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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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Outside looking in: Gendered roles and the wellbeing of working student mothers studying for a part-time PhD

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Abstract

This article contributes to the growing evidence based on well-being in doctoral study. It draws on 35 qualitative, in-depth interviews to explore how the well-being of an understudied group—working doctoral student mothers—is affected when undertaking part-time PhDs. While there is a growing literature on the research student experience and an increased awareness of mental health issues in doctoral study, there has been little exploration of the experiences of part-time PhD students. Moreover, this is particularly true of mothers undertaking doctorates on a part-time basis. The experiences of this sub-group of research students constitute the gap to which this paper responds. It explores the consequences of having to straddle a number of competing domains and examines how the gender role conflict, marginalisation and lack of support experienced by doctoral student mothers impact their psychological, physical and social well-being. The article concludes with a number of recommendations that institutions may wish to consider.

1 | INTRODUCTION

I think there's times where I just feel physically worn down with it, I can't breathe and I'm like... there's times you physically feel the pressure so much that you can't breathe.

(Eileen)

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Part-time research students face many challenges not experienced by their full-time counterparts (Massyn, 2021). These challenges can have a detrimental impact on their well-being. They can feel a sense of detachment from the institution (McCulloch & Stokes, 2008) and a lack of involvement in the ongoing practices, routines and rituals associated with knowledge acquisition (Pyhalto et al., 2012). Their experience may be less satisfactory due to feelings of invisibility within the academy (Neumann & Rodwell, 2009), and they can struggle to balance their various roles (Watts, 2008). These roles frequently straddle a number of different domains and require an ongoing renegotiation of potentially conflicting professional, student and personal identities (Teeuwse et al., 2014). This 'fractured identity' (Watts, 2008) complicates part-time doctoral students' experience of the role of 'student' because engagement with that role, and therefore engagement with their studies, is complicated. As Gardner says: 'academic structures, conventions, traditions and normative socialization patterns are typically not designed to allow students with children, whose schedules and responsibilities are often demanding, much flexibility' (2008, p. 133).

This paper focuses on one particular group of part-time doctoral students, those who are working mothers. Taking a qualitative approach, it considers the ways in which the competing demands and gendered expectations faced by them can threaten to overwhelm their mental, physical and emotional capacity, resulting in negative impacts on their well-being. To seek to understand the experiences of this group of research degree students requires an understanding of their social position as aspiring women scholars in a historically patriarchal society. There are strong social expectations about how women should behave (Stout, 2018), and these expectations can impact on the subsequent reflexive view women have of themselves. These expectations reflect constructions of traditional femininity (Leathwood & Read, 2009) and the expectations laid on the role of mother (Rizzo et al., 2012). The competing identities and processes being negotiated by part-time PhD students raise questions about well-being at a time when universities are increasingly recognising the challenges to mental health that can come with doctoral study. It is within the confines of these expectations and considerations that working mothers embark on part-time PhDs raising the question: "What is the experience of working mothers undertaking part-time doctorates and how does that experience impact on their well-being?"

Students demonstrate agency during their time at the university seeking to exert influence on their educational environments and their social surroundings (Klemenčič, 2015). Students are also, however, embedded in social contexts that can shape the range of agency they may experience during their studies (O'Meara, 2013). Agency thus requires the ability to control factors that influence activity and decision making. The challenges faced by working student mothers can override any sense of agency as familial responsibility and doctoral requirements together with a lack of institutional support can prove difficult variables to reconcile.

Previous research confirms that women engaged in work may make career sacrifices for their family, with studies showing how having young children can impact negatively on a woman's academic career (Neale-McFall, 2020). While these studies are concerned with female academics already employed in universities, their findings have implications for future academics and doctoral students with young families who are considering a career in academia but who are not recognised by institutions as having different needs to the conventional 'standard' student. If institutions do not recognise the conflicting demands on their own employed female academic staff with childcare responsibilities, it is reasonable to conclude that they are unlikely to recognise the needs of PhD students in the same situation (Cronshaw, 2016).

