New Sociological Perspectives
2023, Vol. 3, No. 1, 50-62
https://nsp.lse.ac.uk/

"It's About Channelling that Anger, Isn't It?" Postgraduate Researcher Resistance through Collaboration and Care

Nikki Rutter, Anna Pilson, Emma Yeo, Ecem Hasan*

Abstract

Postgraduate researchers are expected to work independently to create new knowledge, retaining productivity and internalised motivation for the entirety of their PhD research. However, COVID-19 undermined our ability to progress in this typical manner, as the pandemic created an iterative lockdown process within the UK, which increased levels of isolation and decreased levels of institutional support for PhD researchers.
Despite these challenges, many individuals and groups of PhD researchers resisted; creating their own opportunities to research, reconciling the tensions between their essential role as knowledge producers against their invisibility as individuals in the neoliberal university system. Our own efforts of resistance came as we extended a funding body call to 'evidence' the impact of the pandemic on our studies by creating an interdisciplinary group of four UK-based female postgraduate researchers, from various marginalised identities (e.g. disability, age, class, race). We spent the UK-lockdowns unpacking our otherwise individual experiences through a collective lens. These shared responses were collated and understood through the multivocal method of feminist collaborative auto-ethnography (FCAE).In this paper, we (re)immerse ourselves both situationally and critically into the pool of data created in our original FCAE project to co-construct narratives outlining collaborative efforts of resistance against Higher Education's neglect for postgraduate researchers during the pandemic and beyond. We also recognise and actively raise the efforts of resistance of other postgraduate researchers, by citing our peers as core research literature. By publishing and recognising, identifying, and integrating this body of work, we visiblise our value as researchers.

Keywords

higher education, postgraduate researchers, feminist methodologies, feminist collaborative auto-ethnography

* Nikki Rutter is an assistant professor in sociology at Durham University. Nikki's research interests include participatory approaches to child and family experiences, expressions, and responses to harm. She is particularly interested in emancipatory feminist methodologies and how they can be utilised when exploring harmful life experiences. She tweets as @RutterNik. Anna Pilson is a PhD student at Durham University School of Education and Lecturer in Vision Impairment Education at the University of Birmingham. Her doctoral research is concerned with challenging the marginalising forces of dis/ableism in educational research and praxis by reconceptualising participation and voice. Her wider research interests include: Critical Disability Studies, Feminist New Materialism, Posthumanism, Post-Qualitative Inquiry, Participatory Action Research, Autoethnography, Vision Impairment, Teacher Education. She tweets as @pilsonanna. Emma Yeo is a PhD student at Durham University History Department. Emma is particularly interested in historical crisis, and general crisis from a historical perspective exploring resistance and resilience. She tweets as @EmmaYeo5. Ecem Hasan is a PhD student at the Department of Sociology at Durham University. She tweets as @EcemH_.

Introduction

Undertaking postgraduate research training in typical times is difficult enough; financial constraints, isolation, the expectation that work will be conducted independently to create new knowledge, with researchers retaining productivity and internalised motivation for the entirety of their PhD research. The Covid-19 pandemic compounded these experiences for us as a research group, with increasing feelings of isolation, reduced motivation, and the creation of further barriers to networking opportunities which are arguably vital for postgraduate researcher (PGR) development (Rutter et al., 2023). As the response to the Covid-19 pandemic was not conducive to developing a healthy research-culture for PGRs, as within the UK and many other countries, there were iterative lockdown practices. These resulted in intermittent closures of social and university spaces thus increasing levels of isolation and mental health difficulties for staff, students, and PGRs alike, as we, as many researchers were less able to access the resources and communities to complete our research (Kallakuri & Maulik, 2020).

As the needs of PGRs remained unacknowledged, it continued to compound feelings of neglect and invisibility; particularly for those in the early stages of their studies, as only those in their final 12-months were acknowledged in the phase 1 extension policy (UKRI, 2021). Whilst waiting to hear whether our research projects could be extended or adapted, our collective were made to feel neglected within the academic community, as we were witness to mid-career researchers and large-scale grants-holders being offered, and accepting, funding extensions relating to difficulty in completing fieldwork during the Covid-19 lockdowns (UKRI, 2021). In comparison, our funding body, the United Kingdom Research Institute (UKRI), was much slower to create guidance for those researchers in receipt of PhD studentships. Initial guidance was framed around individual responsibility to 'adapt' projects, seemingly without consideration of the nuances of personal circumstances. We felt ourselves subject to a 'narrative of absence' (Pilson, 2020), neglected in the face of dominant hierarchical forces of power supporting the more 'established', already feeling out-of-place within academic spaces due to our non-traditional backgrounds. This paper was conceived after a discussion within our collective which evoked feelings, particularly within Emma, a History PGR exploring a parish-level study of experiences of crisis in early modern Durham who recognised that the diaries of the wealthy were the predominant narrative of disease outbreaks and war; whereas the parish registers documented the lives, stories and deaths of those who had less power and thus, many experiences, many voices, many stories are lost as they are never recorded. In this paper, we explore the experiences of other PGRs and early career researchers (ECRs) from non-traditional and minoritized backgrounds within academic spaces during and due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

As research group of non-traditional PGRs; due to our position as disabled, working-class women with caring responsibilities and family commitments outside of our PhD, those lost voices found by Emma resonated with us. We did not want our stories to be unheard, unwritten. Or worse, for our stories, the private details of *our* lived experiences to be told by others; for their benefit and our detriment, as though we were 'outsiders' and not integrated members of the academic community. In this paper, we explore the experiences of other PGRs and early career researchers (ECRs) from non-traditional and minoritized backgrounds within academic spaces during and due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

The motivation for this article relates to sharing our individual and collective experiences of engaging in PhDs during the Covid-19 pandemic, recognising ourselves as "cultural, social, and emotional bodies" thus taking an autoethnographic approach to the work (Rutter et al., 2023). It is not unusual for autoethnographic work to avoid using research questions, indeed we follow the guidance of Ellis et al., (2011, p. 284) whereby "the questions most important to autoethnographers are: who reads our work, how are they affected by it, and how does it keep a conversation going?" Thus, if we *were* to pose a question, it would be how can define "our own realities *on our own terms*"? (Collins, 2000, p. 274, italics in original), rather than waiting for more established academics to publish work *about* us. This is particularly important when these realities were constructed through the challenges of beginning a research career during a pandemic, and we attempt to utilise our privilege as scholars within a Russell Group institution within the United Kingdom to support those scholars who may hold less privilege.

