

# The Emotional Wellbeing of Doctoral Students Conducting Qualitative Research with Vulnerable Populations

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Qualitative studies have the potential to evoke emotional distress among participants, particularly where sensitive issues are explored. Consequently, novice qualitative researchers become well versed in strategies to minimise risk to participants. But what happens to the novice researcher when they are confronted with the emotional account of a participant? While research practices consistently serve to protect the wellbeing of participants, concern for researcher wellbeing is often overlooked. This study explored doctoral students' experiences of undertaking qualitative research projects with vulnerable populations, and the ways in which this influenced their emotional wellbeing. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with six doctoral candidates attending a public Australian university. The analysis shed light on the ways in which doctoral students navigate their emotional wellbeing, pointing to a range of challenges and resources. This article discusses potential intervention points throughout doctoral candidature, while pondering deeper questions about the responsibilities of universities to support early career researchers.

*Keywords:* wellbeing, doctoral, student, qualitative, vulnerability, higher degree

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The work setting is one of the most important environments that shapes human health (Burton, 2010). Universities constitute a unique workplace, characterised by intense workloads and long working hours (Kinman & Jones, 2008; Sang et al., 2015). These occupational conditions, where work and home boundaries are often blurred, are shown to compromise the health and wellbeing of many academic workers (Kinman & Jones, 2008). Indeed, compared to other professions, academia is shown to have one of the highest incidences of mental illness (Lau & Pretorius, 2019). Doctoral students might reasonably be overlooked as academic workers in a traditional sense, given their enrolment as research “apprentices” in preparation for future independent scholarship. However, doctoral programmes constitute a sophisticated form of professional training, in which many aspiring scholars seek to lay the foundation for a future academic career (McAlpine et al., 2012). Like their faculty counterparts, doctoral students are shown to experience high workloads and occupational stress, which can compromise wellbeing (Schmidt & Hansson, 2018). As researchers in training, doctoral students also experience additional vulnerabilities that are unique to their work context (Levecque et al., 2017). For example, doctoral research culture is often characterised by doubt, guilt, intense competition, financial difficulty, social isolation, and uncertainty, all of which are shown to have a negative effect on wellbeing (Schmidt & Hansson, 2018). In a recent Australian study, 222 PhD students cited a range of conditions of candidature that were of concern. These included financial stress, time pressure, limited developmental support, and “bureaucratic, complex [and] dehumanising” higher degree policies and practices (Beasy et al., 2019). It is not surprising, then, that PhD students are shown to experience significantly high levels of concern.

Wellbeing is a multifaceted phenomenon that is subject to multiple interpretations. However, for the purpose of this article, we draw on Dodge et al.'s (2012, pp. 229-230) definition of wellbeing as "the balance point between an individual's resource pool and the challenges faced... [wellbeing occurs where] individuals have the psychological, social and physical resources they need to meet a psychological, social and/or physical challenge." We also value a salutogenic approach to wellbeing, which places emphasis on the capacity, skills, and resources that people have that positively impact on their wellbeing (Antonovsky, 1987). Wellbeing thus relates to an individual's ability to draw on their resilience and coping skills to lead a fulfilling life and deal with adversity and unanticipated challenges. We view challenges and adversity as an important and sometimes enriching part of life. This perspective of wellbeing is used in an overarching framework for this study.

The topic of wellbeing has received considerable attention in qualitative social research, but with an emphasis on the welfare of participants. For example, through the research ethics application process, institutional ethics boards prompt researchers to systemically document potential risks to their participants and plan strategies to prevent and mitigate harm throughout the project. Upholding these ethical obligations is irrefutably important, and indeed a necessary part of research in order to "do no harm." However, we concur with colleagues who express concern that a researcher's own vulnerabilities are often overlooked throughout this process, despite the possibility that fieldwork could produce stress or angst for the person pressing "play" on the voice recorder (Clark & Sousa, 2018; Palmer et al., 2014; Råheim et al., 2016). Not surprisingly, then, the effect of the research *topic* on doctoral students' wellbeing has not received much attention in the academic literature to date (Velardo & Elliott, 2018).

The research topic can influence qualitative researchers in numerous ways. As a specific form of fieldwork, qualitative interviews constitute an extremely intimate encounter in which personal information and experiences are divulged. In qualitative interviews, it is the participants' ideas, opinions and practices that constitute the data for analysis (Palmer et al., 2014). Clearly, an important part of undertaking interviews is the establishment of rapport to build a sense of trust, safety, and respect for the interviewee (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). Rapport is especially vital when working with groups with whom sensitive and emotionally charged topics are often discussed. For example, it is important that vulnerable populations, defined as groups who are "hard to reach... silent, the hidden, the deviant, the tabooed, the marginalised and hence invisible populations in society" (Liamputtong, 2006, p. 4), feel safe and comfortable sharing their intimate stories in an interview. In fact, some scholars assert that a researcher's ability to empathise emotionally is an important element of "good" qualitative research, since becoming deeply immersed in a participant's story can facilitate greater understanding of the participant's experience and perspective (Angel, 2013). However, strong empathetic feelings are also shown to have adverse effects on researchers. For example, Dickson-Swift and colleagues' eminent work on "sensitive" research shows that researchers can feel emotionally drained and experience feelings of guilt, vulnerability, and exhaustion (Dickson-Swift et al., 2007). More recent studies have demonstrated similar tensions for researchers working in sensitive areas, who have described feelings of vulnerability, empathy, and frustration (Fahie, 2014; Mallon & Elliott, 2019). Some researchers have also described their experiences of undertaking such work as "emotionally risky" (Mallon & Elliott, 2019) and "traumatic" (Moran & Asquith, 2020). Considering the intimate nature of the qualitative interview, the wellbeing of the participant as well as the researcher could both be compromised as personal stories are shared (Dickson-Swift et al., 2005; Fahie, 2014). Accordingly, qualitative researchers can feel emotionally "drained" from the all-consuming nature of their research and may struggle to release their own tensions and anxieties (Pocock, 2015), which could result in compassion fatigue and burnout (Dickson-Swift et al., 2006, 2007; Fahie, 2014).

As researchers and authors of this article, we relate to the topic of researcher wellbeing through our firsthand experience as postgraduate students. During our respective doctoral projects, we both faced unanticipated challenges while listening to the stories of our participants. We were unprepared for some of the emotions surrounding our interactions with participants, including guilt, anger, and sadness. At the time, rather than carefully reflecting on the experience of listening to difficult stories, we focused on continuing with data collection to “get the job done.” Having now reflected on our experiences, some years later, we were surprised by the degree of vulnerability each of us experienced during our doctoral fieldwork. We also noted an absence of literature exploring doctoral students’ wellbeing, especially as it relates to working with vulnerable populations in qualitative research (Velardo & Elliott, 2018). The present study thereby sought to explore doctoral students’ journeys and experiences of undertaking qualitative research with vulnerable populations. By giving doctoral students a voice, we emphasise the importance of valuing the wellbeing of all qualitative researchers, at whatever career stage. Developing a greater understanding of how emerging researchers work and cope during the qualitative research process also provides an important foundation for enhancing support initiatives for doctoral students.

