



## A Qualitative Understanding of Doctoral Students' Experience of Embodiment Syed Abdul Waheed\*

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### ABSTRACT

Human beings exist in the world 'bodily' and their existence is inexorable. International doctoral students' understanding of themselves and their perspectives of the learning environment is through their embodiment. The purpose of the present research was to understand doctoral students' embodiment experiences in relation to a culturally and academically diverse university environment. This understanding was gained through the phenomenological lens of qualitative research. For this purpose, thirteen doctoral students were selected through maximum variation sampling from the Austrian public sector universities located in different states. They were doing doctoral studies in various physical and social sciences at different stages of their dissertation. The understanding of the phenomenon was sought through data collected with semi-structured interviews. The interviews were recorded, transcribed and analyzed by coding the text and categorizing it into themes that emerged while frequently reading the transcripts. The emerging themes include 'stress and anxiety', 'confidence and motivation' and 'physical fatigue and exertion'. Most of the students experienced 'confidence', 'encouragement', 'depression', 'nervousness', 'homesickness', 'stress' and 'frustration' when asked about 'lived body' or corporeality. The study has implications in understanding doctoral students' 'bodily' existence in the universities.



### Introduction

The academic communities, research groups and other scholarly forums within the university provide an opportunity to the doctoral students to interact, experience and give meanings to what is happening and how these activities immediately affect their understanding of the academic environment and how do they contribute to their development in relations to the world where these events occur and where they exist 'bodily' (Bista, 2016; Bista & Gaulee, 2017; Cowly & Ssekasi, 2018; Khanal & Gaulee, 2019; Li, Wang, Liu, Xu, & Cui, 2018; Li & Zizzi, 2018). The previous research in this area shows that students' learning experiences are determined by the learning environment (Austin, 2002; Golde & Dore, 2001; McAlpine & Amundsen, 2008). Also, it is found that in an ideal learning environment, the students are supported by the academic and non-academic personnel of the institute, and they have positive experiences and understanding of the educational setting. In such a situation, the faculty and other academic staff are actively involved in assisting doctoral students for the achievement of the particular objective of the doctoral program (Bista, 2016; Cowly & Ssekasi, 2018; Khanal & Gaulee, 2019; Li & Zizzi, 2018; Styles & Radloff, 2001). On the contrary, the doctoral students who experience that "they are not in the right place" to learn can demotivate them, resulting in their attrition (Pyhältö, Toom, Stubb, & Lonka, 2012, p.6).

The embodiment or corporeality is a source of interacting, experiencing and learning about the world, and we exist to reveal or conceal something about ourselves (van Manen, 1997). In view of Merleau-Ponty (1962), the body is “a living organism which rises toward the world” (p. 87). The temporal and spatial experiences of human beings exist in the body that is comprised of senses. Doctoral students’ experiences of their existence in the space can be explored regarding their “connectedness” to the external environment through their embodiment and corporeal existence. According to Merleau-Ponty (1962), the “connectedness” represents the existence of human beings in the world through the embodied being.

Doctoral students’ understanding of themselves and their perceptions of the learning environment around them is through their embodiment. The meanings they ascribe to their existence and studying in the university, and their understanding of the other people in the academic culture is related to their own embodied existence and situatedness in the world (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). The present study aims to understand how doctoral students assign meanings to the world in which they live through being ‘embodied’ persons from the perspective of the specific situations and in relation to their “connectedness” to other persons therein. An attempt was made to unveil doctoral students’ experiences of living through the university environment and reflect on their experiences while ‘bodily’ existing and experiencing the outer world.

The purpose of the research was to understand doctoral students’ experiences of body in relation to culturally and academically different worlds. In the words of Jones (2013), it aims to uncover “the paths we are yet to travel down, and importantly the issues which have not been fully explored”. The study's main question was to explore, what were doctoral students’ experiences of corporeality while working in the university environment? The study has implications for higher education institutions in Pakistan and Austria to understand doctoral students’ life experiences and how these can be improved.

### **Methodology**

The study emphasized the participants’ lived experiences of the university environment regarding their ‘bodily’ existence; therefore, it is believed that the phenomenological approach best fits the purpose of the present study. This approach guided the methodological procedures of the study as it ‘starts and ends at lived experience’ and addresses the nature of human experiences of the world they live in (van Manen, 1997). This approach guided the researcher to view doctoral students’ life-world of bodily existence through the lens of phenomenology.