Literature

Since our original feminist collaborative autoethnographic project, we have observed a different form of neglect within Higher Education Spaces; otherness. 'Othering' during the pandemic has typically been observed as overt aggressions; anti-asian discourse, racism, violence, and problematic government policies (Dionne & Turkmen, 2020). Our experiences were not so overt, but our existence as an interdisciplinary group of four UK-based female PGRs from various, and intersecting, marginalised identities (i.e. disability, age, class, race), meant that external narratives of PGR experiencers created a dissonance whereby we were exposed to narratives thought to represent our experiences as PGRs, but they were narratives of middle-class, able-bodied, white males with no caring responsibilities; the antithesis of what we were living though. Nevertheless, we have observed literature which represents PGR experiences globally, with students across the world providing evidence they found the closure of university study spaces had a major effect on their studies (Hernández-Medina & Afaneh, 2022, p. 44; Chaudhuri et al., 2022). Just as Emma found that she could not access necessary archives, and Author4 found that she could not access online resources on her personal computer and needed institutional equipment (Rutter et al., 2023); Indian graduate student Deepali wrote of their concerns regarding the completion of their thesis without access to campus facilities: "The libraries and canteens closed… I was in the midst of writing my thesis… I was reluctant to leave. However, there were few options left". (Chaudhuri *et al*., 2022, p. 30). For many PGRs in the literature, the line between home and work blurred (Rutter et al., 2023; Purkayastha et al., 2022).

A concern for some PGRs within the above articles was the way in which some more senior academics have maintained their research outputs by utilising the experiences of their junior colleagues. However, through our engagement with the literature, we have found academic spaces whereby there existed collaborations which were uplifting, rather than an exploitative process. Yan Dai worked with Benjamin Arnberg to produce a fascinating and innovative autoethnography on the experiences of Chinese students during the pandemic, while Manisha Desai explicitly focused on sharing the experiences of her early career colleagues: "I immediately reached out to my advisees, current and recently graduated… I thought it would be a generative way to deal with this overwhelming global crisis" (Dai & Arnberg 2021; Desai et al*.,* 2022, p. 88). We also posit that our own approach of a feminist FCAE can be a 'worthwhile endeavour' which can provide space for ECRs and PGRs to share their lived experiences of living through these troubled times (Roy & Uekusa, 2020; Rutter et al., 2023; Yeo et al., 2023).

Throughout our research as a collective, we have continuously committed to ascribing to a feminist epistemology, one which promotes an ethics of care, promotes collaboration, and seeks to platform the voices of those often ignored within academic discourse (Haraway, 1988; Williams, 2022). As such, we actively engage with practices which avoid reifying hegemonic systems of power within Higher Education, as we seek to avoid contributing to existing racist, ableist, and patriarchal systems so dominant in academia. One way we achieve this, is by ensuring a "conscientious engagement with the politics of citation" (Mott & Cockayne, 2017, p. 954). Black feminism has led the way in citation politics, both critiquing academic practices which neglects the work of Black women in particular, whilst also advocating for practices and promoting methods to #CiteBlackWomen (Bolles, 2013; Williams, 2022). It is these practices which both inspire and encourage us as, for the remainder of this article we are expanding this approach and will only cite work written by those we view as neglected by the 'academy' (i.e. racially minoritized; openly disabled; LGBT+; PGR and/or early career academics; and/or those from the third/voluntary sector). We do not engage in this approach as a co-option of Black feminist thought, but rather recognise it as an emancipatory methodological endeavour which encourages us as early career academics to continuously reflect upon our citation practices and the voices we platform or promote. Those articles which explore the pandemic PGR experience and position PGRs as subjects, written by established academics (such as an article produced in the Education Department at our own institution, Durham University, by a senior academic whom had interviewed 10 PGR students about their pandemic experiences, representing interviewees as passive sources of information) will not be cited or included.

It is frustrating that the neglect of those without traditional access to power, in that they do not have established and tenured roles with social and institutional hierarchies continues, as there are many existing studies which exemplify how to position participants with lived experience as co-researchers. For example, Liddiard et al (2019a, 2019b) ensured that participants had the opportunity to contribute to the article from inception to completion, and were given co-authorship of the research pieces produced as they actively sought to learn from and acknowledge the contributions of their disabled collaborators in their Full Lives project (Liddiard et al., 2019b); finding that deliberately undermining traditional research conventions of researcher and researched allowed for the freedom to centre the contributions of their co-researchers, which proved "foundational to the empirical and theoretical development of the project" (Liddiard et al., 2019b, p. 1474). As a team, they navigated challenges of time, space, experience and health to work inclusively.

Method

Bello et al. (2021) attempted to challenge the isolation experienced by international students in Canada during the Covid-19 pandemic; finding that a collaborative autoethnographic approach was useful in explore the challenges of living with intersecting identities and systemic oppressions in a supportive and cathartic way. The impact of Covid-19 being most harmful and most significant on those with intersecting identities involved in university scholarship was also evidenced by Berlinghoff (2022), who found that the support systems put in place were not enough for those from non-traditional backgrounds.

