deepen this learning, a valid and rigorous methodology needs to be applied to make the learning credible. In this chapter, the methodology of autoethnography is chosen to guide my writing and reflection process.

## 20.2 Methodology: Autoethnography

Autoethnography is a contemporary qualitative research methodology which guides those who are interested in digging deeper into their personal experiences (Pretorius, 2022; Pretorius & Cutri, 2019). It is more than just the telling of personal stories. Instead, it motivates the person to “describe and systematically analyse (graphy) personal experience (auto) in order to understand cultural experience (ethno)” (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 273). Besio (2020) regards this as one of the three different forms of existing autoethnography. She named it *biographical autoethnography*, which she defines as “a style of academically informed autobiographical writing that analyses the researcher’s personal experience as an exemplar of social life” (p. 243).

In this chapter, I will follow this autobiographic writing style to narrate my personal experience as a Ph.D. candidate and a higher education teacher in the new pandemic situation from 2020 to 2022 in Australia. I will re-examine my relevant past experiences through the analytical lenses of the cultural-historical and activity theory conception of activity and crisis. My role as an autoethnographic researcher is many-fold: the participant, the observer, the writer, the storyteller, and the analyst (Besio, 2020; Ellis, 2004; Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Pretorius, 2022; Pretorius & Cutri, 2019). It is hoped that the learning obtained from this reflection would help to offer a new perspective to perceive crises as potential opportunities for learning and development. Therefore, in the following section of this chapter, a cultural-historical and activity theory conception of activity and crisis is presented and summarised as a conceptual model of crisis. Then the chapter presents three summative narrative accounts of three major academic challenges that I experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic. Each of the summative narrative accounts is followed by an analysis of the

experience from the analytical lenses of the conceptual model of crisis. Then a short conclusion is presented with the synthesised learning from this autoethnographic exploration of my experience of crisis in academia between 2020 and 2022.

## 20.3 Theoretical Framework

### 20.3.1 *Cultural-Historical and Activity Theory and the Concept of Activity*

Cultural-historical and activity theory is a theoretical framework useful for conceptualising a person's development (Chaiklin, 2019; Nardi, 1996; Polivanova, 2015). This theoretical framework, with various theoretical contributors such as Vygotsky, Leontyev, and Engeström, to name a few, contains a set of perspectives and conceptual tools that helps to explore how people emotionally experience and interpret a social situation and what their activities are in response to the social situation (Nardi, 1996). In the cultural-historical and activity theory tradition, the world of human activities and their social situation are a *dialectical unity*, for what a person does (their activity) and their social situation mutually influences each other. Through this autoethnographic chapter, I would like to explore how the changing social situations in the academic field brought by the COVID-19 situation impacted my personal activities and how these personal activities provided opportunities for the development of new capabilities. In order to achieve this aim, it is essential to take a closer look at what the concept of activity means in the cultural-historical and activity theory context.

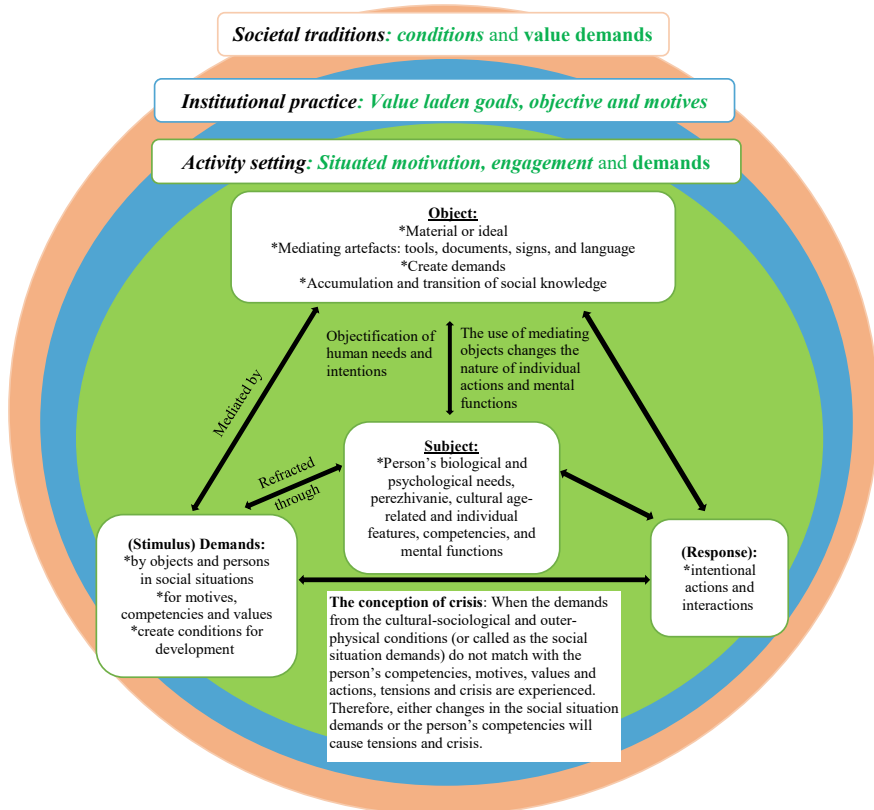
Chaiklin (2019) wrote a research article investigating the emergence and the development of the concept of activity among Soviet researchers, which could be dated back even earlier than Vygotsky's time. I want to quote Chaiklin's definition of the concept of activity here as the foundation for my discussion:

“The category of activity, as a psychological phenomenon, is based on the idea that **persons** are inseparably engaged and acting in relation to **objects (both physical and spiritual)**. Activity emerges or is embedded in this always-present internal relation between person and the objective world, where **the dynamic of this relation is a person's intentional action aimed ultimately at satisfying needs**. That is, a person formulates and pursues goals, aimed at making transformations in **material conditions** in the course of producing needed objects. This inseparable relation of person and **environment**, together with the dynamic productive relation are the fundamental core of the concept of psychological activity, where these actions usually draw on **historically existing traditions of action**, and sometimes by **creating new actions**.” (Chaiklin, 2019, p. 9, emphasis mine).

To understand the concept of activity, we need to understand the environment that the person (see the ‘Subject’ section in Fig. 20.1) is influenced by and tries to influence. From the above definition, we can see that this environment includes the “objects (both physical and spiritual)” (see the *Object* section in Fig. 20.1) and the “historically existing traditions of action” (Chaiklin, 2019, p. 9). Hedegaard (2008,

2012), who also worked within the same cultural-historical theoretical tradition, even though more focused on the research of the development of young children, provided a practical conceptual framework for better understanding the *historically existing traditions of action* in the environment. She argues that historically existing traditions are influenced by the *societal conditions* such as the ideologies and values in a society or community that a person lives in, and then the *institutional practice* such as the *value-laden goals, objectives, and motives* of the institutional that a person resides in, as well as the *activity setting* that a person experiences (see the orange, blue, and green circles respectively in Fig. 20.1) (Hedegaard, 2008, 2012).

Chaiklin (2019) argues that a person formulates specific goals to satisfy their needs through their intentional actions within the special conditions of their environment (see the relation between the *Object* and *Subject* section in Fig. 20.1). In other words, the environment creates the conditions for a person’s intentional actions (see the



**Fig. 20.1** The conceptual model of crisis. *Note* This figure tries to capture the cultural-historical and activity theory conception of activity and Riegel’s conception of crisis in an integrated conceptual model, which was used as an analytical lens for unpacking my personal experience and development as an academic in the COVID-19 crisis

relation between the *Stimulus/Demands* and *Object* section in Fig. 20.1). However, a person's intentional actions also change the conditions in the environment and eventually lead to *new actions* (see the *Response* section in Fig. 20.1). This dynamic relation between the person's intentional actions and the environment is the core of the psychological activity. Development of new actions, new mental functions, and capabilities occurs as "the activity of man[sic] who, as a species and as individual, acts to change reality and in doing so is himself [sic] changed" (McLeish, 1975, p. 210).

## 20.4 The Concept of Crisis

The existing crisis literature presents different conceptions of crisis. In the past, crises were typically associated with negative stress and trauma (Greer, 1980). For example, the psychodynamic conception of crisis links it to mal-coping and mal-functioning in adulthood caused by unresolved trauma in the early years (Greer, 1980). Caplan (1964) challenged the negative conception of crisis as harmful and came up with a contrasting claim that crises are opportunities to enhance personal competence and capabilities (Greer, 1980). Greer (1980) argues that this positive conception of crises as opportunities for development was later further supported by various researchers such as Bugental, Leitner, and Stecher as examples. Bugental (1965) even argues that personal crises as "an essential condition" for development (p. 18). Caplan (1964) conceptualises crisis as "a major disruption of an otherwise steady state of emotional equilibrium" (Greer, 1980, p. 19). However, this conception was challenged by dialectical psychology, which argues that life is never a static but ever-changing process (Greer, 1980). In addition, Caplan's (1964) crisis model focuses on the person's emotional reaction and adaptation to the event-related change in the social environment, which is believed to lead to the person's enhanced flexibility and competencies. However, Caplan's (1964) crisis model fails to better understand the dialectical and dynamic relations between the person and their environment during this crisis process.

Vygotsky (1998), one of the key contributors to cultural-historical and activity theory, conceptualises crisis as the tensions between the individual's inner biological and psychological needs and characteristics and the changing social situations caused by cultural age changes. The specific social situation associated with cultural ages is conceptualised as a social situation of development, which is regarded as the source of a child's development (Vygotsky, 1998). However, Vygotsky's (1998) conceptualisation of crisis focuses on young children and adolescents (at the cultural age of infancy, one, three, seven, and thirteen), instead of adulthood. Furthermore, Vygotsky's (1998) conception of crisis mainly focuses on the so-called developmental crises or transitional crises that are age-related (Caplan, 1964; Greer, 1980; Polivanova, 2015). Yet, it does not touch upon another type of accidental and event-related crisis (Bloom, 1963; Caplan, 1964; Greer, 1980), like the COVID-19 pandemic analysed in this chapter.

In addition, Vygotsky did not provide a concrete conceptual model to understand the relation between crisis and these individual and environmental dimensions.

Another psychologist who shared a similar conception of the dialectical relations between the individual and the environment is Riegel. Just like Vygotsky (1998), Riegel (1976) shares the claim that crises are fundamental sources for human development and he further conceptualises crisis as the tensions caused by the failed coordination and broken synchrony among the respective changes of a person's inner-biological, individual-psychological, cultural-sociological, and outer-physical dimensions. Unlike Vygotsky (1998), who focuses more on the developmental crisis, Riegel's (1976) conception of crisis applies both to the age-related developmental crises and the event-related crises. Therefore, Riegel's (1976) four-dimensional conceptualisation of crisis can be integrated into the conceptual model of crisis in Fig. 20.1 to enrich the analysis of the COVID-19 pandemic as a crisis for academics. The inner-biological and individual-psychological could be combined into the *Subject* section in Fig. 20.1. The cultural-sociological and outer-physical dimensions could be combined into the orange, blue, and green circle, representing the societal conditions, institutional practices, and activity setting, including the *Stimulus/Demands* section and the *Object* section in Fig. 20.1. Moreover, the concept of crisis could be conceptualised as the tension or mismatch between the subject's inner biological and psychological features and the demands from the cultural-sociological and outer-physical conditions (see Fig. 20.1).

## 20.5 Personal Experiences in the Crisis of COVID-19

### 20.5.1 *Job Insecurity in Higher Education Caused by COVID-19*

Due to COVID-19, universities in many countries experienced severe financial struggles due to the cut in government funding and the plunge in both intentional and domestic student enrolment (Cahusac de Caux, 2022b). In response to the financial struggles, numerous unprofitable courses were cut; schools, faculties, and departments were restructured for running costs reduction, and a considerable number of academics were made redundant (Kowal et al., 2020). For example, the U.S. Bureau of Labour Statistics (as cited in Rincon, 2021) reported that the higher education workforce in the United States shrunk by 7% since Feb 2020. In Australia, significant academic job losses were also noticed (Craig, 2020). Many tenure and non-tenure academics also reported their concerns about their job insecurity (Rincon, 2021).

The job security in higher education is more than those abstract figures reported in government reports or journal articles. I felt it as a personal experience.

Although I was lucky to keep my sessional teaching jobs when Sydney went into lockdowns, several of my friends and acquaintances who worked in higher education lost their job. I still remember a friend who was told one morning that she was no longer needed for her role as the



casual placement coordinator because early learning centres stopped taking new placement students. She cried while telling me the story, stressed about her mortgage and bills. Another friend, as an ongoing full-time lecturer in a prestigious university, told me she was stressed about losing her job because some of her colleagues had already lost their jobs due to the restructuring of their institution and the removal of unprofitable courses. I personally also worried that the chances of getting new sessional employment opportunities the following semester would be slim. For a couple of months, I was stressed and constantly calculating how long my savings could keep me going. Due to this sense of insecurity about losing my sources of income, I felt compelled to find more jobs. As a result, I kept sending my resumes to potential higher education employers. To my surprise, after a series of interviews, I ended up with four sessional teaching jobs in four different institutions across three different states, which means it would be unlikely for me to lose all the jobs at once.

### 20.5.1.1 Analysis

The new societal condition created by the COVID-19 crisis in which extensive and prolonged lockdowns and closure of national and state borders led to significant job losses in many sectors, including the higher education and academic sector. This societal condition meant that higher education institutions posed higher demands on their staff to work harder to secure their job since the competition for higher education and academic jobs became fiercer due to the decreased available positions and increased job applicants (change in the *Demands* section in Fig. 20.1). This led to a temporary tension between the demands of the social situation and my unchanged competencies, which I experienced as a crisis (see *the conception of crisis* in Fig. 20.1).

I soon developed the motives to find ways to secure my sessional teaching positions. I took intentional actions (see the *Response* section in Fig. 20.1) and worked harder to improve my teaching skills and employability by taking professional development courses and exploring more employment opportunities by sending my resumes and taking multiple job interviews. Through these intentional actions in the engagement of professional development courses related to teaching and other employability skills and job-hunting activities, my teaching and job-hunting competencies enhanced (this is the change in the *Subject* section in Fig. 20.1). As a result, my social situation changed again. I obtained four sessional higher education teaching jobs in four different institutions across three states. My intentional actions led to the changes in my competencies (reflected in the *Subject* section and changes in my social situation reflected in the *Demands* section in Fig. 20.1). Then again, my personal need for job security were met because I had four sessional teaching jobs in four different institutions, and the job insecurity crisis caused by the COVID-19 situation was resolved through this dynamic process. Fortunately, I was left with improved employability and job hunting and interviewing skills.

## 20.5.2 *Online Teaching and Remote Researching Skills Required During COVID-19 Lockdowns*

Lockdown policies enacted by most countries demanded a quick shift from face-to-face to online teaching (Corbera et al., 2020; Craig, 2020). During the COVID-19 lockdown period, all the institutions where I worked also made a quick shift from face-to-face teaching to online teaching.

Before COVID-19, I had zero online teaching strategies, and Zoom was the only platform I used for virtual meetings. As a result, I felt stressed and worried that I might do poorly with online teaching and eventually lose my job. However, I soon became confident with my online teaching skills through active learning and constant practice, and I received positive feedback from students.

Another issue caused by the COVID-19 lockdown was my original Ph.D. data collection plan. This was a common issue experienced by many colleagues and fellow doctoral students (see, for example, Chaps. 23–28; Cahusac de Caux, 2022a; Duran, 2022; Hradsky, 2022; Karlina, 2022; Maulana, 2022; Qureshi, 2022).

The plan was wholly thrown away because it involved visiting research participants in their family settings. I felt my doctoral research project became stagnant. With the support of my doctoral supervisors, we redesigned the data collection process. We turned it into a remote research project in which I worked collaboratively and remotely with research participants to collect my data. I successfully finished my data collection in 2021.

### 20.5.2.1 Analysis

The new institutional demand for delivering online teaching requires a different digital pedagogy and the knowledge of using different online teaching platforms such as Teams, Blackboards, and Zoom (changes in the *Demands* section in Fig. 20.1). In the beginning, I felt panicked and stressed because this meant my then existing teaching competencies did not match the new demands from the institutions. This could be conceptualised as minor crises (see *the conception of crisis* section in Fig. 20.1). However, I was motivated to secure my job and support students who struggled with the new online learning conditions. As a result, I not only started reading articles sharing online teaching strategies but also intentionally took the effort to experiment with various online teaching tools (and these are all my intentional actions in response to the new online teaching demands). Through my intentional engagement in online teaching practices, I have become more confident and skilled with my online teaching. Again, my personal competencies strike a new equilibrium with the social situation demands, and the crisis of online teaching was resolved.

As my online engagement and teaching competencies enhanced, I worked more effectively remotely with research participants for my Ph.D. research project because the same virtual meeting tools and some engagement strategies were used for my higher education teaching and my research data collection. The remote research methodology enabled me to work with more research participants and obtain more

data (my original Ph.D. research plan was to collect data from 8 families, yet the remote research method allowed me to work with and collect data from 18 families). This remote digital research experience also allows me to write a methodological chapter on remote digital research with my supervisors in a book that they edited. Through this experience, I learned that one crisis might lead to the development of new competencies, which affords new possibilities and opportunities.

### ***20.5.3 Work-Life Balance Issues Caused by COVID-19 Situations***

A high level of dissatisfaction regarding work-life balance and negative emotions have been reported among academics (Bender et al., 2022; Rincon, 2021). This is especially true for female scholars who might not only experience the challenges of shifts in their academic teaching and working environment but also experience more challenges in child-care responsibilities, conflicting roles as mothers and scholars, and reduced professional support in domestic settings (Bender et al., 2022; Lambrechts et al., 2021; Shalaby et al., 2021). As a result of these barriers to the pursuit of scholarship, a more significant loss in research productivity was highlighted for female as opposed to male academics. For example, it has been reported that female academics published on average fewer academic papers than male academics during the early months of COVID-19 (Lambrechts et al., 2021; Shalaby et al., 2021). Consequently, there is a rising concern for the worsened gender inequality and gendered bias within academia (Bender et al., 2022; Pereira, 2021; Shalaby et al., 2021; Wagner et al., 2022).

I personally have not experienced the gender inequality reported in the existing COVID-19 situation related literature, and I do not have children, so I was not struggling with challenges in child-care responsibilities. However, I do personally experience that it is so much harder to strike a work-life balance due to the COVID-19 situation. After the lockdowns eventually finished and we returned face to face teaching, I realised I spent much more administration time processing students' emails regarding absence, extensions, and additional help with the assessment due to their involuntary absence from the classes. This situation is worse with the professional experiences units because students might require adjustment to their placement due to their own and their supervising teachers' situations.

#### **20.5.3.1 Analysis**

While COVID-19 is around, face-to-face teaching poses new demands for me to spend more time managing administration tasks (see the *Demands* section in Fig. 20.1). This demand does not match my inner desire to spend more time in meaningful thinking, writing, and researching, which was my original motive to become an academic (see the *Subject* section in Fig. 20.1). This disequilibrium relation between the demands of the social situation and my personal desire is experienced as a crisis for me. Although I have not yet resolved this crisis, the crisis conceptual framework

depicted in Fig. 20.1 helps me remain positive and see several options. For example, I might be able to negotiate with my workplace to arrange my workload in different ways allowing me more time for desired activities such as reading, thinking, writing, and researching (i.e., to change the social situation to match my individual desire). Alternatively, I could choose to resign from my current full-time lecturing job and thus offer myself more time to work on tasks I desire (another potential option to change the social situation to match my individual desire). Otherwise, I could try to figure out a more effective system to manage administration tasks and further improve my time management and prioritising skills (through my intentional actions and engagement in the activities to enhance my corresponding competencies).

## 20.6 Conclusion

The unprecedented COVID-19 situation has posed crises for individuals, communities, societies, and even the world. People tend to perceive crisis as something adverse and detrimental in the past. In contrast, this autoethnographic chapter, informed by cultural-historical and activity theory, reconceptualises crisis as new opportunities for learning and development. The conceptual model of crisis theorised in this chapter was helpful in my analysis of my personal experiences. It helped me understand how I developed new capabilities through my active and intentional actions to handle challenging situations. The crisis became the force that pushed the changes in my social situation and the development of my individual capabilities to take place. The conceptual model of crisis also helped me unpack a minor crisis regarding an overwhelming workload and identify potential resolutions of the crisis. It is argued that the conceptual model of crisis presented in this autoethnography can be a useful tool for understanding crises within a person's activity and helping a person identify potential resolutions of the crisis.

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# Chapter 21

## A Shift in Doctoral Students' Demands and Motives During the COVID-19 Pandemic



Ade Dwi Utami 

**Abstract** The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted human life globally, including at all levels of education. In this chapter, I will discuss how I, as a doctoral student, dealt with the new educational practices which resulted from the COVID-19 pandemic. I highlight the change of demand and motives I experienced, including the conditions and challenges I faced when managing my son's home learning and my online learning. I developed a new educational practice of using technology to support my various needs as a doctoral student. I show that commitment, dedication, and resilience during the restricted learning process played an important role in helping me to successfully adjust to my pandemic learning conditions. I conclude this chapter by providing practical insights into how other doctoral students could adapt to the changes resulting from COVID-19. These insights can help future doctoral students cope with stress associated with significant change, workload demands, time-management challenges, and personal commitments.

**Keywords** Doctoral students · Education · Motive · Demand · Wellbeing · COVID-19

### 21.1 Introduction

It has been previously acknowledged that a Ph.D. is a challenging journey (Lee & Murray, 2015; Pretorius et al., 2019; Woodhouse & Wood, 2022). However, it is also an important stage for future academics where they develop their identities, agency, and intercultural competence (Pretorius et al., 2019). Through the process of supervision, mentoring, and training, it is assumed that doctoral students will develop the necessary skills to deal with a variety of challenges including academic pressures and personal struggles. However, these issues are often multi-faceted, and doctoral education programmes often do not adequately address the needs of students (Pretorius & Macaulay, 2021; Pretorius et al., 2019).

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Drawing upon the concept of dialectical relation between demand and motive, this chapter argues that the COVID-19 pandemic created conditions that generated new demands and raised new motives for doctoral students, in particular in relation to the use of technology to facilitate learning. I explore my experiences through the use of autoethnography as a methodology. By reflecting on my experiences, I show how I was forced to embrace new technological learning modes and develop my digital skills.

## 21.2 Demand and Motive as a Theoretical Framework

This chapter employs the concept of *demand* and *motive* from cultural-historical theory as the central dynamic factors of development (Chaiklin, 2012; Hedegaard, 2002). In this context, *demand* refers to the requirements of the social situation. As noted in the previous chapter, demands include competencies and values and create conditions for development (see Yu, 2022). Motives created in social activities define human development (Leont'ev, 1978). *Motive* describes “the goals that come to characterise a person’s actions in different settings over a long period of time” (Hedegaard, 2002, p. 55).

Motive affects a person’s participation in an activity (Fleer, 2012; Kravtsova & Kravtsov, 2012). This concept indicates the connection a person has with their surroundings. Therefore, the concept of motive can be used to explore the interaction of doctoral students with the learning environment, specifically during the COVID-19 pandemic. “Motive is not located solely in a person, nor solely in a situation or condition external to a person” (Chaiklin, 2012, p. 209), rather a dialectical relationship exists between a person and their surroundings (Fleer, 2012; Hedegaard, 2002, 2012). Moreover, “motives are developed in the course of the person’s interaction in social institutional practices” (Winther-Lindqvist, 2012, p. 129). This highlights that institutional practice plays a crucial role in supporting a person’s development where the institutional practices related to the doctoral degree programme provide social interaction through the conditions created. Thus, employing the concept of motive allows us to understand how such institutional practices influence students’ participation during their doctoral studies.

There are three different kinds of motives, namely dominant motives, meaningful or meaning-making motives, and stimulating motives (Hedegaard, 2002, 2012).

“Dominant motives are the most important, linked to the activities that are central and meaningful to a person’s life. A dominant motive is always meaningful; otherwise, it cannot be the dominant motive. A stimulating motive is one that could be meaningful in another context, but placed into a new activity, it can possibly motivate new activity in such a way that old and new activities become combined” (Stenild & Iversen, 2011, p. 138).

Dominant motives connect to the type of activities that are central to a person’s life. For me, this ties in with the role of being a mother. It is not only due to the role of a single parent during my doctoral study, but also related to the feminist



theory (Leavy & Harris, 2018) which positions females as mothers that are simply expected to do it all unsupported. Working, studying, taking care of my son, and providing home-schooling appear to be overly demanding and potentially harm my physical and mental health. As a result, my dominant motive becomes a meaningful or meaning-making motive because something that dominates a person's life should be meaningful (Hedegaard, 2002, 2012).

Such shifts in motives occur in the multiple roles as a mother and a student that dominate my life give meaning to living my life. However, since my decision to pursue a doctoral degree few years ago, a new motive has emerged and the motivation caused by the pandemic itself stimulated new activities, switching my schedule between working on my research and supporting my son's home learning, as well as creating workstation at home, eventually leading the new strategy to achieve my goals.

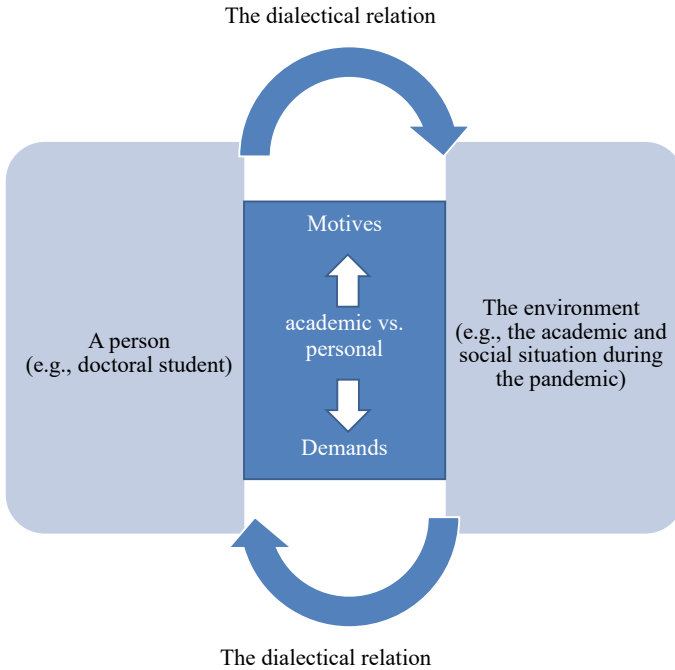
It is through the relation between people and their surroundings where the old and new activities are combined in order to develop a stimulating motive (Hedegaard, 2002, 2012).

By using Vygotsky's (1994, 1997) theory of demand and motive, a dialectical relation between a person and the surroundings can be explored (Hedegaard, 2012). Figure 21.1 presents a dialectical relationship between demand and motive of a doctoral student, academically and personally reflected through the connection between an individual and the surrounding environment. The connection between a person with their surroundings is reflected through the concept of a dialectical relation between the concepts of demand and motive, representing how the cultural response in regard to a change of environment in the learning context and the everyday life context is created (Fig. 21.1). Hedegaard's (2014) conception of motives and demands as dialectic across activity settings is used to understand my development of the new practices related to online learning at home as a new activity setting in the institutional practices.

### 21.3 New Educational Practices During the Pandemic

Recently, educational practices have changed as a result of the rapidly evolving COVID-19 situation (see Cahusac de Caux, 2022). Universities around the world have been trying to support students' academic needs and also ensure the safety of students at the same time. This had a significant impact on doctoral students' academic lives (Carrillo & Flores, 2020; Rashid & Yadav, 2020). Such difficulties were also compounded for doctoral students who simultaneously fulfil the role of mother and Ph.D. student in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Several chapters in this book have highlighted some of these struggles (see, for example, Adams et al., 2022; Patel, 2022; Yip & Maestre, 2022).

I was approaching my final milestone when COVID-19 suddenly hit us. Fear was the first feeling that came to me. Afraid of the unknown deadly virus that has spread around the world. In that condition, a thought about how to manage my study in this kind of situation



**Fig. 21.1** A dialectical relation between demand and motive of a doctoral student

haunted me. Not only thinking about how to adapt to home learning and online learning practices, but also thinking about how I can study while having my son doing the home learning as well. These situations result in new goal setting to juggle the multiple roles.

The appearance of new institutional policies due to the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in a new educational practice: online learning. While distance learning is understood as a learning strategy for students who are geographically distant, online learning is defined as a type of learning strategy that involves the use of technology to support the learning experiences (Carliner, 2004; Moore et al., 2011). Online learning can be seen as a version of distance learning due to the use of technology in this type of learning strategy for students that are physically distant (Conrad, 2002; Reeves et al., 2002). It has been previously noted that the influence of different factors should also be considered in developing and using technology for educational purposes, namely social, cultural, economic, and political factors (Selwyn, 2011). However, during the pandemic, the implementation of technology was key to maintaining the continuity of the educational process, and there was little time to consider these different factors which influence students' learning.

This adaptation to online-only learning was found to be difficult and stressful (Novikov, 2020). The difficulties of online learning included a lack of resources, including a poor internet connection, as well as unsuitable home study environments

(Novikov, 2020). This was particularly true in my case, where I lost access to the specially-designed doctoral research space.

I still remember when the university informed all the doctoral students to empty their working spaces in the Faculty of Education building for safety reasons. I tried to work at home using my laptop. However, using the laptop was not enough. The need for multiple monitors and an available printer emerged. So, I decided to buy these and build my own working station. Providing the working facilities was a considerable expense. It did not end there. Having all the facilities was still not enough without a proper learning environment. I shared my learning space with my son who had to study from home as well, leading to distractions when he needed help.

## 21.4 New Motives Emerged in Educational Conditions During the COVID-19 Pandemic

A new institutional practice creates new demands that position a person in a new orientation as a result of facing the challenges to a role (Capp, 2013; Hedegaard, 2012).

My new learning environment imposed on me by COVID-19 elicited new demands—what could be done to motivate me to meet my learning demands? New motives emerged that determined how I dealt with the competing demands created by the pandemic situation, such as the safety demand for me and my family, my personal life demand, my familial demand, and my academic demand.

The tension created in a social situation as a result of demands from the environment and my motives acted as a catalyst for new psychological development (Vygotsky, 1998). For me, tensions emerged in the activity settings when dealing with the new demands, enabling an opportunity for human development (Hedegaard, 2014). Therefore, the COVID-19 pandemic was actually a catalyst to transform my educational practices.

The difficulties that I experienced in doing online learning created motivating conditions for me to develop my digital skills. For doctoral students, the use of computers and the internet was already a part of daily activities. However, implementing online-only learning and during the pandemic created new conditions with which I was unfamiliar.

It was all about resilience due to the need to adjust to the new learning environment and the demands on playing double roles as a Ph.D. student and a mom. I struggled at the beginning, physically and mentally. I had so many things to do related to my tasks as a student and my responsibilities as a mother which was added to by handling my son's home learning. It was a drastic life change that needed to be accommodated immediately. It causes an anxiety that can result in failures. The Ph.D. and the mother's role had been so hard in normal life and even harder during the pandemic. I had to adjust and find alternate ways to organise everything and meet the demands.

During this pandemic, parents and teachers shared responsibilities in developing children's learning at home using online learning (Pramling Samuelsson et al., 2020).

Besides supervising their children at home, parents also need to work alongside the teachers organising and managing the implementation of children's daily activities (Pramling Samuelsson et al., 2020). This required a strong commitment, as well as a significant amount of time and energy to help children learn at home. On the other side, doctoral students as parents were also required to maintain their research productivity, completing research-related tasks, as well as organising the supervision and research discussion.

The requirement for parents to work from home while providing assistance for their children's learning has consumed my energy and time. Aside from my resilience, a collective effort and understanding from me, my supervisors, and the university played a crucial role. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on my research project has become a major concern, including safety and wellbeing issues due to the personal pressures I encountered and continue to face due to the crisis. In these unprecedented circumstances, personal commitments and academic commitments must be juggled in managing research from home.

## 21.5 Dialectical Relation Between Demand and Motive

The pandemic situation created conflicting demands in my doctoral journey, which represents the idea of a dialectic relationship between a person and their surroundings (Vygotsky, 1994, 1997). How I adapted to the changes in order to cope with associated stress, workload, time constraints, and personal life concerns during the pandemic demonstrates the significant relationship between an individual and their environment. As I reflect on my journey, I realise,

How commitment, dedication, and resilience were developed from the limited learning opportunities played an important role for me to successfully adjust to my new learning and everyday life conditions by managing the competing demands during the pandemic.

There is a "holistic dialectical relations between psychological, biological and cultural dimensions" (Fleer & Ridgway, 2014, p. 17). This understanding can provide guidance on how the learning environment can support doctoral students in a different context of learning because there is a dialectic relationship between the student as an individual and their surrounding environment. This helps in understanding how the pandemic conditions influenced my physical conditions by creating new demands and resulting in new motives emerging through the transition process, which involves dramatic tensions that needed to be resolved.

Home learning through an online system has become the only possible strategy due to the safety reasons associated with the pandemic. However, different factors and conditions from the microsystem related to the personal condition of the student and the macrosystem related to the educational practices determine the success of the new practice, including in doctoral degree practices. Collaboration work between the environment, such as institutional practices as part of the macrosystem in educational practices and the individual condition of the student as part of the microsystem in educational practices, contributes to the successful journey of a doctoral student.

The pandemic attacked everyone. It has been a collective struggle. It has been a huge transformation in everything in our everyday life practices. Undertaking everything from

home as a part of an isolation strategy to stop the spreading of the virus was a major challenge for everyone. However, related to my doctoral journey, all the support from others, friends, neighbours, supervisors, the university, and even the government created a motivation in me to fight the struggles. I could see that Monash University was aware of the challenges caused by COVID-19 and showed efforts to ensure that the financial security and the health and wellbeing of students were well supported. Hardship funding was donated to help those who had financial problems, health support was provided for physical and mental health, and academic support was available related to access to the facilities and the system, for example by applying for an extension. I could also apply for an extension with scholarship support for the tuition fee and some other expenses. The library service was improved by expanding the access to eBook collections adding digital versions of in print books. It was really helpful due to the challenging situations.

## 21.6 Alternative Strategies Addressing the Doctoral Journey Demands During the Pandemic

I would also like to discuss and share some alternative strategies that can address the doctoral journey demands required by the new educational policy of the COVID-19 and help Ph.D. students cope with the struggles during the pandemic.

COVID-19 has created many challenges for people, including doctoral students in doing their research project. Moreover, the challenges were worse for Ph.D. moms that have double or multiple roles. For example, they have had to try to manage their children's needs, home schooling and their own Ph.D. journey. Fortunately, the institution has recognised this and supported the Ph.D. students' needs, including Ph.D. moms. Being strict and flexible at the same time are important. How can we discipline ourselves in meeting the demands and provide flexibility by understanding self needs and self-care? I was preparing a thesis with published works and somehow the process of publication has been impacted by the pandemic as well. There was nothing we could do about this. Thus, I extended my candidature. The additional time meant that we had more time for the unpredictable situations to be solved with the help from the supervision team.

Firstly, facing the pandemic situation, doctoral students need to make a plan to help them manage the situation. It has been shown that pathway thinking from hope theory (McNeill, 2010; Snyder, 2000) assisted the doctoral student in achieving their hope by developing a strategy and creating a plan (Utami, 2019). Therefore, doctoral students will be better able to manage the competing demands from surroundings, such as academic demands and personal commitment.

Importantly, agency thinking, as the other component of the theory, plays a crucial role in determining the success of the plan created (McNeill, 2010; Snyder, 2000). Agency thinking is the key component of hope theory related to self-control and relationship with surroundings (McNeill, 2010; Snyder, 2000). Therefore, secondly, doctoral students need to develop intrapersonal skills related to wellbeing and self-control and interpersonal skills related to their relationship with their surroundings. Lau and Pretorius (2019) highlight the mental health crisis in academia. Consequently, being self-aware and getting support during the doctoral journey are crucially important (Lau & Pretorius, 2019). By recognizing the dialectical relationship between a person and the social environment, a collaboration effort can be

developed between a doctoral student as an individual and the university support system as part of the social environment in order to support the doctoral students' wellbeing during their journey.

Moreover, in practice, online learning requires different information, communication, and technology skills in order to be able to use the different apps needed for learning and manage the needs of the doctoral practices in the digital environment. Although, technology-based learning or the digital learning conditions can cause the doctoral students to feel overwhelmed, it has become the only possible strategy of learning for community safety reasons during the pandemic. Therefore, thirdly, it is crucial for doctoral students to develop their information, communication, and technology skills to fulfil the needs of digital or online learning. This is further discussed in other chapters of this book (see, for example, Chaps. 32 and 33, Aiusheeva, 2022; Kisworo et al., 2022).

Finally, regarding technology-based learning, due to the implementation of home learning using digital platforms, the learning process relies on the availability of information technology devices, including a stable internet connection. In contrast to the university, the lack of technological infrastructure, facilities, and supplies such as computers, internet connections, and other technological devices was found as the main obstacle I experienced in the home learning setting, and this caused disruption during the learning and research process. Therefore, a doctoral student needs to seek support in order to support their learning needs, specifically in the form of digital learning.

## 21.7 Conclusion

While the COVID-19 disruption persists, Ph.D. researchers are facing a crisis period which could not have been predicted. The changes in educational practices during the pandemic have been very challenging. However, seizing the opportunity presented by these new conditions can be seen as a transformation for innovation in educational practices and an opportunity for individual change. Specifically, in a doctoral programme, short-term social adaptations due to COVID-19 have forced Ph.D. students to play their roles and take responsibilities to maintain and finish the research journey from home. By highlighting the challenges and insights based on my personal experience, this chapter tries to contribute to the analysis of the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on doctoral students' lives through the investigation of motives and the demands which emerged. This chapter discussed the educational response to the COVID-19 pandemic and how I adapted to the changing learning environment given my personal situation. I found that perseverance in this challenging situation was important and believe it can help doctoral students keep a spirit of positivity to continually strive for higher standards of learning.

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# Chapter 22

## Entering a Career as an ECR in an Increasingly Shifting Academic Landscape: The Value of Different Forms of Capital



Luke Macaulay 

**Abstract** Previous research has indicated that many PhD students undertake a PhD degree with the goal of pursuing a career in academia. Due to the competitive nature of the post-PhD job market, many of these students feel the necessity to undertake extra work outside of their degrees to increase their chances of securing employment via increasing their overall academic profile. Examples of this work include publishing in academic journals, as well as gaining teaching experience in higher education settings. The PhD journey in and of itself can be an all-encompassing lived experience, placing the doctoral student under high levels of stress, as well as negatively impacting their work/life balance and overall wellbeing. As such, any additional work taken on by the student can further add to this burden. The COVID-19 pandemic has generated an environment of economic instability in the field of higher education, which has worsened the competitive academic employment landscape. Using Bourdieu's theory of practice, in this chapter I will detail my own experiences in the field of higher education. This will include (a) my experiences as a PhD student attempting to develop my academic profile to be a competitive candidate in the post-PhD job market, and (b) as an early career researcher navigating this job market throughout the pandemic. Of particular interest is the concept of capital and how the value of various types of capital have shifted throughout the pandemic, and subsequently how my experiences of this within the field of higher education have influenced my overall academic identity.

**Keywords** Bourdieu · Academic identity · Capital · Higher education · Employability · COVID-19

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## 22.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I discuss the strategic development of my academic identity throughout my PhD candidature and how this identity has subsequently been affected by my experiences as an Early Career Researcher (ECR) working throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Previous research has indicated that many PhD students undertake a doctoral research degree with the goal of pursuing a career in academia (Pretorius & Macaulay, 2021). As such, for many of these students the PhD programme serves as an apprenticeship to transition into the job market as an ECR. PhD programmes are increasingly embedding a variety of professional skillsets—beyond generic research skills—to be learnt by students to best equip them in entering the job market (Davies et al., 2019; Gilbert et al., 2004; Lam et al., 2019; Pretorius et al., 2019). It has been argued that the importance of the acquisition of these skills for PhD students in higher education is a result of the increasing institutionalisation of higher education, whereby a neoliberal consumer model of education is becoming the norm (Pretorius & Macaulay, 2021). Therefore, for higher education providers of PhD programmes it is now an imperative for these programmes to be (a) reflective of these institutional shifts for the benefit of their students, and (b) to subsequently offer competitive programmes for their consumers (e.g., students).

Furthermore, as the post-PhD academic employment landscape has become increasingly competitive for newly graduated PhDs, with only approximately 40% finding employment in academia (Australian National University, 2021), many graduates may not be successful in achieving their career goals. As such, “graduates need to develop not only their discipline knowledge but also their professional skills [...] Universities have consequently also incorporated compulsory professional skills development into their doctoral [programmes]” (Pretorius & Macaulay, 2021, p. 628). Therefore, as PhD students develop their academic identity throughout their research training (Hoang & Pretorius, 2019; Pretorius & Macaulay, 2021), this identity is increasingly becoming complex against the backdrop of institutional shifts and a competitive job market.

Congruent with the autoethnography approach underpinning this book, in this chapter identity is defined as “narratives, stories that people tell themselves about who they are, who they are not, as well as who and how they would like to/should be” (Yuval-Davis, 2010, p. 266). Therefore, academic identity refers to the development of a narrative regarding how the individual (a) currently sees themselves as an academic, (b) how they would like to see themselves as an academic in the future, and (c) the investments the individual makes to maintain and continue the development of this narrative. Importantly, academic identity is usually contingent on one’s experiences within the institution of their academic workplaces/place of study (e.g., a university). As such, Gee’s (2000) conceptualisation of institutional identity and how this intersects with Yuval-Davis’ (2010) narrative conceptualisation are of interest in this chapter. For Gee (2000), institutional identity refers to an individual’s positionality, and all that is implied by that positionality, within an institution which is “authorized by authorities in [that] institution” (p. 100). Therefore,

while PhD students as aspiring academics construct their identity relative to “who and how they would like to/should be” (Yuval-Davis, 2010, p. 266), this construction can be significantly influenced by institutional mandates and shifting norms (Gee, 2000).

In the Australian context, which is relative to my own experiences as a PhD student and ECR, PhD students undertake “an independent research project over three to four years (full-time) while supervised by a team of at least two supervisors” (Pretorius & Macaulay, 2021, p. 628). At the same time and as previously mentioned, PhD students are now increasingly needing to undertake professional development throughout their candidature. Furthermore, due to the competitive post-PhD job market, PhD students report that the PhD and professional development alone is not enough to be competitive within this job market (Pretorius & Macaulay, 2021). As such, there is increased pressure to take on additional work such as publishing in high-ranking journals, gaining teaching experience, presenting at international conferences, and so on. This pressured workload has the capacity to undermine one’s overall identity and perceptions of success relative to their future career goals (e.g., academic employment), as influenced by institution norms. Of concern, this can manifest in high levels of poor mental health for PhD students (Barry et al., 2018; Lau & Pretorius, 2019; Pretorius, 2022). Additionally, it has been identified that these institutional pressures also contribute to the poor mental health of academic staff (Guthrie et al., 2017; Winefield et al., 2003). This has led to an environment which Lau and Pretorius (2019) have labelled as a “mental health crisis in academia for both PhD students and academic staff” (p. 38).

As detailed above, shifts in institutional norms and a competitive post-PhD job market can place a high level of pressure on PhD students—as well as recently graduated PhDs—relative to their career goals and academic identity. Unfortunately, this competitiveness has been significantly compounded in Australia as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic (Australian National University, 2021). I will not go into specific detail about the pandemic generally, as this is covered in Chap. 1 (see Cahusac de Caux, 2022). Of specific concern is the impact of the pandemic on PhD student and ECR academic identity relative to their career goals to work in academia. Australia is a large exporter of higher education, and with the closure of the country’s borders to international students and little economic support from the government within the sector, this has led to economic instability within the field of higher education. This instability has led to academic job losses, as well as job freezes within certain university faculties. Subsequently, fewer academic positions are available compounding the competitive employment landscape (Australian National University, 2021). As such, PhD students and ECRs may feel the pressure to go over and above in the development of their academic identity to be competitive candidates within this landscape. Additionally, this pressure can exist alongside the general pressure of life within a pandemic (e.g., family concerns, health concerns, economic concerns) (Paula, 2020). As such, the research landscape for these individuals is one of uncertainty and rapidly shifting norms as influenced by the pandemic.

Timing was on my side in that in early 2020 I was successful in securing a three-year contract as a post-doctoral Research Fellow just as I was completing my PhD,

and right before the sector was impacted by COVID-19. At the time of writing, I am in the final year of this contract. While I acknowledge that an amount of luck and timing were on my side in securing this position, throughout my PhD candidature I worked extremely hard in the development of my academic identity with my overall career goal of being an academic in mind. Due to the nature of my current employment being attached to a large-scale research project funded philanthropically, my employment throughout the pandemic has been secure. That being said, the uncertainty of future employment and adapting to a new role during the pandemic has not been without stress and concern. Further, I have witnessed many colleagues losing their jobs and even more struggle to gain employment. This has led me to reflect on the nature of my own academic identity that I developed throughout my PhD and continue to do so in my current role, particularly now that my contract is nearing its end.

It is my intention within this chapter to offer an autoethnographic account of my reflections regarding the development of my academic identity as a PhD student and then as an ECR throughout the pandemic. To do so, I will draw on relevant entries from my personal journal to highlight these experiences. At the beginning of my PhD research, I started to keep a personal journal as a tool for self-reflection throughout the journey, which is a practice I have continued as an ECR. As such, relevant entries will serve as data to be analysed and discussed. Such a method has previously been demonstrated as useful when utilising an autoethnography approach to identity construction in academia (see for example Pretorius et al., 2019). Analysis and discussion of data will be conducted through a Bourdieusian lens (Bourdieu, 1977, 1990; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992), with an emphasis on the concept of capital (Bourdieu, 1998; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Tomlinson, 2017). Specifically, I will critically discuss how within the field of higher education that various forms of capital have been vulnerable to rapid shifts in value as a result of the disruption to the field caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. I will first offer an overview of the Bourdieusian lens adopted and how it will be used to frame my autoethnographic reflection. From there I will offer reflections on both the academic identity I developed throughout my PhD to be competitive within the job market, followed by reflections on my ECR experiences during the pandemic and how these have impacted my identity and future goals. Towards the end of the chapter, I will offer concluding remarks and recommendations for PhD students and ECRs who find themselves navigating the current dynamic field of higher education as research students and career researchers.

## 22.2 Theoretical Framing

This chapter will be theoretically framed using Bourdieu's theory of practice (Bourdieu, 1977, 1990; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992), with a particular focus on the concept of capital. Capital can be thought of as the abstract and concrete resources that individuals possess, acquire, and trade for social success (Bourdieu, 1998; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Tomlinson, 2017). In this chapter, cultural capital, social capital, identity capital, and human capital will be the focus. Cultural capital refers

to contextual social and cultural knowledge (i.e., know-how) (Bourdieu, 1998), and in this context refers to the know-how of systems and structures within academia. Social capital refers to the social ties and relationships that can be leveraged for success (Bourdieu, 1998). For example, developed social capital within the context of academia can be traded to further gain relevant cultural capital and to be exposed to lucrative opportunities. Identity capital refers to the investment an individual makes in the development of their identity (Tomlinson, 2017). For example, the investment in developing the identity of ‘academic’ and performing the relevant social practices of an academic congruent with success in academia. Finally, human capital refers to the technical and professional skills needed to be successful (Tomlinson, 2017). For example, in academia these may be discipline specific knowledge of specific research methodologies, and the professional skills to enact this knowledge.

Importantly, the value of capital is contextually dependent on the fields in which social practice occurs. As Bourdieu & Wacquant (1992) explain, “[a] field may be described as a network, or configuration, of objective relations between positions. The positions are objectively defined, in their existence and in the determination they impose” (p. 97). Examples of fields include the field of family, the field of politics, the field of education, and so on. It is within these fields that rules for success are established and accepted by social agents, giving rise to value and utility of various forms of capital (Macaulay et al., 2016). Within the context of this chapter, the field of focus is the field of higher education. Or more specifically, the field of academia.

Additionally of importance in the relationship between capital and fields is the Bourdieusian concept of habitus. Bourdieu (1977) famously describes habitus as “systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures” (p. 72). Put simply, habitus is influenced by the social world and in turn influences the social world on a continuum of internalisation and externalisation. For example, subconscious dispositions have the capacity to shape experiences, and be shaped by experiences in a field, in this case the field of academia. Hage (2013) has described the relationship between habitus, capital, and field as a political and social economy of being. As such, capital can be conceptualised as recognition within this economy which can be acquired and traded for success, whereas habitus is conceptualised as efficiency for this success. Yet, these processes are contextually dependent on the field in which they occur.

### 22.3 Developing Academic Identity as a PhD Student

As mentioned previously, many individuals undertake a PhD with the goal of pursuing a career in academia (Pretorius & Macaulay, 2021). I was no exception. In fact, I was relatively certain that I wanted to pursue a career as an academic not long after finishing my first semester of study as an undergraduate student. As such, entering my PhD programme was an exciting moment for me as I felt like the steps needed to achieve my career goals were moving in the right direction. That considered, I was certainly naïve of what was expected of me throughout the PhD, and the steps

I would need to take to achieve my goal of being an academic. In other words, my goals and ambitions as influenced by my habitus—and a sense of my future identity—were firmly established, yet there was a disconnect between these dispositions and the cultural capital needed within the field to realise these goals (Bourdieu, 1998; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). This is reflected in a journal entry from late 2016:

I have always been clear with my supervisors that it is my goal to be an academic. I was excited today in our supervision meeting that we got to discuss this in more depth. [One of my supervisors]<sup>1</sup> told me that if I am serious about becoming an academic that I really need to start thinking about working towards developing my academic profile as soon as possible. My what, I thought. Without leading on that I didn't really know what this means, I asked, "from your experience, what do you think are the best steps for someone like me to go about this?" Her answer, "well you really need to start thinking about publishing as soon as possible. Also, it is important for you to get some teaching experience. You should also start putting your name out there for any Research Assistant opportunities. All this experience will help you find a job after your PhD. Don't worry, I can help you with this". I am relieved [supervisor] will support me with these goals. She has a great reputation for helping her students with these types of things. That being said, the "don't worry" is easier said than done. This seems like a lot of work, especially as I am determined to finish my PhD in a timely manner.

It became clear to me around the time of the above entry that simply keeping my head down and producing a high-quality research thesis would certainly not be enough if I was to enter the field as an ECR after completing my PhD. One's PhD candidature is like an apprenticeship, whereupon completing a high-quality research thesis, the candidate would have gathered the appropriate human capital (i.e., technical knowledge) to succeed as an ECR (Pretorius & Macaulay, 2021). Yet, this is not technically true. There appears to be a wide variety of human capital needed to be competitive in the post-PhD job market that will not be acquired as an inherent component of one's doctoral programme.

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, more and more doctoral programmes are offering the development of certain professional skillsets within the programme. However, these do not guarantee the creation of a well-rounded researcher with an impressive CV that will include published works, teaching experience, and a variety of research-related experience in addition to one's PhD research. Early in my candidature I decided to undertake what is called a thesis including published works. The premise of this being that I would publish components of my PhD research throughout my candidature, and therefore, the final thesis would include several (2–4) published journal articles. As such, I could trust the acquisition of human capital relating to publishing would be embedded in my general day to day PhD work. I knew this would give me an edge; however, I was also aware that I needed additionally to focus my energies beyond the confines of my PhD work in order to develop a well-rounded academic profile. A former PhD student peer and current colleague famously joked about the need to develop skills outside one's PhD research to be competitive in the job market: "having a PhD is like having a bum, everybody has

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<sup>1</sup> For privacy reasons, individuals' names (unless the other editors of this book) will be redacted when presenting journal entries in this chapter.

one". Therefore, what could I do—or more accurately—what did I need to do to put myself ahead of the pack to be successful in a competitive post-PhD job market?

Other than my lecturers as an undergraduate student and a couple of university acquaintances, before commencing my PhD studies I did not have many close friends or any family that had a PhD degree who I could ask for advice. As such, I entered the field with relatively low levels of cultural capital to be leveraged for success. This is significant, as it has previously been identified that cultural capital is a strong determiner of success within any given field (Tomlinson, 2017). This considered, in some of my previous research I have argued that high levels of identity capital, relative to one's own knowledge of their strengths and weaknesses, can be used a strong determiner of actioning plans to obtain cultural capital within higher education fields (Macaulay et al., 2023, Forthcoming). I feel fortunate that I had relatively high levels of identity capital at this time and was aware that I lacked cultural capital, which was something that needed to be addressed in order to work towards my goals.

It has previously been argued that the acquisition of social capital is incredibly useful to exchange for cultural capital (Brosnan et al., 2016; Rubin & Wright, 2017). In other words, if you develop your networks with individuals who possess higher levels of cultural capital than you in a given field, through these social ties your exposure to cultural capital will be increased. At the time, while not necessarily understanding these processes as linked to capital theory per se, I did know that I needed to put myself out there and develop my networks to better understand what I did not know. Further, through my habitus, identity capital, and an explicit knowledge of my strengths I was confident in how to develop this social capital. For better or for worse, I have always been confident when it comes to developing relationships with others, putting myself out there, and asking questions. However, a consequence of the inherently independent nature of PhD research is that if the individual does not actively work towards developing their social capital, this capital will not accumulate passively—or at least in any beneficial way. The two journal entries below reflect my thinking regarding the importance of social capital relative to cultural capital. These entries relate to an interdisciplinary writing group I participated in throughout my PhD research. The first entry is from early 2017 and the second entry is a reflection on the first entry written over two years later (late 2019).

We had writing group yesterday. I have been thinking about writing group a lot lately. I am so glad that I have been involved in this group. I especially like the way it is interdisciplinary and how I have been exposed to work I would never have been if not for this group. Also, it has been a great way to meet and make friends outside of the faculty. One of the things about writing group that cannot be understated—sometimes I think people don't realise and take full advantage of this component—is all the additional benefits of regularly interacting with peers from all over the university. Naturally I have found this group to be incredibly beneficial for my writing, not only as a writer of my own work, but also as a reviewer of others' work. However, something else that is very important, which comes naturally from this group, is we talk. While you could call this small talk, it is small talk about our shared experiences. Namely, that we are all PhD students. Not only that, but we are also all PhD students at various stages of our candidature. So, while this talking may seem like small talk, it is so much more. It is a community of advice and support. We talk about how things work



and share advice and opportunities with one another. I have learnt so much more from this group than just academic writing.

In a moment of curiosity, or perhaps procrastination, I decided to look over some old journal entries. I have done this before, and it is always mostly cringe. Who are you past Luke? That being said, I found a really interesting entry from more than two years ago about the benefits of writing group. Basically, I write about how writing group is much more than just being about writing. It is a network of likeminded individuals with the shared experience of being PhD students. As such, we can share experiences with each other and offer advice, guidance, and opportunities with one another. I could not have been more right (a welcome change from past Luke's usual ramblings). More than two years on I am no longer the PhD student asking a million questions to those in the group who are further along than me, I am the guy who is doing his best to answer some of those questions for those that are new to the group. Also, it is amazing to reflect on how these relationships have gone beyond the writing group. I have attended parties, gone out for dinners, and had many lunch catchups with writing group members both past and present. Also, the process of coming together and sharing writing and discussing ideas has turned into collaboration. Me, Basil, and Lynette published our edited book this year and many members (past and present) of the group contributed chapters.<sup>2</sup> Also, Lynette and I published a journal article earlier this year in a high-ranking Higher Education journal. None of this would have happened if not for the writing group. I am pretty chuffed about these accomplishments. Not to mention how much I have learned, especially through working on the book.

