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**Notions of Human Capital and Academic Identity in the PhD:
Narratives of the Disempowered**

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Abstract

An important component of PhD students' educational experiences is the understanding they develop of their academic identity. In this study, we explore PhD students' expectations and lived realities during their studies through the lens of Bourdieu's theory of practice. We show that doctoral students perceive the PhD as an all-consuming endeavor and, at the same time, a degree of competing demands. Importantly, several doctoral students' academic identities were laden with conceptions of marginalization, which evoked feelings of disempowerment and lead to a lack of agency. Therefore, this study advocates for a doctoral environment where different forms of human capital are valued and the voices of PhD students are respected within the academy. This will ensure that future scholars are able to enter the academy with a strong sense of who they are and where they fit within their field.

Keywords: doctoral education, academic identity, capital, agency, disempowerment, marginalization

The Changing PhD and Doctoral Students' Academic Identity Development

While the Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) degree has existed for many centuries, the design of the contemporary version has shifted over the past four decades (Boud & Lee, 2009; Cahusac de Caux, 2019). One welcome change to the PhD is the increased recognition that professional skills (also termed transferable or soft skills) can enhance doctoral students' ability to apply their disciplinary knowledge (Gilbert, Balatti, Turner, & Whitehouse, 2004; Lam et al., 2019; Pretorius, Macaulay, & Cahusac de Caux, 2019). Importantly, it is now increasingly understood that encouraging students to recognize the professional skills that they have learnt through their studies allows them to build their personal knowledge to achieve their future goals (Pretorius et al., 2019).

Within this changing PhD context, neoliberal influences have also fundamentally restructured the contemporary education landscape. These market forces have resulted in an era where the higher education environment is increasingly seen as an industry with students perceived as consumers (Vican, Friedman, & Andreasen, 2020). As a result, the global higher education environment is becoming more focused on metrics (see, e.g., Lingard, Martino, & Rezai-Rashti, 2013; Sampson & Comer, 2010; Vican et al., 2020). In the doctoral education context, this increased focus on metrics has, for instance, resulted in the tightening of completion deadlines where students have to achieve a series of accountability milestones (see, e.g., Macaulay & Davies, 2019). At the same time, however, doctoral students are required to dedicate time to other requirements of the course such as professional skills development (see, e.g., Davies, Macaulay, & Pretorius, 2019). Consequently, doctoral students face significant pressure to build their *personal brand* to secure future employment.

This focus on metrics and branding influences students' conceptions of what it means to be a PhD student; in other words, students' academic identities are shaped by the neoliberal practices and discourses of the doctoral education environment. In this paper, we consider identity to be that which is reflected in the "stories that people tell themselves and others about who they are, and who they are not, as well as who and how they would like to/should be" (Yuval-Davis, 2010, p. 266). This definition focuses on the agency of the individual (i.e., the intentional actions made by an individual considering the affordances and constraints of the context, see Hoang & Pretorius, 2019). It is, however, important to note that identity and agency are influenced by politics, contextual norms, other individuals, and axes of power (Yuval-Davis, 2010). Additionally, identity is believed to be dynamic and constantly constructed through participation in the social world; in other words, identity is a constant process of transformation (for a recent review, see Hoang & Pretorius, 2019).

It is important to note that a person can have multiple identities. Of particular interest to this study is the concept of *academic identity*. Based on our above-mentioned definition of identity, we define academic identity as that which is reflected in the narratives people use to describe themselves within the context of academia. In the doctoral education context, a PhD student's academic identity is shaped as they negotiate their various identities through the act of conducting research (Hoang & Pretorius, 2019). As PhD students discover and contribute to the values, skills, norms, and attitudes of their discipline, they become socialized into their chosen disciplinary community and the broader academy (Austin & McDaniels, 2006; Gardner & Barnes, 2007; Roksa, Feldon, & Maher, 2018; Weidman, 2010). In this study, we consider socialization as an ongoing dialectical and cultural process that should change both the individual student and the institution within which they find themselves (Austin & McDaniels,

2006; Tierney, 1997; Tierney & Rhoads, 1993). This definition is important, given the present study's focus on marginalization and disempowerment.

Importantly, academic identity is continually constructed through the act of navigating the “discourses of knowledge and master narratives within the academy” (Giampapa, 2011, p. 135; Hoang & Pretorius, 2019). Academic identity development, therefore, relies on the navigation of the oftentimes tacit or unspoken knowledge and practices in academia. Consequently, we define doctoral students' *academic identity development* as the continual construction of a sense of self through the actions of appropriating or rejecting the values and practices of academia. It has been noted that implicit knowledge and practices can create “an environment of invisible exclusiveness where those who ‘know’ become privileged and those who do not are forever held at the margins” (Badenhorst & Xu, 2016, p. 2). Consequently, the implicit nature of academic identity development can contribute to an environment where the voices of PhD students can become marginalized within the broader academic institution. In this study, marginalization refers to an environment where PhD students' voices can be seen as *peripheral* in importance compared with those of the institutions who *control* the educational experience (i.e., the institutional bodies or funding agencies that determine the rules or practices that govern academia). When the voices of doctoral students are marginalized, they no longer engage in this dialectical co-construction of the institution, which disempowers them as members of the academy.

Purpose of the Present Study

This study explores doctoral students' expectations of, and lived realities in, their PhD program to better understand how the discourses and practices of academia influence their academic identity development. We examine students' reasons for pursuing a PhD and explore

their experiences of building their disciplinary knowledge, professional skills, and academic identities throughout their candidature. The findings from this study demonstrate that doctoral students perceive the PhD as an all-consuming endeavor and, at the same time, a degree of competing demands. Importantly, several doctoral students' academic identities were laden with conceptions of marginalization, which evoked feelings of disempowerment and lead to a lack of agency. Therefore, this study advocates for a doctoral environment where different forms of human capital are valued and the voices of PhD students are respected within the academy.

