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Where's the Validation?': Role of Emotion Work and Validation for Doctoral Students

This article presents an original engagement with research into emotions in the PhD to ask: 'Where's the validation?' by using emotion work as a theoretical foundation. We develop a focus on emotional dissonance in the PhD journey, to explore challenges around managing emotion. We explore how PhD students manage emotions around their projects and their PhD communities. Our focus in this paper is on the lived experiences of six PhD students, using reflective methods and interviews. In our analysis of the challenges PhD students face, we find that validation is a key part of the doctoral learning journey, and the emotion work that takes place. By aligning analysis of PhD emotion work with the theme of 'validation theory' we pinpoint how instances of validation are key to identity formation for PhD students. We argue that validation is crucial for PhD students' wellbeing and conclude that unless identity formation as a PhD student coincides with processes of external validation, then emotional dissonance occurs.

Keywords: Validation, Emotional dissonance, PhD, isolation, creative reflection, LEGO

Introduction

Doctoral learning journeys have been recognised as emotional 'rollercoasters' (Cotterall, 2013; Baptista, 2014) and transformative (Herman, 2010; Morrison Saunders, Moore, Hughes, & Newsome, 2010); as well as fostering the development of academic identity (Pyhältö & Keskinen, 2012, Chen, McAlpine & Amundsen, 2015). However, emotions are rarely discussed with PhD students because they are seen as antithetical to the intellectual thinking required for a PhD (Aitchison & Mowbray, 2013). Attention has been paid to the emotional connection with the subject of study (Baptista, 2014); writing as an emotional process (Cotterall, 2013; Aitchison &

Mowbray, 2013), particularly around managing feedback (Aitchison & Mowbray, 2013); the impact of negative and positive interactions with supervisors and departments or disciplinary fields (Johansson, Wisker, Claesson, Strandler, & Saalman 2013; Cotterall, 2013; Sala-Bubaré & Castelló, 2017); the emotional pressure of balancing the PhD with family, and the positive effect that managing 'emotional distress' has on completion (Devos, Boudrenghien, Van der Linden, Azzi, Frenay, Galand & Klein, 2017). However, although emotion work (Hochschild, 1983) is a key part of the PhD (Aitchison & Mowbray, 2013), research into and on emotion work within doctoral education remains underexplored. We argue that during the PhD, self-validation is achieved by immersion in the endeavour of completing the project. Conceiving the 'self as PhD project' represents an emotional investment. However, this ideal often proves unsustainable: while conceiving of the self through the lens of the PhD project can provide validation for doctoral students, what emerges is unsustainable notions around productivity, isolation, as well as emotional dissonance. We see the PhD as an individual journey and a community endeavour towards self-validation, which in turn is key to identity formation for PhD students. Our notion of the self as PhD project is inspired by Skakni's (2018b, p. 199) work on the PhD as a process of 'self-actualization'. This in turn locates selfhood through Giddens' (1984) notion of 'structuration' where identity emerges in the 'interplay between individual agency and social factors'. We found that where there is a lack of correspondence between the students' self-validation and external validation, emotional dissonance occurs. This is why emotional dissonance is an inherent part of the PhD. Emotion work is crucial because doctoral study requires an unsettling of previous 'ways of knowing' and 'ways of being' (Kiley & Wisker, 2009; Timmermans, 2014).

Emotion work, Emotional Labour and the Role of Validation

Drawing on Hochschild (1983), emotions have entered the sociological research and have become the foci of a number of studies and analyses, particularly in relation to teaching (e.g. Näring, 2012, Isenbarger & Zembylas, 2006), touching on Higher Education teaching (Laws & Fiedler, 2012). In the course of such explorations, the terms emotion work (sometimes designated 'emotional work') and emotional labour have become somewhat conflated. In line with Hochschild's work on the service industry emotional labour is interpreted as the management of one's emotions as part of one's employment, where for the benefit of their employer, workers are polite with a rude customer (Zapf, 2002). Emotion(al) work by contrast is defined as intentional actions or activities in order to support others and promote another person's wellbeing (Thomeer, Reczek & Umberson, 2015), – a student managing emotions to please a supervisor. For Zapf (2002, p. 239), emotional work is 'private' emotional management, as opposed to the exchange value of emotional labour. Yet, Hochschild (1983) argued that University lecturers perform emotional work. This occurs around the lecturer's individual professional journey, where 'they maintained personal images as individuals who "genuinely" cared about student welfare' (Ogbonna & Harris, 2004, p. 1197). This shows how emotional labour and emotion work cannot be simply and neatly categorised: for PhD students, emotions are managed in line with organisational expectations (Skakni, 2018a), and emotional burdens emerge around personal challenges and managing interactions with others (Beasy, Emery & Crawford, 2019).