## **Methods**

### **Methodology**

This study was underpinned by an interpretivist epistemology, which assumes that people actively construct and then act upon realities they assign to events, actions, processes, ideologies, and conditions in the world (Patton, 2014). The assumptions surrounding interpretivism relate to the notion of “multiple realities” (Atkinson, 2012), which have methodological consequences for the choice of data collection method and analytical practices (outlined later). As argued in other studies (e.g., Elliott et al., 2019), interpretivism is a coherent and necessary underpinning for research seeking to use a constructivist variant of grounded theory. Constructivist grounded theory pays analytical attention to language, provides methods for theorising action, bonds the researcher with the researched, and seeks multiple perspectives (Charmaz, 2020). Unlike traditional and post-positivist variants, constructivist grounded theory focuses on meanings constructed from interpretations of the data (Charmaz, 2006). Grounded theory is traditionally used where a relevant theory does not exist, or in an area where little is already known but the researcher remains committed to the pursuit of developing a substantive grounded theory that has high relevance and practical application (Holt, 2017). After considering a range of approaches to qualitative research, grounded theory was thereby deemed an appropriate methodology for this research study, given a substantive theory to explain the process and impact of qualitative work with vulnerable populations on doctoral student wellbeing has yet to be produced. This provides an important theoretical basis for establishing methodological coherence from herein.

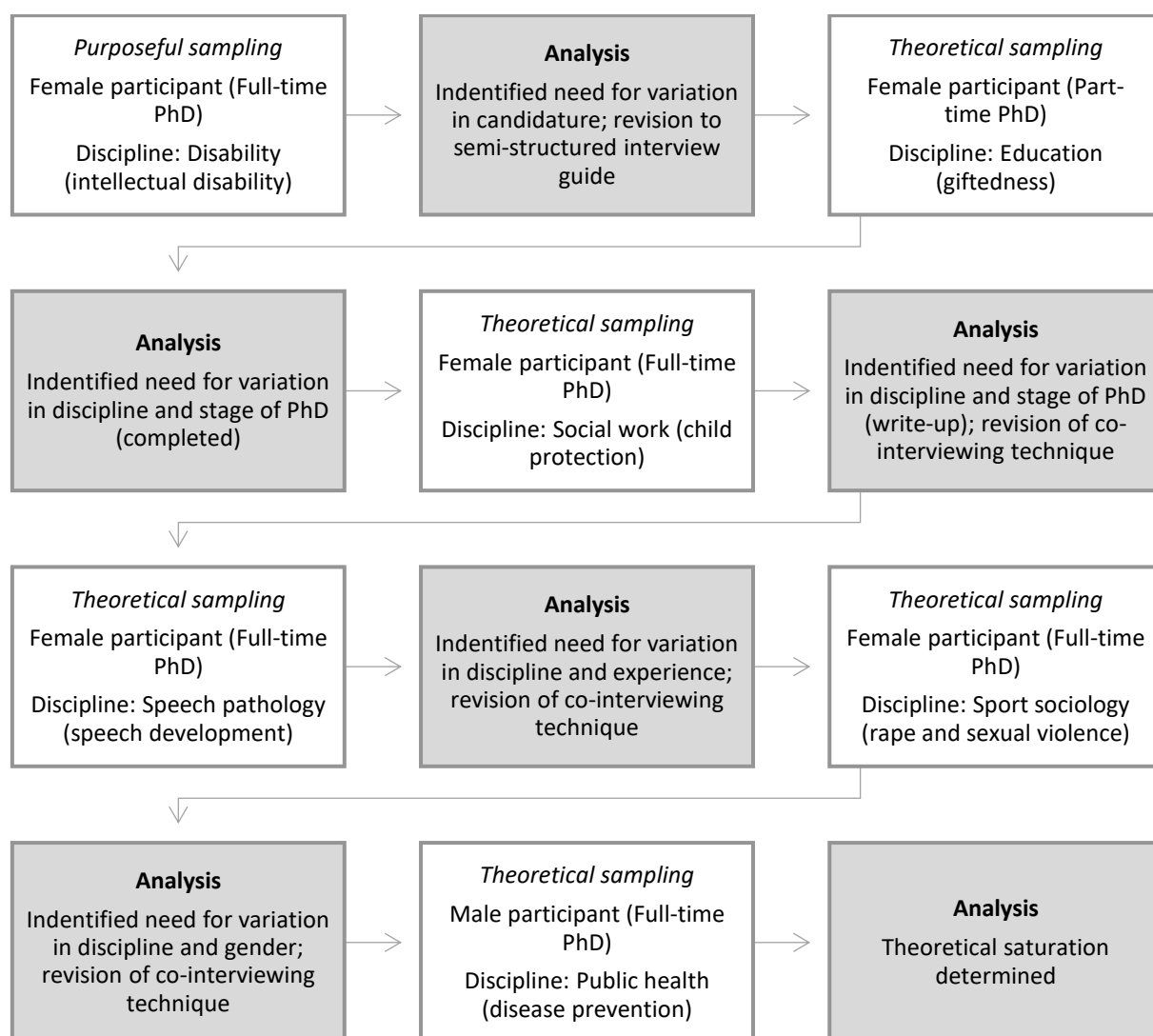
### **Participants**

Following institutional research board ethics approval, six doctoral candidates (five females, one male) were recruited from an Australian public university using both purposeful and theoretical sampling strategies. For inclusion in the study, participants had either commenced or completed qualitative data collection with a vulnerable population group, at the point of recruitment. The participants’ projects each involved working with vulnerable populations across a range of disciplines, including disability, education, social work, speech pathology, sociology, and public health.

## Procedure

We recruited participants via emails and flyers targeting postgraduate students within the university. Information pertaining to the study was also circulated via email to academic staff in supervisory roles as an additional strategy to recruit doctoral students. The information outlined that involvement was entirely voluntary, including the option to be interviewed using a co-interviewing technique or a one-to-one interview, and that participants would go into a draw to win a \$20 stationery voucher. Interested participants contacted the lead researcher (first author) via email and a time and location for individual interviews was established.

**Figure 1:**  
*A Traditional Approach to Theoretical Sampling*



Prior to facilitating each individual interview, participants were provided with a verbal explanation of the study. They were also reminded of the privacy, anonymity and confidentiality conditions associated with the project. The participants provided written consent prior to commencing. In total, six in-depth interviews were conducted with doctoral students undertaking qualitative projects with vulnerable populations. The interviews ranged from 61 to 75 minutes (mean 68 mins). In-depth interviews were chosen as they are an

indispensable source of rich and new information about social and personal aspects of people's lives (Smith & Sparkes, 2017). However, following the lead of Redman-MacLaren et al. (2014) and their support for remaining open to new possibilities for learning in qualitative research, each participant was offered the option to complete their interview with both of the researchers in the room, which we term *co-interviewing*, or alternatively, a one-to-one interview. Each participant agreed to the co-interviewing option, which we argue enhanced the co-facilitation of questions, note-taking and probing, and the quality of post-interview debriefing and reflection.

We developed a semi-structured interview guide from previous studies on researcher wellbeing (Dickson-Swift et al., 2007) and from what Weed (2017) describes as "sensitising concepts" that provide a point of departure for data collection within a grounded theory approach. This included broader stressors relating to PhD candidature and strategies to manage wellbeing, informing the construction a 13-item semi-structured interview guide for participants. Two ice-breaker questions comprised the introductory questions about demographic information. Here we described how we (the researchers) came to the study and sought background information about each participant's PhD topic and project. Transition questions involved probing participants about their interviewing experience during the data collection phase within their doctoral project. A focus on the participants' experience as a "novice" interviewer was emphasised during the transition questions. The remaining questions explored emotions and feelings, strategies and mechanisms for coping, retrospective views about supporting emotional wellbeing during candidature, and possible points for institutional intervention. As co-interviewers, we initially took turns asking questions, but intuitive opportunities for probing and follow-up characterised the dynamic nature of each interview (Redman-MacLaren et al., 2014).

