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RESEARCH ARTICLE:

A Narrative Inquiry to Explore Lived Experiences of Women Pursuing PhDs in South Africa

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Abstract

The journey experienced by women in higher education spans across the areas of teaching, research and leadership. As academics and scholars within these areas, women professionals find few opportunities to share what and how they have navigated this space. Adding in the complexity and challenges of pursuing a PhD to the existing burden placed on women in a gender-segregated environment can be taboo. In this paper, a novel methodology of Narrative Inquiry of reflective writing is used to explore the stories that may be difficult to articulate. We explore the experiences of women as they discover their leadership competencies and academic identities, and the support, motivation and successes they harnessed to complete their PhD. The collaborative sharing of these poetic pieces highlights new ways to actively engage outside of the existing closed communities. While we know that no two lived experiences are the same, this study will draw on the diversity of the experiences as a unifying and enabling narrative for other women on this path.

Keywords: *PhD; women; story-telling; lived experiences*

Introduction

The journey experienced by women in higher education spans the areas of teaching, research, and leadership. As academics and scholars within these areas, women professionals find few opportunities to share what and how they have navigated this space. Adding the complexity and challenges of pursuing a PhD to the existing burden placed on women in a gender-segregated environment can be taboo. In this paper, a novel methodology of Narrative Inquiry of reflective writing is used to explore the stories that may be difficult to articulate. We explore the experiences of women as they discover their leadership competencies and academic identities, and the support, motivation, and successes they harnessed to complete their PhD. The collaborative sharing of these poetic pieces highlights new ways to actively engage outside the existing closed communities. While we know that no two lived experiences are the same, this paper will draw on the diversity of the experiences as a unifying and enabling narrative for other women on this path.

For women to fully undertake their academic roles and their full and effective participation in public life and decision-making, higher education has a standard requirement that women obtain their PhD. UNESCO Assistant Director-General for Education, Stefania Giannini, claims that it would seem intuitive that women's leadership should correlate closely with their attainment in higher education (UNESCO-IESALC, 2021: 5). Women in higher education still encounter obstacles when seeking to occupy key academic positions in universities, be involved with relevant research, and take leadership roles. Achieving a PhD is often equated with achieving that title of leader within the higher education space (Naom, 2021: 39) and understanding what and how that achievement is reached is, therefore, an important part of the discussions on women in leadership roles. Each doctoral journey for women is unique and nuanced with its' own challenges (van Rooij *et al*., 2021: 48). Many factors are uniquely related to doctoral success. More important is the reality of the lived experience of this doctoral journey. In sharing the lived

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experience, the audience can understand the nuances and complexities of completing a PhD (Handforth, 2022: 2).

Narrative inquiry is a method that is based on collecting stories and examining them as a way to understand lived experiences (Savin-Baden and Van Niekerk, 2007: 464). Women's experiences and perspectives provide a unique and important lens for examining history (Leshem and Trafford, 2006: 22). Through storytelling, women can share the details of their experiences and their emotional impact (Goward, 2015: 100). To facilitate this process, creative writing methods, such as the 55-word story approach, can be used (Fogarty, 2010: 400). This reflective writing approach draws on the writer's experience to provide insights into specific problems or phenomena.

South African women and the experiences they have shared of what PhD journeys entail have not changed significantly over time. These stories continue to share a difficult, challenging journey, as is depicted by Castle in her piece on the heroic journeys of PhD students in a South African School of Education (Castle 2013:108) – 'it was pure hell. . . I had to stand on my own, fighting for time, fighting for money, for space. . . and the targets were always shifting. . . I was so busy fighting. . . I had no time to bleed. . . In the end I succeeded, but it was pure hell and determination' (Castle, 2013: 103). Various South African studies have identified common negative factors in the working environment of Higher Education institutions. The environmental factors include race, gender, and power. Studies conducted by Boshoff (2005: 374), Alabi *et al*. (2019: 6) and Castle (2013: 110) have highlighted that these factors create a silence around the challenges experienced by female academics in this environment. This environment does not provide platforms for the sharing of these challenges among peers, which can lead to feelings of isolation and disempowerment for female academics. The acknowledgement of these environmental barriers to achievement for women in HEI is seen in the efforts made by the Department of Higher Education and Training in South Africa. Workgroups developed programmes geared toward addressing the inequities of women in Higher Education in 2018, with little to no evidence since then of the success or failure of these interventions (Mapulane, 2020: 1).