Theoretical Framework

In recognition of the dynamic and complex power relationship that exists within doctoral education, this study was conducted through the lens of Bourdieu's theory of practice (1977, 1990; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Bourdieu's theory of practice is a theory designed to better understand how individuals vie for, and acquire, social success. For Bourdieu, social practice is understood through "domination and relative strength that [...] is mainly the result of unequal allocation of resources within the society" (Walther, 2014, p. 7). As such, this is not an ontological theory of social practice, but rather an economic theory concerned with the production, quality, quantity, and distribution of abstract and concrete resources (Hage, 2013; Macaulay, 2020). Bourdieu's theory of practice was chosen because it recognizes the complexity of power and success within social and institutional structures (Agbenyega & Klibthong, 2015). Furthermore, Bourdieu's theory acknowledges the dynamic role agency plays in shaping individuals' relationships with their social, political, and institutional context (Macaulay, 2020).

In particular, this study uses Bourdieu's inter-related conceptual thinking tools (*field*, *doxa*, *illusio*, *capital*, and *habitus*) as a theoretical framework (see Figure 1). *Field* describes the

System of thoughts, attitudes and ways of understanding academia

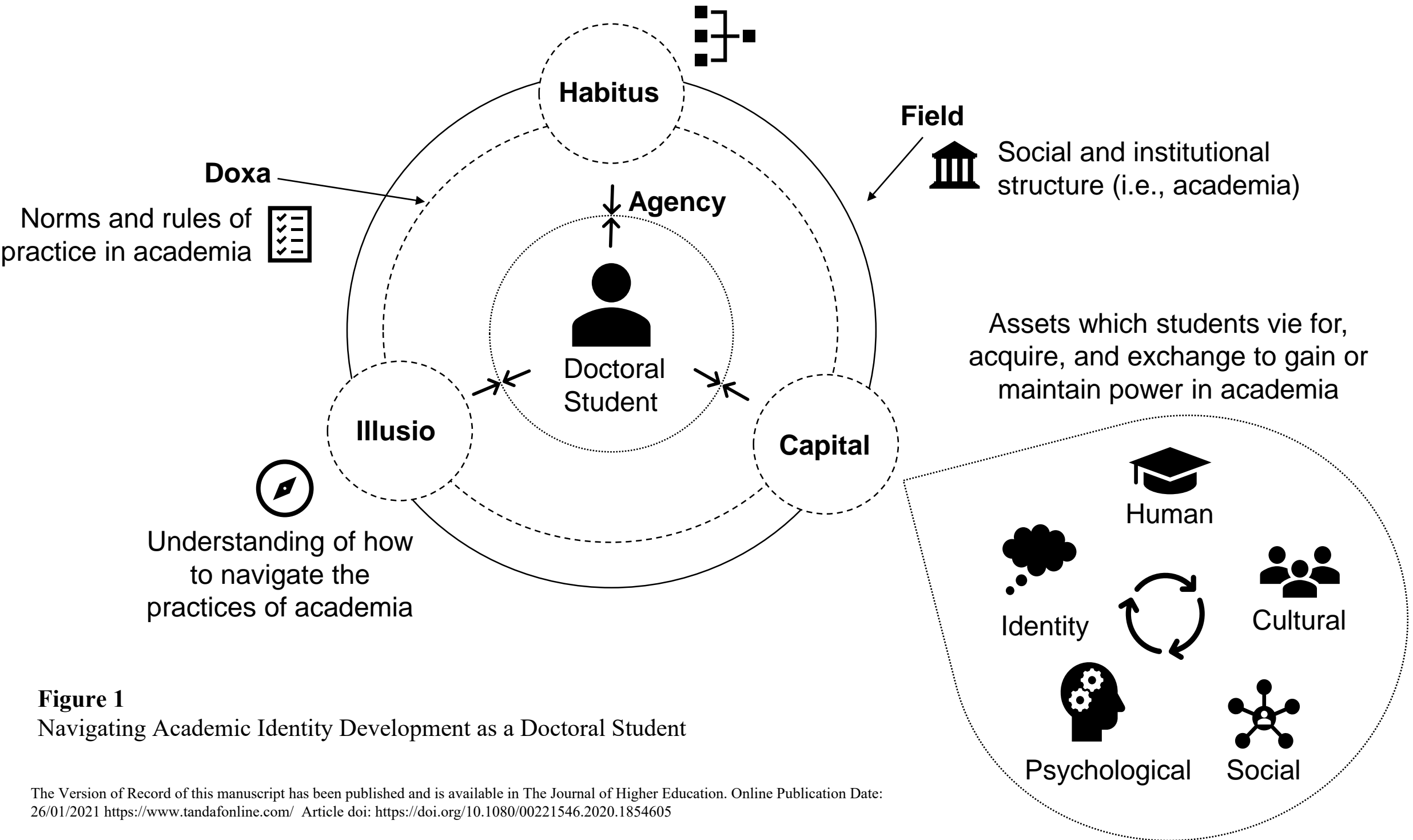


Figure 1
Navigating Academic Identity Development as a Doctoral Student

social and institutional structure within which individuals find themselves (Bourdieu, 1977, 1990; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Within this field (i.e., academia), there are certain norms or values that are constantly developed, setting the rules of practice within the context. These ‘rules of the game’ are set by those dominant in the field and tacitly accepted by the individuals active within the field, a concept termed *doxa* (Bourdieu, 1977; Nguyen, 2019). *Doxa* is also inter-related with *illusio*, a concept that refers to the investments that individuals make to commit to the socially constructed logic and values of the field (Nguyen, 2019; Webb, Schirato, & Danaher, 2002; Webb et al., 2017). *Illusio*, therefore, demonstrates an individual’s understanding of how to navigate the practice in a specific field which is dependent on an individual’s agency. In this study, field, *doxa*, and *illusio* were used to understand doctoral students’ agency within academia.