Hochschild (1983, p. 90) highlights some of these tensions when she proposes a theory of emotive dissonance, where 'maintaining a difference between feeling and feigning over the long run leads to strain'. This emotive dissonance, where our feelings are at odds with what we believe we should be feeling, can lead to feelings of hypocrisy

in the short term, and cynicism, self-alienation and depression in the longer term (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993; Loseke & Cahill, 1986; Lewig & Dollard, 2003; Zapf, Vogt, Seifert, Mertini & Isic, 1999). Our own work with PhD students has shown that emotional dissonance is a prevalent feature of the PhD experience, particularly around the recognition of the need for work life balance, set against the guilt incurred for not prioritising the PhD research at the expense of other areas of life (Brown & Collins, 2018). Indeed, dissonance is at the very core of the PhD, as in order to push the field of knowledge forward, thresholds have to be crossed and old ideas, formulations, structures, habits, and sometimes cultures and languages have to be left behind (Wisker & Bengtsen, 2018). However, in academia, a narrative emerges, shared by supervisors, administrators and students that the PhD is a 'trial' and that suffering is inevitable (Skakni, 2018a). Becoming or being academic is an active process of reconciling or indeed resisting the need to harmonize autonomy, authenticity and values with the success criteria audit of the neoliberal university (Archer, 2008; Henkel, 2005). Within this discourse, the active dealing with and manipulation of one's emotions during the PhD journey is pivotal to find one's place and develop a sense of belonging within academia.

Within the scope of this kind of emotion work, interpersonal and academic validation (Rendón, 1994; Rendón & Muñoz, 2011) play a key role. Rendón (1994, p. 44) defines validation in higher education as 'an enabling, confirming and supportive process initiated by in- and out-of-class agents that fosters academic and interpersonal development'. Here students are respected as creators of knowledge and members of a learning community (Rendón & Muñoz, 2011). This is particularly pertinent for PhD students: for postgraduates in Australia and the UK 'ill-being', a negative state of wellbeing, is becoming the norm (Beasy et al., 2019, p. 2), where 'ill-being' denotes 'a

mismatch in the relationship between the individual and the environment which often leads to stress and burnout' (Stubb, Pyhältö, & Lonka 2011, p. 34). Conversely, validation implants people within environments through for example, equality and activities that bring academics and students together (Rendón, 1994). Research on 'emotion work' and 'emotional labour' in doctoral education points out how PhD students experience discomfort within particular environments, with their supervisors (Johansson et al., 2013), with writing (Aitchison & Mowbray 2013), where validation might be a mitigating factor. We show that PhD students are less invested in the idea of a PhD community than they are in their own research projects, because the latter provides more opportunity for self-validation. We conclude by emphasising the role that emotion work analysis and validation theory play in helping to build PhD researchers' wellbeing.

Methodology

Our qualitative research combined workshops and classroom-based activities with follow-up interviews. We offered a series of non-compulsory workshops to doctoral students related to learning about creative tools for reflection to support wellbeing. Students signed up voluntarily to the workshops and students attending were provided with detailed information on the research project, its aims and goals, and consent forms, which they completed if they wanted to opt in and have their contributions considered for the research project. In line with participatory research frameworks (Tandon, 1988) students could choose the scope and involvement in and throughout the project. As a first stage, students participated in a workshop using Lego® bricks and figures. We recorded students' models and their explanatory reflections. We reported on this initial stage elsewhere (Brown & Collins, 2018), so in this paper we focus on the subsequent

phase of the project. We followed up with in-depth semi-structured interviews that were conceptualised as a conversational exchange which co-constructs a narrative, through an inter-change of views and reciprocally constructed knowledge (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018, p. 24). These lasted around 50 minutes each. We worked with 24 participants across our workshops. Six of these students self-selected to continue with the study and were contacted for interview. Our study focuses in on the lived experiences of these six PhD students (see Table 1). Half of these students were 'Home' or 'Domestic' students, paying the UK's home fees. The other half were 'International' (classed as 'Tier 4' or general student visa for non-European Economic Area students, paying international fees).