However, a study conducted at the University of Pretoria found that by not silencing or oppressing women, their empowerment and development as women managers could be supported (Kele and Pietersen 2015: 14). Additionally, Moultrie and de le Ray (2003: 418) suggest that professional development programmes for women in hostile organisational cultures should focus on developing personal skills. Reflective practice in an environment of high pressure to achieve, such as in a PhD programme as a woman, is needed. This would enable these women to build their own capacity to manage stress and achieve personal growth (Wilson *et al*., 2022: 259). It is against this background that this study explores the narratives of women as PhD holders and candidates in a South African context. Drawing on the reflections provided, we highlight the dichotomy that exists in the challenging and rewarding process of completing a PhD.

Methodology

In this qualitative study, we made use of narrative inquiry and maintained the individual personal narratives intact (Riessman, 1993: 32). As a qualitative phenomenological method, Narrative Inquiry enables us to explore the experience in which the stories are rooted, the individual experience of the phenomenon under study (Ford 2020:245). Narrative data (people telling a story using the 55-word story technique) was analysed by looking at the told stories and extracting the 'themes' of the narrative (Franzosi, 1998: 548). Instructions to construct a 55-word story were shared via email, outlining the reflective writing process participants would undertake to produce the story (Fogarty, 2010: 400; Fogarty *et al*., 2013: 656). Participants emailed the completed 55-word stories to the authors. Each story was analysed as a single unit to understand the unique experience of the participant by each author. The authors clustered the units into similar themes relating to the experience of the storyteller (Riessman, 1993: 52; Franzosi, 1998: 521). Through consensus discussions, the authors identified the themes that existed within the stories told by the respondents and presented them for further textual analysis.

The method of collecting stories and poetry as a reflective medium was used to explore the experiences of PhD candidates and recently graduated doctoral students, specifically those who were full-time candidates while working full-time jobs in South African Higher Education. Thirteen stories were collected from seven women who shared a common experience of being full-time PhD candidates while working full-time jobs. To explore the experiences of PhD candidates and recently graduated doctoral students, the researchers used storytelling and poetry as a reflective medium. Thirteen stories were collected from seven women, highlighting their unique experiences and challenges in completing their PhD while juggling full-time work in higher education. Conducting

a Narrative Inquiry using the reflective method of 55-word stories presents a novel methodology in which participants are encouraged to explore their personal, environmental, and broader social aspects of the experience under study. To our knowledge, this is the first time that this approach is used in exploring the experiences of women on the PhD journey.

Each author read the stories provided and identified themes related to the experiences. In comparing our themes, we recognised the difficulty in clustering the stories. Debating and re-naming the themes reflexively, we acknowledged our assumptions and personal beliefs of what the author had shared. The consensus was reached on the key themes after multiple discussions and readings of the stories, with an agreement that diluting the richness of any narrative would counteract the impact of the analysis. Our aim to present a true reflection of the experiences of these participants required that we honour that richness. The remainder of this study presents our analysis interspersed with the relevant stories shared verbatim to retain the depth and breadth of the experience as dictated by the Narrative Inquiry methodology (Lindsay and Schwind, 2016: 17).