[Insert Figure 1 here]

Capital refers to the assets which individuals vie for, acquire, and exchange to gain or maintain power within their fields of practice (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Macaulay, 2020). Bourdieu (1998) outlined four types of capital: economic capital (i.e., wealth or monetary resources), social capital (i.e., social connections), cultural capital (i.e., knowledge of the culture of society), and symbolic capital (i.e., social status/prestige). Bourdieu demonstrated that differences in relative acquisition of these different types of capital can either advantage or disadvantage individuals, influencing their perceived power within the field (see, e.g., Bourdieu, 1988). This classification of capital has been expanded by Tomlinson (2017) to describe the different forms of capital graduates need to succeed in their respective fields (see Figure 1). For Tomlinson (2017), capital includes human capital (technical knowledge and professional skills), social capital (networks or relationships), cultural capital (cultural knowledge and embodied

behaviors), identity capital (formation of work identities), and psychological capital (resilience, self-efficacy, and adaptability). The present study focuses specifically on the interplay between doctoral students' human and identity capitals as they navigate the field of doctoral education. For the purposes of this study, *human capital* refers to the discipline-specific technical knowledge and professional skills that students obtain during their doctoral studies. Juxtaposed against this emphasis on measurable knowledge and skills is the more nebulous concept of identity capital. In this study, *identity capital* refers to the attainment of an academic identity through the social practices of academia.

Habitus can be defined as a system of thoughts, attitudes and ways of understanding that are constantly constructed within the social world (Bourdieu, 1977; Nguyen, 2019). Habitus occurs through the process of socialization as individuals develop a shared and internalized understanding of the norms of the field of practice (Mendoza, Kuntz, & Berger, 2012). In other words, habitus structures individuals or groups to reinforce the existing structures within the society (Agbenyega & Klibthong, 2015; Bourdieu, 1977, 1984). In this study, habitus was used to explore how students' interactions with the structures of academia shaped their academic identity.

Research Context

Australia is an ethnically and linguistically diverse nation with 29.7% of the population born overseas (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2020). Furthermore, international education is one of Australia's largest sources of revenue, contributing \$37.6 billion to the economy (Department of Education, 2019a). Indeed, enrolments from international students comprise 21.9% of all enrolments in the Australian higher education sector (Department of Education, 2019b). In

Australia, Australian and New Zealand citizens, Australian permanent residents and holders of permanent humanitarian visas are classified as domestic students. International students are those students who hold temporary visas to study in Australia. These temporary visas also allow international students to work in Australia during their course of study (Department of Home Affairs, 2020).

Doctoral training programs in Australia are predominantly based on a research apprenticeship model. During their candidature, students conduct an independent research project over three to four years (full-time) while supervised by a team of at least two supervisors. Entry into an Australian doctoral program requires completion of at least three years of undergraduate study, in addition to either an honors year or master's level degree that incorporates a research component (The Group of Eight, 2013). A distinguishing feature of the Australian doctoral program is that independent research forms the focus of the degree; discipline-specific coursework is usually not required (The Group of Eight, 2013). In the ever-changing and multi-faceted employment environment, doctoral graduates need to develop not only their discipline knowledge but also their professional skills. Some Australian universities have consequently also incorporated compulsory professional skills development into their doctoral programs (The Group of Eight, 2013).

The present study was conducted at a large Australian research-intensive university that is part of The Group of Eight (Australia's leading research-intensive universities, The Group of Eight, 2020) and is ranked as one of the top 1% of all universities worldwide (Times Higher Education, 2020). The professional development component of the doctoral program at this university is designed to develop professional skills in the areas of research and teaching, as well as professionalism, innovation, and employability. Doctoral students are required to complete

three milestone seminars during their candidature, presenting their research progress to date in both oral and written form. Students also have to demonstrate progress towards completion of the required professional skills training. Successful completion of a milestone seminar signifies their progression to the next year of their degree. It is important to note that, while this study was conducted in Australia, the challenges faced by doctoral students in neoliberal higher education institutions have been documented across the world, including in the United States, Europe, and the Asia-Pacific region. Consequently, we believe that the findings from this study will be relevant to scholars in many countries.

Methodology

Ethics

The design, data collection, and analysis procedures of this project were approved by the university's Human Research Ethics Committee. All participants were informed of the nature of the study and provided informed consent.

Study Design

This paper presents the analysis of the first set of findings from a large mixed-methods study designed to explore the wellbeing of doctoral students during their candidature. The study followed a concurrent triangulation mixed methods design that incorporated the collection of both quantitative and qualitative data at the same time (see Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007). An online modality for data collection for this project was chosen as it provided participants with a low-risk environment within which to reflect on their personal mental wellbeing. It was thought that face-to-face discussions with a staff member who had an unequal power relationship with

the participants may hinder the collection of accurate responses, particularly with regard to the psychological wellbeing questions.

The research design was aimed at encouraging students to reflect on their own experiences during their doctoral candidature. It has been shown that reflection promotes personal growth and self-discovery; reflective practice is, therefore, now considered a key higher-order thinking skill for doctoral students to foster personal epistemology (Cahusac de Caux, Lam, Lau, Hoang, & Pretorius, 2017; Lam et al., 2019; Pretorius & Ford, 2016). Consequently, the research design of this project was structured to allow participants to explore the disciplinary content they had learnt during their candidature, as well as evaluate their professional skills and their place within academia.

Participant Recruitment

Participants were recruited through purposeful sampling (see Palinkas et al., 2015). Expressions of interest were sought from 41 PhD students from the Arts, Education, Science, and Medicine, Nursing and Health Sciences faculties within the university. These PhD students were chosen with the purpose of documenting the diversity of students' experiences, while also exploring common patterns across participants. In total, 29 PhD students agreed to participate in the study (a response rate of 70.7%). As part of the survey, students were asked to choose their own pseudonym and provide demographic data (see Table 1). Participants were at various stages of their candidature and the majority of these students (28) were from social science disciplines (i.e., Arts or Education). One participant was from a medical science discipline. While there are distinct norms in different academic disciplines which could influence academic identity development, we chose not to exclude this one participant for two reasons. Firstly, this participant had previously studied a degree in a humanities-based discipline. Several of the other

participants in the study had also previously studied in disciplines outside of social sciences. Secondly, our study is based on the premise that we wanted to privilege the voices of doctoral students. By excluding one or some of the participants, we felt that we would be further contributing to the silencing of their voices. As such, all 29 participants who completed the online survey were included in the study.

