

**The experience of PhD students of colour and how they navigate their relationships,
identity and work environment at the University of Groningen.**

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Abstract

The present study looked into how PhD students of colour experience their relationships and navigate their identity and work environment at the University of Groningen. People of colour (POC) were used as a sample for this research because they are an underrepresented group at the University of Groningen (RUG). We conducted semi-structured interviews with nine participants from different faculties and asked about their work environment, supervisor relationships and their identities as POC's. The results revealed that participants perceived their PhD environment as largely positive but faced some adversities. Previous experiences with adversities outside of the university left a lasting impact on them. Participants had both positive and negative perceptions of Dutch culture and made different efforts to integrate and adjust. In general, participants desired community, and being affirmed was a valuable part of both their professional and personal relationships. They were aware of the benefits of having a support network and experienced more negative emotions when they lacked a sense of belonging. These findings contribute to a slowly emerging body of research that represents minority groups in academia. Recommendations were made for how the RUG can better facilitate the PhD experience for POC students. Limitations of the study include not being able to reach theoretical saturation due to time constraints. Future efforts should invest in a narrower focus group as well as having a comparison group of white/non-POC participants.

Keywords: PhD, identity, work environment, POC, relationships, adversities

Introduction

The PhD degree is an intense project, known for its rigour and demanding nature. Brunsma et al., (2016) explain that the PhD programme is marked by learning to navigate significant levels of stress and anxiety; a need to develop strategies of balancing work and life in a setting where the line between the two is incredibly faint. PhD students of colour face additional challenges on top of the already stressful PhD journey. The challenges include a lack of culturally similar mentors, insufficient undergraduate preparation, limited financial support, and a nonoptimal institutional climate (Zhou et al., 2004). For the sake of the study, we define the term People of colour (POC) as anyone who is not white, which is a broad and imperfect term that includes a wide range of cultures and ethnicities and is based on how a person self-identifies. Because PhD students of colour remain a minority at the University of Groningen (RUG), little to no research has been done to document their unique challenges. This thesis will look into the question: how do PhD students of colour experience their relationships and navigate their identity and work environment at the University of Groningen? The Self Determination Theory will be used to better understand these experiences.

Self Determination Theory and relationships

The Self Determination Theory (SDT) postulates that people require three basic psychological needs; autonomy, competence and relatedness in order to perform better and have overall satisfaction in the workplace. (Ryan & Deci, 2008). Ryan & Deci (2017) define each of the needs as follows: autonomy refers to having freedom and independence, competence refers to a sense of accomplishment and mastery in one's endeavours, and relatedness refers to connecting with other people and feeling cared for.

Peers and supervisors can fulfil these needs in PhD students by forming meaningful relationships, allowing them to work independently and affirming their capabilities. Good

mentoring is one of the best indicators of success in PhD students (Burnsma et al., 2017).

Mentees may look for mentors from the faculty who are of similar backgrounds to them, which is often based on race, ethnicity, gender or other status (Brunsma et al., 2017). Students of colour also seek out faculty of colour who are able to better relate to their racial experiences, off or on campus and throughout their life course (Thomas et al., 2007).

The need for relatedness is also a crucial factor in student success in higher education (Walton & Cohen, 2007). Relatedness may be particularly important for ethnic minority students because they are underrepresented in higher education. Ethnic minority students have shared that peer support and faculty mentorship provided them with the support they needed to thrive in academia despite the barriers they faced as ethnic minorities (Vasquez et al., 2006). Despite the findings indicating the importance of students of colour finding mentors with a similar background, the paper by Chelsi et al., (2012) mentions that ethnic matches between mentor-mentee dyads are not necessary for building an effective relationship.

Literature on PhD students of colour

Limited research has been conducted about PhD students of colour in the Netherlands therefore most of the literature mentioned originated from studies conducted in the U.S. It is important to note that the U.S. is a highly racialized context and issues of race may vary in the Netherlands. With that said, a lot of the literature is still applicable and gives valuable insights into what students of colour experience during their PhD.

PhD students of colour face similar experiences as their white counterparts in relation to their work, but must additionally deal with structural and systematic racism within higher education, in the larger society as well as day-to-day racial microaggressions (Brunsma et al. 2017). Microaggressions can be defined as the “everyday verbal, nonverbal and environmental slights, snubs or insults, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory or negative messages” (Sue, 2010). PhD students of colour

experience microaggressions perpetrated by peers and faculty at the individual, institutional, and structural levels (Gildersleeve et al., 2011). Racial microaggressions also exist on an environmental level such as in course content including readings, and presentations (Sue et al., 2009).

