

Fractured Decolonising Discourses: PhD students' experiences of picking their way through the shards.

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Research Domains

Postgraduate scholarship and practice (PGSP)

Abstract

This paper explores PhD students' experience of intercultural issues within supervision and examining practice in the UK. Responses to a recent survey on decolonizing supervision practice indicated that there is a lack of auditing of intercultural issues at this level of HE. Student respondents voiced deep concerns about a system seems fractious and resistant to meaningful change. To understand the underlying experiences that give rise to these concerns, peer-facilitated focus groups with 20 students explored:

- scope to negotiate power differentials in supervision relationships
- support to identify and address intercultural differences and their impact
- the extent students felt seen within the wider context of their life experience and context

Students' views convey there is a lack of open dialogue or preparedness to address issues and a multiplicity of them that impact their learning and success. This highlights the need for supervision pedagogies that specifically tackle cultural assumptions and power dynamics.

Full paper

Despite continued calls for EDI to be a training priority within supervision development (UK Council for Graduate Education 2022), as Belluigi (2023) reports, institutional racism within academic progression remains obdurate to change. Reflective work by international PhD students attests to the fragile purchase it is possible to find in these circumstances and the compromises and costs incurred in doing so (Abdessalam and Cross 2019, Khanijou and Zakariah 2023, Tan 2021). Within the wider international academic community, colonial educational practices and norms still cast a long shadow that ill prepares international students to understand the cultural clashes they may encounter or critically challenge white privilege which obscurs them (Chatterjee and Barber 2021, Majee and Ress 2018, Stein 2021).

Findings from a recent survey of decolonization issues within examination and supervision practice within HE in the UK revealed quite divergent perspectives about the tensions in working with international PhD students (Cross 2023). Several students voiced deep concerns about systemic resistance to meaningful decolonisation within the existing neoliberal agenda. Academics tasked with taking forward a programme of work to decolonise the curriculum raised similar concerns about the limited scope of what was being achieved relative to the enormity of the task. Others argued that for many international students, decolonisation runs counter to their aspirations, whilst still others argued decolonisation is a deeply suspect term that itself has been captured by western elites and denuded of meaningful effect. This diversity of views called for more in-depth research to unpick how international students orientate themselves and make choices within this quite fractured space, thus completing a two phase exploratory-explanatory research design (Creswell and Planto 2017).

Our research methodology grows out of a Bakhtinian (1981) conception of dialogic discourse analysis and is informed by post qualitative insights (Barad and Daniela 2021), which mean we understand that interpretation is an ongoing interaction that evolves through time with agency unfolding on multiple layers of which we can only be partially cognisant (Kuby, Spector, Johnson-Thiel 2019).

Recruitment used an exponential non-linear snowballing technique (Frank 2014) to recruit completing PhD students through ESRC Graduate School networks, and other academic networks. Particular care was taken through the recruitment process to create a diverse demographic of respondents in a trustworthy and transparent manner (Tuck and Guishard 2013) that could give insight into the intersectionality of their experience.

We conducted 5 (two-part_ focus groups with a total of 20 students in discussions that facilitated participants to compare and contrast their experience across institutional contexts across the UK. Mindful that peer facilitation can minimize issues of self-censure and deference and accelerate collaborative thinking (Djohari and Higham 2020), we deployed this approach as our team included recent PhD graduates from different international backgrounds. Also aware the single focus groups capture only a small snapshot of experience and does not provide time for initial sensitization to topics to have time to mature, we adopted a two phase focus group approach. The first focus groups gave participants an opportunity relate their experiences, the dilemmas they faced and their views on the relevance of decolonising discourse to elucidate the power dynamics and intercultural factors at play. Focus group questions were developed from pilot conversations with recent graduates. Participants had time to look over transcripts, before a second focus group sought to explore the initial themes identified in more depth and to ensure that interpretations of key points participants made rang true to their intent. This approach was taken to give participants an active role in analysis rather than positioning them as passive subjects of inquiry. Throughout thematic data analysis process an ethic of care informed the process (Reich 2021).

Focus groups gleaned a quite disparate view of how commitments to decolonization showed up in practice. Positive experience with supervisors contrasted with a lack of visibility of a wider institutional commitment to decolonization. Within these discussion participants articulated a sense of what intercultural sensitivities were live for them and how these differences were worked through over the course of supervision, conveying a sense that it was sometimes like picking a path through broken glass. The diversity of intercultural aspects students identify suggests dialogical skills play a crucial role and that should be given priority in supervision development and mentoring (Gesturing Towards

Decolonisation 2021, Hyatt and Hayes 2020). Although the views shared in this study may be illustrative of wider dynamics, there is much further work to be done to more fully understand how PhD students, supervisors and support services can develop sustained cultural change.

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