Recent research has also highlighted these types of benefits related to writing groups (Chakraborty et al., 2021; Hradsky et al., 2022; Lam et al., 2019). Importantly, the above journal entries are telling examples of the power of social capital and how this capital can be traded for cultural capital. Through being exposed to the opportunity to develop social capital, my level of cultural capital (and how to effectively use this cultural capital) was significantly increased. Additionally, as indicated in the second journal entry, the opportunities I gained through developing this social capital allowed me to further develop my human capital (e.g., "I am pretty chuffed about these accomplishments. Not to mention how much I have learned, especially through working on the book"). Further, this process required minimal effort on my behalf. Sure, I had to volunteer to be a part of this non-compulsory opportunity and show up and do the work. The rest of the processes, though, occurred relatively organically. This will not always be the case. In other instances, the individual may need to be more active in putting themselves out there when developing their social capital, which for some may be a daunting process. Below is a journal entry where I discuss this type of networking. This entry contains my thoughts on attending the Monash Education Research Community (MERC) Annual Conference in mid-2017 and networking with academic staff in the faculty.

Yesterday was the MERC conference. My first ever conference.<sup>3</sup> I was quite nervous, but I think my presentation went well. I told a friend later in the day how nervous I had been, and

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<sup>2</sup> It is nice to read this knowing that this current volume is also a collaboration between the three of us.

<sup>3</sup> As an aside, I cannot help but laugh when I read this. I must have caught the conference bug after attending the MERC conference. The following year I presented four different papers at four different conferences in four different countries. Whilst fun, not recommended if you value your work/life balance.

she told me “For someone that was so nervous, why did you keep inviting people to come and watch your presentation?”. A funny and good point. I could say that it was shameless self-promotion, however, I think I was just excited to be around people. Just being around my peers and academic staff put me in a really good mood. In fact, I think it was the best mood I had been in for a very long time. The PhD can be lonely, so it was nice to be around people who are going through the same thing in a supportive environment. Plus, I met lots of new people. I think it was especially great the way academic staff in the faculty came along and supported us. I was really keen to meet and introduce myself to [a senior academic in my field]. I was a little nervous introducing myself, but she was so nice, and we spoke for a long time. She also introduced me to [another academic who researches in my field], who came along and watched my presentation and gave some incredible feedback. All in all, it was great day and a needed confidence boost.

There are several interesting things to unpack in the above entry. First, it is clear that I found my day at this conference to be a rejuvenating experience. I was clearly happy to be around people. Previous research has identified that undertaking a PhD can be quite an isolating and lonely experience which can impact one’s overall mental wellbeing (Janta et al., 2014; Lau & Pretorius, 2019). This comes through in my entry, and as an aside to the focus of this chapter, the development of social capital throughout one’s candidature can be a great way to mitigate loneliness and isolation. While this day was beneficial for my overall wellbeing, it has become one of those days I look back on as being very important. Simply building up the courage to introduce myself to a senior academic that I looked up to, caused a very welcomed knock-on effect. Both academics mentioned in the above entry have become mentors and dear friends over the years since that conference. They have introduced me to other academics in the field, invited me into research projects as a Research Assistant, and have continued to be collaborators post-PhD. By simply taking an active approach to the development of my social capital, and putting myself out there, I developed networks with generous senior colleagues who have exposed me to a plethora of cultural and human capital in the following years.

Looking back on how far I had come at the start of my PhD candidature to where I was at the end, it is interesting to reflect on the first journal entry presented in this section where my supervisor encouraged me to develop my academic profile (e.g., “you really need to start thinking about publishing as soon as possible. Also, it is important for you to get some teaching experience. You should also start putting your name out there for any Research Assistant opportunities”). Through building my cultural capital and developing a know-how of the field, I worked really hard to develop my academic profile just as my supervisor suggested and ticked all the boxes she suggested. As promised, my supervisors were extremely supportive. Additionally, I worked hard to develop my social capital and to be a part of the overall academic community in which I was working, which as I have highlighted was extremely beneficial. Therefore, as I was completing my PhD, I felt confident that I had done all I could to set myself up to be a competitive candidate in the post-PhD job market.

Before discussing life post-PhD in the next section there are a couple of important points to make before rounding off this section. While I worked hard to develop my academic profile throughout my PhD candidature, I obviously had to also undertake

my actual PhD research. At times this was challenging. Feelings of pressure to produce a quality thesis as well as gain teaching experience, publishing experience, and Research Assistant experience is a lot to manage. Elsewhere, I have shown that this pressure can affect one's overall wellbeing and sense of identity (Macaulay & Davies, 2019). Additionally, this is occurring within the pressures of time, where timely completion of one's PhD research is strongly encouraged by the institution (Macaulay & Davies, 2019). Once again, this can impact one's overall wellbeing.

Reflecting on the pressure of time when developing one's academic profile, earlier in this chapter I highlighted that a useful conceptualisation of identity is that which is proposed by Yuval-Davis (2010) as being "narratives, stories that people tell themselves about who they are, who they are not, as well as who and how they would like to/should be" (p. 266). This was clearly applicable to me throughout my PhD candidature regarding my goals to be an academic. However, as the construction of this identity occurred within the space of a large institution, which essentially sets the rules for success within the field, Gee's (2000) notion of institutional identity is also of importance. Institutional identity is influenced by one's positionality within an institution which is "authorized by authorities in [that] institution" (p. 100). This leads me to guide the reader to a caution. The time and effort of development of my academic profile throughout my PhD journey, as linked to the identity narrative I was constructing, was heavily regulated by the authority of an institution. Given the poor work/life balance I experienced throughout my PhD, and while I am happy to have achieved all I did, I do look back and think it is a little sad that so much of who I was and wanted to be was chained to the precarious rules and norms of an institution. In doing so, it is very easy to lose sight of who you really are, and what is really important.

Finally, I would like to conclude this section with a brief story. Towards the end of 2019 when I knew that my PhD journey was drawing to an end, I was having a conversation with another PhD student and an academic staff member in the faculty—both of whom were very supportive throughout my candidature. The other PhD student and I were discussing how hard we had worked throughout the duration of our candidature to set ourselves up as being competitive in the post-PhD job market. There we were listing all the things we had done and how hard we worked. After listening patiently, the academic staff member who we both would regularly look up to for advice simply stated, "you are forgetting one thing that you have left off your list, luck".

## **22.4 Academic Identity and a Global Pandemic: Trying to Make it Work**

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a sizeable impact on the academic job market, both in Australia and abroad (Australian National University, 2021; Watermeyer et al., 2021). As the academic job market in Australia was already extremely competitive,

to put it bluntly, the COVID-19 pandemic has possibly created one of the historically worst times to be an academic looking for stable work. As previously mentioned, just before the COVID-19 pandemic began I was lucky to gain a three-year contract in a research role. As such, I have had stable employment throughout this difficult time. This has been a great thing for me, as stable opportunities for people at my academic level are currently scarce. In late September 2021 I took part in a panel discussion about ‘life after the PhD’ as part of the 2021 MERC Annual Conference. The notion of opportunity in the job market featured heavily in the panel discussion. Below is a journal entry from the day after the panel discussion. In this entry, I reflect on this notion of opportunity.

I took part in a panel yesterday as part of the MERC Annual Conference. The title of the panel discussion was the Adaptability and Transformative Nature of a Monash Education PhD. This panel was chaired by the Dean of the faculty and included me and five other previous Monash Faculty of Education PhD students. All of us have gone on post-PhD to work in a variety of different academic roles. I guess given the current pandemic it is good for students to hear others’ success stories in terms of their employment in this climate. I have been thinking a lot today about some of the discussions in the session, with one particular discussion staying with me. Me and [a previous PhD student peer] have both gone on since our PhDs to work in research only roles. The first question to the panel was directed to me and [previous PhD student peer], which was “why did the two of you choose to take on research only roles after your PhD?”. A fair enough and interesting questions. [My previous PhD student peer] answered this question, and her response could not have summed up the current climate better. To paraphrase: “I don’t think it had anything to do with choice, it was more about the opportunity. I didn’t choose to take on research only role to fulfil any particular goal, rather it was the opportunity that was available to me and in this climate, I am in no position to turn down any opportunities to find employment in academia”. I don’t think this was the uplifting message that the panel organisers were hoping for, but [my previous PhD student peer] was right on the money. Before the pandemic jobs were scarce. Now it is even worse. If us juniors want to stay in the game, we need to shapeshift and adapt to what comes our way.

As a field of social practice, the norms and rules for success within the field of academia have shifted. From a Bourdieusian perspective, within any field of social practice the social agent must accept the rules and norms when playing the ‘game of success’ (Blackmore & Hodgkins, 2012; DiGiorgio, 2009; Macaulay et al., 2016). This concept is called *illusio* and indicates the social agent’s level of investment in the rules for success, via the attribution and acceptance of the meaning of their contextual social reality (DiGiorgio, 2009; Hage, 2013; Walther, 2014). Developing a nuanced understanding of these rules and building the necessary capital to be successful can take time. For me, I put the work in over the course of my PhD candidature with an expectation that I would have a relatively good investment and understanding for the rules for success. However, for recent (or soon to be recent) graduates of PhD programmes in this climate, it is becoming increasingly difficult to understand the rules for success, let alone being able to invest in these rules.

I can see the end of my contract in sight. As such, I have needed to start thinking quite carefully about my next moves. I have begun searching for new opportunities and putting in applications. I have found this process to be quite stressful and draining, considering I am putting together these lengthy applications while also trying to work

full-time. Given the competitive nature of the current employment landscape for academics, it is important to temper one's expectations when applying for positions. That being said, considering the work and energy that goes into such applications—as well as the promise of a new future if successful—rejection is still tough. This is reflected in the following journal entry from May 2022.

It has been a tough couple of months. I have missed out on two overseas post-doc opportunities and a lecturer job. My contract ends early next year, so I need to start thinking about the next steps. I know there is a chance that my contract will continue, but in this climate, nothing is certain, and nobody is making any promises to anyone. I knew just how incredibly competitive each of these was going to be. But still, it burns. The thing is the amount of time that goes into each application is a lot (especially the post-doc research proposals). Also, this work is done on top of my already full-time workload. That means these applications need to be written on weekends or after work. I am 100% aware that this is part of the game, but the stress and work that goes into these applications can feel like such a waste. I know it is all learning. Things have become so incredibly competitive. I was chatting with [a mentor who is a full professor and head of department] and he told me that they just advertised several positions in his department and the number of applications they received was staggering. And from all over the world. Also, because of the competitive landscape caused by COVID, for relatively newly minted PhDs we are now swimming in a much more competitive pool and competing against academics with much more post-PhD experience. Looking through the comments on one of the post-doc opportunities, while these were mostly positive, one comment stung. Something to the effect that my publication output was not impressive. As a relatively new graduate (18 months or so), I thought that over ten peer-reviewed publications and an edited book was not too bad considering how fresh I am. To see the forest through the trees I just found out that I am the number one person on the reserve list for one of the post-docs. So, if one person drops out, I am in. This is a bittersweet thing to know. So close, but so far.

Reading over this entry, my frustration is evident. Things are tough. I know how competitive things currently are, and the previous levels of capital needed for success relative to the field have shifted. The component of the above entry that I find the most interesting is how such narratives (i.e., my own and others) may impact our overall sense of identity. As indicated earlier, identity can be conceptualised as narratives (Yuval-Davis, 2010). For so long my identity capital has been so strongly linked to a clear narrative of wanting to be an academic. While I am lucky to be living this narrative, I would be lying if I said that I do not feel that this identity is being challenged (or at least questioned by me) in this pandemic era. It feels like every other day I see an academic on my Twitter feed announcing that they are leaving the profession. I can kind of understand why.

You will notice that several times in this chapter I referred to myself as being lucky for having my current job, and securing this job when I did (i.e., just before the pandemic). While yes, I do feel lucky, I also feel that the 'luck' narrative can be problematic. This narrative can discount the hard work an individual has put into the development of their academic identity, as well as have negative consequences for one's wellbeing. The following journal entry comes from April 2022, in which I am reflecting on the notion of luck relative to this chapter.

In writing my chapter I have been thinking about luck and what this means in the current academic job market. I was proof reading sections of my chapter and in several places, I

refer to myself as being lucky for having the job that I have. I know that things are difficult for academics looking for work at the moment, but I wonder what the consequences are for those of us that are working relative to luck. I remember sometime last year when I was complaining to another academic about how I was feeling burnt out, and their less than helpful response was, “hey at least your lucky enough to have an academic job at the moment”. This really annoyed me. Does being lucky enough to have a job mean that I have to ‘suck it up’ when I am feeling burnt out, whilst trying to work and generally survive life in a global pandemic?

Earlier in this chapter you will remember that I recounted a story of a senior academic telling me and a peer that although we had put in the hard work to build our academic profiles, luck will always be a variable when finding employment. That particular story was pre-COVID, and since then the field of practice has changed. Sure, luck is still a factor. However, many academics have had to adapt and change many of their regular teaching and researcher practices, whilst juggling significant changes to their day to day lived experiences, all in a more competitive climate where the wellbeing of academics is of grave concern (Dinu et al., 2021; Kalmus, 2021; Lau & Pretorius, 2019; Watermeyer et al., 2021). As mentioned earlier, Bourdieusian social practice can be conceptualised as a ‘game of success’ (Blackmore & Hodgkins, 2012; DiGiorgio, 2009; Macaulay et al., 2016). It is important to acknowledge that the rules of the norms of this game in the field of academia (as well as many other fields) have significantly shifted as a result of the pandemic. As such, if the individual needs a ‘time out’ to catch their breath, surely this is more important than playing through because you feel lucky to be on the court.

## 22.5 Discussion and Concluding Remarks

Hage (2013) describes Bourdieu’s theory of practice as being underpinned by the “accumulation of social being” (p. 80). In other words, this theory is concerned with social economic practices regarding production, quality, quantity, and distribution of social practice across fields. Within these fields, one’s habitus (i.e., unconscious dispositions) represents efficiency for success, whereas capital represents the recognition of success as resources that can further be traded. Importantly, these practices are relative to the norms of any given field which can change and shift over time, and in some instances quite rapidly. This is the case with what we have seen in the field of academia in Australia in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, especially where employment is concerned. A simple economic analogy to better understand this is inflation. As highlighted in this chapter, there is a need for the PhD student to build a variety of forms of capital to be successful in the post-PhD academic job market. However, given the current economic instability of the field of academia caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, there is now an issue with supply and demand (i.e., far more candidates than available positions). While this has always been the case—or at least in recent history—the issue has been compounded by COVID-19 (Australian National University, 2021). Therefore, the previously required capital

to be successful within the field is now insufficient relative to the demand of this success, essentially devaluing levels of acquired capital.

The above contention has implications for identity development, or at least it has for mine. As noted earlier, identity can be conceptualised as narratives that we construct regarding who we are and who we want to be (Yuval-Davis, 2010). Yet, within the context of academic identity that is situated within institutions (i.e., universities), these narratives can be heavily influenced by the mandates and norms within these institutions (Gee, 2000). Problematically, this can place a vulnerability in the construction of one's identity narrative. Given the competitive nature of academia, the work needed to construct such a narrative can be all encompassing and negatively interfere with work/life balance (Pretorius & Macaulay, 2021). Consequently, the development of academic identity can override the development of other identity narratives (e.g., social identity, family identity). As such, if components of one's academic identity are compromised—especially by forces outside their control—this could lead to a crisis of existential proportions. This leads me to a valuable lesson I have learned over the course of developing my academic profile as a PhD student and working as an ECR throughout the pandemic: academics, we are more than our academic identity. Do not get me wrong, I enjoy the work and will most likely stay in field as long as circumstances permit, but what I have learnt and implore others to also consider is not to put all your identity eggs into the one basket—especially an institutional basket.

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# Chapter 23

## The Kitchen Table: Mother-Academics Reconfiguring Their Emerging Identities While Aligning Family and Work



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**Abstract** Mother-academics are disadvantaged by historical and systemic inequalities situated within academia which have been compounded by the pandemic. Through the analytical lens of the theory of practice architectures, we focus on work practices and women's emotional experiences while reconfiguring their identities as online academics and simultaneously their changing home worlds due to the close proximity of their children at the kitchen table. Findings indicate that pre-COVID-19, boundaries between mothering and academia were delineated by the physicality of settings. In contrast, when forced to work from home during the pandemic, skilful navigation was required to obtain a home/work balance. Empathy was required to realign and locate a form of equilibrium in the merging online and home environment at the kitchen table. We contribute to the growing body of literature that advocates for academia to become a less gendered environment in the future.

**Keywords** Mothers · Academia · Mother-academics · Transformation · Identity · Empathy · Theory of practice architectures · COVID-19

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## 23.1 Introduction

Literature abounds regarding the prevalence of a neo-liberal and patriarchal culture situated within academia. Although Australian universities promote diversity, equity, and inclusion, and provide agreements as well as policies that reportedly support a work life balance, the historically situated expectations of gender and work are prevalent. These expectations position women as caregivers, good at administrative tasks, while promoting men as leaders, in charge of business directions and finance (Gilbert et al., 2020). This is reflected in studies that indicate workers in academia who identify as women academics are disadvantaged due to historically gendered institutional inequality; for a large proportion of this population, there is limited recognition of maternal roles and responsibilities (Gilbert et al., 2020). It is well known that women and more specifically mothers progress more slowly and accept lesser roles and financial remuneration throughout their academic careers compared with their male counterparts (Allen et al., 2021; Heilman & Okimoto, 2008). Mothers also continue to navigate the spaces between their role as caregivers and a workplace that does not recognise the complexity of their everyday lives (Eaton & Burns, 2020). The historical and current patriarchal performance model disproportionately affects mothers due to the “pressure of total commitment” (Gaudet et al., 2020, p. 76). The inequity has been more noticeable during the COVID-19 pandemic as women’s contribution to academic journals has decreased, indicating women have been required to interrupt their research more than their male counterparts (Gewin, 2020).

The impact of COVID-19 on early and mid-career women and specifically mother-academics seems to be contributing to widening the ongoing inequality in academia. The lockdowns in Melbourne, Australia have compounded the challenges for mother-academics as the boundaries between home and work merged. We examine the blurring of online academic work and life as mother-academics and their children congregated around the kitchen table. We argue that navigating the boundaries of this new space and reconciling historical and emerging tensions have led to reconfiguration of mother-academics’ identities.

Through the analytical lens of the theory of practice architectures (TPA), built environments transform the sayings, doings, and relating of individuals and collectives (Kemmis et al., 2014a; MacDonald et al., 2022). In this chapter, we aim to add a new dimension to understanding practice architectures, where the online work and home spaces merged and were reconfigured into “new hybrid geographies and architectures of practice” (Variyan & Reimer, 2022, p. 3). In the hybrid space (online and face to face) there were few physical boundaries between family and work, and the needs and wants of established and new actors (family, students, and work colleagues) collided. By presenting five narrative accounts of everyday life during the pandemic, nuanced insights into mother-academics’ lives will contribute to a better understanding of a mother’s positioning in academia during the pandemic, and the deepening gender divide which has occurred. The evolving ecologies of practice

when working in a hybrid space at the kitchen table, with children of varying ages (6–27-year-olds) created disruptions, and implications for academic practice.

## 23.2 Working Mothers: Reconfiguring Identities in Hybrid Architectures of Practice

Both historical and current research indicates mother-academics are disadvantaged in academia (Heilman & Okimoto, 2008; Myers et al., 2020). Longstanding research indicates that mother-academics voice concerns about their emotions, indicating fears and feelings of guilt, which were lived daily when striving to reach their goals of tenure and promotion (Toepell, 2003). During the pandemic the constraints women experienced have been compounded, as was seen in some of the other chapters in this book (see, for example, Chaps. 4 and 13; Patel, 2022; Yip & Maestre, 2022). It seems that mother-academics have experienced a jolt both career-wise and personally. Gilbert et al. (2020) argue that having the prevalent neo-liberal and patriarchal academic culture in higher education works at devaluing motherhood through “the reification of a disembodied masculinised worker” (p. 5). Further, Heilman & Okimoto (2008) found limited recognition of maternal roles and responsibilities, which results in mothers taking lower academic roles and progressing at a much slower pace than those who identify as male. It is interesting to note that child-free female academics progress on career paths similar to their male colleagues (Heilman & Okimoto, 2008). There is, therefore, a need to understand work-life balance for mother-academics.

A key concept in recent literature concerning mothers’ work in academia is locating a balance between home and work life. Feigon et al. (2018) indicates “a potentially adverse impact on the overall quality of life and overall life satisfaction when work and personal lives conflict” (p. 300). Yet, Huopalainen & Stama (2019), in their autoethnographic study of ways mothers’ balance the demands of contemporary motherhood and academia, found some mothers felt satisfaction with motherhood and their academic careers. A second area that mother-academics found challenging to balance during lockdowns were the role of teaching and research while juggling children’s home learning. In a study by Minello et al. (2021), consisting of in-depth interviews with thirteen academics, it was found that mother-academics prioritised online teaching while giving up their research time to simultaneously cope with their children’s home learning and care. The attention towards working mothers’ work-life balance illustrates the constraints and enablers of mother-academics’ practices in relation to gender equity and identity transformation (Huopalainen & Stama, 2019; Minello et al., 2021).

In a comprehensive literature review by Allen et al. (2021), extensive evidence was noted that concerned institutional gender inequity for females and mother-academics in particular. In essence, mother-academics are *victimised* through patriarchal norms within the academy, constantly needing to negotiate constraints and enablers in order

to survive and thrive in academia (Allen et al., 2021). Consequently, there is a need for a radical shift in this “cultural landscape of academia” (Gilbert et al., 2020, p. 6) which has been brought centre-stage through the lived experiences of mother-academics during the pandemic. As a way forward, there is growing evidence that academia requires consultations with mother-academics in relation to the development of policies that address gender equity (Allen et al., 2021). This will help to support mother-academics in navigating a better work-life balance and progress in their careers at the same rate as their male counterparts.

### 23.3 Theoretical Approach

Our interest in this chapter is to consider how our practices were influenced by the changes to our physical and social environments during lockdown, and how these changes in conditions blurred our identities of academic and parent. We adopt a site ontological approach where we understand that “it is *through our practices* that our dispositions and our sense of agency form and develop, as we interact amid the practice architectures of the different settings we inhabit” (Kemmis, 2019, p. 36, emphasis in original). In order to examine the influence of our site of practice we employ TPA (Kemmis & Grootenboer, 2008) which considers how practices connect together in specific sites such as a classroom, a faculty office, or in this case, our homes. TPA defines practice as “a form of socially established cooperative human activity that involves characteristic forms of understanding (sayings), modes of action (doings), and ways in which people relate to one another and the world (relatings), that ‘hang together’ in a distinctive project” (Kemmis et al., 2014a, p. 155). An international network of scholars has developed and employed TPA in a range of settings for the purpose of “explor[ing] the forming, self-forming, and transforming nature of educational praxis and explain[ing] its relevance at a time when instrumental, managerialist, and neoliberal rationalities continue to dominate global and local education narratives” (Mahon et al., 2017, p. 15). This has included the use of TPA to investigate practice in higher education (see, for example, MacDonald et al., 2022; Mahon & Galloway, 2017; Santos & Soler, 2021).

TPA puts forward the argument that practices do not “spring forth fully formed” (Kemmis et al., 2017, p. 245) but are enabled and constrained by the arrangements that shape interactions. TPA identifies the assemblages of a distinctive project in terms of three interwoven aspects (Kemmis et al., 2017; Santos & Soler, 2021):

1. Cultural-discursive arrangements which exist within a semantic space mediated by language and are evident in the *sayings* of practices that we experience as ways of speaking and thinking about the world (for example, language, discourse and ideas).
2. Material-economic arrangements which exist within physical space and time and are evident in activities or *doings* that we experience as, for example, our actions and schedules; and.

3. Socio-political arrangements which exist within social space and prefigure how individuals connect with each other. We experience these *relatings* as conditions of solidarity and power, for example, in organisational rules and norms, and expectations of our practices.

TPA enables a framework for examining practices within social sites and importantly assists illumination of the concept of *praxis*. Praxis considers intersections of identity, agency, and practice arrangements, defined as a “kind of educational practice that is informed, reflective, self-consciously moral and political, and oriented towards making positive educational and societal change; it is context-dependent and can therefore take many forms” (Mahon et al., 2017, p. 15). In using TPA to consider our changed practices as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, we seek to exhibit praxis that informs and supports our reconfigured identities as academics as we have learnt how to go on (Kemmis, 2019) in ways that value the full scope of our own humanity and contribute the rehumanisation of higher education in the form of gender equity (Kemmis, 2019; Santos & Soler, 2021).

## 23.4 Methodology

We examine the ways in which the change in physical arrangements of sites (from working in an office to working at home) changed our personal and professional practices. The abrupt changes in the cultural-discursive, material-economic, and social-political arrangements both enabled and constrained each mother-academic and their academic/personal practices in various ways. The five authors are all participants in this chapter. We are early to mid-career mother-academics with each person having under ten years of service at the same university. We decided to narrate and analyse our own stories, as we have a collective desire to understand and share the experiences that encompassed our professional and personal learnings as mother-academics during one of the most extensive lockdowns world-wide, in Melbourne, Victoria, Australia during 2020–2021.

The data originated from informal discussions where some authors were face-to-face on the university site and others joined online, sitting at their kitchen table managing children’s schooling. The time was memorable, as Melbourne was emerging from lockdown only to be informed five days later that we were to go back into a *snap lockdown* for seven days. This *snap lockdown* lasted for 12 weeks. Over the course of six months, we met monthly for two hours. We reflected on our experiences and ways in which our practices had changed across the home and university sites, what our practices used to be, and what they encompassed during lockdown. All of the authors contributed to a shared Google document and, in total, collected ten hours of field notes. We decided to write storied accounts of our experiences to explore the ways that changes to our physical sites initiated changes to our work practices.

The stories presented here are narratives that the authoring academics have shared with families, others, and selves. They provide a glimpse into our lives as mother-academics and, according to Yuval-Davis (2010), these stories provide information about who we are/not and open possibilities of who we could/should be. As the stories are contextualised to draw out our lives in academia, the narratives contribute to our academic identities (Pretorius & Macaulay, 2021). However, we extend this point, as our academic and family lives are intimately intertwined within the hub of our households: *the kitchen table*. The stories presented contribute to understanding our transforming identities as we reconcile becoming mother-academics during the pandemic and subsequent lockdowns. We recognise the limitations of the current study as it is small-scale and not generalisable. However, the purpose of this study is not generalisability, but rather in-depth explorations of the reflections of our emotional experience as we lived through lockdowns while supporting our children.

### 23.4.1 Data Analysis

The data analysis followed an iterative approach, beginning with re-reading our own narratives and coming together to discuss ways our narratives outlined constraining and enabling factors within our practices as mother-academics. We then devised a table with sayings, doings, and relatings as horizontal headings and our names were placed on the left-hand vertical side of the table. We systematically went through our own writing to examine constraining and enabling dimensions of practice evident in the sayings, doings, and relatings of our narratives (see Table 23.1). In the final stage, we came together to discuss similarities and differences of our practices and presented these in relation to our theoretical understanding of TPA and the literature.

**Table 23.1** Example of the analysis table

	Sayings	Doings	Relatings
Fiona	Imposter syndrome took some management	Working hours sitting at my kitchen table Messier day as well as having our books, papers and computers, it may also have piles of laundry, craft materials, and mail	Literally next to me at the table, was usually one of my children working on a remote learning task I had been working to reconfigure the other facets of my life to accommodate both this identity and the logistics of my first full-time work in over a decade. The separation of roles that was possible in normal life helped with this

## 23.5 Shifting Narratives of Work–Life Balance

### 23.5.1 *Megan: Bigger Kids, Bigger Problems*

*As academics we were instructed to provide extra care for students, and to be lenient due to the effect of isolation and working fully online during the pandemic. This resulted in extra-long working hours. I felt constantly exhausted, with strained eyes due to copious hours on zoom. I remember a strong feeling of internal conflict where the personal/professional divide blurred due to the accessibility and proximity of my workstation, to my personal life. Many students were struggling with isolation and concerns about their health, and that of their family, student's work suffered at the 'cost' of caring for their own family and similar to academics, were working jointly together at the kitchen table. Others were in single rooms by themselves with no close contacts day after day. Many requested one on one conversations. In the end I set up a weekly zoom drop in session where we discussed areas of our personal lives and introduced family members, and pets. One student commented 'it's the first time I've met anyone from my university beyond discussions in breakout groups.' Another two students found they were living in the same neighbourhood and met up for walks.*

*My three sons had chosen various combinations of work and study, and serendipitously, in 2020 they all graduated, and began to apply for graduate positions sitting next to me at the kitchen table. The process was laborious and time consuming. I was conflicted, as although young adults, I felt my sons needed parental support, but I seemed to have little time, and I did not really know how to help them, over the top of my laptop, I watched the toil. Ecstatic when they passed one hurdle the grumbles when they missed out. Over 2020, I was forced to question my own identity as a mother-academic and wondered what had happened to those students without the resilience to continually move on from so-called failure.*

### 23.5.2 *Fiona: The Kitchen Table*

*Throughout 2020–2021 I spent most of my working hours sitting at my kitchen table. To my right was the kitchen bench, often littered with dirty dishes and condiments left out by my family of four after mealtimes. To my immediate left, literally next to me at the table, was usually one of my children working on a remote learning task. Our kitchen table is in a constant state of flux as the hub of the house. On a messier day as well as having our books, papers and computers, it may also have piles of laundry, craft materials, and mail. Prior to 2020, I had only been a career academic for 18 months and was new to developing an identity as a bonafide academic. During this time, I had been working to reconfigure the other facets of my life to accommodate both this identity and the logistics of my first full-time work in over a decade. The separation of roles that was possible in normal life helped with this. I keenly took opportunities to work in the faculty and sought to make connections with others to support my learning and develop my knowledge about what the work entailed. As for many women academics, imposter syndrome took some management, but working to develop a sense of belonging in my workplace helped.*

*These separations evaporated through 2020. My identities of academic and parent collided at my kitchen table and the stakes of both were amplified by the conditions of COVID-19. My children struggled, as so many have, with the isolation and distance both*



*from the learning and social aspects of school (Longmuir et al., 2021). And whilst I navigated significant changes in my practices of teaching and research, I felt the pressure of the impacts on higher education in Australia, knowing that many in my industry were losing their jobs.*

### **23.5.3 Venesser: All Aboard the Home Starship USS Enterprise**

*Over 2020 and 2021, the sense that we are living at work or working at home (Creely et al., 2021) highlights the messy busyness of my home being transformed into Starship USS Enterprise of the Star Trek series. Navigating remote learning for my school-aged children and my own work as a full time academic has meant my home becoming a battleground with the office, the school, the starship and its bridge, all in one. I have found life as I previously knew it, has changed completely. This experience is wearisome and exhausting and yet novel and exciting with many opportunities to connect with the learning of my children first-hand and with building meaningful connections with my colleagues and students, online. Technology made communication possible by allowing us to continue surviving through lockdowns, but it has also made it clear that we are just human, even when at our best. As Captain James Kirk, from the Star Trek series suggests, “We make mistakes, but we’re human—and maybe that’s the word that best explains us” (Roddenberry, 1967).*

*I have now grown to believe strongly that life can be chaotic, messy and uncharted; yet joyful, fulfilling and adventurous. I’ve found that the haphazardness of the last two years has helped me keep work and home-schooling, leisure and rest, spirituality and mortality working side by side in an on-going juggle of days sliding into weeks and weeks into months as the academic mother at home.*

*As a working academic with school-going children, I now find myself letting go of trying to keep perfection and balance in place with work and home kept in separate spaces. This synergy of work and home provides me with new dreamings into possible future work-life balances while daily living with COVID-normal pressures and realities. It helps me, in multiple ways, to distinguish between what should never be compromised and what can be realigned, reshaped and restructured.*

### **23.5.4 Sylvia: Juggling/Shifting Identities**

*The pandemic has impacted life in so many tangible and intangible ways. The biggest challenge the pandemic brought to my life is the blurring of personal and professional boundaries. Life as an academic and a single mother has always been a balancing act with long hours of working into the night after completing parental responsibilities. The pandemic meant the added stress of juggling both responsibilities simultaneously. I have often wondered if there was any concern for the wellbeing of parents and academics with the extra work hours and emotional costs of working with anxious children and students. On more than one occasion I have had to reach out to university students who were anxious, dealing with domestic violence and feeling isolated. The nights afterwards were often sleepless wondering if I had done enough or if there was something more, I could do to ease the situation for my students.*

*Home schooling brought in many challenges especially when working with a special needs child alongside the extra kitchen duties (brought on by a perpetually hungry teenager) and minimal contact with the outside world.*

*Finally, the pandemic ushered in a need to rethink my teaching approaches. During the first lockdown I had to shift my focus from a mainly outdoor experiential learning approach to an online mode of learning. For example, my first class had to be moved from the botanical gardens to offering a virtual tour of the same gardens. This required a massive amount of out of the box thinking where we participated in activities that involved exploring nature in outdoor spaces to identify nature learning opportunities in backyards and through windows. While in the past I have been critical of teaching 'nature' indoors the forced and swift move to online learning opened up new vistas and possibilities to teaching and learning.*

### **23.5.5 Liang—Tracing My Academic Life Over COVID**

*What I was challenged to do is to balance my work and home life at the same time. My 6-year-old son first started home learning and needed a lot of parental support with home learning tasks. Simultaneously, it was my first time working at home. The uncertainties were embedded in everyday work and home life.*

*With regards to the academic teaching, thanks to the technologies, we were still able to connect with our students over the virtual space. Until the first assessment task was nearly due, quite a lot of students asked for extensions towards the due dates of their assignments, to reduce their anxieties and stress during this challenging time. I realised how intense online learning is. Quite a few wonders were around me such as to what extent could we as academics effectively and affectively connect to students' feelings over the virtual space. I completed a professional development module about ways to create a community in the classroom, which supported me to make trusting and harmonious relationships with the students and create an online learning community.*

*In academic life, what I really missed was the close communication with colleagues as part of the daily practice. Thanks to the technologies, under the support of leaders, the weekly lunch time catch-up and Four Padlet Collective Documentations on the virtual space were arranged, which were a great help to share our feelings, uncertainties, concerns and thoughts. Also, I occasionally sent short text messages to colleagues, which supported my continuing connections.*

*Due to the long period of lock down, I had to support my son's learning and development. I tried to make life easier for him and myself. My son and I had regular times to relax, with one hour mindfulness time scheduled. This included half an hour walking outside around the neighbourhood and half an hour of children's Yoga. It was amazing to notice that I got to know him more over this period.*

## **23.6 Discussion**

The COVID-19 pandemic continues to influence each aspect of social, physical, and emotional life. Its impact on those of us working in academia has been profound, changing academia with lockdowns requiring an instant shift to online teaching and learning (Jalongo, 2021). Watermeyer et al.'s (2021) study of academics in the UK shows the majority are *bruised* by the sudden transition to online learning, with most

indicating distrust towards digital pedagogies; considerable *trauma* has also been linked to profound personal and professional disruptions academics experienced during the pandemic.

Our study examined how new arrangements on, at and around the kitchen table prefigured new sayings, doings, and relating as our academic identities and home lives collided while working and mothering. We all learned to perform academic labour in this new space and continued our professional and personal learning journey. The focus rests with ways we integrated working with children and the demands of employment at a Group of Eight university. Kemmis et al., (2014a, p. 2) argues that we participate in “a dance between identity and otherness, a dance between the reproduction of some things alongside the transformation of others”. The authors concentrated on their professional and personal dance while learning new practices at the kitchen table where we created and constantly negotiated conditions that were conducive to professional learning and also accommodated the remote learning our children were required to undertake.

### 23.6.1 *Juggling Our Voices*

The particular cultural-discursive arrangements in a site prefigures the language we use and make practices visible through sayings. In this home/work hybrid space of online and sitting face to face with children, what we needed to say, and to whom, could change from moment to moment. In our narratives, we see sayings such as “constant state of flux” (Fiona), “juggling” (Sylvia), “balancing” (Ling), and “messy busyness” (Venesser). These phrases describe the moment-by-moment interactions of the personal and professional required due to our changing working situation. Although we made efforts to maintain some separation in our practices, our sayings as mother-academics which can usually be seen in distinct professional and personal language, were often merged. This occurred notably in the virtual meeting spaces, as our homes and lives were existing at the “feathered edges” (Variyan & Reimer, 2022, p. 17) of our screens. While on Zoom calls, we were often simultaneously engaged in dialogue with our children, sometimes in actual conversation (for example, guiding home learning in the brief moments while muted in a meeting), and always internally (as we worried about the ways that our family were coping with their circumstances). This cultural-discursive blur of our personal and professional lives filtered into our sayings as we worked, particularly with students. We came to understand that it was acceptable to share the personal and to have our mother identity more visible, and we encouraged this in others.

The amplification of wellbeing in the semantic space was an ever-present part of our consciousness that was reflected in the cultural-discursive responses of our institution as calls for us to attend to student wellbeing emerged. Discourse around wellbeing became ever present and shaped our practices as noted by Sylvia “a lot of discussion of wellbeing—both as parents ensuring wellbeing of our children and as educators ensuring the wellbeing of our students”. An example of changed practice as

a result of this discourse was shared by Megan in her description of how she purposefully organised a virtual discursive space for her students “where we discussed and introduced family members and pets”. In these ways, our sayings demonstrated authentic caring practices that are naturally associated with mothering, and we note that these became more important, and in some ways valued, in our professional practice.

### ***23.6.2 Slipping Space and Time***

The TPA (Kemmis & Grootenboer, 2008) provided us with a second critical lens in reflecting our hybrid situation and resulting in changed practices by focusing on our “doings”. Examining doings reveals practices which are prefigured by material-economic arrangements including the societal ideas of gendered roles in work. In the home/work hybrid space these include the physical space we set up for our working homes, the resources we used for online teaching and home learning for our own children, and virtual space and time over the online teaching. As we examined the evidence of our “doings” from our narratives, it was revealed that our practices were significantly transformed by the abrupt and drastic changes to the spaces, time, and resources for our work. Fiona described space and time factors that characterised her experience and the personal and professional interactions in this material-economic dimension as “working hours sitting at my kitchen table... [while]... literally next to me at the table, was usually one of my children working on a remote learning task”. Our proximity to our children was also noted by Liang who mentioned “I had my own home office set up for the zoom teaching and work meetings while physically placing a table next to my office desk for my six-year old son”. Venesser further highlighted that her “home [was] becoming a battleground between the office, and the school”, illustrating how this was a tension that we navigated in these spaces.

The enmeshed nature of the tasks and attention that we gave to our roles as mother-academics were symbolised in our descriptions of the objects and spaces that surrounded us. Of these, the kitchen table is one that we have selected to capture the collision of home and work. This object became a boundary spanning space for several of us and, as Megan described, was also evident as a symbol of the doings of our students as they navigated the same tensions in their own locked down lives. In physical space and time, we suggest that these material-economic arrangements influenced the different ways of doings as we coped with the COVID-19 situation. Unlike the “solidity of what yesterday seemed to guarantee” our yesterdays seemed quite different as we entered into extended lockdown. We did not have “the security of legitimate social orders, the dependability of family and friends” (Kemmis et al., 2014b, p. 3). Instead, one day merged into another as we toiled in condensed worlds of the online space. Time took on a different pace where the days went slowly but the weeks were gone in an instant as Venesser described “an on-going juggle of days sliding into weeks and weeks into months as the academic mother at home”.

This also explained our feelings of constant juggling as our doings merged across multiple dimensions all at the same time while the COVID-19 situation changed how we worked day and night.

### ***23.6.3 Colliding Connections and Commitments***

Within changed social-political arrangements that prefigure relatings in the social space, we became more creative and innovative to manage our relationships and responsibilities across both our mother and academic identities. We noticed that delegating, saying no, setting things up, and letting others complete a task were more prominent in our practices. Although individually as five academic mothers we experienced different ways of social arrangements and relatings, our narratives emphasise a shared acknowledgement of wellbeing and caring and the importance of communication over this challenging period. As Liang mentioned, “I had to seek effective ways to communicate with the students and also help myself and everyone feel a sense of belonging in the community of learners.” This echoes what Venesser explained as she sought to “build meaningful connections with my colleagues and students, online”. During emotional moments, Sylvia described the intensity of concern for her students as the personal at times became critical: “On more than one occasion I have had to reach out to students who were anxious, dealing with domestic violence and feeling isolated”. We realised that feelings of empathy were enhanced in our relatings because of the shared baseline in the socio-political arrangements of experiencing the pandemic together though often separated by time and space. Through this empathy we could anchor ourselves to what others were going through, which supported our innovative doings and, combined with the virtual communicative space, shared new ways of relating to the students and colleagues; we could support one another.

Through consideration of our changed practices that are visible in our sayings, doings, and relatings, one main finding was that our academic identity has been transformed while meeting the challenges and changes. These “sayings” in the semantic space, “doings” in the physical space–time, and “relatings” in the social space, are dynamically intertwined but all three dimensions of arrangements that prefigure practice were significantly disrupted due to the ongoing pandemic. Our example of five academic mothers juggling multiple aspects of our personal and professional identities over the pandemic shows the influence of mother/academic identity on our praxis, which we understand as morally-informed action (Kemmis & Smith, 2008). We found that we agree with Monahan (2002, p. 7) that “identity construction is inseparable from the relationship between individuals, spaces and practices”. We acted in the present moments, in our homes, while considering the various relationships to inform our future practices with the praxis reflection of “what should I do next?”. Variyan and Reimer (2022) suggested in their study of academic practice during the pandemic that “academics were not free to do as they pleased but were faced with a multi-faceted and emerging context that forced on them new practices, new visibilities and new virtualities” (p. 17). We also argue that our new practices

emerged as a result of our complex attempts at morally informed decision making: the collision of needing to make morally important/right decisions and what is best for students and our own family as we work together at the kitchen table. Our transformed practices in these hybrid arrangements support that “practice may be enacted as praxis” (Mahon et al., 2017, p. 14) as it involves moral, ethical, and professional decisions.

### 23.7 Final Remarks

Overall, this study looked at the ways in which mother-academics’ identities shifted in response to the demands of online academia while supporting their own children in the online learning spaces allowing for new kinds of praxis to take shape. Our emerging identity as lecturers was primarily shaped by our historical past workplace and the hybrid working-from-home space we entered during the pandemic. There was a constant juggling of personal and professional spaces with academic mothers noticing the silos and structures of pre-pandemic life melt away. This was confronting and challenging since we would otherwise ensure that our professional identity was separate and our roles as mothers stayed invisible and not seen to have any impact on our professional lives. There was little control over the *everydayness* becoming visible in our professional lives and with time we adapted and accepted this as part of our new academic identities. As we sought to balance our personal and professional lives, we saw the notions of time, physical space, and emotional availability fade and merge in a never-ending cycle. As the pandemic progressed, we were more accepting of our merging identities and the focus shifted to the centrality of wellbeing for our children, students, colleagues, and ourselves. We found new ways of reaching out to others around us with a clear enhancement of empathy in how we reacted to people and situations around us.

As the world grapples with the pandemic which now seems to be ongoing with new mutations continuing to play havoc with the world order, we consider the implications of what it means to work in these situations. What seemed to be transient, temporary measures to help overcome the pandemic are slowly evolving into a new way of living and working. The implications of this study are far reaching for mother-academics globally who are facing similar demands as they juggle their personal and professional lives. It also holds meaning to all other academics who are impacted by the ongoing pandemic and work with mother-academics as colleagues. The findings of increased empathy and the focus on wellbeing hold meaning beyond the ongoing pandemic. The tensions created by a heavily impacted higher education sector embroiled in a socio-political environment of job losses, loss of loved ones, and increased isolation from family and friends calls for everyone to work with heightened empathy and sensitivity.

The pandemic has also created new vistas for enhancing our professional lives. As academics and mothers there are many examples of how we reimagined and brought creativity to our new work situations. These have ramifications for a larger

audience interested in the lives and works of academic women and mothers. Similar to others, we envisage an academic environment where mother-academics are able to negotiate the blurred lines and collisions between their home and work life and progress within the same timeframe and similar positions as men throughout their careers. Although a small-scale study, we aim to contribute to the growing body of literature that advocates for academia to become a less gendered and more equitable working environment for mother-academics. There is a dire need to revisit and realign policies to support mother-academics; this is an opportune time as we are used to swift changes, which continually occur. Change is necessary as higher education is moving through a crisis.

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**Part V**  
**Doing Research in Times**  
**of Change—Methodological Ethnographies**  
**of Coping**

# Chapter 24

## The Effects of the Pandemic on the Research Output and Strategies of Early Career Researchers and Doctoral Candidates



**Basil Cahusac de Caux** 

**Abstract** The COVID-19 pandemic has shaken research in higher education in unexpected ways (OECD, 2021). While it sped up the transition to online and virtual modes of learning within the academe, it also generated significantly higher levels of anxiety and depression among university-based researchers (Chirikov et al., 2020). Higher education institutions adopted widespread changes in teaching loads and research policy at break-neck speed, often to the dismay of early career researchers and doctoral candidates. This chapter investigates the impact of the global health crisis on the research output and strategies of early career researchers and doctoral candidates at universities around the world. It reviews the literature on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on research output and strategies. The chapter also incorporates recent findings from the author’s research project, which investigates the long-term impact of the pandemic on academic writing strategies and output among doctoral candidates (following on from results previously published in Cahusac de Caux (2021)).

**Keywords** Research output · Research strategies · Early career researchers · Doctoral students · Ph.D. candidates · Pandemic · COVID-19

### 24.1 Introduction

While almost every profession has been affected by the pandemic, academics in the early stages of their careers have borne the brunt of pandemic-associated setbacks in academia, including delayed career progression and a lack of support from senior colleagues (Watchorn & Heckendorf, 2020). Researchers have labelled this pandemic-associated phenomena “early-career stagnation” (Watchorn & Heckendorf, 2020, p. 14), and point to anxieties related to job security and career progression. In addition to career stagnation, early career researchers (ECRs) are faced with a significant drop in mobility. Mobility was severely impacted by

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pandemic-related border closures and self-isolation protocols (e.g., contact tracing) in the years 2020 and 2021 (El Masri & Sabzalieva, 2020). For example, Gill (2021) provides anecdotal evidence of how challenging and daunting it can feel to relocate for career purposes during times of travel restrictions and strict regulations. Taken together, the combination of insufficient support and restricted mobility pose a severe threat to both the short- and long-term prospects of early career academics around the world. This led to the branding of ECRs as a *lost generation* of academics (Jackman et al., 2021; Nicholas, 2021).

## 24.2 Early Career Academics and Doctoral Candidates

In this chapter, ECRs are defined as academics and researchers who began their professional teaching and/or research careers at a higher education institution no more than ten years ago. This definition resembles Nicholas et al.'s (2017) definition, in that it includes individuals who are “in a research position or have been in research positions [...] but are currently doing a doctorate” (p. 6). Generally, ECRs are considered to hold a doctoral degree from a university or higher education institution. Doctoral candidates, on the other hand, are defined as individuals who are actively pursuing a doctoral degree at a university or higher education institution. While some researchers view these categories as mutually exclusive, in this chapter doctoral candidates are considered as ECRs, but not all ECRs are considered doctoral candidates. In other words, doctoral candidates are a sub-category of ECRs, and ECRs also include other groups such as postdoctoral fellows, lecturers, and part-time academics. The shared feature across all sub-categories of ECRs is the active pursuit or relatively recent completion of a doctoral degree in an academic discipline(s).

The significant disruption in faculty hiring across institutions due to COVID-19 led to the stagnation of ECR skills development and research output (Watchorn & Heckendorf, 2020). Fear of contracting the virus also resulted in ECRs rethinking research collaboration with peers (Cahusac de Caux, 2021). Similarly, a shift from in-person to online conferencing resulted in a reduction in networking opportunities for budding academics who typically disseminate their research in front of their peers and seniors (Raby & Madden, 2021). A reduction in networking opportunities also meant fewer chances to generate new ideas in a collaborative manner. It is, therefore, likely that some ECRs may turn inward, choosing to complete tasks that only require individual input and commitment, as opposed to interpersonal engagement and peer-based collaboration.

Doctoral candidates have experienced numerous research-related challenges during the pandemic. The most salient challenge is a lack of access to research facilities and equipment during lockdowns and partial curfews (Phyältö et al., 2022; Stenson et al., 2022). While it is difficult to calculate the significance of its impact, a lack of access to facilities and equipment has hampered and stifled doctoral candidates' research output across the world. An additional concern is access to research

participants (Duran, 2022; Hradsky, 2022; Karlina, 2022; Qureshi, 2022). If doctoral candidates are unable to gather data from research participants due to restrictions on movement and face-to-face interaction, this may result in either delaying the data-gathering process or switching to alternative research methods. In some cases, it is feasible to gather data from research participants via virtual video-conferencing platforms (Torrentira, 2020), but this is not always the case. Chapters 24, 25 and 26 (Hradsky, 2022; Karlina, 2022; Maulana, 2022) provide insights from doctoral candidates who have adapted their data collection to virtual video-conferencing platforms, highlighting both the benefits and limitations of these approaches.

While doctoral candidates were granted thesis deadline extensions (Cahusac de Caux, 2021), many did not fully benefit from the extra time due to exacerbated mental health issues and family commitments. International doctoral candidates were faced with even greater challenges, as they were in some cases required to return to their home countries or asked to commence their doctoral programmes from overseas (Li & Zhang, 2022; Mokbul, 2022; Rangarajan & Daneshfar, 2022). The provision of remote learning and videoconferencing (e.g., for supervisory meetings) failed to provide the same level of immersion and cultural affinity that face-to-face programmes do. This is partly related to the way in which doctoral research is conducted: it is based on a master-apprentice model that requires regular interaction between candidates and supervisors, academic practice, and disciplinary mastery (Cahusac de Caux, 2019; Carter-Veale et al., 2016; Lam et al., 2019). Removing the core components of this model leaves students feeling stranded and can contribute to increased levels of anxiety and frustration.

### 24.3 Finding Space to Work

An oft-heard complaint relates to doctoral candidates' inability to access a sufficient workspace. Many doctoral candidates, including those that I surveyed and interviewed, report struggling to produce research because of the impracticality of working at a small desk or dining table at home (see Cahusac de Caux, 2021). To make matters worse, workspaces were often shared with others (such as roommates, children, or partners, see Adams et al., 2022; Patel, 2022). Ghosh et al. (2021) also note how the lack of a private workspace was viewed as a stressor by postdoctoral fellows. While the closure of campuses was unavoidable, many doctoral candidates hoped that institutions would keep dedicated workspaces accessible to those who needed them. The lack of access to sufficient workspaces did not only impact research output, it also affected data collection (Maulana, 2022; Qureshi, 2022). Issues such as the availability and reliability of internet connections, research database and archival access, background noise, and time zones become even more pressing when doctoral candidates are gathering data from home. In cases where specialist equipment was required to conduct research, ECRs were forced to purchase equipment and software, rent workspace, or put research on hold until access to laboratories was restored (Hunt, 2020). In many cases, this cost individuals both financially and in terms of mental

health. Suart et al. (2021) report how numerous Canadian postgraduate and postdoctoral researchers experienced “grief following change” due to laboratory closures (p. 66).

Deznabi et al. (2021) argue that poor working conditions, which include lack of access to adequate workspaces, have been extremely detrimental to motivation among ECRs. They identified postdoctoral fellows as the most heavily impacted group (Deznabi et al., 2021). However, doctoral candidates suffered severe setbacks in terms of opportunities to socialise with peers (Deznabi et al., 2021). This drop in socialization may be associated with the unavoidable need to secure isolated workspaces (e.g., at home). Other researchers have found that the quality of one’s workspace is a determining factor of work satisfaction (Aubry et al., 2021). This is perhaps why university administrators at some universities decided to create “staggered schedules” which provided ECRs with a degree of access to laboratories and facilities during the pandemic (Jarrell & Locascio, 2020).

## 24.4 Gender-Based Differences

Female ECRs are disproportionately impacted in terms of teaching load (Gibson et al., 2020), which has long-term consequences for promotion, tenure, and faculty turnover. This was compounded by the pandemic, where female and male academics’ experiences differed notably (Aubry et al., 2021). For instance, Yildirim & Eslen-Ziya (2021) reported a significant difference in work conditions, particularly for female academics with children. This is reflected in Cahusac de Caux (2021), which found that “family commitments” influenced the writing and working habits of doctoral candidates (p. 301). This is also supported by findings published by Vitae (2020b), a UK-based organization which studied the impact of the pandemic on researchers in the United Kingdom. The chapters on academic mothers in this book (see Adams et al., 2022; Patel, 2022; Umarova, 2022; Yip & Maestre, 2022) detail the challenges of working as a student or researcher while raising children.

During the pandemic, female academics were under increasing pressure to meet institutional demands while generating the same research and teaching output as male academics. Male academics are typically overrepresented in many fields of academia and are simultaneously perceived as archetypal scholars (Newcomb, 2021). This leads to unequal representation in academia, with female academics reported spending more time than their male counterparts on non-research-related work (Shalaby et al., 2021). Female ECRs tend to assume the majority of affective care responsibilities among academics with children. While this places a certain degree of pressure on female academics, the pandemic aggravated this imbalance even further, as male academics were expected to work more while females were left to assume additional childcare and child education responsibilities (Amano-Patino et al., 2020; Cardel et al., 2020). When the majority of schools transitioned to remote learning, this placed an additionally heightened burden on female academics with children to oversee the academic performance of their children (Deryugina et al., 2021).

While the presence of children and other dependents in the household impacted the research output of both father and mother academics, it disproportionately affected mothers, who were fifteen percent less likely to complete or submit work for publication (Shalaby et al., 2021). Actual hours devoted to research also varied between father and mother academics, with mothers over thirty-five percent more likely to report a decrease in hours spent conducting research (Deryugina et al., 2021; Shalaby et al., 2021). Female academics were also more concerned about job security than their male counterparts as a result of the pandemic (Vitae, 2020a). This paints a grave picture for female academics, who already faced an uphill battle for equitable representation before the pandemic.

Since male academics may still represent the archetypal scholar in some disciplines, they need to play a more active role in raising awareness around the challenges faced by female academics (e.g., affective labour and a drop in research output). It is also important for male academics to reflect on their own privilege and consider how they can adapt their practices to ensure a more equitable work environment for all. I tried to do this while my family was in lockdown.

As a male academic and father, I tried my utmost to share childcare-related duties with my spouse, who also works full-time. This manifested in the form of assistance with schooling, cooking meals, and bedtime routines. During lockdowns, I taught from home, and thus was able to support my child through her first few months of kindergarten. Since she started her lessons online, I was fortunate enough to be able to guide her through the various activities her school had set. When kindergarten reopened, I drove her to school and collected her at the end of the school day. Being present from the very start may have eased her transition from online to in-person schooling. Taking a proactive role in terms of raising my child was truly rewarding and I believe the pandemic provided me with the space to seriously contemplate the kind of learning environment that would truly benefit my child.

While the formation of new departmental and institutional policies would be welcome in many institutions to address unequitable work distribution (such as female academics doing more non-research related work), more expedient measures, such as sharing of teaching load and research-related duties, could be implemented at the collegial and departmental levels. Additional support for parent academics, such as childcare facilities or assistance finding and securing childcare, would be welcomed by many faculty members (Rahman et al., 2022). Lastly, raising awareness around the disparities between parent and non-parent academics may help stakeholders devise new and innovative solutions to address the added burden of ongoing childcare and affective care during the pandemic.

## 24.5 Teaching Load and Research Output

One concern among ECRs is the increase in teaching hours experienced during the pandemic. Many factors may be attributed to these reported increases in teaching hours and teaching load. They include budgetary constraints associated with a decrease in enrolment (particularly among international students), the perceived *ease* of remote teaching, casualisation of the academic workforce, and a drop in the number of academics available to teach (Daumiller et al., 2021). During the years 2020 and 2021, universities around the world struggled to maintain levels of enrolment due to a litany of concerns among students, including funding for overseas study, student mobility, and preconceived notions of the inferiority of online versus in-person learning (Mok et al., 2021). To address these concerns, universities mobilised their resources in new ways. One strategy involved preparing academics for a swift transition to remote learning. In some cases, this transition took less than a month to complete, and resulted in severe pressure being placed on ECRs to upskill while teaching their assigned courses.