Results and Discussion

In the process of immersion within these narratives, we were struck by the dichotomy present in each one. No story told a tale of only one perspective. The stories tell a tale of highs and lows, success and perceived failure, support and isolation. These are stories of the intersection between working toward a professional goal and simultaneously feeling that there are too many personal responsibilities that weigh them down. They demonstrate the complexity with which women navigate the experience of the doctoral journey. Our analysis guided our understanding of the phenomenon of experiencing a PhD as a South African woman in 2 overlapping themes of personal beliefs and societal expectations, and academic culture. Each theme included both positive and negative experiences (Figure 1).

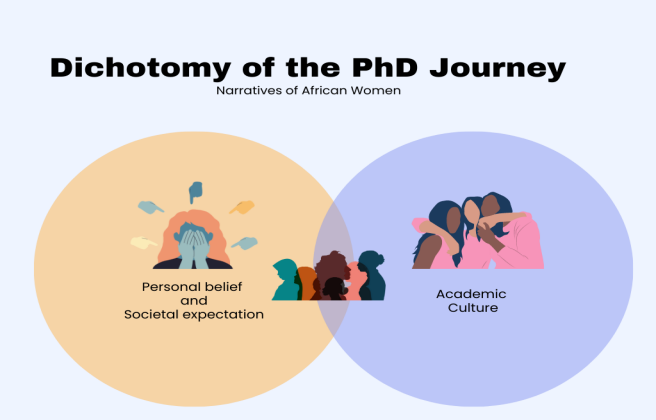


Figure 1: Key themes within presented narratives

It has been noted by other researchers that women struggle with conceptions of ability and experience self-doubt during the process of their PhDs (Brown and Watson, 2010: 392; Nori and Vanttaja, 2023: 678; Naom, 2021: 47). This was true for our participants, who shared stories in which they questioned their ability to succeed during the various stages of the PhD. This difficulty in recognising their ability to succeed was foregrounded in stories where the conclusion demonstrates growth and a change in their thinking.

The PhD journey differs for each individual, and the participants shared the nuances each of the journeys presented. Feelings of self-doubt and linkages to their competencies were made. Success in obtaining the PhD as a measure is comparable, and while the participants' experiences present challenges along the way, the end of the journey is marked with learning and a value of enlightenment on the researched topic or academic focus area.

Standing in the Light

I'm afraid. A PhD is like a dark room with only a torch. I keep bumping into furniture, had to rest often. My eyes adjusted. I can make out some shapes now, some ominous, others familiar, still scary. Each step, I turned on a lamp. I did it. Bruised, but standing in the light.

My journey

PhD they call it... LLD in my case.
Am I smart enough?
Proposal feedback... You're not smart enough.
You're not on their level.
Doubt.
BUT your supervisors believe in you.
Rework.
Resubmit.
Feedback - best proposal ever.
What? I AM smart enough?
Believe in what others see... Excellence.

Dr Dr

My child and I graduated as Dr and Dr on the same day. He is qualified to remove an appendix while I can attach an appendix. He doesn't think my joke is funny, but I have a way with words while he has a way with his hands. We are proud of both of us.

Goldmining my Findings

Knee-deep in findings,
Wishing it was numbers instead of words now.
The words say so much
More than what I captured,
in those field notes
More than what I expected
So,
Is that why I am so excited?
This picture creates before my eyes.
Is this what's meant when they say,
The data will tell?

The role of women as a minority within the Higher Education sector and in Postgraduate communities often influences the pressure and ability of PhD candidates to succeed (Aryan and Guzman, 2010: 75; Naom, 2021: 51). Adding in the complexity of responsibilities and challenges related to childcare, navigating relationships and meeting expectations of the work environment, have been known to influence career development and trajectory (Brown and Watson, 2010: 393; Aryan and Guzman, 2010: 75; Naom, 2021: 51). The narratives shared by the seven women in this paper highlight the balancing act that is required to reach their goal of completing a PhD while navigating the complexity of the expectations in their immediate social environment. One of the positive aspects of the experiences that were shared by the participants was the value of supportive structures within their lives. While literature alludes to the value of formal mentorship structures (Aryan and Guzman, 2010: 73; Hoskins and White, 2013: 185), this did not seem to be the primary source of support for these women.