### **Participants and Data Collection**

The doctoral students studying in various disciplines of physical and social sciences constituted the sample of the study. Thirteen such participants were selected through maximum variation sampling from the Austrian universities located in different states. This diversity of participants shown in Table 1 allowed the researcher to gain in-depth data and a rich understanding of their lived space and lived body and how they experienced and interpreted their existence in the space they lived through (Smith et al., 2009). The names of the participants given in the results section are pseudonyms.

The present study attempted to examine the phenomenological understanding of doctoral students’ experiences with respect to their bodily existence, i.e., lived body or corporeality (Van Manen, 1997). The data were collected through semi-structured interviews. Some of the questions were re-structured, their order was changed, and few probing questions were added for further elaboration. The participants were asked; Which bodily experiences did you have in different situations while being in the university? How would you elaborate on such experiences?

The interviews were personally conducted by the researcher who contacted Pakistani doctoral students through an already existing e-mail group and sought permission for an interview during the year 2016. The interviews were conducted face-to-face at the participants’ workplace or research laboratory at the university. Following the principles of interviewing in qualitative research (Seidman, 2013; Silverman, 2010), the interviews' duration ranged from 47 to 73 minutes.

### **Table 1** *Characteristics of Doctoral Students*

Participant	Gender	Age	Semester	Working in team/ independently
A	M	31	4	As a team member
B	F	36	5	An independent Researcher
C	M	31	6	An independent Researcher
D	M	35	2	An independent Researcher
E	F	34	6	An independent Researcher
F	M	33	5	As a team member
G	M	33	5	As a team member
H	F	-	4	An independent Researcher
I	M	36	6	An independent Researcher
J	M	32	7	As a team member
K	M	32	5	An independent Researcher
L	M	30	4	An independent Researcher
M	M	45	8	An independent Researcher

### Analysis of Interview Data

The emerging themes were derived, determined and described according to the criterion suggested by van Manen (1997): "Is this experience still the same if we conceptually change or delete this theme from experience? Does the experience without this theme lose its fundamental meaning?" (p. 107). In other words, a specific theme was included in the results if it can modify or change the understanding of a specific aspect of the phenomenon if it is omitted or changed. During the analysis, the researcher used participants' direct and typical quotes that revealed the essence or nature of the bodily existence they lived through characteristically and uniquely. The themes were formulated using van Manen's (1997) approach of analysis. The emergent themes were interpreted from the participants' perspectives and experiences of the lived body that helped understand the bodily existences and nature.

### Results

The study participants described their experiences of bodily existence while reflecting on the stress and anxiety, confidence and motivation and physical fatigue and exertion they had during their study and stay in the universities. These emergent themes are described with respect to the participants' experiences and perspectives in the following lines.

#### Stress and anxiety

Space defines how a person bodily exists, feels and responds to his immediate environment. The theme "*stress and anxiety*" describes participants' feelings and state of pressure, stress, and strain when they encountered an "*unusual*" situation regarding spatiality. The intensity of the distress changed across the journey of doctoral studies.

One of the doctoral students' Haris remarked that he was very tense in the early time of PhD, "*The*

reason was that I was continuously thinking and worried; if I am moving in the right direction; if I am investigating a worthwhile problem, and can I present it effectively ?” When he was working on the methodology of his project, it was so hard for him to avoid this state of mind that even he had been thinking about his plans during the sleep and sometimes experienced sleeplessness. He reflected that during this time:

*Sometimes, it was very difficult to sleep... and if I slept... I woke up during the night and started to think about my research project... Then I could not sleep and used to work on my research proposal and keep on doing it unless I sleep.*

One of the doctoral students, Sara, was studying at a university of Art who gone through a specific experience of how she existed during her journey towards PhD. She considered that the “*current doctoral studies provided her with a materialization of feelings with neumatic correlation to the topicality of the core objective.*” Her bodily experiences developed as time passed. She was researching a problem in Pakistani perspective that sometimes led her to feel like she was wandering in the soil of her city in Pakistan. She reflected, “*I remained confident that pulling out the originality of research from a rather conservative and under-theorized area will ultimately reward me, and emotional hardships will be soon over.*” She felt pride and had honour from her friends and colleagues because she believed in the originality and value of her work. She described, “*I would rather imply that the affirmative amplification of my feelings was directly related to the acceptance of my very being in a foreign situation and refuting the external factors of disapproval.*”