Further, students of colour reported underestimation of personal ability, and cultural/racial isolation (Torres et al., 2010). Icons and symbols in Predominantly white institutions (PWIs) are not culturally inclusive such as the names of buildings around campus, and speakers in lecture series are not as ethnically, racially, culturally and linguistically diverse as they need to be (Gay, 2004).

PhD students of colour have the dubious distinction of being ‘the only one’ or ‘one of the very few’ in many areas of their work, thus leading to these students frequently being physically isolated and feeling excluded from the mainstream dynamics of their studies (Gay, 2004). PhD students of colour are immersed in a world that is not their own and made to feel as if they are ‘guests’ on their own campuses (Gay, 2004). PhD students of colour often find themselves teaching about race and ethnicity or dealing with students who have not had teachers of colour in the classroom (Brunsma et al., 2017).

Impact on well being

These experiences take a toll on the well-being of PhD students of colour. Research suggests that experiencing racial microaggressions has negative outcomes such as self-doubt, frustration, and isolation that can impact diverse students’ decision to stay or withdraw from higher education (Proctor et al., 2018). For ethnic minority school psychology students, their encounters with microaggressions was associated with higher levels of emotional distress and lower perceptions of belongingness (Proctor et al., 2018). These paths also led to less academic engagement and difficulties in completing their programs. Such experiences also significantly impact well-being and performance (Hyun et al., 2007). The absence of a

prominent population of colleagues and professors from their own ethnic groups places psycho-emotional burdens on PhD students of colour and dealing with isolation takes emotional and intellectual energy that could otherwise be directed toward academic pursuits (Gay, 2004).

Aim

The University of Groningen conducted a well-being survey about PhD students' well-being in 2020. The survey found that a few PhD students considered quitting, had fallen behind schedule, and were dealing with stressors related to the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite the circumstances, PhD students were generally satisfied with their PhD trajectory as well as their supervision (Well-being survey, 2021). The survey breaks down the population based on features such as gender, and nationality. However, there is no breakdown of the racial groups that make up the PhD population and the percentage of PhD students of colour remains unknown in this survey.

Thus, there is a gap in knowledge about the experiences of PhD students of colour. There is a gap in how they relate with their supervisors and colleagues, how their identity affects their work and interactions and what steps the university can take towards helping them cope with their challenges. The aim of the study is to investigate the experience of students of colour, by asking the question: how do PhD students of colour experience their relationships and navigate their identity and work environment at the University of Groningen? The research question covers various aspects of their PhD including their supervisor relationship, integrating into the program, their experience as a POC in a PWI and ways they feel the university can improve in terms of diversity and inclusion. These experiences were collected using qualitative methods by conducting semi-structured interviews with nine participants. Qualitative research is relevant for this study because it

allows us to capture the attitudes and feelings of the participants, integrate theory, and be reflexive as researchers (Willig, 2009)

Methods

We used qualitative research to learn more about the experiences of PhD students of colour at the RUG. Qualitative research is flexible and reveals rich data that quantitative research cannot. It allows participants to discuss past experiences that shaped current perceptions and feelings. Qualitative researchers are interested in how people make sense of the world and how they experience events. Here, the aim is not to add predictive value to the existing literature, but to describe and explain experiences as they occur (Willig, 2008). In qualitative studies, researchers play an integral role in the collection, interpretation and reporting of the data. This requires an enduring self-awareness of our own presence within this study (Finlay, 2002). Our reflexive statements are as follows:

As a person of colour, I try to reflect aspects of my identity in my work in order to learn and gain a deeper understanding of my experience. This research gave other POC's a platform to voice their experiences of being part of a minority in PWI's and allow them to feel seen. In a way, subconsciously, this project may have been a means to access people like me who are older and can affirm my experiences. Because I am also a POC, participants may have felt more open to talk about their experiences with me.

Sterre stated that she strives for equality in society and makes an effort to be aware of her own stereotypes and prejudices which sparked her interest in the topic. Her research could have been swayed by her preconceptions about POC's having unsatisfactory work experiences and her ethnicity as a white female. Participants may not have felt completely at ease sharing their experiences. When it comes to racial issues, she admits that she still needs to educate herself more.

Yvette stated that while she generally seeks to educate herself about societal issues through reading, but rarely engages in conversations about personal and daily experiences of discrimination. As a result, she was fearful of overstepping participants' boundaries when interviewing them about a sensitive subject. Additionally, as a white woman, she lacks the lived experiences of a POC. While she felt open during the interviews, participants may have withheld some of their true emotions and struggles.