There is an intersectionality at play in navigating the journey of and toward a PhD for women. Integral to the experiences of achieving a PhD as a woman in South Africa is the recognition of the many roles that they play within their professional and personal lives. The respondents reflected on their experiences of dealing with expectations and upheaval in their personal lives. At the same time, they lament the burden of racial and gender stereotypes that they encounter regardless of the role they have embraced as an academic. Overall, the stories that these women shared have painted a picture of the possibility of navigating the intersectionality because of and through nurturing support structures that they have actively sought to create.

The Balancing Act

PhD, my dream
I in male oriented system, marriage, children, family
work, work, work
Balance balls and my personal ball keeps dropping
Not priority in previous system, now no support, too old, too white

Despite odds, delays and sabbatical not respected…
Late nights; early morning; write and rewrite
Display utmost selfishness, perseverance
I made it!

Heads Up!

I have to add yet another ball to all the others I have to keep in the air.
Where will I find the time and energy for this ball?
How do I keep them all happy?
What if I drop one?
They are becoming heavier and bigger.
I am becoming smaller.
Heads up, it's coming!

Books and a borrowed furniture

Six months before submitting, leaving the marriage to room next door. Not so easy to walk out. start anew, telling myself and the children, in residence, everything would be ok. After a few weeks, I realized I wasn't safe. I stole out with a blanket and PhD books as pillows.

The Lifeline, My Security Blanket

Support comes from many sources, multiple forms
Not always clear,
on what I needed
The joke to make me laugh
question to make me think
treat to make me breathe
kind words to push me on
comes from everywhere, sources I never tapped into before.
The people, blog, meme even
The student on the street.

My Tribe

I felt lost. Family cheering for the highs wasn't enough. I needed support inside the environment that breaks you down, that's as much about collaboration as it's about gatekeeping. Find others who understand. My tribe worked, we got it. They reminded me of who I am. Not just a student, a friend who is loved.

Journey to Discovery

Lonely journey…uphill battle…seeds of doubt. Words of advice? Seriously! For me, it was my solitude. Discovering more about myself. Stripped naked when you get you first chapter review. Taking a step back to gain a new perspective. A gentle nudge from unexpected places. Eyes of admiration, inner strength, inspiration to others who dare to dream.

The academic culture, and positionality of women within this culture, are often discussed from the perspectives of race and gender minorities (McCoy, 2021: 324; Fisher *et al*., 2019:4; Ngubane and Makua, 2021: 4; Hlatshwayo *et al*., 2022: 15; Mayya *et al*., 2021: 9). Our invited narratives, as shared above, reflected the recognition of this. This is similar to other studies where the need for community with colleagues and fellow students who understand the challenges posed by stereotypes and racial roles, enhances the journey toward a PhD (Aryan and Guzman 2010:74). Interestingly, other researchers have noted the diversity of reasons for embarking on this journey as one that is not just scholarly but also personal in nature (Castle, 2013: 109). Regardless of the motivation, the existence of power and privilege afforded by gender and racial groups in academia are often large obstacles on the path to achievement (McCoy, 2021: 324) and appears to be the case for our invited narratives above. For women, this seems to be endemic as it is closely tied to gender roles within society (Nori and Vanttaja, 2023: 682). This struggle to achieve for personal and scholarly reasons does not appear to be isolated within this group. Three of the stories specifically highlight how embedded the formal processes, personal beliefs and academic culture are.