2 | IDENTITY ROLES OF DOCTORAL STUDENTS

In her report on mature aged students, Crawford (2021) identified how student mental health can be impacted due to the interactions between the multiple roles within the university, workplace, home and community. Identity roles were also highlighted as a key factor causing conflict within the lives of the participants in this study. However, while the current study involved working mothers, the women interviewed did not focus much on the

role of worker. Our research found that they were seeking to reconcile two distinct primary roles, 'mother' and 'doctoral student'. Women have to manage the first of these (the role of mother) within societal frameworks that assume motherhood to be the 'peak' of a woman's life experience while they also overcome the 'everyday guilt' (Elvin-Nowak, 1999) associated with the second—embarking on a PhD.

Barkin and Wisner (2013) identify how, in the transition to motherhood, many women feel they lose some of their identity. This process of 'maternal transition' (Darvill et al., 2008) experienced by women on becoming mothers can lead to changes in their 'self-concept' and a sense of a lack of belonging in other social groups. Engagement with academic communities may also be largely novel for women participating in doctoral study and brings with it challenges as they are exposed to new procedures, knowledge and skills.

For part-time working doctoral student mothers, their identity as a doctoral candidate is often considered as being peripheral to their more established identities of 'mother' or 'employee' (Cronshaw et al., 2022). This perspective echoes studies considering gender disparities in HE in America (Mason et al., 2013), in Australia (Winchester & Browning, 2015) and across Europe (Sagaria, 2007).

3 | WELL-BEING AND DOCTORAL STUDY

There has been a noticeable and increasing concern with well-being in recent years with changes in the UK being promoted through improvements in business practices (BITC Workwell, 2014), government initiatives (Leka & Jain, 2014), and the activities of charities (Mind, 2022). Narratives and practices around well-being within higher education have also evolved and frameworks and processes that support students' transition to university, and their well-being once there, have been developed and implemented. These include online sources such as *The Well-being Thesis* and *Student Minds* and resources including the *Stepchange* 'Mentally Healthy Universities' (2020). Students develop psychosocial conditions, and these vary across individual students according to many variables including their environment, society, the institution and the study context (Hughes & Spanner, 2019; Wulf-Andersen et al., 2022). Given that: 'physical and emotional well-being is now recognised as contributing to academic success' (Waight & Giordano, 2018, p. 394), student well-being is high on the agendas of education institutions across the globe (Billington et al., 2021) regardless of the stage or level of study. Concern over the well-being of doctoral candidates was amplified following a 2017 European study, which found that up to 32 per cent of doctoral students were at risk of developing a 'common psychiatric disorder' (Levecque et al., 2017) with factors such as the supervisory relationship (La Touche, 2017), role conflict, inflexible processes and workload (Mackie & Bates, 2019) and lack of institutional support (Beasy et al., 2021) contributing to stress and potential mental health problems. This concern was also reflected by McAlpine et al. (2020) who suggested attention should be paid to how life experiences intrusively affect the PhD student experience.

Grossman and Gruenewald (2020) focus on the importance of well-being as a psychological trait, while Nieboer and Cramm (2018) argue that the main dimensions of well-being are social and physical. Earlier studies, such as Margitics and Pauwlik (2009), argued that subjective well-being consists of life satisfaction and frequent positive emotions, alongside a scarcity of negative situations and emotions. As such, these later discussions fit well with the framework employed by this study to understand the facets of well-being impacted by the women's experiences, a typology of well-being developed by Grant et al. (2007). This typology of well-being was used to analyse the data, the three elements being: (a) psychological well-being (happiness) involving a balance of positive and negative thoughts combined with fulfilment and realisation of human potential; (b) physical well-being (health) involving potential illness, stress and access to healthcare; and (c) social well-being (relationships) including ones' relationships with other individuals and relevant communities (Grant et al., 2007, p. 53). Grant et al. (2007) defined well-being based on a range of literatures that all reflect a similar perspective around the three dimensions of well-being. They considered the early work of the World Health Organisation describing a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being (WHO, 1946) as well as the philosophical work of Nussbaum (2001), psychologists

such as Diener and Seligman (2004) and the sociologist Allardt (1993). Before moving to the analysis, the article lays out the method used.