I began teaching remotely shortly after the decision to close campuses was made by the Ministry of Higher Education. Within four weeks, faculty members in my department had been trained in the use of virtual learning platforms and online assessment design practices. I am proud of the fact that my institution was among the first in the region to move its courses entirely online. The faculty training that was offered was immensely helpful, as it not only covered the essential functions of virtual learning platforms but also explained how to incorporate a host of assessment techniques. While some students struggled due to digital literacy issues, they were in the minority. The major challenge at the start of remote learning was ensuring that all students had stable internet connections and suitable accessories (i.e. microphones and cameras) that would allow them to fully benefit from the course material and class discussions.

Teaching loads were also distributed unevenly at many institutions, which tend to depend more on academics on casual and part-time contracts for the majority of their teaching needs, particularly at the undergraduate level (Watermeyer et al., 2021). This resulted in high levels of burnout among ECRs, who struggled to cope with the combined pressures of an increased teaching load and a climate of unpredictability—both in terms of job security and public health (British Education Research Association, 2020; Gewin, 2021). While research has shown that a certain amount of work-related stress motivates individuals to prioritise tasks (including the allocation of research time), heightened and continual stress overwhelms individuals. This negatively impacts their work-life balance, and can lead to career change and distancing oneself from academia (Lindfelt et al., 2018). If a state of chronic stress becomes the norm, ECRs may decide to relegate research, essentially categorizing it as a task of secondary importance. Continued pressure may contribute to an increase in the turnover rate in academia, which is already a problem in many disciplines and institutions.

Research output has generally declined since the start of the pandemic. This applies to the majority of fields, including the so-called *hard sciences*, where basic and applied research provide humanity with innovative solutions to a wide range of



problems. ECRs have devised some interesting strategies to deal with the challenges associated with the pandemic. For instance, the National Science Foundation drew on several funds, including the American Rescue Plan, to help ECRs with support mechanisms such as funding extensions. In some cases, however, assistance came too late.

## **24.6 A Longitudinal Investigation of the Impact of the Pandemic on Doctoral Candidates**

In late-February of 2020, I initiated a research project that dealt exclusively with the impact of the pandemic on the academic writing output and strategies of doctoral candidates around the world. Research output was one of the sub-topics of the project. Initial results of the project were reported in Cahusac de Caux (2021), which indicated that a significant proportion (approximately 84%) of doctoral candidates struggled to write about their research during the pandemic. The data used in that publication came from surveys and interviews with doctoral candidates conducted during April 2020.

More recent data I collected in February 2022 allows for a longitudinal analysis of the problem. Compared to responses received in April 2020, doctoral candidates were more likely to assert that the pandemic had neither a positive nor negative impact on their academic writing output and strategies. While approximately 22% of respondents claimed the pandemic had neither a positive nor negative impact on writing output in April 2020, the percentage selecting the same response doubled to roughly 44% in February 2022. This perhaps indicates that doctoral candidates' research is less susceptible to the sudden changes in mobility and accessibility associated with the pandemic.

There was also a shift from negative to more neutral or positive responses with regards to academic writing strategies among doctoral candidates. For instance, in April 2020, more than 50% of doctoral candidates claimed the pandemic had had a negative impact on their academic writing strategies. In February 2022, this dropped to 25%, with an equal majority asserting the pandemic had "neither positive nor negative" (37.5%) or a "positive" effect (37.5%). This notable shift indicates that doctoral candidates have acclimated to the new norms of conducting research during a pandemic.

While the pandemic still distracts and takes a toll on mental health, doctoral candidates seem to be more able to concentrate on their research than during the start of the pandemic. One doctoral candidate outlined how:

Now that I am working from home and not commuting, I have been able to be more flexible in how I structure my day. I now allocate a block of time in the morning and a block of time in the evening when I am at my best (but would normally be commuting) specifically to write. (respondent 124, 4 February 2022)

Another doctoral candidate noted how the pandemic provided them with a “[v]aluable opportunity for me to focus only on my thesis”. While pandemic-associated restrictions have generally impacted doctoral candidates and other ECRs in negative ways, this is not always the case. In my case, for instance, I have used time spent working from home to reflect on my role in academia and generate novel ideas for meaningful research projects.

## 24.7 Positive Outcomes Associated with the Pandemic

ECRs based in middle- and low-income nations had greater opportunities to create impactful research, in part due to the “devolution of research activities” (Strachan, 2021, p. 2). Instead of researchers in the global north travelling to the global south to conduct research, researchers and institutions are increasingly dependent on locally based researchers in the global south to gather data and conduct research (Strachan, 2021). This allows researchers in middle- and low-income nations to showcase their research skills and disseminate their findings to wider audiences.

While ECRs continue to battle pandemic-related restrictions, there are groups of ECRs which created stronger and more tight-knit support networks at an institutional and departmental level (Tikhonova et al., 2021). This indicates that ECRs are resilient and willing to overcome significant obstacles and challenges to produce impactful research. The research strategies they devised include adopting new methodologies, gathering data through alternate mediums (e.g., online), and re-prioritizing various parts of the research process (American Psychological Association, 2020). I found this in my own research practice.

I perceive the pandemic as an event of tremendous significance in academia. As a researcher, I began questioning conventional wisdom regarding how to conduct research shortly after the pandemic started. By early March 2020, I knew that the most effective way to gather data going forward would be through online surveys and virtual interviews using video conferencing platforms like Zoom. I started calling for participants using the social media platform Twitter while distributing questionnaires about the impact of the pandemic on academic writing (as described in the preceding section) via Google Forms. The outcome of these new research methods took me by surprise: thanks to my network of colleagues, I was able to reach more people than I initially expected. In fact, I do not think that I could have easily gathered data on close to 120 doctoral candidates without adopting a new approach to conducting research involving both virtual and online tools.

While anecdotal, similar themes of resilience and adaptability seem to be emerging among doctoral candidates. For instance, Eigege & Kennedy (2021) highlight the importance of exploring “non-traditional modes of research, as the conventional methods are no longer sufficient to capture the impact of the times” (p. 623). As evidenced in this book, ECRs are more likely to select research methods such as autoethnography, which in the past did not receive widespread support by senior academics (see Cutler et al., 2022), including doctoral thesis supervisors. This dynamism of adaptability may generate new outlooks and directions in future

research, especially if ECRs choose to continue honing their newfound research methodologies. ECRs are also devising innovative strategies to deal with other setbacks associated with the pandemic. For instance, instead of pausing their research, a group of doctoral candidates decided to attend virtual events when gathering their data (Abdul Rahman et al., 2021). This not only reduced costs, but provided them with insights they may never have had. Universities have also helped doctoral candidates envision new research strategies by providing guidance in the form of handbooks and self-assessment questionnaires (Canterbury Christ Church University, 2020; Garcia Garcia & Barclay, 2020).

ECRs and doctoral candidates tended to fly less frequently for research purposes during the pandemic, due to travel restrictions and other regulations. This resulted in a smaller carbon footprint among ECRs and doctoral candidates. While this reduction may be insignificant when compared to other groups of frequent fliers, it has raised questions about the need to travel for research. Though conferencing will probably continue to require travel to and from certain destinations, future conference organisers, especially among the current generation of ECRs, will likely offer virtual participation options to participants. Similarly, researchers will probably pause when thinking about how to access data and archival material that can be collected digitally. Instead of travelling across or between countries to access libraries, there may soon be large repositories that contain the publications a researcher needs. The pandemic has expedited the transition toward digital archiving.

Researchers are also initiating a fruitful discussion of *new mobilities* in academia. Instead of maintaining a heavy dependence on face-to-face interaction and the ability to travel to collaborate and network with researchers, Shelley-Egan (2020) argues that we should invest in improving the quality of virtual mobility. This can be—and has been—done by providing researchers with greater online connectivity, access to cloud-based services, and exposure to new modes of virtual interaction. While virtual mobility cannot replace traditional mobility, it should not be neglected as a viable alternative or substitute for conducting high quality research. Researchers are now dedicating more energy and time to exploring the potential benefits of virtual mobility in higher education (Buchem et al., 2018; Ruiz-Corbella & Alvarez-Gonzalez, 2014; Villar-Onrubia & Rajpal, 2016).

I believe *Research and Teaching in a Pandemic World* is an excellent example of how researchers can consistently collaborate without needing to meet face-to-face due to pandemic-related restrictions and geographical distances. Since we (the three editors) found ourselves separated due to the pandemic, we communicated using Zoom, WhatsApp, and email. We shared chapter drafts and reviewer comments through cloud-based services such as Google Drive and Dropbox. Online video conferencing platforms and cloud-based services enabled this project to progress without any major hinderances.

## 24.8 Conclusion

Restrictions associated with COVID-19 have had an overwhelmingly negative effect on the research output and strategies of ECRs, particularly early in the pandemic. As movement was restricted and campus closures were extended (sometimes indefinitely), many ECRs were forced to work from home and devise new ways of keeping their research projects afloat. This was challenging for many, as securing adequate workspaces in shared accommodation or in close proximity to family members may have been unfeasible. Gender-based differences complicated this even further, with female ECRs more likely to experience a host of disadvantages: heightened concerns about job security, affective labour, and an increase in non-research related work.

Teaching loads increased as universities transitioned to remote learning. ECRs felt overburdened with increasing workloads, and in many cases were unable to effectively conduct research as a result. Research output dropped and emergency support for ECRs was provided in order to mitigate the blowback of pandemic-associated hardships. Nevertheless, doctoral candidates exhibited increased resilience in the later stages of the pandemic (i.e., by early 2022). They were better prepared to handle the pandemic by devising new academic writing strategies that have less of a negative impact on their writing output.

It is challenging being an ECR in a climate of unpredictable and sudden introduction of restrictions on access and movement. Postdoctoral fellows, doctoral candidates, and researchers have experienced increasing workloads, job insecurity, project funding issues, and a lack of peer socialization. Institutions and government agencies have attempted to address these issues. However, more can be done in order to re-establish the appeal and value of a career in research among recently minted and soon-to-be-minted holders of doctorates.

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# Chapter 25

## (Dis)embodied Learning: Centring the Body and Emotions in Online Professional Learning



Danielle Hradsky 

**Abstract** In this chapter, I explore through an auto-ethnodrama what it was like to conduct and experience embodied professional learning online during the COVID-19 pandemic. Online learning is recognised in research as increasing participation and access, but also perceived as lacking human connection. I seek to open up the possibilities, problems, and uncertainties of online learning by suspending in time and examining this personal experience of centring the body, its experiences, emotions, and relationships when teaching and learning online. The majority of this chapter is a short play script, entitled ‘Worth It’, which was created by drawing on data from my PhD research during the 2020 lockdown in Victoria, Australia. In this research project, I explored teaching for reconciliation between First Nations and non-Indigenous Australians with a group of drama teachers. Through ‘Worth It’, I unpack our experiences and explore the potential of online learning to increase, rather than decrease, human connection.

**Keywords** (Dis)embodied learning · Online learning · Teacher professional learning · Auto-ethnodrama · First Nations education · COVID-19 · Qualitative research · Research methods

### 25.1 Introduction

Embodiment, or the holistic integration of body, mind, and emotions (Forgasz, 2015), is the core of my education and research practice. As a drama educator, my pedagogies centre the body, its experiences, and relationships (Bresler, 2004; Hunter, 2011). As a PhD researcher, I am exploring how teachers can be engaged with the (super)complexities of teaching for reconciliation between First Nations and non-Indigenous Australians. Embodied and creative research methodologies are increasingly being recognised as valuable and valid in research with decolonising aims (Kara, 2020; Ritenburg et al., 2014). I therefore sought to make the body and emotions

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explicit when engaging my teacher-participants with complex, often uncomfortable concepts such as race relations and historical acceptance (Reconciliation Australia, 2020).

Initially, I envisioned facilitating physical, creative professional learning (PL), thereby nourishing the relationships that are so necessary to this work. Unfortunately, I was due to facilitate this PL in April and May, 2020. As Australia and the world locked down in response to COVID-19, I postponed the programme, (incorrectly) believing online embodied learning to be impossible. During the next few months I gained experience in online teaching and recognised that COVID-19 would continue affecting our lives for the foreseeable future. Thus, in October and November 2020, I facilitated six weeks of (dis)embodied learning, via Zoom, for 12 Victorian Drama teachers. I also yarned (a relationships-based interview method drawing on the principles of Indigenous research, Bessarab & Ng'andu, 2010) online with each of the participants before and after the programme.

In this chapter, I tell the story of our pandemic learning experiences through the form of an auto-ethnodrama. Ethnodrama is research reported through theatre, thereby maintaining the embodied nature of the human experiences being investigated (O'Toole, 2006). As Denzin (2018, p. 456) eloquently states, "ethnodramas examine moments of crisis in the culture, liminal moments, suspended in time". This ethnodrama explores personal liminality regarding pedagogies, embodiment, and connection, sparked from the global crisis of COVID-19. I have chosen to include myself as a leading character, using the pseudonym 'ELOISE', making this an auto-ethnodrama. Saldaña (2005, p. 19) states that the ethnodramatist must ask, "Whose story is it?" This is my story—my story of hope, frustration, grief, surprise, gratitude, and a plethora of other emotions. It is also the stories of my participants, or rather, my students, colleagues, friends, and fellow-travelers on this learning journey. We stand onstage together, each speaking for ourselves rather than being interpreted by a fieldworker (Saldaña, 2005).

To create this auto-ethnodrama, I drew on the two one-hour yarns with each participant, as well as the six two-hour PL sessions, all of which were recorded and transcribed by me. I also used my own and the participants' journals. All data were coded using Saldaña's (2021) dramaturgical frame, wherein the terms and conventions of theatrical characters are applied to qualitative data. For each participant (including myself), I identified Saldaña's (2021) elements of character: our objectives, conflicts, tactics, attitudes, emotions, and subtexts. For this auto-ethnodrama, I extracted data wherein we referred directly to COVID-19, particularly learning and teaching online, and also related incidents such as technological issues, or pets and children interrupting the sessions. I examined these data in relation to our elements of character. For example, was being online a conflict or a tactic? What attitudes did we have towards learning online? What emotions were evinced? Common threads enabled me to conflate myself and the 12 participants into the seven characters presented below.

Certain structural and stylistic choices require further explanation. Structurally, because this auto-ethnodrama focuses on the impact of being online during embodied learning, less attention is paid to what the embodied learning actually involved. This

will be explored in future publications. Stylistically, I have chosen to follow writing conventions common in drama: dividing the drama into six scenes, including stage directions written in italics, and having characters speak their thoughts in ‘asides’, unheard by others onstage. The RADIO included in Scene 1 quotes press releases from Victorian Premier Daniel Andrews (2020a, b), delivered during March and August, 2020. Through these conventions, I hope to give you, the reader (and perhaps one day the audience member), the sense of being there in our world (Saldaña, 2005).

I seek to open up the possibilities, problems, and uncertainties of online education, by suspending this personal experience of (dis)embodied learning in time. Online learning and research are convenient, increases participation and access, and reduces costs; however, prior to the pandemic many institutions and individuals remained resistant to change (Panigrahi et al., 2018). COVID-19 has forced educators and researchers to transition and transform their practices, with mixed success (Maqableh & Alia, 2021). Online learning is generally perceived as lacking human connection (Panigrahi et al., 2018), decreasing interaction, and increasing psychological issues such as boredom, anxiety, frustration, and loneliness (Maqableh & Alia, 2021). In other words, online learning too often lacks embodied experiences and relationships. ‘Worth It’ explores how the participants and I mourned the embodied experience of working together in a studio, but found unexpected benefits to being online. For some, online learning was emotionally safer and increased relationships to family, community, and place. Others experienced increased self-consciousness and technological difficulties. We all appreciated that being online provided access to and connections with people normally disbarred through distance, accessibility, or personal responsibilities. We have no simple answer as to whether learning online was better or worse than in person. It was different, challenging, often uncomfortable, but undeniably ‘worth it’.

## **WORTH IT**

### *Characters*

ELOISE, the researcher and teacher educator

### *The PARTICIPANTS*

JONAH, an experienced metropolitan teacher

LALI, a metropolitan pre-service teacher

NITA, a regional teacher with several years’ experience

ELLA, an experienced metropolitan teacher

JAZ, a beginning metropolitan teacher

STAN, a beginning rural teacher

*Also included: ELOISE's RADIO, JONAH and NITA's children, STAN's housemate, and LALI and ELLA's pets*

**Scene 1: "It'll be fine. Won't it?"**

*The stage is divided into seven sections, representing each of the characters' spaces. A large screen on the rear wall shows what is on ELOISE's computer screen. ELOISE is centre-stage, spotlighted. The PARTICIPANTS are off stage, their spaces dark. ELOISE is writing her PhD ethics application, murmuring to herself. It is mid-March, 2020.*

ELOISE: One-hour interview...café...professional learning sessions...University drama studio...transformative and embodied teaching strategies...developing a community of praxis...physical experiences...done! Submit!

*ELOISE turns on the radio while making a cup of tea.*

RADIO: Victoria is currently grappling with a more imminent threat than most other states—because we have more cases. We will implement a shutdown of all non-essential activity to combat the spread of coronavirus. If you can stay home, you must stay home. Because if we don't, people will die.

*ELOISE turns the radio off, shoulders sagging.*

ELOISE: I don't think this counts as essential.

*She begins amending her ethics form.*

ELOISE: Due to COVID-19, this is now deemed an unacceptable risk to participants' health. Professional learning sessions will be postponed until September.

*She sighs.*

ELOISE: I'm a bit disheartened. Feels like such a long time till I can actually start. *Pause.* I'm just sad.

*Lights fade and then rise again. It is now August. ELOISE is lying on the couch, listening to the radio.*

RADIO: From 6 pm tonight, Victoria will enter a State of Disaster. A curfew begins tonight. Study must be done remotely. These changes will be in place for at least the next six weeks. We can—we will—get through this. Apart. But together.

*ELOISE is frustrated, but resigned.*

ELOISE: I've got to get started. The project has been pushed back and back. At least from teaching I know that drama online still works. Even though it's not quite as good.

*She begins to amend her ethics form again.*

ELOISE: Sessions will now take place online.

*A Facebook post appears on the large screen. It reads: "Do you struggle with how to appropriately teach Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures in Drama? Are you interested in engaging more deeply? This online professional learning research project could be for you!" The PARTICIPANTS enter and read the advertisement on their computers. As each PARTICIPANT speaks, their stage area is spotlighted.*

JONAH: Oh wow! I can't believe a project like this exists. I've been wanting to build content knowledge in this area for ages. I wonder where my gaps are? My blind spots. *Off-stage, his wife calls to him. Coming! He exits.*

LALI: I really want to do this. Everything that's happened this year with the Black Lives Matter movement has been like a lightbulb for me. I feel guilty that I don't know anything about this. Is it for pre-service teachers though? Am I going to be this clueless newbie?

NITA: I need to do this. I think I'm doing stuff superficially. It's cool that so much is happening online now! We're all in the same medium. I hope I'll make some connections. I don't have a big network down here. *Pause.* Hope I'm not the only parent.

ELLA: Gosh, I'd love to help develop programmes like this. Nothing's really changed from when I was at school. And... I'm old. I don't want to be this old person who sits back. I want to find out what I really believe.

JAZ: Teaching First Nations perspectives. That's an interest of mine. Oh, there's a professional learning thing. I'd like to extend my knowledge. My first year of teaching has been difficult with the pandemic, and having a chronic illness. I'll email.

STAN: Ooh. This is an opportunity I don't want to miss out on! I'm still coming to terms with my cultural identity. Teaching this stuff is giving me a connection, but I don't feel confident yet. I'll be learning something new. *Pause.* I wish we could be in a room together. It's sad not meeting people.

*ELOISE takes a deep breath.*

ELOISE: Okay. We're going with online. I think it'll be fine. Won't it?

*Black out.*

## ***Scene 2: "Feels so different."***

*The first session. Everyone is sitting in front of their computers.*

ELOISE: Good morning everyone. We're going to introduce ourselves, and acknowledge the Country that we're all on. I'm on Wurundjeri Country. I pay my respects to their Elders past, present, and future, as well as to the Elders of all lands throughout so-called Australia. I extend that respect to the First Nations peoples here with us today.

JONAH: I can go first, if you want? My name's Jonah. I acknowledge the Wurundjeri-willam people, and the Woiwurrung language that's spoken where I live. I'm interested in learning to embed First Nations practices in my classrooms.

LALI: I'm Lali, and I'm from Wurundjeri Country, just near Coranderrk, which has a really rich history of Indigenous peoples. I'm embarrassed to say I don't know as much about it as I should. I would like to know more.

NITA: I'm Nita, and I'm on Gunditjmara land, I think. I'd like to have more confidence bringing the Indigenous into my classes.

ELLA: I'm Ella, and I'm on Wurundjeri land. I'm hoping to gain the confidence to alter the European perspectives that are over-represented in contemporary Australian education.

JAZ: I'm Jaz, and I'm on Bunurong land. I'd like more understanding on how to include First Nations work in the classroom, and advocate for change.

STAN: I'm Stan, and where we are, there's some overlap with the clans. You have to acknowledge two Countries. It's a bit contentious. So I'm on Yorta Yorta and Bpangerang Country. I'd like to feel confident in knowledge of Indigenous history, and how to facilitate respectful conversations with students. I'd also like to feel more comfortable with saying that I'm part Indigenous.

ELOISE: Thank you. I'm going to share my screen now.

*A map showing the First Nations Countries in Victoria appears on the large screen.*

ELOISE: Go up to 'View Options' at the top of your screen, and then click 'Annotate'. You can draw, you can get stamps. Have a practice.

*JONAH starts drawing a penis. ELOISE clears it.*

ELOISE: Possibly not penises.

*Everyone laughs.*

ELOISE: I'm going to clear the screen now. I'd like you to get a heart stamp, and put a heart where you live.

*Everyone does so.*

ELOISE: We're quite clustered around Melbourne. But we also have some people way out in rural and regional areas, which is exciting. We're going to make a series of freeze frames now. As we make each one, I'm going to ask you to reflect on something. First, I want you to make a freeze frame expressing education. Shape your body to symbolise what education means to you.

*The PARTICIPANTS stand. LALI holds both hands to her head, looking worried. JAZ and STAN both hold their hands up as if receiving a gift. NITA wraps her arms around herself. ELLA balances her hands as if weighing pros and cons. JONAH's space is very small; he has to stand close to the camera. He has his clenched fists on his hips but only his midriff is visible on the large screen.*

ELOISE: What was your personal experience of education? Did you have an enabling experience? Or was it constraining? Did it help you to do what you wanted to do? Or make it harder? Change your freeze frame if you need to, to reflect that experience.

*JAZ, NITA, and STAN change their freeze frames. JAZ is now pushing up a heavy weight. NITA's pose becomes more defensive. STAN looks like he is in conversation.*

JAZ (*aside*): This is exciting! I'm pumped! I struggle to take things in, if it's in lecture form. This, I'll remember clearly.

JONAH (*aside*): I get this. I don't need to embody words. I have the capacity to think about what they mean to me without looking like an idiot. All you can see is crotch-based movement. What am I doing?

ELOISE: Now, creating a freeze frame that says truth.

*The PARTICIPANTS take on new poses. LALI is peeping through her fingers. JAZ creates a circle with her arms above her head. STAN cups his hands to one side. NITA holds hers to her throat. ELLA is peering upwards as if through a skylight. JONAH cups one hand over his face and hugs himself with the other, but this cannot be seen.*

ELOISE: Think about the emotions associated with truth. Are they comfortable emotions? Or are they discomfoting?

*LALI's eyes widen and fingers tense. JAZ lifts her gaze, smiling hopefully. ELLA is now pushing the skylight apart. STAN looks into the camera, holding out his hands. As he does so, a housemate wanders past.*

STAN (*aside*): Agh, what am I doing? This is uncomfortable. I live in a share house. I get the purpose of this, but I feel awkward.

LALI (*aside*): I'm uncomfortable. But why am I uncomfortable? Is it because I'm just generally uncomfortable with the activity? Or is it because of the content? I think my discomfort is helpful.

ELOISE: What about justice? Creating a freeze frame that says justice.

*The PARTICIPANTS change poses. LALI holds her arms behind her back, head bowed. JAZ holds both arms to one side, fingers tensely spread, shoulders clenched. STAN stands in a 'scales of justice' pose. NITA holds both hands up, surrendering. ELLA looks like a superhero, about to charge into battle. JONAH holds both arms outstretched.*

ELOISE: In your freeze frame, are you the person giving or receiving the justice? Change your pose if you want to reflect that differently.

*LALI drops her hands to her sides. STAN gradually tilts to one side. ELLA draws her clenched fists strongly together.*

NITA (*aside*): I'm really uncomfortable. I wasn't expecting this. But I could use this with that tricky group of middle years students!

ELLA (*aside*): Thank goodness I've been using Zoom to train in physical theatre this year. At least I'm familiar with performing in front of a camera. I would have shit myself doing this last year. Hello, thank you pandemic.

ELOISE: To finish up, we're going to run and find a hat that represents a thought or question that you're having. Something to wear that represents an emotion that you're feeling. And something to hold that represents your practice. Go!

*The PARTICIPANTS run to find objects. They return to their cameras.*

ELOISE: Beautiful! Stand up, and take on a pose. You're a fantasy hero on a quest, and you're going to make a statement. I am Eloise the Comforted. I am peeling away the layers on my journey.

LALI: I am Lali the Apprehensive. I'm comforted by what's coming.

JAZ: I am Jaz the Curious. I am growing.

NITA: I am Nita the Connected. I'm ready to learn.

ELLA: I'm Ella with Layers, shining light into the unknown.

STAN: I'm Stan the Grateful. I am excited to nourish.

JONAH: I am Jonah the Questioning, trying to find something that I can hold onto on my path.

ELOISE: Fantastic! Let's all go on a journey!

*There is laughter as everyone says goodbye and logs off. The lights fade on everyone but ELOISE, who is left staring at the blank screen.*

ELOISE: Phew! I feel excited and drained. I'm not getting back the emotional rush or joy of teaching in person. Zoom ends so abruptly. No gentle "Bye-byes" and hugs. *Pause.* I think that went well, but I desperately need some positive feedback.

*Black out.*

### **Scene 3: "I miss it."**

*Lights up. ELOISE is telling the PARTICIPANTS about the early history of education in Victoria. The content is emotional.*

ELOISE: In 1869, the Victorian Government proclaimed absolute control over the care, custody, and education of First Nations children. Legally, First Nations people were non-citizens. White people thought they should die out quietly, and in the meantime, possibly be useful as slave labour. *Pause.* Our story doesn't end here. But take a moment now to reflect.

*Everyone turns off their screens. Their reflections are unheard by others.*

STAN: I feel so disappointed and angry. But what now? How do I communicate these truths?

JAZ: I'm sad. Why are so many still not aware of this? Why can't more people care?

LALI: Angry. So angry. How do I not know this story? Am I part of the problem?

*LALI cuddles her dogs for comfort.*

JONAH: I'm disgusted. So frustrated that I feel numb. I have to focus on what can be done now.



*JONAH's young daughter runs past and waves at the screen. He watches her thoughtfully.*

NITA: I feel so much empathy and anger. We still believe this of people who don't speak English. We have to change the future for these kids.

*NITA's children enter, hungry. She begins making toast.*

ELLA: I'm confused and ashamed. Why has there been so little balance of information after all this time?

ELOISE: Planning this session was stressful. This history is painful and shameful. My heart aches. *Pause. To PARTICIPANTS:* Alright, take a moment to come back to where you are now.

*Everyone turns their screens back on except NITA.*

ELOISE: We're going to be spending time in breakout groups now, finding out what's happened between now and then. You'll get an A3 sheet with lots of information and quotes. You're going to create a short performance only drawing on these words. Think about what you want the others to learn about this era. I'll float around and check in on you. Off you go!

*All of the PARTICIPANTS except NITA move into breakout rooms. Lights fade on everyone except ELOISE and NITA. NITA struggles to turn her screen back on.*

NITA: Sorry, I haven't got an invitation.

ELOISE: Hm. Let me try moving you to a different room. Anything come up that time?

NITA: No. I can't even see you. I can only see myself. Oh God, what have I done wrong? This has never happened before.

ELOISE: I'm sorry, I don't know how to fix this.

NITA: It says I don't have Zoom client installed, download now. But last week I was able to go into a group.

ELOISE: Do you want to download whatever it's telling you to download?

NITA: Sorry about this. It's really frustrating. I think I'll have to turn my computer off.

*There is a pause while NITA does this. She is ashamed and frustrated.*

NITA: Why can't I get back in? Why can't I be good at technology? Haven't even done the readings. God, I feel so bad.

*The computer starts up again and NITA reappears on the screen.*

NITA: Oh, now I'm back! I can see you! And I can see the breakout room!

ELOISE: Awesome!

*NITA enters the breakout room with LALI and JONAH. Lights come up on their areas.*

NITA: So sorry about that, I had a technological issue.

LALI: That's okay! I'm nervous about this performance. Playing First Nations characters.

NITA: Yeah, me too.

JONAH: I think it's okay just to have a good conversation.

*Lights fade on this group. Lights come up on STAN, JAZ, and ELLA.*

STAN: My computer screen's not big enough to have all of this on it.

JAZ: Yeah, my computer's lagging so much.

ELLA: There's a lot of information.

STAN: *Reading.* The phrase 'a part of savages' is just in your face.

ELLA: It's awful to use this language when we're aware that it's not okay.

JAZ: It's uncomfortable, but it's verbatim. Basing this off someone's testimony gives us a frame of reference.

STAN: Truth is powerful.

*Lights fade, then rise on everyone back in the main room. STAN, JAZ, and ELLA have just finished their performance.*

TALI: I enjoyed the use of space, coming close to the camera and moving away.

JONAH: Loved the long pauses and feelings of curiosity.

NITA: Powerful use of movement. Loved the sense of the uncomfortable.

ELOISE: Thank you everyone. Can we give them all another round of applause?

*Everyone applauds.*

ELOISE: We've taken an emotional trip today. Let's reflect on that, share with the group, check in with everyone.

LALI: I have my dog joining me. I'm feeling this overwhelming sense of fear. I haven't started my professional teaching career yet, and I don't want to contribute to the damage. I want to think that I'm making change, but then I get stuck thinking, am I fighting a brick wall?

ELLA: Lali, your words speak volumes. This is heavy. I'm feeling quite emotional too. I have a lot of anger, and confusion about how people can believe that colonisation was a better life for everybody, when it was so destructive. But the idea of being in partnership with everybody in our society, and listening, is really exciting and important. I can't wait to get back into a drama classroom to see how it goes. Take a crowbar to that wall, Lali!

JONAH: For me, today reaffirmed that big question: why has this taken so long? But there is this kernel of hope, that we are earnestly and willingly listening to stories told by First Nations people. It's exciting to me, rather than fearful.

STAN: Today, I found that anger and outrage building. Reading those things, this feeling of discomfort takes over me. But that shock really motivates me. I don't have to sit back anymore. I can be part of that cultural change.

JAZ: I feel a lot of anger, and frustration, but there's hope in there. I'm excited to be part of a positive shift in views and change. The anger spurs me on to learn more and see what I can do to help heal.

ELOISE: Nita? You're muted. *Pause.* Still muted.

NITA: Sorry, I've had the worst day technologically. I'm feeling a lot of shame about how woefully inadequate my school is, and how little I've really been paying attention to this. But anything worthwhile is hard and uncomfortable.

ELOISE: I wish I could give you all a hug, but as it is, I'm gonna give you a Zoom hug. Can we all hold out our arms to each other?

*Everyone does so. On the large screen, their hands appear to touch. Everyone smiles.*

ELOISE: Have a good week everyone! Bye!

*The PARTICIPANTS log off. Their lights fade. ELOISE stands and starts making lunch, but her hands shake so much that she drops food everywhere. She collapses on the floor, head in her hands.*

ELOISE: It's been such a tumultuous week. Melbourne is opening up from lockdown. I saw my niece for the first time in five months. She's gone from being an infant to almost walking. Seeing her was such a joy, but also exhausting. We're just not used to socialising anymore. *Pause.* I was so anxious about this session. Getting the balance right, making sure the participants are comfortably discomfited, rather than wounded or frozen. I know they need to feel these emotions, but it feels painful to hear them say they feel sad, or ashamed, or angry. I want to keep them safe, even though being safe isn't in their best interests. And teaching it online is hard. Not because I can't have the pedagogical effects I want—I can—but because there is a joy that comes with sharing the same space. That joy is so important, and so hard to find online. I miss it.

*She begins to cry. Black out.*

#### **Scene 4: "A whirlwind."**

*Lights up on LALI, STAN, and NITA, who are in a breakout room together. They are role-playing a scene from NITA's past.*

NITA (*in character as herself*): Hey guys, we're playing volleyball today. Everyone excited?

STAN (*in character as a student*): Yeah absolutely. *To LALI.* Hey, are you seeing what I'm seeing?

LALI (*in character as a student*): Look at that Asian person. They're so short!

STAN: Where do they come from?

LALI: They're all from China, of course!

STAN: Are we allowed to play them? Like, is this allowed?

NITA: We're all playing the same game. Why don't you try befriending them?

LALI: Oh, we don't speak Chinese. Do we just do karate?

STAN (*as self*): End scene! Guys. That became a bit racist.

NITA: But this is what I'm hearing from students.

LALI: If it's within a context to explore and learn, is it okay? We're using it as an example to show this is a racist scenario.

NITA: You know what we missed? We weren't the kids being talked about. We removed their voices from the conversation.

STAN: We only played one side.

LALI: I felt very uncomfortable as a student. I felt even worse knowing that those stereotypes were in my mind, that I could so easily draw on it, even for a play context.

STAN: I felt physically uncomfortable. I didn't want to say some of the things I said. I came really close and whispered into the laptop. I don't want people to see me as this villain. This isn't who I am.

*Lights fade and come up on ELLA, JAZ, and STAN, who are role-playing a scene from JAZ's past.*

ELLA (*in character as a Maths teacher*): We've been incorporating First Nations content by charting alcoholism and community statistics. So at this stage...

JAZ (*in character as herself*): I'm sorry, you shouldn't be teaching statistics around alcoholism. That is not the right thing to do. That's stigmatising First Nations people as alcoholic.

JONAH (*in character as a school leader*): Could we wait until people have finished talking?

JAZ: No, I'm sorry, I won't wait. You can't do that.

ELLA: Can I meet with you afterwards? I think—I think you're onto something.

JONAH (*as self*): Alright. Let's discuss how it felt to play the different roles.

ELLA: That felt ugly. To be called racist in a public forum. I had this flush. It was absolutely horrible. Very, very confronting. But also illuminating. This is what so many people do, because it's just too hard for them to be personal, flexible. I didn't feel it was me personally being called out. But the character had nowhere to go, except to say, "That's actually true".

JAZ: My frustration was palpable. I felt like I worked with morons. But I have more strength and knowledge than I thought.

*Lights fade and come up on everyone back in the main room. They are reflecting on the session.*

NITA: Do I know what racism is? That really opened my eyes. Have I become complacent?

STAN: I avoid awkward situations, avoid conflict. I hope to work on this. Change does not happen from within comfort zones.

LALI: The task was eye-opening. Do I not see racism? What are my internalised racist tendencies?

JONAH: The more deeply we dug, the more disgusted I was. No teacher challenges racism openly, ever. To see Jaz actually fully challenge the staff briefing sparked so much joy.

ELLA: As teachers we need to ensure that we are inclusive. Not knowing or understanding is a poor excuse for allowing ignorance and bias to exist.

JAZ: Having my scenario chosen, hearing feedback from others about how I handled it, made me realise that I'm making a difference in a small way. There has been change, even if it is slow. Maybe I need to not be too hard on myself.

*STAN sniffs and wipes his nose.*

JONAH: Stan? Are you okay? You seem really sad.

STAN: What, me? Oh yeah, I'm fine. I've just got an itchy nose.

JONAH: Sorry, I didn't mean to make you uncomfortable.

STAN: No, that's kind of amazing actually. We're doing an online PD and someone cares about how I feel. That's special. No one ever asks if I'm okay at school.

JONAH: I would never ask that at school. I'd say that was someone else's job. But I realised last week that taking care of each other is all of our jobs. That means it's mine as well.

LALI: I wasn't expecting to feel such a strong kind of family connection to you all.

NITA: There's a magic happening. *She is becoming very emotional.*

ELOISE: Thank you for travelling together. We're a bit over time so I'll wrap up.

*ELOISE ends the session. Lights down on everyone except ELOISE and NITA.*

ELOISE (*aside*): What a whirlwind. Did everyone finish feeling safe and loved? I wish I could check in after the sessions.

NITA (*aside*): Oh my God, I'm crying.

*Off stage, we hear NITA's daughter calling: Mum! I've got swimming! We have to go!*

NITA: This is rough. Magnificent, but rough.

*She leaves the stage. Black out.*

### ***Scene 5: "Different experiences."***

*Lights up on ELOISE and the PARTICIPANTS, all in character wearing costumes. They have been role-playing teachers at an imaginary school. STAN has been having internet difficulties. JONAH's camera is also off. His daughter sits beside him, drawing.*

ELOISE: Take a minute now to come out of character. Turn off your cameras, take your costumes off, go and get a drink.

*Everyone does so.*

STAN (*aside*): Whoa, that was not what I expected. I didn't realise we were going to be in role-play for so long. People took it so seriously! I was so angry at the internet for not working. I wanted to participate more.

LALI (*aside*): This course is way more interactive than I expected. I'm emotional. It's really solidified how real this is.

JONAH (*aside, looking at his daughter*): This is beautiful. Seeing her say hello, talk back, want to be part of it. Her world is going to be so much better because I did this PL. Even the conversations we have are going to be better.

*ELOISE turns on her screen again.*

ELOISE: And we're back!

*Everyone turns their screens on. The energy is high.*

LALI: Ella! Your cat! I loved it.

ELLA: He's like, "I'm just gonna climb up on you now."

LALI: It was perfect.

JAZ: That felt so good, to stand up in a staff meeting and say, "Actually, can we do this differently?"

NITA: That was quite ballsy of you, as a beginning teacher. There's a lot of power involved. You were really vile as the principal, Eloise.

*Everyone laughs.*

ELOISE: I may have taken it a bit far, but I think it's important.

JAZ: Really important.

ELOISE: That's it from me today. I will see y'all next time.

*The PARTICIPANTS start to leave, but STAN manages to turn his screen on.*

STAN: I just wanted to share something with you all. I always used to say, "I'm part Indigenous, part convict, part Korean." But that's my heritage. I'm not part. I am. That's been the greatest shift for me.

ELOISE: Thank you so much for sharing that. That's lovely.

*Everyone responds joyously, then leaves. Lights down on everyone except ELOISE.*

ELOISE: I feel utterly drained. I get back as well but it really is intense. Still, today struck the right chord. People had fun as well as learning. Stan at the end made me happy cry. Everyone is having very different experiences, and that's okay.

*She smiles as the lights fade. Black out.*

### **Scene 6: "Worth it."**

*Lights up. The stage is set for a picnic. There is bird song and the sound of a river.*

*ELOISE and the PARTICIPANTS enter and greet each other, laughing and hugging. It is a month after the course has ended, the first time they are all meeting in person.*

ELOISE: Being online wasn't the original plan. I wanted to run this in person, but then COVID happened. How did learning online work out for all of you?

LALI: I liked it. I loved being in my own space, particularly when it was difficult emotionally. I don't know if I would have enjoyed it as much in person. There's a weird sense of security with the screen. Face to face is quite confrontational when your discussion is serious and heavy. I felt like there was more openness, no hesitation with disagreeing or sharing praise.

NITA: Just from location, I wouldn't have been able to go in person, 100%. Then this group would have been even more urban and childless! *Everyone laughs.* But it was great being in my community doing this work. When I go to PDs in Melbourne, there's a power and presence that means I'm not so aware of my own community.

This programme being online, gave us regional teachers a voice and ownership over the content, a seat at the table.

STAN: I would have loved to have done it in person. It's a selfish perspective. I'm in a different situation to people with families. I go to Melbourne often. I still took it seriously online. But I missed those post-conference discussions where you're walking away and say, "Let's go get a coffee."

JONAH: I would have committed more in person. Online, it was easier for me to do less, commit less. Not care less. I committed in my own way. I would have been able to do it in person, but I would have gotten anger from my family. It was a stressful time.

JAZ: For me, learning online was definitely beneficial. There were moments when it would have been great to be in person. Actually feel the emotion in the room, and help people out. But online we could connect with so many different locations and people. And from an accessibility perspective, it was nice to be comfortable at home. If it was raining we didn't have to go outside. Being online makes it easier for people to speak up. You're forced to listen to them, fully pay attention, instead of just speaking over one another.

JONAH: Yeah, when I get nervous, my instinct is to make jokes. Sometimes in person that's alright, it can break the ice. But being online, I couldn't do that. By making a joke, you're talking over somebody's important point. It was really positive to just sit back and learn, and speak when I got asked to speak.

LALI: And we could have the chat going while things were being discussed. There were a lot of different avenues where we could unpack things.

ELLA: I would have preferred learning in person. But I really enjoyed meeting people from around Victoria, and not just on Wurundjeri land. Emotionally, it was very personal. Being in the space, we would have been able to read each other more. But on the whole, it was really rewarding.

NITA: I had technical issues, which frustrated me. Sometimes my computer just didn't want to do it. I panicked: "What have I done? Am I clicking the wrong thing?" But I learnt a bit technologically, so that's cool. If we have another pandemic, I'll be able to use it.

*Everyone groans and laughs.*

STAN: It's incredible that people from different parts of Victoria were able to join. But I wonder what that embodied experience would have been in a physical space with people? I don't know. I got self-conscious at times. When you're not looking at yourself, I feel you're freer. But look, it's the end of 2020 when we've done everything digitally, and I'm so over it.

JONAH: We grew to care for each other, in an online environment. There's a chance we cared for each other more. We were really looking at each other, really watching to see how people were feeling. I'm probably wrong. I reckon if we were together, we would have cared a lot for each other too. But differently. We saw each other's partners and cats and dogs. We were in each other's lives more. We got to see what people were like. And that's quite different.

ELLA: But what about you, Eloise? Were you nervous at the start?

ELOISE: Yes. And after every session. I was aware in my head, that learning online was effective. But I'd finish each session feeling drained. I'd put in so much energy and emotion, but from the screen, I don't get as much back. I'd go through this emotional cycle. What if none of them like it? Have I pushed them too far? I learned to manage it. It's a relief to have the sessions over. I also miss them terribly. I sucked the marrow out of them. But it's been really good to come out the other side and go, "Yes. It was worth it."

*As the lights fade, everyone holds out their hands to each other, echoing the online hug. Black out.*

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# Chapter 26

## Leveraging Zoom Video-Conferencing Features in Interview Data Generation During the COVID-19 Pandemic



Mochammad Ircham Maulana 

**Abstract** As the COVID-19 pandemic has triggered strict restrictions for traveling and face-to-face meetings, the utilisation of digitally-mediated communication tools to generate interview data in qualitative research during the pandemic was almost inevitable. Employing autoethnography as a research method, this chapter aims to narrate, analyse, and interpret the author’s personal experiences generating interview data for a qualitative research project via Zoom video-conferencing during the pandemic. It presents several unique benefits of the use of video-conferencing technology that the author found, as well as some possible challenges that the author anticipated when using the technology. In addition, it also elucidates some distinctive platform-specific features of Zoom video-conferencing that the author utilised to maintain high-quality and secured digital interactions. The information contained in this chapter is significant for researchers who are considering utilising video-conferencing technology, especially Zoom, to generate interview data in the future.

**Keywords** Zoom · Video-conferencing · Qualitative research · Interview · Autoethnography · COVID-19 · Research methods

### 26.1 Introduction

In-person or face-to-face interviews are frequently identified as “the most typical and emblematic” (Niero, 2014, p. 316), irreplaceable (Lo Iacono et al., 2016), and superior (Johnson et al., 2019; Seitz, 2016) mode of data generation in the history of empirical qualitative research. There seems to be a consensus and a scholarly tradition among qualitative researchers that interviews are supposed to be conducted through face-to-face manner (Johnson et al., 2019). It is argued that the use of in-person interviews, which requires physical proximity between researchers and participants, allows the researchers to develop personal connection, intimacy, and rapport with

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the research participants more naturally (Johnson et al., 2019). Moreover, the use of this mode of interview enables the researchers to take their participants' verbal and non-verbal cues into account when they analyse their data (Adams-Hutcheson & Longhurst, 2017). Therefore, when interview data is generated through alternatives of in-person interviews, such as through telephone, email, or instant messages, the quality of data gained is often questioned (Thunberg & Arnell, 2021).

It is argued that major harm to the quality of interview data appears whenever researchers and participants cannot directly see each other (Adams-Hutcheson & Longhurst, 2017; Niero, 2014). Therefore, previous researchers recommended that the use of digital technologies in interviews should only be used as an alternative or an additional option especially for participants who have logistical difficulties to meet the researchers face-to-face (see, for example, Lo Iacono et al., 2016; Mirick & Wladkowski, 2019). However, more recently, researchers have started to note the benefits of digitally-mediated data collection in settings of unequal power relationships or when the topic under investigation was sensitive or stigmatised (see, for example, Pretorius & Macaulay, 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic has led to a paradigmatic shift, as these digitally-mediated communication tools transformed into the only viable and prospective tools for qualitative researchers to continue their interview data generation efforts (Gray et al., 2020).

With the physical distancing requirement and the mobility limitation that the COVID-19 pandemic has triggered, it has become very challenging or even nearly impossible for qualitative researchers to generate data through traditional face-to-face or in-person interviews (Lobe et al., 2020; Thunberg & Arnell, 2021). Consequently, the utilisation of digitally-mediated interviews, which include emails, chat/instant messages, telephone, and video-conferencing interviews, for qualitative data collection during the pandemic was almost inevitable (Thunberg & Arnell, 2021). These digitally-mediated tools served as a safe and unique solution to maintain the process of data collection when face-to-face meetings were not possible (Lobe et al., 2020). Given the increasing accessibility and familiarity to the digital communication technology among the society as well as the ubiquitous use of it in the society's daily communication, it should be recognised that the use of digital technology in interviews cannot be forever considered inferior. Particularly, since this technology has enabled users to administer synchronous audio-visual communications in forms of video-conferencing that closely resemble face-to-face meetings, the affordances of utilising this mode of interview should not remain underestimated.

This chapter employs an analytical/interpretative autoethnography research method to explore my experiences of utilising Zoom video-conferencing in my research project. I aim to narrate, analyse, and interpret my experiences to present several unique benefits of the use of video-conferencing technology that I found as well as some possible challenges that I experienced when using the technology. More importantly, this chapter also shows some distinctive platform-specific features of Zoom video-conferencing which I utilised to maintain high-quality and secured digital interactions. As the quality of data collected through video-conferencing technology is highly dependent on researchers' familiarity with and expertise of their choice of platforms (Ahmad, 2020; Lobe et al., 2020), the information contained

in this chapter is significant for qualitative researchers who aim to use the video-conferencing technology, especially Zoom, as a medium of remote interviews. While previous studies on the use of video-conferencing technology in qualitative interviewing mostly focused on only one platform (Skype), this study specifically elaborates the use of Zoom video-conferencing platform that has gained significant popularity and been prevalently utilised among qualitative researchers during the pandemic.

## 26.2 Methodology

Autoethnography is defined as a qualitative research method that utilises a researcher's personal experiences and narratives to analyse and interpret certain cultural experiences in which they are immersed (Holman Jones et al., 2016; Pretorius & Cutri, 2019; Pretorius, 2022a). According to Chang (2016), there are three writing styles frequently used to conduct autoethnography research. It includes "descriptive/self-affirmative, analytical/interpretive, and confessional/self-critical/self-evaluative" (Chang, 2016, p. 39). This research employed an analytical/interpretive autoethnography approach. Therefore, in this chapter, the author's personal narratives are treated "as materials to analyse rather than a centre piece to appreciate" (Chang, 2016, p. 40). It is also necessary for autoethnographers to support their arguments not only with internal data collected from their memory, but also with external data gained from other relevant resources (Chang, 2016). Consequently, I interweave my experiences with data from previous studies on the use of mediated-communication tools especially video-conferencing. My narratives were drawn from my own experiences conducting a qualitative research project about Indonesian senior high school teachers' perceptions and enactments of character education in their teaching activities. The research project involved two pilot interviews with two Indonesian senior high school teacher volunteers and three actual semi-structured interviews with three Indonesian senior high school teachers all of which were conducted through Zoom. These interviews were administered individually and ranged in duration from 45 to 70 min.

## 26.3 Defining Video-Conferencing Technology

It is important to specify what is meant by video-conferencing in this chapter. Video-conferencing technology, which is also known as VoIP (Voice over Internet Protocol) systems, is defined as a digitally-mediated communication tool that enables people residing in different geographical locations to enact a synchronous audio and video communication through the internet (Lo Iacono et al., 2016). Nowadays, there are numerous video-conferencing platforms that people can choose to conduct this form of communication, including Zoom, Skype, FaceTime, Google Meet, Cisco Webex,

GoToMeeting, and various social media applications such as Facebook Messenger or Whatsapp. While these video-conferencing platforms have different user interfaces and features, it generally requires access to compatible digital devices (such as a smartphone, tablet, PC, or laptop) with working speakers, microphone, and camera, and an internet connection. In the context of the interview data generation process in qualitative research, it is argued that video-conferencing technology has resolved the limitations of other mediated communication tools such as telephone, email, and chat/instant messages (Archibald et al., 2019; Thunberg & Arnell, 2021).

Compared to other digitally-mediated communication tools, video-conferencing is a kind of technology that most closely resembles in-person meetings. As it provides both visual and verbal cues, this mode of remote interview may indeed resemble face-to-face meetings (Ahmad, 2020). Therefore, numerous scholars contended that interview data generated through video-conferencing technology should not be regarded as an inferior or a secondary option compared to in-person interviews (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014; Khalil & Cowie, 2020; Weller, 2017). On the contrary, the use of video-conferencing technology should be seen as a viable option to generate interview data (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014). In fact, the benefits of using video-conferencing, including time-effectiveness, cost-effectiveness, flexibility in participant recruitment, are greater than its drawbacks (Sullivan, 2012). Therefore, to some extent, compared to the traditional face-to-face interviewing, the use of video-conferencing technology for remote interviews has several unique benefits for the conduct of qualitative research. In the following sections, I reflect on my own experiences and highlight both the benefits and challenges I experienced while utilising Zoom as a data collection platform. As highlighted below, I also have experienced some difficulties generating interview data through face-to-face meetings during the COVID-19 pandemic time. Thus, I decided to use the Zoom video-conferencing platform.

When I was generating interview data for my qualitative research project during the COVID-19 pandemic, Australia closed its international border and applied various strict restrictions for face-to-face meetings. It was almost impossible for me to get back to Indonesia, my home country, to administer in-person interviews with some Indonesian senior high school teachers whom I wanted to interview. On the other hand, even though some of my colleagues on campus could relatively be research participants, still, face-to-face meetings were highly restricted. Thus, the only viable option was to conduct remote interviews through digitally-mediated communication tools. I decided to use Zoom video-conferencing.

## 26.4 Benefits of Using Video-Conferencing Technology to Generate Interview Data

### 26.4.1 *Increasing Familiarity with Video-Conferencing Technology Within Society*

The utilisation of digital communication technology for interviews in qualitative research was usually associated with sampling bias as it could exclude potential participants who did not have access to it (Cook, 2012). It is argued that the lack of familiarity with computers and the digital communication technology could prevent people from participating in research (Sipes et al., 2022). However, the use of digital communication technology nowadays has become nearly ubiquitous due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and the internet is more accessible and affordable in both developed and developing countries. People are becoming more familiar and more accustomed to the use of this remote communication technology in their daily life (Gray et al., 2020; Khalil & Cowie, 2020). Consequently, researchers need to adapt with this new situation (Nind et al., 2021). They have to remain up-to-date to choose more effective, efficient, and preferable modes of interviewing (Mirick & Wladkowski, 2019). They also need to be sensitive with people's choices whether they want to be interviewed online or in-person (Shapka et al., 2016).

During the COVID-19 pandemic in which people are strongly advocated to stay at home and alter parts of their life into digital communication technology, Lobe et al. (2020) argued that the society's digital literacy has increased even more significantly. In fact, scholars argue that the pandemic has cultivated a new digital revolution (Nind et al., 2021). Zoom video-conferencing platform, for example, has become "a ubiquitous feature of pandemic life" (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2021, p. 374). As of December 2020, this platform has been downloaded 485 million times and reached approximately 350 million daily meetings (from only 10 million in December 2019) (Iqbal, 2021; Molla, 2020). Over 45 million minutes of webinars were hosted on the platform in 2020 and over 90,000 schools used the platform for remote learning during the pandemic (Iqbal, 2021). Moreover, the use of this platform for interviews and focus group discussions in qualitative studies during the pandemic has also become prevalent (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2021). Numerous qualitative studies used this platform for online interviews (see, for example, Archibald et al., 2019; Cahusac de Caux, 2021; Gray et al., 2020; Khalil & Cowie, 2020; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2021). With these conditions, it is argued that Zoom and other similar video-conferencing platforms have high potential to contribute to qualitative research in the future (Archibald et al., 2019). As it becomes easier for people to participate in online interviews in qualitative research, their willingness to participate in the conduct of online interviews is increased (Lobe et al., 2020). This was also my experience.

At the time of the interview schedule, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, my research participants were required to digitally alter their teaching practices into Zoom and Google Meet video-conferencing platforms. Thus, when I told them that I wanted to interview them about my research topic via Zoom video-conferencing, they had no questions about what Zoom is

or how to operate it. Nor did they propose other similar platforms. They were indeed very familiar with the platform. Moreover, I also found that all of my participants had already installed a stable Wi-Fi connection at their homes to facilitate their digital teaching activities and their children's remote learning during the pandemic. I believe that these conditions make it a lot easier for people, especially teachers, to participate in online qualitative interviewing in the future.

### ***26.4.2 Time-Effectiveness and Cost-Effectiveness***

The use of video-conferencing technology is more time-effective and cost-effective compared to in-person interviews (Ahmad, 2020; Gray et al., 2020; Sedgwick & Spiers, 2009; Seitz, 2016; Thunberg & Arnell, 2021). Unlike in-person interviews which require researchers and participants to spend a certain amount of time and money to travel to a certain destination, video-conferencing technology provides an alternative for researchers and participants to meet in a virtual world (Sipes et al., 2022). This way, meetings for the interview can be more affordable and more flexibly scheduled (Ahmad, 2020; Jenner & Myers, 2019). These ideas are in line with my personal experience.

Among others, traveling was one of the most restricted and difficult things to do during the COVID-19 pandemic in Australia. I still remember that during the pandemic people were only allowed to go outside for five essential reasons including shopping for essentials, authorised working or schooling, providing care and medication, getting vaccinated, and exercising for maximum two hours. Going back to my home country, Indonesia, was indeed possible, but the procedure for it was highly complicated and the flight was rare and expensive. Not to mention the cost, time, and effort to get tested for COVID-19 before the flight and the procedure to do quarantine after arriving in Indonesia. To make it more complicated, the participants whom I wanted to interview could definitely be reluctant to meet me in-person since I had just arrived from overseas. Therefore, I found the use of Zoom as the most viable, time-effective, and cost-effective option. For a novice researcher like me who had limitations in time and financial matters, there were no other better alternatives.