## Data Analysis

Guided by Charmaz (2006), analysis started following the first interview and continued throughout and after data collection. After each interview, the researchers made field notes about the ideas and possible relationship between these ideas in the form of memos. Each recording was transcribed by a professional transcription company before a complete verbatim transcript was returned to the research team. Pseudonyms were then used to protect the identity of each participant represented in the data. All interview recordings were transcribed and coded during data collection. Transcription produced 148 pages (66,622 words) of single-spaced textual data which were analysed following the core principles summarised by Weed (2017) involving the use of codes and memos to develop concepts, the method of constant comparison, and the concept of theoretical saturation. As newcomers to using a constructivist grounded theory approach, we were cognisant of "glossing over" participants' meanings that might reflect what Charmaz (2006) considers an outsiders' view rather than an insiders' view. To this end, we employed word-by-word and incident-by-incident techniques as described by Weed (2017) during the process of initial coding. Word-by-word initial coding helped to provide context to early descriptions of the phenomenon. Incident-by-incident initial coding was then used to identify the nature of the smallest concepts relating to doctoral student wellbeing. We argue that the application of multiple qualitative analytic methods for the initial coding was necessary, given that constructivist grounded theory requires that researchers "take control" of data collection and analysis (Charmaz, 2006). A process of focused coding was then undertaken involving coding the most significant codes to determine theoretical adequacy. This analytical step was aided using reflexive memo-writing to begin linking codes together, and in doing so, moving from codes (descriptions of the phenomenon) to concepts. Although not often reported, and in the spirit of aiding traceability, the memos ranged from 300 to 1,000 words in length

(total of 4,359 words). Analytic reflexive memo-writing was the basis on which we ensured the analysis was constructed from the data.

### Methodological Rigour

Given the interpretivist underpinnings to the study, we adopted different means, methods and practices from lists that were not fixed, rigid or predetermined (Smith & McGannon, 2018). We suggest that the methodological rigour of this study should largely be evaluated on the methods that judge the versatility and potential of constructivist grounded theory. This includes credibility, originality, resonance, and usefulness, as suggested by Charmaz (2006), as well as sincerity, to judge the intuitive, inventive, and interpretive act of writing. Here we detail the means, methods and practices used to enhance rigour in the study, as well as an argument to encourage readers to consider the article's potential naturalistic generalisability:

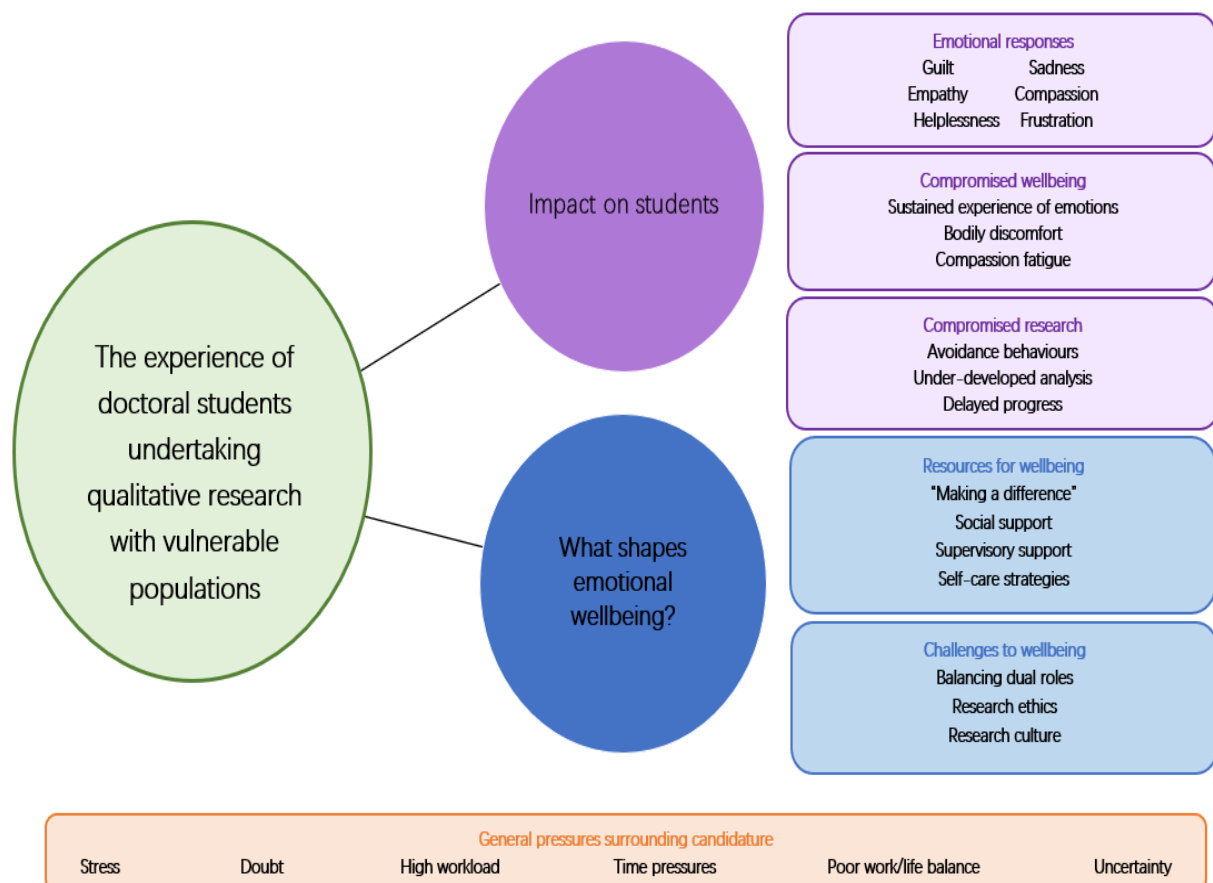
- *Credibility* was achieved by providing abundantly rich descriptions to “show” rather than “tell” (Tracy, 2010) readers about the implicit actions and meanings within the studied phenomenon. In this light, the authors have provided an honest and traceable account of the theoretical sampling and constant comparison method leading to the construction of concepts and categories. Importantly, the data reflects thick descriptions and clearly highlights who is talking and who is not talking in the co-interviewing process, which is an important means for achieving credibility (Tracy, 2010).
- *Originality* was achieved by providing new insights to challenge, extend or refine current ideas, concepts, and practices around doctoral student wellbeing during their qualitative work.
- *Resonance* was practised by providing sufficiently rich accounts of the data, encouraging readers to consider if the categories portray the fullness of the studied experience (Charmaz, 2006). The rich textual data, reflected in the ensuing findings, are presented in ways to encourage the readers to reflect upon it and “make connections to their own situations” (Sparkes & Smith, 2014, p. 184).
- We argue that *usefulness* was achieved because the article offers a grounded theoretical model explaining how doctoral students navigate emotional wellbeing during qualitative work with vulnerable populations. The theoretical model offers points for intervention for supervisors, institutions, ethics boards and candidates, demonstrating high relevancy and utility.
- The other means for demonstrating rigour included adopting methods and practices to achieve *sincerity*. This was achieved by promoting self-reflexivity and transparency regarding the methods and challenges. The second author acted as a critical friend for the lead researcher to examine their own position and presence in the research and help acknowledge the multiple interpretations that exist relating to the interview data. This involved meeting regularly during data collection and analysis to act as a “sounding board” (Sparkes & Smith, 2014) to examine the memos, initial coding, early descriptions of the phenomenon and the development of concepts and categories. We have also demonstrated sincerity and openness about the challenges inherent to constructivist grounded theory methodology, especially for novice grounded theorists who employed dual coding methods (word-by-word and incident-by-incident) for initial coding.
- As Smith and McGannon (2018) argue, thick and rich descriptions are needed to help readers reflect upon, and make connections to, their own lives. As we have provided below, the rich characteristics of the data are offered to the readers as a means through

which to explore how they might connect to similar experiences, settings they move in, events they have observed or heard about and people they have talked to (Smith & McGannon, 2018). If this happens for readers, it might be suggested that the research displays naturalistic generalisability well beyond doctoral students undertaking qualitative work with vulnerable populations.