This paper draws on data elicited through a research process we term Feminist Collaborative Autoethnography (FCAE) whereby we, as a collective, engaged in iterative FCAE sessions (full details available in Rutter et al., 2023), an approach which has been identified as a unique, innovative, robust form of Collaborative Autoethnography (Badley, 2022; Nind et al., 2022). Initially we engaged in online Microsoft Teams meetings, which were utilised as a method of collaboration and care, as we brought the reflective diaries requested by our funding body, as mentioned above, shared experiences, and probed the reflection to illicit more depth and reflexivity. This process evolved, and became a space which allowed us to unpack our experiences as PGRs, and our challenges, as we realised that – as PGRs from non-traditional backgrounds – we were neglected in the broader narrative of PGR lockdown experiences whereby some established academics were writing and publishing about the PGR experience without collaborating and co-authoring with PGRs themselves. Through the sharing of written and oral reflections, we met fortnightly throughout 2020 to unpack our otherwise individual experiences as a collective. In these meetings we brought our reflections and engaged in purposeful discussions on our ongoing pandemic experiences which we thought may relate to PGRs outside our collective. Relational ethics using a praxis of care, in line with feminist epistemology, underpinned the analysis of our collaborative work (Haraway, 1988; Rutter et al., 2023; Yeo et al., 2023), adding depth to the narratives rather than the more descriptive detail which would have resulted if our approach had not been feminist. Sharing experiences through this method enhanced our intersubjectivity and facilitated the co-construction of knowledge. This work was undertaken in order to provide a safe, supportive and cathartic space for us to process our experiences as doctoral researchers during the pandemic (for further description see Rutter et al., 2023).

For this article, we wanted to explore our data on the one-year anniversary of the initial project, and were provoked by several articles, in particular those from our own institution, Anon University, which spoke *about* the PGR experience without including PGRs in the writing or articles. Indeed, Anna participated in this research, but did not feel that she was provided with any opportunity to work *with* her department to explore the pandemic challenges further. Therefore, we conducted a secondary analysis of the original FCAE data, in an attempt to explore whether the feelings of neglect within the academy was something which has grown over time, or whether it was something that had existed from the beginning of the pandemic. This phase of analysis involved stepping away from the research questions, and instead reading the accounts taken from both our individual

reflections and collaborative sessions whereby we share our frustrations and resistance to the neglect of PGRs during the Covid-19 pandemic. By immersing ourselves both situationally and critically into the pool of data we have been able to view our narratives more holistically. This way of analysing data counteracted the risk of missing holistic representations which may have occurred in our previous work whereby we use the more systematic approach of a reflexive thematic analysis (Rutter et al., 2023; Braun & Clarke, 2020).

Findings

> *The way I think about my research subjects has shifted subtly. I'm conducting a parish level study of experiences of crisis in early modern Durham, so I'm dealing with the details of thousands of individuals over around two centuries. Prior to covid, my sympathies lay primarily with the wealthy individuals whose words survive. I could see what they were going through during traumatic times such as disease outbreaks or wars because their diaries or letters survive. Now, when I read the parish registers that show the effects of those events on the poor I feel a greater affinity with those whose stories are unwritten. (Emma)*

As mentioned previously, the above quote highlights the importance of highlighting a multitude of narratives when exploring periods of crisis, and thus these findings represent our own narratives as individuals, and a research collective,

In our immersive revisiting of our original FCAE data, which had been recorded consistently during all of our Microsoft Teams meetings during the pandemic, we attempted to take an holistic approach to understanding narratives for this article. As such, we have opted to present the findings in two separate sections. In the first section, we present three of our personal narratives, and quotes which were selected due to their relationship to our position as researchers. We frame these experiences as 'personal reflections'. We do this to emphasise the importance of individual experiences to resist the conflation of PGR experiences we critique; ensuring that our words and experiences are present, verbatim, controlled and centred by ourselves.

Personal Reflections

Nikki:

Author1's narratives of herself as a PGR were often at odds with the researcher or scholarly identity she observed being performed by others at the same institution. Most PGRs Author1 encountered fit the traditional scholar stereotype of white, middle-class, single, with no caring responsibilities, and living near the University. Whilst Nikki was living with multiple invisible disabilities, raising a disabled child as a single parent after a relationship breakdown during the pandemic, and navigating PhD study, reviews, and home-schooling. Much of the guidance provided by the University was designed for PGRs or students who fit the aforementioned traditional PGR, which resulted in advice and guidance being offered by the institution which frustrated Nikki. Whilst the advice and guidance was well meaning, it was far removed from her lived experiences as a first generation scholar, living away from the University, as a single parent attempting a PhD during the pandemic:

> *If I receive one more blog post from [my college] talking about how some 18-year-old is finding it really easy to avoid procrastinating during a pandemic… Because she just does her activities and small chunks… I'm going to scream.* (Nikki)

This dissonance was compounded when it became clear that there had been little to no acknowledgement of the individual circumstances and challenges faced by PGRs. This could be seen when exploring the offers of support, which were available at the emotional and pastoral level through supervisors and administrators. However, there was little to no acknowledgement of the practical needs of PGRs within our institutions in comparison to other non-permanent members of the academic community. For instance, all

UKRI-funded postdoctoral researchers received six-month extensions for their UKRI-funded projects (UKRI, 2020), and undergraduates received a no detriment policy within our institution. Ecem supported Nikki's point and explained:

> *I know that staff members and staff alike 'it's okay to take time off, it's okay that [the pandemic] impacts you' but realistically… I still feel… Like… We should be doing more… we should be… finishing things by now and… we should be submitting.* (Ecem)