4 | METHOD

Following the grant of ethics approval by the University of Chester Ethics Committee, recruitment for the study was undertaken through *Vitae*, the UK postgraduate researcher development hub. Following the agreement with the organisation, a letter of invitation was published in the *Vitae* newsletter, and 35 working mothers who were pursuing research degrees by part-time study were recruited and subsequently interviewed, with all 35 interviews being completed within nine months (see Appendix 1 for participant profiles). Each in-depth, semi-structured, qualitative interview lasted between two to three hours in locations varying from quiet offices to crowded coffee shops. Each interview was recorded using a Dictaphone™ and then transcribed by the first-named author. Recording and transcribing the interviews allowed for repeated, in-depth examination of the women's narratives and provided a document for each interviewee that they could check and verify that it provided an accurate representation of the interview (Bryman & Bell, 2015). The participants were not students at the researcher's institutions; however, one of the researchers was a working mother studying for a part time PhD. The researcher demonstrated complete transparency with the respondents, identifying her own life situation, family dynamics, work and study experience and acknowledging the potential for subjectivity.

As the primary purpose of this research was to understand each of the women's experiences individually and then seek to identify common themes across those experiences, an interpretivist approach was adopted (Creswell, 2007) with thematic narrative analysis being used to identify themes. To ensure clarity within this process, the research adopted template analysis (King & Horrocks, 2010), a technique of coding that acknowledges there can be a number of interpretations of the data depending on the reflexivity of the researcher (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2018). This approach to analysis provides a flexible technique of identifying themes that emerge from the study of narratives. This flexibility regarding procedures for data gathering and analysis allows the researcher to adapt the method of analysis to their own study and it considers themes across all narratives rather than simply analysing individual cases (King & Horrocks, 2010).

Following Denzin and Lincoln (2023), the researcher began the analysis by identifying some general themes emerging both from her own experiences and from her reading of the literature on mothers, female students and the postgraduate experience. These 'a priori' themes were the starting point for the rest of the analysis. The 'a priori' themes of identity conflict and student experience were not emergent, they were established from the reflexivity of the researcher, reflecting on her own experiences of being a part-time PhD student and a mum. This template was then modified as the researcher began reading through the transcriptions, considering broad themes and sub-themes from a subset of data. After using the template on this small subset the researcher considered any patterns in terms of themes and modified the template, identifying any cluster themes. Some of these cluster themes emerged from the 'a priori' themes and were maintained throughout the study. The template therefore had a range of main themes and cluster themes that enabled the researcher to identify the women's narratives in relation to these areas.

Inductive reasoning was used to draw out themes but in applying Grant's framework to structure part of the analysis we reverted to deduction. Template analysis lends itself to both approaches, so we are drawing on both traditions to better understand the experience of working mothers pursuing part-time PhDs. Template analysis does not prescribe a set number of codes or themes or hierarchy as does grounded theory, instead it gives the researcher the freedom to 'identify themes wherever they find the richest data' (King & Horrocks, 2010, p. 429). This places template analysis: 'between content analysis where codes are all predetermined and their distribution is

analysed statistically, and grounded theory where there is no *a priori* definition of codes' (King & Horrocks, 2010, p. 118).

The interviews were interrogated to develop an understanding of the participants' lived experiences, offering a way of understanding the world developed directly from the women's experiences. This approach allowed the development of an understanding of the respondents as a cohort of mothers undertaking part-time PhD study, enabling the exploration of a unified experience while maintaining the integrity of the individual narratives and personal experiences of those involved. In the discussion that follows, pseudonyms are used to preserve the anonymity of the respondents.

5 | FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

5.1 | Understanding the well-being of working mothers pursuing part-time PhDs: Overarching themes

The following section highlights the key findings of the study. The beginning of the discussion addresses the factors that the women felt were the biggest challenges as PGR students, these being role conflict, marginalisation and lack of support. The discussion then explores how these issues impacted the women's physical, psychological and social well-being.

