VALIDATION IN DOCTORAL EDUCATION: EXPLORING PHD STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF BELONGING TO SCAFFOLD DOCTORAL IDENTITY WORK

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ABSTRACT

Aim/Purpose	The aim of this article is to make a case of the role of validation in doctoral education. The purpose is to detail findings from three studies which explore PhD students' experiences and perceptions of belonging in one UK university, in order to hypothesise how validation and self-validation could make a difference in doctoral education, and what practices might support this.
Background	The article draws on research into doctoral identity and work on 'doctoral capital' to explore how PhD students' perceptions and experiences of not belonging to doctoral communities negatively impacts on their wellbeing. It extends this research by incorporating theories from Education and Psychology to build a theory of validation in doctoral education.
Methodology	The article reports on three studies on PhD journeys and communities undertaken at one UK university. It draws on interview data from thirty doctoral candidates, which was thematically analysed using NVivo 12. Taking a qualitative approach to provide a rich and holistic focus on participant 'meaning making', the studies explore how PhD students understand belonging, where they receive validation and feel they need validation, and where self-validation can make a difference to their positivity about the PhD. Taking this approach to understand processes of 'meaning-making' paves the way to scaffold solutions through 're-framing' processes such as coaching and mentoring.
Contribution	Thinking about PhD students' belonging through the dimension of validation allows for practical support for developing belonging to be scaffolded, specifically through creating spaces to draw coaching skills into supervisory training and PhD student support (e.g., peer mentoring). This is significant as scholarship has shown that coaching has positive effects on wellbeing. This article contributes to understanding of where and how validation and self-validation manifest in doctoral education for PhD students. This contribution identifies ways in

which external validation can help to scaffold internal self-validation; thus, offering a way of potentially mitigating risk factors to PhD students' wellbeing. Specifically, validation can be understood as a 'reserve' that can be drawn on for 'self-validation'. Validation is a solutions-focused theory. As a conceptual apparatus to understand doctoral students' perceptions, validation theory also provides a frame for scaffolding practical ways for PhD students to build doctoral identity.

Findings	The article focuses on challenges to PhD students building communities, supervisory relations and self-validation. It finds that supervisory feedback is a key area where PhD students seek validation. Two arguments are offered. First, that validation is a crucial process in (positive) doctoral identity work. Second, the argument is offered that making spaces for coaching skills to support PhD students can increase opportunities for validation (e.g., via supervisory training) and self-validation (e.g., via peer mentoring).
Recommendations for Practitioners	Those who support doctoral researchers can potentially support the development of validation skills and self-validation skills. Some recommendations are included around supporting supervisory training in feedback and listening skills, peer mentoring as a way to foster a transition between external validation and internal self-validation for PhD students, and a worksheet for students' self-validation is included as an appendix.
Recommendations for Researchers	This article extends existing literature on PhD students' emotion work by offering a new dimension to understand how belonging is developed amongst PhD students. Thinking about belonging through the dimension of validation shifts work on belonging towards possibilities of practical support.
Impact on Society	Whilst the term 'validation' has been used in undergraduate educational research, and in Psychology (in theory and in clinical contexts) drawing these terms together to create a theory to understand doctoral identity work in higher education has larger potential applications. 'Validation' could potentially prove useful within doctoral education context to understand and scaffold PhD students' development as they navigate transitioning identity positions during candidature. Thus, although the studies are limited in scope to the UK context, the findings could be more widely applied to other higher education contexts.
Future Research	Two areas for future research are identified. First, to understand whether and how different groups of doctoral candidates (e.g., such as international students, LGBTQ+ students, etc.) have different validation needs and priorities in their doctoral identity work. The second is to understand the possible impact of using coaching with PhDs in different contexts (e.g., through peer mentoring schemes, supervision, and self-validation).
Keywords	validation, self-validation, doctoral identity work, belonging, PhD students, graduate teaching assistants

INTRODUCTION

Validation is a key process in doctoral identity work. Whilst identity work designates broadly how people engage "in forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising the constructions that are productive of a sense of coherence and distinctiveness" (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003, p. 1165), doctoral identity work specifically describes the construction of PhD doctoral candidature as

an identity involving particular kinds of work and related habits, organisational, intellectual, and cultural forms of interaction, belonging, and practices (Barnacle & Mewburn, 2010; Kamler & Thomson, 2014; Mewburn, 2011). Within this complex navigation and building of an identity, PhD students understand their success and progress in accordance with whether they derive/receive validation and affirmation of these practices. Here, validation is a kind of 'emotion work' (Collins & Brown, 2020) around the PhD, and acknowledgment of students' roles in knowledge creation fosters their academic development and confidence. Validation can be understood as derived from an external source, or internally given self-validation. It is timely to consider this, as recent research has shown that around 30-40% of postgraduate researchers are at risk of developing a psychiatric disorder (such as depression) across the course of their studies (Guthrie et al., 2017; Levecque et al., 2017; Metcalfe et al., 2018), with isolation as a key risk factor in PhD students developing stress and depression (Metcalfe et al., 2018). A survey by Vitae and SMaRteN (2020) during lockdown showed isolation was even more pronounced amongst female and international researchers. With greater doctoral student isolation during the pandemic, it becomes more pressing to ensure that validation is scaffolded for PhD students, in order to support their wellbeing.

This article develops a theory of 'validation'. 'Validation' thus far has not been applied to doctoral education (except Collins & Brown, 2020). Developing a theory of validation in doctoral education thus extends valuable work on how PhD students' perceptions and experiences of not belonging to doctoral communities negatively impacts on their wellbeing. The article draws on studies from education and psychology to posit that validating PhD students provides a scaffolding that can help foster a sense of their belonging and confidence. Validation is defined as recognition for PhD students; specifically, in their development of their own scholarship, where a match between the individual and the environment (Beasy et al., 2021) is routinely reaffirmed, and importantly, where the development of an academic identity (doctoral identity work) is encouraged and acknowledged. The article contends that receipt of external validation can provide resources from which students self-validate. This definition has been influenced by hearing this term used across years of coaching PhD students (although these students do not feature in this study). In the definition of 'validation', this article offers solutions-focused approach by suggesting where, in practice, validation might be scaffolded in the doctoral experience.