Nikki voiced her frustration that deadlines were the most challenging thing to navigate alongside her personal experiences of home-schooling and running a charity alongside her PGR role, but this was not considered in the support offer. It was as though PGRs were living in a void where the pandemic was expected to have no impact of productivity, despite the support provided to postdoctoral researchers and undergraduates mentioned above:

> *Everyone on the front of it has been; we're all really supportive and we understand that this is a pandemic… you need to do everything in your own time… we really care about you and your wellbeing. But we're not going to change any of your deadlines… And we're still expecting you to commit to your nine month review in the same time you would have done if this had never happened… From the University perspective. All my deadlines are still my deadlines, because as a postgraduate researcher, like… there's no gift like there are with the undergraduates with a whole [no detriment policy]… We don't get any of that. So… that's… why I'm quite interested in talking about nine month review… because that still feels very much like… you've got to act as though nothing has changed. Despite the fact everything has changed…* (Nikki)

As the needs of PGRs remained unacknowledged, it continued to compound feelings of neglect and invisibility. It also felt for Nikki as though this lack of action positioned us and our research as less valuable, invalidating our role as researchers; as only those in their final 12-months were acknowledged in the phase 1 extension policy (UKRI, 2021). Despite the lack of *visibility* felt by Nikki whilst trying to receive support, she was still able to find pockets of resistance, as she not only recognised but responded to the lack of support for PGRs from non-traditional backgrounds:

> *It's the old adage though, isn't it? What is it? before you diagnose yourself with depression and low self-esteem… Make sure you're not just surrounding yourself with arseholes. And it's absolutely that whole thing of: is this coming from within? Is this because I have a mental health condition that flares up? Or is it because actually, I'm sitting in a system here where… I'm not getting what I need right now.* (Nikki)

This resistance provided space for autonomy, as Author1 recognised that whilst she felt neglected by pandemic-related policies that were being implemented at her institution, there were freedoms associated with having an independent PGR project that were not replicated at other levels of scholarship:

> *I think… we're like the Managing Directors of our project, we bring in the funding… and the university hosts us, but it's our money, it's our project, it's our direction that comes in.* (Nikki)

Anna:

For Anna, the pandemic was/is suffused with emotion:

> *For me it's been anger… I've been really angry. A lot… I'm really angry at just the culture of the neoliberal University generally… I'm really angry at myself for feeling so hard done by… when I'm essentially a very fortunate and privileged person… I'm really angry at myself for not dealing with… with my feelings, so that I had a really tough mental time… And angry at myself for being angry at myself. I'm angry at, just like… austerity, for the position that a lot us are in financially because of that… [which the] situation of the pandemic has exacerbated… Angry at the government for many, many reasons. I'm just fucking angry…I read like a paragraph of somebody's work yesterday and it just made me go 'boom'… And I just ended up writing three handwritten pages on disability that I probably won't use [in my thesis] but*

> *at least I got it down. And I think… it's about channelling… that anger isn't it? And… I found it to be a really paralysing force but also a catalytic force during this lockdown.* (Anna)

This idea of anger as a "catalytic force" reminded us of the work of the work of Audre Lorde (1997, p. 280) on her reflections on anger, racism, and the uses of anger:

> "Every woman has a well stocked arsenal of anger potentially useful against those oppressions, personal and institutional, which brought that anger into being. Focus with precision it can become a powerful source of energy serving progress and change. And when I speak of change, I do not mean a simple switch of positions or a temporary lessening of tensions, nor the ability to smile or feel good. I'm Speaking of a basic and radical alteration in all those assumptions underlining our lives."

For Author2, her emotions were not stable or constant, or even consistently negative, but the spectrum of emotions played like a xylophone by a toddler, keys struck at random and never in sliding scales. From anxiety about the progress of field work, grief at the loss of her original project, despair at a poor progress review, anger at the emergence and exacerbation of oppression in society. There was guilt at her white, cis privilege, sadness at the social isolation experienced, contentment spending time with her son, joy in appreciating the outdoors, to elation at getting the collective's first collaborative piece of research published. The pandemic reinforced to Anna that she cannot separate her different intersecting identities - mother, student, teacher, wife, queer, disabled - they all play into each other overtly and subtly, and that the thesis is a living document which represents an assemblage of all of these influences. As Chaudhuri, Dundung, Rajak and Patgiri (2022, p. 25) state: "the story of our selves tells the stories of our societies", and, arguably, vice versa.

The pandemic was/is a time of paradoxes, precarity and polarity for Author2 in both her PhD research and personal life. Simultaneously enjoying the privilege of possessing a doctoral funding package and therefore an income, while at the same time, watching the same funding body undermining the security of its students, with an initial refusal to consider a wide-spread extension programme. Experiencing the dichotomy of robust physical health but fragile mental health. Becoming an internationally published academic, while being told that her PhD project was no longer 'good enough' by reviewers. Finding comfort and security in strangers and yet finding emotional, as well as physical distance, expanding with loved ones. Feeling time and space move from concrete to liminal as the world moved online. Finding previously secure trajectories now off-course. Although Anna's experience was unique to herself, the themes discussed were certainly not unusual for other doctoral students - leading to many occupying a pandemic PhD precipice:

> *[Funders] could just say to us: 'You know, you're not going to get an extension… or you can apply for an extension' because… we don't even really know if we can. I honestly… I do think I am about three to four months behind schedule or I will be by that point for various reasons. And I don't really want to have an extension because I want [my PhD] done, and I need it finished and I need to get back to full time work but… God, it would be good to know that we could [have an extension]… it would take off some pressure to know that… [it would] take away the uncertainty.* (Anna)