[Insert Table 1 here]

As mentioned earlier, Australia is a multicultural nation and this was reflected in the participant cohort of this study. Participants were linguistically diverse, with more than three-quarters of the cohort speaking English in addition to at least one other language. The participants represented both domestic (9) and international (20) students and were from ethnically diverse backgrounds: Australasia (6), Europe (2), East Asia (4), South Asia (2), Southeast Asia (11), the Middle East (3), and undisclosed (1). It has previously been argued that while Australia is a demographically multicultural nation, social, political, and institutional practices are often underpinned by hegemonic Anglo-Celtic norms (see, e.g., Baak, 2011, 2016). As a relatively young nation state, Australia has a contentious colonial settler past with an “ongoing denial of Indigenous sovereignty over the land” (Due, 2008, p. 1). Australia also has a controversial history of racialized immigration policies, including the Immigration Restriction Act 1901 (colloquially known as the ‘White Australia’ policy, see Baak, 2011; Macaulay & Deppeler, 2020). Given these examples of the power structures within Australian society, we acknowledge that ethnicity is associated with discourses of inequality relating to power and opportunity. Consequently, in this study, we define ethnicity as “a two-dimensional, context-specific, social construct with an attributional dimension that describes group characteristics (e.g., culture, nativity) and a relational dimension that indexes a group’s location within a social

Table 1*Participant Demographics*

Participant (Pseudonym)	Gender	Ethnic Origin	Domestic/ International	Stage in PhD Candidature
Anna	Female	Australasia	Domestic	First Year
Henry	Male	Middle East	International	First Year
Mary	Female	East Asia	International	First Year
Rami	Female	South Asia	International	First Year
Cassy	Female	South Asia	International	Second Year
Em	Female	East Asia	International	Second Year
James	Male	Middle East	International	Second Year
Melani	Female	Middle East	International	Second Year
Melissa	Female	Southeast Asia	International	Second Year
Natasha	Female	Australasia	Domestic	Second Year
Reza	Male	Southeast Asia	International	Second Year
Azu	Male	East Asia	Domestic	Third Year
Cora	Female	Europe	Domestic	Third Year
Harry	Male	Australasia	Domestic	Third Year
Keisha	Female	Southeast Asia	International	Third Year
Lindsay	Female	Australasia	Domestic	Third Year
Liz	Female	East Asia	International	Third Year
Memet	Male	Southeast Asia	International	Third Year
Noni	Undisclosed	Undisclosed	International	Third Year
Pippi	Female	Southeast Asia	International	Third Year
Rasta	Female	Southeast Asia	International	Third Year
Sally	Female	Australasia	Domestic	Third Year
Sonia	Female	Southeast Asia	International	Third Year
Vivian	Female	Southeast Asia	International	Third Year
Cherry	Female	Southeast Asia	Domestic	Recent Graduate
Joseph	Male	Europe	International	Recent Graduate
Robert	Male	Australasia	Domestic	Recent Graduate
Sheldon	Male	Southeast Asia	International	Recent Graduate
Tam	Female	Southeast Asia	International	Recent Graduate

hierarchy (e.g., minority vs. majority status)” (Ford & Harawa, 2010, p. 251). This definition emphasizes that ethnicity is not only dependent on the unique socio-cultural characteristics with which members choose to identify, but also involves how these characteristics are perceived, situated, and reinforced within the wider society (Ford & Harawa, 2010).

Qualitative Data Collection and Analysis

Qualitative data were collected through closed and open-ended questions that were designed to explore participants’ reasons for undertaking doctoral training, encourage reflection on personal wellbeing, and identify potential barriers to wellbeing in doctoral programs. In this paper, we present the analyses of participants’ responses to the following three qualitative questions:

1. “Why did you choose to study a PhD?”
2. “Would you recommend studying a PhD to other students?”
3. “Any other comments?”

The first two questions were designed to explore the students’ reasons for pursuing doctoral studies as well as their educational experiences to date. The third question was intentionally broad to allow students to draw attention to anything that was of particular concern to them. This is in alignment with the researchers’ view that PhD students’ voices need to be highlighted in academia. Responses to this question were used to explore the students’ human and identity capital, allowing the researchers to understand the participants’ sense of power within academia. Key to our conceptualization of identity in this study is the ways individuals construct their identity through the narratives they shape and present to others (in this case, us, as the researchers). Therefore, by better understanding participants’ own perspectives of their

human capital and identity capital, we could also better understand how students valued their academic identity relative to the power structures of their institution.

Following completion of the initial data collection, several electronic follow-up email-based conversations were conducted with participants to further elucidate the concepts identified in their responses. For example, the responses to the question “Would you recommend studying a PhD to other students?” were quantified, as the participants were provided with three options (“Yes”, “No”, and “Maybe”). These responses were then examined in concert with their answers to other questions. If it was still unclear why they would or would not recommend the PhD to others, participants were then asked to provide an explanation for their choice. Through these electronic conversations, therefore, participants were able to divulge any further information they felt was relevant to the study.

Reflexive Thematic Analysis

We used reflexive thematic analysis (see Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019; Braun, Clarke, Hayfield, & Terry, 2019) to analyze the qualitative data in our study. In brief, the researchers familiarized themselves with the data by reading the participants’ responses (Braun et al., 2019). The data were then coded to identify the main concepts highlighted in each participant’s answers and these concepts were constructed into themes through a process of revision and redefinition (Braun et al., 2019). We consider these constructed themes as representative of both the semantic and latent content of the participants’ responses (Braun et al., 2019). Importantly, we acknowledge the contextual nature of the themes that were constructed, noting the importance of the researchers’ reflexive analysis throughout the process (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Braun et al., 2019).