Participants

Our sample consists of nine current or former PhD students, who are affiliated with the RUG. Throughout this study, we will address them by their pseudonymized names: Maxine, Bright, Sebastian, Jessica, Stacey, Lana, Amber, Isabelle and Nick. Their ethnicities can be characterized as Black (2), Asian (3), Hispanic/Latino (3) or multiracial (1). Moreover, all participants have non-Dutch nationalities, which may have an effect on the results of this study. This sample represents PhD students from the faculty of Science and Engineering (4), Medical Sciences (3), Campus Fryslân (1), and Behavioral and Social Sciences (1). At the time of data collection, participants had been a PhD student for at least one year or, if graduated, completed their PhD less than one year ago. Potential participants were invited to take part in this study through an open call (Appendix C) which was promoted by the Graduate School, Ph.D. councils, Ph.D. associations, and other community groups. Due to time constraints it was not possible to reach theoretical saturation, therefore the inclusion of nine participants was an arbitrary number. To recruit participants we used a convenience sample, participants were selected based on availability and willingness to participate. No compensation was offered for their participation. The open call method of recruiting participants could lead to an underrepresentation or overrepresentation of populations. This may result in volunteer bias as people with polarized opinions are more likely to volunteer thus neutral experiences may be underrepresented.

Procedure

We conducted semi-structured interviews, with the freedom to add or remove subjects from the interview guide (Appendix A) and make it adaptive based on interviewee's responses. We also selected important and not-so-important points of our guide in case the interview reached the time limit. Participants were allowed to skip questions if they wished. An additional note we would like to make is about Question 3 which is extensive and may have been confusing to participants. In particular, in the interview with Jessica more attention was given to the negative aspects of PhD students of colour experience, therefore, it could have been a leading question.

The interviews were given in person or online through Google meet. The duration of the interviews ranged between 50 minutes and 100 minutes. There were no prior relationships between participants and researchers, except for Bright who one of us was acquainted with. During our interviews, we tried to make participants feel comfortable by allowing them to decide the label they identified with and emphasized their rights. We put similarities or common interests forward if any, acknowledged their experiences like hardships and struggles and asked the participants to choose the setting of the interview. We made use of silences, non-verbal body language and encouragements to motivate the participant to share.

Interviews were audio-recorded. We used F4 transkript to manually transcribe the interviews. After an initial round of transcribing, the audio was reviewed a second time for accuracy. Words that indicated no meaning (e.g. 'eh', 'like') were not transcribed. Relevant non-verbal signals were also noted.

Ethical considerations

This study was approved by the Ethics Committee of Psychology at the University of Groningen. Code for approval: PSY-2122-S-0013. At the start of the interview we asked

participants to verbally consent. We emphasized the participant's rights, including the right to withdraw, right to make changes, right to not answer any questions, right to view the transcript. Names, faculties, nationalities and most countries were kept anonymous in the transcript unless otherwise stated or deemed relevant for the research. The interviewees were asked for their preferred pseudonymized name. If they did not have a preference, a name was allocated. Lastly, audio files containing the interviews were encrypted and kept at our personal University accounts.

Thematic analysis

This study uses a thematic analysis to distill themes from the transcripts. During data analysis, we consider the data through the lens of our research questions and the theoretical framework of Self-Determination Theory. We assume that a pattern exists in the experiences of our participants resulting from their identity as a POC or being an international PhD student, despite not sharing a uniform nationality, ethnicity or cultural background. This study used a thematic analysis with a hybrid deductive and inductive approach. This means that we code the data within the Self-Determination theory to some extent, but also build a coding scheme that does not consider the framework.

Data analysis

Transcripts make up the data, which contain the subjective lived experiences of our participants' work environment. Byrne (2021) denotes six phases of thematic analysis. Our starting point corresponds to Byrne's first phase: we familiarized ourselves with the data, by transcribing the interviews manually and doing preliminary readings of the transcripts. Phase two is the production of initial codes for the first two transcripts that reflected the content of the data closely. We used Google Docs which allowed us to highlight meaningful excerpts from the transcripts and suggest codes using the comment function. We then transitioned to

ATLAS.ti to code all transcripts. The software allowed us to code systematically throughout the dataset and to group and organize the codes and record the definitions of each of the codes. Newer codes that were developed further down the coding process were noted and previous transcripts were revisited and reviewed. Some older codes were deleted or replaced with better fitting codes. After finishing coding, we transitioned to phase three, four and five which provide an outline for generating and evaluating themes (Byrne, 2021). We created an overview of the codes through a scheme in Excel and printed this out. We then marked codes that fit together with different colours and tried to come up with themes that stood out for all of us. After separately working on the themes our supervisor gave us feedback. Our individual results highlighted some of the same information with a slightly different focus. However, how we structured the information differed considerably. Together, we agreed upon a main structure containing themes and subthemes, using a mind map that shows how the codes within a particular (sub)theme interrelate.