### Results

All six participants were leading qualitative studies that uncovered stories of emotional intensity. While the participants’ accounts and disciplines varied, the grounded theory sheds light on common concepts related to the process of navigating emotional wellbeing while undertaking qualitative research with vulnerable populations. Figure 2 depicts the experience of doctoral students undertaking qualitative research with vulnerable populations. Figure 3 provides information pertaining to each participant and their field of research and enrolment status.

**Figure 2:**  
*A Substantive Grounded Theory of the Experience of Doctoral Students Undertaking Qualitative Research with Vulnerable Populations*



**Figure 3:**  
*Participant Characteristics*

Pseudonym	Sex	Field of research	Enrolment status
<b>Miranda</b>	Female	Disability studies	Domestic student; External
<b>Mandy</b>	Female	Education	Domestic student; Internal
<b>Courtney</b>	Female	Social work	Domestic student; External
<b>Jennie</b>	Female	Sociology	Domestic student; Internal
<b>Jane</b>	Female	Speech pathology	Domestic student; Internal
<b>Frankie</b>	Male	Public health	International student; Internal

## The Experience of Navigating Emotional Wellbeing

### *Impact on Students and Their Projects*

Participants described feelings of sadness, sympathy, and empathy during and immediately after their qualitative interviews, although the degree to which they experienced these feelings varied. We noted that the research context played some part in participants' experiences. For example, Frankie and Courtney shared similar experiences of working with vulnerable populations in international contexts. Both experienced an overwhelming sense of guilt going into collect data within their communities and then leaving to return to Australia. Their guilt was largely grounded in the broader concerns of poverty and injustice, and the difficulties associated with learning about lack of access to basic resources and poorer life chances. Frankie described his overwhelming concern for his participants, which also reflected his frustration around global inequities.

*But the stories I heard were disturbing ... people not having money to afford prevention, even treatment, and someone going like, "Okay. Yeah, I went to hospital, they prescribed this medication. They said the medication is not covered by the insurance ... I don't have the money to buy the medication ..."* That was the most, one of the most disturbing. (Frankie)



Based on their accounts, the world was not doing enough for some people and there was an acute awareness of their own privilege as PhD students. Courtney stated that she was not prepared for the overwhelming guilt that she would experience during and after her interviews, which contained some “*horrendous and unbelievable stories.*” Throughout our discussion, she likened herself to a parasite:

*I think prior to going into the research setting I underestimated what, and I wasn't prepared for, it hadn't occurred to me these feelings of guilt that I might feel. I hadn't really thought about the difference between being a helper versus a researcher, and I hadn't resolved that parasitic-like voyeuristic sort of feeling ... I still feel guilty about it, I've got to say. I know that sounds bizarre, but it's really difficult. I think that during the process it was occurring to me as I'm talking to these children, that I'm here, I walk away with the doctorate; these kids give me all of this painful stuff and I walk away richer. (Courtney)*

Feelings of sadness and empathy were also evident for doctoral candidates who collected their data in Australia. Across all interviews, students described feeling sorry for their participants to varying degrees. This was influenced by several processes such as the researchers' request for participants to share more detail in the interviews, as well as social actions, for example, shedding tears with participants. Participants described using a range of probing techniques to more fully explore a topic or statement in an effort to go beneath the surface of the described experience(s). While some students like Miranda and Mandy experienced great empathy and sadness, with a significant and sustained visceral response that they perceived to be distressing, Jennie and Jane reported more transient empathy that seemed to resolve more quickly. As Mandy explained, “*you might come across things that break your heart.*” Specifically, Miranda and Mandy both described crying, as a result of their sadness and empathy, alongside general bodily discomfort associated with anxiety. For example, as described by Miranda:

*I could really relate, almost empathise and feel them ... It's been a little while since this happened, but I know that I would, with the anxiety, you've got that where your system is running faster, I would probably have not eaten as well as I usually do, or it would be in a different way... and your thoughts go back to it, you don't sleep as well. You're just a bit more fractured from your life than you generally are. (Miranda)*

We also noted an overwhelming sense of gratitude across the cohort, with the students acknowledging the fact that their participants were generously “giving” to their research project, by sharing their intimate stories, which were often painful and deeply personal. Ten, people's difficulties stemmed from social marginalisation and broader social inequities, which was difficult for doctoral researchers to accept, and evoking feelings of injustice and sadness:

*For me, the most difficult part of doing my research was hearing people disclose rape, stories of rape, and then going out into the world afterwards and being in a world where people constantly diminish those kinds of experiences. (Jennie)*

*I find it emotional. I find it — it's, what is it? Well, it's empathy isn't it really?... So, I think there's that reaction. And I just think, I don't know that you can get away from it. (Jane)*

There were residual emotions that endured beyond the data collection period for students who collected their data in different countries. Both Frankie and Courtney returned to Australia to complete their final analysis and thesis write up, where they were required to resume research in a completely new environment. Frankie vividly described feelings of immense sadness that resurfaced for during data transcription. Both he and Courtney explicitly talked about having to relive participant stories while writing up their respective theses, which proved to challenge their wellbeing. Courtney was still troubled by her PhD interview experience, which had since been featured as a talking point in professional counselling sessions.

*The stories were still very much in my mind ... because the longer I dealt with the data, transcribing, listening to the interviews over and over, and then I can still imagine when they were telling me those things, and the people who said them. So those days, it was so much, and so after the time of the data analysis and then writing of the results it was still something that kept recurring because I still read the stories directly. (Frankie)*

However, ongoing sadness was similarly experienced by Miranda, who experienced distress during the data transcription phase and beyond, despite remaining in a consistent environment.

*There was anxiety ... escalating to really intense anxiety for a period of two or three days, where I cried at the time. Even now, there is still some residual anxiety over this because I can feel some changes within my body. (Miranda)*

It was interesting to note that Jennie actively decided to use a professional transcription company, so that she did not have to “relive” her participants’ accounts. She described this action as potentially protective as it somewhat limited interaction with her data. Jennie was the only participant to report outsourcing of data transcription.

Evidently, our grounded theory demonstrates that researchers are affected by the research process at an individual level, but it also points to the possibility that emotional wellbeing could influence the progression of the research project itself, particularly when there are residual emotions. Two participants, Mandy and Frankie, shed light on their intense journeys and some of the associated difficulties with conducting their research. Mandy described avoidance behaviours in relation to transcribing and analysing the interviews that she perceived as more “difficult” and emotional. She also described the experience of having to present her preliminary research findings at a national conference, where she felt “heavy” having to relive aspects of the research by sharing participants’ stories with the audience. She described wanting to avoid sitting with the data, in order to protect her wellbeing.