This article offers a two-point argument. Firstly, as outlined, it argues that validation is a key process in doctoral identity work. Secondly (drawing on Education, Coaching and Psychology scholarship), it contends that making spaces for coaching skills to support PhD students can increase opportunities for validation. This contributes to doctoral studies by moving towards a 'broaden and build' approach (Frederickson, 2001), which understands (external) validation as a means of building personal resources throughout the PhD that can reinforce internal self-validation, and ultimately 'doctoral identity'. The 'broaden and build' theory sees the experience of positive emotions as an accrual of intellectual and psychological (and other) resources (Frederickson, 2001, p. 4), which "outlast the transient emotional states that led to their acquisition" to be drawn upon later.

Using the lenses of identity work and 'doctoral capital', data from three qualitative studies amongst 30 PhD students is explored to highlight the desire for validation within their PhD journeys. These studies looked at the journeys that PhD students make (two focusing on PhD students, the other on international Graduate Teaching Assistants transitioning into the UK) (N. Brown & Collins, 2018; Collins, 2019; Collins, 2021; Collins & Brown, 2020). (Here, in the UK context, it should be noted that 'International' designates PhD students from both inside and outside of the EEA, a definition recently altered, along with fee status). Data from these studies showed that an important factor which made a difference to PhD students was the extent to which their PhD supervisors and their peers validated them.

This article contributes to and extends existing research by consolidating a theory of validation, (drawing together scholarship from Education and Psychology). Such a theory of validation offers a route to understanding how belonging for doctoral candidates (in perception and experience) can be

developed. It also offers some practical suggestions as potential benefits for PhD students' sense of wellbeing and doctoral identity work. Specifically, it explores how peer mentoring can offer ways for PhD students to transition from external validation to self-validation. Understanding validation for PhD students offers a way of potentially mitigating risk factors of isolation and role insecurity (Levecque et al., 2017) to PhD students' wellbeing; for example, by scaffolding doctoral identity work using coaching skills with PhD supervisors and students.

In what follows, theories of validation from Psychology and in Education are outlined. This identifies the relevance of validation to thinking through PhD students' sense of belonging. Subsequently, key scholarship on 'doctoral identity work' and 'doctoral capital' is summarized, which offers a background for understanding why validation is important within the doctoral context. The focus then turns to studies of PhD belonging in communities and provide a brief overview of the significance of the supervisory relationship for PhD students. Following the methodology, results of three qualitative studies of PhD journeys are outlined, to draw out key dimensions of validation and self-validation within the PhD journey, using these to develop practical suggestions of where validation can be incorporated into support for PhD students.

LITERATURE REVIEW

VALIDATION THEORIES

What follows discusses theories of validation from an educational context (Rendón, 2009) (next section), and from Dialectical Behaviour Therapy (Pederson, 2017) and Riess' (2018) work on empathy.

In Bowlby's (1969) theory of attachment theory, interactions with primary care givers enable infants to develop mental representations of themselves. If the infant's needs are met, secure attachment forms, but where the needs are left unmet, insecure attachment results (see Andriopoulou & Prowse, 2020, for a summary). In Dialectical Behavioural Therapy, the secure attachment process is framed as a 'validating environment', where caregivers validate appropriate responses and invalidate inappropriate ones. This process acculturates infants and, in an optimally responsive environment (which is only ever an ideal), these validating responses help individuals navigate their own emotional responses (Koerner, 2012, p. 6). Pervasive invalidation can lead to hypersensitivity and suppression of emotional responses. Riess (2018, p. 82) argues similarly that validation is "psychological oxygen" vital for children's growth, and where "they haven't had validation internalized, they are constantly looking for affirmation that they are okay and acceptable from the outside world". Riess is writing from a perspective of theorising empathy, but the arguments she makes coincide with those of Dialectical Behavioural Therapy.

Whilst Dialectical Behavioural Therapy was developed for use in clinical settings (Pederson, 2017, p. 24), the emphasis on validation as a therapeutic approach to reach clients and demonstrate understanding (Pederson, 2017, p. 25), to unravel self-invalidation, and the teaching of validation as a skill to enable connection to others (Pederson, 2017, p. 272) are all potentially suggestive for doctoral education. Validation is a way of building self-confidence and rapport with others in Dialectical Behavioural Therapy. If, as Riess (2018, p. 84) suggests, children who are validated develop an internal sense of confidence, and if, as Andriopoulou and Prowse (2020) argue, patterns of attachment in childhood are echoed in major relationships throughout a person's life, then validation is not just needed in childhood. Validation is a "psychological oxygen" necessary as a component in key relationships, such as supervision. In Dialectical Behavioural Therapy validation is something that patients can build for themselves (Linehan, 2015).

VALIDATION IN THE CONTEXT OF DOCTORAL STUDIES

In the educational context, validation has been used as a theory applied to undergraduate students to champion the recognition of the experiences and stories of minority students into departmental

events and into university curricula. Validation in higher education (specifically in relation to creating supportive conditions for minority students) is defined as "an enabling, confirming and supportive process initiated by in- and out-of-class agents that fosters academic and interpersonal development" (Rendón, 1994, p. 44). Here students are respected as creators of knowledge and members of a learning community (Rendón & Muñoz, 2011, p. 12). This is particular pertinent to apply to the context of doctoral education: for postgraduates in Australia and the UK, 'ill-being' (a negative state of wellbeing) is becoming the norm (Beasy et al., 2020, p. 2), where 'ill-being' denotes 'a mismatch in the relationship between the individual and the environment' which can potentially result in stress and burnout (Stubb et al., 2011, p. 34). Conversely, validation implants people within environments (through, for example, equality and activities that bring academics and students together) (Rendón, 1994). As such it provides opportunities to enhance students' motivation, confidence, and autonomy (Rendón & Muñoz, 2011, p. 19).