5.2 | Role conflict

Role conflict occurs when an individual is involved in an array of roles, each with its own competing demands. Respondents often described managing their many roles as 'spinning plates' (Cronshaw, 2016), with contradictory priorities pulling them in many different directions and producing conflicting emotions about the PhD and its place in their lives (Handforth, 2022). The role that provoked the most conflict was that of 'mother'. The women in this study all discussed the difficulties of the PhD in terms of reconciliation of conflicting 'mothering' responsibilities, whereby the woman takes responsibility for the child's welfare, leaving them with feelings of guilt and anxiety when they have to leave the child for their own employment or study demands. Women can become defined by any mother role they fulfil and people's expectations of them are managed through societal understanding of what mothers should do, be like, and how they should behave:

I do think that people, when they hear you're a mum, if they don't know you or hadn't known you previously, there's an immediate kind of assumption of knowing what you are and who you are.

(Lynette)

Students usually choose part-time study because of competing demands on their time which means they are likely to be in a constant state of negotiating between professional, student and personal identities (Teeuwssen et al., 2014) as they shift between a range of roles including employee, spouse, parent, sibling and colleague. The consequences can be dispiriting:

I just feel as if I'm doing a bad job at everything, you know? I don't feel I could do a good job with any of them because I'm spreading myself so thinly.

(Laura)

We get e-mails all the time, "This conference, that conference, blah, blah, blah"... it was in London on a Wednesday afternoon! That's not going to happen for me, I've got kids. I can't do that.

(Victoria)

Unable to reconcile the role of mother with that of doctoral student, the women experienced conflict between roles, leaving them with feelings of anxiety at the lack of involvement in the student community, then guilt when they tried to address this balance and were not fully engaged with the mother role (Utami, 2019). Their PhD study provided a sense of distance from the other members of the mums' in-group, despite the women focusing their main identity on that of 'mum' yet their role of mother was what often prevented them from being anything more than peripheral members of the other key community, the student in-group:

I find it hard to still be "Mum", but then be a student, be these other things as well. Because that's what takes the priority, it always will.

(Heather)

When I'm here as a student it's difficult because I'm still breastfeeding, so that's hard.

(Sokieta)

This conflict and the associated gender bias had a significant impact on the women's identity and sense of who they were and where they belonged. All of the women spoke of the role conflict they experienced as a woman and a mother working and studying, and the result of this in terms of its impact on individual mental and physical health (Amstad et al., 2011).

5.3 | Marginalisation

Each of the women had an idea of what it was to be a mum and a student and attempted to mediate those perceived meanings and group identity through their behaviour. They encountered difficulties, however, as the in-group characteristics of these two communities were not always easy to emulate simultaneously, something which often led to the women feeling excluded as they lacked the opportunities, involvement and knowledge required to participate fully:

I find it very difficult sometimes changing the hats to meet different situations, you were never a great mum because you didn't go to all the mummies classes and you're not a great colleague because you don't go to the pub with other people from work, so everything you're doing, you're not quite doing as well as everybody else but trying to keep up, and I think that can be very isolating.

(Jan)

The additional demands faced by a part-time student, including familial care and employment can impede a smooth transition through the PhD process and, as a result, they are seen by many as 'transient' members of the research community (McCulloch & Stokes, 2008). The experience of belonging and participation in the academic community is considered: 'an essential component for the development of socio-psychological well-being, with students feeling less stressed, exhausted and anxious' (Stubb et al., 2011, p. 44). This is supported by Hughes et al. (2022) who highlight how important a shared identity and social integration are for student well-being. Lack of socialisation can have a negative impact on doctoral retention as students feel marginalised as a result of little interaction with faculty members and fellow students.

The women's circumstances left them on the periphery or completely excluded from the doctoral student community and therefore lacking that sense of identity enjoyed by more full-time members of that community. This exclusion left them feeling isolated and lacking motivation. They questioned their ability to continue as they did not have the shared discourses, repertoire and resources of the full members of the doctoral community, something which impacted negatively both social and psychological well-being.

5.4 | Lack of support

A word often used by the mothers to describe their experience was 'lonely'. Despite having a family, friends and work colleagues, it was deemed an existence that distanced them from those around them. It was not a physical loneliness. They lived with other people who they saw daily. The feelings of loneliness came from the lack of understanding of what they were going through and a subsequent lack of support. Few around them fully understood what it was to study for a PhD while managing the numerous other demands placed on them. This lack of understanding led to a feeling of disconnectedness (McCulloch & Stokes, 2008), which in turn, left the women questioning themselves and their ability. There was no reassurance that what they were thinking, feeling and experiencing was a normal part of the PhD process and this resulted in the women feeling they were on their own:

I didn't realise how isolating a PhD is. I expected more connection with other PhD students. You know, formal connections, more things that made it a more supportive experience.

