An Intersectional Understanding of International Female Doctoral Students' Narratives

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Abstract

This paper explores the experiences of international female doctoral students in Australia, including significant social and academic life-events, through narrative inquiry. Many theoretical and empirical doctoral studies explore the experiences of doctoral students in 'big-picture' and generalised ways. This research contributes to our understandings of more specific experiences. The goal of this study is to begin mapping an account of the intersection of gender, higher degrees, and social identities of these students from their point of view. Therefore, I have conducted a narrative inquiry among 13 international female doctoral students through multiple email exchanges, followed by in-depth interviews. A total of 65 narratives and 13 interviews have been collected at the end of the data collection. The theory of Intersectionality and the Feminist Standpoint theory consolidate to aid the thematic analysis of research participants' narratives, as they reflect how power operates within our social and academic culture. The research findings contribute to our understanding of the complexity and diversity of the international female doctoral students' lives and allow the educators, universities, policymakers, and future doctoral students to see a closer and more detailed view of these students' life events.

Keywords: International Female Doctoral Student, Narrative Inquiry, Intersectionality

Introduction

Modern societal structures are patriarchal and constructed in such a way where men make most of the political, economic and cultural decisions (Profeta, 2017). Tertiary education around the world is not an exception - more men are in leading position than women (Aiston & Yang, 2017; Winchester & Browning, 2015). Australia moved relatively quickly to enroll women in the universities. However, the men-women ratio never achieves the satisfactory bar in the decision-making position. Men often hold the maximum leading places and make decisions for women at the university level. As a result, women voice often hidden from the mainstream student voice (Booth & Kee, 2011). Contextual background and cultural differences create a different circumstance for international female students, which lead them living in a parallel community and separate them from the multicultural society of Australia (Gomes, 2015). The struggles of international female doctoral students are more complicated due to less number of women enrollment rate in higher degree research programmes along with the mode of their study and intersectional identities (Devos et al., 2017).

According to recent data, women comprise around 45% of higher degrees research students globally but underrepresented at the doctoral level, even where they are over-represented at the master's level research programme (Contreras-Aguirre & Gonzalez, 2017; OECD, 2019). Following the global trend, more women are enrolling to pursue higher degrees in recent years than before in Australian universities (Australian Government's Department of Education and Training, 2016) [Figure 1,2,3 and 4]. However, the growing number of women in Australian higher education does not confirm an equal and women-friendly environment for female students in the university atmosphere (Pritchard, 2007; Savigny, 2014). Instead, it shows a gap of information as the data is absent or publicly unavailable (Boey, 2014).

