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Navigating the Silent Storm: Psychological Distress, Isolation, and Supervisor-Student Dynamics in the Mental Health Experiences of Postgraduate Researchers in Pakistan

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Abstract: Postgraduate researchers are in a position that is characterized by challenging academic achievements, extended periods of evaluative uncertainty and strong reliance on a single supervisory relationship. Mental health in higher education has been a topic of increasing international interest, but there are few qualitative accounts of mental health in South Asian public sector universities, and little documentation of the experiences of MPhil and PhD scholars in these settings. This study will explore the lived experience and meaning-making of psychological distress and academic isolation for postgraduate scholars and how the differences in supervisor-student relationships are understood to influence psychological wellbeing. A purposive sample of 15 post-graduate scholars (8 MPhil, 7 PhD; 9 females and 6 males) was selected from three faculties of a public sector university in Peshawar, Pakistan and interviewed using semi-structured, in-depth interview technique. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was used to analyze transcripts. Three interconnected experiential dimensions were created: chronic evaluative anxiety that is bound up with academic self-worth; structural loneliness that is experienced in the context of local research isolation; and perceived power imbalance in supervisory configurations. Low supervisory responsiveness and over-managing were linked to increased psychological strain, and structured and emotionally supportive feedback were perceived as protective. The results take social isolation and leader-member exchange theories to a new, under-researched institutional and cultural context and indicate that researcher vulnerability is less a matter of individual deficit than of the structure of supervision and peer community. These have practical implications such as supervisory accountability measures, formal peer-support measures and regular confidential checks on the wellbeing of post-graduates. The limitations of the single site, cross sectional design are discussed and directions for comparative and longitudinal research are given.

Introduction

Pursuing an advanced research qualification has become an area of significant psychological risk. Large-scale studies have found high rates of anxiety and depression among postgraduate researchers

compared with similar highly educated populations (Levecque et al., 2017; Evans et al., 2018), and systematic reviews have confirmed that this is the case across national systems and disciplines (Hazell et al., 2020; Jackman et al., 2022). However, the psychological experience that leads to the operational measures of research training, such as publication rates, time-to-completion and securing grants, is still largely ignored in institutional research training assessments. In many academic micro-cultures, emotional distress is normalized as a rite of passage (Mattijsen et al., 2020) allowing for considerable distress to build up without the need for institutional response.

The dynamic has a specific shape in the context of higher education systems. Pakistan has seen an unprecedented growth of post graduate enrollment over the last two decades as a result of a series of reforms by the Higher Education Commission (HEC) but support infrastructure has not seen such growth. Public sector universities have complex administrative procedures, unpredictable funding, shifting research criteria, and high expectations from families and society for MPhil and PhD scholars. Where they do exist, formal structures for the mental health of research students are disjointed. The international evidence base, further, is overwhelmingly from North American, European, and Australasian contexts (Sverdlik et al., 2018; Jackman et al., 2022) and so it remains unclear how much of the evidence base is transferable to institutional environments that feature greater hierarchy, collectivist family structures, and resource constraint.

This study aims to fill this gap with a qualitative inquiry at a public sector university in Peshawar, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Instead of considering distress as a personal problem, it is explored in the context of the transactional nature of the researcher's relationship with the academic context, with two structural characteristics outlined in the literature that are considered central to the postgraduate experience: academic isolation and the supervisor-student relationship. This study foregrounds the sense making of scholars and documents the ways in which localized institutional norms have an impact on researcher vulnerability and stability, as well as providing one of the few interpretative phenomenological accounts of postgraduate mental health from a South Asian context.

The study is guided by three research questions

1. How do postgraduate researchers describe and make sense of psychological distress and academic isolation during their candidature?
2. How do participants interpret the role of supervisor-student dynamics in shaping their psychological wellbeing?
3. What institutional conditions do scholars associate with the intensification or alleviation of these experiences?

Literature Review and Theoretical Framing

Psychological distress in postgraduate researchers

There is a large body of international evidence that suggests that post graduate researchers have higher rates of anxiety, depression and burnout. In their study of 3,659 PhD students in Flanders, Levecque et al. (2017) concluded that psychological distress was experienced by one out of two PhD students and one out of three was at risk of a common psychiatric disorder, with organizational conditions being the most important factors. This is similar to what Evans et al. (2018) found in an international convenience sample, and the mixed methods synthesis echoes this pattern and adds the mediation of institutional environment (Hazell et al., 2020). Distress is often not a single event; it is the result of chronic structural stressors such as long-term uncertainty over the success of the project, financial instability, and an external measure to self-validate (Sverdlik et al., 2018; Woolston, 2019). Qualitative descriptions talk about a personal erosion of academic self-worth, where scholars find it difficult to differentiate between

personal worth and research production (Morris, 2021). Early-stage doctoral researchers seem to be especially vulnerable as they move from formal study to autonomous research (Jackman et al., 2022).