Table 1: Participant information

Gender	Faculty	Year of Study	Mode of study	Fee type
3 males 3 females	2 Arts and Humanities 2 Sciences 2 Social Sciences	1 first year 3 third year 2 second year	5 full time 1 part time	3 domestic students 3 international students

The study design aligned with the methodology of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, seeking depth of experience of a small number of participants, where the 'researcher is trying to make sense of the participant trying to make sense of [experience]' (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009, p. 3). This design allowed

us to develop rich data, diverging from recent studies on PhD wellbeing which have sought to measure it quantitatively as 'mental health' (e.g. Levecque, Anseel, De Beuckelaer, Van der Heyden, & Gisle, 2017; Pyhältö & Keskinen, 2012). Our work emulates Sala-Bubaré and Castelló's study, which developed 'journey plot' and 'community plot' instruments to investigate significant doctoral experiences of a small number of participants. Whilst Sala-Bubaré and Castelló (2017) asked their participants to use graphic representations which indicated emotional intensity, we invited participants to build Lego® models using self-selected Lego® pieces. During our workshops students built and explained their PhD journeys. In follow-up interviews, participants were again offered the opportunity to build a Lego® model of their PhD community. Our rationale for Lego® modelling was to exploit its potential to create layered metaphorical meanings for deep reflection (James & Brookfield, 2014) for meaningful stories to emerge. We aimed for a broader scope of investigation rather than looking specifically for positive and negative experiences (Sala-Bubaré & Castelló, 2017). Our Lego® research instrument was not designed to measure emotional dissonance, but was 'particularly appropriate for the exploration of PhD students' […] emotion work' (Brown & Collins, 2018, p. 204). The data resulting from workshops and interviews consisted of artefacts and conversations, which were all fully transcribed verbatim.

In our workshops prior to this research we had noted the richness of narratives around the PhD journey and that students were less engaged in the idea of a PhD community. We wanted to investigate whether and how students invested more in their PhD project than their community. The research questions that guided the workshop and interviews related to the participants' experiences of their doctoral journey in general and more specifically, experiences of the doctoral community. For the models,

participants were given instructions such as ‘build your PhD journey in LEGO’ or ‘build your PhD community in LEGO’. In the interviews, we followed up the model-making with open-ended questions such as ‘Please, explain what your model means to you’ or ‘Which challenges do you encounter in this setting?’.

Given the complexity of the data consisting of artefacts and transcribed conversations, analysis was an iterative spiral during which we moved between artefacts and interview data to account for individual relevance but simultaneous interconnectedness (Rose, 2016) of the visual and textual data. We thematically coded (Braun & Clarke, 2006) the interview transcripts and visual data using NVivo 12, assigning a descriptive code derived inductively from explicit content (see Tables 2, 3, and 4). Thematic analysis provided a ‘theoretically flexible’ tool, orientated to locating initial codes, then collating and themes (Braun & Clarke 2006, p. 77). Our descriptive codes around progress for the PhD journey and belonging for the community models furnished the basis for categories for further iterative, thematic ‘latent’ (Braun & Clarke, 2006) analysis, to move beyond words to embodiment and emotion. Our interpretative tools emerged from our previous and ongoing research into emotion work and emotional dissonance (Brown & Collins, 2018), which provided the underpinning coding framework within which we couched our analysis. Specifically, emotional dissonance was designated by noticing contradictions in accounts or eruptions of emotions (Brown & Collins, 2018). A theme we identified in pulling together our descriptive codes into broader categories, was the importance of validation for PhD students. We had not previously anticipated this from the narratives, and in emphasising this in our analysis, we followed our ‘gut’ (MacLure, 2011), where the researcher’s decisions in analysis are a testament to their, embodied connections to others (MacLure, 2011). In a later ‘online reflections’ phase of the project, we conducted a focus group

with half our participants in which we outlined our findings. This enabled member validation of our findings (Brinkman & Kvale, 2018, p. 145).