(Grace)

It's difficult working on your own, not having people to bounce your ideas off. I'd be talking about it at home and nobody would have a clue what I was talking about, and my husband would say, "Oh, that's nice."

(Patricia)

The language of these quotations illustrates how emotionally charged both the experience of conflicting roles and the action of describing those experiences can be. Doctoral study is often presented as a logical, processual experience in which one stage follows another, the whole taking place in a domain separate from other domains in which the research student may be active (Stokes & McCulloch, 2006). The experience of the participants in this study showed clearly that this is not the case, with the subsequent isolation and lack of support leaving them questioning their ability to continue. Research has linked social support to reduced work-family conflict (Kossek et al., 2011) and has been found to reduce feelings of loneliness (Zhao et al., 2013) yet it would appear that the dual roles of mother and student, alongside the challenges of marginalisation and a lack of support left the women in this study on the periphery of the research degree community, which had a marked impact on their well-being.

6 | APPLYING GRANT'S FRAMEWORK

6.1 | Psychological well-being: Happiness

The women in this study wanted to feel competent and autonomous in their achievements but experienced conflict due to the pressure to fulfil their gendered 'obligations' as mothers, resulting in feelings of guilt.

The chronological and physical constraints of time and space on studying were clear when the lives of the women with children in this study were examined, however what became apparent was the power of the moral constraints affecting the women. They experienced conflict around day-to-day responsibilities as they attempted to adhere to what Bepko and Krestan (1990) refer to as society's hidden 'Code of Goodness'. As reflected in the narratives of the women in this study, a familiar feeling was that they had not done anything well-enough and as a result, they never had what Bepko and Krestan (1990, p. 5) describe as the 'luxury of self-satisfaction'. Instead, the women experienced self-doubt, guilt and greater conflict in their lives, all common feelings associated with the 'Code of Goodness'.

It's the guilt I suppose. The guilt that I'm not doing what I should be doing; it hangs over you all the time.

(Grace)

You're anxious about everything, it's a really complicated mix of guilt and anxiety.

(Joan)

The emotional responses evoked by these experiences are antithetical to happiness and a state of positive well-being, something emphasised in the following comments:

It only takes one nudge then everything goes belly up. I'm always on that tightrope of 'something's going to go in a minute'. You're under pressure all the time.

(Laura)

It's sending me a bit loopy. It feels like a weight, it's got heavier and heavier as I've gone along.

(Emma)

At some point during the process of studying for a PhD, many of the women in the study felt that things had just got too much to deal with and questioned their motivation to continue with the doctorate. They often felt overwhelmed at the enormity of the task, not the task of doing the PhD, but the task of doing the PhD part-time alongside sustaining employment, looking after family members and bringing up their children. June, for example, describes how eight weeks before her viva, her father-in-law became critically ill and moved into their family home, she had to look after him, while preparing for the viva and continuing to juggle her full-time job and family commitments:

I came into work having cared for him all Christmas and said to my boss, "Either I take a week off sick or I work from home, because if I don't I'm either going to kill someone or kill myself." I said, "I have reached capacity."

(June)

This enormity of her many commitments had direct and significant implications for her mental health. Joanne also struggled with the mental load of caring for family members while studying. She discussed the challenge of studying while managing her husband's health:

My husband was diagnosed with a brain tumour. He's had two lots of surgery and he's got epilepsy, so he's not been able to drive...he's struggled at work, they were supportive at first, and then they weren't. So we've had lots of periods of stress.

(Joanne)

These health issues also impact on happiness and can wreak an emotional toll on an individual's psychological status, demonstrating the complex and inter-related nature of well-being in the doctoral (as in other) space.

6.2 | Physical well-being: Health

The implications of studying for a PhD were far reaching and touched many aspects of the women's health.

You sacrifice everything that you do for yourself, and health-wise, that's not very good is it.