Figure 1: Gender breakdown of students enrolled in Australian higher education,1949-2012 (Parr, 2015)
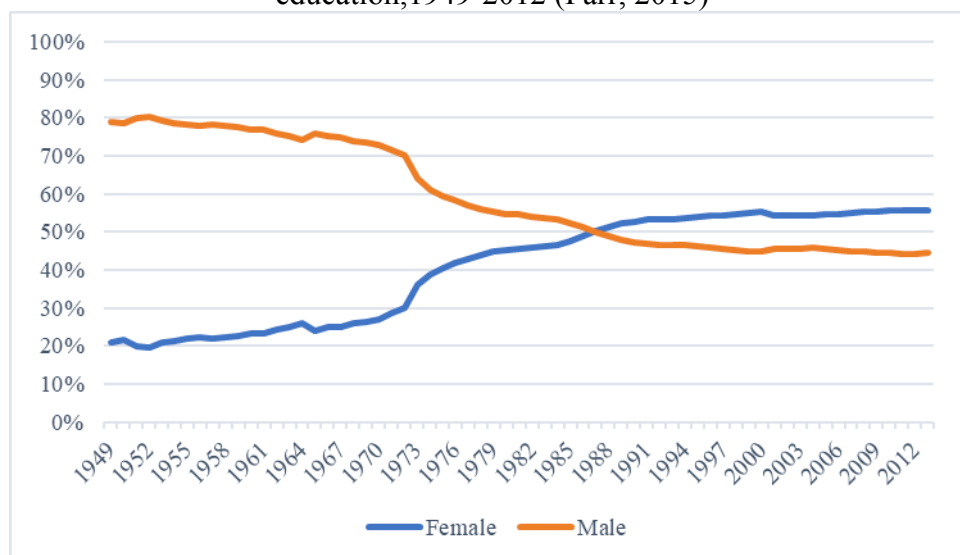
This statistic shows the growing trend of women enrolment rate in Australian higher education from 1949 to 2012. The significant growth occurred between 1973 and 1991. Furthermore, this growth continued to increase over time presented in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Gender breakdown of students enrolled in Australian higher education, 1989-2017
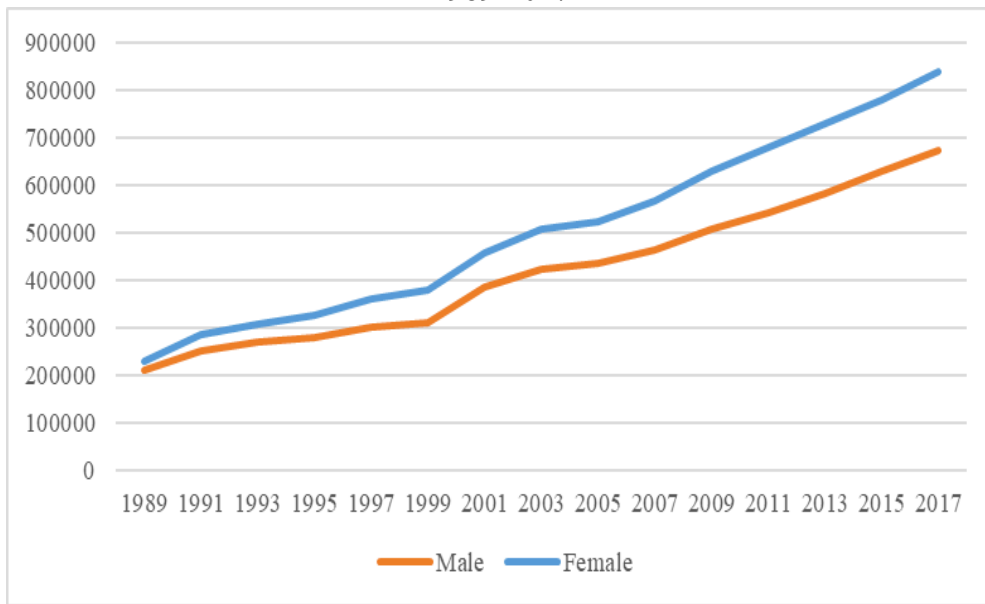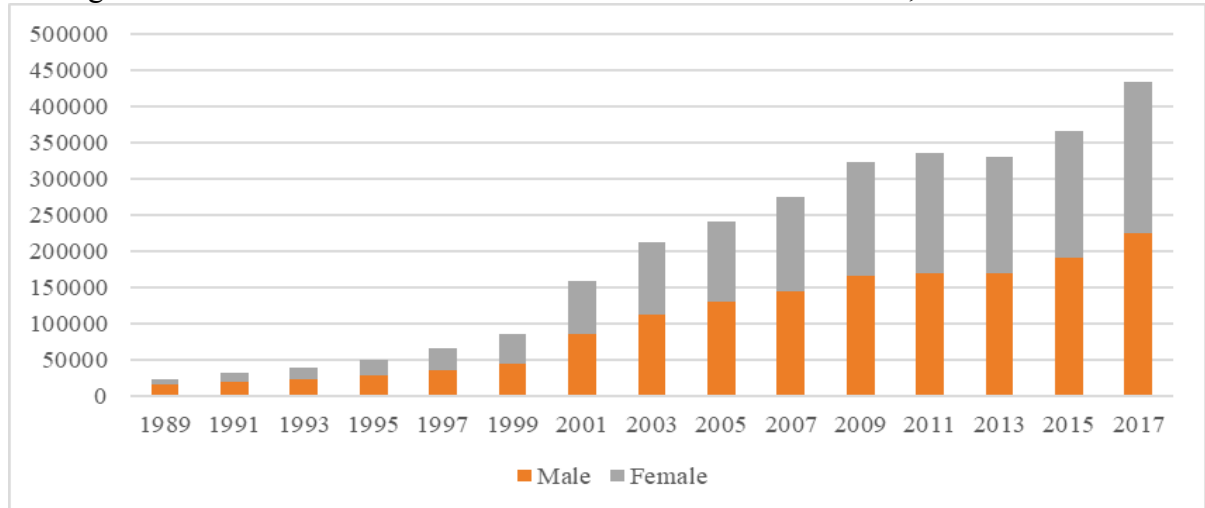
Though the women enrolment rate is higher than the men in the overall Australian higher education system, women were still behind than men in HDR enrolment till 2017. The number of female students increased over time, but men were in the leading position because men's number also increased steadily in the HDR enrolment.