*I was watching her physically shaking and hearing the crumbling of this poor kid. And then having to transcribe it and write it up and then constantly sort of come back to that. I would love to not actually have to look at it again, to be honest. I'd love to take her out of the study in some ways because it does affect me on some levels. But I know that I have to, it's fine, but that's intense...hers was the last I would transcribe. It would be the last that I would want to do analysis on. I kind of would like to avoid it, because in some ways hers was the hardest. (Mandy)*

## Resources for Wellbeing

### *Making a Difference*

All participants were ultimately conducting their doctorates in order to “make a difference” in the broader community. All described wanting the absolute best outcomes for the vulnerable populations they were working with and demonstrated immense commitment and compassion. In discussing the challenges associated with working with marginalised groups, some students used a “cost benefit” analogy to describe their views, which served to justify or defend the emotional burden one experiences by doing this kind of PhD, on the basis that the pain and intensity “was worth it.”

*If you're going to engage properly with people, you're going to show warmth, genuineness, and those type of things, and I'm in the field because of that, and then the difference that you make. I think in a way I keep thinking all of this will be worth it ... Not only because you get this degree and you feel good about yourself, but there's been some things I've learned and that I've been able to pass on, and there's some difference I've made into people's lives, which inadvertently makes a difference in my life, I feel better about myself. (Miranda)*

*I think I get around that [difficulties working with a vulnerable population] by thinking that I'm contributing, because — and I guess that's the motivation to do the PhD in the first place as well, I want to see improvements in the interventions that we have to offer. (Jane)*

In doing so, all participants demonstrated a deep sense of compassion for their research participants. There were also many positives associated with doing a PhD. For example, Mandy described data collection as an “*incredibly enriching and exciting time as a researcher*” despite the “*heavy*” experience of having to navigate intense emotions. For Frankie and Courtney, the gross global injustices that frustrated them were also a significant motivational factor for completing their PhDs. In this way, researcher discomfort was deemed important in order to fully comprehend and make sense of vulnerable groups’ experiences and the need for action and reform. As Frankie explained:

*I want to see justice, not to forget really, because I have a passion to empower people. Empowerment for me is very important, and if I'm working to empower people, I'm happy. If I forget that's good for me, but ... no good for them. (Frankie)*

For Jennie, this idea needed to be externally reinforced by those around her:

*My counsellor would literally just say to me, “Your research is valuable, you're making a difference, you are doing a good thing. You care about the research. You should keep doing it.” And my partner tells me similar sorts of things all the time. (Jennie)*

### ***Practising Self-care***

Participants employed a range of self-care techniques to ease the emotional distress and fatigue associated with data collection. These included strategies like exercise, eating well, taking a bath and spending time with friends and family.

*If I find that I'm struggling then I think, oh yeah, get changed, or go for a run, or something that makes you stop. And then also just give yourself permission and say, I'm going to think about that when I go and sit at the computer next, or look at that next, and I'm not going to think about it now. (Jane)*

*I have been known to walk the dog a lot. So, when I'm worried, it's just that fresh air, it's getting moving, it's trying not to think about anything, you know, all that, lose yourself in a movie, all the things that are proactive health strategies. (Miranda)*

Participants largely attributed these coping skills to prior industry experience. In fact, all but one participant spoke extensively about their prior work experience and its connection to their doctoral studies. Industry experience was collectively perceived as a level of necessary protection and a way to develop resilience, as it had introduced participants to the research context and enabled them to develop skills in communication, engagement, debriefing and general self-care. All participants agreed that had they not developed coping skills prior to the PhD, then it would have been much more difficult. Despite experiencing varying degrees of emotional distress, the skills learned through industry seem to buffer the potential adverse effects of stressful experiences on participants' emotional wellbeing. Jane specifically talked about her ability to compartmentalise, a skill she had acquired through years of experience as a speech pathologist:

*I think that I wouldn't have been able to do it if I didn't have the 12 years of experience as a speech pathologist working with children that don't use speech to communicate ... I think if you probably were a bit more melancholic or a bit more — didn't have that resilience factors, that yeah, well the things we're talking about could be really challenging as a PhD student. I mean on top of that, if you didn't have the years of experience. (Jane)*

### ***Social Support***

All participants discussed social support as a resource for wellbeing. Social support took various forms, but participants predominantly spoke of the encouragement and assistance offered by their peers who were also undertaking their doctorates. This form of support was deemed especially beneficial, as one could personally relate to, and empathise with, the unique process of undertaking a doctorate. Consequently, the identification of, access to, and utility of social support made it easier to navigate individual processes of researcher wellbeing because participants felt their peers could validate feelings, perspectives, and actions through the lens of a "PhD researcher." For participants, the ability to connect with peers, increased feelings of wellbeing and provided a sense of relief during more intense periods, such as writing up. Jennie's story shed light on the social support she received through a self-established PhD writing group:

*It took me a while to realise that I needed to seek support somewhere other than my supervisors and that I needed to find my own supports in informal ways as well to be able to cope with doing difficult research ... I think that the sooner a PhD student realises that and realises that their support will come from their colleagues, their PhD colleagues, the better off they are ... And I think when you're particularly doing quite difficult research, it needs to be drilled in in every process that your wellbeing matters. (Jennie)*

Beyond peers, family and friends were also described as providing an important form of social and emotional support and encouragement for participants, particularly when they were dealing with distress. Frankie did not debrief with friends, and preferred to keep his struggles private, but still sought the company of friends after data collection sessions to relax and unwind. In Frankie's case, access to friends provided a sense of immediate relief during data collection, where he was able to dissociate from negative feelings related to his participants' stories. However, he did experience ongoing difficulties during the later stage of the doctorate when he returned to Australia. Social support in the form of professional counselling was sought by one third of the group, who found this to be extremely beneficial as they were able to express distress and develop new skills to cope with their experiences. After data collection, Courtney sought counselling from the university service to talk through some personal issues but found herself discussing some of the difficulties arising from her interviews, which were clearly unresolved. She found it useful to talk through the difficulties she had been carrying and viewed counselling as a potential avenue for healing.

*I actually, this week, late last week sorry, saw a counsellor here, and that's one of the things, I didn't mean to talk about that, I was talking about something completely, my mother-in-law is very unwell and I was talking about that actually, and she asked about the research and I started talking about that, and I sort of welled up. I went, "Oh, I didn't even realise I was carrying that level." And she said, "We don't hear that. We don't hear PhD students talk about their research like this." And I said, "Well, maybe you don't but I think, I couldn't imagine that I'm the only person experiencing this level of discomfort." (Courtney)*

For Jennie, counselling enabled her to develop a suite of self-care techniques that she later adopted throughout her PhD, and offered her an opportunity to debrief where necessary:

*I had to develop self-care techniques but that was because my mental health had really deteriorated by the time, I sought counselling, and that was at my counsellor's request. But before that, no, I didn't have any self-care techniques at all. I kind of just did the interview, went back to doing work ... I just kept moving and going and kept it to myself. Whereas afterwards, I was focusing on self-care more generally, not just in relation to my research, and I had that debriefing with my counsellor about any issues that would come up. (Jennie)*

Despite only one third having accessed the service, all participants cited professional counselling as a potential support strategy for PhD students dealing with difficult content and emotional distress. In doing so, they also highlighted some barriers to the current university counselling system. For example, it was difficult to access immediate support due to high demand, and continuity of care was lacking, which meant that students were not always guaranteed to see the same counsellor for consecutive sessions. Some participants also

recommended a dedicated “PhD counsellor” with whom they would be able to connect with, and who would be well versed in the specific issues faced by doctoral students as a distinct population group.