Structural and academic isolation

Isolation comes up again and again in the literature as a defining feature of the research degree (Ali & Kohun, 2006; Morris, 2021), and it seems to work on at least two levels. The first is institutional. Postgraduate study is built around cohorts and shared classrooms, but once scholars move into the research phase there is often no physical or organizational space where they encounter peers at all; each person disappears into their own project. The second is epistemic. Advanced research is so specialized that even a willing listener outside the sub-field cannot really follow what a scholar is struggling with on a given day, so the daily texture of the work goes unshared. In this study the concept of isolation is defined in terms of social isolation theory, which does not refer to physical loneliness but rather to the perceived lack of professional community, common purpose and emotional support. The difference is important because though one may be surrounded by people, one may be isolated in this way. When no one in the immediate network understands the specific and ambiguous work, no ordinary setback can be normalized, and it has the potential to become bigger including whether one belongs in research at all (Ali & Kohun, 2006; Morris, 2021). When both kinds of isolation happen simultaneously, researchers have no access to the informal peer coping that typically takes care of academic stress. Family and friends can contribute, but there is evidence to show that only partially (Waight & Giordano, 2018).

The supervisory relationship as a wellbeing mediator

It is well documented that the supervisory relationship is the most influential on retention and wellbeing of post-graduates (Litalien & Guay, 2015; Mainhard et al., 2009). This study is based on leader-member exchange (LMX) theory, which suggests that leaders have different quality relationships with individual members, impacting access to resources, psychological safety, and performance (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). The framework is easily transferable to academic supervision as the supervisor is the first point of contact for institutional resources, academic validation and career advancement. Trust, emotional support and good communication are all key ingredients of good exchange. The two patterns that can be recognized in the literature on supervision are the *laissez-faire* or neglectful, in which students are left without technical and structural guidance, making normal research problems systemic, anxiety issues surrounding project viability, and the hyper-controlling or authoritarian, in which autonomy is decreased, evaluative anxiety is increased, and power asymmetry is reinforced (Mainhard et al., 2009). The supervisory relationship and personal factors are still among the best predictors of researcher mental health, even when accounting for demographic factors (Berry et al., 2021).

The present study

Although quantitative studies have found links between poor supervision and attrition or distress, the interpersonal mechanisms by which supervisory experiences are perceived as negative or positive are somewhat under-specified, especially in non-Western systems. Hierarchical academic cultures can exacerbate the gatekeeping role of authority postulated in LMX theory and collectivist social structures can change the nature of isolation and disclosure. The authors are not aware of any published interpretative phenomenological study which has explored these processes with MPhil and PhD scholars in a public sector university in Pakistan. This is the purpose of the present inquiry.

Methodology

Research design

This study is an idiographic study involving qualitative interpretation and analysis of experiences that are important to the individual, and that may be helpful in making sense of that experience. Smith et al. (2009) and Smith & Osborn (2015) explain the process of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). It was decided not to adopt descriptive phenomenology or thematic analysis because the research questions concerned not only the nature of the experiences of the postgraduate scholars, but their interpretation and evaluation of those experiences within a specific institutional context. The method has two hermeneutic layers: the researchers making sense of participants who are themselves making sense of their experience. The consolidated criteria for reporting qualitative research (Tong et al., 2007) are followed in the reporting.

Researcher positionality and reflexivity

Both authors are located within the institutional environment under study. The first author is a postgraduate scholar; the second is a faculty member with supervisory responsibilities. This insider positioning facilitated recruitment and rapport and sensitized the analysis to institutional particulars, but it also carried interpretive risk: proximity to the phenomenon can predispose researchers toward confirming familiar narratives. To manage this, both authors maintained reflexive memos throughout data collection and analysis, recording assumptions and emotional responses to participant accounts, and these memos were reviewed at each analytic stage. Interviews were conducted by the first author, whose peer status reduced the power differential between interviewer and participant and the second author was not involved in the interviews or in any way dependent on the participants.

Participants and recruitment

Purposive sampling was employed to identify those individuals who could give deep and first-hand descriptions of the experiences examined. The participants had to be MPhil/PhD students at the public sector universities with at least one year of supervised research. This provided them with enough experience in the research process as well as supervisory relationships. The first-year students and coursework-only students or those enrolling in universities in the private sector were excluded.