### ***26.4.3 Flexible Participant Recruitment***

Similar with other digitally-mediated communication tools, the use of video-conferencing technology has eliminated the need for physical proximity. Consequently, it brings many advantages toward the process of participant recruitment in qualitative enquiries. First, this technology enables researchers to access larger and more diverse participants who may be initially excluded and inaccessible because of geographical or financial barriers (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014; Gray et al., 2020; Jenner & Myers, 2019; Lo Iacono et al., 2016). This way, research can be more democratic (Lo Iacono et al., 2016). Second, video-conferencing technology increases participations for potential participants who are based in isolated or dangerous places (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014; Thunberg & Arnell, 2021). During the pandemic, for example, people were stuck at their homes and were only accessible through online

communication. Third, it also offers a chance for independent recruitment from traditional gatekeepers (Janghorban et al., 2014). Below I describe how these flexibilities helped me to recruit my research participants during the pandemic.

With the availability of Zoom video-conferencing technology, I could flexibly recruit and interview my participants from my bedroom. I did not need to spare a significant amount of time and money to travel to their homes in Indonesia just to interview them. Moreover, at that time, COVID-19 cases in Indonesia were quite high and news about horrible impacts of the virus was spread rapidly through mass and social media. Accordingly, Indonesian people were strongly required to stay at and work from their own homes. They were reluctant to meet other people in-person. If I insisted that I had to interview my participants face-to-face, then the recruitment and interview processes would be more difficult and take longer. For researchers who have a very tight time frame for their research, this flexible participant recruitment process in video-conferencing technology is a great advantage.

#### 26.4.4 *Novel Intimacy*

As video-conferencing interviews facilitate physical separation and allow both researchers and participants to choose their own space to do the interviews, Wahl-Jorgensen (2021) argued that the use of video-conferencing for interviews can result in “novel intimacies” (p. 375). It has been found that when both the researchers and participants reside in their own private places, they can feel more comfortable, less nervous, and less pressured during the interview (Seitz, 2016; Sipes et al., 2022; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2021). The participants become less worried about time and tend to talk longer (Lo Iacono et al., 2016). More importantly, as they are physically separated from the researchers, the risk of discomfort or embarrassment as the result of meeting unknown researchers as well as the risk of being overly intimate or intimidated because of private meeting locations (participants’ house or researchers’ office) is reduced (Jenner & Myers, 2019; Weller, 2017). This kind of novel intimacy, which might be more difficult to achieve in face-to-face meetings, was apparent in my experience below.

All of my participants chose to do the interview in the evening (around 6 until 8 pm) after they finished doing their jobs. During the interview, they resided at their own homes and wore casual clothes. Two of them even brought a cup of coffee with them. They seemed very relaxed and comfortable answering my questions during the interviews. There was not any signal of distress or discomfort. After the interview ended, and the recording was stopped, we even continued our conversation for about 10 until 15 minutes. We talked mostly about their teaching practices during the COVID-19 pandemic and my study in Australia. At the end of the conversation, I told them that I might need to contact and interview them again in case I needed some clarifications regarding what they said during the interview. And they answered yes without any hesitation. I believe that Zoom interview is very convenient for them as it can be easily scheduled and administered remotely from wherever and whenever they feel comfortable.

### 26.4.5 *Development of Rapport*

As direct physical proximity between researchers and participants is absent, many scholars are concerned about how rapport can be developed and maintained in remote interviews (Jenner & Myers, 2019). Some viewed that when researchers and participants do not share certain senses (smell, touch, and taste) such as in face-to-face meetings, “moments of disjuncture” (Adams-Hutcheson & Longhurst, 2017, p. 148), as well as “depersonalisation and disengagement” (Sellen, 1995, p. 144) can potentially occur. However, studies have found that rapport building in interviews does not depend on the kinds of medium used but depends on the topic of research and the personalities of researchers and participants (Lo Iacono et al., 2016). Therefore, the use of digitally-mediated communication tools in interviews do not necessarily result in a reduction or absence of rapport between researchers and participants (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014; Jenner & Myers, 2019; Sipes et al., 2022). Additionally, the use of mediated communication tools does not necessarily mean that rapport is harder to achieve (Weller, 2017); rapport can be built as easily as in offline settings (Lo Iacono et al., 2016).

In the case of video-conferencing technology, Thunberg and Arnell (2021) argued that the availability of both verbal and visual cues in this technology has resolved some negative aspects of other digitally-mediated communication tools in interviews. Even though some of the visual cues from body language could be missed due to the placement of the camera (Lo Iacono et al., 2016), it was found that the availability of visual cues, in addition to the verbal ones, has helped researchers to establish rapport and personal connections more easily with their participants (Archibald et al., 2019). On the other hand, the participants also appreciate the ability to see the researchers (Gray et al., 2020; Mirick & Wladkowski, 2019). As they can listen to and see the researchers in real-time manner, they feel that the researchers understand what they are saying and this makes them feel more connected (Mirick & Wladkowski, 2019). In some cases, video-conferencing interviews can even develop rapport more quickly compared to in-person interviews (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014). Thus, the absence of physical proximity, which the video-conferencing technology facilitates, can potentially solve the “pressure of presence” that is inherent in face-to-face interviews (Weller, 2017, p. 623). Below, I illustrate how the visual and verbal cues helped me to develop rapport with my research participants.

The feature of Zoom video-conferencing that provides both verbal and visual cues in interviews has facilitated me to develop rapport and personal connection more easily with my research participants. With this beneficial feature, I could create a more friendly and informal situation not only with my voice, but also with my facial expressions, gestures, and physical appearances. More importantly, during the interview I could directly see what my participants were doing or expressing so that I could give appropriate responses to it. For example, when they took some time to think or try to remember the answers to my questions, I could stop myself from interrupting them. In addition, when they were answering my questions, I could nod my head, make direct eye-contact, and take necessary notes to show that I was listening closely to what they were saying. These might be impossible to do if I used telephone or other voice-only mode of communications.



### **26.4.6 *Quality Interview Data***

Compared to in-person interviews, the quality of data generated from remote interviews has been frequently questioned and even considered inferior (Jenner & Myers, 2019; Johnson et al., 2019; Thunberg & Arnell, 2021). As such, it is argued that this mode of interviewing should be utilised selectively, and in-person interviews should be placed on a superior position (Johnson et al., 2019). Johnson et al. (2019), for example, contend that the use of remote interviews could likely result in less rich data compared to in-person interviews. In-person interviews, on the other hand, are said to produce richer and more detailed interview data as they bring about more “conversation turns and word-dense transcripts and field notes” (Johnson et al., 2019, p. 1). However, in the case of video-conferencing technology, numerous studies have found empirical evidence that remote interviews conducted via this technology did not result in inferior data quality. In fact, video-conferencing interviews could generate data which is as reliable and in-depth as in-person interviews (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014; Jenner & Myers, 2019) or even better (Jenner & Myers, 2019; Lo Iacono et al., 2016). They also do not result in shorter interview duration (Jenner & Myers, 2019; Johnson et al., 2019; Khalil & Cowie, 2020). The above contentions are in line with my personal experience below.

Overall, I was really satisfied with the quality of interview data I gained from Zoom interviews. I did not see that my data could be better quality if I administered the interviews in-person. The length of the interviews was within my expectation (45-70 minutes). The conversation turns proceeded smoothly. I got the exact information that I was investigating. The participants answered my question in an extensive and comprehensive way. However, I recognise that not all Zoom interviews would result in high quality data. Researchers need to assure every single aspect that affects the quality of digital interactions to gain high-quality data. They need to do what it takes to prevent and anticipate possible problems.

### **26.4.7 *Increased Participant Openness in Sensitive Topics***

It is commonly believed that the presence of direct physical proximity in in-person interviews to discuss personal or sensitive topics is irreplaceable (Seitz, 2016). It is argued that this mode of interview can make research participants more comfortable and more open to answer personal and sensitive questions (Sedgwick & Spiers, 2009; Seitz, 2016). However, it should be recognised that directly meeting unknown researchers alone in a private or public place can also possibly make the research participants feel nervous, uncomfortable, hesitant, or even intimidated (Jenner & Myers, 2019; Sipes et al., 2022). Some research participants might indeed feel more comfortable and relaxed to discuss the sensitive topics when they reside in their own comfortable places and are physically-distant from the researchers (Jenner & Myers, 2019; Sipes et al., 2022). Pretorius and Macaulay (2021) and Pretorius (2022b), for example, highlighted how a large amount of data could be collected through email-based conversations. They, therefore, argued that these types of data collection strategies were appropriate in settings where there is an unequal power relationship or

where topics were particularly fraught or stigmatised (Pretorius & Macaulay, 2021). Therefore, the use of remote interviews to discuss sensitive and personal topics can be useful (Jenner & Myers, 2019; Sipes et al., 2022). A particularly valuable feature of this type of data collection strategy is that the participants possess control over the interview and can leave it at any time simply by clicking on a button (Gray et al., 2020; Janghorban et al., 2014; Thunberg & Arnell, 2021); leaving an in-person interview could be more difficult for participants.

In the case of video-conferencing interviews, numerous studies have found that the use of the video-conferencing technology has resulted in an increased participant openness when discussing personal or sensitive topics (see, for example, Gray et al., 2020; Mirick & Wladkowski, 2019; Sipes et al., 2022; Thunberg & Arnell, 2021). It was found that there are no significant differences in terms of disclosure between in-person and video-conferencing interviews (Jenner & Myers, 2019). In fact, research has found that personal or sensitive topics can be discussed more richly through the medium of video-conferencing technology (Thunberg & Arnell, 2021). By employing this mode of interview, research participants are more open and expressive (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014). With regards to my personal experience, below I described how open and comfortable my participants were during the Zoom interviews.

In my view, the topic of my research was relatively personal and sensitive as it concerned with the participants' professional knowledge and pedagogical approaches on character education (CE). As professional teachers who have been teaching for a relatively long period of time (7–12 years), my research participants could definitely feel embarrassed, judged, or underestimated if they did not show that they possess sufficient professional understanding on what CE entails and how to integrate it within their teaching practices. They could possibly lie to protect their self-esteem and pride. However, during the Zoom interviews, I found that they were very comfortable and open to admit some of their weaknesses in CE. Frequently, they elaborated their answers quite extensively without any prompts. For example, when I asked them about how they enact character education in their teaching practices, they openly admitted that they did not either plan or assess the character education. In addition, when I asked them what they did to enhance their knowledge about CE, they also admitted that they did not try to read the CE policy or join seminars or trainings about it. In my view, the use of Zoom video-conferencing makes research participants more comfortable and more open to answer personal or sensitive issues.

## **26.5 Challenges of Using Video-Conferencing Technology for Remote Interviews**

### ***26.5.1 Lack of Familiarity with Platform-Specific Features***

To conduct a high-quality digital interview through the video-conferencing technology, it is significant for both researchers and participants to be familiar with the features of the platform they use. In fact, various technical issues that occur during video-conferencing interviews were usually due to the lack of familiarity with the

platform (Mirick & Wladkowski, 2019). Therefore, many scholars recommend a pre-session meeting between the researchers and the participants prior to their actual interview sessions (see, for example, Archibald et al., 2019; Lobe et al., 2020). It was argued that the pre-session meeting can prevent unforeseen technical issues and familiarise the participants with the features of the chosen platforms (Archibald et al., 2019; Lobe et al., 2020). In this way, they can be more confident to use the platform (Archibald et al., 2019). However, the pre-session meeting is optional. It is only necessary when the participants are not familiar with the digital platform used for the interview. In my case, as illustrated below, the participants declined my offer to do the pre-session because they already used Zoom for their digital teaching and learning activities. Nevertheless, because it was my first-time administering interviews via Zoom, I decided to conduct pilot interviews with two volunteers to get the general impressions and feedback on how it went.

When I offered my participants that I could organise a pre-session meeting for them, all of them clearly stated that they did not need it. They were confident to use the platform and did not need the pre-session. However, as it was my first-time hosting interview sessions through Zoom, I thought that I needed a general impression and feedback on how it proceeded. Therefore, I decided to administer two pilot interviews with two Indonesian senior high school teacher volunteers. As a result of these pilot interviews, I found some valuable points that were worth considering before conducting my real Zoom interviews. First, when the volunteers used smartphones instead of a laptop and connected to the internet through mobile data instead of Wi-Fi, it was more likely that the connection was not stable. Lags occurred very frequently, and eventually the smartphone became very hot. Thus, in my real interviews I strongly recommended my participants to use laptops and Wi-fi connection. Second, when the volunteers put their device on the floor or sat too closely to the camera, the digital interaction was not maximum. Eye-contact was difficult to do, and sometimes facial expressions were difficult to read. As such, in the real interviews, I asked my participants to put their laptop on a table and slightly sit back from the camera. This way, the video-conferencing interviews became more similar to in-person interviews. I strongly recommend researchers to administer pilot interviews with volunteers to give them impressions and inputs about how the video-conferencing interviews proceed. This way, potential technical problems in the real interviews can be anticipated.

### **26.5.2 Technical Issues**

The main challenge of administering video-conferencing interviews is definitely related to possible occurrences of various technical issues. It includes lags in sound and video, malfunctioning technology, dropped calls and pauses, inaudible or indistinct audio, poor quality video, voice disruptions from participants' surroundings, and power outages (Archibald et al., 2019; De Felice & Janesick, 2015; Gray et al., 2020; Khalil & Cowie, 2020; Mirick & Wladkowski, 2019; Seitz, 2016; Sipes et al., 2022). The quality of digital interactions is highly dependent on how researchers prevent and anticipate these possible problems (Khalil & Cowie, 2020; Thunberg & Arnell, 2021). Failure to address and anticipate these problems can frustrate the participants (Ahmad, 2020), decrease the intimacy between researchers and participants (Seitz, 2016), and affect the quality of digital interaction (Thunberg & Arnell,

2021). Therefore, many scholars (see, for example, Archibald et al., 2019; Lobe et al., 2020) suggested researchers send a set of instructions containing information about necessary internet connection speed, technological equipment, and logistical requirements to ensure a high-quality environment for the interview.

First, it is pivotal for researchers to assure that their participants have access to stable internet connection or bandwidth (Jenner & Myers, 2019; Johnson et al., 2019; Lobe et al., 2020). The use of this stable internet connection can guarantee high quality video and shorter audio transmission lags (Sedgwick & Spiers, 2009). Second, it is also significant for researchers to assure that their participants possess the necessary technological equipment (Khalil & Cowie, 2020; Lobe et al., 2020); this includes compatible digital devices (such as a smartphone, tablet, laptop, or PC) with a good quality speaker, microphone, and camera, and sufficient battery level. It has been found that laptop and desktop computers tend to work better than mobile devices, as devices like smartphones and tablets are more prone to buffering issues and dropped calls (Jenner & Myers, 2019). Lastly, it is also crucial for researchers to ask the participants to reside in a relatively undisruptive and quiet place to minimise disruptions from the participants' surroundings (Jenner & Myers, 2019; Johnson et al., 2019; Thunberg & Arnell, 2021). Ethically, it is important to secure the confidentiality of the interview (Thunberg & Arnell, 2021). As described below, I suggested my participants follow several requirements prior to the interview sessions. As a result, the interviews went well without any notable technical issues.

To anticipate technical problems during my Zoom interview, five days before the interview schedule, I talked to my research participants about several technological and logistical requirements that they better fulfil during the interview. Before the interview began, I reconfirmed again that these requirements had been fulfilled. It includes using a laptop instead of a smartphone, residing in a relatively quiet and bright room, wearing earphones with working microphone and speaker in it, connecting to stable Wi-Fi signals, sitting not too close to the camera, putting laptop on a table instead of the floor, and having sufficient battery level. Fortunately, my participants had no difficulties in fulfilling these requirements. In fact, they were accustomed to applying these requirements in their remote teaching activities during the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, lags in sound and video almost never happened during the interview. The image and sound were clear, and there were no disruptions from the participants' surroundings. In addition, I could see my participants' upper body very clearly, and the conversation felt more intimate as we listened to each other through earphones. I believe that the fulfilment of these technological and logistical requirements holds a crucial role to determine the quality of digital interaction as well as the quality of data gained from it.

## **26.6 Distinctive Features of Zoom Video-Conferencing**

### ***26.6.1 Intuitive Functionality***

Research has found that research participants perceived Zoom as an easier platform to use than other similar video-conferencing platforms (Archibald et al., 2019; Gray

et al., 2020). In addition, it is rated above other interview media such as face-to-face, telephone, and other video conferencing platforms (Archibald et al., 2019). The user interface in Zoom is considered user-friendly and straightforward, and has intuitive functionality (Archibald et al., 2019). Thus, to function effectively in Zoom, researchers or participants do not need to possess sophisticated digital literacy. Reflecting on my own user experience in Zoom, as I illustrate below, I found that using Zoom was indeed simple.

As a relatively new user of Zoom video-conferencing, I could say that the user interface and features of Zoom are very easy to understand and use. I do not think that users, either researchers or participants, need to possess sophisticated digital literacy to function effectively in Zoom. People with decent digital literacy can use it very easily.

### ***26.6.2 Uniquely Generated Links, Waiting Rooms, and Locking Features***

Zoom allows researchers to selectively invite their participants into a Zoom meeting through uniquely generated links and meeting ID (Archibald et al., 2019). I chose to share a uniquely generated link to the participants on which they could simply click to join the meeting.

I shared a unique generated link to invite my research participants to join my interview session. Each of my participants received different links, and these links will be expired as soon as the meeting ends. In my opinion, compared to the meeting ID and password, the use of this unique link was a lot simpler. Obviously, typing meeting ID and password might be more effortful than just clicking a link.

Even though researchers can selectively invite their research participants through a unique generated link or a meeting ID with password, the issue of Zoom-bombing, in which uninvited guests somehow find the meeting link or guess the meeting ID to join and intrude the meeting, might still occur. This is particularly problematic in research settings, as participant confidentiality is crucial. While this occurrence might be more prone to group meetings in which the link for the meeting is published publicly, still, it is better to anticipate it in any Zoom meeting. Therefore, Zoom has waiting room and locking features. The waiting room feature enables researchers to place new participants in a waiting room before they can get into the meeting; the researcher can, therefore, control who enters the space at any time. Meanwhile, the lock meeting feature allows researchers to prevent unknown participants from joining the meeting. Below I narrate why I believed that activating this lock meeting feature is important during Zoom interviews.

To anticipate intruders to get into my interview meetings, I activated the feature of lock meeting provided in the Zoom security option. This way, after the participant joined the meeting, no one could join, intrude, or interfere with the interview sessions. Even though the occurrences of the Zoom-bombing might be very rare, I believed that as a researcher, I was responsible to anticipate such possible problems before it actually happened.

### ***26.6.3 Virtual Background Feature***

Zoom has a unique feature called virtual background that enables users, or in this case researchers and participants, to change the background of their video into a picture of their choice. Zoom provides several default options, but users can also use pictures that they choose from their own hard drives. As illustrated below, I found that utilising the virtual background feature is beneficial in Zoom interviews.

During Zoom interviews, two of my research participants and I utilised the virtual background feature. I used a picture of a Monash university building (learning and teaching building), and two of my participants respectively used a bookshelf picture and a picture representing a building of his workplace. I believe that this distinctive feature that Zoom provides is very useful in remote interviews. First, it allows users to choose their own self-presentations. Second, it helps them to protect their privacy (researcher and participants cannot see each other's home properties). Third, it helped them to focus on the topic of interviews instead of being distracted by things around them.

### ***26.6.4 Screen Sharing Feature***

One of the most distinctive features of Zoom is the screen sharing feature. This feature allows both researchers and participants to share their screen display to each other. In the case of the researchers, this feature is very useful to show crucial documents about their research, and some pictures, videos, or other visual materials to ignite a conversation with their research participants (Archibald et al., 2019). This way, the participants can get more complete and clearer information about the research. Participants can also share their screens with the researcher which allows the sharing of artefacts in research projects. Below I describe how this specific feature helped me to explain the focus of my research and to share some useful points to consider during the interview to my participants.

Before I began to record my interviews with my research participants, I used the screen sharing feature to display a powerpoint document containing some information about my research. It included the aims of the research, some major open-ended questions that I was willing to ask them, the explanatory statement, the ethics approval, and the consent forms that had been signed by them. Moreover, I also displayed some points which might be useful for them to remember during the interviews. For example, they did not need to talk fast, they could ask for a break, they could bring a drink, and they had time to think about their answer. By digitally displaying and explaining these information and documents, instead of showing it through the camera or saying it verbally or explaining it through emails, I believed that my participants got a clearer picture on what the research was about and felt more ready to participate in the interviews.

### ***26.6.5 Recording Feature***

When researchers access Zoom through its downloadable version, instead of through browsers, they can record their interview sessions as well as save it in their local drive

or in the Zoom cloud (Archibald et al., 2019; Lobe et al., 2020). This is relatively more secure compared to other video-conferencing platforms such as Skype, for example, that uses third party services or add-ons to record the audio or video file (De Felice & Janesick, 2015; Lo Iacono et al., 2016). Moreover, in Zoom, the recorded files are only available for the researcher hosting the meeting. Therefore, it is more confidential compared to Skype that shares the recording link to all the participants (Lobe et al., 2020). In addition, for ethical reasons, Zoom asks for participants' consent to record the interview. As illustrated below, this recording feature of Zoom video-conferencing has helped me to maintain the confidentiality of my interview sessions.

Zoom allowed me to record my interview sessions without any add-ons or third-party services. More importantly, it gave me an option to save the recording files in my own computer drive. In my view, this option helped to maintain the confidentiality and security of my interview sessions. No one, including the participants, but me, as a researcher and host of the meeting, could access the recording files. The recording files (both audio only and audio-video versions) were available after I ended the meeting. Moreover, what I like about Zoom is that it asks participants' consent to record the meeting.

## 26.7 Conclusion

This chapter aimed to narrate, analyse, and interpret my experiences generating interview data through Zoom video-conferencing platform during the COVID-19 pandemic. It has elucidated some unique benefits that I found from utilising Zoom video-conferencing platform for online interviews. These benefits included the increasing familiarity with video-conferencing technology within society, time-effectiveness and cost-effectiveness, flexible participant recruitment, novel intimacy, quality interview data, and increased participants' openness. In addition, I described some challenges which I had to address and anticipate when conducting interviews through the video-conferencing technology including technical problems and the lack of familiarity with platform-specific features. Lastly, I have also marked out some distinctive features of Zoom video-conferencing which I utilised to maintain the quality, confidentiality, and security of my digital interactions during the research project. These features include the intuitive functionality of Zoom, as well as the unique meeting links, waiting rooms and locking meetings, virtual backgrounds, screen sharing, and recording features.

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# Chapter 27

## Pixelated Participation: A Ph.D. Student's Notes of Online Data Generation During the COVID-19 Pandemic



Yeni Karlina 

**Abstract** The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted many aspects of life globally. Similarly, the imposed travel restrictions and border closures in Australia have prevented me from travelling to Indonesia for my Ph.D. fieldwork. Due to this issue, I had to move my interviews, focus groups, and narrative writing online. I conducted my interviews and focus group discussions with English teachers in Indonesia through synchronous platforms such as WhatsApp and Zoom. In addition, I utilised a private Facebook group to facilitate narrative writing activities which were pivotal in my data generation process. Many research studies (see, for example, Archibald et al., 2019; Deakin and Wakefield, 2014; Tuttas, 2015) have documented how online research has afforded both the researcher and participants with flexibility, cost effectiveness, and convenience in a research project with time restraints, geographical distance, and other logistical issues. However, a story about online data generation in the COVID-19 context from a Ph.D. student's perspective remains underexplored. In this autoethnographic account, I will reflect on the process of online data generation in the context of my Ph.D. study. I argue that the online data generation in my research has yielded a “guarded optimism” (Madge and O’Connor, 2004, p. 9) for synchronous online data generation as an equal, rather than secondary option for qualitative research data generation which often uses face-to-face interviews and focus groups as the “gold standard of interviewing” (Hine, 2005, p. 4). Through this story I hope to enrich conversations about the possibilities and challenges of doing online data generation for a Ph.D. study during a global pandemic.

**Keywords** Online data generation · Video-conferencing · Narrative · Critical reflection · COVID-19 · Qualitative research · Research methods

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## 27.1 Introduction

In this chapter I will provide a critical reflection of how I pivoted to adapt my data generation methods due to the COVID-19 pandemic. I will explain how I invited my participants and the forms of data generation methods after the pandemic compelled me to make several modifications to my research design. The importance of qualitative researchers in social science to be reflexive and mindful of how their experiences, cultures, and beliefs influence their research process has been widely explored (see, for example, Moon, 2006; Pillow, 2003). In my Ph.D. research, for instance, I have been keeping a research journal that allows me to reflect on my research process. This habit has encouraged me to be a reflexive researcher who does not merely report facts (Moon, 2006). For example, I began my Ph.D. project by constructing autobiographical narrative texts to interrogate my own experiences, assumptions, and beliefs; these reflective texts were key factors that inspired my research project. In a similar fashion, this chapter was born from one of the research journal entries that I kept for my Ph.D. project. Below is an example of a journal entry which captured my worries and weariness in navigating the challenges of rethinking my data generation plans during the COVID-19 pandemic.

May 2020

Doing a Ph.D. is super-duper hard even at the best of times. It is often isolating and draining. The COVID-19 pandemic has put us on an even more challenging path. Fieldworks are disrupted or even cancelled, research sites inaccessible, work space at the campus closed, international students stranded, and study motivation plummeted.

Due to the travel restrictions during these pandemic times, I needed to cancel my planned travel to Indonesia for my data collection. I planned face-to-face interviews, narrative writing occasions, and focus groups with my teacher participants. With the border closure going on, I needed to throw those plans out of the window! As there is no end to this pandemic in sight anytime soon, I began to see the possibilities of my research year as following a storyline, the story of 2020. Knowing that I was unlikely to be doing my planned fieldwork, I continued to think how I might do the data collection differently and make tangible progress.

Tick tock tick tock... I felt like I was under a significant pressure to read, synthesise, and make decisions promptly about how I would go about my data collection.

To explain this experience and generate knowledge based on my reflection on this experience, I used autoethnography as a method of inquiry. As a contemporary research method, autoethnography moves away from the objectivity of positivism and privileges reflexivity to represent and interpret personal experience and cultural practice (Adams et al., 2017; Pretorius & Cutri, 2019; Pretorius, 2022a). The rest of this chapter will document some key autoethnographic reflections which I engaged in during the online data generation processes. Autoethnography allows a meshing of the personal and communal, the private and public, to facilitate a space where I can reflexively “identify and interrogate the intersections between the self and social life” (Adams et al., 2017, p. 1). As such, autoethnography enables me to write about my personal experience of generating data online during the COVID-19 pandemic

and locate this personal experience in a larger social context of a doctoral study at an Australian university and the Indonesian contexts where my participants work and live.

### 27.2 Pivoting to Online Data Generation

At the university where I am currently completing my doctoral programme, a Ph.D. candidate has to pass three milestone review seminars where we present our progress in front of a panel consisting of academics in relevant fields. I finished my first milestone (termed confirmation of candidature) in late February 2020. Having finished the first review, I was ready to travel to Indonesia for my data generation process. However, while I was preparing for the trip, in mid-March 2020, the WHO declared COVID-19 as a global pandemic. As a result, newly imposed travel restrictions and border closures prevented me from travelling to Indonesia for my planned fieldwork. Consequently, I had to make some changes from my initial data generation plan to my current one as illustrated in Fig. 27.1.

The most and perhaps only feasible course of action was to move my interviews, focus groups, and narrative writing online. I then started to look into some literature on online data generation in qualitative research. Much research (see, for example, Archibald et al., 2019; Deakin & Wakefield, 2014) has documented how online research has afforded both the researcher and participants a flexibility, cost effectiveness, and convenience in a research project with time restraints, geographical distance, and other logistical issues with which to contend. The previous chapter (Maulana, 2022), for example, detailed the various affordances of Zoom as a platform to conduct online semi-structured interviews. Moreover, researchers with the

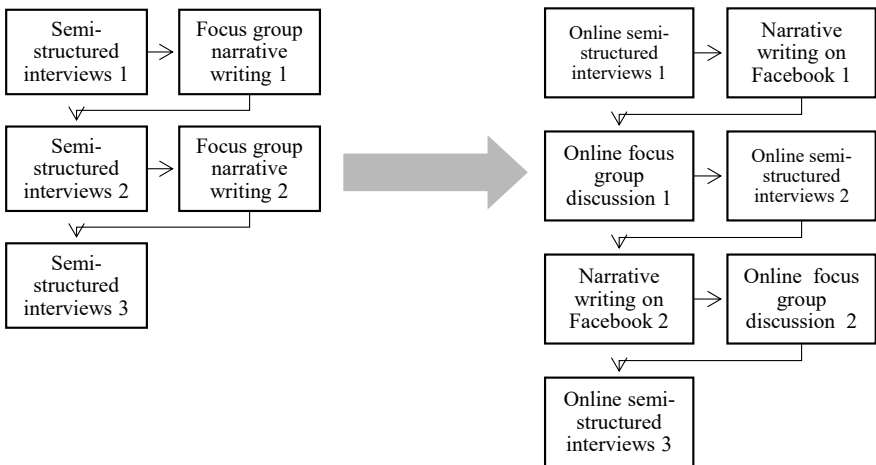


Fig. 27.1 Changes to data generation plan

experience of conducting online research have reported that the quality of responses obtained through online research is similar to those from more traditional methods (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014; Madge & O'Connor, 2004; Tuttas, 2015). For example, Pretorius and Macaulay (2021) and Pretorius (2022b), managed to accumulate a rich and in-depth collection of data through the use of email-based conversations. It was, therefore, reasonable that I felt cautiously optimistic about these (initially undesirable) changes to my project.

Indeed, this change to my project, despite its limitations, has widened the range of participants and increased the depth of participation in my project. Initially I only invited teachers who had completed their PPG programme (a pre-service teacher training programme) from Siswa University where I was teaching. However, as word spread, teachers from different cities began to express their interest in participating, as did PPG graduates from different institutions. Despite this positive development, I was aware that the online mode of data generation in my research potentially affected my access to participants. As this research required participants to have a stable internet connection, I remember having to exclude one participant who would have participated if this research were to be conducted face-to-face. She apologised that she needed to cancel her participation because she did not have a reliable internet connection in her area.

The issue of the digital divide has been identified as one of the major limitations of online research. Some regions and groups in the world are *less connected* by virtue of their circumstances—nationality, region, income, age, and gender (Mann & Stewart, 2000; O'Connor & Madge, 2017). Due to this limitation, data representativeness has therefore been problematised especially (and ironically) in online research which often claims to be “unrestricted by geographical boundaries” (O'Connor & Madge, 2017, p. 424). Having an awareness that the teachers who participated in this research mostly came from more urban areas in various cities in Indonesia with better internet connections, access to computers, and digital competence, I strived to select teachers from a range of different sociocultural settings in the hope to generate rich data. I ended up with eight English teacher participants who completed their PPG programme in four different universities, and work at schools of different socio-economic conditions in many different cities in Indonesia.

### 27.3 Reflecting on Online Semi-Structured Interviews

I began my semi-structured interviews in May 2020. The sessions were conducted individually with each participant on a video conferencing platform of their choice. For the interviews and focus group discussions, I chose synchronous video conferencing rather than asynchronous non-visual communication mediums such as telephone or email. I was guided by researchers with experience of doing video conferencing interviews in their studies, such as Archibald et al. (2019) and Deakin and Wakefield (2014). I believed that an online interview on video conferencing platforms might be the closest thing to face-to-face interactions because I could see

and respond to non-verbal cues such as gestures and facial expressions. I offered my participants several choices of platform on which we could hold the interviews, including Zoom, Skype, WhatsApp, and Facebook Messenger. This step was particularly important because choices related to technology should be made by considering the participants' preference, familiarity, and digital competence (Salmons, 2016).

In my study, some teachers' decisions to choose (or not choose) a certain platform was also influenced by the emotion evoked by one or another digital platform. In the Indonesian context, WhatsApp or WA (a free text and voice messaging app that also allows one-on-one or group video conferencing) has been a popular choice for online learning during the pandemic times due to its affordability and familiarity. My teacher participants reported that they had been using the application in their work, explaining all communication with their students, colleagues, and students' parents happen on the platform. As a result, one of them coined the term "*WAnxiety*" to describe her emotional response to communication on the platform. Others confessed that the high volume of chats that they need to respond to "24/7" was "*emotionally draining*" and "*overwhelming*", making them feel like a member of an "*online shopping admin team*". Consequently, some teachers chose "*anything but WhatsApp*" for our interviews. In the end, Zoom was the most popular choice.

Most of the interviews lasted for about 45–90 min, extending over five months. We faced relatively minimal technical problems during the interviews. I brought a series of questions to these interviews, but I always planned to use these flexibly, making the interviews semi-structured in nature (Seidman, 1998). My intention was to treat the interview as a conversation about professional practice rather than a question–answer exchange (Mishler, 1986). I was aware of how easily an interview can create a binary between the researcher and the researched. I was concerned that my participants would see me as the *researcher*; I did not want to be thought of as some kind of expert who knows something they may not because they might be hesitant and fearful of giving me *the wrong answer*. This concern was especially salient because I had taught and worked closely with some of my participants during their PPG programme. I had to admit that it was sometimes difficult to alter relationships and identities that had been established, especially with the participants I knew before the research. Each of us came to the interviews with different expectations and purposes (Seidman, 1998). Therefore, at the start of each interview I emphasised that I was excited to learn from them and to listen to their stories.

Positioning one's researcher self in an online research project has drawn some attention in the literature. As mentioned earlier, I intended to set up the interviews as a space for a conversation which subsequently required a more egalitarian positioning between my participants and myself as we engaged in dialogue. In order to do this, establishing rapport and building and maintaining interpersonal relationships were essential. Building rapport in online platforms can be more challenging than in face-to-face interview settings (Archibald et al., 2019). This could be attributed to the nature of online communication which tends to be more direct than face-to-face interactions (O'Connor & Madge, 2017). In contrast, other studies have found that online synchronous interview participants were typically more responsive than face-to-face participants, and developed rapport more quickly (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014;

Tuttas, 2015). Similarly, Archibald et al. (2019) mention that video-conferencing enables the researcher and participants to see each other and respond to non-verbal cues, adding a personal touch which is crucial in building rapport and interpersonal connection.

Although I did not compare online interviews to face-to-face interviews directly, I did not experience any difficulty in establishing rapport with my participants—certainly not to the extent reported in other studies about video conference interviewing (see, for example, Abell et al., 2006; Krouwel et al., 2019; Rowley, 2012). If anything, the current COVID-19 circumstances have somehow helped me to create an initial bond with my participants before the interviews. Several studies (see, for example, Archibald et al., 2019; O'Connor & Madge, 2017) have documented that shared characteristics between the researcher and participants are likely to result in a good level of rapport, yielding an atmosphere which is “anonymous, safe, and non-threatening” (O'Connor & Madge, 2017, p. 11). Both my participants and I were teachers who had to navigate the challenges of remote learning using a variety of online platforms. It was not uncommon that we spent a few minutes before or after the interviews exchanging resources for online teaching; other times, we taught each other about several Zoom features that we used in our online teaching. Another rapport building opportunity afforded by online interviews was the experience of collaboratively overcoming initial technical difficulties, which facilitated collaborative problem-solving between my participants and myself. However, I was also mindful that as we are currently teaching in different contexts: I teach English in an Australian institution with relatively well-resourced online learning facilities and my participants teach in Indonesian schools with more issues with online learning. Consequently, I needed to be more sensitive in sharing my experiences in order not to “paradoxically exemplify differences” between myself and my teacher participants (Abell et al., 2006, p. 241).

## 27.4 Private Facebook Group Forum as a Method

Another change that I needed to make to my original data generation plans was to modify the teacher writing sessions that I had planned to hold face-to-face. I initially planned to adopt a strategy of generating teacher stories through dialogic and collaborative teacher professional learning programmes, such as the STELLA and *stella 2.0* in Australia (cf. Doecke et al., 2008; Parr & Bulfin, 2015), *Writing for the Development of Learning and Thinking* programme in Israel (Aharonian, 2017), and critical autobiography writing during pre-service teacher education in the United Kingdom (Turvey & Lloyd, 2016). These programmes had suggested models for creating social spaces where teachers could gather at a specific time and place to write and discuss their writing and other issues related to their work as educators. However, these plans could not be realised because of the COVID-19 pandemic and the accompanying lockdowns.

I then decided to create two online forums on two different platforms in order to achieve my goal of providing teachers with a space for writing and sharing their stories with each other. I created an asynchronous teacher forum on a Facebook private group in which teachers could write their teaching narratives in their own time. A Facebook private group was chosen as the platform for teacher writing as it allows group members to post their writing as well as read and react to other members' post, with no significant security and privacy issues. Besides, most teachers in my Ph.D. study are Facebook users and are, therefore, quite familiar with its features. By encouraging them to write in an online teacher community, I hoped to reduce the solitariness of their writing experience which is likely to contribute to teachers' reluctance to write as identified by researchers such as reported by Locke (2015) and Whitney and Badiali (2010). After most of them had posted their writing to the group and read each other's writing, I also held focus group discussions on Zoom in which the teachers could talk with each other about their writing, and about their professional, and sometimes personal, lives. The following is an example of a writing activity undertaken by my participants in the Facebook group:

### [ACTIVITY 3] NARRATIVE WRITING

Hi everyone. See the Wordle below? I made this Wordle from the written reflections that you've submitted to me. It's interesting that the most frequently used word is 'students'. The word appears 44 times in your writing. It emphasises how much you put your students at the centre of your teaching! 😊

Time for another reflection! Read the following prompts

A (Dis)Connection: English from Home

Earlier this year Minister Nadiem Makarim announced that the rest of schooling in 2020 will be held remotely. One of the instructions echoed by him and many education stakeholders during this COVID times is to make student learning as contextual as possible. Without a reference to a strict academic curriculum like before, subject English is very likely to struggle with the very aspect of contextuality and relevance in Indonesia. As we know Indonesians very rarely use English in their everyday life, making exposure to English very limited for both us teachers and our students. You told me in our interviews that many students and yourselves as teachers often struggle to meaningfully use English in your life. Both yourself and your students probably only use English in the classroom. Now that it has been moved online, ada potensi berkurangnya kesempatan dan ruang untuk berinteraksi dengan Bahasa Inggris. As a teacher, how do you deal with this?

Ada nggak momen dimana muridmu mempertanyakan buat apa belajar Bahasa Inggris kalau lingkungan rumah saja nggak ada yang pake bahasa Inggris? Has English language and subject completely lost its relevance during this pandemic time?



What about you? Dulu pas ngajar face to face mungkin kalian menggunakan lebih banyak Bahasa Inggris? Now that professionally you're not required to use as much English, apalagi kalo kalian ngajarnya Cuma lewat WA group, how has it affected you and your relationship with using English? Apakah kalian tetap mencoba engage untuk setidaknya menjaga skill bahasa Inggris kalian dengan blogging, vlogging, reading, atau journal writing?

Tell me a story of how you've been dealing with this particular aspect in your teaching. What else has been missing from education? You don't need to answer all the questions above. Use them as inspirations to guide your stories. You can come up with your own themes and stories that you think are interesting!

Sama seperti written reflection yang pertama dulu, here are several prompts yang mungkin bisa digunakan untuk guiding cerita kalian:

- § Describe and explain using questions: When and where did it happen? Who was involved? What was the sequence of events? Who said what? Who did what?
- § Provide rich, concrete atmosphere: Feelings during and after the incident? What emotions were evoked?
- § Analyse the general meaning and significance for you as a teacher: What does the incident tell you about teaching and learning? Can you relate it to literature/ theories that are important to you? Can you relate it to your beliefs as a teacher?
- § Post your story to our group
- § Read a number of stories written by other teachers in the group and respond on the comment section

I want you to share your stories with each other before we have our next Focus Group Discussion. I hope you can relate with each other better in order to find a better way to move forward in your teaching. We're in this together!

Let me know if you have any question. Good luck! 😊

I found that at first many teachers were quite shy to post their writing to the group. Unlike participants in a study by MacLeod et al. (2017) who viewed other participants' contributions in the group as inspiration to people who were hesitant to contribute creatively, many participants in my study sometimes felt discouraged to share their writing due to embarrassment of comparison. They sometimes asked if they could send me their narratives privately, believing that their writing was "*not good enough compared to X's writing*" or that their writing was "*in Indonesian, unlike Y's writing which is in English*"—all making them feel *minder* (Bahasa Indonesia word for "inferior"). I had to encourage them that their writing was valuable and I was more interested in their writing as a form of reflection, rather than a product that would get judged for its flaws. In between posts, I often posted to motivate them to write and to remind them of the collegial and collaborative nature of this activity.

This encouragement is particularly crucial to help teachers move beyond their lack of experience and confidence in writing (Bulfin, 2005; Locke, 2015).

Overall, I was quite happy with my participants' engagement with the reflective writing activities, despite a significant delay in the participation of many teachers in the second round of teacher writing. I remember writing an email to my supervisors to express my worry about my research timeline due to this delay.

It has been 3 weeks since I put up prompts for teachers' writing in our group but only two out of eight have responded by posting their writing. It has made me question if I have been asking too much from them, and at the same time not providing them with the support and environment in which they're comfortable with writing.

I have been sending them encouragement to try writing with the hope to provide "active support, encouragement, and opportunities" (Bulfin, 2005, p. 55). I provided them with samples. I had fun with their writing and made a Wordle in the group. Some of them said they're not confident English writers. Well I have said that the writing does not have to be in English and practising their English writing is just a bonus and not the main goal of this activity. Some of them said that they haven't got the time to write. Fair enough. Last week The Ministry of Education issued some changes to the curriculum for online learning. Schools are adjusting to the suggested changes and that's probably why my teacher participants haven't been able to complete their writing. I don't mind the wait, but I don't particularly like the feeling that comes with the wait. Instead of introducing a different way of reflecting and learning from their experience, have I been forcing them into writing? How do they feel about this whole process? How long do I need to wait until I move on to the next phase of my data generation? I hope that they have more time this week so that we can move to our second focus groups.

One reason that could possibly explain this delay, as reported by Kuswandono (2013) in his study of pre-service teacher reflective practices in an Indonesian university, is the Indonesian collectivist culture. This is likely to mediate teachers' (un)willingness to engage in individual reflection whereas many preferred a group reflection because it was a less confronting method of reflection. However, I did not suspect this to be the reason in the delay of my participants' writing. I knew from their first round of narrative writing that they were able and willing to generate rich insightful accounts of their experience. This delay could possibly better be explained by the problematic timing of this activity due to the COVID-19 pandemic. For instance, as explained in my email to my Ph.D. supervisors above, I did acknowledge that the change to online teaching required teachers to spend much of their time planning the transition to online teaching, making time for research participation quite limited. This development reminded me that I undertook this research with humans and this project took place in—as one of my supervisors said in his response to my email—“*real world, where these things happen!*”

## 27.5 Zoom Focus Group or a Teacher Forum?

As mentioned earlier, to follow up the Facebook group activity, I held two focus group discussion (FGD) sessions virtually. These sessions happened synchronously on Zoom as I believed this mode promised greater spontaneity, group interaction, and higher levels of engagement on the topic (Madge & O'Connor, 2004). The discussion lasted for 60–90 min. I prepared a set of guiding questions to provide a broad structure for the sessions. However, the flow of the conversations tended to evolve naturally as participants proposed their own questions and comments about their professional practices. The discussion was further enhanced by features such as the share screen function, which allowed them to share interesting articles or resources that they found as a prompt for discussion. Not only did they use these sessions as a space for professional conversations, but participants who knew each other in the PPG programme prior to this research also got to catch up on personal lives, making ice-breaking not too difficult at the start of the discussions. Occasionally, we used a few minutes at the start of the session to teach each other about some features on Zoom that could be useful for teaching, such as polls, breakout rooms, annotation, etc.

By being open to issues which may not have been specified in the pre-planned questions, I expected to generate a richer range of data and experiences from the participants, rather than just issues which I may have brought to the discussion from my own experience. I wanted my participants to come to the focus group with the expectation that they were allowed to exercise their agency, to discuss issues that mattered to them as English teachers. I wanted to hopefully leave them *“feeling like we are not being researched yeah guys? I’m feeling like I’m in a teacher sharing session”* as one of my participants described at the end of our first focus group discussion. I believed that the flexibility of the online focus group warranted a possibility for a continuous engagement with them. At the end of our last interviews most of these teachers suggested the potential for making this focus group sessions a regular forum for them to talk about teaching. This is something that they believed was very timely as the COVID-19 pandemic has made many of them feel *“alone”* and *“disconnected”* from teacher communities.

## 27.6 Conclusion

In this critical reflection I hope to illustrate that the online data generation in my research has yielded a “guarded optimism” (Madge & O'Connor, 2004, p. 9) for synchronous online data generation as an equal rather than secondary option for qualitative research data generation, which often uses face-to-face interviews and focus groups as the “gold standard of interviewing” (Hine, 2005, p. 4). In maximising this potential of online platforms as a safe and productive space for data generation in educational research, I have demonstrated that researchers must be mindful of several key aspects: recruitment of participants, participant’s access to the internet,

choice of online platform and technology, and the development of online rapport. Table 27.1 presents key questions for researchers to consider when engaging in online data generation.

Through reflecting on my experience of doing my data generation online during the COVID-19 pandemic, I learned about the very humane side of undertaking research—that relationality and relationships between myself as a researcher and my participants underlie the entire research process. Our lives happen side by side with the data generation activities. Yes, first and foremost they are teachers in my study; however, in our video conference interviews.

**Table 27.1** Key aspects to consider in online data generation

Key aspects	Questions to consider
Recruitment of participants	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● How will the online participant recruitment be carried out?</li> <li>● How do we make sure that our participants have Internet, IT competence, and safe space for the data generation (Deakin &amp; Wakefield, 2014)?</li> <li>● Digital divide: who do we include/exclude by our decision to conduct the research online (Madge &amp; O’Connor, 2004; O’Connor &amp; Madge, 2017)?</li> </ul>
Participants’ access to internet	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Have we ensured our participants have access to the internet?</li> <li>● Is there anything we can do to support participants’ access to the internet (e.g., the provision of financial compensation that our participants can use to purchase mobile data)?</li> </ul>
Choice of online platform and technology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● What kind of data do we need, e.g. text, audio, audio-visual data and communication (Deakin &amp; Wakefield, 2014)?</li> <li>● Have we considered the response time (i.e., synchronous or asynchronous) (O’Connor &amp; Madge, 2017, p. 417)?</li> <li>● Have we considered the preference of the research participants (e.g. their (un)familiarity with a certain platform, internet reception, or affective atmosphere invoked by a certain platform)?</li> <li>● Have we considered our and our participants’ IT competence in choosing online platforms to use in the research?</li> </ul>
The development of online rapport	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Have we considered the challenges of online interactions (e.g., the directness of online interviews, lack of visual cues, the ‘head shot’ style, and technical difficulties)?</li> <li>● Have we considered various strategies to build rapport in online interactions, such as pre-interview contact and exploring similarities to build rapport?</li> </ul>

I also saw them as: a daughter of a father who ‘crashed into’ the interview session, a mother who sometimes had to watch her kids while on a Zoom call with me, a wife of a husband who made her a cup of tea as we started the interview, and many other identities. Seeing my participants in their most private of worlds has made me approach them with even more respect, humility, and appreciation of their time and participation.

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# Chapter 28

## The Unforgotten Pre-service Teachers [Participants]: Did the Pandemic Affect Learning While on Practicum? What Uncompleted Pre-service Teachers' Mentoring Experiences [Data] Can Tell Us



Alberto Maringer Duran 

**Abstract** In education, practical, experiential, or experimental research is usually based on a number of participants from whom we collect data. We contact them and explain their role in the study and ask them to kindly devote their time to us. Our final dataset (data “useful for our research”) is a portion of our data corpus (all data collected). The story we finally print is the one from the dataset purposefully selected from the data corpus. The myriad of reasons given for not including some of our participants’ data in the dataset include the following: participants’ lack of enthusiasm, punctuality, timely delivery of audio recorded data, or data quality. The pandemic outbreak impacted my participants’ lives, workplaces, and studies. Their practicum experience was impacted too, so some of them could not complete their own teaching rounds. As a consequence, they could not provide enough data to analyse in order to answer my research questions. They tried, but it was not possible for some of them. However, all the data collected, my data corpus, is valuable to me as a teacher educator and as a mentor teacher. This is a twofold story: my participants’ troubles and commitment during their practicum, and my own troubles collecting data while not neglecting what my unselected participants did for me. The pandemic’s devastating effects in teacher education programmes in Chile is affecting pre-service teachers’ practicum experience, their relationship with their students and their relationship with their mentor teachers, both university-based tutors and school-based mentors. Knowing the needs and experiences of pre-service teachers who did not get a completed experience in their allocated university-partner schools may help us to better navigate the practicum experience in the present times.

**Keywords** Mentoring · Practicum experience · Mentor teachers · COVID-19 · Qualitative research · Research methods

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## 28.1 The Researcher and His Context

I am a doctoral candidate in Education. Previously, I worked in a public university as a Physics teacher educator and in a public school as a Physics teacher in my home country, Chile. As a Physics teacher educator, one of the roles I played was the one of being a university based specialised tutor (UT). Every year, I was assigned to a group of pre-service teachers (PSTs). The programme I worked for is the same one from where my participants were recruited for my PhD study, so the data for my research was collected from the same university where I had worked as a part-time teacher educator. My duties comprised teaching and tutoring Physics PSTs in two units: *Physics Methods* and *Teaching Physics*. While the Physics Methods unit was widely connected with applied educational theory to teach and learn Physics, the Teaching Physics unit was designed to develop PSTs specialised knowledge to teach Physics while PSTs were on their practicum. The Teaching Physics unit was developed to connect PSTs' theoretical knowledge with the practical knowledge of teaching Physics and, at the same time, help PSTs develop both theory and practice, in order to better prepare them to teach.

In this chapter, I use my experience as a UT to reflect upon two of my six participants post practicum interviews' expressions and experience. None of the data used in this chapter was included in the final dataset I am using in my doctoral thesis. That is because Fernando and Francisca (pseudonyms)—the two participants in this chapter—were excluded from my study because they could not teach a group of secondary students during their practicum experience. However, that was neither Fernando's or Francisca's fault nor was it because of their lack of desire to complete it, but was a consequence of the circumstances associated with COVID-19 pandemic restrictions at school.

In recent months, I have been reflecting on what we, as researchers, can learn from those participants that are excluded from our research. To explore this further, I have used a narrative ethnographic methodology to explore my participants' experiences and interweave them with my own reflections of how I can be a better UT in the future. Narrative ethnography is an autoethnographic methodology where “stories that incorporate the ethnographer's experiences [are incorporated] into the ethnographic descriptions and analysis of others” (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 278). As highlighted by Pretorius (2022), “narrative ethnographies are, therefore, focused on the experiences of others while illuminating these experiences with insights from the researcher's own experience [...] through purposeful exploration of the encounters between the researcher and participants” (para. 11). In this chapter, I explore the encounters I had with my participants during their interviews, as well as the encounters I had with their data during the analysis of my findings. I also analyse my personal experience about my approach when mentoring Physics PSTs (i.e., my mentoring dialogue strategies). In this way, I highlight how not forgetting the excluded participants in our research can foster reflective practice and promote professional growth.



Throughout this chapter, I include both my previous personal experience and the interpersonal experience with my interviewees. As is suggested by Ellis et al. (2011), if we do autoethnography we should use our evocative skills to connect our personal experience with the reader who might share our interest about the cultural aspect we are researching. Evocative vignettes taken from my interviewees' responses and reflections about their mentoring dialogues with their own UTs are used to reflect on the use of my own mentoring experience. Participant PSTs' perceptions about their learning achievement during mentoring conversations have been underlined as a key factor to be observed in order to improve teacher education programmes (Mauri et al., 2019). In that sense positive and negative experiences like the ones experienced by my participants might be of help to portray not just what happened during this pandemic, but what interactions were of help and what needed to be reshaped. I am using the vignettes in the form of two short stories upon which I would expect the reader to reflect on my participants' experience in their practicum and their mentoring. Their explanations alongside their expressions and stories triggered my mentoring knowledge and skills in the same programme from where my participant PSTs were participating. Ellis (2004) explained that autoethnography is connected with writing in academic style but including the author's introspective consciousness and their lived experiences. Following that approach, two short stories based on my participant PSTs (Fernando and Francisca) are used and compared. By sharing my thoughts, I want readers (teachers, mentor teachers, and teacher educators) to have a discussion and reflect about their mentoring experience with their own PSTs. Moreover, I believe that it is not just what patterns I might find but the interview itself which might be useful for UTs own pedagogical reasoning about their mentoring duties.

The first semester of 2020 was almost lost for every school, most of them were closed from the end of March. After the first pandemic wave, few schools reacted by sending some homework, documents, and guidance to their students. However, Chilean homes are not well equipped with internet or a mobile data connection. For instance, in 2020, 30% of the households in Chile did not have mobile or internet connection at home and 73% of the connected households experienced consistent connectivity issues (Mierzejewski, 2021). My participants learnt about their university's new course of action of changing the whole teaching system to an online platform a couple of weeks after the start of the first semester. However, the pandemic affected the Chilean university students' mental wellbeing, and continues to do so. That is recognised as a major health problem in Chile (Mac-Ginty et al., 2021). The practicum experience also required collaboration from three stakeholder groups during the pandemic time:

- Stakeholder group one: the university administrators of the partner-schools and the university-based tutors providing the teacher education as prescribed by the programme.
- Stakeholder group two: the partner-schools, school principals, and school-based mentor teachers providing the learning opportunities to their students while adopting new actions to provide a safe environment within an online teaching environment.

- Stakeholder group three: the students and their parents agreeing to engage with the online teaching and learning where available.

As a result of the pandemic, my participants' practicum experience was delayed and only started late in September 2020. Consequently, every PST was allocated in a partner-school for five weeks (doing online teaching). However, the reality differed from what was planned and just a few PSTs completed four or five weeks in their practicum. The vast majority of PSTs only completed two to three weeks with their assigned class. Sadly, my participants, Fernando and Francisca, did not teach at all; they were allocated but unforeseen problems happened so they could not teach to any class. In a normal year, each PST is allocated in a partner-school and they can teach and practice for twelve weeks each semester. For my participants the situation was devastating.

## 28.2 My Interviewees

Fernando and Francisca (both 24 years old) were in their final semester in a Chilean Physics and Mathematics teacher education programme. The interviews were conducted after they finished the programme, but before their graduation as teachers. As part of the programme, PSTs are paired with a UT and with a partner school in order to develop their practicum experience. As was stated before, usually PSTs spend 12 weeks within the school and, in that period of time, they need to engage in teaching to one class for 5 consecutive weeks. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Chilean school system was overwhelmed and partner schools allowed PSTs for only a limited time (5 weeks or less). Within that scenario, some school-based mentor teachers were unable or reluctant to accept any interference in their work and some of them actively rejected their responsibility to mentor their PSTs. Fernando and Francisca did not have their practicum because the school teacher who, in the first place, accepted to be their mentor, finally withdrew from the mentorship programme. On the university side, Fernando and Francisca were paired with the same UT, Javiera (pseudonym), so they experienced the painful situation in a similar manner and were accompanied with the same UT. However, how they experience the mitigative actions taken by the programme to replace their practicum was different.

## 28.3 Fernando's Disappointment with the "Practicum" Experience

The teacher education programme did not allocate Fernando in one of their partner-schools. After waiting for three months, he was asked to teach a lesson to a group of UTs at the end of the semester, November 2020. Fernando expressed his frustration,

The truth is, I was very angry with my practicum, I am actually disappointed in what I did, what the teachers [teacher educators] did. I'm very... very disappointed indeed. I have no other words. I feel like the way they assessed us... but they were reluctant to do it, so it was like... I wouldn't know how to objectively reflect because it wasn't real either.