Below we present the results of our journey and community model building with the descriptive codes we applied to participants' explanations of their models (Tables 2 and 3). These explicit descriptions of journeys and communities derive inductively from the terms and ideas participants used themselves (Braun & Clarke, 2006), yet they sit within our broader framework that investigates emotion work. For the PhD journey, every participant mentioned each code or topic (Table 2); the PhD community descriptions (Tables 3 and 4) were more varied. Different levels of connection to communities were felt, with some participants explicitly expressing imposter phenomenon. Table 4 identifies the level of belonging articulated by participants, and Table 3 identifies where participants found that belonging came from sources other than in academia. From this manifest content of the PhD as an individual project, we identified a further latent level of assumptions around the notion of self as a PhD project.

Results

Table 2: The PhD journey: models and interviews

PhD journey models		
Codes	Definition	Example
Individual PhD	PhD as a unique journey made substantially alone	'I've tended to just plough a lone furrow'

Supervisor present	Supervisor as an important presence in the PhD	'This here represents my supervisor, she's very close to me […in] academic support'
End as reward	Finishing the PhD as ascendency/recompense	'I said that about a gift here I hope that it's going to be like really wonderful thing if I could finish my PhD, and I think it's a long path to go'
Obstacles and detours	PhD punctuated by blockages, and/or detour from straight path	'This little obstacle can describe the second year of the PhD. Where you just get completely railroaded in a different direction and then eventually you find your way back to where you were.'

Table 3: PhD Community: models and interviews

PhD community models			
Codes	Definition	Example	Respondents
School	Key components of community in school/department	'I think this [model] is very much in the school, pretty much every day. [The] same people.'	2: weak 3: limited

Doctoral Training Partner	Key components of community University-wide and/or located in Doctoral Training Partnership cohort	'[the people in my model] are from different schools …[And] I was in the [X DTP…,] you all start together.'	1: strong 1: weak
Imposter Syndrome	Belonging impeded by imposter syndrome	'I think I have a little bit like imposter syndrome. […] I don't think I can I have enough competency to produce that kind of scholarship.'	3: strong
Family	Family as key support for PhD (either in the UK or elsewhere)	'maybe I am missing my wife here [in the model] because she is an integral part of this process. She's definitely part of my social community despite the fact that she's not here in the office.'	3: strong
Cultural	Feelings of belonging based in ethnic or cultural group	'And here closer to me is the [X] community because I'm an ethnic group here'	2: strong

Table 4

Coding for level of belonging		
Limited	No or limited feeling of belonging	'I don't really fit in[…]. no one's being *not* inclusive, it's just I don't feel I'm *with* anyone.'

Weak	Some level of attachment, but belonging is not necessarily comfortable	'It's not that I feel settled, but it's just that these are the kind of people who are around me.'
Strong	Strong sense of attachment to and identity rooted in that community/structure	'as I went further on with the PhD and got a bit more comfortable with my research […] the community became a little bit smaller, and did perhaps become more centred at [my University].'

Self as PhD project

A key theme of the PhD journey was the PhD as an individual journey. The PhD was characterised as a 'lone path', 'ploughing a lone furrow', with participants stating 'everyone is on their own struggle', 'it's a single person's race', 'I'll be able […]to be original, but it also means I'm alone'. While detours or obstacles (probation reviews, getting lost in the literature, learning languages, intellectual challenges) figured in many models and interviews, for many the PhD was a prize at the end of the journey, rather than an incremental build-up of small achievements. The personal learning journey undertaken was often and sometimes entirely subsumed within the academic endeavour of completing the project: something where 'you just know that you have to give it everything'. Participants described work 'blending' with 'every aspect of my life' or stated 'I can't separate [work and life] at all'. Some participants also recognised how the PhD contributed to their own personal growth: 'I came here to […] advantage myself, open new skills, [overcome] my own limitations'. What emerged from participants'

discussions was the identity coordinate of 'self as PhD project'.

The PhD was a transformative process, and many participants narrated *themselves* as a kind of 'project' – specifically, the lone PhD researcher overcoming obstacles, subsumed within the research of the PhD, emerging as a kind of 'self in progress'. 'The idea is to become a better person'; '[I'm] learning as I go along'; 'I see my PhD as a as a way to improve myself as a person'. In such complex, taxing, emotional journeys one participant argued, 'getting that validation' is crucial. Unlike undergraduate or Master's level study, 'There is no grade now', so the question 'where's the validation?' became prevalent as other markers of validation had to be sought. For some it was 'knowing that you are doing it right', getting through a probation review, or when the supervisor 'really praises', or displays approval through 'just a facile expression or body language'.