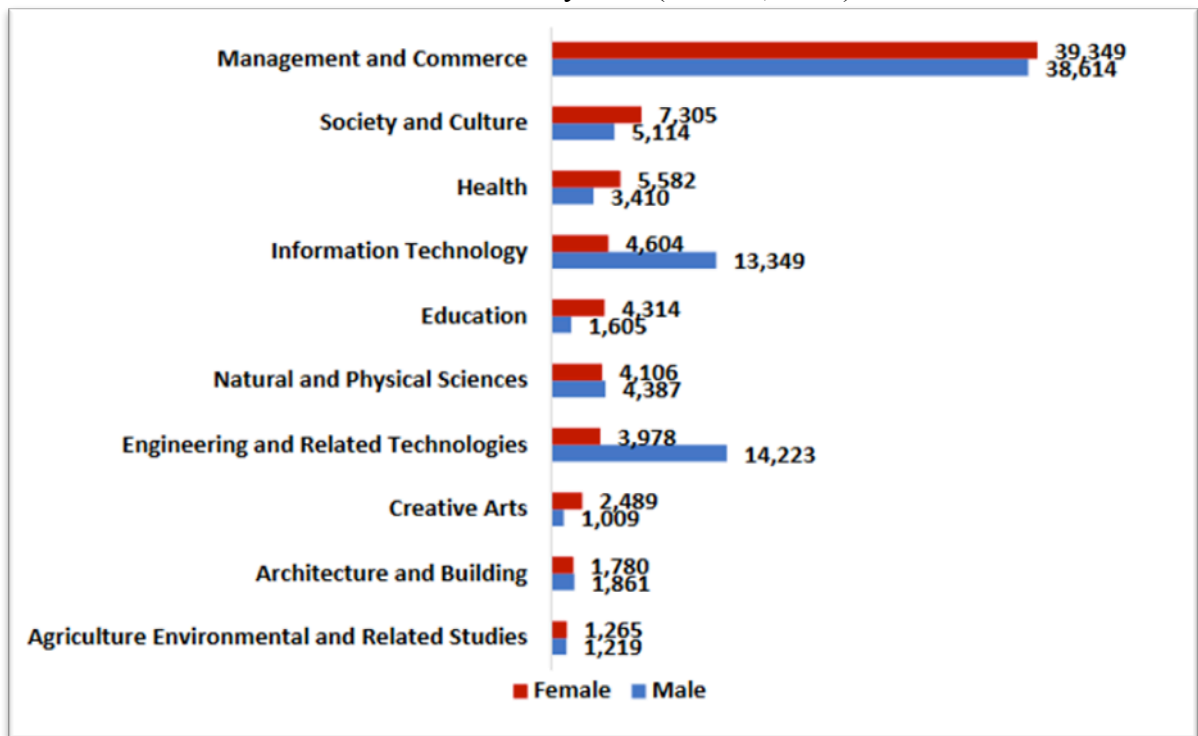Figure 3: Gender break down of HDR students in Australia, 1989-2017
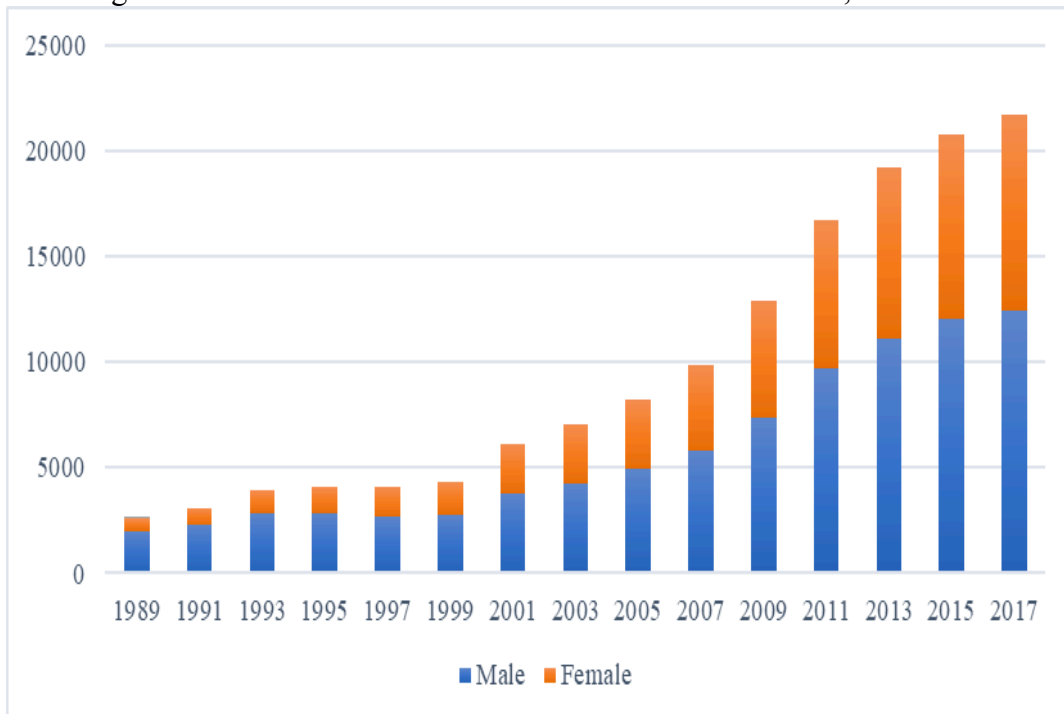
Figure 4: Gender breakdown of International students in Australia, 1989-2017