### ***Supervisory Support***

Supervisors were critical to students’ research experiences, and the level of support offered to students varied considerably. Some participants described turning to their supervisors for debriefing post-interviews, which seemed to assist in working through emotional difficulties. Courtney was able to contact her supervisor while she was collecting data overseas, and in between conversations he suggested she journal her thoughts and experiences, which she described as beneficial. Mandy also described the support offered by one of her supervisors:

*I called Jack [pseudonym], my favourite supervisor, and said this has happened, what do I do? I know that I’ve done what I’m supposed to do but it’s not good enough. And so, he gave some clear advice about a follow-up contact with the school coordinator. ‘Cos I just felt like I wanted to disappear from the site until I knew what to do. (Mandy)*

By contrast, other students lacked emotional and debriefing support from their supervisors, and some were unsure about whether this type of support fell within the remit of PhD supervision. Jennie’s lack of support from her supervisors, especially at critical moments of her candidature, was clearly problematic. To prepare for her fieldwork, one supervisor sent Jennie an article on vicarious trauma to help her deal with anticipated emotional wellbeing issues in the field, without following up with any discussion or debriefing. This was just one example of supervisory support that was deemed inadequate. Since then, Jennie changed supervisory teams and moved to another university and had an improved experience. Jane received some support from her primary supervisor, but also pondered whether she should have confided more in her supervisory team, and in doing so, questioned supervisory responsibilities:

*I certainly could have planned to talk more scheduled approach with my supervisor, not that I don’t know that she would necessarily have had the time to be honest, to do that ... But then is that her role and expertise necessarily, as a supervisor, to give me ... support and empathy? Maybe it is. I don’t know? (Jane)*

## **Barriers to Wellbeing**

### ***Balancing Dual Roles and Research Ethics***

While industry experience provided some resources for navigating emotional wellbeing, participants also discussed having to straddle dual identities; that of a PhD candidate, and the other as a practising professional (e.g., social worker, educator, speech pathologist etc.) who might otherwise respond in a different way to some of the emergent stories. Courtney drew a distinction around the difference between “industry” interviewing as a social worker and research for “research” purposes. Industry work, she described, is more person-centred and focused on benefitting the client, whereas research is focused on achieving the researcher’s aims and objectives by answering their predetermined research questions.

Mandy provided a different perspective by detailing how she was forced to suppress her natural maternal and humanistic instinct to comfort an individual in emotional distress, in order to fulfil ethical obligations. While she was satisfied that she had done the right thing as a researcher, she also felt like she had failed as a human being, which resulted in sustained feelings of guilt.

*I felt very disempowered because I knew the boundaries of not being able to help these young people. I felt very bound by my professional ethics in terms of I couldn't hug those young people. You know, the mother's heart went out to these girls. (Mandy)*

Other participants described unanticipated difficulties they had encountered with respect to research ethics, particularly when issues arose that went beyond the scope of procedures outlined in the university ethics approval notice. This also extended to knowing how much they could reveal in a debriefing scenario, without compromising the confidentiality of participants. For Jennie, a professional counsellor offered a layer of trust that assisted her in navigating this issue:

*I would usually talk to my counsellor about that [participants' stories] because I think I felt more comfortable with that extra layer of confidentiality in there. That my counsellor couldn't tell anyone about what I had told her, so I knew that I wasn't betraying my participants in any way. (Jennie)*

All participants felt that the university ethics process placed significant emphasis on protecting participants, without enough consideration of researchers themselves. This was deemed an important area for change, in order to better support the wellbeing of doctoral students.

*The ethics committee will ask for counselling facilities for participants; they don't think about the researcher, so this is something that's never come up. (Frankie)*

### **Research Culture**

Research culture emerged as a barrier to emotional wellbeing, for several reasons. The high work demands in academia are well established, and PhDs are characterised by a range of pressures that disrupt work–life balance. Participants spoke about the general pressures of doing a PhD, irrespective of topic and discipline. Such factors included stress, time pressures and poor work–life balance, which constituted overarching barriers to achieving wellbeing. Some participants were explicit in describing the culture of “excellence” and “competition” that characterises the PhD programme, which can mean that there is little opportunity to show vulnerability. Frankie, for example, discussed the institution’s focus on timely completion and resilience in the face of hardship, which meant that students simply needed to “*get their research done.*” As such, he did not perceive researcher wellbeing as core business of the university. Mandy described the deeply embedded excellence culture which can prevent students from reaching out and exposing their vulnerabilities, in fear of judgement:

*We (PhD students) are a strong, multi-talented, diverse, well-travelled, articulate group of people who are amazing ... but I think as a group, we are too proud. I think we protect our professional reputation, and I think we are*

*very private about our struggles. And I think it takes a lot for that kind of person to admit when they're not doing well ... We need a space to actually discuss this, 'cos it's not talked about. (Mandy)*

On another note, Jennie emphasised the disjunction between faculty staff and PhD students, which created an unsupportive research culture that did not foster supportive, collaborative relationships:

*There needs to be more emphasis I think on research culture and building relationships with each other, particularly PhD students, because I think something that I found and I've had this conversation with people in my group as well, is that, and no offence, but as a PhD student, you are not included with academics. A lot of the time you're excluded ... They [academics] don't treat us like colleagues, they treat us like students. (Jennie)*

In summary, our grounded theory sheds light on an interconnected process of navigating emotional wellbeing. Participants' compromised wellbeing was, in part, attributable to the research topic itself and the emotions associated with working with vulnerable populations. This includes feelings of stress, sadness, guilt, and anxiety in and beyond the field of data collection. Navigating researcher wellbeing was further complicated by interweaving layers of the doctoral students' professional and life experiences with their research phenomenon (e.g., work experience/identity) and more general stressors associated with undertaking a PhD (such as social isolation). Self-evident mechanisms to assist students navigate their own wellbeing whilst undertaking qualitative work included seeking support from supervisors. However, supervisory support was either supportive or hindering in this regard, differentially impacting the ways in which wellbeing was navigated, compromised, and/or restored. Finally, our grounded theory recognises institutional influences (e.g., neoliberal university culture and higher degree culture) as a broader, macro-level factor impacting on researcher wellbeing. For novice researchers such as doctoral students, especially those emotionally exposed while undertaking qualitative work, broader higher degree cultures of excellence reinforce maladaptive coping practices akin to attitudes that convey: "suck it up and get on with it." Taken together, the proposed grounded theory offers a substantive theoretical map of how doctoral students navigate their own wellbeing while undertaking qualitative work with vulnerable populations.