I was thinking about what things I would change for Fernando to perceive the alternative activity in a positive manner. His disappointment is based on not being allocated, on the quality of his own work and his UTs assessment upon him. On top of that, he perceives the alternative lesson mitigative action was not taken with enough care, he perceives their UTs as a careless audience like they did not want to be there for him. Fernando's discomfort with the solution offered (a simulated class with UTs as his audience) is clear; he believed that the solution given was useless and pointless.

...and I don't really judge the UTs, I feel like they tried to put themselves in a role... they weren't really students. So, the dynamics didn't work out to be interesting, they weren't playful as they would have been with kids.

Here I can see that a key factor would have been played by Fernando's UT, but probably she (Javiera, his UT) did not realise that she could organise some rules about the UTs participation. Firstly, for instance, she could have instructed them to follow her lead about responding in a way a year nine student would. At this point I am aware of the lack of teaching experience that some of the UTs have. Some of them did not have any school teaching experience at all. Secondly, it seems relevant to be supportive and to avoid comments or to not express their ideas as UTs during the lesson, so it is relevant to offer the PST space to lead the class. Thirdly, the UT and/or Fernando should have informed the audience that, once the lesson is over, there would be time for feedback and comments about how the knowledge for teaching was perceived during the lesson, and the UTs assessment of the lesson and the teaching as well.

Soon afterwards I realised that Fernando's disappointment had other sources and they were not just connected with the class simulation (having UTs pretending to be year nine students). The one lesson Fernando did was about light, specifically reflection and refraction.

...the practicum, so we had to teach in a fictitious context... which in the end was... the topic wasn't given to us. In the end we had to choose it [the topic to teach] by ourselves, and the one I chose was focused on light, on what reflection and refraction are. That was the subject I teach.

Fernando wanted the students to differentiate both phenomena of light, recognise the difference between the two, and know how to describe and observe them.

As prior knowledge I expected that the students did not really know anything about refraction. That they were struck by the fact that reflection is not only the mirror in which one sees oneself. So... that's what I expected, that with these new concepts they would be creating knowledge together, along with the videos that I had prepared, the activities. That they themselves were complementing their ideas, that a group of people said something and then, another group of students said something else and that they were complementing each other...

While Fernando was expressing what he wanted for the lesson to be and what his expectations were, I wondered whether or not he talked and received enough feedback within his mentoring conversations with his UT. Here Fernando is expressing a naïve approach based on what he thought was a good lesson plan without having thought about how some things might not happen as was planned. That is a common idea PSTs have when entering into a teaching programme (Weinstein, 1989). I would love to challenge that idea with questions like: “How do you expect they connect these ideas when they do not know anything about refraction? How can that phenomenon be observed in real life? Is there something missing in between? Maybe you can provide some common experiences where refraction is observed (observing an object through a magnifying glass, through a glass without water, and through a glass with water) and ask them: What can you observe? What do you think is happening?”. Of course students have previous knowledge and experience about refraction, but they probably do not think about what is happening and how they can build a model (a mind model or a geometric model). For that they need the help of a teacher, but a teacher who knows what they already know about the phenomenon observed. I believe that not having a partner-school for Fernando took his UT by surprise. However, I believe that there is no excuse for not providing enough mentoring conversations in order to organise a lesson plan accordingly. Also, there was no post lesson mentoring conversation to address all sorts of situations and to reflect upon the lesson plan and shed light on how the teaching experience was done. As a UT, the post lesson mentoring conversation is key to reflect on what was done and what can be done differently in the future to improve his students’ learning. PSTs (and seasoned teachers as well) usually cannot see clearly their own teaching so observations from an outsider are of great help.

We had just a few mentoring conversations with Javiera [Fernando’s UT]. Because... we did not have started the practicum, we did not have mentoring conversations, we did not have time together. It was like: “since you haven’t yet started the practicum, you are free to go”. So, even though we were there from September to mid-November we didn’t see Javiera, it was: “nothing kids, nothing to do for today”. Okay.

So, for more than two months, Fernando had no mentoring dialogue, no preparation, and no lesson planning at all. It is well recognised that the practicum experience plays a vital role in a teacher education programme and that teacher educators are well aware of how PSTs value the experience as key in their development within the programme (Mena et al., 2017). Consequently, when I was listening to what Fernando was narrating to me I could not stop thinking about what other arrangements could be done to avoid that undesired situation. “Was it not possible to talk to another partner school and add Fernando at least to try out one lesson? Was it really a last-minute school mentor teacher dropping out? Why was Fernando not invited to a mentoring conversation with another PST, so at least he could observe and participate in a real conversation about teaching?”. Fernando stated very clearly his opinion: he considers that the practicum experience and the mentoring conversations were irrelevant in the programme.

...it was a bad process... I mean, I don’t consider it to have been an important unit within the semester.

Moreover, when I asked Fernando whether or not he learnt how to teach Physics, his answer was devastating:

I learned to search in the curricular bases of the ministry [of education], I can look for the contents in the [curricular] bases, in books. How to teach is something that is at my disposal... I don't feel like they have taught me something like: "Fernando, you have to teach this way, you have to do this". I feel like the mentoring unit did not provide me with any useful tools.

I could recognise Shulman's (1986, p. 8) words asking "How does the successful college student transform his or her expertise in the subject matter into a form that high school students can comprehend" when he observed that, at that time, teaching was increasing its attention to how to teach and leaving aside the content as something that teachers can naturally connect through some standard procedures. Fernando did not express any concern about professional knowledge to teach Physics; he ended the programme believing that teaching is more about collecting some "useful tools" rather than being a reflective practitioner as was described by Schön (1987). The practical and theoretical connections to enable Fernando to gain expertise in transforming the subject matter into a form of knowledge, strategies, and skills his students can grasp and then comprehend, was not at his disposition in any form. The palliative solution (i.e., teaching a lesson to an audience composed by UTs) was useless to him.

## 28.4 Francisca's Optimism in Learning How to Teach and Commitment to Being a Teacher

Francisca was appointed to develop her practicum experience in a private school. Francisca, like Fernando, did not teach a single class in that school. However, Francisca's reflections on her school mentor teacher decision were different. She reflected about what she would do if something similar happened to her in the future and what she would do, as a teacher, knowing how relevant the practicum is and the key role school mentor teachers play in PSTs' knowledge for teaching development.

Well, we had some problems with the mentor teacher. The time given to do the practicum was limited. We had two and a half weeks to do everything, so I think it was a very short time, so we didn't have time to reflect upon what we learned there. Although the mentoring conversations with Javiera—my UT—helped me to design the class, I think it is not enough. *It's not like I have had time to learn about it... I tried to use everything that I had learned in the physics methods unit. But I do believe that an important learning experience is related to the situation we had and to consider the type of teacher I want to be. I feel that it is also mixed with what you are investigating, the mentor teacher has a fundamental role both: in guiding the students and sharing the experience of what he believes is useful or what he believes does not help us and we did not have that opportunity... to experience that. The mentor teacher did not want to be with us, just like that. So, significant learning is related to that, in the type of teacher I want to be if it ever comes to me, and I hope that I will have the opportunity to be a mentor teacher.*

Francisca used the negative experience of not being welcome to the practicum by that particular Physics teacher as a way to think about herself. She expressed in a

clear manner what kind of teacher she wanted to be and what kind of commitment she would offer if the responsibility of mentoring someone else ever came to her. Furthermore, unlike Fernando, Francisca showed her resilience and positive stand when unexpected reactions or responses came from the audience comprised of UTs, as we can observe in the following:

Well, this one got a bit tricky for me because the teachers had to pretend to be seventh grade students. So, some did, but some teachers forgot that so they corrected me as I progressed... ha, ha, ha.

Also, differently than Fernando, Francisca showed ownership of the simulated class. She expressed that the audience “had to pretend to be seventh grade students”, so I wondered if she highlighted that before or during the class so that she could navigate her lesson plan better. Instead of complaining about the unforeseen situation of not having the regular practicum, Francisca preferred to express what possibilities there were for her. Stetsenko (2008) pointed out that meaningful situations are not exclusively connected to cognition and knowledge exchange to fit the participants’ aims, but to the collaboration and engagement actions of the participants, as well as the emotions connected to that exchange. Francisca’s appreciation of the opportunity to have a dialogue with others, to share what she learnt, and to receive feedback with an open mind produced a sense of belonging to the conversation and opened a rewarding (despite being limited and not ideal) simulated practicum situation.

When I asked Francisca whether or not she considered the lesson as successful, she started with a positive general thought, and additionally she observed that she (and potentially her students) might have valued the use of the online communication tools.

I think it worked well, considering that it was the first time I had applied that, and I had planned the class itself for a face-to-face format. At first, I thought that due to the online format it was not going to work very well, but now I think that more tools could be used virtually and their use finally favoured the lesson and the development of it.

Francisca’s lesson was designed to teach about “continental drift”, a term coined by Alfred Wegener in 1915, but widely rejected by the scientific community at the time (Romano et al., 2017). To Francisca, the content is relevant but is not the key element for the students to learn; scientific concepts are organised throughout time with the help of researchers, scientists, and explorers. She also wanted to highlight the discussions about how to differentiate scientific knowledge from opinions and how to identify reliable sources and sound arguments from personal comments.

I think it is always important to know the environment that surrounds us, to know its evolution. Therefore, I think that knowing the continental drift, or at least knowing a panoramic view of how the Earth evolved as we know it today, is important as basic culture. But, more than that, I find important the ability to reflect, to argue with evidence, since nowadays in social networks anyone uploads an image with information that has no source [and] anyone could believe that. So, I think they are necessary skills to learn. Be able to identify which source is reliable, if it makes sense, and finally always take a position with arguments.

Francisca stated when I asked that she “wanted to have the role of a mediator as a teacher” and consequently she explained her actions with the class she taught.

...In the most important part of the class, I separated them into groups. So, I would go every two minutes, but more than I asked them, the idea was for them to tell me what they were seeing, what they were thinking. And there you could see that they were establishing relationships and, what seemed more important to me as well, is that they were reaching an answer that the continents as such were not always like this. But they couldn't explain his movement. That is, they managed to say that at some point they were together, but they could not explain why. So, in those answers one could show a little bit that they were relating the patterns a bit and finally developing an analysis of a set of evidence.

What Francisca did was trying to bring back what Alfred Wegener experienced when trying to make sense of facts and discoveries which did not have a clear or sensible explanation at the time he published his article about the continent's movement (Romano et al., 2017). At that time, 1915, the geophysics community refused to accept Wegener's ideas of continental drift, Francisca asked herself: "so how one can hope to achieve a total understanding in one class?"

What Francisca thought about evaluation and what evaluation means within a class was organised around what her purpose of teaching was. For her, evaluation meant understanding what the students were learning and if they were going in the right direction or if they were deviating from that. In this way she could determine if they were "achieving what one hopes".

So, I think that with the same questions that are being asked by the students during the class it is possible to evaluate what the students are understanding, if they are understanding the central idea of what we are arriving at or if they are deviating when we talk about fossils to reach the targeting question. There was an attempt to go elsewhere, so I think that there the students are not relating the contents and one would have to go in to review a little more. I think that, during class, with the guiding questions to see how much they are learning... that is, understanding how much they are learning can be a bit difficult, but how much they are... achieving what one hopes.

The knowledge for teaching development becomes observable when a teacher is able to make connections in the areas of teaching expertise such as content knowledge, pedagogical knowledge, and pedagogical content knowledge (Kind & Chan, 2019; Park & Chen, 2012). In Francisca's responses and reflections one can observe her content knowledge about "continental drift" emerging alongside what she predicted her audience's difficulties might be in learning that. Furthermore, her explanations about how to use the learning strategies as evaluation strategies are clear and observable expressions of her knowledge for teaching. Sadly, she did not have the opportunity to demonstrate her professional knowledge for teaching (with students in a classroom) or reflect after each teaching round with her mentor teachers about her knowledge.

## 28.5 Conclusions

Francisca and Fernando, both 24 year-old PSTs are at the same final stage of the same teacher education programme. They were also assigned the same UT to support them during their practicum. Despite all of that, they did not perceive their “practicum” experience in a similar manner. I believe that by reflecting upon what the differences were and also upon what actions we can take, we will be able to offer a better experience to our future PSTs.

In comparing these two autoethnographic stories, the first clear difference is Francisca’s and Fernando’s attitude towards the disruptive change in their practicum: not having a school-mentor teacher to support and accompany them and, as a consequence, not having a practicum experience. While Fernando expressed his disappointment with the programme and the teacher educators, Francisca analysed what she might be doing differently if she were a teacher in the role of a school mentor teacher. I am neither deflecting the teacher educator programme’s responsibility on that matter nor the devastating effects of the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak, but analysing what the PSTs attitude towards this challenging situation was. While Francisca expressed her agency and ownership as a teacher, Fernando seemed reluctant to step out and did not accept the alternative experience as something of any value in his teacher training. Both Francisca and Fernando worked in isolation, so they did not have the chance to talk about their lesson plan, to receive a supportive critique, or to share their reasoning and planning before the lesson, other than with the UT. It seems that the UT had little influence in the development of their attitude and emotions towards these difficult times. I strongly believe that working as a team (i.e., Fernando, Francisca, and their UT) will probably attenuate Fernando’s reluctance to the alternative solution for the practicum experience.

A second clear difference is the chosen topic. Each one chose a topic of their preference without their UT guidance. They chose a topic they felt comfortable with but they did not analyse their lesson plan, their teaching, or the feedback received similarly. While Fernando hardly expressed any knowledge for teaching of the topic of light reflection and refraction, Francisca was able to connect the content—continental drift—with the history of science, the more probable difficult areas for the students to learn, and a sound strategy which was well connected with her evaluation strategies. I am reflecting as a UT: How could I better help PSTs like Fernando and Francisca? What mentor teacher role might help me better with Fernando? What about Francisca? Is the same role I will need to play?

Both, Francisca and Fernando, told me that they were free to choose the topic of their preference. Since it was not connected with the aim of my PhD project, I did not ask them about how they chose their topic to teach or what their options were. I know that they might be willing to choose a topic which is familiar to them or a topic they used in another assignment but some questions I would be asking them would be: How is the chosen topic helping you to explore and use your orientation towards science? How is your strategy shaped by that orientation towards science? What are the key elements you want your students to learn? What are the difficulties



you are likely to find that might make it difficult for your students to learn what you want them to learn? These sorts of questions are designed to help PSTs organise their professional knowledge for teaching. Specifically, these questions would allow them to connect their content knowledge with their pedagogical knowledge and their pedagogical content knowledge, as well as organise and practice their knowledge bases, not just to teach in general but to teach each specific topic (Hume et al., 2019; Kind & Chan, 2019; Magnusson et al., 1999).

The pandemic's devastating effects in teacher education programmes in Chile affected PSTs' practicum experience. Francisca and Fernando's stories and their relationship with their UT helped me to reflect on my own experience as UT and understand the needs and experiences PSTs have in order to increase their readiness to teach. I strongly perceive that these autoethnographic stories were of help to me to be able to better navigate my future PSTs' practicum experience. Not only in the normal difficult times of my PSTs in the past, but in harder times when the caring of each other's mental health has gained particular relevance.

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# Chapter 29

## The Impact of COVID-19 on PhD Research: An Autoethnographic Account by an International Student in Melbourne



Muhammad Adnan Qureshi

**Abstract** Being a researcher on a highly sensitive issue and an international PhD student in Melbourne, I have faced significant challenges throughout my ongoing PhD journey. Using an autoethnographic approach, this chapter describes the lived experiences of the intense situations that impacted my research activities under the COVID-19 pandemic. Through my PhD, I am committed to contributing my bit toward changing global perceptions of HIV and AIDS. My intrinsic motivations draw from the death of my brother figure and childhood best friend. These motivations have enabled me to fight back against numerous challenges that have appeared within the circle of research opportunities. I dealt with each challenge by returning to my intrinsic motivations, showing resilience, and progressing with my research. In the beginning, I had challenges getting my project approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee of my University, which took about two years. Once my research was approved, the COVID-19 pandemic situation pushed me back to square one. Subsequently, I chose an online research methodology due to the state of helplessness I experienced as a result of COVID-19 restrictions. These conditions changed my overall research landscape and introduced several unanticipated challenges to my original plans to conduct an ethnographic study. Based on my reflections, I recommend that all PhD researchers, and international students in particular, pay significant attention to the timeline of their candidature. Researchers need to be flexible and rationalise the importance of continuing their research activities amidst difficult situations such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Keywords** Intrinsic motivation · Online research · Homophobia · Autoethnography · Lived experience · Ethics in human research · COVID-19 · Qualitative research · Research methods

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## 29.1 Introduction

This chapter is based on my lived experiences as an international PhD student in Melbourne, Australia. It provides an autoethnographic description of the various problematic situations I faced during my ongoing PhD journey including the COVID-19 pandemic. My PhD project is motivated by the tragic death of my brother figure and childhood best friend, giving it more meaning than a simple piece of paper. Unfortunately, since I started my PhD journey, I dealt with several administrative issues which disrupted my research activities. Given these challenging situations, anyone might easily think of giving up. However, my intrinsic personal motivations made me fight back and overcome the hardships I faced. Nonetheless, the challenges to my research field introduced by the COVID-19 pandemic have proven to have a significant negative impact on both my research activities and my personal health and wellbeing. I outline my challenges and the strategies I used to overcome them in the rest of this chapter. This chapter has five sections: introduction and background, theoretical framework, methodology, findings, as well as conclusion and recommendations.

## 29.2 Introduction and Background

The COVID-19 pandemic outbreak began in early 2020, dramatically affecting higher education experiences for both institutions and students (El Said, 2021). Its influence appeared to be particularly significant for international students in higher education (Gomes et al., 2021). This was expertly illustrated by Rangarajan and Daneshfar (2022). On the other hand, many felt that the Australian state neglected to provide appropriate support to international students during the pandemic, particularly to those facing life challenges such as poor mental health, financial issues, discrimination, and homelessness (Nguyen & Balakrishnan, 2020). The vulnerability amongst international PhD students as a result of the pandemic caused many to change their research directions (Bista et al., 2022).

Although the COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted international higher education, there is a paucity of research examining students' experiences (Kee, 2021). While my experiences and challenges as an international student in Australia might be like other international students, to a certain extent they are unique as COVID-19 directly impacted my research activities. I came to Melbourne in 2018 with lofty aims to commence my PhD unravelling the complex and culturally taboo phenomenon of increasing HIV/AIDS cases amongst homosexual and bisexual men in Pakistan. Previous studies on the sensitivity of researching a sexually marginalised group such as homosexual and bisexual men inspired me to design my study layout carefully. Fitzgerald's (1977) exploration of Aboriginal societies and how traditional power and authority dominate sexually marginalised groups motivated me to investigate the anthropological circumstances of male homosexuality.

I knew in advance that my sensitive research endeavour would encounter disturbing and challenging situations throughout the entire research process. These challenges included research ethics, data collection, and mental health (Fenge et al., 2019). Thus, having discerned that an in-depth study of lived experiences combined with the participant observations would be required, I decided to employ an ethnographic approach. Core concepts of ethical practice include beneficence, non-maleficence, justice, as well as respect for autonomy and these concepts are particularly fraught in areas which are stigmatised or taboo (Ford & Pretorius, 2017; Pretorius & Ford, 2017). Given the particularly sensitive nature of my intended research area, significant ethical issues were raised at the human ethics review of my university, creating unpredictable conditions for my PhD research. The situation became even more complicated with the emergence of COVID-19, which introduced challenges for data collection, and subsequently caused me to face economic, mental health, personal health, and life issues.

Although my ongoing PhD journey has consisted of multiple challenges which at times made it feel like continuing seemed impossible, my great motivations behind this project propelled me to never stop from achieving my academic goals.

For me, this PhD is the purpose of my life. I have been through a dark period in my life when I felt as though everything was over for me, but the hope of doing a PhD helped me back on track with my life. The tragic death of my childhood best friend is my fundamental motivation to carry out my PhD research. He took his life after being diagnosed with HIV and his death completely traumatised me. I lost so many relations at once: a friend, a brother, and a mentor. No one can say with certainty how he contracted HIV, but what people believed about his disease is not true. I believe that he would be alive today if he had the right awareness about how to combat his disease. Likewise, other people would not have stigmatised him if they had the right awareness. I still cannot imagine his pain when he decided to take his life, but I think everyone would have done the same given the way that HIV is socially stigmatised in Pakistan. My PhD helped me turn my pain into purpose by raising HIV awareness among my people.

My PhD motivations not only saved my life, but also helped me to identify my potential to contribute to wider humanity and gain a sense of self-satisfaction. The situations that occurred during my ongoing PhD journey were abnormal; my motivations made me stay strong.

### 29.3 Theoretical Framework

Motivation brings movement and activity to individuals and drives them to achieve something in life (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Templeton (2016) argues that motivation is a crucial element of pursuing a PhD Schunk and Zimmerman (2012) claimed that a student's motivation could be spontaneous or may be based on material reward, but it is more likely that this motivation will turn into passion. Ryan and Deci (2000) explained two kinds of motivation: extrinsic and intrinsic motivation; unlike extrinsic motivations, intrinsic motivations do not require a material reward. Templeton (2016) suggests that intrinsic motivation is important for commencing and completing a

PhD However, motivation varies amongst individuals and their preferences, be they personal interest or a material gain (Templeton, 2016). Recent research by Pretorius and Macaulay (2021), for example, demonstrated that the students in their cohort were not motivated to complete their PhD because of the symbolic title of *doctor* they would receive at the end. Rather, the PhD students in Pretorius and Macaulay's (2021) study "chose to pursue doctoral studies for career success, self-discovery or personal growth, and social justice" (p. 635).

I believe that my motivation for commencing my PhD is entirely a case of *intrinsic motivation*. I am not after a material gain and am not anticipating that my PhD will get me a highly paid job. Following Baumeister's (2016) core concept of *wanting change* through motivation, my PhD has a strong motivation to bring about a social change. I believe that through my PhD I can change how the people of Pakistan recognise and interpret HIV/AIDS by bringing about emotional change, a change in agency, and a change of social interaction (Baumeister, 2016).

As noted earlier, my motivation behind this PhD is the traumatic experience I faced due to the death of a close childhood friend. He committed suicide after being declared HIV positive. His death had a strong impact on my life. Most of the people forgot about him after burying him under a huge mound, but I could not forget because he was an amazing person. I cannot forget his support in each step of my life. Most likely, no one wanted to talk about him because his death symbolises a stigma. People tended to react judgmentally over his character and even raised concern for the people who were closely associated with him.

I remained confused for a long time in my attempts to understand if he was wrong or right in his decision. It took me a while to build an understanding that he may have ended up with that decision because of his emotional state. I was curious how a disease could be seen so negatively and how people could be so biased against it. I felt like HIV was my biggest enemy for taking away the best mate in whom I confided. However, I have realised the problem was not HIV itself, but the socio-cultural environment of Pakistan that created a hostile context for people who contracted the disease. Why is this disease associated with such an extreme level of negativity? I tried to put myself in a neutral position to realise the grim reality of being HIV positive and discovered that I would have had to take the same step in that context because this disease left no other option to survive. I questioned myself: for how long will this negative societal attitude toward HIV cause people to take their life when they could still live a normal life?

My rage turned into sympathy as I found that this was all happening due to a lack of awareness. People in my country needed to be educated about this disease to shake the stigma and to recognise that HIV is neither a death sentence nor a divine punishment. Then, I chose to fight in a literary war and create HIV awareness among the people of my country. Despite knowing that an individual struggle could not be an earth-shaking endeavour, I found myself motivated enough to be the first drop of rain and to contribute my bit toward the process of social change.

Thus, I had a strong intrinsic motivation for my PhD project. I vowed to provide a unique perspective for my country to identify what we lack when it comes to educating our people about HIV. My research now aims to contribute to breaking the social stigma around HIV, which makes people feel uncomfortable. I am motivated to envision a place for my people where they willingly opt in for HIV screening and treatments without being stigmatised and can consult about sexual health issues

without being hesitant or fearing judgement as a result of their sexual orientations or marital statuses.

## 29.4 Methodology

This chapter follows an autoethnographic approach (see Ellis et al., 2011; Holman Jones et al., 2016; Pretorius, 2022). I felt that autoethnography served best as a method for this piece of writing since I was capturing a highly personal experience from my life that has its foundation within me. At the same time, my subject matter is also highly social because it involves the description of the environments, contexts, people, and patterns of interaction surrounding my experience. At first, I was inspired by the research of Templeton (2016), who used autoethnography as a method of studying PhD students through the primary theoretical framework of intrinsic motivation. Another inspiration was Adams' (2016) autoethnographic research, the motivation for which came from his partner's death, where he employed writing to challenge the cherished norms of heteronormativity. Another more reflexive study by Cunningham and Carmichael (2018) based on autoethnographic features of the authors' personal life and the academic challenges she faced during her PhD journey in a business school environment is also a source of inspiration for this work.

### 29.4.1 Data Analysis

For this chapter, I have utilised my lived experiences, observations, context, and the details of the events and interaction patterns with other people relevant to my ongoing PhD journey as the primary sources of data. However, I have focused on some of the most significant events from this period such as the COVID-19 pandemic. I have negatively characterised my descriptions of these events as they had introduced challenges, barriers, and limitations to my research capacities. I feel that the data I have provided in this chapter support my argument that the circumstances I met in my PhD journey were quite abnormal and that, without a strong personal or intrinsic motivation attached to the project, anyone would easily have dropped out. I continued my research activities through the mainstream events of the COVID-19 pandemic where the public priority was *masks* and *not condoms*. Hence, for the clarity of my readers, I am analysing my challenges using two lenses: pre-COVID-19 challenges and challenges related to the onset of COVID-19.

## 29.5 Pre-COVID-19 Challenges

PhD motivations are not necessarily tied to academic learning; they could include other forms of learning as a process (Templeton, 2016). Hence, PhD scholars do not always find a clear road map, but often face several challenges across the entire journey (Pyhältö et al., 2012). By sheer chance, my PhD journey did not follow a smooth and steady road from the very beginning. In the first place, it was almost impossible to conduct such culturally sensitive research while living in Pakistan. I am completing my PhD on a highly competitive Pakistani national scholarship programme. It was also challenging to convince my funding agency to approve my research topic, but I am glad I made it through. I therefore had to choose a foreign country in which I could conduct and complete my project.

Three months later I arrived in Melbourne and the Swinburne Human Research Ethics Committee informed me that my research project was not doable due to its highly sensitive nature. Significant concerns were raised about conducting an overseas ethnography with potential safety risks to the researcher (myself) and the participants. A substantial methodological change was suggested, but I was committed to carrying out an ethnographic study. After another three months of uncertainty, I resubmitted the research ethics applications, but it was returned with the same concerns. I felt stuck in a bizarre situation where I could not see the future of my research. In the seventh month of my candidature, the Dean of the Faculty assigned me to an entirely new team of supervisors.

With the support of the new supervisory team, I started to work on mitigating the issue of sensitivity. We spent two more months resubmitting the human research ethics application for the following review. With a different response this time, the Human Research Ethics Committee chair called us for a meeting in person. After hours-long discussions, I was requested to provide several legal documents from Pakistan before commencing my fieldwork. Obtaining official letters from the Pakistani authorities and government was a great challenge. My former professors and close contacts from Pakistan helped me obtain the required documentation. However, this process took about three more months of my PhD candidature.

Finally, we resubmitted the ethics application for the following review. The Swinburne Human Research Ethics Committee approved the application, enabling me to conduct a health-related ethnography in Pakistan. Before starting the fieldwork in Pakistan, I had to appear in my confirmation of candidature review. The panel review put forward the concerns of COVID-19 and foresaw limitations to carrying out physical fieldwork in Pakistan. Four days after my confirmation of candidature, the first lockdown in Melbourne came into effect. I also received news from Pakistan that my intended research site was completely shut down, driving me towards a devastating conclusion. Given this sudden situation, my supervisory team, panel members, and the Dean of the Faculty advised me to change my methodology.

There were no visible hopes of conducting an ethnography given the unpredictable setting of the COVID-19 pandemic.



It was a most devastating time for me. I felt like all my efforts had gone to waste and my project would never progress. These circumstances compelled me to ask myself what was essential to the continuity of my project. I questioned which was more important for my research: having the ideal layout or sharing the message I wanted to convey.

My intrinsic motivations helped me realise and embrace the sensitivity of the context and go for what was practical. Disheartened, I chose to be an online researcher just for the continuity and progress of my research.

## 29.6 Challenges Related to the Onset of Covid-19

While my research did not find an ideal and desirable research environment since the beginning, the challenges introduced by the COVID-19 pandemic made things worse. The intense situations I met during the COVID-19 pandemic momentarily shrunk my hopes and made me feel stuck, but my intrinsic motivations helped me to overcome these insecurities. My intrinsic motivations made me capable of proving to myself that I am resistant and strong. Finally, there occurred a time when my intrinsic motivations carved within me that confident person who, in the face of challenges, called “*try me!*” instead of “*why me?*”. Thunborg et al. (2013) suggests that motivation to pursue a higher level of education is “dynamic and subject to change over time and situations” and is “part of the process of forming student identities” (pp. 180–181). Thus, my PhD motivations formed my new identity.

Before I appeared in my confirmation of candidature milestone, I was confident enough to have addressed each challenge posed by the method of field ethnography throughout the human research ethics application without having a single clue that the COVID-19 pandemic would adversely impact my research activities. Below is a detailed discussion of these challenges and experiences, with suggestions for future researchers.

### 29.6.1 *Change of Methodological Approach*

The first and significant adverse impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on my PhD research was a methodological shift from ethnographic to online research. Due to the complete lockdown in Pakistan, there was no further hope for conducting in-person research activities. My supervisory team made the executive decision to change from ethnography to online interviewing, so I had to modify my human research ethics application one more time. Considering that online methodology emerged here from a state of helplessness, it was thought to be an opportunity to carry on the research activities by all available means. I had to find solace in the fact that many social science researchers had already successfully utilised online methods while conducting delicate research (Ahern, 2005). Researchers with a plan to collect in-person data amongst human subjects failed to initiate research activities due to the

COVID-19 pandemic (Garcia Garcia & Barclay, 2020). Therefore, many had to shift to the use of online methods (Roberts et al., 2021). Different approaches to online data collection were discussed in detail by Hradsky (2022), Maulana (2022), and Karlina (2022) earlier in this book.

Ryan and Deci (2000) define intrinsic motivation as a crucial element in higher education as it relates to learning and achieving educational goals. Being an online researcher posed several disadvantages. For instance,

I felt that online research prevented the emotional engagement amongst participants required for my study. Initially, participants reflected a significant level of hesitancy about the issues of privacy and confidentiality. At that time, I began to feel that I would never achieve my academic goals without doing an in-person ethnography. This loss of opportunity to collect data in person felt like a strong setback from my research goals but, on the positive side, this pressure made me discover my hidden potential.

In a similar way to Hradsky (2022), I challenged myself to use online methodologies as innovatively as possible.

This self-challenge, made under strong intrinsic motivation, worked magically; there appeared a time when I felt I had discovered fruitful aspects within myself and my participants that allowed both parties to develop mutual trust and share the required information without being further stigmatised.

Once again, I would say all this was made possible due to the intrinsic motivations behind my project.

### ***29.6.2 Challenges in Participant Recruitment***

Online researchers face multiple challenges that start with participant recruitment (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014). Participant recruitment impacts the overall success of the research (Manohar et al., 2018). However, there could be multiple factors that negatively impact this process (Patel et al., 2003). Researchers have to be pragmatic about participants' motivations in their recruitment plan, particularly when the research is focusing on post-graduate students (Khatamian Far, 2018). Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, I utilised online platforms for data collection—a change that appeared to be a daunting challenge.

Deakin and Wakefield (2014) suggest that online researchers face a higher level of difficulty when their research topics are sensitive and delicate. It may seem easier to find participants online for sensitive research topics, but in practice it is hard; online recruitment carries potential barriers that demand new strategies and tools (Kling et al., 2021). Online researchers observe a significantly higher withdrawal rate amongst participants compared to studies done in person or in a lab (Howell, 2020). This method also minimises space for rapport-building (Are, 2021). At first, I faced a lack of interest amongst participants. Once participants were shortlisted for the interviews (after the briefing session), my research observed an 80% withdrawal rate. Doing online research involves following ethical obligations (Are, 2021), and

I felt powerless because participants had the full right to withdraw at any time. My online recruitment via social media therefore had only a 20% success rate.

While following an online interviewing method, I observed a significant drop amongst potential participants who were directly engaged in homosexual activities. I contacted 104 participants; out of them, only 21 completed the interviews. Most of the participants were hesitant to consent to audio recording, thinking it a threat to their social image. The initial response regarding participation was quite disappointing. Several participants were not getting back to me after undertaking information sessions, and those who had given in-depth interviews requested that they be withdrawn. It was devastating, given the time and tremendous amount of energy spent on each participant.

I had somewhat anticipated this outcome of utilizing online research for such a sensitive topic, but I had already committed fully and did not wish to stop. I dealt with this situation through the lens of my intrinsic motivations. Instead of losing hope, I was driven to find the technical element in my data collection trends from which the error was coming. Finally, after a profound analysis, I was able to deduce the cause of distress amongst participants. After identifying the reason, I returned to the participants and asked their reasons for withdrawal. My findings were quite acceptable and natural as participants had privacy and confidentiality concerns around being interviewed online.

Another major cause was the level of distress participants felt after being interviewed on the topic of sexually transmitted infections (STIs). I found that one of my interview guide's sections was based on STI (HIV/AIDS) related screenings and information on different window periods of STI testing. This section was creating post-interview anxiety amongst participants, causing many of them to withdraw. So, looking at that bizarre situation, my supervisory team and I made one more executive decision to remove those questions, which brought about a visible positive impact on the overall withdrawal rate.

### ***29.6.3 Issues of Different Time Zones and Space***

Coping with different time zones in Pakistan and Australia while conducting online research was a significant challenge for me. I dealt with this challenge by utilising my intrinsic motivations, as intrinsic motivations are natural human inclinations of inquisition and interest that help them accept new challenges (Di Domenico & Ryan, 2017).

Due to the unanticipated COVID-19 situation, my research used an online research method via live Zoom meetings. Melbourne time was 6 hours ahead of Pakistan, so arranging convenient times amongst participants was quite challenging. Olson (2019) argues that the biggest challenge for online researchers is to beat unsynchronised clocks in two different zones. My research targeted male populations, which are largely unavailable for interviews during working hours in Pakistan. Although it was a complete lockdown in Pakistan, no participants felt it appropriate to be interviewed during their working hours (according to Pakistan's standard time) from 9 am to 5 pm. As a matter of fact, Pakistan's lockdown was not like Melbourne's, making people strictly follow state orders. Most of the participants preferred to be interviewed after 5 pm Pakistan time, which was 11 pm for me in Melbourne.

Due to the geographical setting of Melbourne, it is tough for international students to rent a whole house for themselves. Most international students are likely to share living space with others due to limited funding. When sharing your living space with others, it comes as

an ethical obligation to maintain silence and peace for others. Most of my interviews were held after 11 pm in Australia (Melbourne) time and lasted for at least 60 minutes (sometimes even more than 2 hours). It was a very tough effort to keep the interview process happening as my housemates were at home and sleeping. My housemate repeatedly made complaints about my interview process causing distress and discomfort due to noise. I would not argue that they were wrong; unintentionally or intentionally, my interview process was creating a significant amount of noise because of technical issues. For instance, participants frequently lost internet connection, and we were almost yelling to ask each other “can you hear me now”? The bright side of this situation was that I was somehow progressing with my research. I had felt that even the COVID-19 pandemic could not beat me down, and my project was moving ahead. It was my intrinsic motivation that was pushing me up as I was facing and fighting significant challenges.

### **29.6.4 Technical Issues**

Mirick and Wladkowski (2019) discovered that there are potential benefits of conducting online interviews, but there are serious issues as well that impact on interview tempo such as internet disconnection, audio/video interruptions, and power cuts. I began to face different issues related to technological disruptions since commencing online research.

The first challenge was to recruit participants who already knew the online interview process. In my case, I have been unfortunate as it was the beginning of the COVID-19 situation in Pakistan and my participants had no previous experience of being interviewed via Zoom. The first challenge was to train the participants for the interview using Zoom before they appeared for the information session. I still faced many problems during the actual interviewing process. The second challenge was the unstable internet connection. Most of my participants were using their mobile phones to ensure that they were interviewed in a safe place. Internet connections provided by cellular companies in Pakistan face weak signals and frequent disruptions. However, it was still better than those participants using their desktop computers for interviewing, where suddenly interviews were ended due to power cuts.

In Pakistan, power cuts are quite normal and cause Pakistani people to face challenges in their routine life (Lodhi & Malik, 2013). Some of the areas in Pakistan observe 12 h of electric load shedding during a day (Dawn.com, 2016).

The technical issues I met during the time of data collection added more intensity to already existing issues.

At various points, I was exhausted, but I did not let myself be demoralised as I always counted each interview as progress toward my research goal. Now, when I look back at that time, I am thrilled that I was able to deal with those challenges and can see that it was my passion and intrinsic motivation that made me achieve so much.

### **29.6.5 Financial Constraints**

Australia has one of the world’s highest standards of living (Abdelkader, 2020). However, it can be difficult for international students to manage their meagre finances

to afford accommodation and food. A study conducted amongst the international student population in Australia reported that most international students face financial crises during their studies (Deumert et al., 2005). However, during the COVID-19 pandemic in Australia, while international students faced multiple challenges to work and study, housing remained one of the most daunting challenges (van Reyk, 2021).

During the lockdown period, I stopped receiving my stipend from Pakistan. At that time, I struggled financially, and I truly felt abandoned. I spent some of the darkest days of my life in conditions of extreme poverty. I remember a time when I had only \$50 in my account and I had 23 days left to pay my rent. I was surviving on bread (which cost about \$1.80 a day) and water. The fear of being bankrupt and being on the streets was sucking the blood from my veins. Finally, the day arrived when I failed to pay the rent and my landlord threw me out on the street. This time was extremely hard, but I was still holding onto my motivations and had a firm belief in myself. At last, fate came to my aid at my darkest hour. How grateful I am to the amazing Australian lady who sheltered me in her house for three months free of charge. She put in place a new norm of humanity, at least for me. It was at this time that I learned: education is not something we gain from universities or colleges; education is something people exhibit through their actions. Whenever I recall that episode, I feel a tremor in my spine. It was a point when I had felt no ground under my feet and no sky over my head. What would have happened to me if she did not take me to her house and not helped me unconditionally? So, yes, no flowers come without thorns. I was living a settled life in Pakistan with family, enough money, and a job, but I came to Australia with my intrinsic motivation for self-satisfaction and I would never say that all that happened to me was wrong. I firmly believe in serendipity, and it all had a purpose: to transform me from a boy to a strong man today.

### ***29.6.6 Homophobia and Discrimination***

Since I initiated my PhD project, there were numerous events when people gauged my character based on my research topic.

I wonder how people can make assumptions and build unrealistic associations around researchers and their research interests. Will a researcher interested in environmentalism eventually become a tree? Is a researcher interested in sea life essentially a dolphin?

The criticism I faced on my research topic strengthened my intrinsic motivation and made me even more resilient. Templeton (2016) explains that the motivation to pursue a PhD is a natural inclination for the students in terms of their cognitive, social, and physical development, which promises educational and professional advantages in developing a new set of skills. The homophobia and discrimination I faced helped me develop the new skill of resilience and tackling my vulnerabilities by myself, but I must acknowledge that this stimulus was created in me by my best friend, who I will call Stephen. I still remember his kind words when he and my mother once tried to convince me to continue my MSc, but I was afraid of the university's environment. He said:

Dear baby man [sic], the world is there to crush you by counting your shortcomings; you need to embrace your weaknesses and make them your strengths. See, also mother told you to put your weaknesses on a pedestal, but I would like you to hang them all together on a tall tree at the gateway of our city for wider public attention to let them know who you actually are.

In Melbourne, I faced stigma and discrimination multiple times. A study conducted amongst 200 international students in Australia reported that most international students faced bad treatment, including discrimination and racism (Deumert et al., 2005).

In the beginning, I had felt like it was all my perceptions that people behaved in a discriminatory way towards me, but, over time, I realised that all those happenings were a consequence of homophobia. I did not bother much about it and each time I gained more power and inner strength. Eventually, though, there occurred an unfortunate time when I felt sick. This event happened a day before the first lockdown in Melbourne, which highly impacted my PhD research.

I faced inhumane treatment by a fellow PhD candidate in my study office, who always avoided looking at me as if I were some sort of filthy creature. He always expressed a feeling of extreme disgust and dislike. My study desk is located close to the entry and exit door, and I unintentionally looked up whenever someone entered or exited. Upon that unintentional act, this man always reflected an extreme level of scorn. I did not anticipate that a fellow PhD candidate would behave in such a rough manner toward a colleague for the simple offence of an unintentional look. This person always turned red in the face, blood boiling in his veins and hissing like a cobra. Finally, one fine day, it happened that this gentleman awarded me the title faggot. While I knew that my university would fully support me if I had formally complained about this incident, I deliberately avoided reporting it. My decision of not reporting was based on the concern that it would negatively impact his professional career.

This was not the only incident where I was judged on behalf of my PhD research topic. I wonder how people build their perceptions about a person without bothering to ask what that person's philosophy is. Amongst all the miserable situations I faced, I think character judgment was the most painful thing for me, but I tolerated it by grasping tight to my intrinsic motivation. I always think that the message I want to deliver through my research is much bigger than my pain.

### **29.6.7 *Mental Health Issues***

Previous research has revealed an increased level of vulnerability to mental health issues amongst international students due to linguistic, social, cultural, economic, and academic challenges. Despite the fact that international students are especially vulnerable, they are more hesitant to call for mental health assistance than domestic students (Orygen, 2020). A study conducted amongst international students who stayed in foreign countries during the COVID-19 pandemic revealed that many had developed fatal mental health conditions (Lai et al., 2020). Furthermore, recent studies have revealed that there was a mental health crisis in PhD programmes even before the COVID-19 pandemic (Lau & Pretorius, 2019).

Since I came to Melbourne in October 2018, I could not go back to Pakistan a single time due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which adversely impacted my mental health. Similar to Mokbul (2022), I had never encountered this feeling of suffering and dealt with such complicated situations simultaneously.

Lockdown snatched every joy and colour from my life. It was challenging for me as an international student to cope with the lockdown pressures all alone. I came from an extended family background where I always received love, affection, and the utmost care from my people. Here in Melbourne, I lived with no friends, no family, and no support at all.

On top of that, the homophobic incident that happened to me intensified my mental health condition. The biggest challenge for me was to seek in-person mental health care within the lockdown periods. I was sharing my living place with other people and there was no way I could maintain my privacy and confidentiality to benefit from telehealth services. I felt a need to support myself and decided to get assistance for my mental health issues. Without seeking mental health attention, I would not have managed to reach my academic goals. My intrinsic motivation made me care for the continuation of my PhD project. I changed my accommodation and shifted to a place to live by myself and I started to take telehealth mental health assistance and I realised that it was a timely decision.

## 29.7 Conclusion

Using an autoethnographic approach, this chapter has tried to convey my academic struggles as a researcher of a sensitive issue. Amongst the range of challenges I faced, the COVID-19 pandemic proved to be the greatest one. The COVID-19 pandemic introduced an intense degree of difficulty to my research, to the extent that I would have likely pulled out had I not had strong intrinsic motivations behind my work. From my personal experience, I suggest that each PhD researcher needs intrinsic motivations to face uncertain and unpredictable situations and contexts such as the COVID-19 pandemic. My intrinsic motivations were so powerful that I was able to overcome whatever roadblocks came across my way and I continue to progress through each stage of my candidature.

## 29.8 Recommendations

While the information provided in this chapter is comprised of a single subject's experience, I still feel that it offers insights and recommendations to students, academics, and the wider society.

### **29.8.1 For Students**

From my experience, I would like to recommend that postgraduate researchers hold space and flexibility in mind when considering their research design. Malleability becomes an essential quality for researchers that helps them adapt to time constraints and unforeseeable situations like the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **29.8.2 For Academics**

Based on their loneliness and other sufferings, international postgraduate researchers, by default, become subject to vulnerability when compared with local students. I consider myself highly fortunate to have had the greatest humans as my supervisors. They never left me alone in my journey and took special care of me, which boosted my energy. Therefore, I would like to recommend all the academics who deal with the international postgraduate students show concern for their students' wellbeing. A little extra care from an advisor can greatly impact the working efficiency of the students.

### **29.8.3 For the Wider Society**

International students in the COVID-19 pandemic became a vulnerable group within the population, especially with regard to their mental and emotional health. When opting to move overseas, international students look forward to respect, love, and affection from the people of the host country. If they feel judged and excluded on behalf of their colour, race, and language, they will lose focus on their academic goals. I recommend that all people in the local communities try to include international students in their circles and share their happiness by just considering them as fellow human beings. Your little gestures of care will contribute tremendously to lessening the vulnerability amongst the international postgraduate student community.

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**Part VI**  
**Supporting Academic Identity**  
**Development During a Global Crisis**

# Chapter 30

## “Memeing It Up!”: Doctoral Students’ Reflections of Collegiate Virtual Writing Spaces During the COVID-19 Pandemic



Amar Freya and Jennifer Cutri

**Abstract** Completing a PhD is an isolating and arduous process, where doctoral students’ wellbeing is impacted. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the pre-existing feelings of social isolation and lowered productivity resulting in further challenges due to the absence of established social support systems. Higher education is an area of particular interest, specifically in Victoria, Australia, where all students spent most of the years 2020 and 2021 in a lockdown. This chapter presents a reflective autoethnographic account of two doctoral students’ experiences of writing their theses during the COVID-19 pandemic. We are two sociological researchers pursuing PhDs who experienced an extended COVID-19 lockdown while studying at Monash University’s Faculty of Education in Victoria, Australia. Our chapter identifies how our socio-emotional and academic writing struggles were intertwined and how they affected the overall progress of our doctoral thesis. The emotional aspects included, but were not limited to, fear, anxiety, uncertainty, stress, and a lack of support, which will be the focus of this chapter. We use our accounts to share our coping strategies by acknowledging the effects of these emotional aspects. We achieved this through participating in collegiate virtual writing spaces via Zoom, creating a sense of accountability for writing by employing the Pomodoro technique. Furthermore, social interaction was a significant component of the Zoom sessions; we maintained our digital proximity while we were physically apart. The use of memes, presented an opportunity for us to socialise, joke, and reflect on the positives, thus creating a sense of self-efficacy during this challenging time. Ultimately, these sessions created a space to remind ourselves and each other of the passion behind our doctoral degrees and ascribe somewhat positive meaning to the thoughts and feelings related to the stressful and unexpected COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, we offer this chapter to support our fellow doctoral peers in these times of uncertainty across the globe.

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**Keywords** Reflection · Autoethnography · Collegiality · Virtual writing spaces · Mental health · Wellbeing · Online memes · Doctoral students · COVID-19

## 30.1 Introduction

We are two doctoral students at a Victorian-based higher education institution (Monash University), studying in the Faculty of Education. The beginning of 2020 was initially an exciting time as we worked towards completing our PhD studies. We had our Final Review milestones booked and worked independently and collegially to finalise our plans for thesis submission. At this point in time, we were already enduring doctoral and academic-related challenges in terms of feeling imposter syndrome, struggling with academic writing, and experiencing an identity crisis as novice researchers. These feelings are commonly experienced amongst doctoral students and have been the centre of recent scholarship pertaining to doctoral student wellbeing (Cutri et al., 2021; Pretorius et al., 2019). Doctoral students often experience stress, anxiety, depression, as well as feelings of inadequacy, and can struggle to balance the competing demands of doctoral study with real-world expectations, such as employment and family responsibilities (Pretorius et al., 2019). Therefore, we argue that, as PhD students, we were already submerged in the academic realm that was riddled with, as noted by van Rooij et al. (2021), psychosocial and emotional stresses. We draw on van Rooij et al.'s (2021) definition of psychosocial aspects as the need for support systems for doctoral students to cope with the pressures of academia.

While we were already facing these pre-existing mental health concerns, unbeknownst to us, since PhD students *live in a writing cave*, the world around us was rapidly changing and the current mental health crisis was about to intensify. Our ambitions for completing our doctorates in 2020 immediately dissipated due to the COVID-19 global pandemic. In Australia, the increase in the number of cases began from late March 2020, where international travel was restricted, state borders were closed, hotel quarantine was mandated for international travellers, and social distancing restrictions were introduced. In July 2020, the State of Victoria experienced its second wave of COVID-19 infections leading to mandated mask-wearing in public. In response to the immediate threat and dangers of COVID-19, the State of Victoria enacted a debilitating, but necessary, state-wide lockdown to stop the spread of this deadly virus (Andrews, 2020a, b, c). From March 2020, universities across the state immediately ceased on-campus activities with social events cancelled or postponed, except for essential workers and researchers (Dodd et al., 2021). Melbourne's latest lockdown ended in October 2021 with 263 days in lockdown since the beginning of the pandemic (Lockdown Stats Melbourne, 2021). Since our PhD studies did not require in-person laboratory use, we were not deemed essential and, therefore, we had no choice but to continue our candidature at home.

Working from home is challenging, with many recent studies highlighting the severe impact on doctoral students' mental health and wellbeing (Chirikov et al.,

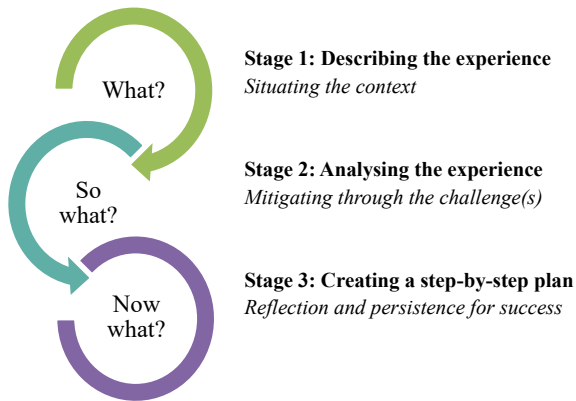
2020; Dodd et al., 2021; Kee, 2021; Tasso et al., 2021). Furthermore, thesis writing productivity and the ability to continue with research were significantly affected (see, for example, Aristovnik et al., 2020; Cahusac de Caux, 2021; Kariotis, 2020). Due to us experiencing such challenges ourselves, we collectively discovered an essential coping mechanism that enabled us to push forward on our PhD journey through the pandemic. We felt that it was necessary to outline our personal narratives, which we initially perceived as an insiders’ joke but discovered to be an essential survival mechanism during these unprecedented times. Therefore, in this chapter, we present our unique coping mechanism of engaging with virtual PhD specific and academic memes as our prewriting ritual. Such a ritual was imperative as we incorporated this strategy into our collegiate virtual writing space. We developed sustainable writing practices during the state-wide lockdown by drawing upon Wilson and Cutri’s (2021) model of collegiate, student-driven writing events. In order to substantiate the value of a virtual meme, we present our experience in the form of a reflective autoethnography.

Through this process, we drew on Pretorius and Cutri’s (2019) reflective practice model to represent the cycle of our personal growth and academic development while trying to work on our theses during the COVID-19 lockdown. Through capturing our experiences within the reflective autoethnographic practice model, we present our unique approach to managing the psychological stress of working remotely under lockdown conditions and creating a flexible, collegiate virtual writing space that enabled us to be autonomous with our writing when the external circumstances were out of our control. Consequently, our unique approach of creating an informal stress-release ritual prior to our collegiate virtual writing space assisted us in successfully achieving our final milestones and bringing us one step closer to completing our PhDs.

## 30.2 Reflective Autoethnography

As two doctoral students sharing our autoethnographic account of mitigating the COVID-19 pandemic, we felt that the reflective practice model would be an appropriate methodological tool to present our voices. The reflective practice model we used was created by Pretorius and Cutri (2019) to help capture the voice of doctoral students and illuminate their PhD experience through autoethnography. It incorporates elements from the minimalistic model of reflection (Rolfe et al., 2001) and the concept of reflection for learning (Pretorius & Ford, 2016) in the doctoral education space. Recently, for example, Chakma et al. (2021) applied the reflective practice model to structure their autoethnographic inquiry into graduate students’ participation in an online collaborative writing group during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown.

The methodological approach of autoethnography enables writers to capture their human experience, while showcasing their reflexivity (Pretorius & Cutri, 2019). Specifically, concerning the doctoral study process, autoethnographic reflections privilege the student voice while exploring the complex layers of the doctoral space



**Fig. 30.1** Adapting Pretorius and Cutri's (2019) reflective practice model in this chapter. Adapted by permission from Springer Nature Customer Service Centre GmbH: Springer Wellbeing in Doctoral Education: Insights and Guidance from the Student Experience by Lynette Pretorius, Luke Macaulay, and Basil Cahusac de Caux © 2019 <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-13-9302-0>

(Pretorius & Cutri, 2019). Autoethnographic reflections are grounded in the cultural, historical, and political contexts (Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Pretorius & Cutri, 2019; Pretorius, 2022a; White, 2003), consequently being an appropriate methodological choice to discuss our reflective experience of working of doctoral study during the COVID-19 pandemic. We intentionally adapted Pretorius and Cutri's (2019) reflective practice model to personalise our autoethnographic reflective experience (see Fig. 30.1). The cyclical nature of Pretorius and Cutri's (2019) reflective practice model enabled us to illustrate the stages of growth we experienced throughout this narrative.

In the first stage, we situate our experience in the discourse that a mental health crisis existed prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Along with providing an overview of the pre-existing psychosocial and emotional stresses in the doctoral space, we also identified how we established an informal coping strategy. We formulated a stress management technique by engaging with virtual memes to cope with feeling overwhelmed with thesis writing prior to the pandemic. Building on from the contextual overview, the second stage reveals how we engaged in a collegiate virtual writing space to mitigate the challenge of working on our PhDs during the state-wide lockdown. Drawing on elements of Shut Up 'n' Write! (SUNW), we imitated specific protocols, such as the Pomodoro technique and goal setting, along with embedding our ritual of engaging with memes as a psychosocial stress management tool. Within the final reflective stage of the model, we specifically accentuate how working together through a collegiate virtual writing space enabled us to develop sustainable writing practices for this particular situation. We provide the explicit example of how our technique of collegiate writing, with the support of engaging with memes, helped us accomplish our Final Review milestones and progress our doctoral journeys.



Our reflections are carved through the act of *telling* our story/narrative (Nelson, 2018), where we utilised Adam et al.’s (2017) storytelling device of narrative voice to accentuate our unique experience and feelings associated with the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown. Through this process, we resonated with Rafi’s (2018) assertion that autoethnography is not only about a “journey of self-knowledge” (p. 93) but also an invitation for our readers into our experience. Following the reflective practice model, we adopted the term *stages* in our headings to illustrate how we described and analysed the autoethnographic experience step by step. Each stage of the model identifies our key transition phases. We, therefore, offer this chapter as an opportunity for fellow doctoral researchers affected by the pandemic to reflect and rediscover their academic potential through their experience of undertaking doctoral study during unprecedented times.

### 30.3 Stage 1. COVID-19 and the Mental Health Crisis Amongst Doctoral Students

Since the beginning of the pandemic, doctoral students found themselves socially isolated, with limited access to equipment and resources, experiencing heightened issues with time management, as well as studying unproductively and ineffectively (Chakma et al., 2021; Chirikov et al., 2020; Kariotis, 2020). There is an increasing amount of literature that accentuates the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and its associated lockdowns concerning graduate research students’ thesis productivity and mental health (see, for example, Chap. 23, Cahusac de Caux, 2022a). Additionally, tertiary students were identified as a “very high-risk population” for mental health difficulties (Dodd et al., 2021, p. 8). Large-scale studies of Australian, American, and British university students also identified findings of students experiencing psychological distress and exhibiting major depressive symptoms (Dodd et al., 2021). We resonated with the challenges identified in the literature, as we were trying to remain focused on our writing whilst coping with mental health and overall wellbeing shortfalls.