Whilst theories on validation derive from different settings, they are united as they all exhibit a process of embedding someone in an environment or relationship in a secure way that is continually re-affirmed. This exhibits why belonging in doctoral communities feels so important for PhD students who are navigating transitioning identity positions (Beasy et al., 2021). In terms of supervision, this suggests that validation plays an important role in supervision for doctoral candidates looking to develop their professional identities and progress in their PhDs. This is not to say that supervision should only dispense validation. Validation might be part of a range of techniques or prompts used by a supervisor to support doctoral study. Furthermore, validation is multidimensional, and other areas of university support and beyond might also scaffold validation, e.g., Researcher Development, student involvement with their departments or schools, extra-curricular interests, etc.

A key facet of supervision is ensuring that students understand the standards their PhD will be judged through and helping students to build expertise and deepen their understanding of their topic (Taylor et al., 2018). Here then a key challenge in supervision is establishing a balance between critique, evaluation, challenge, and validation. As such, self-validation by PhD students and supervisory validation of students can be seen as important avenues of doctoral identity work. In the latter, supervisors (among other things) mentor, collaborate with, advocate for, and help students to cope with failure, contributing to the student building of a sense of identity within that particular field (Barnes & Austin, 2009). They may also challenge and chastise (Barnes & Austin, 2009), or exhibit indifference, and here a PhD student's capacity to self-validate becomes important. A number of studies have looked at PhD students' capacity to manage supervisory criticism and interactions, although none has described it using the term self-validation (e.g., Bradbury-Jones et al., 2007, Johansson et al., 2014; Li & Searle, 2007).

Finally, in terms of embedding validation within doctoral education, one key way (beyond building connections between students and supervisors, strengthening feedback, and integrating students into their departments), is through coaching. Validation in its broadest sense can be seen as empathy, understanding, respect, warmth, and authenticity and as being unbiased and sympathetic. In a coaching or therapeutic relationship, experiencing these through connection, has been shown to have positive effects for the coachee/patient's development (De Haan, 2008, pp. 42, 51). A key factor in the success of coaching then is the relationship between coach and coachee (De Haan, 2008, p. 52), as within it the coachee's experience is validated. Boyatzis et al.'s (2019) approach 'coaching with compassion' demonstrates that coachee affirmation, specifically in relation to prompting the development of their personal vision, achieved positive results, which they measured using magnetic resonance imagining. Thus, developing coaching approaches within doctoral education offer avenues for PhD student validation.

VALIDATION AND SELF-VALIDATION AMONGST DOCTORAL STUDENTS

In practice, validation occurs through doctoral identity work, specifically through recurrent corroboration of congruence between 'the individual' and 'the environment' (Beasy et al., 2021). Validation

emerges where the development of an academic identity is encouraged and acknowledged – in supervision, and (belonging) in wider communities. The term "identity work" has been used by a number of scholars to describe how PhD students conceive how their changing identity during the PhD journey. It can include the simultaneous production of scholar and PhD text as part of the doctoral process (Kamler & Thomson, 2014, p. 16); identity work in everyday activity (such as card access to office space) (Barnacle & Mewburn, 2010); in supervision, and in sharing troubles with others (Mewburn, 2011), and where doctoral students play various roles, such as Graduate Teaching Assistant and student (Collins et al., 2021; Winstone & Moore, 2017).

PhD students' identity work takes place over a number of different domains: "social (networks within and outside of academia), economic (e.g., scholarships and paid employment) and cultural (e.g., enculturation)" (Usher & McCormack, 2020, p. 323). Within these domains "students need to identify with and develop the "right kind of capital" to successfully navigate fields of social and scholarly play" (Usher & McCormack, 2020, p. 333). Acquiring and displaying "doctoral capital" is a key part of doctoral identity work and has a significant effect on PhD outcomes (Walker & Yoon, 2017). For example, frequent and effective interactions between PhD students and supervisors (Barnes & Austin, 2009), the inclusion in social networks (Gardner & Holley, 2011), and successful presentation at conferences (Gopaul, 2011), all represent effective displays of doctoral identity work. Doctoral capital thus encompasses successful identity work in relation to "1. … cultivation acquired before and during the PhD; 2. … production and accumulation of cultural goods … such as publications … 3. … official recognition [e.g., certificate]" (Walker & Yoon, 2017, p. 404). What follows looks at 'cultivation acquired during the PhD', to examine where people do not feel they belong or 'fit', where doctoral capital is felt to be lacking.

Supervision is one of the key relationships in supporting PhD students to completion (Green, 2005; Halbert, 2015; Krauss & Ishmail, 2010; Lee, 2008; Orellana et al., 2016; Zainal Abiddin, 2007; Zeegers & Barron, 2012). Within this relationship, and beyond subject expertise, PhD students fundamentally value the social and emotional care supervisors provide (Andriopoulou & Prowse, 2020; Doloriert et al., 2011; Halbert, 2015, p. 31; Wisker, 2001). Part of this social care is the valuable role supervisors play as gatekeepers to wider research networks (which further embed belonging) (Douglas, 2020). Supervisors can also provide spaces of coaching/mentoring and reflection (Lee, 2007). Such processes require emotional work on the part of the supervisor and student (Doloriert et al., 2011). A key aspect of supervision bringing together social and emotional care with subject knowledge is feedback:

> As the most frequent reason for meeting, students and supervisors need to see feedback as being positive for self-development, but also need to be aware of the power and emotion dimensions of this sensitive aspect of doctoral supervision (Doloriert et al., 2011, p. 744).

Whilst positive feedback is validating in the process of doctoral identity work, negative feedback (perceived or intended) can disempower students (Doloriert et al., 2011). A sidestep into Organisation Psychology can help underscore the relationship between positive line management (or supervision) and employee (or student) wellbeing. A line manager's behaviour towards an employee has a direct effect on employee performance, productivity, absenteeism, job satisfaction, attrition, motivation, engagement, and morale in the workplace (Gilbreath & Benson, 2004; Mathafena & Hewitt, 2018). Returning to the PhD context, a supervisor is not exactly a line manager; supervisors do not always manage students' everyday activities (Pope, 2020). Nevertheless, it would seem that there are potential wellbeing outcomes in supervisors validating their PhD students through effective feedback, and social and emotional care.