She described how she responded to her bodily experiences that she had during the lengthy and hard journey of the doctoral studies, and she used to satisfy herself and motivated to keep on struggling. She elaborated, “*I, as a person controlled my bodily feelings over the dynamics of my doctoral journey, where being strong was the only anticipation and remaining positive was the only salvage.*”

Some of the doctoral students felt lucky to find colleagues from their workplaces who made their boring workplace feel like a second home, and their life became comfortable. This suggests how cooperation and assistance from someone who realizes to “*be with you*” give meaning to where you work and live. She was challenged with a significant burden of work, mainly in two years long, but she was fortunate to find a colleague who helped her till the end of her doctorate. Maryam remarked:

*I did not have ideal feelings of doing a PhD as the rules of PhD and, in general, the rules of living in this city are very uncertain, strict and against human nature. Nevertheless, my colleague, Mr. “J” turned my life into a world of living with certainty. If he had not entered my professional life, I would not survive in Austria with my small kids.*

### **Confidence and Motivation**

Providing opportunities for gaining confidence in the workplace enables the students to exist positively. Making speeches in front of a huge audience in a big auditorium is one of these events that foster students’ belief and confidence. In Pakistani academic culture, the students are not provided such opportunities of building confidence through speeches and other social activities during schooling. This happened with Yousuf, a doctoral student in a veterinary university and had to deliver a speech in the general club. He was afraid of doing so since his school times. He thought he would be hooted, discouraged and laughed at when he was a schoolboy. Nevertheless, he managed such speeches in his university successfully. He reflected:

*I was able to develop my confidence in speaking in front of my colleagues over time. I delivered lectures, participated in conferences, and addressed an even bigger audience...It gave me a lot of confidence and motivation to speak publicly.*

Similarly, working in collaboration with others on a research project gives confidence in success and integrity, and it gives new meanings to space where you work jointly. It was noticed that the doctoral students who were working on a research project in a team got more confidence during their studies. On the other hand, working independently can make others feel jealous. Ibrahim experienced,

*Sometimes you work independently and get good results from the experimentation on your sample... I have observed that it makes others jealous... and if you have a lack of funding for doing such an experiment, you can be depressed as well.”*

Doctoral students’ previous experience of researching and working with their supervisor also shaped

their confidence and approach to work while being at a workplace in Austrian universities. Haris did his masters from another European country, and he used to be “*afraid*” of his master’s supervisors because he may ask him a question that he would not be able to reply. He reflected, “*I don’t feel much fear now as my supervisor is so kind, and he always boosted my confidence. He encouraged me on my first presentation, although it did not go well.*”

Similarly, Yousuf fears his technical staff, who was supposed to assist the doctoral students working in the laboratory during experimentations. He used to get the impression that the technical assistants were “*angry*” with him as he could not speak the German language with them. He remarked:

*Sometimes, you need assistance and have to contact the assistants repeatedly, and they don’t feel it well as they hesitate to talk in English... It looked to me that he becomes angry when I go to him again and again... I don’t think we can learn and feel confident this way.*

Shifting to a different cultural setting makes someone uncomfortable, and it can affect academic and personal life. Doctoral students from Pakistan and did not have an experience of studying in another country did not feel at home being in Austria. Yasmin was experiencing this state of mind. She reflected, “*I experienced homesickness because I never went out of my home in my whole life. I was frustrated and shocked when I found myself in a single room to live all alone. I don’t want to remember those days.*”

### **Physical fatigue and exertion**

In the theme “*physical fatigue and exertion*”, the doctoral students described how they spent long hours in their field, laboratories, working on their computers and collecting data intensively.

The doctoral students realized that they need to be very active and attentive while working for more than eight hours in the laboratory but being human, they cannot avoid physical fatigue. Yaqoob described that “*Working in a laboratory is painful when you are working non-stop. You feel as if you have been restricted in a box. Sometimes, I feel pain in my heels, and I had to bear it to complete my work.*” Some of the doctoral students worked more than their working hours to meet the project's target within time, which affected their physical position. For example, Salman described that he had to work “*more than his capacity*”. Due to work pressure, one day, he became faint when he fell on the floor while working at his house.