We acknowledge that we were both experiencing psychosocial and emotional stress and believe it is essential to share this sentiment with others. This is because there is a mental health crisis in academia (Lau & Pretorius, 2019, 2022b), and it is unfair, even unethical, to continue to gloss over this pertinent issue. Most significantly, the mental health crisis amongst doctoral students precedes COVID-19. Doctoral students—both international and domestic—prior to COVID-19 reported heightened levels of depression, anxiety, substance abuse, eating disorders, suicidality, and a range of interpersonal complications (Evans et al., 2018; Lau & Pretorius, 2019; Levecque et al., 2017; Tasso et al., 2021; Zullig & Divin, 2012). COVID-19 further exacerbated and complicated these pre-existing challenges for doctoral students. Jennifer shares her experiences with the mental health crisis amongst doctoral students prior to COVID-19:

In 2019 I contributed to the book “Wellbeing in Doctoral Education”. My participation in this project was a pivotal moment for my doctoral student journey as I was almost halfway through my candidature. In the leadup to this moment, I spent the last year and a half in a private struggle as I endeavoured to establish myself within my scholarly field. Daily, I was overwhelmed with feelings of never feeling ‘up to scratch’ and that I felt like an imposter being a PhD candidate. I was also stressed as I tried to balance research and my academic teaching and research assistant responsibilities. When I was invited to contribute to the project and through my meetings with the academic writing team, I immediately realised that I was not alone in my feelings of stress, isolation, and imposter syndrome. There was certainly a mental health crisis in academia!

Further highlighting the importance of social and professional support amongst peers, we shared our experiences of being doctoral students prior to the beginning of COVID-19:

I was fortunate that there were several grassroots established groups provided by members within my faculty to help novice researchers through the terrain of academia. By working alongside like-minded people, I developed a range of coping strategies, such as using the Pomodoro technique and writing in collegiate based groups. I discovered that writing socially helped my writing productively as we learned techniques from each other. A crucial aspect of social writing was that this provided a space where I did not feel the ‘academic’ pressure and I could laugh, joke, and cry with my peers. Such spaces also enabled informal interactions, such as sharing academic memes (see Figure 2 below) to lighten the mood (Jennifer).

As a neurodivergent doctoral student with chronic depression and anxiety, my routine and support network kept me motivated and dedicated towards my PhD (Amar).

The Australian and global lockdown of universities due to COVID-19 resulted in major changes in how education was delivered (Cahusac de Caux, 2022b). The mode of delivery changed from predominantly in-person to online (Kee, 2021). The pandemic impacted doctoral students severely—either directly with physical and mental health issues or indirectly with academic, social, and economic factors (Aristovnik et al., 2020). Boredom, anxiety, depression, panic, worry, frustration, anger, hopelessness, and shame were some of the emotions experienced by the students (Aristovnik et al., 2020; Chirikov et al., 2020; Dodd et al., 2021; Tasso et al., 2021). Doctoral students also found themselves with suspended personal and professional research plans, experiencing unnatural isolation, and feeling anxious due to fear of losing family and friends (Chirikov et al., 2020; Dodd et al., 2021; Tasso et al., 2021). Many of these impacts have already been discussed by others in this book.

Reflecting on how these positive routines and support from peer groups changed due to the pandemic, Amar and Jennifer note that,

Everything appeared to be working well at this point in time. I had a supportive peer community, and I was on track to work towards my final milestone. Suddenly, a global pandemic occurred. Within the space of a week, I found myself out of work, out of my apartment, and off-campus. The COVID-19 pandemic had forever changed the track of my PhD journey. I had to move back home with my partner, who was also a doctoral student at the time [see more on this in Chap. 17 by Cutri and Lau (2022)]. From March 2020 to October 2020, I was living in an isolation bubble as Victoria was in a total lockdown. I had to work from home on the kitchen bench on a barstool which was challenging as I had no funding to afford basic study supplies, and I also lost my working income. The struggle was real with experiencing two rounds of sciatica (Jennifer).

The pandemic created a sense of uncertainty, loss, and isolation. Prior to the pandemic, I had managed to create a routine for myself that worked like a well-oiled machine surrounded by a supportive peer group at university. As COVID-19 and its restrictions progressed, I felt an acute loss of comradery, support, and routine (Amar).

Along with us, other international and domestic doctoral students in Melbourne and worldwide adapted to communicating and collaborating online. This closure of universities and change in delivery modes resulted in many students seeking comfort, solace, and support from their peers through online mediums. We did the same—through the creation of our collegiate virtual writing space. Before COVID-19, we used memes to *share our misery*, to make each other laugh during submission weeks, and cope with difficult constructive feedback from our supervisors. It became much more than that over the past two years where we supported each other and our lack of productivity through PhD specific, academic, COVID-19 memes, which were used as an informal mechanism prior to the pandemic.

### 30.4 Stage 2. Memeing It Up!

When the State of Victoria imposed the lockdown and restrictions for leaving home, there was minimal time to adequately prepare our transition to continue our graduate studies at home. The two main difficulties we faced were fulfilling the expectations of continuing our doctoral research to meet a timely submission and coping with the psychological stress of living in a global pandemic where a vaccine did not (yet) exist. As the pandemic developed and there were concerns about misinformation and excessive information being shared regarding the pandemic, memes offered comfort, validation, and reassurance that we were not alone. Jennifer highlights how having a collegiate virtual writing space to share her feelings helped her at the beginning of the pandemic,

I acknowledge that I was in a fortunate situation where I already had collected my data so I was at the stage of data analysis and writing drafts in preparation for my final milestone. However, I had two challenges: physically with ongoing sciatica, and secondly, a mental health crisis was taking its toll. Each morning I struggled to rise from my bed as I could not bear another Groundhog Day—thanks, Bill Murray, I think I will stick to Ghostbusters. I would start the day lying in bed messaging my dear friend, Amar, who also expressed her despair of trying to work on a thesis during the pandemic. We eventually made a game of who could get up and turn on their laptop first to lighten the mood. We decided to meet on Zoom and just use the time to joke, cry, and eventually open up our thesis progress.

Given that the entire state of Victoria was in lockdown, the only way to maintain a human connection to people beyond our households was via the internet. We had already been in a position of collegiate writing buddies prior to the pandemic, where we would sit together on campus and work independently on theses while checking in which ensured self-care. We decided to continue our collegiate writing, but this time through a collegiate virtual writing space using the Zoom platform. In the beginning, adapting to this sudden life change was extremely overwhelming, so we were not

very academically productive. However, our daily Zoom mental health debriefs were essential for our overall wellbeing before jumping into our writing. It is important to emphasise that all stages of doctoral candidature present different challenges. Therefore, we contend that regardless of the stage of the PhD journey, it is crucial to acknowledge the heterogeneity of the experiences and to respect that the PhD journey differs for every student. So, while we are grateful to be at the final writing stage where our data collection was not affected, academic writing continued to be a daunting experience.

During our Zoom chats, we forged a specific strategy to ensure a steady focus on our writing, and supported each other through our emotions. Such emotions included feelings of isolation, imposter syndrome, writer's block, fear, uncertainty, hopelessness, and questioning our self-worth. Jennifer suggested adopting a framework known as collegiate, student-driven writing events, which simulated a particular aspect of SUNW that she co-developed with an academic in the Faculty of Education. Wilson and Cutri (2021) developed the term collegiate, attendee-driven writing networks as a euphemism for the common SUNW social writing groups (see Mewburn et al., 2014). General characteristics of such academic collegial writing spaces consist of focused writing time with scheduled breaks. The benefit of Wilson and Cutri's (2021) collegiate writing model is that writing groups are positioned as semi-structured and, therefore, allow for greater flexibility amongst participants, as SUNW can be rigid.

An example of being flexible is how we applied the Pomodoro technique, where we worked in timed intervals to sustain concentration yet adjusted accordingly based on our needs. For instance, as a neurodivergent person and to ensure that she could maximise her writing potential in the sessions, Amar would work on a specific cycle of 10 min writing with a 5 min break. This technique was manageable as even though Amar would stop writing after 10 min, Jennifer would sometimes choose to work to the 20 or 25 min mark without being distracted because we agreed to remain muted until the official check-in break.

I have always found the Pomodoro writing technique helpful, and once we were asked to work from home, I actively started seeking out writing groups. These sessions gave me a renewed sense of routine and purpose and forced me to get out of bed and join other interdisciplinary peers from all over Australia and the world. Although there were no commitments for time and completion of work, it was a motivating factor for me to get up and try. These writing groups provided me with a platform to express how I felt, complete work and build a sense of community and accountability.

Importantly, we developed a prewriting routine where we would share PhD and/or academia related memes to help create a positive atmosphere and kickstart serotonin production. Most of us know what memes (some pronounce it as *me-me* and some call it a *meem*) are: a picture or video which showcases thoughts or feelings that have specific meaning in a particular context. One of the most well-known memes is the image of a sitting dog surrounded by fire and drinking coffee saying, "This is fine". During the pandemic, this meme was adapted to include images of toilet rolls instead of the coffee cup to highlight that the toilet roll frenzy was so terrible and comical that we failed to comprehend that this is where our world was at (MacDonald, 2021).

As noted in Stage 1, we both love searching for memes, but engaged in this behaviour while procrastinating; yet we did not realise the potential and psychological benefit of memes for one’s wellbeing. As Jennifer notes:

Like our social writing sessions, we applied the Pomodoro technique to help us write during the Zoom meeting then check in to remain accountable. We intentionally kept our camera’s on because Amar loves staring at my beautiful face the whole time. The actual reason is that we found we were more productive if we felt the other person was watching. One day while I was trying to write, I noticed that Amar was constantly laughing and that her husband was in the room, and he was also laughing. It got to the point where I stopped the session and asked, “what is so funny?”. She then screen shared, and there was a meme. I honestly felt that was the highlight of my life during the pandemic. Just one small meme brought such joy. The competitor in me kicked in so I felt compelled to produce a meme. Of course, Amar, who is also competitive, then memed me back. Our war of the memes was an immense highlight, and we achieved no writing-oops! Nevertheless, it was worth it!

Compared to other media content, memes seem to elicit more humour and positive emotions in internet users (Myrick et al., 2021). Internet memes are defined as “units of popular culture that are circulated, imitated, and transformed by individual internet users, creating a shared cultural experience in the process” (Shifman, 2013, p. 367). For us, memes became a source of connection, support, humour, and the last semblance of normality while trying to progress on our doctorates during an unprecedented pandemic.

Research has found that memes had the potential to positively impact our psychological state and increase our ability to cope with stress, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic (MacDonald, 2021; Myrick et al., 2021). For us, one of the ways of ascribing positive meaning to the COVID-19 pandemic was by viewing and sharing memes. Coping efficacy is essential when dealing with stressors and their resulting stress (Myrick et al., 2021). Meaning-focused coping is a form of coping seen as a response to significant adversity or trauma (August & Dapkewicz, 2020). When a meaning-focused coping style is employed to re-evaluate the meaning of a stressful event, ascribing positive meanings can help reshape thoughts and opinions about the stressors and the stressful event (August & Dapkewicz, 2020). Unintentionally, rejecting the idea of a traditional SUNW group, we instead formed a *collegiate virtual writing space* where we met to write but also share memes and communicate about how the pandemic caused personal hardships for us, thereby transforming our homes into conducive learning spaces. Echoing Chakma et al. (2021), we felt that the space we created was an *antidote* to the work from home settings forced upon us during the pandemic.

### 30.5 Stage 3. Mitigating Research Disruption and Achieving Milestones

We put forward that collegiate virtual writing spaces are helpful for doctoral students attempting to make progress on their theses under lockdown conditions. Writers

are encouraged to set and share personal writing goals followed by a celebration upon reaching those goals. Wilson and Cutri (2021) contend that sustainable writing practices are developed through these specific characteristics—keeping writers on task and minimising procrastination with clear and achievable goals. Since the start of the March 2020 lockdown and briefly returning to campus in April 2021, our biggest challenge was overcoming the final hurdle prior to our thesis submission: Final Review. We needed to be adequately prepared for this milestone. We contend that we were able to accomplish our Final Review milestones by implementing sustainable writing practices.

The notion of sustainable writing practices encompasses the capability of writers to engage in certain writing behaviours to ensure efficiency, productivity, and quality written output. Sustainable writing practices involve the development of specific writing strategies that enable us to adhere to the disciplinary genre and the ability to revise a draft based on supportive feedback (Tyndall et al., 2019). By participating in our collegiate virtual writing space, we contend that we could mitigate self-sabotaging barriers of isolation, perfectionism, imposter syndrome, and anxieties about our writing capabilities. We attribute this to our personal coping mechanism of the informal use of PhD and academic memes. We both felt that we had regained our sense of personal autonomy over our writing. The following excerpt reveals how Amar was able to regain a sense of value for her writing, which she attributes to her participation in our collegiate virtual writing space:

Evidently, I was not alone in this feeling of loss, grief, and isolation. Around me, my family, friends and extended doctoral students were experiencing similar feelings. This led to the creation of multiple informal social and formal writing groups. The social groups mainly consisted of peers that were more than just doctoral students who were colleagues at the faculty. We would check in on each other, rant and seek advice for all things PhD and life. Memes became a central focus of these social groups where we would occasionally communicate only through memes, gifs, and emojis. While we were all suffering together, this support system lessened the acute sense of loneliness and isolation. We would use this social group to plan what we would do once the restrictions were lifted, and this created a sense of excitement and something to look forward to.

Amar's excerpt shows that she has adapted to the virtual learning environment and, as identified by Kee (2021), can find a way to manage her emotions by utilising memes as her coping mechanism. Establishing a comfortable virtual writing environment is essential so that we can write productively. Chakma et al. (2021) acknowledge that SUNW may not work for everyone. Wilson and Cutri (2019) attribute this to the rigid nature of this specific writing event. In contrast, while collegiate, student-driven writing events draw on elements of SUNW, such as Pomodoros and goal setting, the critical difference is that this is a flexible writing space. A key aspect that helped us function in this unprecedented situation was that we were on the same page and, as Wilson and Cutri (2021) highlight, collegiate virtual writing spaces enable like-minded people to come together.

Being two graduate students working towards our final milestone, we were able to resonate with the pressure of preparing for this significant event, and we needed to enact sustainable writing practices to ensure we would meet this requirement for

our candidature. These logistical writing strategies took time to develop as we had minimal contact with our supervisors due to the online learning environment, so we relied heavily on each other to make sense of how to continue our PhDs. We contend that this revelation aligns with Kariotis (2020) assertion that it is impossible to replicate pre-pandemic conditions for effective research. Therefore, the best thing to do is adapt our approach and not pressure ourselves or hold ourselves to pre-pandemic academic standards. Looking back on our approach, we found that pandemic-induced logistical writing strategies were essential transferable skills because they taught us how to adapt our approach to academic writing under unprecedented circumstances. As the final weeks counted down, we only had one item left on our to-do-list: finish our PhD.

### 30.6 Conclusion

Through divulging our personal narrative of struggle and persistence of writing our doctoral theses during the COVID-19 pandemic, we hope this chapter provides an insight into alternative strategies to help graduate students mitigate their personal challenges. We draw on our experience working towards our Final Review milestone and how we successfully passed as evidence that our collegiate virtual writing spaces worked. The global pandemic is one extreme example of how life can be turned upside down, yet there is a continuous expectation to maintain *business as usual* (Le, 2021). In this case, business as usual was continuing the trajectory of our doctoral theses. Given the circumstances, we quickly adapted and endeavoured to do our best. Most doctoral students engaged in online SUNW or other writing group sessions (see, for example, Chakma et al., 2021; Hradsky et al., 2022); however, we believe that formulating specific writing strategies goes beyond the popular SUNW style. Going further, we explicitly engaged in a collegiate virtual writing space that utilised the SUNW elements of the Pomodoro technique and goal setting. However, we augmented this by incorporating the inclusion of memes as a prewriting ritual. Our justification for this inclusion is on the premise that the pandemic has exacerbated mental health issues, which we have argued already exist in academia. Throughout this chapter, we have drawn on our personal experiences focussing on our psychosocial wellbeing as doctoral students attempting to make progress on our theses during the COVID-19 pandemic. By sharing our strategy of engaging with memes to motivate our writing sessions, we hope that other doctoral students can adopt this coping mechanism to support their endeavours. We encourage future scholarship to build on this disposition.

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# Chapter 31

## ‘Intertext’ in a New Context: Lessons Learnt from Collaborating, Contributing, and Connecting Through an Online Interdisciplinary Student-Led Symposium During COVID-19



Gabriella Karakas  and Samantha Webster 

**Abstract** Like so many of our peers who were in the process of completing a Ph.D., we experienced a dislocation from space, routine, and community at the onset of the COVID pandemic. We were no longer meeting in seminars, having incidental chats in the corridors, or engaging in the day-to-day routines that we found supportive as Higher Degrees by Research (HDR) candidates. As student representatives for just over 700 HDRs in our college, we found ourselves wanting to create opportunities to seek out connection during these strange times, but being unsure of how to do this in the context of such a diverse cohort all dealing with different impacts of the pandemic. In September 2020, amidst the second wave of COVID cases in Victoria, we hosted an online student-led interdisciplinary symposium for HDR students in our college (the Intertext Symposium), adapted from its previous face-to-face format. The Symposium surpassed previous years in terms of attendance, engagement, and support from academics. In this chapter we reflect on the lessons learnt from supporting, contributing, and collaborating on the collective goals of the Symposium. We question why people might have sought to engage in the Symposium, the opportunities for further collaborations, and what we will take forward into the future. In addition to reflecting on what we learnt, we also discuss how changes brought about by COVID-related disruptions may have implications for future HDR communities and collaborations. Previous HDR interactions relied heavily on access to physical space, which made it difficult for geographically dispersed candidates to participate. We anticipate models of online conference events and research project management developed during COVID-19 will be used in future events to cater to diverse audiences (such as those who are geographically dispersed, financially disadvantaged, or carers), even in the absence of restrictions and pandemic constraints. In addition, we believe reflexivity and agility will benefit future student representatives and leaders

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as a means of learning from and responding to complex challenges currently faced by the higher education sector.

**Keywords** Student representatives · Higher degrees by research students · Doctoral students · Online conferences · Reflexivity · Diversity · Inclusion · Student engagement · COVID-19

## 31.1 Introduction

One of the most frequent grievances by candidates pursuing higher degrees by research is the inability to engage in meaningful relationships with peers and colleagues (Cantor, 2020). A study of loneliness among doctoral students conducted in the so-called *pre-pandemic era* concluded that “both domestic and international [Ph.D.] students from a range of disciplines experience social isolation, suffer a lack of emotional support and may struggle to engage in meaningful relationships with their peers” (Janta et al., 2014, p. 565). The onset of the pandemic brought with it distinct challenges, many stemming from social-distancing and work-from-home measures. Indeed, in surveys undertaken since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, more than half of participants (54%) felt lonelier than during pre-pandemic times (Lim et al., 2020).

During this time, we (Gabriella Karakas and Samantha Webster) experienced being both Ph.D. candidates and Higher Degree by Research (HDR) candidate representatives at our university in Melbourne—a city which spent a total of 263 days in lockdown (Lockdown Stats Melbourne, 2021), at one time earning it the title of the *most locked-down city in the world* (see, for example, Boaz, 2021). Like so many of our peers who were in the process of completing their Ph.D.s, we were faced with a dislocation from space, routine, and community as a result of the pandemic. We were no longer meeting in seminars, having incidental chats in the corridors, or engaging in the day-to-day routines that we found supportive as HDR candidates. A study conducted at our university shows that we were not alone in grappling with the challenges of working from home and contemplating uncertain futures (Gomes et al., 2021). As student representatives for just over 700 HDRs in our College, we found ourselves wanting to create opportunities for peer connection during these strange times, but being unsure of how to do this in the context of such a diverse cohort all dealing with different impacts of the pandemic. An opportunity presented itself in the form of the annual *Intertext Symposium* at our university, which is traditionally convened by HDR representatives. This was an opportune moment to bring together candidates during many stages of the Symposium’s duration—its preparation, presentation, and evaluation. Although there is a growing research landscape on the impacts of the pandemic on doctoral education and academia (Cahusac de Caux, 2021; Gomes et al., 2021), there is currently no available research on the impact of candidate-led initiatives promoting wellbeing, connection, and engagement.

This chapter utilises autoethnography, as it is an advantageous approach to consider our experiences and subsequent learning during our time as Ph.D. candidates and representatives at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. We used a minimalistic model for reflection known as the *What? So What? Now What?* framework (Driscoll, 2000; Pretorius & Cutri, 2019; Pretorius & Ford, 2016; Rolfe et al., 2001). In brief, the *What* dimension of the framework allows us to recall and outline our experiences, the factual account of what happened and the particular situation (Pretorius & Cutri, 2019). Secondly, the *So What?* dimension allows for the deeper exploration of thoughts and feelings at the time of the event with particular consideration for improvement (Pretorius & Cutri, 2019). Lastly, the *Now What?* dimension builds on insights gained to plan for the future (Pretorius & Cutri, 2019). In this way, we use our reflection as a learning tool (Pretorius & Ford, 2016).

Becoming an effective researcher requires numerous traits, particularly self-awareness and reflexivity. These practices of introspection may include reflecting on life-changing events or influences, personal values, and actions in the face of adversity or challenge (Skovholt, 2012). In addition, the act of telling “also cultivates creative thinking, ownership of ideas, and enthusiasm for learning” (Pretorius & Cutri, 2019, p. 27). The act of telling allowed us to reflect on our experiences of co-chairing the Intertext Symposium, explore our thoughts, and discuss the implications of what we learnt in the process of collaborating, contributing, and connecting through an online interdisciplinary symposium.

## 31.2 Background: The Intertext Symposium

The Intertext Symposium at RMIT University is a student-led research symposium for HDR candidates in the College of Design and Social Context (DSC) which began in 2018 and has been held annually since. The aims of the Intertext Symposium are to showcase postgraduate research across the eight schools within the college, celebrate the significant contributions of postgraduate researchers, as well as bring together the HDR community to provide a channel for the exchange of information and transdisciplinary collaboration. It is run for and by HDR candidates, with support from the university. The Symposium brings together HDR candidates at various stages of their candidature across disciplines to present their research projects.

As candidate representatives, one of our responsibilities was to chair a committee for the Intertext Symposium which involved establishing a committee of students across the college, working with academics and staff across the university, managing the abstract submission process, and registering attendees. In 2019, we ran the Symposium which took place face-to-face over one day. However, 2020 brought new and unprecedented challenges, with COVID-19 changing the face of academia and related activities as we knew them. Using the *What? So What? Now What?* framework (Driscoll, 2000; Pretorius & Cutri, 2019; Pretorius & Ford, 2016; Rolfe et al., 2001) we describe the process of adapting to these challenges and creating a new way of connecting with our peers over this time.

### 31.3 What?

Our personal reflections on the onset of the pandemic highlighted the emotionally charged response to the drastic shift and ensuing changes to our lives. Gabriella, as a counsellor, likened her initial feelings of the pandemic to the stages of grief:

I could liken the stages of COVID acceptance to that of the seven stages of grief—shock and denial, pain and guilt, anger and bargaining, depression, the upward turn, reconstruction and working through, and finally acceptance and hope. I often recall the morning of our first (of many) hard lockdowns in Melbourne. I was sitting in my shared office with other Ph.D. peers, when it was announced that Melbourne was going into lockdown—we had a few hours to collect our belongings and relocate home. Although global circumstances would suggest this was to be a long-term transition to working from home, the initial denial of the magnitude of the situation meant I only took my laptop home—leaving behind the rest of my books, printed materials and even my scarf. Surely, I would be back to collect it shortly (I liked to have it at hand when grabbing my daily coffee downstairs). However, almost two years on, the scarf still lays on my chair, waiting to be functional once more. The next stages followed—pain and guilt (how had I taken my privilege of free movement for granted for so many years?), anger (how am I meant to complete this Ph.D. now?!), bargaining (I promise I'll finish it twice as fast if things go back to how they were!), depression (I'll never get this done, it is a horrible thesis anyway...), the upward turn (working from home isn't too bad—at least I can stay in my pyjamas), reconstruction and working through (I work better in the mornings, so I'll start setting an early alarm) and acceptance and hope (we'll be back soon, and my newly developed resilience will help me conquer the rest of this essay).

Grief oftentimes becomes complicated with the conditions outside of one's control that synthesise the experience of loss (Lobb et al., 2010). As a result of physical distancing demands, there was grief over the demise of conventional routines in academia such as celebrating successes, meeting new peers, and connecting with existing ones (Wallace et al., 2020). Samantha reflected on the impact of the pandemic on her Ph.D. and personal life:

I felt a little frozen in a world that was moving on swiftly, caught unprepared and not knowing where to go next. On a personal level, my own research was upended by COVID-19 restrictions and I was unable to do my fieldwork as planned. I found myself separated from my family who live in another country, dealing with uncertainty and anxiety and wondering when I would get to see them again.

Although inertia felt like second nature after months at home, we could see there was a need to cultivate an academic environment in our new context. Restrictive policies during the COVID-19 pandemic impacted mental health, which (Taquet et al., 2021, p. 110) partially attributes to “impaired mood homeostasis” where there is a “failure to positively regulate mood via mood-modifying activities” (Haucke et al., 2021, p. 4). Gabriella spoke of her experience:

I realised quickly I was not alone in my feelings—my Ph.D. peers becoming increasingly vocal about writer's block, feelings of loneliness and isolation, and the impact of being separated from peers and familiar spaces on the quality of their writing, thinking and reasoning.

As student representatives, we felt a responsibility to advocate for HDR students who we knew were dealing with extraordinary challenges and needing support in many different forms. Facebook groups were formed, students reached out, and yet we were unsure of how to be truly effective in our roles.

However, we also felt that merely attempting to transpose old ways of engaging with our peers to an online format was an unrealistic aim. We began to speculate on the possibilities to increase candidate engagement and support connection within the challenging times we faced. An opportunity presented itself in the form of the annual Intertext Symposium at our university, which was traditionally convened by HDR representatives. This posed the question—would others be interested in collaborating with us in this new and somewhat daunting terrain? Yes, many had asserted they wanted the platform to (re)connect with peers, however, everyone seemed to now be in the low phase of the stages of grief. Complacency and helplessness had set in, and contact between peers was increasingly spread apart. Samantha spoke of the initial efforts taken to gain insight into the interest of HDR candidates in being part of the Symposium's organisational process:

Together we decided that it would be good to gauge interest from the HDR community before making decisions. We put out a call for volunteers for the committee, thinking that if we got very little response, we'd take that as an indication that this was an event better suited to a face-to-face format, and that people's minds were otherwise occupied or they did not have time to devote to organising an event.

Much to our surprise, our call for Intertext committee members was met with unexpected enthusiasm and responses. Not only did more candidates apply to be part of the organising committee than in previous years, but academic staff were also very eager to participate and see the conference come to fruition. We took this as an indication that there was interest and that we should take the opportunity to investigate what a symposium could look like in the context of COVID-19. Having a larger group of committee members offered a range of perspectives and we started fortnightly meetings exploring what an online symposium might entail, asking questions such as: *what would meaningful engagement look like?* and *what would participants want from an online symposium of this kind?* There was consensus among the committee that despite the proliferation of online meetings and webinars, a space to focus on work of other candidates was important. There was also a sense that coming together and sharing was an important piece missing from an environment that had pivoted online.

The next few months of conference organisation saw consistent contact between peers, enthusiasm over a new project, and rushes of adrenaline that previously lay dormant—reinvigorated by the small wins of collating abstracts and creating panels, and with the promise of a successful event on the horizon. We collectively agreed that the format of the symposium was to be a mixture of asynchronous and synchronous deliveries. Students would submit an abstract for consideration by the committee. Following acceptance, they would record a five-to-seven-minute presentation which would be uploaded to our website. For the formal symposium component, academic chairs and referees consisting of staff across the college would facilitate live sessions

with up to five presenters. Referees would have the opportunity to ask questions to the presenters, and the audience could then engage in a Q and A and facilitated discussion.

When we approached academics to contribute to the symposium as referees or chairs, we were unsure of the extent to which they might wish to engage. Gabriella noted:

We were asking them to volunteer their time for a student-led symposium at a time where we knew workloads were growing exponentially, research time had been diminished, and many academics had lost colleagues and were dealing with the unprecedented precarity of academic work.

Again, to our surprise, we had a higher response from academics than the previous two years combined, to the extent that we added an additional referee to each session and had a waitlist of academics ready and willing to participate.

The Symposium itself was a remarkable success—with over 250 attendees, the event was more frequented than any of the previous face-to-face iterations. In the following section we analyse our thoughts and feelings toward the event and areas for potential improvement in the future.

## 31.4 So What?

In addition to the Symposium being well-attended, the demographic had also notably shifted. In previous years, the conference had catered to predominantly metropolitan residents attending the university. Moving to an online format lent itself to being more geographically inclusive, with people from interstate, rural locations, and participants from other universities in attendance. Similar findings were reported by Niner & Wassermann (2021), who noted that “moving online substantially increased the accessibility of [a] conference for those who would be unable to attend an in-person event for financial or personal reasons” (p. 1). Their study, which investigated virtual conferences, indicated that “the online experience was able to recreate some of the benefits of in-person events, and that many participants are interested in attending online or virtual events in the future” (Niner & Wassermann, 2021, p. 1). Gabriella considered some of the benefits in the case of Intertext:

It was better frequented, more inclusive, had more involvement by candidates and academics in its organisation, covered a broader spectrum of research topics, and was longer in length—allowing for panel discussions and guest speakers on areas of interest to Ph.D. researchers. I found myself thinking back and comparing this to previous conferences I had attended. I felt that perhaps the asynchronous aspect of the symposium had allowed others the time and space to think about an issue. I wondered if this had created opportunities for more people to engage than those who felt confident in a normal face-to-face setting. I also wondered about modes of communication. No longer did people have to speak to ask a question—questions could and were posted in the chat to presenters. People added comments and shared contact details to pick up the discussion on their own.



Indeed, there were many opportunities facilitated by an online symposium. The radical departure from the *status quo* of face-to-face conferences brought with it increased accessibility and flexibility. As organisers, we were complimented on this, along with the welcoming environment and helpful communication around events and panels by attendees. By way of accessibility, the online format lent itself well to welcoming participation Australia wide—with the usual travel costs now void. Niner & Wassermann (2021) reported that one of the most positively acknowledged elements of online conferences is the ability for participants to access recorded materials and being able to engage with content at their own pace, in their own time zone—which was also a well-acknowledged positive feature of Intertext (Edelheim et al., 2018; Gross & Fleming, 2011). Samantha shared her observations regarding new opportunities presented with the changed format:

A face-to-face conference assumes that people live close enough and have the time to spend a day in an academic building. We noticed many people joining us from regional locations and interstate, as well as other universities. We also felt that although the online format takes away some opportunities, some people felt more confident to contribute through a chat box. Others had the flexibility to log-in to the sessions when they needed to, meaning that busy academics were able to join without the constraints of travel and other competing demands on their time.

As well as the evident benefits of the online format, shortfalls were noted by attendees and organisers alike. Some participants believed the conference to be too long, and others lamented the lack of face-to-face or social events. It seemed that attendees succumbed to so-called *Zoom fatigue*—tiredness, worry, or burnout associated with the overuse of virtual platforms of communication, particularly videotelephony (Jiang, 2020). Although many showed initial enthusiasm to partake in both the formal conference and online social events, they later stated that a full week of online participation was not comfortably achieved. Furthermore, a balance of academic and social dimensions was hard to negotiate, particularly without a blueprint to follow. Others commented on the inability to “protect” their time from work or personal commitments (particularly as the closure of schools brought on increased home-schooling pressures for parents)—the usual face-to-face format allowing physical and mental distancing from usual commitments. It was also stated that the lack of opportunity for informal interactions or *water cooler chats* was something that was missing from the symposium, particularly as this could be a precursor for meaningful connection and networking—something which was also reported in research of online conferences (Edelheim et al., 2018; Gross & Fleming, 2011). We found one of the challenges of shifting networking events online was the inability to recreate similar informal and non-verbal cues for communication that are essential for relationship building (Oester et al., 2017). This informal communication comes from physical proximity, where body language can be a signal to invite verbal engagement (Fish et al., 1993; Niner & Wassermann, 2021). Niner & Wassermann (2021) note that “this proximity is challenged by remote participation where many of these cues remain invisible or less easily detected” (p. 3). Samantha reflected:

[...] there was still a gap where social interactions and exchanges had once lived in the conference dynamic. I felt we weren't quite able to meet that need in our format, and this was

reflected in comments and conversations with attendees. I felt people were keen for spaces to informally chat about the interesting themes, synergies or reflections on the presentations. There was still a discussion centered mainly around the reviewers and presenters, whereas the audience were more passive. But this also forced me to question whether there were spaces and settings for this kind of ‘fire side’ chat engagement when we were face-to-face. Whilst this was part of the problematic nature of online engagement, I felt like this ran deeper than the limitations of technology. These issues were there for me before we had to do it all online. Maybe the online nature just made it more visible or gave us the opportunity to reflect on something we were seeing in a different light?

From an organizational perspective, we consider that much of the success of the conference could be credited to the enthusiasm of the committee. We were also surprised at the number of academic staff who were able to attend the symposium. Grimalda et al. (2021) suggest that situations of existential threat, such as COVID-19, can “enhance prosociality in general and particularly toward others perceived as belonging to the same group as the individual (parochial altruism)” (p.1). This is directly in line with our experience, with a much stronger response to the call for committee members and a stronger retention rate of volunteers throughout the process. Likewise, academic staff were also enthusiastic throughout all stages of the organisational process and event. In previous years staff were mostly represented by HDR delegated authorities who had come to support students. However, in this instance it felt as if staff were present not only to support candidates, but also to engage with ideas, research, and presentations in a collegial manner. It was a recurring comment that the Symposium created a new platform for academic engagement that was missing from the Ph.D. experience which is well-known for being a solitary endeavour (Cantor, 2020). Gabriella noted the following:

Upon reflection of the event, I can attribute the enthusiasm of the organising committee to the success of the Symposium. Although the act of volunteering is in itself altruistic, many committee members claimed that they felt reinvigorated by the conference and its success, and more connected to their peers than ever. The previous feelings of guilt of perhaps not taking full advantage of the Ph.D. experience meaning they were more committed to meaningfully engage with their peers and the research field.

Reflecting on our thoughts about this event helped us recognise the benefits, whilst also acknowledging significant room to learn and grow. This led us to consider the implications of the symposium and think about how this might impact future events.

### **31.5 Now What?**

Our experience of the Intertext Symposium felt like a critical point from which to draw insights about what we learnt in a time of change—with times of crisis often offering significant opportunities to innovate. Our reflections pose more questions than providing answers, but perhaps those of us who are teaching and researching in a post-pandemic world should embrace curiosity as it approaches an unknowable future. The experience of pivoting a face-to-face event to an online platform for

engaging with our HDR peers allowed us to reflect on what we could take into the future, and the possibilities of modifying methods of collaborating, contributing, and connecting with such communities. We became keenly aware of the importance of learning from our experiences as we bid farewell to 2020 in the hope that 2021 would bring us back to some form of *normality*, only to find ourselves plunged back into lockdowns with the outbreak of the Delta variant of COVID-19 in July 2021. This again shattered the myth of snapping back to previous ways of doing research and academic work. Gabriella remarked:

We're at a time where I feel there is no going back to 'normal'. While this new way of doing things has been challenging and uncomfortable, it's also shed light on assumptions we've made and things we've taken for granted.

The Symposium paved the way for reimagining candidate-led conferences at our university. At the time of writing, the 2021 symposium is looming and will run online once again—in part due to rising COVID cases in Melbourne, significant budgetary constraints in higher education institutions, and the fact that many of our international HDR peers have been unable to return to Australia due to current border closures (as discussed in Chap. 3, see Rangarajan & Daneshfar, 2022). While we are not in convening roles this year, we hope that our explorations prove useful to future committee members and other student representatives responsible for organising similar academic gatherings. Samantha reflected on how this may impact future candidate-led events and initiatives:

In the future, I'd like to learn from these opportunities. Who is privileged by the 'normal' way of doing and who is excluded? Is there a better way of doing things that enhances equitable opportunities for all HDR candidates?

Furthermore, the experience of the symposium made us wonder about the possibilities of using a hybrid environment (i.e., a mixture of synchronous and asynchronous models) going forward. Although we found many benefits to offering alternative modes of attendance, we were conscious of the sense of loss that we felt in moving away from all face-to-face modes of gathering. Gabriella acknowledges "it is hard to omit the reality that many people are wired towards face-to-face engagement". Following this, Samantha commented on alternatives to hosting either face-to-face or online events.

While the 'hybrid' model seems to offer the best of both worlds, it is also probably the most complex, having to engage on screen and in person at the same time while switching between the two. Is a compromise achievable? What if we gave people more time to sit with the ideas of a paper or a presentation before asking them to respond or ask questions? Would we get more meaningful questions or wonderings? Would we be more likely to foster collaboration between schools, candidates, and research teams? What would we learn from and with one another?

Tisdell & Loch (2017) investigated the possibilities of an ethical hybrid model for conferences, finding a lack of consensus on a format for this model. Their research demonstrates the challenges of integrating in-person and online formats with the risk of inadvertently segregating the online and in-person communities from one

another. This study, which took place prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, found the cost of travel was the most common barrier to attending an in-person conference (Tisdell & Loch, 2017). The authors raised their concerns that inadequate integration in hybrid models has the potential to widen existing systemic inequalities, particularly if in-person activities are prioritised (Tisdell & Loch, 2017). Within the context of a pandemic, for example, this may impact people with comorbidities who are at greater risk of severe illness from contracting COVID-19. It is crucial that we continue to problematise new ways of working and reflect on the barriers that any new formats may introduce. We believe that modifying practices in the future needs to reflect the diversity of the HDR cohort, and in doing so, actively engage with candidates. Thinking about our experiences of the Intertext Symposium and what we would take with us into the future has led us to consider possibilities for further research in this area.

## 31.6 Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic forced a shift in the ways that we as HDR candidates engaged with one another and participated in academic events. From our experiences in pivoting to an online mode of engagement during this time, we found there were many benefits—such as creating further opportunities for a more diverse cohort of students to attend and working with academics outside of our chosen fields of research. However, we also noted the distinct lack of informal social opportunities which play an important role in students' feelings of connection and belonging. Together, we would like to use this opportunity to think of ways of reimagining conferences or symposia that meet the needs of diverse groups. Many conferences and events have been reformatted to be online out of necessity during the COVID-19 pandemic. Niner et al., (2020, p. 254) discuss the implications of this format for “equity, justice and sustainability for the post-pandemic world”. Similar to our own experiences, Niner & Wassermann (2021) acknowledge that an online element can improve the capacity of conferences to address systemic injustices. However, we are cautious in embracing the online or hybrid conference as a one-size-fits-all solution to these issues, believing that inequalities will persist in these new formats without a commitment to continuous critical reflection and the dismantling of barriers that serve to exclude. Future research could consider ways to support HDR candidates through creating opportunities that foster peer collaboration to support feelings of connectedness and belonging.

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# Chapter 32

## “Let’s Talk About Wellbeing!”: Fostering Interdependence in Doctoral Communities



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**Abstract** The Ph.D. genre captures the complexity and plurality of practices generally confronting doctoral scholars, creating challenges and at times contributing to wellbeing concerns. The arrival of COVID-19 has exacerbated such challenges with its associated mandatory self-isolation and other imposed measures, leading to explicit and implicit impact on members of the doctoral community. This autoethnographic study draws upon the collective reflections of a group of researchers as they explored practical ways of fostering and supporting mental health and wellbeing within the doctoral community. Our study highlights three aspects for consideration: (a) a holistic understanding of doctoral wellbeing as key, (b) the interconnection between doctoral scholars’ and staff members’ well-being, and (c) communities serving as avenues to psychological wellness.

**Keywords** Doctoral students · Wellbeing · Ph.D. genre · Autoethnography · Holistic psychological wellness · Interdependence · COVID-19

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## 32.1 Doctoral Scholars' Wellbeing Before and Leading Up to the Pandemic

A quick glance of the literature on doctoral education indicates the well-recognised highly complex Ph.D. genre awaiting those who decide to embark on what is considered the highest mode of formal education (Berman & Smyth, 2015; Sverdlik et al., 2018). Such complexity may easily emanate from multiple inherent challenges generally characterising the Ph.D. process; these include challenges of an intellectual, instrumental, professional, ontological, and personal nature, challenges necessitating adjustments to the doctoral mode of learning, and challenges associated with national or institutional contexts affecting the quality of doctoral provision (Devos et al., 2017; Holbrook et al., 2014; Lovitts, 2005; Pretorius & Macaulay, 2021; Wisker et al., 2021). Any or all of these challenges are also often compounded by the “lack of structure”, “unmapped journeys”, or “plurality of practices” that typically characterise part or the entirety of a doctoral programme relative to undergraduate or postgraduate taught programmes (Elliot, 2021b; Holmes et al., 2020, p. 221; Sverdlik et al., 2018, p. 376). When these challenges are encountered with added personal, emotional, or social strains, within or outwith academia, a stressful experience becomes inevitable (Deconinck, 2015). Due to a wide range of contributory internal and external factors to doctoral stress, Deconinck (2015) argues that the principal doctoral-related challenges are psychological by nature, and thus, inevitably create psychological wellbeing challenges (Berry et al., 2021).

The arrival of COVID-19 in early 2020 radically changed day-to-day lives globally and in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) as staff and students responded urgently, creatively, and with impressive agility. Although various interlinked issues arose from the same source (e.g., the urgent shift to online teaching delivery, virus-related fear of the unknown, and social isolation), COVID-19 made an impact in various and distinct ways, with differing consequences and intensity (Mental Health Foundation, 2020). In the doctoral education context, for example, this impact entailed changes in the learning (or supervisory) delivery mode by shifting to *emergency remote teaching*, which conformed to mandated social distancing measures (Elliot & Makara, 2021; Shin & Hickey, 2021). The broader impact included severe restrictions when socialising with extended families and friends. At times, it also led to loss of revenue and jobs (e.g., government scholarships) with severe financial implications, particularly for those based overseas (Mental Health Foundation, 2020).

Notably, remote working among doctoral scholars<sup>1</sup> or supervisors also led to contrasting consequences. For those who were forced to *home-school* their young children, the pandemic made their situation more challenging (Elliot & Makara, 2021). This was demonstrated in several chapters in this book (Adams et al., 2022; Patel, 2022; Umarova, 2022; Yip & Maestre, 2022). By contrast, those who did not have such responsibilities found that working remotely meant gaining extra hours, which would otherwise have been spent commuting. Being likened to a stormy sea,

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<sup>1</sup> In other contexts, they are referred to as Ph.D. or doctoral students, Ph.D. or doctoral researchers, and Ph.D. or doctoral candidates.



it was asserted that with COVID-19, “[w]e might all be sailing on the same rough sea, but we are not in the same boats and do not have the same equipment to navigate these waters” (Mental Health Foundation, 2020, p. 21).

Regardless of the various ways in which the pandemic impacted both doctoral and supervisory groups, fear and restrictions raised by COVID-19 arguably had an impact on everyone’s psychological wellbeing, perhaps more so at the beginning when very little was known about the virus. Yet, social connectedness, a vital means for nurturing psychological wellbeing, also happened to be the very thing that was discouraged. Doing so paradoxically counteracted the social support that is argued to be vital in reducing doctoral stress and addressing social isolation that is part and parcel of the doctoral experience (Berry et al., 2021; Milicev et al., 2021). Likewise, social isolation has also inadvertently diminished previous institutional efforts to promote and strengthen a positive research culture among doctoral scholars (e.g., by building various types of communities). Further, there is an argument in which within the doctoral community, the international doctoral cohort (or those who are pursuing a Ph.D. abroad) may have experienced the most significant impact (Balgabekova et al., 2022). This cohort’s sense of isolation—starting from the isolating nature of a Ph.D., intensified by living away from family, friends, and outside their comfort zone, and then, compounded by the pandemic’s mandatory self-isolation, meant that the potential social support extended by friends and colleagues in the host country was also curtailed (Balgabekova et al., 2022; Elliot, 2021a; Elliot & Makara, 2021). This was expertly demonstrated in Chap. 3 of the book (see Rangarajan & Daneshfar, 2022).

Intensified loneliness brought about by the pandemic lockdown for many doctoral scholars is arguably a crucial area of investigation considering that “loneliness predicts student psychological distress to a greater extent than other academic and non-academic factors” (Berry et al., 2021, p. 2). Moreover, since doctoral scholars’ psychological wellbeing was regarded as a topic worthy of attention even prior to the pandemic (Blackmore et al., 2020; Boynton, 2021; Byrom et al., 2020; Levecque et al., 2017; Milicev et al., 2021; Pretorius, 2022; Pretorius et al., 2019), and more so after the arrival of COVID-19, promoting continuing conversations about how to foster and nurture doctoral scholars’ wellbeing, remain strongly warranted.

## **32.2 Reflections on Advancing research Culture by Managing Environments & Networks (ACuMEN) Knowledge Exchange Webinar: An Autoethnographic Study**

Through an institutionally-funded project, a team from the University of Glasgow (in Scotland, United Kingdom), with financial support from the College of Social Sciences, pursued a scholarly online event about wellbeing. A focus on wellbeing is of particular interest to the team whose remit and research interests converge in doctoral

scholars' learning journeys and mental health and wellbeing. Their work focuses on doctoral (and other postgraduate) students' learning experiences, specific cohorts (e.g., the international cohort), and scholarly writing, for which psychological lenses are typically employed. Specifically, the ACuMEN team organised a Knowledge Exchange webinar where three experts in the field spoke about: (a) doctoral student wellbeing, (b) valuing and supporting others, and (c) being well in academia. The webinar, which took place on the 1st of June 2021, was structured in such a way that each presentation was followed by break-out discussions among the delegates, with pre-organised guiding questions facilitated by each team member. During the event, all delegates were also invited to respond to a specific Padlet activity question: "What will thriving doctoral and supervisor communities look like?". Finally, we enquired after delegates' expectations from the webinar and the aspects they found most important.

The combination of (a) expert talks, (b) delegate discussions, (c) Padlet reflections, and (d) evaluation of the Knowledge Exchange webinar facilitated rich reflection from the team. By employing a collaborative autoethnographic approach to this study, we then primarily considered our collective reflections on the research process (e.g., webinar presentations and discussions) by exploring the researchers' and participants' observation and experience while conducting a study (Méndez, 2013). As in other autoethnographic methods, "observation, participation and writing about the cultural experience, while taking into account thoughts and feelings evoked during the process were prioritised and regarded as key" (Pretorius & Cutri, 2019, p. 29). Altogether, the participants' collective reflections produced approximately twenty pages of data from Eneida, Francesca, Karen, Nadine, and Nicole (pseudonyms). The analysis of the team's reflective data was guided by an inductive thematic approach carried out by the first author following repetitive reading and preliminary colour-coding leading to further categorisation, and finally, generation of a list of themes and sub-themes (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The absence of a priori categories encouraged openness when critically seeking a sound appreciation of *doctoral wellbeing*.

We identified three main themes (doctoral challenges, impact of the pandemic, and fostering mental health and wellbeing) and several sub-themes in our data. Table 32.1 presents the classification of themes and sub-themes from this study, which served as the basis for the discussion of findings in the rest of this chapter. The data (i.e., the collective reflection from team members) generated through the ACuMEN webinar allowed for a more holistic understanding of doctoral wellbeing. Our findings progressively focused on the increasing importance of social support and a sense of interdependence, leading to strengths, fragilities, and experiential rewards offered to scholars for being part of communities.

**Table 32.1** Classification of themes and subthemes

Doctoral challenges	Impact of the pandemic	Fostering mental health and wellbeing
Core (e.g., diverse composition, lack of Ph.D. structure, scarcity of resources, incoherent institutional ethos)	Explicit (e.g., effects of the pandemic that required additional support for the doctoral community)	Interdependent efforts (i.e., ideal approach for addressing the interdependent nature of the doctoral scholars’ and staff members’ psychological wellbeing)
Peripheral (e.g., maintaining motivation, combatting Imposter Syndrome, having support networks)	Implicit (e.g., extended effects on supervisors and professional staff members who support the doctoral community)	Communities for doctoral scholars (i.e., practical platforms that contribute to nurturing doctoral scholars’ academic, social, and psychological needs)
Transversal (e.g., bi-directional association between core and peripheral challenges that overlap or intersect at different points)		Communities for supervisors and staff members (i.e., practical platforms for promoting staff members’ psychological wellness as they support doctoral scholars.)

### 32.3 Insights into a Better Understanding of Wellbeing in Doctoral Practice

The discussion will initially consider the core and subsidiary challenges and their impact identified in our data, including internal and external facets of wellbeing in the context of doctoral education. This then leads to exploring the effects of the pandemic on doctoral scholars and the staff who support them (e.g., supervisors, doctoral convenors,<sup>2</sup> and professional staff), prior to highlighting the interdependent nature of promoting mental health and wellbeing in the doctoral context. We argue that our synthesised reflections offer a more holistic but equally complex picture surrounding the concept of wellbeing. Such reflections highlight the multiplicity of views regarding wellbeing which leads to a transversal perspective of issues and challenges that may overlap or intersect with each other. This understanding of the complexity of wellbeing is essential prior to raising feasible ways forward for doctoral practice.

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<sup>2</sup> In other contexts, they are also termed doctoral programme directors – they lead graduate schools.

### ***32.3.1 Transversality of Core Doctoral Challenges Requiring Differential Support***

While increased attention to doctoral wellbeing is evident from a number of recent publications (Boynnton, 2021; Byrom et al., 2020; Hradsky et al., 2022; Levecque et al., 2017; Milicev et al., 2021; Pretorius et al., 2019), it is acknowledged that this does not automatically translate into practical applications (e.g., new social support or resource provision, a different research ethos, or more ways of communicating useful information with the doctoral community). Instead, recent research has raised awareness of the multiple concerns associated with doctoral wellbeing, including issues observed prior to the pandemic such as intensified loneliness (Berry et al., 2021; Elliot, 2021a). As an example, in our study, Nadine stressed the highly diverse composition of the doctoral community, which entails “differing communication of expectations and needs [in] different stages” of their Ph.D.; this is often exacerbated by “lack of coursework” and “structure” and may, therefore, lead to a “hit-and-miss” learning experience. Nicole added that this struggle can be due to a lack of knowledge of “very basic how to’s of research and navigating doctoral life”. Such diversity of knowledge, needs, and expectations has implications for institutional provision.

The transversal doctoral challenges that highlight the diverse needs of the doctoral community and necessity for more tailored support provision continuously prompted various efforts from the institutions, graduate schools, and staff members to improve doctoral wellbeing. The concerns identified were twofold: (a) a potential scarcity of human resources and (b) an absence of a coherent institutional ethos for supporting the doctoral community, as exemplified in the following reflections from Karen and Eneida.

Although universities all have general shared aims in terms of a desire to support [postgraduate researchers or] PGRs, the ways in which this support is designed and delivered can vary a great deal. Smaller institutions can find it difficult to bring about change on a large scale: they simply do not have the staff/resources required. Equally, approaches can vary across larger institutions, which can lead to different experiences for PGRs. Connected to this was the idea that it’s important to have an explicit institutional statement on research culture: ‘defining what you value’. Without this, it’s hard to develop a coherent institution-wide ethos on supporting researchers. (Karen)

Lack of communication of roles & responsibilities through the department or supervisors—expectations are found out informally from other Ph.D. students, via socialisation. Interestingly, there is plenty of useful information passed on informally to doctoral students. Consequently, those who have less time in campus e.g. due to maternity leave, are disadvantaged from receiving less informal but beneficial information. (Eneida)

Moreover, decisions on the institutional response were expected to be informed by how much support institutions can realistically provide when both internal (i.e., persistent work progression—or aspects that are regarded within scholars’ control) and external factors (i.e., clear communication of roles and provision—or aspects pertaining to what institutions can offer) were also taken into account. Such responses also take place against the backdrop of promoting and maintaining healthy boundaries

among staff members (Blackmore et al., 2020). The availability and nature of provision or resources offered in large and small institutions may generate extra pressure, too. Taken together, when seemingly random institutional provision is compounded by a lack of clarity about staff members’ roles and responsibilities on the subject of doctoral wellbeing, confusion and low confidence tend to be rife. In turn, it can even lead to disadvantaging certain doctoral cohorts, especially the ones who need to be supported the most, as they miss accessing such provision or resources.

### 32.3.2 *Direct Impact of Peripheral Doctoral-Related Challenges*

It is worth noting that the lack of uniformity in doctoral provision has crucial implications not only for the learning experience per se, but also, for other facets of the Ph.D., which was often the case even before COVID-19’s arrival. Reflecting on a speakers’ presentation, one of the internal factors that could shape the doctoral experience was *self-motivation*—pertaining to how doctoral scholars keep on motivating themselves while operating in programmes that are “very unstructured”. Eneida noted,

Incoming Ph.D. students’ motivation needs to be ultra-strong. This can act as a buffer as they start experiencing different challenges associated with doctoral studies. Arguably, this motivation needs to be maintained, supported throughout their study. What factors can help maintain such a high level of self-motivation? Does this boil down to individual strengths only? Otherwise, what practical support needs to be in place? This suggests that it is not just strength of intellect that matters.

This suggests that beyond intellectual capabilities, a very strong willpower from doctoral scholars, particularly ongoing self-motivation, time and resource management, proactivity, and a strong sense of direction are indispensable as they navigate an unstructured Ph.D. programme (Elliot, 2021b; Sverdlik et al., 2018).

Nevertheless, it has been asserted that the Ph.D. itself is only an element in the entire Ph.D. experience. The Ph.D. is connected to a (supportive) supervisory team, a (positive) department- and university-wide research culture and disciplinary environment, and other networks within and outwith academia. In our data, participants noted that support networks outside of academia could be invaluable in fostering a sense of belonging (Nicole), addressing loneliness (Nadine), and even reinforcing how personal and professional development are intrinsic to the doctoral experience (Francesca, Nadine).

While viewed as something at or outside the periphery of doctoral education, various networks can have a direct and vital impact on the doctoral experience itself. It has been suggested that Imposter Syndrome (or the misperception of oneself as not being intelligent or capable despite previous achievements leading to fear of being exposed as a *fake*) (Colman, 2015; Cutri et al., 2021; Lau, 2019) and perfectionism are prevalent among doctoral scholars, and both are associated with mental health issues such as depression and anxiety (Berry et al., 2021; Lau, 2019; Milicev et al.,

2021). Eneida's reflection on one of the speaker's points "perceived belongingness is a negative predictor of Imposter Syndrome" was a case in point. Addressing Imposter Syndrome is vital to encouraging doctoral scholars not to dismiss opportunities and pursue efforts for developing their skills and knowledge rather than by being merely governed by "impression management", which is counterproductive. This suggests that social support can strongly contribute to maintaining psychological wellness and resilience, as highlighted in Milicev et al. (2021).

With respect to potentially prevalent "hit-and-miss" doctoral learning experiences due to lack of regularity in which expectations are communicated as a result of the "lack of coursework" and "structure" (Nadine), it can be argued that through scholarly networks,

Researchers learn about far wider topics than specific project or disciplinary knowledge and research methods. Much more than that, they develop their understanding with respect to their personal growth and development, and their professional networks and relationships, which then subsequently supports the quality of their work. (Elliot, 2021b, para. 8)

In sum, it is worth recognising the invaluable contribution from other human resources, including those outside academia, as channels for fostering and nurturing: (a) socialisation; (b) encouragement, motivation, and practical support; and (c) psychological wellbeing (Blackmore et al., 2020; Elliot et al., 2020). Arguably, recognising the importance of 'other' key players in the doctoral experience has become even more crucial during the pandemic lockdown.