For Andriopoulou and Prowse (2020) the efficacy of building a doctoral identity through supervision can be understood through attachment theory. They argue that whilst attachment theory is assumed to refer to attachments to primary care givers, in actuality a series of figures throughout someone's

life will be subject to attachments. Thus, supervisors and supervisee's attachment styles both influence doctoral outcomes, e.g., "anxious [avoidant] supervisees found it difficult to accept corrective feedback" (Andriopoulou & Prowse 2020, pp. 654, 655), while 'insecurely attached supervisees' always already expect a negative supervisory relationship. Thus, attachment styles directly influence how feedback is conveyed and received, and supervisor's perceived social and emotional care. A slightly different psychological lens on attachment theory is to view building relationships through validation. As explored above, secure attachment occurs in a 'validating environment'. Thus, that these findings suggest that different supervisee attachment styles shape doctoral identity work and a sense of belonging, also supports the idea that supervision can be a key domain of validation or invalidation for doctoral candidates. Validation brings academics and students together, through community and knowledge building (Rendón, 1994), so the dimension of social and emotional care experienced within supervision has ramifications for the larger process of enculturation experienced by the PhD student.

Concentrating on attachment styles in supervision focuses on the PhD student and supervisor relationship, overshadowing other elements of the doctoral journey, including doctoral candidates' capacity to build their own resources and self-validate. Indeed, Doctoral students' identity work involves enculturation into a scholarly community. What this community means in practice is mutable, potentially encompassing disciplinary affiliations, a school or faculty attachments, or belonging to a research group (Vekkaila et al., 2013, p. 14). PhD communities can be a source of stress (Collins & Brown, 2020; Stubb et al., 2011), and if students felt excluded from these communities, they were more likely to disengage from the PhD (Vekkaila et al., 2013). Scholarship has suggested that it is not uncommon for PhD students to feel that they do not belong to a scholarly community (e.g., in Pyhältö et al.'s 2009 study, 1/3 of participants did not feel like part of a community); and a lack of sense of belonging can result in despondency about the value of a PhD student's contribution to a community (Stubb et al., 2011), and thus a lack of 'doctoral capital'. Recent studies have shown how the doctorate impacts negatively on PhD students' wellbeing due to isolation, with specific groups such as international students and students with caring responsibilities experiencing more prolonged and impactful isolation (Metcalfe et al., 2018; Stubb et al., 2011). PhD communities are potentially 'empowering' for doctoral candidates (Stubb et al., 2011), yet often tenuous or out of reach, and thus 'invalidating'. Furthermore, the very idea of belonging to a PhD community might be seen to stand in contradiction to the "character of the independent, autonomous scholar that lies at the heart of the pedagogic practices and regularity regimes of the PhD" (Johnson et al., 2000, p. 137). Here, assumptions around doctoral students' 'autonomy' can lead to neglect of socialisation, with a focus instead on developing an independent scholarly identity (Yeatman, 1998). Indeed, whilst self-sufficiency and independence might seem normative in the PhD context (and as such potentially 'validating'), in practice this can become a barrier to building supportive networks (Collins & Brown, 2020).

Smaller communities can be successfully established amongst PhD students. This includes the success of PhD student support groups (Panayidou & Priest, 2021) and writer's groups (Beasy et al., 2020; Stevenson, 2020). The support group offers PhD students social connection which correlated with confidence in completing the PhD and life satisfaction (Panayidou & Priest, 2021). These smaller communities validated the PhD students by providing spaces for identity work that acknowledged their "capability" and also their challenges. Here such communities can be seen as offering validation and thus 'resources' for PhD students. Such resources can be drawn on to potentially 'undo' negative thoughts, and improve psychological resilience (Frederickson, 2001). This scholarship suggests that such PhD communities can also foster possibilities of self-validation for PhD students, where dialogues with others reinforce their own competence (Vekkaila et al., 2013, p. 23) and confidence (Panayidou & Priest, 2021; Stevenson, 2020), as well as relatedness.

METHODOLOGY

RESEARCH APPROACH

Based within an interpretivist approach that focuses on how participants create meanings (Ritchie et al., 2014, p. 12), the three studies discussed here focused on participants' PhD journeys. The first study explored emotional dissonance within the PhD and data was collected from workshops and from interviews (N. Brown & Collins, 2018; Collins & Brown, 2020). The second study looked at the transition into UK higher education by International and EU Graduate Teaching Assistants (Collins, 2019; Collins, 2021) and again collected data from workshops and interviews. In the third study, students participating in a peer mentoring scheme during lockdown (Collins, 2021) were interviewed and surveyed about their experience of the scheme. A key feature of all the studies was discussion of ideas of PhD communities, and belonging emerged as a key theme in these discussions. The interview data from all the studies is discussed below, data from workshops is discussed elsewhere (N. Brown & Collins, 2018; Collins & Brown, 2020). This focus on interview data here enables an identification of patterns of 'meaning making' around the theme of validation across time (the first study took place in 2017, the third in 2021). Crucially, through this in-depth approach, interview participants were active agents in informing development of provision at the institution (with the study results being reported back to units focusing on doctoral support). Furthermore, the methodological approach also coincides with the proposition that teaching coaching skills can scaffold validation and self-validation, as coaching is also crucially about exploring meaning making, and solutions-focused reframing of challenges (Boyatzis et al., 2019). In other words, understanding how PhD students make meanings is a key step towards identifying where challenges (particularly to confidence and belonging) can be reframed.

Within the studies, the interviews began with a creative elicitation exercise, in order to explore non-habitual understandings of identity, and these have been reported on elsewhere (N. Brown & Collins, 2018, 2021; Collins, 2019; Collins et al., 2021). The discussion below focuses on where the semi-structured 'life-world' interviews (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018, p. 14) open up participants' lived understandings of belonging or not belonging, and how doctoral identity work is carried out. This kind of interview does not feature fixed questions, nor is it entirely non-directive. As such, the onus is on the "inter-action between the interviewer and interviewee" to co-construct meaning (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018, p. 2).

