The Experiences of Postgraduate Research Students from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic Background: An Exploratory Study

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Background – The contribution of postgraduate research to creating highly skilled workforces, knowledge creation and transfer activities, and its contribution to global economies cannot be underestimated. Yet, recent attention has been drawn to the various challenges faced by postgraduate research students in terms of physical and mental wellbeing, lack of job control and clarity, excessive demands and ambiguous job role status. Evidence suggests that Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) postgraduate research students may face specific challenges, and that these are not necessarily addressed by universities’ support structures. The study’s aim is to explore the experience of BAME postgraduate research students currently studying in the UK.

Methods – Telephone semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 postgraduate research students across a range of disciplines and institutions. Participants were recruited through postgraduate online networks. Data were analysed using Thematic Analysis.

Results – Using the analytic lens of Crenshaw’s intersectional theory and Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory, four interacting systems were shown to impact upon the wellbeing of BAME postgraduate research students by creating specific challenges; these included: ethnicity, gender, lifestage and social status. These challenges were experienced by participants at the micro (individual expectations and experiences), meso (relations to peers, supervisory and/or mentoring teams, friends, family, and other support network), and macro levels (institutions’ structures and policies, national and international policies and context).

Conclusions – The study implications are discussed in terms of recommendations for best practice and further research.