Results

The results are divided into two main themes. The first theme discusses the adversities the participants experienced and their effects. This theme has three subthemes that explain the impact of previous experiences, the importance of being affirmed in relationships and the workplace, and the risks of not being affirmed and accounted for. The second theme delves into community and experiencing a sense of belonging. This theme has four subthemes and goes into creating Vs. finding community, professional and personal life, feeling ‘othered’ and integrating and adjusting into Dutch culture. It is important to note that all of our participants were international students, therefore there is an entanglement of identities in their responses since aspects of being a POC overlap with aspects of being an international student. Some of the findings are also capable of belonging in more than one theme or subtheme. With that in mind, the first theme discusses adversities.

Main Theme 1: The impact of adversities in relation to one's identity and prospects.

Despite having largely positive experiences, some participants faced a number of adversities and stressors in relation to their racial identity. This included microaggressions, prejudice, 'isms' and stereotypes, to name a few. These experiences lead to feelings of isolation, standing out, difficulty connecting with others and worries about future prospects. The first sub-theme describes how past adversities had a lasting effect.

Sub-theme 1: Lasting influence of previous experiences

Some students shared the unpleasant encounters they experienced within the University, however, some students had experiences outside of the University that had a lasting impact on them and affected how they anticipated their interactions at the RUG. Stacey confided:

I remember once I was in the United States and people heard me speaking Spanish, and someone commented that I should go back to where I came from. And I think from that point on, I have this inner fear that someone is going to say that to me.

Such experiences influence interactions and limit the likelihood to engage in more personal activities outside of the workspace and form meaningful relationships, resulting in feelings of loneliness. On the contrary, Sebastian shared how his encounters with racism outside of the Netherlands were of higher intensity which gave him a tough skin "[...]I've experienced worse. For me, the threshold of discrimination is maybe a bit higher, because I've faced real discrimination in (North American country)." Sebastian, therefore, had less negative feelings towards any questionable encounters he had in the Netherlands, and aspects of integrating including learning Dutch were easier and more positive for him.

Sub-theme 2: The importance of being affirmed

As participants shared their hardships, a topic that emerged was the affirmation of their experiences. Affirmation refers to having your experiences confirmed and encouraged

by others. Participants would confide in colleagues, supervisors, friends and family about their adversities, and having their experiences affirmed was important. Lana shared a microaggression she experienced based on her ethnicity:

A couple times I've had like white Dutch people commented and like really I found it to be insulting [...] 'Oh my God your English is so great', like why are you surprised? Do you think we have no education? Like I don't know, I feel like it's quite offensive. Why? because I look like this so you would expect I don't speak English well?

When asked about how she copes with these situations, she responded “[...] Sometimes white people don’t understand what it's like [...] usually I just complain about it to my other friends that are also like other people of colour because they will understand.” Lana felt that her experience could only be affirmed by other POC’s. Lana's basic need for competence was not met as her language abilities were being questioned.

Maxine recalled a remark a colleague made during a meeting about Maxine's progress “‘And my colleague [...] said to me, [...] ‘you're very lucky’ and I said luck? Is it luck? Or would you say that you did well and you worked hard” Maxine experienced turmoil as she tried to make sense of the comment “‘Like you know the whole mind play [...] they call it gaslighting [...] right? So now you have to think like that comment sounded off [...] But am I reading too much into it? It was one of those moments” Maxine’s supervisor later affirmed her experience and hard work “‘The next day my supervisor did reach out to me in a text and say, ‘It’s not luck right, you're doing a good job’ that was cool.”

Another example comes from Nick’s encounter with his lecturer who made some remarks he felt were rude, while others said it was just Dutch directness, “‘When somebody will say, ‘This is how we do it in the Netherlands’. And then I say, ‘No it's not’ [...] I will have enough support from people who I have talked to” Nick’s opinion was affirmed by those

around him, and shared the importance of having people of a similar background as well as Dutch people who can share his experiences:

What helps from the (Latin American nationality) perspective is that you can always talk to people because they often share the same experience. But from the Dutch perspective, for me it was really important to have Dutch people who agree with me.

Being affirmed reduced negative emotions and feelings of uncertainty and helps find others to relate to.

