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DOCTORAL JOURNEY DURING COVID-19: REFLECTIONS FROM A COLLABORATIVE AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

Aireen Grace Andal* Ural Federal University, Yekaterinburg, aandal@urfu.ru
Russian Federation

Shuang Wu University of Auckland, Auckland, shuang.wu@auckland.ac.nz
New Zealand

* Corresponding author

ABSTRACT

Aim/Purpose	This paper identifies and examines cross-cutting experiences from the perspective of two doctoral students, whose research was affected by the coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19).
Background	The COVID-19 pandemic continues to be challenging for higher education scholars in terms of proceeding with their research and how the pandemic sets the scene for changes in higher education's future. Due to increased anxiety levels because of uncertainties, the paper provides a reflection of doctoral experiences from two students – one in Russia at the data collection stage, and one in China (enrolled in New Zealand) at the proposal stage.
Methodology	Through collaborative autoethnography and joint-reflection, we analyze our experiences as doctoral students focusing on methodological adjustments, ethical dilemmas, adaptation strategies and supervisor-supervisee relationships. Conducting a collaborative autoethnography provides a richer analysis of the interplay between perspectives, compared to a traditional autoethnography. Collaborative autoethnography also provides conditions for a collective exploration of subjectivities of doctoral students through an iterative process. After providing separate individual accounts, we discussed our experiences, analyzed them, and engaged in a joint-reflection from our consensual interpretations.
Contribution	Our work aims to contribute to existing discussions on how COVID-19 impacted on doctoral students' coping strategies during the pandemic. The paper

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encourages doctoral students to further discuss how they navigate their doctoral experiences through autoethnography and joint-reflections.

Findings

Three main themes transpired in our analysis. First, we encountered roadblocks such as interruptions, frustrations and resistance to adapt our doctoral studies in the pandemic context, which align with the recent literature regarding education during the coronavirus pandemic. Second, we faced a diversity of burdens and privileges in the pandemic, which provided us with both pleasant (opportunity to create change) and unpleasant (unknown threats) situations, thereby enabling us to construct and reconstruct our stories through reflection. Third, we experienced a shared unfamiliarity of doing doctoral studies during the pandemic, to which the role of the academic community including our supervisors and doctoral colleagues contributed to how we managed our circumstances.

Recommendations for Practitioners

We speak to our fellow doctoral students to dare navigate their doctoral experiences through collaborative reflections. In practice, by reflecting on our experience, we recommend that new doctoral students remain flexible and mindful of their doctoral journeys and recognize their agency to deal with the unexpected. We thus encourage the view of doctoral studies as a process rather than outcome-oriented, as we gain experience from processes.

Recommendations for Researchers

We recommend using both collaborative autoethnography and joint-reflection as an instructive tool for qualitative research. Such engagements offer important discussions towards further communications and exchange of ideas among doctoral students from various backgrounds.

Impact on Society

More broadly, this work is an invitation to reflect and provoke further thoughts to articulate reflections on the impact and various ways of thinking that the pandemic might bring to the fore.

Future Research

Doctoral students are welcome to contribute to a collectivity of narratives that thicken the data and analyses of their pandemic experiences in higher education to reinforce the role of doctoral researchers as agents of history in the trying times of a pandemic.

Keywords

doctoral studies, higher education, COVID-19, collaborative autoethnography, reflection

AUTHORS



Aileen Grace Andal is a doctoral researcher under a double-PhD track in Philosophy & Ethics (Ural Federal University, Russian Federation) and Geography & Planning (Macquarie University, Australia). She is currently a research fellow at the Centre for Global Urbanism in Ural Federal University. Her research pays particular attention to children's geographies and the importance of children as co-creators of spatial and geographical knowledge. Majority of her recent academic engagements involve children's urban spaces with emphasis on slum-dwelling communities in the global South.



Shuang Wu is a doctoral researcher in social work at the University of Auckland. Her research pays particular attention to children's participatory rights in both daily life and research. She is also interested in participatory methodologies and methods. Majority of her recent academic engagements involve Chinese left-behind children's living experiences from their own perspectives.