Figure 5: Number of male and female international postgraduate students in Australian universities by field (Larkins, 2018)

In 2018, remarkably, more international female students were enrolled in postgraduate programmes in Australian universities than international male students in almost all the field of study except IT and engineering-related fields (Larkins, 2018). Though these women comprise a more significant number among international postgraduate students in Australian, did not get much attention by the policymakers and/or universities because little work has been done only focusing on the facts, figures and lives of international female postgraduate and doctoral students' till now. Therefore, their struggles are hidden to the world. There is a need to explore these students' lives that take places within and outside the university. It is essential to identify the strategies that can support female international doctoral students in

balancing research study, work and home life (Boey, 2014). With this background in mind, I intended to conduct this project to explore the narratives of international female doctoral students in Australia.

The objective of the study

The objective of this study is to explore the academic and social experiences of international female doctoral students in Australia. This includes understanding experiences which impact their journeys as postgraduate students and observing their changing perceptions about education through the pathway of doctoral study. The goal of this study is to begin to map an understanding of the intersection of gender, higher degrees and social identities that are experienced by these students.

Research questions

1. How have international female doctoral students in Australia experienced PhD journeys?

a) What motivates them to undertake a PhD?

b) How do they experience their academic and social life during their PhD?

c) In what ways do intersections of gender, doctoral studies and other social identities impact their experiences?

Narrative inquiry

This is a narrative study (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Narrative inquiry is a way of inquiring into people's live events. It remains attentive to the broader contexts and relationships within the nest of human lives (Meister, 2011). I chose narrative inquiry for data collection because the intension was to collect in-depth data, which needs to reflect participants' life experiences. Life experiences come out better through stories. We are all storytellers, and stories are the best way to see the past. This method helped me to dig into my participants' life events and helped the participants to reflect on their experiences.

There were three phases in the data collection process. The first phase was the briefing session. This was an essential session to start-with. The objective of this session was to explain the purpose and goal of the study to the participants as well as introduce and negotiate a flexible framework to support their narratives. Another purpose of this session was to break the ice to ensure a safe and friendly space for the participants so that they can open-up while writing their narratives and participating in the interviews. Participants who understood and agreed with the process of data collection were invited to the second phase.

I have adapted multiple email exchanges method from the letter exchange method for the second phase of data collection (Barksdale, Watson, & Park, 2007; Smith, 1993), which helped me to dig into life events of the participants by requesting for more clarification if needed and covered many aspects of their lives in a short period of time.