Sub-theme 3: Not being affirmed and accounted for

The presence of affirmation was important to PhD students' experiences, however, not being affirmed had a negative impact and resulted in feeling ignored and lacking representation. Not being affirmed for PhD students of colour can come in different forms, such as lacking diversity, poor representation and limited access to POC staff. When Isabelle first joined the RUG, the guide in charge of orienting new international students was sick, but never reached out to her after recovery, leaving her confused and isolated '*I think the university should give courses to emphasize people on how hard it is to be a person of colour in Groningen.*' Bright reflected on the lack of diversity in his faculty and shared '*We were only two black people in my whole department*' He explained that as an African, he did not see many other Africans like him who were staff at the University and that the ratio of the white to POC population was about 80 to 20, which is an extremely poor balance. Bright worries about representation at the University, and a future for himself and other POC's:

Sometimes it makes you feel a bit isolated [...] it helps and it gives you sort of some hope that you can also become like them if there are people of colour also taking positions at your department or at your faculty [...] but if you don't see them, it makes you doubt whether you have a place here after your PhD studies, whether you can get

employed here. So sometimes it made me feel [...] that there is nothing good going to come from this, because [...] there is no precedent''

Main Theme 2: The importance of community and experiencing a sense of belonging.

The desire for community was a common factor in the participants' responses and is critical for satisfying the need for relatedness. Notable themes were the significance of finding a community, the negative impacts of failing to find similar others and the role of a support network. Generally, some participants were able to socialize in their new environment *'I have good friends here and socialization is great here'* Bright states. *'Having a life here, settled down. That has a large impact.'* Sebastian remarks. However, participants like Stacey did not have as much luck finding similar others or having a community when she arrived:

When you are starting in a new country, you don't know anyone and it's really hard to just try to find people you connect with [...] it was also hard to find like a community of people. I haven't met a lot of (Latin Americans) [...] I would feel also nice to have someone who is from my country or from Latin America

Other factors such as the pandemic played a big role and made it difficult to meet people. Maxine stresses the importance of community *'I don't think people understand how affinity groups, how they work, and how much it's needed for people of colour. Especially, and I want to say especially for black women, it's hard if you don't have that.'* The following sub-themes discuss community, personal and professional life, feeling like 'the only one' and assimilating into Dutch culture.

Sub-theme 1: Creating Vs. finding community

A distinction is made between finding and creating community. Creating community is effortful and implies one is investing time and resources to seek out community and ensure they bond over common factors and remain together. Finding community implies an affinity group was pre-established and it is only a matter of locating them. These contrasts

demonstrate how important community is for people, whether they are willing to go to the lengths of creating community or simply waiting to find it. Maxine made active efforts to find community. She created her own diversity-centred group and would actively look for communities that reflected her identity. *‘My friend and I [...] my first year we started (group name) [...] it was good that we had that community in my first 6 months right [...] And I needed that, that was like nourishment to my soul.’* Maxine always actively made efforts to find communities that reflected her identity and affirmed her experiences:

I joined other groups [...] part of like a black doctorate, black-girl doctorate Facebook group, I was part of all these groups. and I had to do that, in order to [...] to hear other people say 'no its not just you' because you need that sometimes.

Being able to create and find these groups herself fulfilled Maxine's basic needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness, as she had mastery overdoing these tasks on her own terms and produced a community she related to.

The time at which these communities are found or created also matters. If they are found earlier on in the program, students have a foundation and a source of nourishment to their soul, while others who find a community, later on, tend to view the beginning of their program in a negative light and recall feelings of loneliness and overworking. Amber expressed negative feelings towards living in Groningen before finding a community:

Only this year, I might found my community [...] They are mostly Asians [...] we just drink together every week [...] one of them is from (same department) [...] I think that's my community. But before that, I didn't like Groningen at all.

Stacey developed coping strategies to manage her isolation:

My way of coping of not dealing with I don't have friends here [...] also not a single family member from Europe. So I was like okay I'll work [...] and I was just working and I could work like 12 hours or so, and I could just keep going and going and going

Sub-theme 2: Professional and personal life

PhD students of colour do not only have to navigate their work environment but also form personal relationships outside of work. Professional life involves project work and supervisor and colleague relationships. Personal life involves creating friendships and doing activities unrelated to work-life such as travelling or religious activities. Going to Church was a big part of Bright's personal life that helped him integrate:

And I think for me one of the main things that really help me during my PhD is the church I was part of [...] I was developing friendships with many people in the church it made me feel like [...] I have a sort of a new family here.

For some participants, these two worlds blend and new dynamics are formed. When Stacey first arrived in Groningen, there was a lockdown and finding people to connect with was difficult:

The best thing was my supervisor because she was so kind to me, and she would invite me to have a lunch with her, with her family, and she was so welcoming to me and I felt that at least I had someone.

This is an example of how a professional relationship also became a positive personal relationship, however, professional relationships can go in different directions.