(Sara)

Many described situations that demonstrated the emotional turmoil and anxiety caused by the conflicting demands of studying for a part-time PhD. They highlighted issues that affected them more because they had less time to prepare and deal with them and provided very honest accounts of personal sacrifices that had repercussions beyond the initial study period, such as family illness and strained marital relationships. Abby, having had fertility treatment before the birth of her first child, was concerned about the risks of waiting too long before beginning the treatment again, yet delayed the process due to the PhD:

I suppose on the personal side the main sacrifice has been delaying trying for another baby. I am due to complete my PhD in October and I know that if I have another baby that will not be possible. I am therefore delaying trying until the PhD is complete. This is potentially problematic as I will be 38 and could be running out of time.

(Abby)

6.3 | Social well-being: Relationships

The experience of belonging and participation in the academic community is considered: 'an essential component for the development of socio-psychological well-being, with students feeling less stressed, exhausted and anxious' (Stubbs et al., 2011, p. 44). A lack of socialisation can have a negative impact on doctoral retention if students feel marginalised and have little interaction with faculty members and fellow students. Byrom (2017) reflects this, highlighting how beneficial students supporting students can be. The additional demands faced by a part-time student can lead to longer completion times or sometimes an interruption of studies (Gatrell, 2006). These 'forgotten' students are something that Neumann and Rodwell (2009) identify as a key problem when creating a research culture across an institution. The experience of isolation appears a widespread and seemingly 'necessary' feature of the doctoral programme for many (Handforth, 2022). This lack of socialisation can have a negative impact on doctoral retention as students have little interaction with faculty members and fellow students resulting in their feeling marginalised:

I don't think I felt part of anything, I was too isolated. And I didn't get to talk about my research until I sat down with a supervisor, so I didn't get to share it with other people.

(Patricia)

You give up friendships because you have no time, so you lose people, it's really hard, you give up a lot.

(Sara)

The impact on relationships contributes to this lack of interaction and also to a diminution of opportunities to engage with other research students in exploring and developing the shared repertoire of knowledge. Participation in peer group support has been shown to significantly increase the mental well-being of students (Byrom, 2018; Crawford et al., 2018) yet this was not available or accessible to the women in this study.

6.4 | Confidence, competence and self-belief

The women considered themselves as 'novices' in terms of the PhD (Lave & Wenger, 1991). They lacked confidence in their knowledge and ability partly due to their exclusion from the available institution and postgraduate research activities and associated communities of practice, and as a result, it could be argued they remained as novices within the PhD community. Encouraging connections between 'novices' and experts can support the process of movement from peripheral to 'full member' (Tilley, 2003); however, institutional support in transition was lacking. This raises the issue of the women's isolation from the student community, their position remained peripheral, preventing them from identifying themselves as students (Cronshaw et al., 2022) and they were forced to rely on individual learning resources instead of the shared repertoire of the wider community. When considering the benefits to an individual who participates in a particular community of practice, Fontaine and Miller (2004) identified several including a sense of belonging, personal reputation, personal productivity and enhanced skills and knowledge, benefits which would aid in building confidence, and provide reassurance about the progress of their doctoral study, approach and knowledge. Instead, due to isolation and lack of involvement in the broader community, the participants reported experiencing a lack of self-belief and no opportunities for relevant social learning:

I think maybe I partly didn't feel I was worthy of doing it. I think I felt that I wasn't intelligent enough, which I think is something I still feel.

(Denise)

As a result, partly as a consequence of a lack of informal peer feedback from other candidates, many of the women in this study described feelings of doubt over their ability. They felt they were not intelligent enough or not capable of completing the PhD, that is, they suffered from a lack of self-belief or 'Imposter Syndrome' (Bothello & Roulet, 2018; Clance & Imes, 1978). This phenomenon refers to people who are competent yet who secretly feel inadequate and fear being 'found out' as not capable or not belonging in the position they have attained. The women expressed a lack of confidence and self-belief in their academic abilities despite having previously had successful careers and being accepted on to a doctoral programme (and therefore being recognised as capable by the institution). In their work on the use of progress reports to manage doctoral candidates, Mewburn et al. (2014) found that women were more anxious and tended to worry and over-think the process which in-turn led them to feel less 'part of the academy', whereas the men were 'disengaged and even nonchalant'. This gender difference in attitude and confidence reflects a wider issue around women and their doctoral experience, with many women in this study highlighting a lack of self-belief about their potential:

I doubted I was competent or capable of doing it. So that's what I mean when I say I have to do things really, really well; it's about my self-confidence and self-esteem in things really.