Voice-Centered Relational Methodology

To examine the voices of participants in relation to themselves, others, as well as the cultural and socio-political systems and structures in which they find themselves, Macaulay's (2020) adaptation of the voice-centered relational methodology listening guide (Gilligan & Eddy, 2017; Gilligan, Spencer, Weinberg, & Bertsch, 2003) was employed. This approach examines narratives through the multiple layers and relationships that are evident in personal accounts, allowing researchers to highlight the voices of those that may be vulnerable to marginalization (Gilligan & Eddy, 2017; Macaulay, 2020). Voice-centered relational methodology allowed us to explore participants' narratives using four perspectives. Firstly, the overall narrative was explored to identify the story that was being told by each participant (Macaulay, 2020). Secondly, each narrative was examined to understand how the individual positioned themselves within their story (Macaulay, 2020). This was done by identifying instances where participants referred to themselves and analyzing how these references were framed within the narrative (Macaulay, 2020). Thirdly, the relational aspects of the narrative were explored by examining how the participant situated others within their story (Macaulay, 2020). This perspective allowed us to examine the dynamics of the power relationships that were present within participant narratives (Brown & Gilligan, 1991; Macaulay, 2020; Paliadelis & Cruickshank, 2008). Finally, the social, political, and cultural contexts within which these narratives occur were examined (Macaulay, 2020). This allowed us to explore how participants perceived the dominant culture or institutions within which they found themselves (Macaulay, 2020). Through these four lenses, the polyphonic nature of participants' voices could be elucidated, particularly in relation to the social and cultural contexts in which they occur (Brown & Gilligan, 1991; Gilligan & Eddy, 2017; Macaulay, 2020).

An important component of the voice-centered relational methodology adopted in this study was the construction of pronoun poems. This process allowed us to highlight the contrapuntal properties of participant narratives (i.e., the multiple layers of voices that occurred in harmony or dissonance within a narrative, Gilligan & Eddy, 2017; Macaulay, 2020). To achieve this outcome, the longer narratives of Azu, Lindsay, Robert, and Melani were analyzed relative to the use of first-person pronouns (e.g., “I”, “me”, or “my”), second-person pronouns (e.g., “you” or “yourself”), third-person pronouns (e.g., “it”, “they”, or “them”) and pronouns indicating mimicry or quotes of others (e.g., “Students say...”). This allowed us to construct pronoun poems, by presenting pronouns with important surrounding verbs or phrases to convey the latent meaning of each participant’s narrative (Macaulay, 2020). By focusing on how participants relationally situated their voices, we were able to investigate the PhD students’ human and identity capitals as well as the perceived power of the institution within which they found themselves. An example of the construction of a pronoun poem is shown in Figure 2.

[Insert Figure 2 here]

It is important to note that voice-centered relational methodology is closely linked with the theoretical framework used in this study (Macaulay, 2020). Consequently, the concepts of field, doxa, illusio, habitus, and capital were considered while analyzing participants’ narratives to understand the socio-political and cultural context of academia. In particular, the concepts of field, doxa, and illusio were important in contextualizing the voices of participants within academia to better understand the intentions behind participants’ voices. Furthermore, habitus and capital were used to understand how participants executed and used their voices to navigate academia.

Another important reason is that, for many students like me who want to stay in Australia, our scholarship terminates once we graduate and we need to quickly find a job so that we can survive living here.

For many students like me who want to stay in Australia
Our scholarship terminates
Once we graduate
We need to quickly find a job
So that we can survive living here

Figure 2
Construction of a Pronoun Poem from a Participant Narrative

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness of the qualitative data analyses were established through reflexivity, agreement between co-researchers, provision of representative quotes, respondent validation, and data triangulation. Final analyses were also reviewed by participants and, where appropriate, participants were asked to provide contextual reasons for patterns that were identified. In this way, the participants contributed to the interpretation of the findings and co-constructed meaning with the researchers (Varpio, Ajjawi, Monrouxe, O'Brien, & Rees, 2017).

Quantitative Data Collection and Analysis

Quantitative data were collected to understand the current wellbeing of PhD students and assess the influence of personal, social, and institutional factors that could affect their educational experience and academic identity development. Participants were asked to answer a series of Likert-type items designed to measure the influence of factors such as workload, publishing and funding pressures, support networks, and interpersonal relationships on doctoral wellbeing. This study presents the findings from two of these Likert-type items:

1. "I want to be a lecturer/researcher when I graduate"
2. "I want to work in industry after I complete my studies"

Both of these items are directly related to the students' perceptions of themselves and their place within academia. As noted earlier, participants were asked to explain their initial reasons for pursuing a doctoral degree. The two Likert-type questions, in contrast, provided a picture of participants' career intentions at the time of the study. We acknowledge that it would have been useful to collect additional longitudinal data (i.e., surveying participants at the start of their PhD

and again towards the end of their PhD), as this would have provided a measure of academic identity development during the PhD. This was not, however, possible in the current study.

The participants' responses to the Likert-type items were quantified by assigning a numerical value to each of the categories: Strongly Disagree = 1, Disagree = 2, Neutral = 3, Agree = 4, and Strongly Agree = 5. Results are presented as mean \pm standard error and were calculated using GraphPad Prism. The median value for each question and the 95% confidence intervals are also provided to strengthen the reliability of the quantitative analyses.

Results

Reasons for pursuing a PhD

When asked to explain why they chose to study a PhD, participants identified three main reasons. Firstly, many participants pursued doctoral studies to enable them to work in academia in the future (e.g., Melissa stated "I want to be equipped with research skills to be able to teach in the university or in higher education"). Secondly, participants pursued doctoral studies to pursue a particular passion or research interest; they wanted to learn more about themselves and build personal knowledge.

Initially, studying a PhD was a challenge that I wished to overcome, and I thought that completing the PhD would be good for me personally, intellectually and academically. Toward the end of my candidature, I have been more conscious that I have something to say and I can make an original contribution to knowledge.
(Pippi)

I commenced my Phd because I believed it was a good way to make my life better, to leave my country, engage my brain with activities other than what I was

used to do, escape from a monotonous life style and become a better person.
(James)

Finally, participants pursued doctoral studies to benefit the societies in which they found themselves.