Amber expressed that the relationship with one of her supervisors was mostly professional “*You're not really friends, just professional relationship that is nice.*” Isabelle shared a more negative supervisor experience, that compromised her need for autonomy. She did not receive adequate breaks and her supervisor expected her to be reachable at all times, including holidays, which made the relationship strenuous:

I had Skype calls with him for work during holidays [...] that happens quite often with him [...] I was on a road trip [...] you don't know if you're gonna have internet [...] I was carrying my laptop everywhere [...] because I have to check my email and if they

respond I have to do something [...] these things that mess up with your holiday. [...] it's in the back of your head like oh shit now we're taking the highway for how long, he might call or he might need something.

Sub-theme 3: Feeling like 'the only one'

Some PhD students of colour had isolating experiences that resulted in feeling 'othered', being tokenized and difficulty blending in. Jessica recalls a period where she felt isolated:

I feel lonely because two years ago I was the only (ethnicity) in this faculty and I [...] was very isolated because only myself here and without other (ethnicity) students surrounded. So it could be like yeah, I'm very unique, I'm the only one.

Some participants disclosed the lack of diversity in their faculties and contemplated whether their admission to the University was for ulterior reasons such as filling in a quota, presenting a false diverse image as a University, or acting as a token. Isabelle remarked *"It felt a bit weird [...] I mean out of 10 PhD's, one is non-Dutch. Is that really diverse? It's just because I'm really really different? And then exactly is that what I represent? The diversity here?"* and Maxine questions the reason why she was hired:

When I was hired, I felt, I still do, whether it is or not is being tokenized [...] Was I hired because I'm a black woman? Was I hired because my supervisor does work with persons of colour? Was I hired because of this?

Not only did these experiences result in feelings of loneliness and isolation, participants had to go to great lengths to feel like they belonged, including travelling out of the country to connect with similar others. For example, at the beginning of her PhD, Amber did not have a community in Groningen and would often travel to where her friends lived *"I just have all my friends there. I haven't made any new friends, except one of my colleagues."*

Stacey also had to go the extra mile to avoid feeling like 'the only one':

It was also hard to find like a community of people (here) [...] one time I felt that I needed to go somewhere [...] I went to Germany and I saw a lot of people of colour, and that made me feel better [...] I don't feel like I stand out so much [...] it was kind of like I was feeling normal again [...] I also heard people speaking Spanish and it was kind of like being home in a way. ''

Sub-theme 4: Integrating and adjusting

All PhD students interviewed had origins outside of the Netherlands and migrated for their studies. Some of the students moved to do their PhD, while others, namely Bright, Sebastian, Nick, Lana and Isabelle had lived in the Netherlands prior to doing their PhD. Participants who lived in the Netherlands before doing their PhD had more time to integrate and adjust to the Dutch culture, however leaving one's home country can be a difficult phase for some *''When I first got here and you don't know [...] It's kind of like living through your second puberty. You're insecure about stuff again. ''* Nick explained. Integrating and adjusting involves familiarizing with Dutch culture, learning the language, making Dutch friends and understanding their ways of communication. Some participants found it easier to integrate, such as Sebastian who had a head start: *''For me, I was already living in the Netherlands. I didn't find it too much of a culture clash moving to Groningen. ''* And Nick shares how he made active efforts and was quickly known as the foreigner who understood Dutch culture:

Now I have some Dutch friends, and they say that I know more about the Netherlands than themselves [...] I started studying Dutch when I was here. And every time I was with a Dutch person, I knew all the wording in Dutch and I knew this and these things about the Dutch culture. So my initial integration was just spiralling in a positive way that would make me more and more integrated [...] I just felt very at home [...] I had this relationship and I had all of this network to support me. They are not like family-

family, but they are friends [...] I was integrated and I didn't have this feeling of being like less.

These efforts fulfilled the need for competence and relatedness as he successfully learnt the language and formed relationships with Dutch people.

While some students easily adapted, others struggled to find friends and adjust. Lana explains:

You have to leave your country and family and you have to turn suddenly 160 degrees to come here and maybe at first really like trying to grapple with what is happening and language barriers [...] I was literally lying face down in bed after work because I didn't have like the energy to do anything else and like being very lonely or being very depressed by the weather and I was like why is it dark at 4 pm.

Stacey admitted ‘*I felt like when I was trying so much to change how I am just to make friends and try things. And I think that all my thoughts made me isolate myself more*’

Discussion and conclusion

This study looked at PhD students of colour at the University of Groningen. Conducting interviews revealed rich data and vast experiences that were almost too difficult to summarise into a few thousand words. Efforts were made to make the results as balanced and representative as possible, however as a POC myself, I may have been biased towards giving participants with a similar background more attention or may have overplayed negative experiences. On the other hand, being a POC may have given me a lens to better understand these experiences and notice details that others may miss.