Yet, supervisory praise was complex. Where validation came in part from the supervisors' excitement with the project, this was also emotionally complex pressure to manage: 'I don't want to say […] I can't actually keep pace with this'. Another participant was incredibly positive about their supervisor's contribution to their project and self-growth 'she's really helped really helped me a lot with my academic development'. Yet, this participant also doubted the sincerity of their supervisor's praise and the veracity of their own development.

Self as PhD Project within an academic Community

Having a PhD community was seen as subsidiary to getting the PhD: 'if you have a great support [and] network[s] obviously it's going to make your path easier but it's not […] the main thing. I would say it's like 10-20 percent.' Nevertheless, much emotion work was undertaken around joining community and belonging. Except for one participant, who was part of a doctoral training partnership cohort, participants

identified the site of their 'PhD community' as their school. While what 'PhD community' meant, conceptually and emotionally, was varied (for some family and ethnic groups were strong here), for most their School PhD community felt exclusionary. As such, the 'self as PhD project' was based on finding an identity through the PhD project, not in joining an academic, School community.

For some participants, joining PhD communities had not explicitly happened: 'I don't really have one yet. I don't really fit in' (first year student); 'I'm not sure […] that I have a PhD community […] I'm so far removed in a way, culturally and I think academically from everybody else' (fourth year, part-time student). For others, PhD communities were difficult to sustain; 'I would say I hardly participate because I [am…] overwhelmed by my work'; or take a while to negotiate: 'the beginning of my first year I actually avoid[ed] com[ing] to the office'; 'it's not that we [PhD students] go out for a coffee or sit together to talk anything outside of work'. These were emotional experiences, eliciting self-doubt; 'I don't know if I've got the confidence to […] integrate'; through to reaffirmation of identity; 'belonging [here] is perhaps not as important for me. I do belong in other contexts'. The doctoral training partner student who had established interdisciplinary networks, had the most positive experience of joining communities, describing community as 'a malleable thing, […] you can kind of rework it'.

In order to join a community, there were implicit conventions to recognise and abide by: 'I think social capital is very important because sometimes there are things that it doesn't say exactly in the […] handbook but you need to know it by […] sense or by common sense'. For one participant learning the rules meant affirming the idea that the PhD project needs to be prioritised over building community:

> [In our office for postgraduate researchers] you are all given a desk space [which] has this kind of very fixed partition, everyone has a computer, and so evidently when you look at the room it looks like a sort of a corporate partition work space which is actually meant to say […] "Don't [talk] each other, focus on your work".

Belonging to a community meant confidence to talk in English or in certain academic languages, and mastering 'nuances of words', or being familiar with different kinds of formalities; and for others, it was being accepted into formal structures, such as a departmental lunch. It also meant finding a 'key' to deal with the struggles of the first year: 'there was a big change […] from the first year to the second [because at…] the end of the first year I read the book *How to get a PhD*'. Ultimately, this belonging was precarious as it was based on temporary, transient or circumscribed positions, work spaces, social events.

'Self as project' disrupted: issues around validation

Across most participants' narratives, disruptions to the self and even self-alienation were exhibited in the way that participants conveyed their 'inner voices' railing against their outward performances. Students did not feel comfortable contributing to a research seminar, questioned their PhD, or presented well, yet still felt they did not meet expectations in supervision:

> you sort of feel "[…] I can't say that, I can't ask that question",

> I had to force myself to think positively whereas in reality I [was thinking…] "I don't know what I'm what I'm doing",

> [I] showed them stuff and it was good, but it wasn't necessarily what they were looking for, so I was a little bit "oh no what have I done", […] I got a little bit shaky about it.

This shows how the creation of an academic identity - 'the self as project' - in the PhD journey is bolstered by validation achieved along the way. For participants describing their individual PhD journeys, validation came with the end result of the doctorate, producing something that 'other people can use', or to engage with a topic that was personally important. Yet, some participants had to reconcile themselves to the expectation that 'only three people are going to read it'. One participant grappled with 'impact' for the thesis, and developed an alternative narrative of the value of the PhD:

> I think maybe now I've realised it's okay to detach that idea of impact from your research and to actually realise that in having a PhD and having this type of education you develop a skillset where actually you can have impact in lots of different contexts.