The last phase was the semi-structured interviews. This is the stage where the data became more detailed and confirmed the credibility of the participants' narratives. All the interviews were transcribed and returned to the participants for editing and final approval at the end of the data collection. The written narratives were also compiled in one document for each participant and send back to them for a thorough review. A total of 65 written narratives and 13 individual interviews were stored at the end of the data collection.

Theoretical Framework

The Feminist Standpoint theory and the theory of Intersectionality consolidate their collaboration in the study to explain the experiences of international female doctoral students. Intersectionality analyses and signifies social positionality of the participants based on their experiences from a particular location (Crenshaw, 1989) and the recognition of their experiences is the basis of standpoint theory (Harding, 2004).

Feminist standpoint theory provides an explanatory framework devoted to explaining how knowledge remains central to maintaining and changing biased systems of power. It advocates using women's everyday lives as a foundation for constructing knowledge. It helps scholars to understand and explain the world through marginalised, subordinated and oppressed women's point of view in the society. It is the process of acknowledging their knowledge, skill and experiences (Pandey, 2016). This theory is deep-rooted in the assumption that knowledge is socially situated and primarily based on the lives of men in dominant races, classes, and cultures. Since women's lives are different from men's and most knowledge does not reflect their realities, it is necessary to reveal the social order from women's point of view (Harding, 1991, 2004).

The intersection of multiple identities creates an environment for women to have multi-dimensional experiences. Therefore, the theory of Intersectionality recognises that women who have several oppressed identities in society live different lives than women who share only one or some of those oppressed identities (Crenshaw, 1989).

This theoretical position analyse the positionality of international female doctoral students by recognising their intersectional identities simultaneously and inclusively in a society. This framework structures the understanding of the intersection of participants' social and academic identities. Simultaneously, it focuses on their perspectives and gives importance to their point of view about their social positionality as international female doctoral students in Australia.

Understanding the participants' positionality through the narratives consists of four steps. First, we accept the fact that their identities are inseparable from each other. Second, as a result of such inseparable identities, we recognise that their positions are unlike many students. Third, we must admit the truth that the more layers of disadvantages that are present in their life are rooted in the way the society operates based on its history and policies. Finally, it is necessary to include their voices in the knowledge and equitably address their needs.

The theoretical approach acknowledges systemic discrimination takes place due to people's circumstance or uniqueness such as sexual identity, gender identity, race,

economic status, immigration status, national origin, ethnicity, physical and educational ability. This systemic discrimination among all other aspects of one's identity influences accesses to opportunity. Recognising the multiple barriers to opportunity and multiple forms of prejudice is the first step in this approach. In the material world, people are frequently subject not only to discrimination based on multiple aspects of their identity but also to discrimination unique to the intersection of their identities (Cho, Crenshaw, & McCall, 2013). So, for example, the stereotypes and difficulties faced by an Asian female doctoral student can differ from women of other races, native-born Australians, or immigrant Australians. This theoretical framework goes beyond recognising the multiple forms of discrimination and identifies that the different forms of disadvantages may intersect with each other and result in overlapping and reinforcing barriers to opportunity. These overlapping systems result in unique forms of insight that only impact those in that community.

This theoretical approach can also include focusing on the unique challenges of those who experience the intersections of multiple identities. For example, International students (who face both racial discrimination and discrimination because of their immigration status) or international female doctoral students (who face discrimination because of their gender identity, age, and/or marital status). Both have the possibilities to face the intersection of their multiple identities. Therefore, this framework demands recognition of the voice of those most directly impacted because they are often excluded from mainstream conversations. At this point, this framework allows us to understand the importance of listening stories from the participants directly and valuing their voice. Valuing voice means lifting, promoting, and supporting the leadership and storytelling of those most affected by policies and practices and centering their practical suggestions (Harding, 2004).

Affected individuals have the actual experience that makes them thought leaders in the movement for social justice. Therefore, valuing voice allows those who are affected by policies or practices to play a substantial role in building their own story. It is obvious to recognise that there are multiple voices within a movement when speaking about issues. There is no single way of experiencing an issue, and multiple voices and perspectives need to be considered in order to make a real, lasting, and equitable change (Harding, 2004). For example, when talking about the need to promote accountable supervising or academic supports may be mindful to uplift the experiences of international postgraduate students, domestic postgraduate students, male and female doctoral students to confirm that the movement is inclusive. However, each students' experiences within the system are often different and require different monitoring solutions.