Ethical approvals were sought prior to the commencement of all studies. Participants received participant information sheets and consent forms prior to interviews (and workshops if they participated in those). In each study participants were invited to describe their PhD journeys (as PhD students or GTAs) and to consider what the notions of PhD (and GTA) communities meant to them. In the final study this was from the perspective of undertaking a PhD during lockdown, and their journey through the peer mentoring scheme. In the first study, member validation occurred through a focus group discussion of the study's findings; in the second and third studies, a draft of the findings was circulated to participants who opted to be part of this process for feedback.

PARTICIPANTS

Table 1 summarises the total number of students involved in the projects, and those whose data is discussed below. Only the PhD students who were interviewed are included in this article. Participants hailed from 15 different countries. Table 2 details more demographic information about the participants.

Table 1. Study participants

Study	Total PhD students involved in the studies (e.g., attending workshops/completing surveys)	PhD students interviewed (included in this article)	Method of recruitment for interview
PhD communities	24 students	6 students	From workshop attendees
International GTAs	69 students	12 students	Emailed 168 International GTAs
Peer mentoring during lockdown 2021	43 students	12 students	Emailed 25 students who expressed interest in interview

Table 2. Participant breakdown

Gender	Subject area	Year of study	Mode of study	Fee status
18 females	Arts: 8	First year: 3	Part time: 4	International: 18
12 males	Social Sciences: 10	Second year (or part time equivalent): 13	Full time: 26	Home: 12
	Sciences: 12	Third year (or part time equivalent): 14		

ANALYSIS

In line with the interpretivist design of both studies, the data were coded in iterative coding cycles in NVivo 12, where codes were derived inductively from the interview content. This involved coding through transcript annotations and codes, and transcript memos to build immersion and a sense of the structure of the themes, followed by theme memos to draw out 'metacategories' of supervision, community, and autonomy. Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) provided a framework to inductively draw out participants' key terms and ideas, whilst accommodating deductive top-down themes of validation and belonging that emerged from previous work on the interviews (N. Brown & Collins, 2018; Collins, 2019; Collins, 2021; Collins & Brown, 2020).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Results and discussions from the three studies are presented below, drawing out the core themes of community and supervision.

PHD COMMUNITIES

Certain barriers obstruct PhD students from believing they belong to a community. These barriers include a perception that time dedicated to the PhD needs to supersede other kinds of commitments, and a feeling that they work alone on a niche area, and this specialism prevents connections from developing with others: "Once you reach the level of PhD what I'm working on if I've got a problem with it, well I can talk to my supervisor, but as far as peers go, other PhD students, they wouldn't even understand it"; "I'm able to be original and everything, but it also means I'm alone". PhD students self-identified as 'lone' workers, "ploughing a lone furrow", treading a "lone path", running "a single person's race". They pinpointed a lack of cohort as a challenge to building a PhD community: "I missed classes …, I was missing that sense of oneness, we're all doing the same thing, we are all facing the same struggles": this sense of working autonomously (Yeatman, 1998) saw potential community-building sacrificed for PhD research to be effectively pursued.

Furthermore, international students encounter barriers navigating new languages, norms, and expectations (Collins, 2021; Collins et al., 2021). For international PhD students, "approval" and acceptance was key to validating their doctoral identity work: "There is the fear of being somewhere new, it's the fear of not knowing what's expected of you. … I'm not from here, I need to be approved in a way". There was a sense that 'you don't know what you don't know', and that social capital was important to build these kinds of understandings: "I think social capital is very important … how can I behave, what I should do, … the way that I stay and work at doing my thesis." This participant suggested "sometimes there are things that it does say exactly in the books it doesn't say that … in a handbook but you need to know it by sense or by common sense or something." These findings echo earlier studies that assert the difficulties PhD students face when seeking to establish themselves within PhD communities (Metcalfe et al., 2018; Pyhältö et al., 2009; Stubb et al., 2011). They echo the normative notion of the autonomous independent scholar (Johnson et al., 2000). Nevertheless, the results also showed that PhD students may have communities that they are already part of that can give them a sense of belonging beyond their doctoral identity: "belonging [here] is not as important for me I do belong in other contexts". Indeed, doctoral candidates also seek and integrate into new communities outside their immediate PhD communities, including one atheist who stated: "That's one of the reasons I started going to church, because there was no support structure here". Within the two studies, it was those PhD students who felt voiceless, or described themselves as 'imposters', who sought communities outside of academia (and thus potentially a different kind of 'capital').

Institution or school-wide PhD communities might be harder to develop an imaginative connection to as they have potentially large numbers of unknown members. Smaller communities with personal resonance in the day-to-day issues PhD students faced proved important, specifically communities build around GTA representatives. Here GTA reps actively sought out connections to others and sought to share experiences and integrate other PhD students into these groupings: "the involvement helps you to be someone, and involved more with a community that you do not know". This activity was meaningful and potentially validating, both for the GTA reps and others they represented: "When people share their stories with you, they really empower you to stand you know, on behalf of them"; "I talk to people. It's how you give them to power to talk and the safety net of opening up". Participants here talked of 'being part of something larger', 'standing' for something/someone, and empowering others. However, such activity was not always universally validating for GTA reps, as some found themselves uncomfortably ensnared in the cross-hatches of university and departmental politics, and asked to represent competing perspectives.

In terms of building validating communities, scholarship has shown that writer's groups (Beasy et al., 2020; Stevenson, 2020) and student support groups (Panayidou & Priest, 2021) provide possibilities for the validation of PhD students, and hence self-validation through building confidence. A potentially wide-reaching community building activity that has shown positive outcomes is peer mentoring (see below). Here, those in a similar position (i.e., all doing PhDs), all support each other within a group setting that is personally and socially meaningful (Skaniakos & Piiraninen, 2019, p. 21). Amongst the benefits of this kind of community building are dissemination of knowledge and self-fulfillment (Skaniakos & Piiraninen, 2019). Another related alternative is peer coaching, where PhD students are placed within a mutually supportive one to one relationship, providing personal and social support. Participants in such schemes have reported feeling part of a community and improved mental health (Fried et al., 2019, p. 14).