## **Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to develop a theoretically informed understanding of doctoral students' journeys and experiences of undertaking qualitative research with vulnerable populations and how they navigate their own emotional wellbeing during the process. The resulting substantive grounded theory highlights the ways in which qualitative scholarship with vulnerable populations can affect doctoral students' wellbeing. One of the immediate concerns is that if challenging emotional responses endure and/or exceed the individual's assets and resources to manage the situation, there could be a "lag effect" that threatens their health and wellbeing. Long-term recurrent effects of emotionally driven research have also been noted among other qualitative researchers, at various career stages (Mallon & Elliott, 2019). This might be partly attributed to the demands on qualitative researchers to transcribe and analyse large volumes of data, which often requires many hours of intense, repetitive work (Clark & Sousa, 2018). In thinking about additional consequences, our study indicates that for some students, avoidance behaviour is one potential way of managing the emotional distress of



“reliving” sensitive qualitative data in the analysis or thesis write up stage. Such behaviours, while intended to assist the coping process, may threaten students’ engagement with analytical work as well as successful completion. This has implications for students and supervisors in a climate where timely higher degree completions are emphasised. It might also have implications for the quality of the research, and the doctoral students’ future intentions to pursue a research career. Levecque et al. (2017) and colleagues caution that the overall quality and quantity of academics’ research output could be affected by poor mental health, which is of significant concern. It is also important to re-emphasise that emotional distress arising from the subject matter itself may compound existing vulnerabilities associated with the mere essence of the PhD. Recent evidence, for example, highlights that one in three PhD students is at risk of having or developing a common psychiatric disorder, which is 2.43 times higher than the highly educated general population (Levecque et al., 2017). As such, it is essential that every effort is made to ensure that doctoral students feel adequately supported in their learning environments to minimise stress, anxiety, and associated rates of withdrawal from study (Pyhältö et al., 2009). This is especially important for those undertaking emotionally driven work.

The data arising from this study inspire a more forceful conversation about how reflexivity is understood, supported, and practised during higher degree candidature. Specifically, our findings indicate that the research topic could impact on researcher wellbeing even before data collection and analysis commences. This can be attributed, in part, due to previous industry experience and exposure, individual trait dispositions, as well as balancing roles or transitioning into the role of enquirer (researcher) from professional (e.g., social worker). One of the key challenges for supervisors and students surrounds how reflexive practices are established from the outset of the doctoral programme. Most conversations about reflexivity emerge when candidates are preparing a research proposal, when they share the experiences of study participants, and when they move from the position of an outsider to the position of an insider during the study. Reflexivity is seen as an important indicator of research rigour and “quality” (Smith & McGannon, 2018); however, reflexive practice could offer an additional resource for emotional wellbeing, particularly where students articulate a deep desire to “make a difference” that could motivate and support them in the face of adversity. Fahie (2014) describes the value of specific self-reflexive strategies, such as journaling and scheduled opportunities for critical reflection, for PhD students undertaking emotionally driven work, which may provide opportunities for meaning making and self-development.

Doctoral researchers will inevitably experience degrees of emotional vulnerability at different times during their candidature. For example, the general pressures described by our participants, including stress, high workload, time pressure, and poor work/life balance, have been previously documented in the literature surrounding doctoral students’ collective experiences (Schmidt & Hansson, 2018). However, our grounded theory also illustrates a range of project-specific factors that can compromise emotional wellbeing along the doctoral journey. For instance, a doctoral student may balance dual identities as researcher and a practising clinician in an emotionally intensive environment (e.g., the area of child protection or disability education). This is arguably more common than not, given that researchers’ choices in study topic, research design and methodology are often governed by their own personal values and theoretical proclivities (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004). As such, many doctoral students may possess industry specific knowledge that comprises a source of emotional protection against the emotional nature of qualitative work. They might even possess well-established self-care strategies to sustain a healthy work–life balance. During the research process, however, they might discover that their ethical obligations within the project conflicts with their professional capacity or personal inclination to intervene and support a research participant in a vulnerable situation. Moran and Asquith (2020) suggest that the difficulties

associated with qualitative research are heightened when researchers have a personal connection to the research topic, but, at the same time, acknowledge that personal experience can foster resilience. Based on our participants' stories, the need to navigate dual roles and/or suppress humanistic instincts to comfort participants could prompt feelings of frustration, heightened distress, and feelings of helplessness. This perspective could serve to encourage supervisors and students (among others) to closely consider their connection to the research, and strategies that they have in place to deal with potential feelings of guilt or other emotional reactions, before undertaking their fieldwork (Palmer et al., 2014).

We suggest that compromised emotional wellbeing might be reasonably expected for novice researchers undertaking projects with vulnerable populations or involving sensitive topics. This prompts consideration of the ways in which doctoral students can be better supported and equipped with the necessary resources to navigate challenging experiences. Responsibility in this regard extends to ethics committees, deans of graduate research, and research leaders and policymakers to explore, trial and report on strategies that assist novice researchers plan for and navigate their own emotional wellbeing throughout candidature. It is also important that researchers can monitor their emotional reactions and personal wellbeing, to understand when they need to seek professional support (Palmer et al., 2014). One point of departure is for universities to engage students in a process of asset mapping early on in their candidature to identify existing resources and plans for self-care and self-help (Foot & Hopkins, 2010). Such approaches may empower doctoral students to proactively manage their own wellbeing during research work, while also prompting them to consider areas where early support and assistance may be necessary and which avenues they might pursue. This is a worthwhile consideration for universities seeking to leverage maximum impact on student support by tailoring training to students.

Within the grounded theory, one of the main resources for navigating emotional wellbeing was social support. Our participants overwhelmingly described the support offered by doctoral peers, and to a lesser extent the support of friends, partners, and families beyond the university. The importance of social support reflects the broader literature on doctoral student wellbeing, where social interactions with friends and doctoral colleagues has been identified as an important coping strategy throughout the research process (Cahusac de Caux, 2019; Martinez et al., 2013). Given that a range of factors can adversely impact emotional wellbeing from the beginning of candidature, our participants suggested that establishing support groups or communities of practice with other doctoral students could be particularly helpful at the beginning of candidature. Beyond inductions and elective workshops that seek to develop research capabilities, collegial support could serve as a reliable asset for navigating emotional wellbeing, particularly while pursuing qualitative scholarship with vulnerable groups. Online support programmes or networks might also be a worthwhile consideration, especially given the increasing profile diversity of doctoral students from abroad and those studying from a distance.

Collaborative relationships among staff and students across different levels can also help to build a supportive research culture. This extends beyond the immediate supervisory relationship and implicates colleagues in research centres, laboratories, and institutes. For universities, the need to build and enable social support within the doctoral programme, with peers and academics alike, warrants much stronger consideration (West et al., 2018). In this study, some participants highlighted that a collegial atmosphere was severely lacking between staff and students. This concurs prior research that demonstrates that some PhD students do not perceive themselves as valued members of a scholarly community (Pyhältö et al., 2009). Innovative mentorship initiatives might offer one promising avenue towards the development of higher-quality qualitative research training practices. Based on their work in Canada, West et al. (2018, p. 8) assert that such structures could help to alleviate emotional distress among

doctoral students and could also serve to empower staff and students alike, through conversations about the “emotional side” of academic life. In doing so, collaborative research cultures may help to promote supportive messages around mental health and wellbeing more broadly. It is equally important to consider the support of friends and families outside the university “bubble,” given they constitute an important source of encouragement and respite for doctoral students. One possible strategy is for research programmes to include family members in research induction programmes as a means of highlighting their inadvertent place in the process of managing emotional wellbeing during candidature. Another idea suggested by Velardo and Elliott (2018) is for universities to appoint a dedicated support officer/professional counsellor for doctoral students who experience compromised emotional wellbeing. Barreira, Basilico, and Bolotnyy (2018) found that many postgraduate students experiencing psychological distress did not seek the help of a professional counsellor, which is cause for concern. In the grounded theory, students discussed professional counselling as a potential resource for wellbeing but highlighted the need for greater access to specialised services with continuity of care. Although this may be difficult for universities, due to financial constraints, our participants suggested that these services would be of value to PhD students who are engaged in scholarship with vulnerable populations. It is important that universities continually promote and widen access to counselling services, to reduce pressures within the research environment. Based on our participants’ stories, talking with a counsellor may help to facilitate open discussions about the research journey and associated stressors and challenges.