(Kate)

My study side is very much quite lacking in self-confidence, definitely.

(Cath)

The women discussed how issues such as losing touch with friends, strained marriages, missed family occasions, reduction of hobbies and animosity from work colleagues all negatively impacted the women's psychological, physical and social well-being in ways consonant with Grant's framework:

Mental health, mental stability. There's some days you're clinging on by your finger nails. Because it's just immense carrying the full work load and all the commitments that come with our job, then doing a PhD, then organising a family.

(June)

In securing data from thirty-five mothers studying for a part-time PhD, this study provides a unified voice, the experiences of these women, all encountering similar mental health challenges and barriers to study. The literature has highlighted the importance of belonging for students, yet the mothers in this study were obscured from participation and engagement, instead their engagement with the PhD process was peripheral and their overall experience marginalised. This lack of interaction and support combined with friction between roles had a negative impact on the well-being of the women.

6.5 | Contributions

This study contributes to current debates around well-being in the postgraduate student community. This is an area of ongoing and growing importance and the study further highlights the importance of institutions recognising the challenges facing particular *marginalised or peripheral* cohorts *within this* community. Working mothers are a case in point. Our argument maps out a range of issues and underpinning illustrative data that signal the need to implement support and resources that can help this group manage and navigate the process without negative repercussions for their mental health.

6.6 | Limitations and future directions

This is a snapshot-type of study meaning that the participants were of a single type and were engaged with at a specific point in time in a single higher education system. The problems associated with a snapshot type of study could be overcome or ameliorated by taking a longitudinal approach following a larger cohort of working mothers studying PhDs. This would make a useful future study but would, however, require significant resources. Another option for future research would be to explore the phenomenon of mothers undertaking part-time PhDs in a comparative setting, exploring approaches to doctoral education, institutional frameworks, and experiences in a number of different countries. This would allow the investigation of cultural, social and economic differences as well as the different institutional protocols.

6.7 | Practical implications

In conclusion, we offer some suggestions for improved practice that institutions might like to consider. These fall into three broad categories: institutional; support systems; and improving relationships. While some have been suggested previously, we hope this article will add to the evidence base supporting urgent implementation.

6.7.1 | Institutional

- University procedures and protocols should be adapted to reflect a more flexible, mature and part-time student-centred approach allowing for a more bespoke approach to personal development planning, supervisor contact and requirements of progression.
- Explicitly acknowledge and embed in university policy documents supportive statements recognising the roles and needs of part-time students, including women/mother doctoral candidates.
- Incorporate in research degree supervisor induction and continued professional development an understanding of the different requirements of a diverse doctoral student body, and a recognition of the need for a flexible approach.

6.7.2 | Support systems

- Ensure well-being initiatives are accessible online (as well as face-to-face) with appropriate signposts and links.
- Signpost useful external support systems outside the university infrastructure that can provide additional support if required.
- Offer counselling sessions online through Zoom/Teams/Facetime/Skype. Many health and well-being support services have moved towards online consultations, particularly since the covid-19 pandemic began. This approach could be utilised to provide access to counselling services that would normally require face-to-face attendance.

6.7.3 | Improving relationships

- Set up and provide support for the maintenance of one or more online forums for part-time students to develop communities, chat and share ideas regardless of their subject area.
- Establish online connections schemes, bringing together pairs of students in similar situations, encouraging ongoing communication to enable the sharing of experiences and the provision of mutual support.
- Establish opportunities for mentoring, with more experienced students making themselves available to support those new to the process.

These suggestions could assist in reducing the conflictual nature of doctoral education for working mothers who choose or have no alternative to studying part-time. They will also help other students with potentially conflicting roles or those finding themselves in the sort of unexpected and sudden changes of study-mode such as was imposed on many doctoral students by the recent COVID-19 pandemic.