VALIDATION THROUGH SUPERVISION

For some PhD students, supervisors are their community, and their closest ally:

> My real community in one sense, where I feel I connect is at supervisions.

> I think that my community here wasn't just my peers in terms of other PhD students. I think it was … my supervisor.

Indeed, PhD students are 'attached' to their supervisors (Andriopoulou & Prowse, 2020), administratively, institutionally, and in terms of their expertise, although the nature of that attachment can vary for each supervisory relationship and at different points in the PhD. For a number of participants this connection to their supervisor was vital for anchoring them in the PhD, providing continuity and a sense that the PhD was progressing. PhD students' progress across the long project is often iterative and cumulative rather than straightforwardly linear. Furthermore, without the certitude of grades or (sometimes) the possibility of comparing progress amongst a cohort working in the same area, PhD supervision can be vital for validating PhD students' doctoral identity work. The findings showed that, in line with previous work (Doloriert et al., 2011), positive feedback was validating, providing acknowledgment that aided the process of doctoral identity work.

Supervisory feedback proved complex, and validation stood in lieu of essay marks:

> If I got a 2:1 then I'd know I would need to knuckle down a bit more. … There's no grade now, it's literally I see you [once] a month and you give me a nod to say 'hmmm' and … I just have to adapt to that.

Positive praise could be construed by participants as increasing pressure to achieve or disingenuous, particularly if negative feedback had been given elsewhere: "[the praise] really mean a lot to me. … she give me like a lot of comments and it do build up a little bit of confidence, … and so I think she must be truthful probably like 50% or more for praising me about this." Stone and Heen's (2015) work on feedback is suggestive here. They argue that there are three qualitatively different kinds of feedback, which have different functions for the receiver. 'Appreciation' is premised on 'connection' (p. 31) and recognises the other person in some way and motivates them; 'Coaching' seeks to promote change or learning; and 'Evaluation' explicitly or implicitly compares the recipient to others, or their work to pre-existing standards. Stone and Heen suggest that all three kinds of feedback are necessary as they "satisfy different human needs". Evaluation gives security, coaching helps us learn, and appreciation shows what we do is meaningful (p. 35). Yet evaluation is often the loudest kind of feedback and recipients may mistake feedback intended as 'coaching' as evaluation, as people tend to focus on negatives (p. 43). Here, givers of feedback need to be explicit about what label they are using for feedback, what the purpose is, and what they expect the results to be (p. 52). Considering Stone and Heen's (2015) work in the context of supervisory feedback, evaluation can help students understand the standards their PhD will be judged through, and coaching and evaluation can aid students to build expertise and deepen their understanding of their topic (Taylor et al., 2018). Appreciation in this context can become validation, where progress in building an academic identity can be recognised in feedback. Here it is important to be mindful of Dweck's (2017) work on praise, which has shown that validating someone on the basis of effort and process rather than outcome is more effective in encouraging perseverance.

Another key theme that emerged in the studies was listening. Students want to have a PhD supervisor who they could seek out and who would listen to them, to "make [them] feel important" or "connected" in some way. Yet it was apparent that students may also not have been hearing the messages that supervisors may have intended. The above participant was given praise but discounted 50% of it, another was told that their supervisors were excited, but the internal message was "I'm not good enough, I can't actually keep pace with this". While Stone and Heen's (2015) work on labelling feedback (above) can be a useful tool to discuss in supervisory training, another useful discussion in training can encompass Downey's (2003) continuum of directive to non-directive approaches to interactions. Downey posits that coaches can operate on a continuum from telling, instructing, and giving advice (directive approaches) to offering guidance, giving feedback, and making suggestions (slightly less directive) to more non-directive approaches, such as asking questions to raise awareness, summarising, paraphrasing, and listening to understand. Here supervisees can reach their own conclusions

through reflection and can check this with their supervisor's understanding. Supervisory training can involve discussions on how coaching tools to enable supervisors to coach supervisees, and display that listening (e.g., through paraphrasing to help prompt supervisees to articulate ideas, and asking questions to further develop ideas).

SELF-VALIDATION

Students also recognized the importance of self-validation. In the first two studies, participants mentioned the need to work on aspects of their 'doctoral identity': "I think part of my personal journey is understanding, I think I need to know who I am first"; "I started to build this understanding of the [University] system which is different from what I had back home ... I wanted to start a new life, and that kind of brought me into trying to get into the environment around me". A number of participants did exhibit elements of self-validation, encouraging themselves to work towards probation review, to write and to finish their PhDs (see Collins & Brown, 2020). Rather like the coaching tools mentioned in the previous section, self-validation is a form of self-coaching (see supplemental document). Coaching can "improve relationships ... develop research and professional skills…with academic attainment, progression and output ... influenced positively by coaching" (Lane & De Wilde, 2018, p. 57). Thus, it follows that self-coaching, in a supportive context such as within or instigated by a coaching relationship, can potentially positively impact on doctoral identity work and wellbeing. Whilst validation might be more easily sought from external sources such as a community or supervision, developing self-validation or internal validation can generate positive affect, and positive influence ideas of achievability of goals (Boniwell & Tunariu, 2016, p. 116). Striving towards such internal self-regulation can relieve the burden on supervisors, as stress can be coped with actively, rather than avoided (see Boniwell & Tunariu, 2016, pp. 113-114).

TRANSITIONING FROM VALIDATION TO SELF-VALIDATION

This article has discussed different kinds of validation, which are significant in different ways. A supervisor's validation of PhD candidates impacts deeply on 'doctoral identity' as it is premised on knowledge of the research area, and an identification of where a doctoral study might (or might not) be adding new knowledge to a field. Furthermore, the supervisor's validation prompts the PhD student's knowledge and sense of identity to be extended within a context of wider disciplinary enculturation (Lee, 2008). Within a community of PhD students, validation can be more diffuse, linked to tenuous 'doctoral capital' and students 'knowing their way 'around'. As such it can be harder to establish and maintain. Self-validation is an important self-realization that PhD students can develop a doctoral identity through internal reinforcement, beyond external scaffolding. However, this can be elusive, particularly as a key recognition of successful doctoral identity hinges on completion of the PhD.