Notwithstanding the multifaceted nature of social support, the grounded theory consolidates the significance of the relationship between the supervisor and researcher during candidature (Juniper et al., 2012). While some students were able to draw on their supervisors for collegiality and support, which supported their wellbeing, others clearly lacked support and described feeling isolated. Velardo and Elliott (2018) suggest that universities develop a dedicated training programme in which doctoral students and supervisors collectively participate in developing plans to enhance emotional wellbeing across the journey. This is important given that supervisors play a key role in mentoring and nurturing doctoral students over a sustained and considerable period, which can influence the overall success of the research project (Orellana et al., 2016). Building on Velardo and Elliott’s ideas, the current study provides some contextual ideas for supervisors to contemplate, including strategies to draw on in circumstances where data collection involves powerful examples of vulnerability through storytelling and sharing intense emotions (Velardo & Elliott, 2018). It is important to highlight that supervisors might require additional training and support in their roles. Supervisory training might include how to identify signals and cues that doctoral students are uneasy and require additional support, and advice on how and when to conduct debriefing activities. Debriefing can take multiple forms. For instance, supervisors might encourage researcher reflexivity through journal writing/reflection activities. These practices can then inform debriefing activities with the supervisory team (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004). Not only can these methods promote researcher reflexivity, which is essential to rigorous qualitative work (Palmer et al., 2014), they can also help supervisors and students realise when and where additional support may be required along the journey instead of leaving it to chance. Consequently, supervisors may benefit from developing their capacity to support doctoral students. If this occurs, more experienced senior researchers could play an important role in sharing their own lived experiences of supervising or conducting their own qualitative research with vulnerable populations. This could feature in doctoral training programmes and could also form the basis of high-quality supervisory/early career researcher training initiatives.

A key thought emerging from this grounded theory surrounds the role of the university in supporting doctoral student wellbeing. Following Velardo and Elliott (2018), we assert that some universities can and must do more to support novice researchers undertaking qualitative

work with vulnerable populations. This could take the form of specialised training for staff and students, mapping potential risks and support mechanisms at the entry/proposal stages, and additional forms of professional support. However, this feasibly extends beyond qualitative field work involving observations, interviews, and focus groups. For example, it is plausible that text-based works, discourse analyses and historical studies may also be implicated if the source of data evokes emotionally distressing responses. We also need to consider the research journey beyond data collection. Emotional responses such as guilt, sadness, empathy, compassion, helplessness, and frustration can all endure throughout the analysis, write up, presentation and production of peer-reviewed articles. For example, doctoral students may require additional support if they (a) present their work to audiences at conferences, (b) communicate their work via mainstream media, and (c) share their work with industry stakeholders. In each of these circumstances, researchers might be prompted to relive, reflect, and report on emotionally sensitive and potentially unsettling data. Universities have a duty of care to protect doctoral students throughout these various stages of candidature.

Thus far, we recognise that much of our discussion has centred on building the capacity of students and supervisors to manage wellbeing. At risk of buying into the neoliberal rhetoric of “self-care” and “self-responsibility,” it is important that we conclude by posing the question; how can universities more broadly enhance their overarching social and learning environments to create a culture that supports doctoral students undertaking qualitative research with vulnerable groups? Here, we wish to shift the impetus back onto university managers to accommodate the needs of doctoral students, rather than “responsibilising” individuals. Ensuring doctoral student wellbeing and supporting candidates needs to be core university business, yet many students perceive their wellbeing is not an institutional priority (Beasy et al., 2019).

As a starting point, universities may benefit from broadening an understanding of wellbeing among executives, staff, and students. A rearticulated understanding and importance placed on wellbeing, especially for doctoral students emotionally affected by their work, may also assist in creating a positive shift in research culture. University workers are deeply embedded in a broad system of academic capitalism and insidious managerialism that continues to demand more from staff and students alike, with continued emphasis on excellence, high turnaround, and maximum impact (Berg & Seeber, 2016). Reluctance to seek help is common in academic settings and is often deeply rooted in fear of stigma (Levecque et al., 2017). This culture is deeply problematic as it can lead to the silencing of emotional experiences and exacerbation of mental health problems (West et al., 2018). It is therefore important for university staff, leaders and policymakers to continually question the limitations and costs of dominant research culture, and particularly the short and long-term consequences associated with “rushing” science that entails a high degree of emotional intensity in the pursuit of “excellence.” By improving learning, social, and occupational environments, the university setting could serve as an important resource for students to draw on during candidature, rather than operating as a barrier to wellbeing.

We wish to highlight several limitations of the study design. First, the researchers employed a novel co-interviewing technique involving two interviewers and one interviewee per individual interview. The concept of co-interviewing is somewhat unique, but we also acknowledge that it can potentially create a potential power imbalance in the dialogic exchange. At the same time, we argue that this was a strength of the study design in so far that it (a) enabled intensive interviewing to take place, (b) provided immediate emotional support for both interviewer(s) and participant and (c) encouraged analytically strong memos that were co-constructed by both interviewers following the interview. Furthermore, our co-interviewing technique enabled us to return to important points throughout the interview, especially when both the participant and interviewer(s) were emotionally affected by participation in the

discussion (e.g., breaking down in tears while sharing/hearing their stories). A second limitation was that the experiences underpinning the development of this grounded theory were captured from a single Australian university. Despite this, we theoretically sampled a broad range of disciplinary perspectives and experiences to obtain a sufficient and rich dataset to enable contrast and comparison, understand change over time, and reflect multiple views of participant experience (e.g., by gender, full-time or part-time candidature, PhD topic and age).

### Conclusion

This grounded theory provides a rich account of doctoral students' experiences of undertaking qualitative research projects with vulnerable participants, and the ways in which working with emotionally charged data can influence emotional wellbeing for this population group. Doctoral students described a range of challenges that they faced while conducting their projects with vulnerable groups, which appear to compound the already high levels of distress previously documented in the broader literature on doctoral candidature. In their discussions, our participants also highlighted a range of resources they drew upon to support emotional wellbeing. Assets included diverse forms of social support, self-care strategies and reflections on their underlying motivations for undertaking doctoral research. The student experiences presented in this article should prompt policy makers, universities, ethics boards, supervisors, doctoral students, and families to consider how doing qualitative work with vulnerable populations can affect doctoral students' wellbeing. We acknowledge that it is currently unknown how support practices vary across universities and indeed international contexts. We therefore must caution readers about concluding that universities collectively fail to provide appropriate levels of support and resources for doctoral students who undertake emotionally challenging work. However, our work also lays the groundwork for future research initiatives in this area. The current paper provides some theoretical grounding that might serve as a preliminary "blueprint" for universities to support doctoral students, and there is a critical need for continued research in this area to consolidate best practice recommendations to support students along various points of candidature. Future work should provide further insight into doctoral students' experiences and investigate the efficacy of initiatives that seek to optimise the research environment. This understanding may hold significant potential for more effectively nurturing emerging scholars who are doing important work with vulnerable groups.

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