Similar occurrences have been noted in the US context, with extensions to the tenure track process permitted, but few similar opportunities provided for doctoral students (Foley, 2020). For PGR Foley, this was demonstrative of side-lining of graduate students, as "extensions acknowledge a new reality: It's not easy to produce scholarship during a pandemic" (Foley, 2020, np) - and yet it is much easier for those in (semi) secure jobs with institutional backing and resources than PhD students who often have none of these safety nets and the same (or more pressing) pressures. For Anna, this precarity was symbolic of the existing tropes of inequality so prevalent in Higher Education being surfaced, and made her question her positionality, both as a student and moral human:

> *I'm questioning everything now… Honestly, if my boss rang me up tomorrow and said 'oh, a full time position's arisen' I literally probably would take it and sack this PhD off. Because it's gone from… the PhD… [being] so important to me two weeks ago, to me … questioning*

> *everything… Because I know that's partly to do with my mental health… But it's so hard to judge to what extent… and that's what I can't forgive them for… Because they've [the university] put me… when I was already vulnerable, in a more vulnerable position. And I don't know what to do to get out of it… Because the only way I can get out of it is by expending energy that I haven't really got… I mean just think about what's going on… in the wider world. And what we're learning… about what is getting brushed under the carpet at universities… and people are being allowed to quit; people have been pushed out; people are not getting, you know, hired… not getting places in the first place… because of … the colour of their skin; because of their socio economic background, you know… Is academia a place that I want to be?* (Anna)

Emma:

The initial outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic brought an outpouring of hopeful messages. Rainbows were posted in the windows of houses, uplifting (and perhaps over-optimistic) reminders of shared British stoicism during World War II filled the airwaves and calls to care for the vulnerable in our communities were the order of the day. At first, the pandemic seemed to be a time limited event whose impacts might quickly lessen. However, reality quickly set in, with the growing realisation that life would not return quickly to the pre-pandemic norm. This was something Emma struggled with.

> *So I feel like if we… if we ever did get out of this in a few months and things got a little bit more normal… Okay, that was this time in our lives, and how has it changed us? Are we the same people we were before and we just like, put 2020 in a box and stick it in a cupboard?* (Emma)

Our collective now recognises that 2020-2023 is not going to fit neatly into a box at the back of a cupboard. The disruption the pandemic and institutional responses to it has engendered won't just go away, and the implication of this time will be lost-lasting for all of us at the beginning of our research careers. When the autoethnography group first met, Emma was an Master of Arts student in history, completing her dissertation on a Masters and PhD dual studentship. Due to lockdown restrictions, the archives she had hoped to consult as a historian were closed, and she had to make significant changes to her planned research for her MA dissertation. This was a source of significant stress, as her initial plans had been for the MA study to provide a key building block for her PhD:

> *My dissertation was meant to be the basis of one third of the things I'm looking at… but there's gaps in it… you can't half do it… either you do it completely or you don't do it at all. So it's, like, gonna take so much more time.* (Emma)

The implications of changing her MA project to navigate archive closures were much more damaging to her PhD project than she could have anticipated. Even more challenging to overcome was the impact of archival closures and restrictions during her PhD. Author3 is currently a second year PGR and there are still major restrictions to access to some of the major archives for her project. As a neurodivergent student, the planning and administrative load involved in archival visits has been an additional challenge produced by being a PGR during the (post?)-pandemic world. Furthermore, the digital communication required to continue engaging with the world rather than the typical face to face was difficult to adapt to. This impacted Emma significantly, and she worried:

> *After Skype calls I'm absolutely exhausted. At the end of this call, I'm probably going to just get out a movie for the rest of the night. Whereas if it was in person, we could talk for like six hours and have a great time. But this is tiring. And I don't know why… I want to teach… I'm hoping by October 2022 that things are normal enough that you know I can actually teach [predominantly face to face]. I mean, that's going to be the least of our problems if it's not, right?* (Emma)

Emma also identified the lack of opportunity to just *be* in the research process, and the challenges of needing to 'adapt' projects to match the pandemic reality was very difficult to reconcile with the reality of living through a once-in-a-century event:

> *We're gonna have to move forward, whereas before we could be like 'ok we'll just be in the moment' but now we can't be like that for the next three years...* (Emma)

As a whole, this experience completely shifted the connection Emma had with her research. There was more resonance with those pandemic stories being unearthed, and this emotional connection to her topic of study has been a rare glimmer of light amid the gloom of researching during Covid-19:

> *It has been so weird as well.. before, it was just like lines on a spreadsheet, but now I'm... trying to find out who they were. And like people feel more real than they did before, like reading about them. I'm like, ok this was an actual person. Like, the other day I was walking down New Elvet and it was a court case about where someone lived in New Elvet and they got called a whore. Normally I would just be like okay there's a court case, what does this say? And then I was standing outside Hotel Indigo and I was like, this literally happened right here.* (Emma)

Further Findings and Discussion

Whilst we have provided within the Findings section our individual reflections, the wider patterns of experience for ourselves, PGRs, ECRs, and precariously-employed researchers is now open to discussion. Our feelings of neglect as PGRs could not be unique to our collective, and as evidenced by others, are indicative of wider, systemic difficulties for those from non-traditional backgrounds, within academia (Hernández-Medina & Afaneh, 2022; Chaudhuri *et a*l., 2022). For this section, we demonstrate these patterns by interweaving our narratives with those of others throughout the pandemic. Identifying and lifting the narratives of our peers whilst situating our own stories within the broader examples. These stories represent our experiences, and are personal. They are embodied and emotive. While everyone experienced the pandemic differently, depending upon their intersecting identities and personal circumstance, there were some outcomes that were more universal.