Peer mentoring provides opportunities for self-validation (Skaniakos & Piiraninen, 2019, p. 21) as crucially it can provide openings, through mentorship, for transitions from validation to self-validation. Participants of a peer mentoring scheme during COVID demonstrated transitions from external to self-validation in a number of ways. Firstly, shared goals allowed participants to overcome being "demoralized" by progress being slowed during the pandemic: "[We aimed for] the same finishing point, and have that shared goal. So, I found that really useful ... it's quite nice to say "OK, well actually maybe let's aim for this goal." Secondly, mentoring others was validating as it built confidence: "I've not done anything like this before. ... I've had more confidence to put my point of view across than I probably did beforehand." Thirdly, being mentored and supported encouraged participants to create their own ways of working:

> I was almost invalidating what I was doing. And [my mentor] was saying "no, you know you are doing the work and record what you are doing". ... I remember some point [after our meeting] I went on YouTube, really trying to see some of the things we covered. ... [From that] I devised my own [solution] ... that really worked for me.

Finally, reflections from the mentoring process, also fed back into self-validation in supervision: "having this meta-knowledge about what an advising relationship could be that helped me understand what was going on in what was going on in mine. … that really helped me understand how I would like my advisor to advise me." Thus, wider support networks beyond supervision can be instrumental within a shift from external validation to self-validation. Significantly, in this instance, the (workshop) teaching and use of coaching skills such as listening, feedback and rapport-building within the peer mentoring relationships (scaffolded through workshops) were also crucial to the transition towards self-validation: "Speaking with my mentor/mentee who is a peer in a different field helped us to understand the similarities we were both going through"; "I got new friend and gained my confidence". These examples suggest that through mentoring, and the validation they received during mentoring, participants 'broadened and built' resources for self-validation, allowed for individual development and social connection (Frederickson, 2001).

CONCLUSION

This article has offered two arguments. First, whilst it has not previously been described as 'validation' – validation is a significant process in doctoral identity work. Recent research has identified the importance of resilience in receiving supervisory criticism (Li & Searle, 2007), and growth of self-confidence and independence in supervision sessions as part of successful doctoral identity work (Bradbury-Jones, 2007). The article sought to identify one element of emotion work that emerges around this: validation. To accomplish this, the article has shown evidence of how PhD students experience barriers to belonging, by conceptualising themselves as lone workers whose scholarly originality must necessarily set them apart from other PhD students. It has also shown that PhD students construct connections to other PhD students and their supervisors, and to communities outside of academia that validate them. Here doctoral identity work consists of more than finding an identity within the text/writing of the PhD (Kamler & Thomson, 2014); and of building an identity through daily habitual activities (Barnacle & Mewburn, 2010). 'Validation' draws out an important emotional dimension in constructing a viable doctoral identity through internal and external encouragement and acknowledgement of progress and achievements. Some PhD students who did not find validation in a wider doctoral community found/created it outside academia (particularly in churches).

In defining validation, the article also makes a second argument that creating spaces for coaching skills to support PhD students can increase opportunities for validation. Increasing opportunities and instances of validation then enables a 'broadening and building' (Frederickson, 2001) of doctoral students 'resources' which they are able to draw on in self-validation. In outlining where spaces to build coaching and mentoring skills, the article has mentioned tools and models that can be used in supervisor and PhD student training and development (e.g., Stone and Heen's (2015) model of feedback; Downey's (2003) continuum of interactions; peer coaching and peer mentoring schemes; and a self-validation worksheet (supplemental materials)). Coaching is a validating pedagogy as it emphasises empathy, understanding, respect, warmth, compassion, authenticity, and being non-judgmental: behaviours that allow for the affirmation of the coachee. Studies have shown that exhibiting such behaviours within a relationship have positive effects for the coachee's development (Boyatzis et al., 2019; De Haan, 2008, pp. 42, 51). Thus, a key recommendation of this study is to embed coaching skills into doctoral candidate and supervisor training, and support structures such as peer mentoring. This would offer opportunities to validate PhD students and support their development. It would also offer the scaffolding for PhD students to transition from external validation to self-validation. Placed alongside academic critique and enculturation (Taylor et al., 2018), validation offers opportunities to affirm and recognise progress (which is harder to gauge in the absence of a cohort), explore potential challenges and pinchpoints, in a way that allows PhD students space to lead in shaping their own understanding of their doctoral identity work (both autonomously and within supervision).

This article extends existing literature on PhD students' emotion work (Collins & Brown, 2020; Johansson et al., 2014) and belonging (e.g., Mewburn, 2011; Morris, 2021), by offering a new dimension

to understand how belonging and confidence is developed amongst PhD students. Specifically doctoral identity work and the development of doctoral capital can be seen as at least in part contingent upon PhD students' work, activities, and self-presentation being validated in different domains (e.g., doctoral communities, in supervision and by themselves). Considering doctoral dimensions of validation and self-validation furthermore shifts work towards possibilities of practical support, specifically by finding spaces to draw coaching skills into supervisory training and PhD student support. This is significant as scholarship has shown that coaching has positive effects on wellbeing (Lane & De Wilde, 2018).

In understanding the significance of this work, its limitations require acknowledgement. First, this study was based on a small sample of thirty PhD students at one HEI: it is not possible to definitively generalize results from this sample, and further research is required to understand the vicissitudes of 'validation' and 'self-validation' as phenomena for PhD students. Furthermore, 'measurement' of validation is challenging: experiences validation and self-validation (particularly in mentoring, community and supervision contexts) cannot necessarily be definitively separated from other events in PhD students' lives. Indeed, such challenges of 'measurement' are widespread in scholarship that seeks to understand particular phenomena (N. J. L. Brown & Rohrer, 2019). Finally, locating 'validation' within a discourse of promoting wellbeing in doctoral education needs to be a cautious endeavour; lest it becomes a 'happiness script' (Ahmed, 2010). In other words, in scaffolding validation and self-validation there needs to be an avoidance of creating a normative image of an idealised PhD student who reacts in circumscribed ways to challenges. Indeed, there are certain structural and personal challenges within the PhD that validation and self-validation will not necessarily ameliorate.