Other than meeting the deadlines and objectives of the research, some of the students had worked extraordinarily to compensate for the deficiencies in the area of research skills and knowledge about their proposed field of research, mainly if they had chosen a relatively different topic for their dissertation. Iyas believed that the study culture in Pakistan is different, and sometimes it is insufficient for the advanced studies we are doing in Austria. For that, they need more work to do that may affect them bodily. He reflected:

*I had to read a lot and spend hours understanding a relatively new topic of research. Learning from the basics and working anxiously created mental fatigue and exhaustion that affected my body and health in the end. Nevertheless, I am happy that I did it well.*

Most of the doctoral students suffered in their social and academic life at the beginning that shacked their level of confidence and affected their mental health. The students responded and handled these sufferings differently. Kamran was one of the students who had suffered a lot. He reflected:

*I think that you cannot survive unless you learn to manage such sufferings and physical fatigue that you have at every stage of your PhD. PhD is another name of stress and fatigue...you know... What I did ...? I visited and talked to my real friends whenever I had gone through such situations...and it worked well.*

It was found from participants experiences that they had lived through different states of mind like “*anger, jealousy, fear and other affective feelings such as confidence, encouragement, discouragement, depression, tension and nervousness, homesickness, stress and frustration*” when they shared their responses regarding spatiality and corporeality. Some of their perceptions did not reflect the essence of the corporeal and spatial experiences even after the questions I asked were clarified, yet some were given under different study themes because “*it is what is like for them.*” There were responses regarding space and body that were

very close to the description of these existential themes.

## Discussion

It was found in the study that the working environment of the university shaped participants' corporeal experiences, and most of the participants described their experiences of the body in relation to the nature of their workplace and the research culture. The participants also elaborated on such experiences regarding the nature of their interaction and relationship with scholarly communities of the institute.

Some doctoral students changed their workplace or worked in laboratories that involved intense physical and mental fatigue, and others have to be seated most of the time with no or less mobility while working on computers that created feelings of "boredom, disinterestedness, strain, and monotony". This is an ontological perspective of our lived body that shapes how we feel and exist, and "we become the space we are in" (van Manen, 1997, p. 102). As an example, "We feel a special sorrow for the homeless because we sense that there is a deeper tragedy involved than merely not having a roof over one's head" (p. 102). He elaborated that we exist physically, and our body is unavoidable. It is a source of experience, and we reveal or conceal the physical world and ourselves through our bodily existence. Thus, we can understand participants' life experiences in view of their connectedness to the situation through their physical existence.

Hopwood et al. (2009) argued that doctoral students' broader life and their knowledge of what they do, how they do, what they learn and what they become could not be overviewed. In consistence with these arguments, Hopwood & Paulson (2012) inferred that "they [doctoral students] experience a range of bodily effects, some of which may be a product of their practices, such as long working hours, while others may be beyond their locus of immediate control" (p. 679).

It was noticed that doctoral students had a personal life apart from their academic and professional assignments that affected their transition into the university's academic culture. For example, one of the doctoral students' Yasmin experienced discomfort when she moved to Austria in a relatively different country and a different place of study. In line with such experiences, Hopwood & Paulson (2012) argued that "the material and social surroundings of doctoral workplaces also influence students' bodily experiences and actions" (p. 673). Also, Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009) argued that students' perspectives about others and their lived experiences relate to their own embodied existence and situatedness in the world.

## Conclusion

The study revealed a phenomenological understanding of doctoral students' life-world in terms of corporeality. It reflected how they find themselves bodily in relation to the working environment they lived through during their studies in the academic and research culture of the universities. It provided an understanding of international students' socio-academic integration in foreign universities when they were living, studying and working in a cross-cultural setting, and they needed a supportive environment and affiliation with the people around them. In addition to the phenomenological findings, most of the students experienced 'confidence', 'encouragement', 'depression', 'tension', 'nervousness', 'homesickness', 'stress' and 'frustration' when they were asked about 'lived body' or corporeality. These findings were not substantially different across gender.

The study has implications for international students. This is significantly important for students who are physically isolated from the family and need a supportive environment to proceed with their work and studies satisfactorily while being abroad. The home universities should conduct orientation sessions for the doctoral students before they proceed for their studies abroad to benefit from the host universities' socio-academic culture and make appropriate adjustment in the academic culture and institutional communities.

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