To resist this 'otherness' we have, like many PGRs, attempted to resist by creating more space for those PGRs from non-traditional backgrounds. Initially, we did this in response to our funding body's request for PGRs to keep diaries, to record the impact of the pandemic on their research. We then utilised these diaries as reflexive tools to share experiences and support one another, in the hope that our collective could create something worthwhile to share with the academic community which would resonate with other PGRs. As such, we published this work (Rutter et al., 2023), and have had countless messages from the international PGR community in response.

The positivity of the PGR community to our work, particularly from others from non-traditional backgrounds, reinforced our feelings that there was a need for these narratives. We also reflected upon whether others were conducting the same kind of work, and where we could find them. Our review of the literature found that many PGRs were writing articles and blog posts, but there appeared to be little to no support from more senior academics to help PGRs share their experiences (Dai & Arnberg 2021; Desai *et* al*.,* 2022). Where senior academics and those on secure (tenured) contracts were writing about the PGR pandemic experience, they were writing *about* PGRs, not *with* them. Despite knowing the importance of co-authorship and research opportunities being made available to PGRs for their career development, many tenured staff opted to step on the stories of PGRs to lift above the staggering career implications of a pandemic, rather than collaborating and supporting their PGRs to share their own stories through co-authorship or more.

As our personal accounts show, within our authorship team, we experienced different and fluctuating levels of difficulty depending upon individual, family, and social circumstances. These resulted in differing external and internal pressures. External pressures, such as immovable assessment deadlines; internal pressures such as the desire to complete in time to evidence that leaving a full-time permanent job to complete a PhD was worthwhile. Similarly, Cleaver et al. (2021) were a mixed group of early career researchers (ECR)

who had either recently completed their doctoral research, or were undertaking it during the pandemic. Whilst all three authors were in positions of relative privilege (two authors had administrative and teaching roles within their institution, alongside their roles as researchers, and clinical roles as physiotherapists), they too had these internal and external pressures. External pressures presented clear practical difficulties that two of our authors also experienced; that of child care responsibilities. Internal pressures were the increased workload as there needed to be evidence of what had been *done* during lockdowns.

For Cleaver et al. (2021) their management of these internal and external pressures went through several stages. Initially, they attempted to suppress their challenges but this resulted in work which fell short of their expectations. Next they prioritised their challenges, identifying what really mattered to them. Finally, they opted to share their experiences:

> *When it comes to these descriptions, narratives, related to the pandemic outbreak, I will urge you to be braver and get closer to the lived experiences. Meaning that I challenge you to provide more evocative texts from the first person perspective. In these examples when describing the lived experiences during the early time of the pandemic outbreak - more compelling experience emerges* (Cleaver et al., 2021, p. 25)

Goldstone and Zhang (2021) reported on PGRs and identified several groups who documented the most negative experiences, and we see ourselves represented in those groups: disabled students (Anna, Emma, Nikki); ethnic minority students (Ecem); and those students with caring responsibilities (Anna, Nikki). We are all non-traditional students and thus there is an element of struggling with the support offered by Universities, as emphasised by Anna: "I'm not a stereotypical PhD student… my PhD will never be my priority… seeing certain friends who are parents as well. They just can't, can't get any work done because they're looking after two kids". As PGRs themselves, Goldstone and Zhang (2021) provide policy recommendations to improve support available to PGRs, specifically arguing for "financial assistance, mental health and pastoral support, communication, and academic study support." (Goldstone and Zhang, 2021, p. 1).

Whilst the need for extensions to our PhD projects has been a huge anxiety for many PGRs, including many of our collective, and a key factor in anxiety this was the financial implications of this. We signed petitions to UKRI, we wrote open letters, we worked together to direct our anger purposefully. And as Anna explained, there was a lot of anger:

> *I've had another wave of anger about the extensions lately… umm… because I just think it's such a simple thing that UKRI could do.* (Anna).

Nevertheless, we were also in a position of privilege as ESRC-funded PGRs in receipt of stipends. Goldstone and Zhang (2021) reported similar findings as our own in the previous section in their survey of 3,432 postdoctoral research students. However, in their research, a stakeholder group was identified with experiences that did not resonate with our own; self-funded PGRS. For self-funded students, they were paying for many resources they no longer had access to, such as archives that were necessary for their research. There was a lack of pastoral or emotional support, and they were often required to take up part-time, often precarious work to cover their living and studying costs. These additional responsibilities came without the promise that there would be a fee waiver when they took longer to submit due to pandemic restrictions. Unlike funded PGRs, those who were self-funded had nowhere to go, they had no opportunity to challenge UKRI, an institutional funder or similar.

The financial implications of doing a PhD are well recorded (Hales, Burns & Partridge, 2019). Three of us gave up full-time, permanent job roles to begin PhD study (Anna, Emma, Nikki), and there are Visa restrictions for international students to prevent them from undertaking *too much* additional work alongside their studies; there are additional costs including NHS payments; and the immigration and higher education political landscape has been recognised and described as hostile to those tier 4 immigration PGRs (Migrants Rights Network & Unis Resist Borders Control, 2020). However, the pandemic also made this more challenging, as those self-funded students who wanted to manage their income through part-time work found many businesses closed. Thus, many PGRs

found themselves unable to access the casual work they would have otherwise engaged in. PGRs occupy an unusual 'no-man's land' in society, they are not recognised by the government as workers (Hales, Burns & Partridge, 2019). Furthermore, even those PGRs with funding, such as ourselves, despite the security of a fixed and guaranteed income for the duration of their studentship, because the stipend they receive is non-taxable, they do not receive the same employment rights as other workers (e.g. subsidised childcare). Once again, neglected, two of our collective sit outside of society with no access to funded childcare (Nikki, Anna), and unable to claim carers allowance for any caring responsibilities due to our student status (Nikki, Emma). A dissonant experience of researching within 'the ivory tower', whilst also reducing access to financial support; something which is contrary to the financial processes in other European countries (see Germany, for example).