The participants were recruited from three faculties, namely Social Sciences, Management Sciences and Humanities by way of institutional email network. This ensured that representation was achieved from a variety of disciplinary backgrounds. The final sample comprised of 15 postgraduate researchers of whom 8 were MPhil and 7 PhD students, 9 of which were female and 6 were male. The characteristics of the participants are presented in Table 1.

While the sample size is greater than would be seen in an idiographic sample typically used in Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith et al., 2009), it was deemed to be appropriate given the principle of information power (Malterud et al., 2016). The study aimed to investigate supervisory experiences at different faculties and degree levels, so a larger sample was required to provide a significant variation of experiences across these contexts. The study also continued in the idiographic direction by analyzing the accounts of each participant in detail and finding patterns of the accounts across the cases. When the interviews continued without adding greatly to the experiential insight gained, recruitment was ended.

Table 1. Participant characteristics (N = 15)

Code	Program	Faculty	Gender	Year of study
P1	MPhil	Management Sciences	Woman	2
P2	MPhil	Social Sciences	Woman	2
P3	MPhil	Humanities	Man	2
P4	PhD	Management Sciences	Man	4
P5	PhD	Social Sciences	Woman	3
P6	MPhil	Social Sciences	Woman	2
P7	PhD	Social Sciences	Man	5
P8	MPhil	Management Sciences	Woman	2
P9	PhD	Humanities	Woman	4
P10	MPhil	Humanities	Man	2
P11	MPhil	Management Sciences	Man	2
P12	PhD	Humanities	Woman	3
P13	PhD	Social Sciences	Man	4
P14	MPhil	Humanities	Woman	2
P15	PhD	Humanities	Woman	5

Note. Year of study at time of interview.

Data collection

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted in private settings on campus. The interview guide addressed three domains aligned with the research questions: daily experiences of psychological wellbeing during candidature; experiences of peer and institutional isolation; and the dynamics of interaction with the primary supervisor. Prompts were open-ended, and participants were encouraged to lead with the experiences most salient to them. Interviews lasted between 50 and 75 minutes and were digitally recorded with permission. Interviews were conducted in the language mix preferred by each participant, predominantly Urdu with code-switching into English and Pashto. Recordings were transcribed verbatim, and non-English segments were translated into English by the first author with meaning-based rather than literal translation; translated extracts were checked against the recordings by the second author to preserve conceptual equivalence (van Nes et al., 2010). Quotations presented below are drawn from these verified translations.

Ethical considerations

Each participant provided written informed consent covering recording, translation, and pseudonymized publication of extracts. Given the sensitivity of the topic and participants' institutional dependence on supervisors, particular care was taken with confidentiality: all identifying personal, departmental, and supervisory markers were removed at transcription, alphanumeric codes (P1 to P15) were assigned, and quotations were screened to ensure no supervisory relationship could be inferred. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any point and were provided with information about available

counselling resources.

Data analysis

Transcripts were analyzed manually, without qualitative analysis software, following the six-step interpretative phenomenological procedure described by Smith et al. (2009): immersive reading and re-reading of each transcript; initial noting of descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual features; development of emergent themes; searching for connections and clustering into superordinate categories; movement to the next case, treated on its own terms; and finally the identification of patterns across cases. This case-by-case sequence preserved the idiographic character of the analysis before any cross-case abstraction. Both authors coded the first three transcripts independently and compared interpretations to calibrate the analytic approach; divergences were resolved through discussion with reference to the transcript. The first author completed the remaining case analyses, with superordinate themes reviewed and challenged by the second author at two structured debriefing sessions.

Trustworthiness

Analytic rigor was pursued through the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility was supported by prolonged engagement with the setting, independent double coding of early transcripts, and peer debriefing. Transferability is supported through thick description of the institutional context and sample. Dependability and confirmability were addressed through an audit trail linking each superordinate theme to its constituent emergent themes and transcript extracts, and through the reflexive memos described above. Verbatim extracts are presented for every theme so that readers can evaluate the interpretive claims against the data.

Findings

The analysis developed three interrelated superordinate themes: 1) chronic evaluative anxiety and compromised academic self-worth; 2) structural loneliness arising from localized research isolation; and 3) perceived power imbalance within supervisory configurations. Each is presented with illustrative extracts and interpretative commentary. Extract selection prioritized accounts that articulate the shared pattern while retaining individual voice.

