

Mental health and wellbeing in doctoral students from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic backgrounds (BAME)

There is a large body of evidence for the poor mental health of both undergraduate and postgraduate students in higher education settings (Peluso et al., 2011), leading to the Higher Education Academy calling for higher education (HE) institutions to embed information and support on mental wellbeing into teaching and learning strategies (Houghton & Anderson, HEA 2017).

There is a dearth of research on doctoral students. The limited evidence available suggests that doctoral students may experience a greater degree of difficulty with maintaining good levels of mental health and wellbeing compared to undergraduate students (Peluso et al., 2011). Evidence also suggests that Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) doctoral students face specific challenges that are not addressed by universities' support structures (Peluso et al., 2011). The objective of this study was to explore the mental health and wellbeing of doctoral students from BAME backgrounds.

Methodology

A qualitative approach was used to address the research objective. Fifteen telephone semi-structured interviews were conducted across a range of disciplines and institutions.

Participants were recruited through postgraduate online networks and using a snowballing technique. Interviews were transcribed verbatim. Data were analysed using Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2013) to identify key issues affecting this group.

Findings

The study identified a combination of factors, each characterised by specific power dynamics and bringing their own difficulties, that negatively impact upon BAME doctoral students' mental health and wellbeing. The researchers used Crenshaw's intersectional theory and Bronfenbrenner's ecological model to unpick these factors and explore how they affected BAME doctoral students' experience. Crenshaw's Intersectional Theory conceptualises individuals as a series of overlapping dimensions that define their identities (e.g. gender, ethnicity), each producing its own set of disadvantages, prejudices and discriminations (Crenshaw, 1989). Using this theory, four overlapping factors were identified as generating specific challenges for BAME doctoral students and negatively impacting upon their mental health and wellbeing: gender, social status, ethnicity, and life-stage.

Bronfenbrenner's ecological model (Eriksson, Ghazinour & Hammarström, 2005) explains child social development in terms of expanding ecosystems: from the individual to the immediate ecosystem of the home, to the more expansive ecosystem of the community and larger society. This theory is used to explain the effect of direct and indirect social interactions on mental health. The study findings demonstrated that challenges were experienced by BAME doctoral students at a micro level (individuals' identities, expectations), a meso level (relations to peers, supervisory teams, friends, family), and a macro level (institutions' structures and policies, national and international policies).

Supporting BAME doctoral students

The needs of BAME doctoral students are complex. They face the same issues affecting mental health as non-BAME students (i.e. academic pressure) but also experience difficulties unique to their group. These can increase stress and worsen mental health. Uniquely BAME students are affected by the conscious or unconscious non-inclusive behaviour of other individuals and groups within the HE setting. A more proactive approach to support is required for BAME doctoral students.

The findings provided some initial insights in the specific issues affecting this group. They will be used as a basis for a more comprehensive, larger scale investigation. Ultimately, the research will inform the development of targeted interventions that will both improve the student's wellbeing and impact positively upon completion rates.

References

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Questions for discussion

1. How can HE institutions effectively outreach to vulnerable doctoral students?
2. What additional support is required for BAME doctoral students?
3. How do the needs of BAME international and national students differ?