Another element to the small readership is that while external endorsement of the PhD was crucial to sustaining participants through the PhD journey, a corollary to this was responses to these ratifications, or need for them, from participants themselves – emotion work. Emotional validating work took different forms: learning to work independently '[I'm a]lso trying to embrace the independence', or 'just being able to look past a lot of the narratives', or grappling with self-affirmation or even imposter phenomenon: 'I spend so much time studying […] so I hope that kind of saying [this] in my head would help with the confidence'. Imposter phenomenon refers to a 'self-sabotaging' belief, common amongst graduates, that their success is not deserved, but rather achieved by other's failure to recognise their incompetence (Chakraverty, 2020, p. 160). In spite of imposter phenomenon, the efficacy of emotional validating work decisively affected participants' work: in preparing to present at probation review, feeling confident to write, getting through the 'last 6 months' of the PhD. For some of these participants insufficient self-validation or, pessimism without a recognition of self-worth, had a negative impact on their progress.

For some, emotional dissonance disrupted the 'self as PhD project' narrative. While one participant referred to the positives of talking to others in building community, it became apparent later on that they did not feel like part of a community at all:

> [In India] the boundaries are very porous […] colleagues become friends, friends become […] brothers and sisters […] so when I came I […] thought that everything is very formal.

The participant also frames community in Indian offices from a position of alienation 'it's a very sort of *strange body* that you are working with'. This hints at the emotional dissonance the participant feels at having to integrate into the new environment effectively, as they formally discount the previous 'porous' environment as 'strange'. This links back to the dissonance at the core of the PhD, which is a transformative journey; 'I think part of my personal journey is understanding, I think I need to know who I am first'. Internal validation goes awry in the context of external pressures.

For other participants self-validation through 'self as PhD project' falters when encountering external pressures around productivity (Hughes & Kirkman, 2019). For one participant, whilst undergraduate writing entailed 'direct effort equals [output]', during the PhD, writing was iterative throughout rather than 'finished product'. Consequently, they reverted to self-validation through word count and productivity:

> I've been on this for what a couple of months now, and I have hardly nothing to show for it. And it's like 'But I've been doing stuff, like a lot, so where is it?' […] I'm going to have to go in [to supervision…] and say oh I haven't been able to do it.

Whilst work has occurred the participant cannot feel progress has been made unless words are written. Words here validate both the project and the 'self'. 'PhD productivity' for another participant meant 'consciously choosing a hard path […] even when […] I feel I need to have a break, […] because I am thinking how to optimize my progress related to my PhD'. This participant later admitted to experiencing burnout after 'working repeatedly many days in a row'. Although validation comes through 'PhD productivity' the corollary of this is burnout and loss of motivation, leading to emotional dissonance. For both participants emotional dissonance emerges in the non-coincide of the narrative of self as PhD project and external 'sacrifice' narratives (Skakni, 2018a) around the need to be productive.

Discussion

The 'self as project' is a key element of modernity (Giddens, 1991). In the context of the PhD, identity often becomes synonymous with the research project itself. Thus, for most participants positive self-evaluation of doctoral progress linked to 'output' – the tangibles of words on a page, or chapters completed, rather than skills development. This hints at how in academia there is often an assumed a dichotomy between the PhD as a 'project' and a piece of work, and the larger process of the doctoral candidate's learning, transformation and skills development which occur throughout. This narrative enables the former to be privileged at the expense of the latter, and makes possible the bleeding of work into personal life as research.