Whilst the qualitative data allows deeper understanding of PhD students' navigation of doctoral identity work, further research is needed to understand the complexities of validation. Specifically, more research is needed to understand what validation might need to be for different groups of PhD students, and supervisors from different backgrounds. For example, this work has used theories from Rendón (1994, 2011), who contends that ethnic minority first generation students at university need validation of their cultural heritage and ways of learning. Additionally, consolidating a 'broaden and build' approach to understanding validation and self-validation, might include investigating how much validation is needed to sustain enduring self-validation. Further research is also needed to understand the possible impact of using coaching with PhDs in different contexts (e.g., through peer mentoring schemes, supervision and self-validation). Some of this would be premised on supervisors' receptivity to being trained in coaching skills. Indeed, perhaps the supervisors that would attend these training sessions might be those who are already attuned to validating their PhD students? Nevertheless, a theory of validation offers a route to understanding how belonging for doctoral candidates can be developed and scaffolded: understanding validation as a 'resource' to be drawn on is significant because validation can thus potentially mitigate risk factors of isolation and role insecurity to PhD students' wellbeing.

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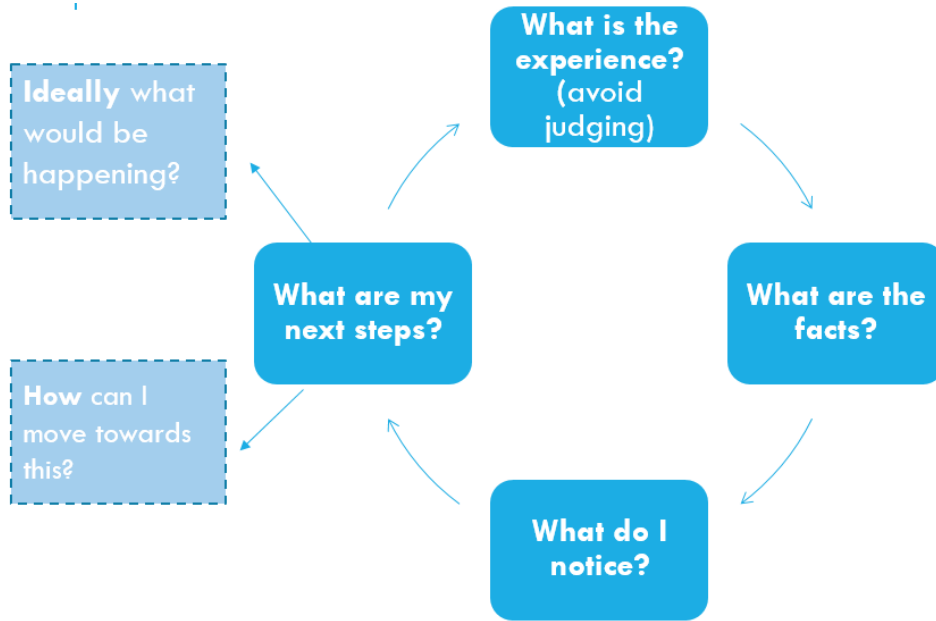
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APPENDIX: SELF-VALIDATION WORKSHEET

What is the experience? (avoid judging)	Separate experiences from judgements or worries about the future, and preconceived notions of how a PhD 'should' be (see: https://thewellbeingthesis.org.uk/postgraduate-research-myths-debunked/).
What are the facts?	Identify elements of an experience that are valid. What are the facts? (Being as non-judgmental as possible)
What do I notice?	What do you notice? In reflecting can you begin to make sense of how you are responding to an experience in light of what you already know and understand?
What are my next steps?	How does this reflection help you, moving forwards? What am I learning about myself as a researcher?

	Ideally what would be happening?	Ideally, what would I like to happen?
	How can I move towards this?	What small steps can I make that will move me towards what I want to happen?

Here's an example, thinking about reframing negative perceptions of progress with the PhD:

What is the experience? (avoid judging)	Separate experiences from judgements: try to not judge progression in terms of undergraduate or postgraduate taught marked work, you haven't finished yet so you won't have done everything and it won't be perfect!
What are the facts?	Even if you are not progressing as quickly as you like, things will have been happening – e.g., thinking, processing, maybe collecting articles etc. What tells you that you are making progress?
What do I notice?	What do you notice about your thinking patterns here? How can you make sense of these patterns of thinking in light of what you already know and understand?
What are my next steps?	How will this reflection help me move forwards with progress?
	Ideally what would be happening? — If progress is good, what would be happening? How can I see myself in a way that I don't compare myself negatively with others, or a pre-existing ideal of where I should be?
	How can I move towards this? — What concrete steps can I take to build my confidence in this area? How can I plan for good progress?

Use the worksheet below to think through a situation in which you would like to be more confident.

What is the experience? (avoid judging)	What is the experience? Try to avoid judging myself: what worries or messages am I telling myself here, that I need to separate from the experience itself?
What are the facts?	What are the facts? Check facts to see if my responses are valid. Linehan (2015) asks: Can I check in with someone I trust to help identify what is valid?
What do I notice?	What do you notice about your response?
What are my next steps?	How does this reflection help you, moving forwards? What am I learning about myself as a researcher? How am I growing and developing? Can I practise self-compassion?
	Ideally what would be happening? / Ideally, what would I like to happen?

	How can I move towards this?	What small steps can I make that will move me towards what I want to happen?

For more on self-validation (in a clinical context) see:

Fruzzetti, A. E. (2013). Self-Validation Handouts V 6.1. http://c-cluster-110.uploads.documents.cim-press.io/v1/uploads/1439757c-c544-4d34-87d9-fa3087107b79~110/original?tenant=vbu-digital

Linehan, M. M. (2015). *DBT Skills Training Handouts and Worksheets*. London, New York: The Guilford Press.

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