Within the UK, even for those PGRs who were able to access employment, much of it remained precarious or would be considered invisible labour. As a collective, we had the opportunity to engage in teaching, or smaller parts of research in our departments, however this was another example of the precarity that facilitates the progression of much more senior academics whilst increasing our own workload at a time when we desperately needed to be building our own academic networks. Another example of how the pandemic engendered isolation from existing support structures is that of researchers searching for participants in their research. Valentina, a postdoctoral student in Spain, remarked in 2020 that connecting with the "collaborators" she required for her research would have been very challenging during the pandemic if she had not already been able to gain these connections (Evans, 2020). This sense of 'disconnection', or in the words of Purkayastha *et al.* 'displacements' and 'disruptions', were a key aspect of our collective experience of the pandemic (Authors Own 2021; Purkayastha et al., 2022).

Collectively, we have acknowledged that our intersectional identities have been a major contributing factor to our pandemic research experiences and we are not alone in this. Other FCAE research teams have engaged with similar concerns regarding the challenges faced by and the unequal impact of the pandemic on certain researchers (Chaudhuri *et al.,* 2022; Hernández-Medina & Afaneh, 2022; Berlinghoff, 2022; Grant-Panting *et al.,* 2022).

> *I feel quite disconnected by… some people's experiences… It feels like a lot less of a level playing field like, you know, just working hard and… networking and making connections and trying to get yourself out there isn't enough anymore.* (Anna)

Our team consists solely of individuals at a similar stage in our careers, as mentioned in out Methods, we met as students funded by the same research body. We engaged at the same time with the tricky aspects of navigating the neo-liberal university during an unprecedented crisis. Author4 found that courses intended to support students online were quickly filled and so 'I can't engage with anything'. For Emma, limited access to academic resources was a surreal aspect of life in 2020. Filling bags with books to take home in March 2020, before being unable to access the physical library for months on end and studying in an empty student house with limited resources, was a far different postgraduate experience than she had imagined.

One of the key institutional failings of our university, as was found within many of the articles cited, was the lack of recognition that many PGRs have intersecting identities, and

Conclusion

thus their support needs were likely to be different to those who did not have additional caring responsibilities, disabilities, and isolation that those considered more 'traditional' PGRs. We were all women at the start of our professional academic journeys, but we were also faced with significant feelings of neglect imposed upon us by academia. However, in the end the construction of this article has made it clear to us that there is an on-going silence relating to the PGR pandemic experience, and that is the way that some senior academics have managed to mediate the challenges of researching in a pandemic by stepping on, and over, their less secure students and colleagues. By doing this, and not

providing the space for PGRs and ECRs to work with them on publishing, gaining their first publication, or even acknowledging them in the final research output, tells their potential PGR students of the future everything they need to know about the support they will receive from such academics.

One of the main limitations we have found in the development of this paper is the limited amount of peer-reviewed literature by PGRs on their own experiences, which restricted the breadth of experiences due our aforementioned citation politics. Whilst we were able to find blogs, briefs, and social media posts by PGRs, ECRs and those on precarious contracts, the current body of literature about their experiences is dominated by established academics. As working-class, disabled women PGRs, we may not have had the power to overturn systemic issues with the academy, and similarly, it is arguable that those PGRs who have had opportunity to share their experiences are those who had more capacity, more support, and more likely to be from traditional (white, middle-class, currently-abled) backgrounds.

We recommend that future research on the experiences of PGRs utilise FCAE methods, as they are effective in identifying shared experiences, whilst also providing supportive environments to navigate the challenges of being a person in the world in a way which directly recognises them as socio-cultural bodies navigating complex hierarchies in a collaborative, ethical way (Rutter et al., 2023, Yeo et al., 2023). Despite criticisms that "autoethnographers are navel-gazing, self-absorber narcissists who don't fulfil your scholarly obligation to hypothesize, analyze, contextualize and theorize" (Ellis, 2009, p. 371), being provided with an opportunity to speak up about our experiences, frustrations, and observations, and creating through our collective a support network whereby we have developed the social capital to continue to challenge those in permanent positions to use their position to platform the knowledge and skills held by those in more precarious positions. We advocate for writing *with* PGRs, not *about them*; supporting PGRs through the writing and publication process; facilitating spaces where precarious and permanent can come together and learn how to share these experiences widely. We also strongly encourage PGRs to support one another and work together to create spaces to write, reflect, and collaborate. There is an intersectional component to this challenge as certain groups are always more visible than others.

References

Badley, G. F. (2022). Posthumous Autoethnography?. *Qualitative inquiry*, *28*(6), 732-740.

Bello, J., Luo, C., Cho, S., & Liang, S. (2021). Living through Covid-19 Pandemic as International Students in Canada: Collaborative Autoethnography of Struggles and Resilience. *Emerging Perspectives: Interdisciplinary Graduate Research in Education and Psychology*, 5(2), 17-22.

Berlinghoff, M. (2022). An autoethnography from a student and underpaid employee. In *Global Feminist Autoethnographies During COVID-19* (pp. 176-184). Routledge.

Bolles, L. (2013). Telling the story straight: Black feminist intellectual thought in anthropology. *Transforming Anthropology*, *21*(1), 57-71.

Braun, V., Clarke, V. (2020). One size fits all? What counts as quality practice in (reflexive) thematic analysis? Qualitative Research in Psychology, 1–25.