7 | CONCLUSION

This study clearly demonstrates the impact studying for a part-time PhD can have on mothers' well-being as they attempt to manage the various mental well-being challenges and emotions associated with being working student mothers. The stress of balancing the various demands placed on them—the expectations of motherhood, the doctoral student role, the lack of connection to others and the feeling of 'going it alone'—all culminated in challenges to their psychological, physical and social well-being. The mother role was difficult to play alongside that of the aspiring academic/scholar with the ensuing conflict resulting in a type of marginalisation by the concurrent demands of their mother identity and the gendered culture

of the institutions at which they studied. Rather than resulting in connection and support for the scholar role, the women found their experience as a PhD student conflictual and having a negative and direct impact on their well-being.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Sue Cronshaw: Formal analysis; writing – review and editing; conceptualization; investigation; methodology.
Peter Stokes: Writing – review and editing. **Alistair McCulloch:** Writing – review and editing.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

None of the authors have a conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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APPENDIX 1

The table below highlights the participant profiles.

Name (pseudonym)	Age	Occupation	Work FT/ PT	No. of children	Ages	Stage of PhD	Live in city of study
Jan	44	Senior Lecturer	FT	2	9 & 5	Submitting after 6 years	Y
Vanessa	48	Freelance Writer	PT	2	13 & 10	Registered for 2 years	Y
Patricia	54	Projects Manager	FT	2	23 & 18	Doing mods after 6 years	Y
Jo	39	Lecturer	FT	2	19 & 12	Registered 4 years	Y
Heather	39	Senior Lecturer	FT	2	11 & 10	Registered 3 years	Y
Jess	44	Senior Lecturer	FT	2	10 & 6	Registered 6 months	Y
Stephanie	28	Research assistant	PT	2	4 & 2	Registered 1 year	N
Naomi	46	Senior Lecturer	FT	2	17 & 12	Just passed VIVA	N
June	47	Senior Lecturer	FT	3	18, 14 & 7	Just passed VIVA	Y
Lynn	46	Senior Lecturer	PT	1	5	Re-submitted after 8 years	Y
Abby	37	Research assistant	FT	1	2	Registered 2 years	Y
Joan	31	Research assistant	PT	4	15, 6, 4 & 2	Registered 2 years	Y
Lynette	34	Management consultant	FT	1	3	Registered 1 year	Y
Kate	44	Senior Lecturer	FT	3	18, 13 & 9	Registered 2 years	N
Rachel	38	Senior Lecturer	FT	1	2	Registered 2 years	Y
Victoria	31	Music Teacher	PT	2	5 & 1	Registered 1 year	N
Grace	43	Admin Co-ordinator	PT	2	10 & 7	Registered 2 years	N
Therese	39	Senior Lecturer	FT	1	4	Registered 5 years	Y
Cath	36	Projects officer	FT	1	9	Registered 6 years	Y
Mary Ann	39	Nurse	FT	4	26, 24, 14 & 9	Registered 1 year	Y
Emma	43	Lecturer	PT	2	26 & 14	Writing up after 7 years	N
Laura	39	Research assistant	PT	2	9 & 7	Registered 2 years	N
Joanne	40	Senior Lecturer	FT	1	11	Registered 4 years	N
Sara	54	Lecturer	PT	2	14 & 11	Just passed VIVA	Y
Cecillia	36	Lecturer	FT	3	8, 7 & 5	Registered 3 years	Y
Trish	35	Head of Policy	FT	1	2	Registered 4 years	Y
Rachel	40	Lecturer	FT	2	13 & 9	Registered 2 years	N
Elizabeth	36	Administrator	PT	2	4 & 6 months	Registered 6 years	N
Sokieta	26	Research assistant	PT	1	7 months	Registered 1 year	Y
Eileen	42	Civil servant	FT	1	5	Registered 7 years	Y
Helen	40	Lecturer	FT	2	5 & 3	Registered 6 years	Y
Paula	54	Manager in FE	FT	4	26, 25, 22 & 12	Registered 4 years	Y

APPENDIX 1 (Continued)

Name (pseudonym)	Age	Occupation	Work FT/ PT	No. of children	Ages	Stage of PhD	Live in city of study
Moyra	39	Lecturer	FT	1	4	Registered 2 years	N
Denise	48	Careers advisor	FT	2	25 & 18	Writing up after 6 years	N
Nikki	32	Researcher	PT	2	6 & 3	Just completed	N