To find ways to help disadvantaged children through play (Em)

I hope that my work will eventually influence the way other teachers are taught and supported in their work (Anna)

Throughout their responses, students did not seem interested in completing a PhD for the prestige associated with having the title of *doctor*. In other words, students were not pursuing a doctoral degree to gain what Bourdieu (1998) termed symbolic capital. Rather, the PhD students in this study chose to pursue doctoral studies for career success, self-discovery or personal growth, and social justice (i.e., to promote a society where all members have "equal access to the benefits of their society", Hemphill, 2015, p. 2).

Career Aspirations

The majority of participants (25) indicated that they definitely wanted to work in academia upon graduation (mean: 4.38 ± 0.15 ; median: 5.00, 95% CI [4.00, 5.00]). Participants were more indecisive when asked whether they wanted to work in industry (mean: 3.17 ± 0.19 ; median: 3.00, 95% CI [3.00, 4.00]). Only one participant was certain that she did not want to work in academia (Lindsay), while seven participants were insistent that they did not want to work in industry (Melanie, Em, Henry, Reza, Robert, Noni, and Rasta).

In order to approximate changes in participants' initial reasons for studying a PhD and their current career aspirations, we triangulated data from the qualitative and quantitative

components of the study. Most participants' (25) initial reasons for pursuing a PhD aligned with their current intentions to either stay in academia or work in industry. Two participants (Sheldon and Em) seemed to have altered their intentions, but the direction of this change was unclear. For example, Em initially wanted to help her local community, but now did not want to work outside of academia. However, she also did not seem interested in working within academia, indicating a level of uncertainty as to where she belonged. Finally, two participants (Sally and Lindsay) had initially expressed the intention to pursue research but were now more interested in working in industry.

Recommending the PhD to Others

While 11 participants would recommend the PhD to other students, 17 were more uncertain of whether others should attempt the degree. Lindsay stated that she would definitely not recommend the PhD to prospective students. When asked to elaborate why they gave these answers, participants focused predominantly on two themes: academic passion and level of commitment.

I am hugely enjoying studying for my PhD, but I am very passionate about my field and have quite a lot of experience in balancing multiple projects. I would recommend doing a PhD to someone who was also passionate, but not simply for the sake of doing one. (Anna)

The advice I would give to somebody considering studying a PhD would be to think about it very carefully [...] because it is a very big commitment. The time and energy required is vast. It requires having a great support network and realistic expectations of one's self and how these are balanced with the expectations of the university. From my experiences, myself and many other candidates I speak to feel the weight of this process. (Harry)

The participants in this study were particularly concerned about how competing demands could negatively impact someone's capacity to successfully complete a PhD. The participants felt that the PhD could become all-consuming. Given that the participants felt that the PhD was an opportunity for self-discovery, personal growth, and social justice, it stands to reason that they would only want to recommend the PhD to those who could be devoted to the task. This was exemplified by Rami:

A PhD can be both a challenging and a thrilling experience or even a combination of the two. Not everyone can go through the process and emerge successful. It's important to understand or estimate the amount of commitment, humility and devotion one requires to be able to make the most of the journey.

Building Human Capital During the PhD

Several students highlighted the importance of acquiring what we previously defined as *human capital* (i.e., discipline-specific knowledge and professional skills) as part of their PhD. This is not surprising, given that the PhD is awarded to individuals who become subject-matter experts (Cahusac de Caux, 2019). What was, however, interesting was that students did not predominantly focus on gaining discipline-specific knowledge (e.g., specific methodologies, theories, or frameworks in their fields). Rather, students' reflections often highlighted the importance of professional skills (e.g., academic writing, critical thinking, learning how to publish, networking, or teamwork). Students considered these skills as an essential form of human capital for their future career success.

Some of the most important soft skills are interpersonal skills, leadership skills, networking skills, teamwork, empathy, and intercultural competence. All these

skills combined allow a researcher to navigate comfortably/smoothly in their study within a university. (Azu)

I also feel the pressure to be active on social media as a means to sell myself and my research irrespective of whether I am comfortable or not. Another example I can think of is the professional development courses offered on topics such as networking, and getting serious about one's potential as a doctoral student. (Rami)

Several students in this study felt that the PhD itself was not sufficient to find post-PhD employment. They lamented the fact that the professional skills were not explicitly taught in their PhD program. In many cases, students felt that they were required to seek out opportunities to learn new skills themselves. However, students also felt that they could not easily recognize the skills they already possessed and, consequently, found it difficult to find opportunities for further skill development.

There are so many different aspects to learn about and it's difficult to know what you don't know. This leaves you always wondering whether you are missing something. There are also many different perspectives offered by others - everyone's experience is so different that it's hard to work out what advice applies to you and what does not. (Cora)

Macaulay and Davies (2019) recently noted that academic institutions invoke a type of moral responsabilization that “transfers complete responsibility of all tasks, processes, learning, relationships, negotiations, and time management onto individual PhD candidates through the structures and systems of the institution” (p. 170). This was a common feature of students’ responses, highlighting the power the institution had in establishing the practices of the field, particularly through the accountability milestones of the PhD.

We are in a compact PhD program with three milestones, each have it's own set of requirements to be accomplished in time! So, we really can't afford getting sick, dealing with problems outside of university etc. because [we] are under constant time pressure for meeting deadlines. We even have to meet our supervisors every fortnight. (Melani)

Since there is no exact right and wrong in Education, I am always afraid of what [is] to come. I am afraid of having panel[s] which are different from those who examined me in the [first and second milestone]. Even though the previous panel said that I was doing good, I am afraid I get other panels and that they have other opinions of my thesis. The same thing applies for examination by external examiner after thesis submission. Things seem to be mysterious. (Reza)

When students spoke about the institution, this did not necessarily only refer to the university where they were currently studying. For several students, this term also reflected other governmental or institutional forces that influenced their future prospects. As such, conceptions of *the institution* for the students in this study reflected the broader definition of *those who had perceived power over them*. This included their supervisors, the university more broadly, the funding bodies of their scholarships in their home country, their future employers, or immigration institutions (e.g., Sonia noted “There should be more supports for international students as their pressure to graduate on time is higher due to the strict of scholarship funding”). These institutional forces were often interwoven, as exemplified in Rami’s narrative:

There is a looming and seemingly invisible competition for publications, research assistantships and teaching positions. [...] The pursuit of academics is highly governed by market forces and the systems that have been created to weed out so called 'under-performing' individuals. The competition and struggles intensify because not only am I a woman but I'm also a woman of colour and an immigrant.