The experiences between participants had many differences and similarities. In general, PhD students felt satisfied with their experience at the RUG and had positive remarks, however, they experienced hardships with regard to their relationships and identity. Adversities from the past left a lasting impact and affected their experiences and perceptions

at the RUG. Participants acknowledged the importance of having a support network and desired community but felt that they had to put extra effort into finding or creating one. Relatedness, competence and autonomy were important in both their personal and professional environments as well as being affirmed in these relationships. Lacking a sense of belonging resulted in negative feelings and having to employ coping strategies. Some participants made efforts to learn the language and familiarize themselves with Dutch culture. These efforts, as well as forming relationships, were important for integrating and adjusting successfully.

Gay (2004) explains how PhD students of colour frequently feel like 'the only one,' resulting in physical isolation and feeling excluded from the mainstream dynamics of their studies. We discovered similar findings because participants frequently expressed feelings of being 'othered,' feeling culturally isolated and wanting to blend in. These feelings were prevalent when participants lacked a community of similar others and found themselves immersed in a new environment that was predominantly white and had language barriers. Examples include being discriminatively assigned to work groups based on one's background and being classified as a foreigner.

PhD students of colour experience microaggressions perpetrated by peers and faculty at the individual, institutional, and structural levels (Gildersleeve et al., 2011). Participants revealed situations in which they experienced microaggressions or inappropriate remarks from faculty members peers, or colleagues. These remarks were related to their language ability, accents, appearance and/or skill set. Participants often questioned their intentions, blaming it on Dutch directness, however, this did not take away the uneasy feeling of inadequacy caused by the microaggression.

Thomas et al., (2007) explain that students of colour tend to seek out faculty of colour. However, Burney et al., (2005) Found that ethnic or racial matches between mentor and

mentees are not necessary for building effective relationships. We explored the relationships participants had with their supervisors. In general, participants felt that sharing similar ethnicities and backgrounds as their supervisor was important, however, other features such as trust and respect took precedence for some. Fulfilling the basic needs of competence, autonomy and relatedness were also key elements in a good supervisor relationship.

Although there were several similarities between the literature and this study, not all the findings could be generalized, which is a limitation of this study. Navigating the existing literature was difficult since not much research had been done on PhD students of colour in the Netherlands. With that in mind, this research contributed to an important field that is insufficiently researched and produced novelty findings.

Limitations

The limitations of this study include having a small sample of nine participants and not being able to conduct interviews until reaching theoretical saturation. This was due to time constraints of the project. Having limited experience with qualitative research meant a lot of time was put into learning a lot of new content as opposed to applying previous knowledge. Some participants may have been overrepresented in the analysis and valuable quotes and information were excluded due to the word limit. Part of our inclusion criteria was POC's who were also Dutch. Unfortunately, all of our participants were international. Future efforts can also include narrowing the focus group and distinguishing identities more clearly, as aspects of being an international student and a POC tend to overlap. Convenience sampling may not have been representative of the entire population. Improvements for future research include collecting data until saturation is reached and having a comparison group such as white/non-POC participants to use as a reference group. A quantitative approach can be used to obtain statistical data and figures to accurately summarize the population percentages and to break down the POC groups.

Recommendations

Based on the literature as well as our findings, we suggest some practical recommendations for the University to implement. POC students often exist in racial isolation in their departments, colleges, and universities (Burney et al., 2005). Thomas et al. (2007) explain that students of colour seek out faculty of colour who are able to better relate to their racial experiences. We suggest that the University should look towards diversifying the staff. The student population has become increasingly diverse while the staff population remains predominantly white. Including more POC's in the staff will help students of colour to adjust faster and have someone to look up to. POC staff members will serve as symbols and representatives and demonstrate that students have a future at the university in higher positions and will help fulfil the three basic needs.

One strategy students use to manage racial microaggressions is building community with other students of colour (Linder et al., 2015). Our findings have strong suggestions that having a community has many benefits for PhD students of colour. Not only does it act as a buffer and alleviates feelings of loneliness and feeling like 'the only one,' it significantly improves well-being and fulfils the need for relatedness. We, therefore, encourage the University to set up more affinity groups and advertise them to new students of colour as well as set up a buddy system or contact that allows them to connect with previous students of colour who can help guide them.

Concluding remarks

To conclude this thesis, PhD students of colour have unique experiences and must learn to navigate their identity and overcome adversities in addition to the stressors of the PhD. Both students and staff of colour in institutions should recognise the role of affinity groups and work towards increasing diversity and connecting with people with similar experiences.