Chaudhuri, M., Dundung, D. A., Rajak, D. & Patgiri, R. (2022). The pandemic and our entangled lives. In M. Heath, A. K. Darkwah, J. Beoku-Betts & B. Purkayastha (Eds.), *Global feminist autoethnographies during COVID-19 : displacements and disruptions* (pp. 24-38). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003223832-4

Chang, H., Ngunjiri, F. W., & Hernandez, K. C. (2013). *Collaborative autoethnography*. Left Coast Press

Cleaver, S., Mohapatra, M., & Simard, M. (2021). Contagious precarity: A collective biographical analysis of early-career physiotherapist academics' experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Dai, Y., & Arnberg, B. (2021). "We Have to Survive, First": Speculative Ethnographies of Chinese Student Experience During COVID-19. *Cultural Studies↔ Critical Methodologies*, 15327086211050041.

Desai, M., Roy, R., Asaavari, A., Hernández-Rios, R. and Khan, K., Writing on self, together: Collective autoethnography as praxis of solidarity and collective care during the pandemic. In *Global Feminist Autoethnographies During COVID-19* (pp. 88-98). Routledge.

Dionne, K. Y., & Turkmen, F. F. (2020). The politics of pandemic othering: Putting COVID-19 in global and historical context. International Organization, 74(1), 213-230.

Evans, I. (2020) 'Early-career researchers share thoughts on life under coronavirus', *Elsevier Connect*, https://www.elsevier.com/connect/early-career-researchers-share-thoughts-on-life-under-coronavirus

Foley, N. F. (2020). Don't forget about graduate students. The Chronicle of Higher Education. Retrieved from https:// www. chronicle. com/article/Don-t-Forget-About-Graduate/248389.

Goldstone, R., & Zhang, J. (2021). Postgraduate research students' experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic and student-led policy solutions. *Educational Review*, 1-22.

Grant-Panting, A., Ellison, V., & Graham, C. (2022). Black women, work, and COVID-19. *Global Feminist Autoethnographies During COVID-19: Displacements and Disruptions*, 185.

Hales, S., Burns, D., & Partridge, B. (2019). Getting on to a PhD. A Guide for Psychology Postgraduates, 12.

Haraway, D. (1988). Situated knowledges: The science question in feminism and the privilege of partial perspective. *Feminist Studies*, 14(3), 575–599

Hernández-Medina, E., & Afaneh, M. (2022) The inequality the pandemic unveils: Teaching and learning in the times of COVID. In *Global Feminist Autoethnographies During COVID-19* (pp. 39-53). Routledge.

Kallakuri, S., & Maulik, P. K. (2020). Challenges facing individuals and researchers: suicide in India in the COVID-19 pandemic. *The Lancet Psychiatry*, *7*(8), 49.

Liddiard, K., Runswick-Cole, K., Goodley, D., Whitney, S., Vogelmann, E., & Watts Mbe, L.. (2019a). "I was Excited by the Idea of a Project that Focuses on those Unasked Questions" Co-Producing Disability Research with Disabled Young People. *Children & Society*, *33*(2), 154–167.

Liddiard, K., Whitney, S., Evans, K., Watts, L., Vogelmann, E., Spurr, R., Aimes, C., Runswick-Cole, K., & Goodley, D.. (2019b). Working the edges of Posthuman disability studies: theorising with disabled young people with life-limiting impairments. *Sociology of Health & Illness*, *41*(8), 1473–1487.

Lorde, A. (1997). The uses of anger. *Women's Studies Quarterly*, *25*(1/2), 278-285.

Migrants Rights Network, & Unis Resist Borders Control, (2020). [Online] Migrants https://migrantsrights.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/The-Effects-Of-Covid19-On-Tier-4-International-students-Report-Aug-2020.pdf

Mott, C., & Cockayne, D. (2017). Citation matters: mobilizing the politics of citation toward a practice of 'conscientious engagement'. *Gender, Place & Culture*, *24*(7), 954–973.

Nind, M., Coverdale, A., & Meckin, R. (2022). Changing Social Research Practices in the Context of Covid-19: Updated rapid evidence review–synthesis of the 2021 literature.

Pilson, A. (2020). Covid-19 and vision impairment in Britain: a narrative of absence. Disability and COVID-19: the global impacts.

Purkayastha, B., Beoku-Betts, J., Heath, M., & Darkwah, A. K. (2022) Introduction: Displacements, disruptions, and distress: An introduction to global feminist autoethnographies during COVID-19. In *Global Feminist Autoethnographies During COVID-19* (pp. 1-17). Routledge.

Roy, R., & Uekusa, S. (2020). Collaborative autoethnography:"Self-reflection" as a timely alternative research approach during the global pandemic. *Qualitative Research Journal*.

Rutter, N., Hasan, E., Pilson, A., & Yeo, E. (2023). "It's the End of the PhD as We Know it, and We Feel Fine... Because Everything Is Fucked Anyway": Utilizing Feminist Collaborative Autoethnography to Navigate Global Crises. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 22, 16094069211019595.

UKRI (2020). [Online] Guidance for the research and innovation communities. [Online] https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ukgwa/20200814172348/https:/www.ukri.org/research/coronavirus/guidance-for-the-research-and-innovation-communities1/ Accessed 4 March 2022

UKRI (2021). [Online] UKRI Report: UKRI doctoral extension policy phase 1 awards. [Online] https://www.ukri.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/UKRI-090421-Report-UKRIDoctoralExtensionPolicyPhase1Awards.pdf Accessed 4 March 2022

Williams, B. (2022). Black Feminist Citational Praxis and Disciplinary Belonging. *Cultural Anthropology*, *37*(2), 199-205.

Yeo, E., Pilson, A., Rutter, N., & Hasan, E. (2023). We Need to be as a Group: Using and Evaluating the Listening Guide in Feminist Collaborative Autoethnography With an Affective 'Fifth Listen'as a Tool to (re) construct Identities. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 22, 16094069231180166.