Chronic evaluative anxiety and compromised academic self-worth

The participants across the sample reported a persistent (as opposed to episodic) form of performance anxiety. Undergraduate stress was linked to a specific event, like an exam, whereas the research degree seemed to create a constant evaluative stress without any natural limits. The pressure was corrosive, as stated by the participants, because it became a part of their identity. P4, who is a 4th year PhD candidate, explained the breakdown of the project's "progress" and the value of the person:

"When your analysis wasn't going the way you expected, you don't think it's a data problem, you think it's a problem with you as a person. In this environment, you get to a point where your intellect and your self-esteem blend together. (P4, PhD, Management Sciences)"

The language here is notable, P4 does not say that he or she feels a failure, but rather that there has been a perceptual change where the failure is his/her own. This interpretive fusion was repeated in cases and was expanded outside of the workday. P2 located the anxiety in the body and in the night:

"Not only do I find myself constantly making mistakes on my draft, but also when I go to sleep after an evaluation, my heart races; it's not just about making mistakes, it's a feeling that I'm just not smart enough to be here." (P2, MPhil, Social Sciences)"

A few participants also described an institutional "rule of silence" that meant not resorting to this strain. It was imperative that distress had to be addressed privately since revealing it would come across as a sign that the student was academically weak and not deserving of support:

"You're expected to look unaffected by criticism, even if you're really distressed by it in your mind – that is a lack of academic stamina, that imposter syndrome builds and builds until you're completely separate from your past accomplishments." (P9, PhD, Humanities)

P9's account suggests a vicious cycle: concealment removes the normalizing feedback that could help break the cycle of impostor experiences, further enhancing the feeling of being uniquely inadequate, which increases the pressure to conceal, which increases the feeling of being uniquely inadequate. This cycle was regularly linked to a loss of confidence which extended to the family and social domains, indicating that evaluative anxiety in this context is not an academic emotion but rather a general state of candidature.

Structural loneliness arising from localized research isolation

The second theme centers on the transition from coursework to independent research, which participants repeatedly identified as the point at which community disappeared. The isolation they described was structural rather than dispositional: it followed from the organization of the degree, not from individual social withdrawal. P5 captured the abruptness of the shift:

"In coursework, you have a cohort. Once you enter the thesis stage, that network completely disintegrates. You become an island. I can go days without having an intellectual conversation with a peer, and that level of professional loneliness makes even minor analytical setbacks feel insurmountable." (P5, PhD, Social Sciences)

Two institutional absences compounded this dispersal. The first was spatial: departments offered no dedicated workspace in which researchers might encounter one another. The second was normative: there existed no legitimate register in which difficulty could be voiced without being read as incompetence.

"You sit in a library or at home for hours, working on a specific problem that very few people around you understand. There is no formal space to say, 'I am stuck and I feel overwhelmed,' without it being interpreted as a lack of ability. The isolation is built into the way the system is run." (P11, MPhil, Management Sciences)

"Our department has no dedicated workspace or common room for researchers. We are physically scattered. Without a structured peer environment, you miss out on the informal validation that comes from realizing everyone else is also struggling. You assume you are the only one drowning." (P14, MPhil, Humanities)

P14's final sentence identifies precisely what the absent peer community would have supplied: comparative information. Without visibility of others' struggles, each participant calibrated their difficulties against an imagined norm of effortless progress, and ordinary setbacks were interpreted as evidence of personal deficiency. In this way the second theme feeds the first: isolation removes the corrective evidence that would contain evaluative anxiety.

Perceived power imbalance within supervisory configurations

The supervisory relationship was the only source of academic validation, direction and progression, and the participants felt the dynamics of this relationship at varying levels. There were two problematic patterns in the accounts. The first was low responsiveness: when silence was prolonged, dependence became paralysis:

"A chapter review takes months, so your entire life is on hold, you have no say in their schedule, and you cannot question their schedule, because they have total control over your degree progress. They have a power dynamic that forces you to be completely under their control." (P7, PhD, Social Sciences)

The second was intrusive control, which was sometimes interspersed with neglect. P1's metaphor of the tool is experienced loss of intellectual agency:

"My supervisor goes from no communication at all for weeks, to suddenly being very controlling and telling me what parameters to change without engaging in any conversation. It takes away my intellectual freedom until I feel like more of a tool doing what I'm told." (P1, MPhil, Management Sciences)

Both patterns shared a common denominator: there was no "recourse." Participants described the hierarchy as closed: complaint or mediation was culturally coded as disrespect, and disrespect carried material consequences for progression.