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Appendix

Appendix A: Interview guide

Motivation (10 min)

1. You are dedicating 4+ years of your life to contribute to academia and to the knowledge on [insert research topic]. What drives you to do so?

(Probe) What year of your Ph.D. are you currently in?

- a. In your research project, to what extent do you feel like you are able to make your own choices? Can you give me an example? (Autonomy)
- b. Do you feel confident in your abilities as a researcher/academic ? How so?

(Competence)

POC experience (20 min)

2. Have you experienced that your identity as a person of colour has influenced your work and can you give an example of how it has or hasn't?
3. Could you talk a bit about how you yourself have experienced this?

(Probe) Did you voice your experiences? Which responses and support, or lack thereof, did you receive and by whom?

4. (If the answer to Q2 is that it has influenced them) What are some of your coping strategies to get through this experience?

(Probe) I would like to revisit [insert challenge] briefly. If a friend/colleague were to go through a similar experience, what advice would you give them?

*(Probe) What was particularly helpful to you to overcome [insert challenge]?

(If the answer to Q2 is that it has NOT influenced them) I think that's really great that you feel comfortable at your work. Have you always felt this way during your Ph.D here? What aspects of your work have helped you feel at home?

Relationship supervisor (15 min)

5. How would you describe the relationship with your supervisor?

(Probe) Can you describe how you and your supervisor are similar? (Relatedness)

(Probe) How does that affect your relationship?

6. What is your ideal supervisor relationship? To what extent does your relationship deviate from this ideal, and why?

*(Probe) Would you like to change anything in this relationship?

7. * You mentioned some qualities in an ideal supervisor relationship such as [list qualities] how would having a supervisor who is also a POC affect your work experience?

Experiences specific to the University of Groningen? (10 min)

8. How would you compare your experience as a POC Ph.D. student here Vs. your previous institute?

(If they did their Bachelor and Master here) Do you observe any changes or improvements with regards to diversity, for example, with the number of POC staff and students? What would those changes be?

9. What advice would you give to the university in regards to improvements they could make for the issues you mentioned? Do you have any tips for improvement?

10. * To end this interview I would like to ask you one more question, do you want to continue in academia after your Ph.D.? Why? Or why not?

Appendix B: Informed consent form

INTERVIEW CONSENT FORM**“THE EXPERIENCES OF PH.D. STUDENTS OF COLOR AT THE UNIVERSITY OF GRONINGEN”**

(INFORMATION ABOUT STUDENT CONDUCTING THE RESEARCH)

- The purpose of the research has been explained to me in writing, and I have had the opportunity to ask questions.
- I understand that even if I agree to participate now, I can withdraw my contribution at any time or refuse to answer any question without any consequences of any kind.
- I am aware that an audio recording and a written transcript will be taken of the interview.
- The following about the processing of my data has been explained to me:
 - The transcript will be pseudonymized and identifiable information will be removed.
 - I will be given the opportunity to check the transcript for any factual mistakes or sensitive information.
 - The original audio recording will be retained at the University of Groningen, encrypted, and will be deleted after the publication of this study.
 - The anonymized transcript of my interview will be retained for 10 years at the University of Groningen.
 - I can request a copy of the audio recording or transcript at any time while it is in storage, as specified above.
 - The transcript of my interview will be used for analysis and anonymous excerpts from my interview *may* be used as part of the bachelor theses of Sterre Pauly, Keziah Seifert and Yvette Compaijen.

- I understand that I am free to contact any of the people involved in the research to seek further clarification and information.
- I hereby consent to voluntarily participate in the current study:
☐ yes ☐ no
- I hereby give permission to record the interview:
☐ yes ☐ no, but the interviewer can take notes of the interview

Appendix C: Open call

Dear Ph.D. students,

For our bachelor thesis project, we aim to explore the experiences of Ph.D. students of color* at the University of Groningen. We would like to interview you about how you experience your research project, work environment, well-being and the collaboration with your supervisor. The interview will take about one hour. Please feel free to participate in our research if you would like to share your experience. We look forward to hearing your perspective.

Requirement: You are a Ph.D. student at the University of Groningen and have been for at least one year, or you have finished your Ph.D. less than one year ago.

You can contact us at phdstudentsexperiences@rug.nl.

* In our study we define people of color as anyone who isn't white. However, we realize that this includes a wide range of cultures and ethnicities and that people of color are not a uniform group. We recognize that people may identify in a number of different ways.

Kind regards,

Sterre Pauly, Keziah Seifert and Yvette Compaijen

Appendix D: Code Scheme

(See excel file)