The success of this theoretical approach is ensuring different voices (from different dimensions) are included in the dominant converse about an issue. Therefore, the research approach recognises the importance of each student's perspective about their social and personal life while narrating their PhD experiences to get an overview of their life experiences during doctoral study. One way to cover all the aspects of international female doctoral students' lives is to get disaggregated data through their narratives. The narratives, which include their background, family, and community lives as well as their study and work experiences. Highlighting the importance of disaggregated data assures that the specific experiences due to intersectional identities

are not missing, rather being uplifted. This protects the voices of those who are directly impacted by ensuring their unique experiences are recorded.

Data analysis

The selection of the subtext was essential for data analysis. In this step, with the research questions in mind, I marked all the relevant sections of the narratives and assembled to create a new file or subtext. For example, quotes about various aspects of the participants' academic lives and social lives were marked separately.

The second step was defining the thematic categories. I identified the themes from the selected subtext, named separately by using NVivo. Words, sentence and sometimes a group of sentences been considered under a theme.

The third stage was sorting the material into categories: At this stage, I grouped different parts of the narratives under the defined thematic categories. Such as under the 'student-supervisor relationship', all the relevant subtext has been included for further analysis.

Finally, the narrative content collected in each thematic category was used to describe the meaning of the narrative text by using the theoretical framework.

Conclusions

I have categorised the findings into three themes. First, the context and factors that motivated these students to undertake a doctoral degree. Where I have seen the histories of their lives, which influenced them to undertake a PhD, this also reflected their expectations. The primary motivation came from their Family upbringing, Past Social context, Previous school/University experiences, peer influences and lastly many of them decided to undertake a PhD for their career advancement.

The second theme was the study experiences during their PhD. They have narrated their study experiences in two ways. They talked about their achievements, which includes milestones of PhD that fuels their journey as well as discussed and reflected on their on-going struggles. For example, one of the common struggles among international female doctoral students was their communication issues. Many of them stated that their communication issues are not rooted in their lack of language skills but lack of cultural knowledge, which hampered their social lives and student-supervisor relationships. One of the participants explicitly narrated her experiences with her two-male supervisors, who dominated and were rude to her. She said,

"I felt that they underestimated me because I am a small tiny woman comparing to them, and I am also not confident in my communication skills. Therefore, I suffered in my first two years. Later I have changed my way of communication and had to raise the volume of my voice during the meeting so that they take me seriously".

However, the student-supervisor relationship is not only being suffered due to communication skills. Another participant faced similar experiences from her female co-supervisor. She believed her co-supervisor were not supportive because of her

religious and cultural beliefs. Her co-supervisor does not like Muslim people because she had some bad memories from her past with Muslims.

So, if we analyse these two cases carefully, there were multiple layers of identities of each student, such as gender, ethnicity, religion cultural identities, academic status, which intersected and put them in a circumstance which was difficult to overcome and a challenge for them during their PhD. However, they also shared many good experiences because the intersection of multiple identities does not always put people in a disadvantaged situation; sometimes, it brings benefits to them.

The experience of international female doctoral students is unique in a sense because when they try to adjust their academic life in a new educational environment, they also experience a changing landscape of their lifestyle, which is an add on difficulties during their PhD. That was my third theme. It is widespread among international students that they face challenges in finding suitable accommodation in Australia at the beginning of their study. On top of that, financial instability, family responsibilities and community issues are some prevalent challenges for them. It becomes more complicated when that student is a woman and career-oriented because society is judgmental towards women actions.

Overall, the research findings highlighted the complexity and diversity of international female doctoral students' experiences from a feminist perspective, revealed their expectations and reality, which will allow educators, policymakers and future students to better prepare for the future.

As with all research, there were limitations to note. First, because of the nature of narrative research, this study conducted with a small group of participants. Therefore, the study purpose was not to generalise the findings to the broader population; instead, it provides an in-depth exploration of the participant's experiences and perspectives. Second, doctoral students' heavy workload was a demotivating factor for the participants to continue their participation in this study, and I had to allocate more time for data collection. Third, although a narrative approach offers space to explore stories and pay attention to the diversity of human experiences, it has challenges conducting unconventional inquiry (Heikkinen, Huttunen, Syrjälä, & Pesonen, 2012). In this case, I was aware of these challenges and took precautions to avoid and reflect upon them.

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