### ***32.3.3 Explicit and Implicit Impact of the Pandemic on Doctoral Scholars and Supervisors***

It has been suggested that the strong sense of isolation typical in a Ph.D. as well as the diminished sense of belonging (possibly stronger among part-time and international cohorts) has been *amplified* by the arrival of COVID-19. Our joint reflections highlighted that the pandemic has had repercussions on doctoral communities that is then extended to their supervisors (Blackmore et al., 2020; Elliot & Makara, 2021).

All speakers in this webinar highlighted the need for mentoring support during the crisis, however, supervisors themselves are often exhausted by the impact of the pandemic and don't have capacity or the training to provide additional support. ... Seen as a whole campus approach with better signposting of services, 'prioritising caring for the carers', the self being nurtured [facilitates] the work being done. (Nadine)

The risk of overburdening individual staff members was raised, and the fear of offering guidance without expertise was openly raised and acknowledged. It was interesting to note the topic of 'boundaries' arising in discussion. How much support should universities be expected to provide ...? Equally, how much support should individual members of staff be expected to provide, is it appropriate for them to provide this support, and how should they create and maintain healthy boundaries to protect themselves? (Karen)

[Another speaker] discusses the importance of ensuring this system is embedded within practices already taking place within the roles of those supporting the system, so as to not

introduce additional work burden to [supervisors, doctoral convenors, professional staff].  
(Francesca)

In recognising the heightened challenges brought about by the pandemic that necessitated additional support for the doctoral community, considerations for a more cohesive institutional approach were suggested. These are arguably crucial not merely in addressing the pandemic’s explicit impact on the doctoral community but also in recognising its implicit impact on staff members such as supervisors and professional development staff whose key remits include supporting the doctoral community. Doing so takes into account healthy boundary-setting and prevention of potential complexities that may arise from problem resolution based on limited knowledge or expertise. This is also to ensure that certain key players (e.g., doctoral supervisors) are not overburdened and are instead offered the support they equally deserve. As Nadine stressed, there is value in “recognising what we have lost and gained in the pandemic and how these feed into how we supervise” and continue with doctoral provision. This then suggests taking account of the impact of the pandemic beyond the doctoral scholars’ group only, which until recently used to be the sole focus (Else, 2021).

### ***32.3.4 Interdependent Efforts Towards Fostering Mental Health and Wellbeing***

Our team’s collective reflective data affirm the interlinked multifaceted challenges customarily facing doctoral scholars, starting with the observed difficulty in navigating a Ph.D. due to lack of coursework and structure, among others. While greater focus has been paid to the academic element where doctoral scholars themselves and the institutions work in tandem to overcome existing core issues (or challenges that are directly linked to the doctoral research per se), a closer introspection suggests that peripheral doctoral issues deserve equal attention. The seemingly bi-directional association between core and peripheral doctoral-related challenges means that one is likely to impact on the other (e.g., the unstructured nature of doctoral programmes can lead to confusion and/or a reduction in scholars’ self-motivation) and vice versa (e.g., lack of social support may influence one’s propensity to dismiss learning opportunities and/or experience Imposter Syndrome). Irrespective of the direction, responses to these doctoral-related challenges at either the core or peripheral level, can arguably contribute either to psychological wellness or to ill health.

Notably, the strong interconnections between doctoral scholars’ and supervisors’ experiences became more apparent following the arrival of COVID-19. The interdependent nature of the doctoral scholars’ and staff members’ (e.g., supervisors, doctoral convenors, and professional staff) psychological wellbeing was emphasised by Karen and Nadine.

This communication is also essential on the topic of mental health and well-being. As someone who frequently works on a one-to-one basis with several researchers, often when

they've found themselves experiencing difficulties, I've found it challenging to walk the line of offering appropriate support. It occurred to me during the initial stages of the pandemic that providing that type of emotional support to PGRs whilst also trying to manage my own well-being was exceptionally draining, and it was reassuring, in a way, to hear that others had also struggled with this, and the notion of how to establish appropriate boundaries. Overall, this discussion has made me feel that the conversation around PGR mental health and well-being must actually be a whole institution discussion: supervisor well-being, researcher well-being, professional support staff well-being—none of these exists independently of each other. (Karen)

[Concerning] support for PGR students during the crisis [it] is estimated that over 18,000 Ph.D.s will require extensions, however, funded extensions are not automatic, and ... evaluation does not address the needs of those who are experiencing additional challenges, such as those with a disability, caring responsibilities, or those with no access to other forms of income. ... Initial impressions were about how the doctoral experience differs across different institutions, subjects and how this is influencing supervisors' expectations. (Nadine)

These passages suggest that in extending support to doctoral scholars, “prioritising caring for the carers” needs not be overlooked in the process (see also Blackmore et al., 2020). Nadine reflects that adopting a holistic institutional approach can facilitate both doctoral scholars' and supervisors' wellbeing “being nurtured”, as the latter (i.e., supervisor wellbeing) is also a key contributory factor to “[doctoral scholars'] work being done”.

### ***32.3.5 Communities for Doctoral Scholars and Supervisors***

While there was wider recognition among the webinar delegates that the pursuit of a positive institutional culture was arguably ideal, it was also acknowledged that realising culture change at national or even institutional level was bound to be a complex process. It is dependent upon agreements on how a positive research culture is to be conceptualised and practised in each institution. This perhaps explains why such a strategy is “implemented via a central framework of values, support, expertise and projects” and requires several years to implement (see, for example, University of Glasgow, 2020, p. 9). As discussed earlier, institutional differences concerning availability of resources may inform the extent to which they can foster a positive research culture and environments effectively.

Within the broader perspective of working towards a change in research culture, both delegate discussions and team members' reflections were filled with examples of how scholarly and non-scholarly communities are argued to have a modest but crucial role to offer. In one of the break-out discussions, for example, Francesca's group shared their discussion of the importance of various communities at each delegate's institution. They then agreed on the necessity of fostering student-led communities and noted that, apart from social support, the international cohort should be given the discretion to promote their own identity and culture via their community's activities (Cai et al., 2019). As Francesca noted,



At [one UK Russell Group institution], there is a doctoral community (6,000 research students) an official community and also the student-led communities (e.g. Chinese students). [We stress] the importance of community building being a student-led process ... if the PGR students are mainly international, [it is essential] that their identity and culture is recognised and included in community building activities.

Similarly, it was suggested that smaller communities, which serve as platforms for semi-formal (e.g., academic writing sessions) social gatherings or activities that combine both academic and fun concepts, were superior. Whereas any of these community models was potentially beneficial, organising activities where scholars may expect integrated fun and scholarly elements, was viewed to be more attractive, as highlighted by Nadine and Nicole.

The pandemic adds a layer of complexity to international students’ [experience] and [we] discussed the importance of being encouraged to form smaller communities directed by students. The importance of a central space shared with PGRs which offers a range of events (e.g. ‘drop-in’ [coffee chats], writing sessions) [is stressed] ... also, early career academics and post-doctoral researchers who are in similar circumstances can mentor PGRs. (Nadine)

Focus on academic & social support—the student community needs academic input in the community building, so if we introduce ‘fun’ activities without any academic aspects, these tend to fall flat, particularly online. However, an evening event offering refreshments can draw students if it is a smaller community. (Nicole)

Perhaps, this is because incorporating academic and fun elements is more tailored to the doctoral cohort in helping them address loneliness, stimulate intellectual curiosity, and offer social support while creating a sense of belonging (Berry et al., 2021; Cai et al., 2019).

The overall sentiments or default position was to support doctoral scholars in as many capacities as practicable (e.g., different models of communities). This included “integrating them into professional communities” (Francesca) since a variety of social-, academic-, practical- and psychological-orientated support via these communities was perceived to be an ideal way forward. Perhaps, this is due to the underpinning strong interconnection between the various facets of the doctoral learning experience (e.g., academic, social, and psychological), where support for a particular facet is often extended to supporting other facets, too (Cai et al., 2019; Elliot et al., 2020; Hradsky et al., 2022). This may explain how being part of combined social and scholarly communities can help foster a sense of belonging and address social isolation, and in turn, help prevent an issue from developing into a psychological concern (see, for example, Hradsky et al., 2022); if not addressed, such concerns can subsequently affect doctoral scholars’ academic productivity. Yet, in the discourse where the focus was solely on the doctoral scholar community (Else, 2021), the stronger interconnections between doctoral scholars’ and supervisors’ experience became more apparent following the arrival of COVID-19. In this regard, we contend that there is value in creating communities for supervisors—a consideration that is equally deserving of attention.

## 32.4 Concluding Thoughts

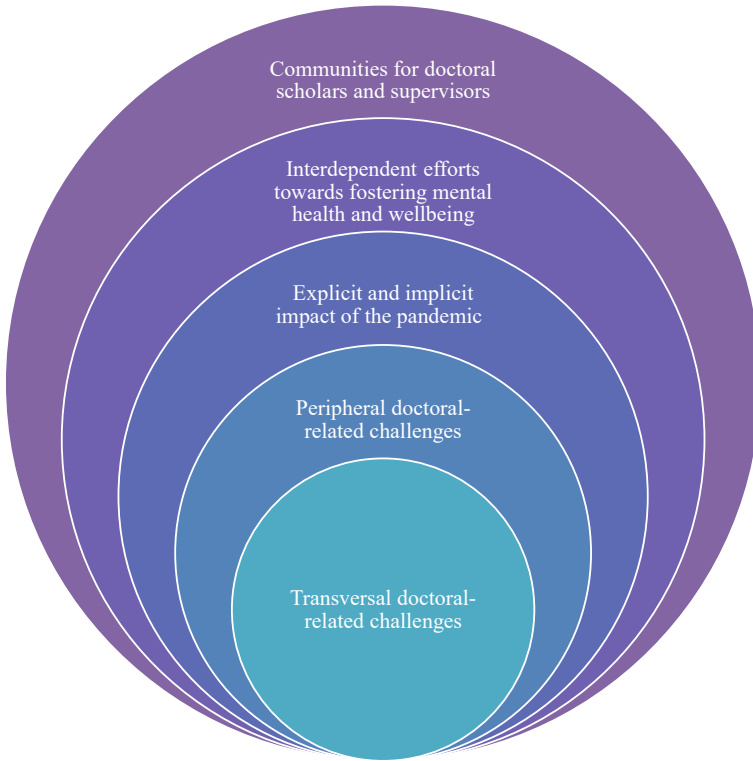
In his seminal article, Eraut (2000), citing Spender (1998), raised the importance of recognising that learning is both an individual and a social effort. According to Eraut (2000), learning takes place both explicitly (often via formal learning and within academia) and implicitly (via informal learning and outside academia). While Eraut's (2000) paper was contextualised in a professional work setting, consideration for the intertwined notion of explicit and implicit learning that can occur simultaneously from various sources and settings as presented in the following passage, arguably applies to the doctoral setting, too.

It is hard to imagine a formal learning context in which only explicit learning of explicit knowledge takes place. To focus only on the explicit learning of formally presented knowledge is to fail to recognise the complexity of learning even in well-ordered [learning settings]. ... Possible understandings may be embedded in the social dimension of the situation... We learn that others know things that we do not know, and that we can rely on others to contribute to certain aspects of a [learning] situation... (Eraut, 2000, p. 132).

As a case in point, in a conceptual study undertaken by Cai et al. (2019) on international doctoral scholars' experience, the authors argued and demonstrated how in addition to what can be acquired via the formal aspects of doctoral learning, active engagement in doctoral communities (both formal and informal) are likely to contribute strongly to doctoral scholars' overall growth and development as researchers. Specifically, the four examples of doctoral communities identified (i.e., institutional research communities, disciplinary communities, cultural communities, and communities of common interests and needs) indicated both direct and indirect effects on doctoral scholars' identity development, scholarly growth, psychological wellbeing, and personal and professional growth (see Cai et al., 2019, for more detail and elaboration on the impact of communities on doctoral scholars' learning experience).

Drawing upon combined informal and community learning and taking into account the various contributory factors to academic or psychological-related difficulties as highlighted by our collective reflections, the value and rewards from engaging in communities are highlighted. As previously discussed, a Ph.D. is customarily characterised by intensified loneliness, ineffective communication (at times, caused by lack of structure), and an absence of a cohesive ethos for supporting doctoral scholars. These factors give rise to psychological challenges and necessitate strong self-motivation, creating a need for a sense of belonging. While the pandemic also initiated further challenges of differing intensity for individuals (Mental Health Foundation, 2020), our study highlights the interdependent nature of supporting doctoral scholars' and supervisors' psychological well-being. We have visualised these interlinked concepts in Fig. 32.1.

We assert the inherent value of establishing communities not only for doctoral candidates, but also for supervisor (and other professional staff) groups. As this is an autoethnographic study, its inherent limitation has become the study's recommendation: we contend that there is a need for further study to investigate empirically



**Fig. 32.1** From various layers of doctoral challenges to the potential benefits of doctoral and supervisor communities

both the explicit and implicit impact of communities on doctoral scholars’ and their supervisors’ wellbeing. If we were to assert that doctoral scholars can greatly benefit from formal and informal learning and support, it follows that staff members who support doctoral scholars are also likely to benefit from active involvement in such communities. With renewed psychological wellness, staff are then likely to be in a better position to extend help and support to doctoral scholars.

Finally, communities can never be a panacea for the multifaceted challenges characterising doctoral education, particularly following the added challenges incurred by the pandemic. We recognise that a number of dimensions need to be carefully considered for the institutional and individual recovery plans (e.g., work-life balance, a holistic institutional approach, positive research culture, co-created provision with doctoral scholars, a less-stigmatised view of counselling, and psychological services, among others). Nevertheless, we contend that nurturing the social and relational components and their potential contribution to both scholarly and non-scholarly growth and development of doctoral scholars and supervisors is key and cannot be underestimated (Berry et al., 2021; Elliot, 2021a).

Communities can exist in various forms—small or large, fun, social or both, purely disciplinary or fully inclusive, mandatory or optional, tailored or generic, institutionally-embedded or self-sustaining, doctoral scholar-led or supervisor-led, and via face to face or online meetings. If strategically considered and harnessed, any of these communities can offer spaces that foster not only discussion, but more crucially, they can enable and nurture doctoral scholars’ as well as supervisors’ mental health and wellbeing and perhaps even foster a preventive approach. In addition, we recommend that further research is conducted on how social, relational, and psychological support can be strategically embedded in communities, perhaps, with a view to uncovering support that is more accessible, sustainable and capable of improving mental health and wellbeing.

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# Chapter 33

## Tackling a Sense of Insecurity: Enhancing Digital Literacy as a Call to Action for Educators During the Pandemic



Marina Aiusheeva 

**Abstract** The chapter describes the perspectives of a mother and educator regarding the effects of COVID-19 within the Russian educational system. I give a brief overview of the prerequisites of the digital transformation of the educational system, which should have guaranteed a fast and seamless transition to online learning at the beginning of the pandemic. However, being a mother of school children, I witnessed the numerous problems which Russian schools faced on the way to urgent digitalisation. In addition, I argue that only a few Russian higher educational institutions have successfully segued into the online mode while a great number of regional universities have encountered difficulties. The chapter shares first-hand experience of an educator working at a small regional university who had to deal with various problems such as the university administration's delay in making vital decisions, a lack of clear guidance on how to organise online learning, insufficient digital literacy skills, and unstable internet connections. I argue for the improvement of digital literacy as a call to action for educators and students in order to cope with the challenges of the abrupt digitalisation of Russian education. In conclusion, the chapter provides some tips for developing digital literacy skills.

**Keywords** Digital literacy · Higher education · Russia · COVID-19

### 33.1 Introduction

Insecurity seems to be the best word to describe the feelings I have been experiencing since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. I contracted COVID-19 and successfully recovered in the first years of the pandemic and am now fully vaccinated. Yet even now, as of the end of 2021, I am still insecure about my future plans.

It looks daring to make short-term plans not to mention long-term ones. I can hardly book a trip for the New Year to the nearest destination as there might be another lockdown urgently announced in the area, and the trip would have to be cancelled. In the summer, our apartment

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renovation was held over for two weeks because the contract workers hired were not allowed to work during the lockdown which had been in effect during that period. Our relatives were going to organise a wedding party in July 2021, but they decided to postpone it until a more convenient time which, sadly, has not yet come. Things might change unexpectedly, and it is hardly possible to make sure that the events arranged would unfold on schedule.

However, my biggest concerns and insecurities are with my children's quality of education and my professional field. I have two schoolchildren in my family, and I am witnessing the transformation of their learning experience; the consequences of the changes are yet to be assessed. Career-wise, I work as an English teacher at the foreign languages department at a provincial Russian university. Due to the pandemic, my academic and teaching activities have been considerably affected.

One of our major international projects, which involves collaboration with an American university, had to be suspended since one of our teammates had become a victim of a coronavirus outbreak. His contribution to the project was of primary significance, and it was hard to replace him and continue the project. Additionally, I had to cancel my academic trip to the USA. I had successfully applied to do a face-to-face course for English teachers organised by an American university. Thrilled and excited, I was looking forward to travelling and getting an unforgettable experience that could have enriched me both professionally and culturally. Unfortunately, my expectation was soon shown to have been misplaced as the course was transformed into an online module.

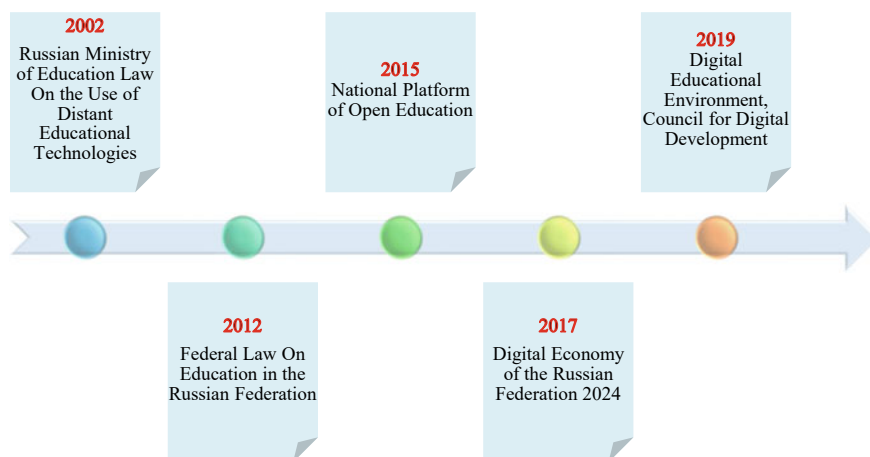
Nonetheless, I can draw some conclusions about the period that has passed since the beginning of the pandemic. I think the main question that every teacher should ask themselves is what they have learnt due to the situation caused by COVID-19. Obviously, there are not only negative points but also positive ones. I consider the improvement of my digital skills to be one of the main achievements that I have gained from this critical situation. Thus, in this chapter, I would like to describe my personal experience of how I tried to cope with this problem and briefly discuss some issues related to digitalization of the Russian education system by using my children's school and my university as examples.

### **33.2 Prerequisites for the Digital Transformation of the Russian Education System**

I remember my state of anxiety when the first national lockdown was declared. The Russian government offered paid leave from 30 March to 03 April for university staff to switch from the traditional face-to-face to an online mode of learning (Russian Ministry of Science & Higher Education, 2020). The teachers were supposed to prepare electronic educational materials and choose proper digital tools to ensure the same quality of the learning process. However, it was evident that a number of our university staff had little awareness of how to fulfil these tasks.

It turned out that it was a kind of stress test for the Russian higher education since very few universities were able to urgently implement fully fledged e-learning





**Fig. 33.1** State laws and policies related to the digital transformation of the Russian educational system

(Melnik, 2020). The representative of the Skolkovo Moscow School of Management Melnik (2020) noted that only top Russian higher education institutions (HEIs) including the Higher School of Economics (Moscow), St. Petersburg Pedagogical University, Ural Federal University (Ekaterinburg), and a few others had already been developing their online learning before and, thus, their adaptation to the new circumstances was quite smooth. Unlike the above-mentioned universities, the other ones, especially those in remote regions, faced tough challenges trying to meet these new requirements.

The digital transformation of the Russian educational system can be traced through various state laws and policies regulating the process (see Fig. 33.1).

The first notion of e-learning appeared in The Russian Federal Law on Education in 2012 (Russian Government, 2012). The law gave definitions of e-learning and the general description of the terms and conditions under which it could be applied. The term *distant educational technologies* is even older as it was introduced a decade earlier, in one the orders of the then Russian Ministry of Education (Russian Ministry of Education, 2002). Along with these official documents, there are a few national projects and programmes that contribute to the development of digitalisation of the Russian educational system. Notably, in 2015, the National Platform of Open Education, which was the first Russian educational portal, was established (Plotnikova, 2019). It combined resources from eight Russian leading universities to provide Russian higher education students with free high quality online courses (Association of National Platform of Open Education, 2015). In 2017, the national programme *Digital Economy of the Russian Federation 2024* (Russian Government, 2017) was designed to develop the digital economy by supporting social projects in this field and coordinating between businesses and educational organizations. The

programme covers such projects as *personnel for the digital economy*, *digital technologies*, and *digital regions* which is purported to enable the digitalization process in Russian HEIs (Russian Government, 2017). In 2019, the Russian government adopted a federal project termed the *Digital Educational Environment* which was aimed at making the implementation of a digital educational environment ubiquitous in every Russian educational institution by 2025 (Ministry of Science of Higher Education of the Russian Federation, 2019). In the same year, the Russian Ministry of Science and Higher Education also established the Council for Digital Development and IT to supervise digital transformation in the corresponding fields (Russian Ministry of Education, 2019).

Thus, the essential prerequisites for effective implementation of e-learning in the Russian educational system were generally set up and, as the COVID-19 outbreak called for immediate transition to online learning, the educational institutions should not have experienced major problems. Sadly, this was not the case, and a number of Russian schools and HEIs found the new situation rather difficult. As of April 2020, only 30% of university teachers were ready to implement online education (Statista Research Department, 2020), and schools in only 33% of regions had a high level of Distance Education Readiness Index (Anchikov et al., 2020).

### 33.3 Russian Schools During the First National Lockdown: A Mother's View

Russian schools appeared to become the objects of the most severe criticism from parents and pupils during the first lockdown (Pashkus et al., 2021). As I had to work from home, I witnessed all the difficulties my children had to overcome, and I share the overall negative opinion about the quality of school education during that period.

My daughter was in her third year of primary school, and my son was in the seventh grade of secondary school. Our family was lucky enough to have an opportunity to provide both of them with individual laptops, smartphones, headphones, and separate rooms in the apartment. Unfortunately, not everyone in my children's school groups had such favourable conditions. The school administration monitored whether all the schoolchildren had necessary devices, but they offered no assistance to those who did not. Some families had to share the same device with all the members, and it caused problems for brothers and sisters who had to use it at the same time, or even worse, to share it with their parents working from home.

Another issue was the plethora of digital tools their teachers had suggested the children use.

My daughter's primary school teacher chose a variety of digital resources such as Uchi.ru, Yaklass.ru, Zoom, Eljur, alongside the VK and Viber social networks. I saw how confused my nine-year-old daughter was trying to figure out which resource is going to be used at this or that moment. My son, who was 13 at the time, was overwhelmed with the necessity to juggle between different online platforms that his teachers, each for their subject, required. It was inevitable that my children occasionally would miss important pieces of information or misunderstand some instructions. Moreover, our internet connection was extremely poor.

In an attempt to improve the situation, we bought a new router and two Wi-Fi repeaters to extend our Wi-Fi range. This alleviated the problem but did not eliminate it. My children would still periodically lose their video conferencing connection, and their teachers who demanded to have video cameras constantly turned on would get quite discontented.

Importantly, the general situation with the pandemic and online learning was very stressful for the children.

They were forbidden to go out alone, they could not meet with their friends and classmates, interact with teachers, visit public places, and so on. They were tired of working on the laptop during the lessons and while doing homework. Every day looked the same, and they seemed to be suffering from “Groundhog Day” syndrome. We, parents, had to make additional efforts to ensure their progress in learning and to reduce their anxiety.

Even though I have described the problems with my children’s experience of online learning, I do believe their teachers tried hard to keep their learning going at a proper level.

I saw that they would put grades and write urgent messages very late, even in the small hours. Their workload increased dramatically, and they had to prepare the materials for the next lessons, give feedback on the previous assignments, contact with parents and children, and write reports required by the school administration almost around the clock.

The above-mentioned problems were quite typical of the majority of Russian schools during that period (Pashkus et al., 2021). Thus, schools seemed to have had a rather painful transition to online learning.

### **33.4 Russian HEIs During the Pandemic: A Teacher’s View**

Unlike schools, Russian universities should have segued into online learning due to the previously set requirements of implementing e-learning. However, despite the fact that many HEIs had been applying an electronic learning system long before March 2020, its use was sporadic and random (Kobysheva et al., 2021). As mentioned earlier, only a few top Russian universities managed to pass this stress test.

Like most Russian universities, my university went through tough times because of the transition to online learning. One of the main factors which contributed to that was the unclear policy and a slow reaction of the university administration. This corresponds to the situation observed in other Russian universities, where the authorities would delay crucial decisions concerning such serious matters such as managing and rescheduling the learning process, organising forms of assessment, or coordinating among different departments (Pashkus et al., 2021). Likewise, our university administration seemed to be perplexed about the urgent necessity to adjust the whole educational process to the new circumstances.

When the first national lockdown was announced and the university professors were given the task to prepare for an online mode of learning, the administration provided no clear instruction on how to organise the learning process. I guess they should have consulted the teaching staff about how to convert the teaching process into a remote one. Nonetheless, there

was no comprehensible guidance on the changes required. It was at the teachers' discretion to choose the tools for remote learning. The teachers would discuss and share their opinions on this or that digital technology in their chats on social networks.

The only distinct recommendation from the university educational and methodological department was to use a Moodle-based learning management system (LMS). Applying Moodle was not an entirely innovative idea at the time; some teachers had previously used this LMS. Besides, there was a pre-existing requirement for all the teachers to design a Moodle course to prolong their contract at the university. Nevertheless, Moodle was considered to be an auxiliary tool rather than a valuable educational resource. This attitude altered when every teacher was forced to use it.

At that moment, many teachers encountered a problem with working on Moodle and, in general, with applying other digital technologies.

It turned out that not every teacher was tech-savvy or had developed digital skills that were necessary for successfully implementing technology in the educational process. For example, the majority of our department faced difficulties writing reports on their online teaching as they had to do that with help of Google Sheets, which was not commonly used by our colleagues at that time. Also, the teachers had a lot of questions about how to create online courses, to enrol students, to track their activity and conduct an assessment on Moodle. In addition, some teachers did not seem to be aware of how to work with such digital tools as Kahoot, Trello, Miro and others. I remember lots of questions regarding technologies that our colleagues discussed in our chat. It was evident that our colleagues needed urgent technical support.

### **33.5 Enhancing Digital Literacy as a Call to Action for Educators During the Pandemic**

Nowadays, developing digital literacy seems to be considered as a key competence for lifelong learning (European Union, 2018). It is especially crucial for a teacher to keep track of the constantly emerging numerous technologies at the present moment (Alarcón et al., 2020). Frameworks such as TPACK and SAMR (Mishra & Koehler, 2006; Puentedura, 2014) emphasise the idea that teachers should possess not only the content of their disciplines and pedagogical methods, but they should also be able to successfully integrate innovative technologies in the educational process. Improvement of digital skills of teachers is viewed as a pivotal task even at a governmental level in European countries, which can be illustrated through the fact that the European Framework for the Digital Competence of Educators has been designed (European Commission et al., 2017). This framework is aimed at evaluating the level of digital literacy among teachers on a 6-stage scale from newcomer to pioneer (European Commission et al., 2017). Based on this framework, another tool for assessing educators' digital skills was established, in particular, DIGIGLO, which is a questionnaire directed at evaluating teacher's level of digital literacy (Alarcón et al., 2020). Thus, in the modern education system, increasing educators' digital competence is considered pivotal. Consequently, special attention should be paid to training or retraining teaching staff regarding the new technologies that exist and

how these technologies could be used in their pedagogical activity, as well as their communication with students, colleagues, administration, and other stakeholders.

So, it was high time to think about the ways to gain more knowledge on digital technologies. It was quite helpful that the head of our foreign languages department decided to organise a practical webinar on new digital technologies for our colleagues. It was a sort of peer-learning as the speakers at the webinar were our colleagues who could share their knowledge about the most essential educational tools. During the webinar we had an opportunity to discuss not only the technical features of those tools but also some methodological aspects.

As Moodle was the main digital platform for our university teachers at that period, its advantages and disadvantages were clear shortly after educators started actively using it.

Moodle was found to be rather user-friendly, it had a number of test types, and both teachers and students could upload files in different formats including text, audio, and video. It allowed the teachers to track the time when students signed in and out, open and close access to assignments or parts of courses at a definite time, regulate the sequence of learning within course modules, and, finally, automatically calculate students' grades.

On the other hand, some colleagues complained about its limitations and flaws.

For instance, in order to create a Moodle course, one would wait for the technical administrator's approval, which could take a few days given the fact that hundreds of other colleagues were doing the same. It was rather time-consuming to check students' answers when they uploaded them in separate files as the files would not open automatically but had to be downloaded. An even more serious issue was that the Moodle version applied at our university had meagre opportunities for a synchronous interaction and lacked the feature of video conferencing.

Our colleagues were very worried about the quality of the learning process. It is believed that a synchronous interaction is pivotal in learning as it positively affects students' cognitive processes and develops their sense of belonging (Peterson et al., 2018).

As teachers, we wanted to ensure that our students had classes on time and their learning process was still effective to the greatest possible extent under such circumstances. So, we discussed which digital technology to implement to ensure it was synchronous and functional.

At first, some colleagues tried to combine Moodle with social networks.

It should be mentioned that in order to ensure direct contact with students, all teachers had created chat groups on popular social networks, in particular, Viber, WhatsApp, and VK. However, very soon some technical drawbacks of those apps were revealed, including restrictions on the number of participants on audio or video group calls, no opportunity to share screen, and difficulty to send messages when calling. It was obvious that a better solution was needed.

Shortly after being recommended by some colleagues, Zoom was determined to be a very beneficial tool for videoconferencing with learners. It has a number of apparent advantages like possibilities to share screen, write messages to everyone and directly to participants in the embedded chat, use the interactive whiteboard, make comments on the material being demonstrated, organise polls, and so on (more

discussions about the benefits and limitations of Zoom can be found in the earlier chapter by Maulana, 2022).

Among many other useful features, this digital platform has breakout rooms which I find extremely helpful for pair work and group discussions during English classes. As those activities are essential for learning a foreign language, the opportunity to use breakout rooms is invaluable. The only drawback is that the free version of Zoom is limited to 40-minute video sessions, and we have to resume Zoom sessions twice during our 90-minute university class. That takes time, and students may sometimes face technical problems while re-joining class.

The final challenges that our university teachers had to face were financial constraints and limited resources. Most HEIs do not have sufficient funding to purchase digital technologies (Pashkus et al., 2021).

Most teachers opted for free digital resources, which is completely understandable. Similarly, educators from many Russian HEIs had to choose the electronic platforms and instruments that provided free plans. As a rule, free plans have significant limitations on the range of features in comparison to the paid ones.

Due to financial constraints, a great number of Russian universities, primarily provincial ones, lack proper technical equipment (Kiselev et al., 2021).

The software and hardware used at our university are rather outdated, and the Wi-Fi connection in the university buildings is very weak and unstable, so many teachers including me prefer to use their own devices and internet plans. It is especially inconvenient when I have to combine face-to-face and online classes on the same day. This happens when separate groups are ordered to study online because their members have contracted COVID and the whole group have to be quarantined for two weeks. The schedule does not change, so teachers sometimes have to teach online from the university premises, and the online class may be hindered by Internet failures.

However, in the autumn semester of 2021, our university allotted a little money to every department, so our colleagues created a Zoom account for our department and bought the Pro plan which allowed to host up to 100 participants without time limitations. The student groups can be as big as up to 50–60 people, and using this Zoom plan was quite handy. Unfortunately, the money allotted was enough to pay for 3 months only.

In the same semester, 20.35 University, the first digital university in Russia, organised free massive teacher training courses for HEIs on different aspects of improving digital literacy.

I enrolled in the 8-month online course on Project Management in Digital Educational Environment, which 20.35 University conducted in cooperation with Moscow Engineering Physics Institute. It gave me a chance to see how the learning process of the university was organised and gain highly sought digital skills. I was surprised with the huge number of the course participants: at the beginning I saw about 1,200 people on Zoom sessions. All of them were academic staff from HEIs, came from many regions throughout Russia, and had different backgrounds. The learning process actively involved Zoom for online classes and Discord for interaction. The speakers were invited from leading educational and IT organisations, and the content seemed to be overburdened with technical information, taking into account that I am from the Arts and Humanities but not from STEM. However, there was a chance to get feedback from the course moderators, lecturers, and peers in case the participants had questions. In general, I was quite satisfied with this course, and one the

most valuable results is the ongoing communication among the participants. We are still able to share our ideas, ask questions, invite each other to conferences and do other things on the Discord platform.

In addition, I and one of my colleagues took part in an international virtual collaboration programme between Russian and American universities, and in March 2021 we managed to receive a grant aimed at improving multimedia use in a higher education setting.

According to the grant terms, a small team from our university were given a series of webinars on PowerPoint features delivered by an expert from one of American universities. I was impressed with the amazing functions this well-known tool can provide, and I increased my knowledge not only about the technical characteristics of this technology but also about the best pedagogical practices of its implementation. The webinars gave hands-on training, and the participants could immediately apply the knowledge obtained.

Also, in the summer of 2021, I did a 4-week online teacher training course conducted by another American university for English teachers from Russia. The course gave us a lot of deep insights both in terms of teaching methods and the use of multiple digital resources which could be successfully incorporated into English teaching.

### 33.6 Conclusion

The period since the beginning of the pandemic has brought not only confusion, frustration, and anxiety, but has also enabled me to grow professionally by developing my digital skills, gaining new experiences, and establishing communication with colleagues from Russian and foreign universities. It could be concluded that digitalization of Russian schools and universities before the COVID-19 pandemic was just starting to pick up momentum, and I see the positive effect of the coronavirus outbreak in this regard as it forced all the Russian educational institutions to urgently acquire innovative technologies which significantly transformed the educational process. The consequences of the rapid transition to online learning have yet to be assessed as the transition itself is ongoing.

I do hope that my children will get a good quality education even though it is obvious that their learning process will be transformed. Having seen my children's struggles with their online learning I realised that they needed to develop their digital skills. As a result, I have enrolled them in IT courses for children twice by the present moment.

Also, I believe that our university is at one of the first stages of digitalization and there is a long way ahead. There are still multiple problems that require solutions.

I need to think about how to organise my work with foreign students who cannot currently come to Russia. I have to use asynchronous teaching methods mostly, as it is difficult and, sometimes, impossible, to conduct online classes while I am teaching offline. This concerns mainly the Chinese students who cannot use Zoom or social networks that are popular in Russia but banned in China.

Additionally, my university needs to invest in retraining teachers. The significant proportion of our current staff is of considerable age, and they may be uncomfortable

with the innovations. In addition, many educators avoid using digital resources as they usually have an English interface. Consequently, it is pivotal to constantly improve the current teachers' skills and hire new highly-qualified staff.

Nonetheless, things are changing at a slow pace, and one of the examples of this is that the university's Human Resources department now realises that teachers and other staff can work fully online, and that they can now hire qualified specialists for distant mode positions. Even a year ago, when one of Monash graduates applied for a position at the university but wanted to work remotely, it was extremely difficult to persuade the administration to approve this. Thus, I hope for positive changes in the digitalization of our university and a deep transformation of the Russian educational system.

In conclusion, I would like to add some tips and suggestions for developing digital literacy among educators and parents:

1. The first and foremost thing is to get rid of the idea that you are not intelligent or young enough to learn new technologies. Using modern technologies is not an innate ability but a skill that can be acquired provided that you are ready to invest time and effort.
2. Learning from peers, colleagues, your students, or even your children is one of the most available and cheapest ways to improve your digital skills. Do not hesitate to ask someone who seems to be more tech-savvy questions about the technologies you would like to master.
3. There is a plethora of instructions and guides to different technologies on the internet. In most cases you can find videos, texts, or pictures that can illustrate how to use a particular software.
4. Doing online courses designed to enhance digital literacy is definitely beneficial as the experts who have great expertise in this field can provide you with relevant information and professional feedback. However, you need to check the credentials of the course teams to make sure they have necessary qualifications.
5. Remember that *practice makes progress*. Keep using digital technologies and eventually your efforts will pay off!

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# Chapter 34

## Education and ICT Amidst the COVID-19 Pandemic: Teaching Reflections of Indonesian Educators



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**Abstract** Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, schools and learning institutions globally had to shift from the classical learning mode to online learning. Doing so in such a short time posed challenges and problems for Indonesian teachers. Further, many Indonesian educators, including the authors, were not familiar with online delivery and the technological aspects of online learning. In this chapter, four authors who are educators in different Indonesian educational settings apply autoethnography to explore their experiences of teaching in online classrooms. First, we attempt to address issues that arose by utilizing four educational lenses. Then, we discuss several points to consider when teaching in online classrooms. We conclude that student disengagement is the main issue in online learning. Finally, we present some recommendations for future practice and research.

**Keywords** Educational technology · Educators · Teaching reflection · COVID-19

### 34.1 Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought new challenges to educational practices around the globe. To control the pandemic, governments worldwide took rapid measures to limit the spread of this infectious virus (Cahusac de Caux, 2022). Many governments closed educational institutions and imposed online classrooms for teaching and learning activities (Chakraborty et al., 2020). Due to this policy, the

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only alternative to implement learning was transforming classical learning into online learning. Indonesia is not exempt from this unprecedented situation. Starting in March 2020, the Indonesian Ministry of Education and Culture (2020) imposed online learning to stop the spread of the COVID-19 virus among teachers and students. This policy has significantly impacted Indonesian teachers and students.

Switching from traditional face-to-face meetings to face-to-screen learning was not a simple task for both Indonesian teachers and students. Problems often occurred in the online learning space, attracting Indonesian researchers to investigate the issues. Based on several Indonesian researchers' findings, online learning problems in Indonesia are primarily about teachers' and students' lack of readiness to use technology, internet problems due to geography issues, and online classroom management (Annur & Hermansyah, 2020; Herlina & Suherman, 2020; Jannah et al., 2020; Sriwarthini et al., 2020; Widiyono, 2020). The reason why these obstacles exist is that many Indonesian teachers and students do not have sufficient experience in conducting online learning or even operating devices (Herlina & Suherman, 2020).

Nevertheless, although online learning in Indonesia has been attracting Indonesian researchers, only a few researchers have focused on the effectiveness of the online learning process. Thus, there is a need for Indonesian researchers to seek factors that influence the effectiveness of online learning (Widiyono, 2020). To delve into the effectiveness of online learning, it is essential to focus on teachers' perceptions due to their strategic role in the whole learning process (Silviyanti & Yusuf, 2015). Therefore, understanding teachers' experience in conducting online learning is crucial in developing more personalised online learning and teaching.

To better understand remote education in Indonesia, this study investigates educators' perceptions of the effectiveness of online learning implementation, specifically in synchronous and asynchronous learning. This study employs autoethnography as a research method (Pretorius, 2022; Pretorius & Cutri, 2019) to gain the teachers' insights into the current condition of online learning to delve into the issues. Since this study is a reflexive exploration of our experiences in performing online learning and teaching, it is expected to connect and enrich the experience of fellow educators in Indonesia and across the world.

## 34.2 Establishing Effective Online Learning

In the twenty-first century, when technology has started to bloom in the education world, some experts started the discussion to seek the optimal ways of integrating technology and education (Ally, 2008; Anderson, 2004; Gorsky & Caspi, 2005; Knowlton, 2002). In an online context, several researchers delineate that the key to creating effective online learning is the interaction among all teaching and learning elements (Anderson, 2004; Gorsky & Caspi, 2005; Knowlton, 2002). According to Garrison & Shale (1990), interaction is an essential element that bridges learning content, teachers, and students in education, including in the online space. Anderson (2004) adds that interaction is always the core of teaching students online. Recently,

many studies have confirmed this notion, showing that interaction is a critical element to boost the learning experience. For instance, studies unveil that purposeful interaction has been associated with positive perceptions of learning (Cundell & Sheepy, 2018; Fedynich et al., 2015; Martin & Bolliger, 2018) and enhance the achievement of learning outcomes (Long et al., 2011).

Furthermore, it is also believed that interaction can create better student engagement (Anderson, 2004). Enhancing students' engagement is vital to creating a better online learning experience. According to Martin & Bolliger (2018), students' engagement provides positive learning experiences and fosters active learning opportunities. This interaction which promotes students' engagement can become the solution to the problems of learner retention in online learning (Banna et al., 2015). Additionally, Meyer (2014) believes that students' engagement indicates the level of their cognitive development, leading to success. In other words, by fostering students' engagement, online learning can be more successful in aiding the students to achieve their academic goals.

### 34.3 A Framework of Online Learning

As discussed in the previous section, engagement and interaction are vital elements to create effective online learning. Teachers could develop better students' learning engagement by intensifying the interactions between students, teachers, and content (Anderson, 2003). Related to interaction, Moore (1989) delineated three forms of educational interactions: student–teacher, student–student, and student–content. Almost a decade later, this list was further developed by Anderson & Garrison (1998) to include teacher–teacher, content–content, and student–student interaction. Together, the six interaction components generally describe the processes of interactions which happen in online learning.

Teachers, students, and content are the main actors of educational interactions, and they create six types of interactions in online learning. Student–student interaction builds the first type of interaction. This interaction focuses on the interaction among students, which occurs in the learning space. Anderson (2004) argues that this interaction is vital to establishing student-centred learning due to its potential to open collaborative action among learners. Moreover, if designed carefully, interaction among students leads to positive learning outcomes (Borokhovski et al., 2012). The second interaction is related to student–teacher interaction, which is the mainstream interaction that exists in learning activities. According to Anderson (2004), in online learning, student–teacher interaction is not only in the form of synchronous mode. The interaction also exists in the form of an asynchronous mode via text, video, or audio (Anderson, 2004). The third interaction is student–content interaction. The internet provides more ways to establish student–content interaction (Anderson, 2004). For instance, students can now access the library from their house or easily access additional resources related to learning materials. The fourth interaction which might occur in the online learning dimension is teacher–teacher interaction. Anderson

(2004) suggests that this interaction opens an opportunity for teachers' professional development. This is because, from the interaction, teachers can learn something from their colleagues and encourage each other to perform well in the classroom. The fifth interaction is connected to teachers and content. This teacher–content interaction focuses on how teachers develop the materials for learning (Anderson, 2004). The interaction allows teachers to consistently update and monitor the effectiveness of content toward the learning. The last interaction is strongly connected to the relation among content. According to Anderson (2004), content–content interactions are about connecting different content and understanding how the content complements each other to add students' knowledge. The interaction between content is vital to provide comprehensive information and facilitate learners' study from various resources.

Additionally, Anderson (2004) argues that the six educational interactions described above could engage learners if teachers construct an online learning environment that supports how people learn. Bransford et al. (2000) argue that there is a convergence of four overlapping lenses which frame how people can learn effectively. The four lenses are learner-centred, community-centred, knowledge-centred, and assessment-centred learning (Bransford et al., 2000). Eventually, teachers' technological tools and interactions in online education should embrace these four lenses to support effective learning (Anderson, 2004). The discussion of these four lenses is scrutinised in the following paragraphs.

### ***34.3.1 Learner-Centred Learning***

Learner-centred learning is based on Vygotsky's views on social constructivism, which emphasises that humans can learn new knowledge through social interactions, learning activity, discovery, and independent learning (Acquah, 2019; Aljohani, 2017; Msonde & Msonde, 2019). From those definitions, active learning and interactions are the keys to learning, allowing students to achieve a zone of proximal development (Alton-Lee & Nuthall, 1992; van Compernelle & Williams, 2012). In a review, Katsarou and Chatzipanagiotou (2021) found that learner-centred interactions enhance students' academic achievement, satisfaction, and engagement (Kang & Im, 2013; Kuo et al., 2014; Park et al., 2015).

Considering these significant positive effects, the learner-centred approach could benefit students; teachers need to create a learning environment that supports and accommodates students' construction of new knowledge (Anderson, 2004), especially in online learning. In this regard, the strategic role of teachers in a learner-centred learning process is to help students make meaning of their learning processes by providing opportunities for students to share their understandings and unique aspects of themselves (Anderson, 2004). Furthermore, Bransford et al. (2000) suggest that teachers could effectively establish learner-centred learning by exercising cultural responsiveness and respecting students' language practices (Bransford et al., 2000).

### ***34.3.2 Knowledge-Centred Learning***

BRANSFORD et al. (2000) argue that effective learning can be achieved if the knowledge delivered in the classroom focuses on what is taught and what competence should be learned. In other words, learning materials need to be organised to support students' understanding of and engagement with the knowledge (Bransford et al., 2000). Hence, when teachers intend to create knowledge-centred learning in an online classroom context, they need to adjust without neglecting the essence of the content.

Fortunately, technology will provide solutions if teachers intend to design effective online learning which focuses on knowledge-centred education. For instance, Lee et al. (2018) prove that technology helps teachers create personalised learning content for all students. Students can quickly learn the content in this study because technology provides an algorithm that offers personalised and refreshed content (Lee et al., 2018). Similar to this finding, Caputi & Garrido (2015) show that teachers nowadays can personalise content using technology, such as Moodle, which makes learning easy for students. The technology would accommodate student-oriented learning to generate the best content for all learners (Caputi & Garrido, 2015).

### ***34.3.3 Assessment-Centred Learning***

Assessment is vital for monitoring learning's progress by identifying students' works (Bransford et al., 2000). Teachers need to employ personalised assessments in online learning to encourage students to assess their work (Xiong & Suen, 2018). Teachers could use a personalised-formative assessment that is flexibly designed for students rather than standardised tests that ignore students' diverse backgrounds (Edmunds & Hartnett, 2014).

Studies show that personalised assessment in online classrooms allows students to revise their works and engage more in lessons (Edmunds & Hartnett, 2014; Wanner & Palmer, 2015). Edmunds & Hartnett (2014) argue that controlling the assessment of the work and generating constructive feedback would enable students to review and reflect on their tasks to achieve the learning goals. Nevertheless, total control of assessment is ineffective for measuring students' work comprehensively (Wanner & Palmer, 2015). Hence, a clear teaching structure in developing an assessment is vital.

Bransford et al. (2000) argue that feedback helps teachers comprehend students' understanding of the subject matter and their ability in the meaning-making process. Hence, formative assessment would prepare students for real-world experiences. Bransford et al. (2000) suggest teachers help students build their ability to undergo self-assessment as an essential part of a metacognitive approach to learning and teaching. This enables students to shift to new situations without explicit prompting.

### **34.3.4 Community-Centred Learning**

Community-centred learning is critical in endorsing learning value and connections to the real world through collaborations between teachers and students or students and students (Bransford et al., 2000). Anderson (2004) argues that technology could overcome the barrier to collaboration through an online network. A study by Newall et al. (2014) shows that collaboration helps the participants face learning difficulties and enriches them with different ideas and perspectives. However, Hine (2000) highlights the challenge of conducting virtual collaboration, ensuring all learners experience affiliation to a particular learning community. Accordingly, mutual presence in place and time becomes highly critical (Anderson, 2004). Ray et al. (2012) found that students struggled to connect with partners abroad, leading to ineffective collaboration. It shows that language and cultural barriers could cause ineffective collaboration.

This discussion highlights the need for meticulous implementation of online collaboration in online classrooms. Collaboration enhances the learning process (Newall et al., 2014), but it might also be burdensome for students (Ray et al., 2012). Ultimately, the online space provides students with a chance for rich collaborations and a learning atmosphere. However, teachers need to carefully identify and analyse the online spaces to prevent students from barriers that hinder the learning process.

## **34.4 Methodology**

In exploring the issue, we employed the autoethnographic method, which focuses on describing the authors' experiences and thoughts related to implementing online learning in their workplaces. Autoethnography is a method regarded as a tool to establish the connection between socio-cultural contexts and personal experiences (Pretorius, 2022; Pretorius & Cutri, 2019). When we applied reflective narratives to the problems, we could reproduce the scenes and events the authors have experienced online. This method allowed us to explore our online learning issues from various aspects.

### **34.4.1 Participants**

This study focuses on the experiences of four authors with different teaching backgrounds. The first author (Angen) is a university lecturer who started teaching in higher education after the start of the pandemic. Additionally, he previously had teaching experience in schools for a couple of years. The second author (Titus) is a social enterprise mentor in Jakarta. He has experience mentoring various students through the screens of electronic devices to teach social entrepreneurship. The third



author (Rika) is a teacher at a language centre owned by a state university in West Java. She has various teaching experiences teaching students locally and abroad. However, due to the pandemic, she had to improve herself to teach online. The last author (Fenny) is a trainer in a state-owned training centre. She has been working there for many years, and currently, she needs to work online due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

### ***34.4.2 Data Collection and Analysis***

Firstly, in collecting the data, all authors conducted reflexive discussions to initiate and trigger their memories related to problems we faced in online learning. We ran the discussion when we started to do this research. Then, we each wrote a reflexive essay on our electronic devices. Thus, we can focus on each author's problems without any interference from other authors. After a few weeks of writing reflective essays, we submitted our reflections in the same Google Docs to analyse similarities and differences in the essays. Consequently, this compilation of authors' voices related to the implementation of synchronous and asynchronous online learning, providing a thick description of the issues being discussed. Thus, a detailed description of the online learning issues could be elicited.

These narrative essays were then collated and analysed in four steps. We follow the steps of recursive data familiarisation, finding the keywords, and theme identification and review (Braun & Clarke, 2006), focusing on how authors created effective teaching and learning activities in online classrooms. Additionally, the theoretical framework discussed in the previous section was used to interpret the themes that were constructed through our reflective narrative essays.

## **34.5 Results and Discussions**

To better understand educators' perceptions regarding the effectiveness of synchronous and asynchronous learning, this section will unpack the authors' thoughts and interpret them with the aforementioned online learning theory. The discussion of theory and authors' reflections are tailored to draw a picture of synchronous and asynchronous learning in Indonesia's education.

### ***34.5.1 Learner-Centred Learning***

All four authors agreed on the effectiveness of learner-centred learning in developing more effective learning activities. In synchronous and asynchronous learning modes, we gave incentives and opportunities for the students to share their understanding

of the subject matter, which we found could also improve students' engagement and participation. Based on our experiences, synchronous online learning improved students' interaction and engagement with the class activities due to immediate responses to the problems. We also witnessed that this quick response helped to involve students to participate in the online classroom activities.

Referring to my experience conducting online mentoring for learners looking for scholarships abroad, I could say that paying attention to learners' needs is necessary. The first step I took was listening attentively to their stories, and I was all ears. I would let them share their experiences and problems accomplishing the assigned task. I want to give them a safe space to grow and learn. Sometimes, they share more of their situation than discuss the course topic. However, I understand that they need to know their process to learn the course materials in a meaningful way, meaning what they were doing. I hope they could connect what they were learning and real life, their hopes, and dreams. I was happy because, in the course evaluation, they appreciated my quick response to their queries and the assignments they submitted in Google Classroom. They feel like I put them in the priority. (Titus)

The experience of Titus is consistent with those of Rika and Fenny:

The learning process is designed to be student-centred. I actively encourage my students to participate in classroom activities in each learning step. For example, when I ask my students to describe (people's) physical appearance, I would not spoon-feed them information to memorise. Still, first and foremost, I would like them to find out themselves or discuss it with their peers. I would ask them to describe their classmates' physical appearance to give them the context in understanding the materials. (Rika)

Considering my learners are adults, which means they are more independent than younger learners, I give them more opportunities to reflect on their learning process. I encourage them to connect what they learn with what they have known before. (Fenny)

van Compernelle & Williams (2012) mentioned that involvement and engagement are core components of learning interaction, which allows students to develop a zone of proximal development. According to Clapper (2015), interaction with the tutors would help students walk through the experience of internal conflicts due to the disequilibrium process of contrast between new information and existing frames of reference. Interaction with teachers or tutors would guide students to adjust their fundamental thinking methods with new understandings through accommodation and assimilation.

However, learner-centred learning is not easily applied in asynchronous learning and teaching activities due to the lack of real-time interactions between teachers or mentors. Minimum interaction was an obstacle for us in developing effective online learning that paid attention to students' skills, attitudes, knowledge, and beliefs. Even if student-centred learning was possible in online asynchronous classes, we felt that the lack of teachers' presence tended to lead to students' low commitment. We reported that students often missed the submission deadlines or ignored some tasks. Titus admitted that interaction with the students in an asynchronous class was challenging.

We have agreed on weekly submission for motivation letters and essays. We had a class every Thursday night. The schedule was discussed between me and the mentees, which is their most available time. I was constantly stressed before the class because they submitted

their work two hours before it. It gives me minimal time to check their assignments, or else they would submit the work a week after, forcing me to modify the class activities. They had many things to do since studying in an international high school and did some social activities. So, I maximised the use of Google Classroom, sending them messages through the application and reminding them to submit their works. We had a WhatsApp group too, so I always reminded them of the assignments and showed some sympathy and support for what they were doing through the WhatsApp group. That is the only asynchronous interaction we had during online courses.

Titus's experience is similar to that of Angen:

The assignment submission is often late, although the deadline is already stated a few weeks earlier. If I do not mention that I have provided questions in the LMS forum, students tend to omit and ignore the questions. Only 1 to 5 students answered the questions.

However, only Titus mentioned the benefit of conducting online asynchronous classes. He experienced that online asynchronous learning fitted students' tight schedules and was accessible at any time.

Based on the mentees' experience, an asynchronous learning method also fits their tight schedule to work on the assignment at the most convenient time they have. Thus, students can access the material anytime they want from any place with an internet connection.

This situation, unfortunately, is not unique to an asynchronous learning setting. The authors also experience problems applying the learner-centred learning approach to online synchronous learning settings. Generally, students showed lower engagement and participation by turning their cameras off, low response to mentors' inquiries, and dependency on mentors' reminders. Titus and Rika experienced the challenge of conducting online synchronous learning.

Batch 5 of the scholarship mentoring was a different experience for me. Having high-school students as my mentees, I sometimes felt like I should initiate the conversation. The worse thing was that sometimes they turned the camera off, and it was difficult for me to engage them. They will only involve themselves in the class if I trigger them with some questions that I thought might be interesting. I would ask their situation first, asking them how their day was. (Titus)

Generally, my students were actively involved in the learning activities. However, sometimes my students were discouraged from actively participating in classroom activities. My hunch is that they were anxious and felt worried and afraid to make mistakes. They were worried about being made an object of ridicule by their classmates. (Rika)

However, as it is stated by Clapper (2015), even if attention to individual students is essential in learner-centred learning, teachers should be aware of the lack of teamwork and communication. Learner-to-learner and instructor-to-learner engagements are crucial to developing a supportive and constructive learning environment. Thus, schools or education institutions need to design engaging learning experiences that facilitate individual student learning and, more importantly, help the students develop collaborative skills (Martin & Bolliger, 2018).