The mechanisms and milestones in the PhD journey are marked with developing the work systematically, from the conceptualisation of the research idea to the final write-up and submission of the thesis report. As academics, this remains a continued learning engagement for participants who, in most instances, have been working in the field for a number of years prior to the doctoral degree. The shift from being a confident practitioner or academic to being a scholar within your field as a student requires an adjustment. The impact of the pressure on doctoral students as a result of the embedded academic culture is not unique to Africa but, in fact, a global phenomenon (Nori and Vanttaja, 2023: 687). In the South African context, the contextual obstacles are prevalent but demonstrate the resilience and perseverance of these individuals (Castle, 2013: 121).

~~Writing~~ Righting my Process

The story to tell my work,
I craft in simplicity,
attempting with acknowledged limited skill.
A draft to offer.
One that has been rewritten many times.
For review.
The scribbled words cut through my self-esteem,
shredding,
breaking,
scattering every bit of will
to pick up the pen again.
Supervisor believes that
this feedback is good.

I Determined

So I cried when the board told me that my proposal was not accepted. The title should have been about all women, the theory was limited. They did not understand - I had never been a white woman and I did not want to use Western theories. In the end I determined my own work.

The TandCs of the PhD

Do it…the PhD
You need it….for the promotion
It has to be done…part of the academic journey
Really??
In line for the ticket
The protocol queue, ethics booth, data collection, analysis, write-up, defense, examination, graduation.
But the fine print on the ticket says more
The skills, the lead, the growth,
the Discovery of my potential

Reflective practice allows one to enhance the positive aspects of their work and mitigate harmful or negative practices (Wilson *et al*., 2022: 260). The stories presented above have highlighted the process that reflection on experiences in the PhD journey can elicit. Through reflecting, the women demonstrate a meaningful, if not often critical, understanding of what engaging with doctoral research meant for their identity and those within their family or professional teams. This practice has also given these women the opportunity to share, within their own words, the emotions and scholarly processes that act as a unifying variable with those outside of their discipline, race and social identity. Unlike similar research done in South Africa a decade ago (Castle, 2013: 109), the narratives of these women do not focus on the heroism embraced as an identity for PhD candidates but rather on the multiplicity of factors that spring to mind when reflecting on being a candidate. It appears, from their stories, that overcoming hurdles as they emerge is embedded in the broader experience of becoming a doctor.

Our invited narratives emphasised both the acknowledgement of the difficulties and positionality in the doctoral journey and the necessity of community among coworkers and fellow students who are aware of the difficulties presented by stereotypes and racial roles. However, the prevalence of privilege and power accorded by racial and

gendered groupings in academia frequently presents a significant barrier to success. Given how deeply ingrained formal procedures, individual values, and academic culture are, the reflections explicitly emphasise how this fight to succeed for both personal and scholarly reasons is not unique to individual women on the PhD journey.

The number of participants included in this study and the method of reflection that we requested presented a limitation in applying the Narrative Inquiry methodology and analysis. Due to the 55-word story method, we were unable to further interrogate the themes, particularly in relation to race and gender norms and practices. Our assumptions and literature review indicated that there was a link between PhD qualifications and the leadership role that women play in academia. While recognition is given that within the academic environment obtaining a PhD often provides leadership opportunities and career development, our invited narratives did not demonstrate this link. Instead, the women reflected on the personal impact and implications of their PhDs within this environment as opposed to the environment of higher education.

Concluding Remarks

It is important to address the academic culture so that it affords opportunities for sharing experiences during and post PhD. We recommend the development of reflective writing skills using the 55-word story method for women that may be shared with others pursuing a PhD. The 55-word story method offers a journaling technique that could contribute to the PhD journey. Creating a culture of reflection and providing opportunities for the community could reduce the sense of isolation and feelings of inadequacy and encourage celebration as an individual and collective. For women in Africa, this cultural practice of sharing stories to engage with and connect during times of difficulty and storytelling provides a familiar and protective expressive opportunity. Additionally, this practice could be beneficial to PhD candidates beyond the African context if shared online. In this way, African women could amplify the voices of their community, reminding others that what could be a tumultuous journey, can also provide opportunities for humour, excitement, achievement, and insight.

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