Developing Identity Capital During the PhD

Students' lack of confidence in their human capital often manifested itself as a feeling of being an academic fraud (commonly termed the imposter phenomenon). This affected their sense of identity. For example, Melissa despaired:

Critical thinking wasn't really focused when I was in my primary and secondary years. In college, I did a different Bachelors degree (Bachelor of Industrial Technology- Major in Electronics Technology). [...] I think if the student has low tolerance and not courageous enough, I guess it is harder. I am also the type of person who is not that assertive and I just obey and follow whatever is instructed. Writing academically is also a challenge. [...] I feel like my education background isn't enough. [...] Sometimes I ask my trusted friends if I am the dumbest PhD student ever in the Faculty of Education.

This imposter phenomenon was also seen in several recently published autoethnographies by other doctoral students (see Pretorius et al., 2019). Importantly, this level of uncertainty often hindered students' confidence in accessing resources that may be available, as highlighted by Joseph's narrative:

I suffered some stress during the start and end of my doctoral studies, as well as imposter syndrome at certain stages (e.g. when faced with a milestone). [...] The tools and resources available to doctoral students can be difficult to come across and utilise, particularly at the early stages of candidature.

Even when students demonstrated a high level of identity capital, they were uncertain as to how to actualize this capital within academia. For example, Pippi had a clear understanding of herself and her academic identity. Indeed, she chose her pseudonym to represent her own character and her vision of her future.

The pseudonym I chose for myself, Pippi, was inspired by the character Pippi Longstocking by Swedish writer Astrid Lindgren. Pippi was small, lively, naive, and carefree, but she was also physically strong. She pushed conventional boundaries and had a good sense of fairness and justice.

Yet, Pippi still felt that navigating the bureaucracy of academia was the most significant challenge she had faced during her studies.

I think micro-politics and bureaucracy are disturbing challenges to PhD students. [...] It took me a lot of time to 'work around' the system and get a sense of both connotative and denotative meaning of messages. Although students are generally encouraged to ask questions, I have learned to read between the lines to decide when and whom to ask. For me it was disturbing because universities are supposed to foster academic freedom and safe talks.

Similarly, Lindsay felt that the main challenge she faced was a lack of clarity about how to become a conveyor of knowledge (i.e., her expectation of what her role as a doctoral graduate should be).

The process of getting it wrong so many times and then having critical feedback without really knowing how to rectify the issue meant that the confidence needed to be a conveyor of knowledge did not develop to the extent needed in the final stages of the phd. [...] I have tried to work out how to be a conveyor of knowledge in an academic written form for myself and with the help of academic support services. This has been taxing intellectually but VERY taxing on my sense of self and my sense of self worth as a scholar.

Narratives of Disempowerment

When speaking about the societal and cultural context of their studies, students tended to place themselves outside of the narrative, indicating that they wished to speak more broadly,

rather than personally. This was often in stark contrast with the rest of the narratives where participants placed themselves in the center of their own narratives. For example, when Azu and Lindsay spoke about their own strengths and weaknesses, there was surety, conviction, and vulnerability evident in their narratives; they were the central characters of their story. However, when they spoke about their position within the institution, they were distant and neutral.

I had a poor relationship with one of my supervisors [...] As a consequence, I was very stuck with my phd, especially in the first and second year. [...] In a research environment, independent work is required most of the time, but a researcher may also find that they could be stuck with a project /research direction. (Azu)

This demonstrates the power that students attributed to the institution: it was seen as distant and omnipotent, often leaving students feeling marginalized and disempowered.

A key feature of the voice-relational methodology analysis was that several students' academic identities were laden with conceptions of marginalization which manifested as anger, resentment, and/or disconnectedness, evoking feelings of disempowerment. For Azu and Lindsay, these feelings of disempowerment lead to a lack of agency to build their own human capital (see Table 2). Azu, for example, acknowledged the importance of technical and professional skills, but felt disempowered to develop these forms of capital due to the pressures of time imposed upon him by the institution (see Table 2). This lack of agency, combined with challenges in the student-supervisor relationship, lead to a negative educational experience for Azu.

[Insert Table 2 here]

Robert's and Melani's narratives were filled with anger, resentment, and confusion. These feelings were clearly linked to forms of institutional power (see Table 3). For example, Robert's resentment was linked to his perception that the institution set the value of his capital,

Table 2

Pronoun Poems Depicting Lack of Agency

Azu	Lindsay
I feel doing a PhD is also hard, technical skills are not directly taught	I think more detailed and interactive workshops are needed
Soft skills are not easily recognised by a student	Help PhD students apply theoretical concepts
Workshops can help, students feel stressed	For some students, theory is fine
Students do have many deadlines	For others, understanding only comes through the process of doing
	There is little to no support for learners who need to practically apply skills

Table 3

Pronoun Poems of Institutional Power

Robert	Melani
I felt and still feel abandoned by [the institution]	I talked
After my candidature was finished, there was no kind of support	My supervisor and co-supervisor
What I could or should do to with my qualification	They agreed
I tried my best to stay connected to the institution	There are paradoxical expectations at the [institution]
It rapidly became clear to me that I was no longer of value to [the institution]	They offer opportunities such as publication awards or exchange programs during your PhD
	You cannot nail them unless you have a publication during your study

disempowering him as an individual (Table 3). Even though Robert included himself throughout his responses, the institution was placed at the center of his narrative. Similarly, Melani felt that others provided the opportunities and set the expectations during her educational experience. She situated herself outside of her own narrative and often did not clearly identify who the other actors in her experiences were, merely referring to them as *they* (Table 3).