"If a supervisor forgets to meet with us or changes the direction of a chapter after six months of work, there's nowhere to turn, and turning a frown means we're disrespecting them and that could ruin our whole graduation process." (P12, PhD, Humanities)

Not all the themes were negative, and the contrast cases are analytically relevant. Those who received structured, balanced, and emotionally supportive feedback reported a qualitatively different candidature:

"It makes a huge difference to have a supervisor who treats you as an emerging colleague, not as a subordinate. When they recognize the effort that went into a draft before they go over it and give comments, it protects your academic self-worth, and you feel structurally insulated from the loneliness that can destroy a graduate student. (P15, PhD, Humanities)

The phrase "structurally insulated" from the P15 suggests that a good supervisory relationship was not just felt better, it replaced the lack of a peer community and mitigated the evaluative anxiety described in the first theme. The three themes, in turn, form a system: dependence is focused on the supervisory dyad, the quality of the dyad determines the extent to which evaluative pressure is contained or amplified, and the resulting anxiety leads to withdrawal and concealment.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore the psychological distress, academic isolation and supervisory experiences and meanings of postgraduate researchers in a public sector university in Pakistan. The results suggest that distress in this population is tightly coupled with the structural architecture of candidature and that the three experiential dimensions are a system of reinforcement.

The results partially overlap with the international literature and complement it in other respects. The combination of research advances and a sense of self-worth outlined under the first theme is consistent with qualitative descriptions from Western contexts (Morris, 2021) and survey findings that highlight organizational factors as the most important drivers of PhD distress (Levecque et al., 2017). The structural account of isolation makes explicit what Ali and Kohun (2006) suggest: what the participants lost was not company but comparative information, the visibility of other participants' struggle, which normalizes one's own. The interpretative method makes available this specification of what peer community actually provides, and of what it is lacking, which prevalence studies do not.

The findings of the supervision align with the leader member exchange theory (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). Low quality exchange was observed in the two patterns the supervision literature expects neglect and over-control (Mainhard et al., 2009) and high-quality exchange was observed as the protective relational resource identified quantitatively by Berry et al. (2021). But the theory's gatekeeping premise was reinforced in two ways in the Pakistani context. First, the cultural coding of complaint as disrespect closed the channels through which poor exchanges could be repaired and left the quality of the relationship up to chance. Second, the supervisory dyad was burdened with a load that goes beyond the

scope of the LMX theory, which was developed in the context of multi-relationship work environments. The supervisor was not the most important relationship in this context but rather the only one, and exchange quality was, therefore, not only a measure of access to resources but of the participant's experiential climate.

The relationship between the themes has a practical implication: interventions that focus on one dimension alone will likely be less effective. Counselling provision deals with the symptom of evaluative anxiety without solving the problem of isolation that creates the symptom; supervisory training deals with dyadic quality without providing a remedy when training fails. The results rather suggest a system of package: supervisory accountability protocols that outline feedback timelines and appropriate avenues for raising concerns; formal peer-support systems and dedicated research environments that re-establish comparative information; and regular, confidential monitoring of postgraduate wellbeing to enable institutions to identify distress without the need for individual disclosure, which participants felt was culturally costly. Each element responds to a different node of the system that the analysis found.

Limitations and Future Research

Three limitations bound the claims of this study. First, as a cross-sectional interpretative inquiry conducted at a single public sector campus, it establishes neither causal relationships nor statistical generalizability; its contribution is the specification of experiential mechanisms whose prevalence remains to be tested. Second, recruitment through open institutional email invites self-selection, and the sample may over-represent scholars motivated by difficult experiences; the presence of positive supervisory accounts within the sample mitigates but does not remove this concern. Third, most interviews were conducted in Urdu and translated for analysis; despite the verification procedure described above, some idiomatic nuance is inevitably attenuated in translation.

These limitations define the research agenda that follows. Longitudinal designs tracking wellbeing from enrolment to submission would identify when the transition-point vulnerabilities described here emerge and whether they consolidate or resolve. Multi-site comparative work spanning public and private universities, and other South Asian systems, would establish which findings reflect sector-wide conditions and which are institutionally specific. Finally, mixed-methods studies pairing the mechanisms identified here with standardized wellbeing instruments would supply the prevalence estimates that regional higher education policy requires.

Conclusion

This study provides one of the first interpretative phenomenological accounts of postgraduate researcher mental health in a Pakistani public sector university. Its central finding is structural: chronic evaluative anxiety, research isolation, and supervisory power imbalance were experienced not as separate difficulties but as a single reinforcing system in which isolation concentrated dependence on the supervisor and supervisory quality determined whether evaluative pressure was buffered or amplified. Researcher vulnerability, on this account, is manufactured by the architecture of candidature and is therefore addressable by institutional design. Supervisory accountability protocols, formal peer-support structures, and routine confidential monitoring of postgraduate wellbeing represent practical, mutually supporting steps toward a research training environment in which the silent storm participants described can be named, shared, and weathered.

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