### 34.5.2 *Knowledge-Centred Learning*

The reflections were various when we discussed the materials given to the learners. Some of us were given the freedom to design the learning. On the other hand, another author admitted that she did not have the freedom to create the materials which might impact the teaching process. Those of us who had space to design the learning content tended to scaffold the learning process carefully. Knowledge was scaffolded through careful consideration to ensure that students follow the learning process. As a result, learners were given learning content that follows logical steps to understand particular knowledge. For example, Angen and Rika reflected the process of designing the learning content, noting:

I think I always use the opportunities to design the learning carefully. Before the learning and teaching activities, I always develop the contents which scaffold the students' language acquisition process. For instance, when I teach writing techniques to my students, I do not give my students examples of complex writing. I usually start with accessible content first, such as simple grammar or vocabulary. I realise that my students' English proficiency is low, although they are university students. I want them to understand the basic knowledge of writing first before proceeding to a more complex writing structure. (Angen)

I carefully design the learning materials for my students to process the knowledge. However, I cannot deny that some students struggle to understand the materials, especially when students learn grammar. Mistakes are often found when grammar is a bit complex to understand. (Rika)

Unlike Angen and Rika, Fenny admitted that she did not have much freedom to design the learning materials. Usually, the materials were given from the learning centre; thus, she could not interfere with the design of the content. Fortunately, the materials were designed based on the learners' capability to understand the materials.

The learning materials are given, and the training institution designs the materials. Fortunately, the contents are created based on the learners' capability in understanding the materials. The thing that I consider the most is when I deliver the contents to the learners. Some learners are not ready with the LMS (Learning Management System). I think this is because the participants are not familiar with the system. Hence, many learners could not access the materials at the beginning of training. (Fenny)

Based on these reflections, despite the authors' strategies to design the content, student engagement was still hard to achieve. We admitted that scaffolding students' understanding of knowledge had been key to focusing on the learning process. Whether prepared by the institution or the teachers, all materials given to the students had been designed judiciously to build students' knowledge. Consequently, we were implementing what Bransford et al. (2000) suggested. Nevertheless, in all our reflections, some students always disengaged during synchronous or asynchronous online learning modes.

Therefore, focusing on scaffolding the knowledge was insufficient to engage the students; thus, an additional strategy is needed to improve the learning. To increase the students' engagement, Khan et al. (2017) argue that teachers need to design content development and delivery, supporting active learning. Active learning can be created in online classrooms through various modes of students' engagement, such as

debating, discussion, or solving a problem (Hurtubise et al., 2015; Khan et al., 2017). Ultimately, engaging students with the learning materials, based on our reflection, is challenging; nevertheless, it is still achievable if we also focus on delivering the content.

### ***34.5.3 Assessment-Centred Learning***

As Bransford et al. (2000) highlighted, the basic principle of assessment is providing learners with feedback and an opportunity to revise their work, thereby developing their understanding. Rika mentioned her strategy to help her students construct their knowledge through scaffolded assessment. The scaffolded assessment allowed the students to process any information in the classroom more systematically. Like Rika, Titus stated that feedback helps his students thrive during the course. Fenny had a different assessment setting since the course materials were designed at the national level before being distributed to the provincial level where she works. Nevertheless, she managed to adjust the assessment to the actual context of her students, who are adults working in a government institution. Rika and Titus mentioned that feedback is crucial to the learning process they conducted.

I think assessment and feedback are crucial for learning. Assessment is needed to check the process and progress of learning. It also needs to be aligned with the learning goals and learning process. (Rika)

Most of my students appreciated my immediate feedback on their evaluations delivered to my mentees after the online mentoring classes. They said it has helped them develop their understanding. I tried to be passionate about the feedback by making thorough revisions to their essays. Yes, it takes time, but I am happy too to help. I could give them several revisions to a single essay, not only once. It forced me to read more, learn more, and look for more references. I am learning too. (Titus)

We found that feedback and revision guided students in their knowledge acquisition. Moreover, feedback and revision helped students engage in the course and make the course more meaningful. Our experiences are consistent with Martin & Bolliger's (2018) finding, which emphasises the importance of feedback in a learner-to-instructor interaction. Feedback from instructors helps students to improve the learning process.

Another aspect of assessment is its congruence with the learning goals (Bransford et al., 2000). All of us stated that we considered the learning aims in planning course assessment. Rika mentioned that her students understood the goals of the assigned assessment because she explicitly informed them before the course. However, she never noted that the assignment she delivers aims to assess their performance. She believes that it would give space for students to explore their potentials, reflect on learning activities, and develop a sense-making process (Bransford et al., 2000). Rika used diverse assessment alternatives to fit learners' various needs. She believed that flexibility and assessment variation would help students in the meaning-making process.

Generally, my students understand the aim of the task I assigned them to do, even though they might not know that the purpose of the assignment is to assess their learning development. I gave them various tasks and some choices of submission formats, in writing, audio, video, songs, or a combination of them.

Titus managed to balance the goal set by the institution and learners' personal goal.

The mentoring class has its goal set by the institution to organise the course. However, as a mentor, I understand how to match the institution's goal and accommodate each learner's personal goal. Some learners were new to the course, so their goal was to understand first the process of gaining a scholarship abroad.

### ***34.5.4 Community-Centred Learning***

We were all concerned about creating collaboration, as we agreed that collaboration in synchronous and asynchronous online learning should be encouraged. In both synchronous and asynchronous online learning contexts, we believed that the interaction between students or teachers needed to be judiciously tailored.

I encourage my students to work together in groups. I share a Zoom link that they can use to collaborate with other students outside the class hours. However, I also encourage them to work in a team during the online class. I believe that they can learn from each other. (Fenny)

I believe peer mentoring would help students develop their collaboration skills. I also think exchanging information between students would help them construct a more meaningful meaning-making experience. (Titus)

I believe collaboration is the key to learning. Usually, based on my experience, students are more active when collaboration is created in the classroom. To me, the involved students are the ways to improve the quality of learning. (Angen)

One of the benefits of having collaborative learning is to help students assess their performance and gain feedback from fellow students. Bransford et al. (2000) suggested that self-assessment and peer feedback effectively boost learning. Another benefit of collaboration is to improve students' thinking skills. Martin & Bolliger (2018) argue that the partnership among students could aid students in enhancing their analytical skills. These benefits indicate that collaboration enhances learning effectiveness in synchronous and asynchronous learning modes.

However, the authors argued that applying collaboration in online learning was not simple. Titus admitted that online collaborative learning was challenging, mainly due to the lack of physical presence, making it arduous for students to build engagement (Anderson, 2004). Rika mentioned that students would rather have the teacher group them than give them a choice to group themselves. Moreover, Fenny reported that some students choose not to attend group work.

It is not easy. They can hide behind the camera. If you have more than 30 students in one online class, you need to check each online room when you do a break-out room in Zoom. Some of the students would just put their profile pictures as if they turned the camera on, but they did not. (Titus)

I have encouraged them to work in a team. However, my students would rather ask me to group them than choose their teammates. It just seems to be more effective that way. Students were a bit reluctant to select their partners for work. (Rika)

Most of my students were enthusiastic about doing group work. However, some students did not attend the group work. (Fenny)

Having teenagers in her class, Rika needed to lead the grouping process. She understood that learner-to-learner interaction did sometimes require the instructor's intervention. Her thought follows Martin & Bolliger's (2018) finding, which found that learner-to-learner interaction is less frequent in online learning. However, considering the importance of collaboration in a learning process, teachers are encouraged to develop students' collaboration skills and support them in teamwork. Collaboration equips students with dynamic learning and conflict resolution skills (Clapper, 2015).

## 34.6 Conclusions

Creating effective synchronous and asynchronous online learning is not a simple task. In general, the authors worked hard to ensure that online learning could aid students in acquiring knowledge. Various strategies and ideas were employed in the learning process to create a learning atmosphere that was similar to face-to-face classrooms. Nevertheless, expectations did not easily match reality. Based on our reflections, online classrooms bring new challenges that are not identical to those teachers face in offline classrooms. The challenges are different because the mode of interaction is different from face-to-face interaction (Anderson, 2004). Teachers also have less power to control students' behaviour in an online classroom. Due to these circumstances, in this study, all of us faced the same fundamental issue in online learning: student disengagement.

As discussed in the previous section, we tried various teaching strategies to ensure that online learning could work effectively. We attempted to address all issues through four educational lenses, namely learner-centred learning, knowledge-centred learning, assessment-centred learning, and community-centred learning. Nevertheless, the strategies used by us did not seem to significantly encourage all students to participate in the learning activities actively. For example, some students always disengaged from the activities in terms of synchronous learning. Based on the reflection of Titus, Rika, and Fenny, students avoided interaction although the teachers set rules for the learning activities. Further, in asynchronous learning, some students also disengaged with teachers. For example, Angen admits that many students often submitted assignments late, although information had been provided in advance. Student engagement is fundamental to the learning process, and we are worried that disengagement will negatively impact the students' learning process.

This research informs that learning disengagement is the main challenge in various online education settings. Although this research cannot be generalised, the authors' reflections in this study could show that learning disengagement is a critical issue

that all teachers should address. When the students do not engage with the teachers' instruction in online learning, it will be hard for teachers to control the learning. Hence, we suggest that future research could propose alternative strategies to decrease students' disengagement in Indonesia's education context. We expect this research will add to our knowledge in employing online learning, thereby helping teachers develop better online education strategies.

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# Chapter 35

## Reflections on Developing Academic Identity During the Pandemic



Pennie White 

**Abstract** This work is a post-modern autoethnographic reflexive narrative about the internal journey in the development of academic identity arising in the context of the transition from working as a casual academic to engagement for a short-term contract and beyond in the quest for tenure during the COVID-19 pandemic. It is an exploration of my personal story about moving from the periphery of academic belonging and being, to reaching the turning point going ‘over the bridge’ toward the future cycles of becoming that await. This study highlights the importance of a sense of belonging and connection in the academic community as a foundation for being and future becoming.

**Keywords** Academic identity development · Pandemic · COVID-19 · Belonging, being and becoming · Situated learning · Legitimate peripheral participation · Post-modern autoethnographic reflexive narrative research

### 35.1 Introduction

Graduates of a PhD aspiring to *become an academic* will periodically wonder if they have arrived. There is no guarantee of tenure after the apprenticeship of a PhD nor the years of casual teaching and research. The milestone of the entitlement to add *Dr* before your name does not signify automatic transition of identity to being an academic. The pandemic has made this arguably the worst time in history to aspire to secure an academic position or to become an academic. Tenured positions are highly coveted and the community of people with a PhD outside of academic engagement continues to grow as the number of available positions shrinks; the number of PhD graduates already far outnumbered the advertised tenured positions pre-pandemic (Croucher, 2016). For those in higher education (as well as in many other occupations) continued employment could not be taken for granted with redundancy negotiations taking place across the country (Hare, 2021). The pandemic has reminded us that

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the concept of tenure as one of stability does not necessarily match reality. It too is subject to the universal condition that nothing is permanent. Is it still viable or desirable to wish to become an academic in these times? What does it mean to become an academic?

I welcome this opportunity to write a reflection on my experience as an academic during the pandemic.

I pause after writing this sentence and wonder if I have the authority and credibility to identify as an academic ... yet. I understand I am on a life-long journey, but which box do I fit into for the call for book chapters ... graduate student, early career, established researcher? (Call for book chapters abstract proposal, June 2021)

The above quote is illustrative of the uncertainty of, and insecurity in, my academic identity experienced since completing my PhD (see White, 2016). This chapter is based on a reflective narrative drawn from contemplations by way of journal entries made during my experience on the periphery of academic becoming during the pandemic. I explore the development of my academic identity during the pandemic including the personal and social learning that accompanies research as learning (Brew, 2001). Pretorius & Macaulay (2021) define academic identity “as that which is reflected in the narratives people use to describe themselves within the context of academia” (p. 624). They elucidate further that academic identity development “relies on the navigation of the oftentimes tacit or unspoken knowledge and practices in academia” (Pretorius & Macaulay, 2021, p. 624). This study explores part of the iterative, meaning-making process of my academic identity development as an emerging researcher and higher education teacher.

I worked in schools for much of my career until I began university teaching in 2016. In mid-2017, I transitioned to working solely in higher education as a teaching and research associate on numerous casual zero hours guaranteed contracts. By 2019, I felt like I had been *just a casual* for too long, often wondering if I was a *real* academic yet, and I developed a narrative to cope with this. I reasoned that I was doing what I loved, teaching and researching, the keystone activities of an academic (along with service, which is also personally important). I enjoyed the freedom to travel outside of the face-to-face teaching periods of the academic year. In 2019, I travelled to Malaysia, France, and Queensland (Australia). On all three trips I completed marking. In Malaysia, I ran a workshop on self-study methodology as an invited guest, reconnected with a PhD alumni peer, and was appointed to the advisory board of a new journal. In France I edited a co-authored paper. I felt empowered in my choices and was enjoying the trajectory of working towards and trialling an academic career.

Then came the pandemic and its implications for the world began to unfold. Border closures induced a wave of university restructures and redundancies across Australia with falling international student numbers impacting institutional incomes (Hare, 2021). The ban on international travel interrupted my empowered personal narrative. Many colleagues lost their work as casuals. The number of academic job losses is estimated to have been as high as 40,000 across the sector to May 2021 (Littleton & Stanford, 2021). There were the hidden job losses where fixed-term

contracts were not renewed while my multiple casual contracts kept me busier than ever. My narrative shifted to one of gratitude for the work I had and the opportunity to continue teaching and researching at what my students had begun calling *Zoom University*. My engagement with students during online teaching inspired me to explore my academic development through contemplation and journaling. I secured a five-month academic contract mid-2021 and hoped for another for the new year or, better yet, an ongoing role. However, a second wave of redundancies (Head, 2021) after prolonged lockdowns and a lack of clarity around when international students would be permitted to return to Australia continued to impact profit and loss forecasts unfavourably.

## 35.2 Learning, Transformation, and Becoming

The broader context for this work is professional development. Professional development has been recognised as more effective when considered as a long-term process (Kennedy, 2014). I consider that important identity work is involved in transformative learning which Mezirow (1997) describes as the “process of effecting change in a frame of reference” (p. 5). Learning is also a social practice. Lave & Wenger (1991) describe social practice as a generative feature in learning in the context of situated learning:

The notion of situated learning now appears to be a transitory concept, a bridge, between a view according to which cognitive processes (and thus learning) are primary and a view according to which social practice is the primary, generative phenomenon, and learning is one of its characteristics. (p. 34)

Therefore, situated learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991) within communities enriches personal identity development during the learning as well as the development of authentic professional practice that cannot fully be realised outside of the context.

Participation and belonging are critical in learning because “the form that legitimacy of participation takes is the defining characteristic of ways of belonging and is therefore not only a crucial condition for learning, but a constitutive element of its content” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 35). In this work on academic becoming, I describe the starting point as *on the periphery*, affording further development in that “peripherality, when enabled, suggests an opening, a way of gaining access to sources for understanding through growing involvement” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 37). Growing involvement in academic life involves interactive engagement with others in academic communities. In this social learning conceptualisation, collaboration and collegiality are recognised as fundamental for learning and engaging in practice (White, 2016), because knowledge of practice exists beyond the page (Wenger, 1998). These concepts will be explored further in considering the narrative that unfolds in this work.

The complexity of learning as a social practice is reflected in the Belonging, Being, and Becoming: The Early Years Framework for Australia (Department of Education & Training, 2009). The themes from the Early Years Framework for Australia are seen as relevant to all people in their journeys, transitions, and transformations during a lifetime. Consequently, this study takes the themes of belonging, being, and becoming against the backdrop of situated learning theory as a framework (presented in Table 35.1) to explore my journey of academic becoming during what has been catchphrased as *unprecedented times*.

This work is also a form of self-directed professional development, a reflective process aimed at enhancing my performance as an academic and exploring my sense of identity development in the process. According to Butler (1996), educators undertaking such learning are “always in the process of ‘becoming’ what is required by the ever-changing parameters of the learning context” (p. 265). Note that academic identity here is considered “a constant process of transformation” (Pretorius & Macaulay, 2021, p. 624) which is not considered ultimately fixed or finite. An understanding of becoming as a continual process with ever-changing points of belonging and being cycles underpins this study which was undertaken during a period of rapid change both in the landscape and in my professional life.

**Table 35.1** Connections between the early years framework for Australia concepts and situated learning theory

	The early years framework for Australia concepts (Department of Education & Training, 2009)	Connections to situated learning theory (Lave & Wenger, 1991)
Belonging	Belonging “acknowledges ... interdependence with others and the basis of relationships in defining identities. ... Belonging is central to being and becoming in that it shapes who ... [people] are and who they can become” (p. 7).	“Legitimacy of participation ... is the defining characteristic of ways of belonging, and is therefore not only a crucial condition for learning, but a constitutive element of its content.” (p. 35)
Being	Being “is about the present and them knowing themselves, building and maintaining relationships with others, engaging with life’s joys and complexities, and meeting challenges in everyday life” (p. 7).	“Peripherality, when enabled, suggests an opening, a way of gaining access to sources for understanding through growing involvement.” (p. 37)
Becoming	Becoming acknowledges that people’s “identities, knowledge, understandings, capacities, skills and relationships change ... [and] are shaped by many different events and circumstances. Becoming reflects this process of rapid and significant change that occurs ... learning to participate fully and actively in society” (p. 7).	Personal identity development during the learning as well as the development of authentic professional practice are realised in the social context.

### 35.3 Methodology

This work is titled a reflection. I have used methods of contemplation and journaling which align with Loughran's (1996) idea of their purpose to "help the writer look back on (or forward to) an event in the hope that it will be a catalyst for reflection" (p. 8). Reflexive commentary and analysis of journal entries situates this work as a reflection of the third kind, reconstructing experience (Grimmett & Erickson, 1988; Loughran, 1996). A reflection might be considered as belonging to the narrative genre of writing. It extends to autoethnography in terms of methodology (see Pretorius & Cutri, 2019 for a discussion on the shift in the use of positivist autoethnography to its adaptation to post-modern reflexivity as an authentic qualitative autoethnographic methodology). When reaching the half-way mark of the word count, I began to contemplate the methodology as beyond being a reflection or narrative, experiencing the reflexivity of autoethnographic work:

I have a dilemma around the methodology. I am wrestling with which self is writing—the writing as self or the reflective self, writing the commentary. .... Am I writing or engaging in a reflection, a narrative, an autoethnography or a self-study—or all of the above? (15 December 2021)

This chapter then, is a form of post-modern autoethnography. Chapter 2 (see Pretorius, 2022) provides a detailed description of autoethnography as a methodology as well as how it was applied in this book.

#### 35.3.1 Data Collection

The data are a series of journal excerpts from June 2021 to January 2022 and one from 2017. The journal entries from June 2021 to December 2021 were handwritten entries made across two personal notebooks used for planning and research across all aspects of my life. The January 2022 entries were typed into this chapter draft. The entry from 2017 was typed in a Google Doc along with some class preparation notes. Data selected from my journaling for analysis are presented in Table 35.2.

I also consider contemplation as part of the data process extending through the subsequent analysis. This is where emic reflexivity interplay has shaped the findings through the analysis process. Conversations with peers as critical friends have also been important in shaping this work, one of whom suggested including the concepts of belonging, being, and becoming from the Early Years Framework for Australia. These concepts along with situated learning theory (presented in Table 35.1) provide a lens for the interpretive analysis process to view and discuss my experiences as they resonated with high level themes encountered in my journal entry data.



**Table 35.2** Description of journal entries selected for analysis

	Date	Number of words	Brief notes or content of entry
1	9 Oct 2017	227	Discursive notes on dissonance faced with the desire to write and publish.
2	3 June 2021	264	Clear wish to be an academic and undertaking steps to become one.
3	21 June 2021	76	Planning to apply for next contract before first one had begun. Plan for self-study.
4	20 July 2021	119	Resisting feedback on the self-study proposal.
5	16 August 2021	99	Still processing feedback on self-study research proposal.
6	15 September 2021	401	Challenging thoughts around not knowing my future institution. Happiness with current contract. Being distracted and missing daily check-in.
7	1 December 2021	214	Joy on appointment to ongoing role. Empathy for colleagues being made redundant.
8	14 December 2021	177	On being out-of-field.
9	15 December 2021	375	About support from critical friends.
10	16 December 2021	433	On being an academic and insider jokes about imposter syndrome with colleagues.
11	3 January 2022	598	I am an academic.

## 35.4 Findings and Discussion

The discussion section is structured around the themes of belonging, being, and becoming, drawing in aspects of situated learning theory discussed in the literature section as presented in Table 35.1. These themes represent the iterative process of learning and consequently there is interplay between the themes throughout.

### 35.4.1 *Belonging as an Academic*

In this section I demonstrate how I experienced a sense of belonging through inspiration and guidance from others through connection and collaboration with people personally known and unknown. A significant and consistent source of a sense of belonging was generated within a group of three colleagues who met daily over a two-year period.

#### *Inspiration and Guidance from People Known Personally and Not Known Personally*

In my data were mentions of three persons not personally known who were a source of inspiration and guidance. The first two were mentioned in an entry entitled “Diary of a goal”. I begin with the prevailing context before mentioning these people and

their influence. Wishing to develop as an academic by publishing from my PhD was my focus, but my frustration with this unmet goal is evident in my diary entry.

I am writing about my deep dark secret goal. It has been nagging in the back of my mind for some time now. One of the excuses I use for not doing it is that I do not conform to the publish or perish pressure of the academy. But I really do want to publish a paper from my PhD. I don't know why. Do I have something to say? I think, "How will I start?" ... I will have to make it the very first thing I do when I get up in the morning. I always put other things first, like preparing my classes, or doing paid research work. (9 October 2017)

There is a clear dissonance here between not wanting to subscribe to the *publish or perish* culture (or publication for its own sake) and having something important to say. I knew publications would help my progression against the competing priority of immediate paid work as a casual, but the tension related to managing paid versus unpaid work was high.

The motivation to publish from my PhD at the time came from a connection with a mentor who had set me the task of publishing as a priority and in writing a three-to-five-year research plan. The post demonstrates a shift in trying to embrace and enact these goals:

I have a mentor and my agreed goal is to publish. I must start today on my goal to write a journal article. I must start today. "Arghh", groans through my head as I open the file with my work in progress. Why do I want to do it then? It is ok once you start right, even enjoyable? So far there are 345 words in the document. The title is 13 words. Only 100 of the words are relevant to the article. It is a loose plan. (9 October 2017)

The struggle and internal challenge for motivation returns in the post, even becoming self-defeating where I point out after the initial positive self-talk that only one-third of the words are relevant. A poor fit between the goal of developing my own research and maintaining paid work may have been making me feel conflicted. While I had a known mentor contact, I was unable to fully embrace the requisite level of participation at that time. I was participating legitimately in higher education teaching as a casual, but not peripherally as I was "not given productive access to activity in the community of practitioners" (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 104). A lack of "interdependence with others" impacted the development of my identity as a researcher (Department of Education & Training, 2009, p. 7) and therefore the "legitimacy of participation [as] the defining characteristic of ways of belonging" (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 35) was not achieved at this time.

An example at the end of the first entry references two sources of inspiration for a good writing habit:

I want to be like Jerry and John. Write every day. :) ... Will I do it? I can, I will, I must! (9 Oct 2017).

Here I draw inspiration from John and Jerry, John referring to John Loughran, the Dean of Education at the time, and Jerry referring to Jerry Seinfeld, both known as highly productive writers. This is an example of inspiration that can come from unknown others.

There were other failed attempts to publish from my PhD along the way. A full paper was drafted and submitted to a journal but not submitted elsewhere after it was rejected. I later worked with experienced academics on a paper and witnessed their resilience and quick turnaround to resubmit elsewhere following rejection. Working with them assisted my understanding of the “tacit” aspects of being an academic (Pretorius & Macaulay, 2021, p. 624) in dealing with rejection. Their resilience impacted positively on my “habits of mind and point of view” (Mezirow, 1997, p. 5). Belonging through legitimate peripheral participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991) with experienced academics contributed to a foundation for learning and improvement in habits of mind I would need for future development in publishing and contemplation of “who I could become” (Department of Education & Training, 2009, p. 7). This example of belonging to a community of practitioners and the resulting relationships (Department of Education & Training, 2009) that allowed for legitimacy of participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991) contributed to identity development.

The second entry in the selected dataset refers to the third person unknown to me who has influenced my journey. The context and contextualisation for this third influence occurred during teaching in Semester One, 2021. My desire for a contract or tenured position in academia grew. I felt that I had developed as much as I could in casual roles. I decided to journal more often about my academic journey:

I want to be an academic. I am currently a research assistant and teaching associate. If I had a contract or tenure, I would be able to do my ‘own’ research. I am going to journal my reflections on the work I am currently doing and clarify my place in academia. I missed out on a job because my research narrative was not clear. If I find where my heart sings, I could find my place. I will journal to discover a problem of practice in this area to help me grow as an academic. (3 June 2021)

I then listed some dot points. Some affirmed my wish to become an academic while others articulated barriers to achieving this:

- I feel ready to be an academic.
- I feel inspired by others who made it.
- I cannot articulate my research narrative.
- I have not published on my PhD since graduation.
- I am busy doing all sorts of areas of research and teaching.

I made the decision to “journal on my work” in the hope that “I might get in touch with what I connect with most” (3 June 2021). I had watched many vlogs by Professor Tara Brabazon during my PhD. This day I Googled “Tara vlog” and “How to be a lecturer” and noted: “I am watching Tara’s Vlog 224—Becoming a lecturer” (3 June 2021). The point of inspiration was Tara’s vlog comment (Brabazon, 2020) that if you did not have a position, you should “Grab a lecturer contract” (3 June 2021). I subsequently successfully applied for a contract that would begin on 12 July and to end on 23 Dec 2021. I had managed to, as Tara advised, “grab a lecturer contract”. This was the third example of inspiration or guidance from someone personally unknown to me.

Tara’s comment in the same vlog that “No one cares about you at all” led me to fully embrace responsibility for my academic progression. Other points made helped

me in developing my thinking about the relevance of my research to my teaching and what scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) might look like for me. The theme of inspiration and mentoring from others was pointed out to me by a friend outside of academia when I read my draft chapter to her. Feedback from others is invaluable in offering new perspectives, richness, and a renewed enthusiasm, even as a sole author on a study about yourself.

While I welcomed the news that I would begin a short term-contract in the midst of marking my final assignments as a casual, I still yearned for a longer contract:

Feeling tired from all the marking. Half-way through. In the next six months I need to secure a further contract. All going well in the new contract, hopefully I could continue in that role longer. Before starting the role, I should set the self-study up officially with [mentor expert in self-study] as a critical friend. (21 June 2021)

It was difficult to embrace the present without projecting forward.

Feedback from those known to me challenged my thinking. Once settled into the new role, I turned my thoughts again to pursuing research—potentially a self-study. I was resisting suggestions for narrowing the focus of a self-study from “How do I currently work academically?” to “How have my experiences as a casual academic influenced my career progression?”. In July, I wrote:

I am reviewing feedback on my plan for self-study. The first comment is that “this is an ambiguous question”. ... The barriers are touchy, and I feel a sense of resisting revisiting them. I remind myself that this is a self-study and an opportunity to look at internal, external and perceived barriers. (20 July 2021)

This appears to present an excellent opportunity for academic development work. In August I was still wanting to forge forward in the new role and was not ready to revisit my recent teaching experiences as expressed in the post entitled “Reflective Entry”:

I don't really like to go back. I like to go forwards. It makes me feel like I am stagnating. But I understand that the reflective process will help me learn and progress. It will take some discipline to apply myself instead of pushing through and learning new things without reflection and strategy. (16 August 2021)

Feedback from someone known to me in this case was valuable in that it provided an academic and personal challenge for me to continue to work through.

The changing rules and increasing restrictions associated with multiple and extended lockdowns in Melbourne, Victoria (Australia) made it challenging to make plans:

I've just seen today's headlines. Victoria's lockdown is extended to 2 September and a curfew is back in place 9pm to 5am. I guess I'll make a plan from now to 2 September (16 August 2021).

My contract did, however, make it easier to set some shorter-term professional learning goals to time in with my contract period. Uncertainty and difficulties in planning due to remote working was limiting my capacity to make connections, thereby limiting opportunities to develop a sense of belonging.

### *New Contacts as a Foundation for Belonging in a New Context*

Connecting with a few key people in my new role in the School of Law during the one and half days I had attended on campus really helped me to be of service in my role in supporting academic development. These meetings were key to the beginning of my belonging in the communities in the landscape (Wenger-Trayner et al., 2014). As research and scholarship were now a part of my role, I dedicated some time to this weekly. I included the writing of this chapter in my performance review goals. I signed up to a mentor programme and was advised to focus on securing a long-term contract rather than longer term research without knowing where I would be employed. This seemed sensible considering the difficulty I had progressing my *own* research as a casual academic.

### *Yearning for the Security of a Contract as a Platform for Belonging*

I was finding writing difficult to manage while applying for jobs for 2022 and dealing with pandemic and weather events causing electrical supply issues at home. It bothered me that I had not secured a position for the following year because I had to state my affiliation for this chapter submission:

By the time I finish this chapter I hope to know what my institutional affiliation is for the line under the title. (15 September 2021)

The lack of institutional belonging was weighing on me, but I also expressed my gratitude on this day for my very first albeit short-term contract. This was juxtaposed with the unsettling environmental events inspiring me to create my own secure electricity supply to the house.

My new generator sits in the hallway close to the front door. Melbourne is emerging from Lockdown 5. I got to do a test run of starting the generator and using it to power my fridge then workstation last week. We had the most extensive power outages in memory in June which prompted me to order the generator. (15 September 2021)

On this day I also missed the morning check-in with colleagues I had been connecting with daily during the pandemic:

Damn, I forgot to log in to my daily meeting with colleagues on time again. My dear friends are not in the Zoom room. I missed them because I am seven minutes late. We have been checking in with each other daily for the duration of the pandemic. (15 September 2021)

I had missed the opportunity for inspiration and guidance I drew from this social practice. I valued the connection I found in my group immensely as this source of belonging and encouragement helped to mitigate the impact of isolation brought about by the pandemic-related work-from-home orders. In March 2021, one colleague had submitted her PhD to be conferred in August and another member sent his work for final proofreading on 13 January 2022. A growing number of studies has documented the benefits of collegial writing groups (see, for example, Cahusac de Caux et al., 2017; Chakma et al., 2021; Chakraborty et al., 2021; Hradsky et al., 2022; Lam et al., 2019; Wilson & Cutri, 2019, 2021). A good example of how these groups have promoted reflective practice can be found in Cahusac de Caux et al.

(2017). The value of attendee-driven writing groups for novice academic roles is discussed further by Wilson and Cutri (2021).

In September I was again thinking about my *own* research. I repeated the feedback that I had noted the last two months almost verbatim:

Feedback said that my question ‘How do I work academically?’ was ambiguous. I will look at papers sent to me and look at their research questions. The papers are not resonating with me. Sue’s story in the Kensington-Miller paper does resonate with me. (15 September 2021)

I was able to move past some of my earlier struggles around what to do with the feedback and engaged with the challenge. I also reflected on my own research being part of my new role:

The freedom to do ‘research’ in my work is new to me. It is an unfamiliar luxury. I am working on the discipline to engage with it. (15 September 2021)

One comment bordering on a tantrum in the middle of the earnest notes is worth including for its comedic value:

I don’t want to engage about the barriers to becoming an academic—I just want to be an academic now!” (15 September 2021)

In November 2021, after a week without power caused by a fallen tree due to adverse weather conditions, I submitted four applications for ongoing roles in one day, using the generator to keep the internet and laptop running. On 12 November, I was interviewed for these ongoing positions and on 17 November received confirmation of my appointment to an ongoing position beginning February 2022. I could hardly believe the outcome and re-read the HR appointment email many times to check. I noted in December,

It is an understatement to say that I am thrilled that I have an ongoing position in a similar role with the Arts and Education Faculty beginning in February. (1 December 2021)

I wanted to announce my appointment to the world but was constrained by the thought that 200 people were losing their jobs in a restructure. At least my appointment was to a vacant position. I reflected on my enthusiasm for starting the short-term contract prior to the restructure. I had been publicly expressing my intention to secure another contract before the restructure was announced:

During my fortunate time of holding a contract I was determined to position myself well to secure a further contract or ongoing role. I told new colleagues that I was on a contract but that I would not be leaving. Then came the whole university meeting where a restructure and round of redundancies was announced. I stopped saying that I am not leaving the institution because my hopes of there being available positions was diminished as departures of amazing people I worked with were happening every week. (1 December 2021)

The restructure made me reflect again on impermanence, moderating what I thought tenure would bring in terms of stability:

The reality that nothing is permanent in life was painted again for me as I still grasped for the stability of tenure as a platform to develop academically, as if my growth was in hiatus until I could achieve this. ... How much of our identity should be inextricably linked to our institutional affiliation? (1 December 2021)

Here I question how relevant a title or position in academia should be to my sense of identity and security. Perhaps it should not matter, but right now, to me, it does. The restructure contributed to isolation due to sensitivity around colleagues losing their positions. This impacted on my sense of belonging and development of relationships (Department of Education & Training, 2009) and thus my sense of identity in the new role.

*Degrees of Belonging—In-field Being Out-of-field.*

The notion of belonging in academic development roles is interesting to consider. My current role was titled *Lecturer*, however the work was an academic development role in a school that was not my discipline area. As a casual researcher working on a project about out-of-field teaching (teachers teaching subjects for which they are not degree qualified) I had wondered what my field was. My issue with this was also the reason I was unable to articulate a clear research narrative in discipline-specific Lecturer role interviews. In December, I reflected on the idea of out-of-field and in-field in relation to this past work and how I saw myself in terms of belonging:

At times I wondered if being out-of-field *was* my field. I had a wonderful, rewarding and productive time being a research assistant for a Maths Professor. What was my colleague who referred me to the job thinking? I ended up working on a research project about teachers working out-of-field teaching mathematics and so I was a researcher out-of-field in a maths project about out-of-field maths teaching therefore I was in-field in being out-of-field. (14 December 2021)

I felt I was in my element in my academic development role supporting active learning and appropriate use of technology in teaching. I felt adept at reviewing and developing learning outcomes with assessable action verbs and course proposals that would meet the curriculum committees' expectations. Was I still out-of-field?

My first contract I grabbed hold of as advised by Tara was again out-of-field. I remember getting the phone call telling me I was successful. I was asked if would I prefer to work with the school of law or finance. Honestly, I didn't think it mattered. We are all somewhat interested in finance as we hit middle age... I did work experience in a law firm and it was one of the 20 professions I considered along with being a pilot or a journalist. When I was very young, I played schools, so perhaps it was my destiny to be in education. (14 December 2021)

I understand that education is my field and that researching in the role with the School of Law or Finance could be challenging as I would only be in-field on the education side of things and assisting with the SoTL aspects, but out-of-field in either discipline. One week of work experience in a small law firm in Year 10 did not legitimise me as in-field. The positioning and questioning about in-field and out-field is also a reflection on the heightened fragility of the academic employment landscape during the pandemic.

*Personal Belonging in the Professional Context and the "Circle of Niceness".*

By mid-December I was secure in my role and knew what was coming in 2022. I resolved to return to this chapter each morning as a practice of my scholarship and

research development, an achievable research milestone for the time of the short-term contract. I apply myself in the morning until check-in time with my group:

I have applied myself for 50 minutes. I made it past 2000 words! Time for my daily 8am check in with my 'circle of niceness'. (15 December 2021)

My *circle of niceness* (Mewburn, 2013) was a way to avoid complete isolation. At the end of the group check-in, one colleague stayed online to discuss my chapter further. I then wrote:

After speaking with ... Jenni, I am feeling more comfortable with offering this personal narrative in my own voice. In my thesis, there was less of my voice because I was concerned about academic rigor and credibility. Now I feel at a stage that I can write from my vantage point and reveal who I am without fear. Jenni's encouragement allowed me to see myself as someone with a wealth of experience in supporting others with their academic development and to realise that it was time for me to be free from self-doubt and criticism. (15 December 2021)

Acting as a critical friend, Jenni provided timely and much-needed reassurance about being authentic in academic writing. For more about Jenni and her autoethnographic journey, see Miles et al. (2019). The depth of connection I felt within my circle of niceness clearly demonstrates the sense of belonging that was the "basis of relationships in defining identities" (Department of Education & Training, 2009, p. 7). This legitimacy of participation, Lave & Wenger (1991) theorised is "the defining characteristic of ways of belonging" (p. 35).

It is through the engagement in the writing and the conversations about the writing that I have found belonging as an academic. I developed my sense of academic belonging through inspiration and guidance from role models both personally known and unknown to me. Influences from both are essential in academic belonging. It is through the literature and community of academics where the practice is represented in the artifacts (such as journal articles, reputation, and vlogs). The academics with whom I have engaged with "legitimacy of participation" (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 35) have been critical to my own journey of development and identity transformation (Department of Education & Training, 2009).

### 35.4.2 *Being an Academic*

Belonging through legitimate participation was a critical foundation for peripheral participation and being an academic that followed. The entries reflect internalising the experience of feeling like an academic where I am in "the present and knowing about myself" (Department of Education & Training, 2009, p. 7). Was this the day I became an academic?

In December, the chapter was nearing completion. There was a calm in the space and time to take a breath and enjoy the security of my current contract being extended to the start date of my ongoing one. I would be able to take leave over the summer instead of just being unemployed. I took a moment to journal:



I sigh with relief that I know that I am at Deakin next year, maybe for the life of my career. It has been a long journey to this point. (16 December 2021)

As my work started to progress, I stopped to make a phone call:

Rang mum to tell her I am having fun being an academic (writing this chapter). She didn't answer. It is 7:20 am. (16 December 2021)

She was the first person I wanted to share my joy of engagement in the academic practice. I credit my mother as my lifetime academic adviser. After all, she modelled how to write reports on *Behind the News* when I was in Grade Five (she wrote the good copy and I had to write it out in my notebook complete with relevant hand-drawn pictorial borders). I still engage in critical conversations about education and seek my mother's advice and thoughts on my work.

On 16 December 2021, "I really want[ed] to tell someone I am being an academic today". I text my young adult daughter in COVID isolation in the bungalow out the back: "I'm having fun being an academic. I'm writing a book chapter". "Nice", she replied. Unsatisfied with this exchange I continued my entry:

I guess I didn't emphasise 'being an academic' enough. The magnitude of the experience of feeling like 'I am an academic' through 'being an academic' cannot be appreciated outside of my self-perception of identity. Everyone else thought I was an academic a long time ago—this was not news to them. (16 December 2021)

The feeling of being an academic arose from engagement in academic practice (writing this book chapter) and in connecting with others; "access to sources for understanding and growing involvement" (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 37). I still wanted to share this shift in my sense of identity:

I look at the clock—less than half an hour until check-in with my circle of niceness. I can tell them 'I am an academic'. (16 December 2021)

My colleagues enjoyed my declaration and appreciated its humour. One colleague commented dryly, "That is great, I can't wait to hear how that is going tomorrow". There was a shared and unspoken understanding that the moments of and fluctuations between self-doubt and self-assurance were regular arisings in emerging researchers such as ourselves. Wilson & Cutri (2019) researched the benefits of collegial writing networks to negate imposter syndrome. The enrichment experienced through my collegial group, where I was "building and maintaining relationships with others, engaging with life's joys and complexities" (Department of Education & Training, 2009, p. 7), fostered my identity development as an academic during a time that was difficult due to the extended working-from-home conditions brought about by the pandemic.

### *Security and Paying it Forward*

My new identity as an academic coincided with my immersion in writing this book chapter and feeling wrapped in the security blanket of my upcoming ongoing appointment. My circle of niceness colleagues gave me an impromptu interview for the ongoing role I was ultimately appointed to which helped significantly. Soon after, I

had the opportunity to support a past student for whom I was acting as referee in the same way. I experienced a strong sense of internalising *being an academic* and also experienced the joy of being able to give back:

I got a message from [past student]. I am so happy for her. She landed the job. I coached her before the interview. (16 December 2021)

I embraced the joyful responsibility of cultivating others aspiring in their academic and professional journeys. I had been able to contribute to peripherality for another, acting as a “source of understanding through growing involvement” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 37).

### *Being an Academic is Not Separate to Being in Life*

I was determined to ensure I established a work-life balance at the outset of my new ongoing academic role, but in my first paid summer break found that I was unable to separate my worlds:

I am on summer break, but I am writing this book chapter. I had hoped to establish some kind of work-life balance on entering as a real academic and taking real breaks and downtime. But I need to meet the book chapter deadline. Writing on your summer holiday is being academic. (3 January 2022)

It felt as though being an academic was now a part of my DNA and I began to embrace my academic practice as part of my everyday being:

I recognise ‘thinking academically’ in bringing together the chapter—in thinking about the complex interplay of concepts. I am doing this while ‘being’ in Albury. I have been connecting with the river and the local people and the extreme heat wave of the summer. I swim. I become one with the cool water until I shiver. Back inside with air-conditioning, power and the internet I am being academic. (3 January 2022)

Professional and personal participation were no longer separate. They flow together. I was no longer concerned with trying to instigate the good advice of ensuring a work-life balance. The professional had become the personal and the personal, the professional.

### **35.4.3 *Becoming an Academic***

I now look forward to a new chapter in my academic journey. My undertaking of this study has helped develop and shape my identity at the point of time in which it was written. The metaphor of a bridge representing situated learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991) as a transition that combines the internal cognitive processes and the interplay of social practice was introduced in the literature review section of this chapter. A colleague had said about my move to the Arts and Education Faculty that “I was just going over the bridge”. I see the bridge as representing the transition both to my new academic home and also my return to the home of my disciplines in Arts and Education. Beyond the bridge lies my next stable platform for belonging, for being.

While tenure may not be permanent, and all things are subject to change, it will be part of my journey where I can breathe easier for a while. New adventures in the next chapter of my life of belonging, being, and becoming an academic await.

### 35.5 Next Steps and Further Research

As an emerging researcher, I am still searching for what makes my heart sing and I happily take ownership of my research trajectory. It has been noted that “the goal of reflective practice is self-discovery and growth, as well as the expansion of one’s knowledge” (Pretorius & Ford, 2016, p. 241). Engaging in journaling for this study has affirmed for me its value as a professional development and research practice. My focus going forward will include further SoTL in my ongoing role in supporting the academic development of others. The reflective work will support my next steps of finally developing that three-to-five-year plan grounded in my authentic research narrative.

### 35.6 Implications and Conclusion

This reflective account of the journey from working as a casual, through securing the first short-term academic contract to finally securing a tenured position represents a major transformation in opportunity, but also a journey of embracing academic identity. Three implications can be drawn. Firstly, there are further opportunities for academic identity development when in a contract position due to the increased opportunity for legitimacy of participation through belonging and peripherality in being, but this does not negate the essential internal personal work in developing an academic identity. Secondly, the internal work occurs through engagement with the academic community during practice, continuing the cyclical processes of belonging and being. Finally, transformative moments or milestones are reached in academia, but ultimately identity and academic development are ongoing journeys of becoming. The journey of becoming an academic happens in tandem with engagement in academic practice afforded through situated learning. Identity is formed in forging ahead and in revisiting the moments that constitute the journey.

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# Chapter 36

## CODA The Challenges of Establishing Academic Identities During Times of Crisis



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**Abstract** This section of the book synthesises authors' contributions by reflecting on the key themes identified in the various stories told within the chapters. It briefly describes the impact that marginalisation, parenthood, mental health, and virtual participation had on the formation of academic identity during the COVID-19 pandemic. The section ends with the editors' thoughts on what was achieved in this volume, in addition to the challenges that lie ahead.

**Keywords** Academic identity · Autoethnography · Collaborative autoethnography · Marginalisation · Parenthood · Mental health · Wellbeing · Virtual participation · COVID-19

### 36.1 Multiple Voices, Multiple Perspectives

The COVID-19 pandemic has generated significant change in the professional and personal lives of early career researchers and established academics in higher education. As we noted in the preface of *Research and Teaching in a Pandemic World* (see Pretorius et al., 2022), we believe that stories and individual experiences matter. In this book, we used collaborative autoethnography (see Chap. 2, Pretorius, 2022a) to share our experiences and bear witness to the myriad effects of pandemic-related restrictions on academic identities and practices. There were stories of loss, trauma, and grief (see Chaps. 3–6; Grant-Skiba, 2022; Mokbul, 2022; Patel, 2022; Rangarajan & Daneshfar, 2022), but also tales of positivity despite adversity (see

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Chaps. 7–10; Cutler et al., 2022; Li & Zhang, 2022; Lin & Xu, 2022; Power et al., 2022). Many chapters covered strategies that were employed to build resilience and growth (see Chaps. 11–22; Adams et al., 2022; Cutri & Lau, 2022; Jiang & Li, 2022; Kalenjok, 2022; Lee, 2022; Macaulay, 2022; Senewiratne, 2022; Sheridan et al., 2022; Umarova, 2022; Utami, 2022; Yip & Maestre, 2022; Yu, 2022), adapt research methodologies (see Chapters 23–28; Cahusac de Caux, 2022; Duran, 2022; Hradsky, 2022; Karlina, 2022; Maulana, 2022; Qureshi, 2022), and adapt teaching and learning practices during challenging times (see Chaps. 29–34, Aiusheeva, 2022; Elliot et al., 2022; Freya & Cutri, 2022; Karakas & Webster, 2022; Kisworo et al., 2022; White, 2022). Throughout these chapters, each author created their own personal narrative regarding the direction that research and teaching may be heading in this pandemic world.

We hope the insightful stories contained in the pages of this volume inform academic practices going forward. In particular, we want to highlight the most salient themes identified in the various stories told within the chapters of this book: *marginalisation*, *parenthood*, *mental health and wellbeing*, and *virtual participation*. While highlighting these common themes, we stress the importance of the individual experience. As is very clear from the stories in this book, the same event can be experienced very differently by different people. As such, we note that the themes we highlight are not exhaustive of everyone’s pandemic experience. What we hope to do through this thematic discussion, however, is illuminate not only the most pressing concerns experienced by those in academia, but also our hope for a post-pandemic academe that is more inclusive and supportive to all.

## 36.2 Marginalisation and Academic Identity

Our identities as academics were shaped by a myriad of issues related to ethnicity, cognitive normativity, and cultural attitudes toward public health. As highlighted by Grant-Skiba (2022), the COVID-19 pandemic coincided with growing anti-racist sentiments, the exposure of pre-existing systematic biases and racism within our institutions, and worldwide outrage surrounding race-related police brutality. This had a tremendous effect on the academic identity of many early career researchers, not only in the United States but in places like Australia, where ethnicity- and race-related issues have a lengthy political history. As noted by Hradsky et al. (2022), “developing an academic identity can, therefore, be chaotic, particularly for diverse academics who carry the burden of reimagining who an academic can be” (p. 7). Academics needed to process the events of 2020 in order to consolidate their academic practices and the role that racist discourses play in higher education and everyday life.

We have learnt that while the pandemic may have been a pervasive fact of everyday life, it did not erase structural and systemic inequalities. Instead, in some cases, these inequalities became more visible, making them all the more essential to address in a meaningful manner. For instance, individuals who are autistic received less medical attention during the pandemic, as resources typically used to assist people

who are autistic were rerouted for the purpose of treating COVID-19 cases. This meant that academics who are autistic were negatively impacted by the pandemic in ways that others may not have been, as showcased by Sheridan et al. (2022). Raising awareness of issues like this during a period of heightened awareness is of utmost importance. This requires clear communication and open discussion between and among academics regarding the ableist attitudes which pervade academia.

### 36.3 Parenthood and Academic Identity

There were salient challenges associated with child-rearing during lockdowns and school closures. Developing and establishing one's academic identity while parenting during the pandemic was certainly a gargantuan feat. How does one grow as an academic if they are overwhelmed by child-rearing and schooling duties? How can one manage increasing parenting responsibilities while maintaining their academic standards and practices? These issues were seldom solved in a systematic and coordinated manner. Instead, academics with children resorted to oftentimes haphazard, and yet practical, solutions that satisfied their needs and the needs of their children.

Thankfully, academics are beginning to strike a balance between professional and familial duties. As Yip & Maestre (2022) state in their chapter on "academic motherhood", early career researchers may begin to view "research work and family life as complementary instead of in competition". Similarly, Adams et al. (2022) noted that they "came to understand that it was acceptable to share the personal and to have [their] mother identity more visible, and we encouraged this in others." Our experiences of the pandemic have taught us that we live in a highly interconnected world where what we do in one part of our lives has far-reaching consequences for other facets of our life and the lives of our loved ones. This is a worthy insight, as many academics and professionals tend to perceive the two as mutually exclusive.

There also needs to be a greater awareness of the gendered nature and expectations of academia. There is a growing disparity between genders, with a significant motherhood penalty impacting academics with child-caring responsibilities. Much like the comprehensively-studied motherhood penalty aspect of the gender pay gap (Cukrowska-Torzewska & Matysiak, 2020; Gangl & Ziefle, 2009; Glauber, 2018), motherhood's effect on the *gendered academic gap*—for lack of a better term—needs to be more carefully assessed. While motherhood tends to impact pay by approximately three to four percentage points (Cukrowska-Torzewska & Matysiak, 2020), the impact on research output tends to be greater (see Cahusac de Caux, 2022). Therefore, there is an imperative to address this gendered discourse if we are to create more equitable and sustainable systems of higher education.



## 36.4 Mental Health, Wellbeing, and Academic Identity

Wellbeing is already a significant concern for academics, with many acknowledging that there is a mental health crisis in academia (see Lau & Pretorius, 2019; Pretorius, 2022b). Several chapters in this book highlighted how the pandemic negatively impacted mental health, with several authors seeking professional support (Mokbul, 2022; see, for example, Patel, 2022). By addressing their wellbeing, many authors discovered new insights into themselves, their ways of knowing, and their practices, learning to develop self-care strategies such as self-compassion. We hope that academia learns from these authors' honest accounts of poor mental health by reducing stigma and prioritising an environment of wellbeing and self-care.

The pandemic not only shed light on the state of mental health within higher education, it also forced many academics to reassess their relationship with their institution. This was done in numerous ways. For instance, some academics erected clear boundaries between personal and professional roles by creating routines that dictated when they work and when they tend to other duties. Establishing new routines was necessary for the wellbeing of academics, particularly those who were experiencing unprecedented shifts in their workload and responsibilities.

Given the incessant focus of the media on the pandemic, many were unable to avoid thinking about the toll the pandemic had—and continues to have—on society. Regardless of whether one was directly affected by the pandemic (e.g., by contracting COVID-19), it was practically impossible to escape news related to the pandemic. It was undoubtedly the most widely discussed topic for close to two years (early 2020 until early 2022). It was so pervasive that dictionaries such as Webster and the Oxford English Dictionary selected words associated with pandemic as their *word of the year* (Merriam-Webster, 2022; Oxford Languages, 2022).

Humour was used effectively as a coping mechanism and as a way of processing mental health issues. Given that many of the jokes and memes were shared on social media platforms, it may be argued that humour was also used by early career researchers as a means of raising awareness around the plight of academics during the COVID-19 pandemic. This is an important point, as many academics are concerned with constructing meaning and conveying profound experiences to others in society. Humour provides a healthy avenue for such practices, as highlighted in the chapter by Freya & Cutri (2022).

Among the many lived experiences of academics, isolation and loneliness were probably among the most common. The sudden disruption to or disappearance of everyday activities (e.g., walking in the park or grabbing a coffee) left academics feeling helpless. We understand now, perhaps more than ever, how crucial human contact is in an increasingly interconnected world. There are different types of connectivity (including both online and physical options), and we need an ample dose of several of these types in order to thrive. This is a lesson that many of us had to learn the hard way during the early stages of the pandemic.

## 36.5 Virtual Participation and Academic Identity

A significant proportion of the authors of the chapters in this book were either international postgraduate researchers or needed to travel for research purposes (or both). They experienced setbacks that could not have been easily forecasted. For instance, some doctoral candidates had to continue writing their doctoral theses away from their institutions and in isolation from their peers. This tested their cognitive hardiness and forced them to rethink what it means to be an academic (e.g., it does not depend entirely on being physically present among your community of practice).

Many academics associated academic competence and identity with the ability to publish research and share their work with the academic community in a variety of different fora. Given the restrictions on travel enforced by governments around the world, many academics perceived the inability to attend academic fora as a threat to their academic identity. The inability to present one's work to peers was equated with intellectual stagnation. Even with the proliferation of virtual conferences, many academics argued that serendipity and the social aspects of conferencing (e.g., networking and socialising) were much more common in in-person academic gatherings (see Rimmel, 2021).

Limited and restricted mobility not only affected conference attendance outcomes. It also impacted another aspect of being an academic: conducting research. As detailed in some of the chapters in this volume (see Duran, 2022; Hradsky, 2022; Karlina, 2022; Maulana, 2022; Qureshi, 2022), research projects had to be completely revised due to an inability to travel to collect data for research purposes. This meant that academics were forced to conceptualise new methods of data collection and analysis, which would inevitably impact the findings of their research. This was a significant challenge to the identities that academics had established through practice and experience (particularly given that many academics build a repertoire of research skills that they apply to new projects). Conducting research using new and often untried tools required careful planning, scrutiny, and courage. Early career researchers sought advice from their mentors and peers, while more seasoned academics drew on their network of colleagues. In both cases, individuals needed to draw on the existing literature while reflecting on the direction their research may take.

Pandemic-related restrictions forced many academics to teach and conduct their research virtually. This was a tremendous shift away from previous conventions, which typically portrayed face-to-face interaction as the dominant and viable mode of interaction. Early career researchers needed to problematise such conventions in order to successfully continue with their research projects, as delays to data collection and other aspects of research would have otherwise meant a complete halt to the majority of research activities for many. While the ability to question conventional research methodologies came from a place of necessity, the solutions that many academics generated were grounded in their attitude toward higher education and intellectual development. In other words, they had to be convinced and comfortable with the new ways of doing research that they had conceived.

Restrictions on gathering motivated groups of early career researchers to organise their own virtual conferences. In terms of participation, these were more successful than in-person conferences, as financial and geographical barriers to entry were essentially eliminated. All academics needed to participate in a virtual conference was a stable internet connection and a quiet space from which to attend. This can pose problems for some academics, particularly those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and in low-income nations who may not have access to adequate internet connections or infrastructure. Nevertheless, communicating and disseminating research is now more environmentally friendly and sustainable than before the pandemic which we view as a welcome change. It is likely that the trend toward virtual and hybrid (i.e., a mixture of in-person with virtual participation) conferences will continue.

Finally, there is plenty of latent potential to be found in online and virtual worlds. We are beginning to see academics engage with each other and the wider public en masse through an online presence on social media platforms like Twitter. As the internet becomes increasingly prevalent in our daily lives through the Internet of Things, we will see new ways of interacting and exchanging ideas that will shape academic identity in new and unpredictable ways. As the internet transitions to a place of seamless and immersive communication, academics and higher education may more readily embrace online and hybrid modes of research and teaching. Both qualitative and quantitative research in a wide range of disciplines will benefit from the multimodality of knowledge creation in a post-pandemic world.

## 36.6 Concluding Remarks

The COVID-19 pandemic has not been kind to academics, particularly early career researchers, in higher education. It placed an immense burden on academics to adapt to rapidly changing circumstances while maintaining their usual workload. This led many to experience burnout and to consider changing their careers. As hinted in the preface of this volume, one of the most effective ways of conveying the challenges faced by academics during the pandemic is through the power of collective witnessing. We hope the volume has achieved this aim.

We also hope that, when memory of the pandemic wanes, *Research and Teaching in a Pandemic World* will serve as a useful record of how COVID-19 affected the world of higher education. Academics will continue to teach and conduct research, albeit in altered and innovative ways due in part to the unforeseeable circumstances generated by the pandemic. The future challenge lies in how we adapt and make effective use of the increasingly interconnected field of higher education—a field full of promise and potential. This challenge remains attainable thanks in part to the grit and determination of academics who wholeheartedly believe in the promise and purpose of higher education.

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