Our investigation of the PhD as journey and community examined participants' assumptions around 'belonging'. To understand the 'emotion work' that doctoral candidates undertake, we connected Hochschild's work with an examination of how PhD students achieve validation. All the participants emphasised how the PhD journey

was an autonomous independent one, and that building community was subordinate to getting the PhD done. For most participants, community did not offer sufficient validation to pull students away from lone work on the PhD. Consequently, you do the PhD alone, you suffer alone. This confluence of autonomy, isolation, and lone struggle was in itself a kind of validation, the 'self-sacrifice norm' (Skakni 2018a, p. 15). This self-sacrifice norm functions as flip side of the PhD as a project of the self: the PhD transforms the self, which is part of the project, but suffering was entailed, and such suffering was 'individualised' hence reinforcing the notion of 'self'. This was also implied when family and certain cultural groups offered support if a community did not; these are still not necessarily groups that PhD troubles could be really shared with. Thus, '[t]he pressure to work autonomously' inhibits PhD students' 'capacity to ask for help' (Skakni 2018a, p. 15). The PhD as an affective process has been explored (Sala-Bubaré & Castelló 2017), but we found that emotional work was often done in isolation (see Ogbonna & Harris 2004) because participants did not find community to be supportive. PhD communities, for most participants were identified with Schools. Most PhD communities described were bisected into research areas, which students were encouraged to pursue autonomously, meaning people felt they could not talk to each other. The strength of the narrative of the PhD as an autonomous journey meant the possibility that community could be 'empowerment' not 'burden' (Stubb et al. 2011) lessened, reducing a possible source of support and wellbeing (Pyhältö & Keskinen 2012; Skakni 2018a).

Participants sought or were structurally obliged to accept external validation to affirm their progress and the quality of their work. However, their own emotion work around validation did not always coincide with existing narratives of endorsement. Examples of this included rejecting the notion of 'impact' and rejecting a narrowly

academic career path. Here self-validation may lead to reworking the self as PhD project. Rendòn's (2011, p. 12) validation theory focuses on external validation by 'faculty', as 'intentional, proactive affirmation of students'. However, validation is also an internal process. Indeed, the PhD is a process of identity work: 'writing a text and writing a self' (Kamler & Thomson 2014, p. 16). This aligns with what we have called 'self as project'. Our research suggests that it is difficult to validate this 'self' when it is not being sufficiently 'productive'. This is then where emotional dissonance occurs, around supervisor praise, or external pressures which cause internal validation to go awry. Emotional dissonance, 'the mismatch between felt emotions and the organizationally desired expression of these emotions' (Zapf et al., 1999, p. 379), emerges for these doctoral students when internal narratives, the self as PhD project, and external narratives, producing words on a page, confidence/understanding PhD conventions and formalities, adopting a position as expert, do not coincide. Emotional dissonance is 'an emotion regulation problem […] with positive relations with exhaustion and depersonalization' (Zapf, 2002, p. 225). For our participants this difficult emotion work around the PhD linked to stress and burnout.

While some students acknowledged the doctoral process as personal transformation, it was linked with a 'role', producing a piece of research. This is significant because the more invested people are in their roles, producing a thesis, the greater the impact of stressors on wellbeing (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993). It was around supervision that emotional dissonance occurred within some participants' narratives of 'self as PhD project'. The observed contradictions show a mismatch of internal and (formally) external validation, where the medium of praise is not the message.

Conclusion

Building on research on emotions in the PhD our study shows the complexity of the lived experience of the PhD, something that could be missed by surveys concentrating on ‘measuring’ wellbeing specifically in terms mental health.

The aim of our study was to focus on the emotion work PhD students undertake in understanding the PhD journey and their sense of community belonging. We argue that instances of validation are key to identity formation for PhD students. We found that if there is a lack of correspondence between the students’ self-validation and external validation then ‘emotional dissonance’ occurs. Whilst our participants were emotionally invested in their doctoral projects, they also experienced burnout, isolation, and emotional dissonance emerging from pressures around work-life balance and productivity, as well as community belonging. Our findings inform supervisory training on giving feedback within our own institutions. However, more needs to be done. Firstly, our guidance for supervisory training needs to be expanded and explored in an evaluative research measuring the impact of our recommendations. Secondly, more research is required regarding the particularities of lived experience within doctoral education, especially where international students are concerned. This is because students' cultural backgrounds, educational upbringing and personal experiences have a bearing on the processes of validation and on how individuals deal with emotional dissonances within the doctoral journey. Lastly, future research should look to exploring feedback and validation processes as a collaborative endeavour between doctoral students and their supervisors. Employing role play and mediation exercises will allow to extrapolate experiences of supervisors and supervisees and thereby generate a new set of data to enable an analysis of hidden decision-making regarding feedback that is being provided or received. Ultimately, our aim should be to effect substantial cultural and attitudinal changes within, across and beyond doctoral schools.

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