[Insert Table 3 here]

It is also important to note that the marginalization and consequent disempowerment experienced by students stood in stark contrast to their espoused reasons for pursuing a PhD, particularly for those students who wanted to pursue social justice. Yet, in their own society of academia, they felt marginalized. Indeed, when participants were provided with the voice-centered relational methodology analysis, Azu noted the dangers of voicing a narrative that was critical of academia. This demonstrates that, even when students are given the opportunity to advocate for improvements to their own learning environment, the powerful influence of the institution remains prevalent in their thoughts.

Discussion

The interactions between human and identity capital served as a useful conceptual lens to better understand participants' reasons for pursuing a PhD and their lived experiences during their studies. We demonstrated that students decided to study a PhD for reasons that were both practically extrinsic (i.e., to gain employment) and personally intrinsic (i.e., to be build personal knowledge and pursue social justice). Furthermore, we showed that doctoral students considered the PhD as something to only be attempted if a person could devote their full attention and energy to the pursuit. This is closely aligned with Bourdieu's (1977) concept of *illusio*, where the intensity of the investments one makes towards the accumulation of identity capital is linked to

an acceptance of the rules for success across fields. Finally, we also highlighted that students perceived the PhD as a degree of competing demands, where forms of human capital were in constant conflict. Acquiring high levels of human capital was identified by participants as being an important component of their success within the field of academia. However, there were points of contention regarding how to best acquire this human capital and which types of human capital were of most value within the field of academia. Students lamented that the human capital they developed as part of their studies focused predominantly on discipline-specific knowledge; the human capital associated with skills that are more transferable was seen as neglected. Yet, students felt that discipline-specific knowledge alone would not be sufficient for future academic success. Consequently, individuals who did not already possess high levels of identity capital missed opportunities to identify and acquire professional skills.

Placing the voices of participants in the center of their narratives highlighted a stark relational disconnect between participants and the institution. In this study, several students' academic identities were laden with conceptions of marginalization which manifested as anger or resentment towards, and disconnectedness from, the institution. A key finding in this study, therefore, was that several participants felt that the institution did not provide them with the agency to build their own human and identity capital. This made them feel marginalized, thereby disempowering them as individuals. Given that the participants in this study considered the PhD as all-consuming, these feelings of disempowerment diminished their educational experience and hindered their academic identity development. For some participants, feelings of disempowerment may have also been further influenced by key components of the intersecting social characteristics of their identities. Certain social characteristics are not inherently vulnerable to institutional disempowerment; rather, contextual interactions within institutions

produce these experiences (Lamb, Jackson, Walstab, & Huo, 2015; Macaulay, Deppeler, & Agbenyega, 2016). It is nevertheless important to note that experiences of intersecting social characteristics can intensify institutional disempowerment, resulting in forms of disadvantage (Macaulay et al., 2016). Therefore, the disempowerment and marginalization of some participants in this study may have been exacerbated by certain social characteristics and their contextual interactions within the institution of the university relative to its prevailing ‘norms’. Indeed, Rami noted this, highlighting that her “struggles” intensified because she was a “a woman of colour and an immigrant”.

From a Bourdieuan perspective, how certain forms of capital are valued and acquired by some participants in relation to their habitus within the field of academia may create contextual challenges. For example, many of the participants in this study were international students, which may have contributed to a lack of social connection (i.e., social capital) within the institution to help them build their academic identity. Additionally, for those participants from more collectivistic backgrounds, the value of social capital may be prized above other forms of capital. Yosso (2005) has previously argued that it is important to assess how capital is valued, as traditional Bourdieuan interpretations can view certain individuals through a deficit lens regarding the forms of capital they *do* and *do not* possess. Yosso (2005) indicates that many minority communities within Western contexts possess high levels of *community cultural wealth* that can assist in forms of social practice. This cultural wealth incorporates *aspirational capital* (the ability to maintain aspirations and goals in the face of adversity) and *resistant capital* (knowledge and skills acquired through experiences of inequity and inequality, Yosso, 2005). In an educational climate where the overall wellbeing of PhD students is alarmingly low (see Lau & Pretorius, 2019), educators and institutional policy-makers should work towards building

doctoral education environments where students' voices are valued. By valuing PhD students' voices within academia, educators can foster students' sense of agency and belonging, and gain a better understanding of the strengths that students possess. Building a culture of belonging for all students is likely to significantly ameliorate the isolation that is often experienced during doctoral studies, thereby positively affecting PhD students' overall wellbeing. Therefore, it is important for institutions to recognize and value the different types of capital that a diverse doctoral student cohort possesses.

Some limitations to this study should be noted. Firstly, this research project was conducted at a single university with participants that were predominantly from social science disciplines. Consequently, the generalizability of the findings in this study may be limited. Secondly, there were no voices in this study that represent institutional perspectives. Future research should, therefore, investigate how doctoral students' status in the institution is understood from the perspectives of those in positions of perceived power. This would allow for a more in-depth exploration of the influence of the institutional context in doctoral students' academic identity development. Finally, further research is also needed to explore the role of psychological, cultural, and social capital on the educational experiences and academic identity development of doctoral students.

Conclusion

Given the findings in this study, we advocate for a doctoral environment where both disciplinary knowledge and professional skills are valued as essential forms of human capital. This is not to say that PhD programs should become vocational training degrees. Rather, PhD programs should encourage students to develop their academic identities through purposeful reflection on the knowledge and skills they already possess. This reflection for learning approach

can enable students to develop the agency they need to better construct their learning journeys so that they can develop the capitals they need for future success. Furthermore, we encourage those within academia to value the voices of doctoral students. This will ensure that we develop future scholars that are able to enter the academy with a strong sense of who they are and where they fit within their field.

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