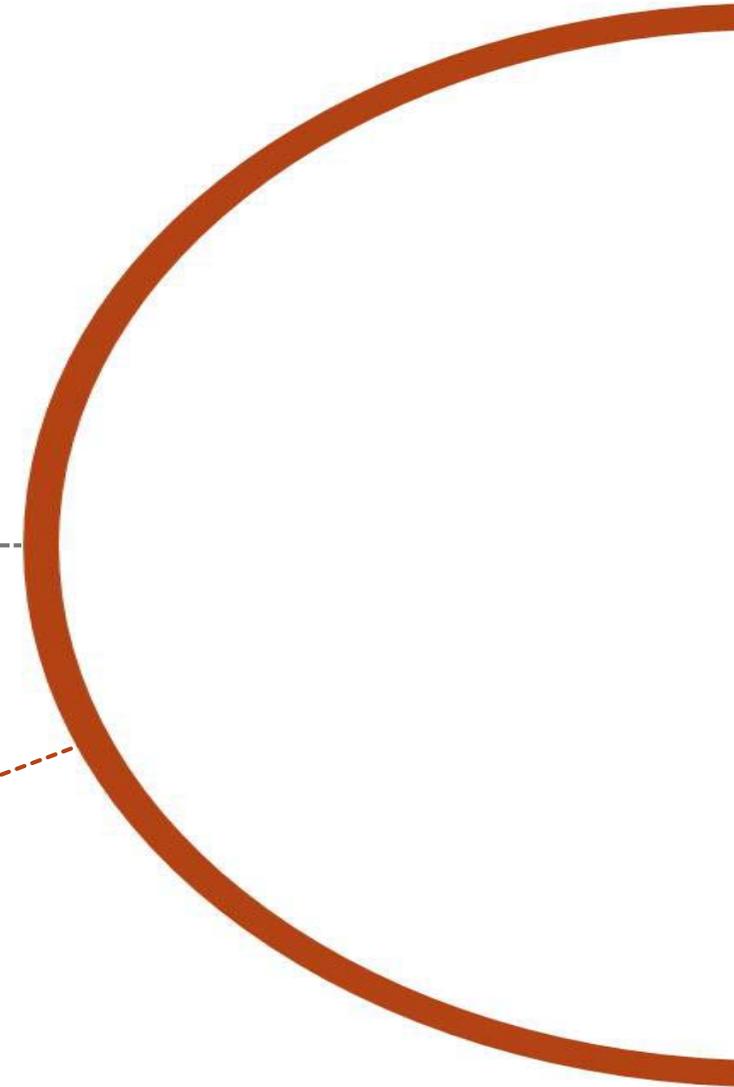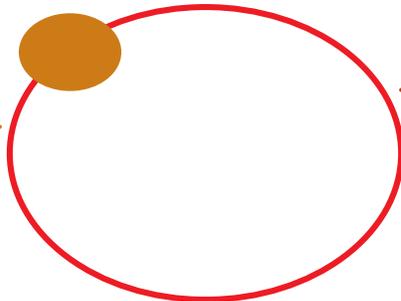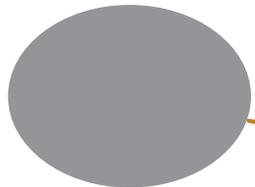# The Experiences of Postgraduate Research Students from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic Background: An Exploratory Study

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Background

- Recent attention has been drawn to the growing rate of **mental health difficulties experienced by PGR** students and the **attainment gap** between students from BAME backgrounds and those from White ethnic backgrounds (Neves & Hillman 2016)

- Evidence also suggests that Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) postgraduate research students may face **specific challenges**, and that these are not necessarily addressed by universities' support structures (Peluso et al., 2011)

- **PRES 2017** (Slight, 2017):

  – Only a small relationship seen between demographics and student experience suggests an **inclusive culture** in which students can be fully engaged- Needs to be verified

  – However a low number of PGRs report a positive work–life balance (61%). Those with a more positive **work–life balance** are more likely to be satisfied with their programme and confident to finish on time

  – In addition PGR students reporting a **mental health condition** are less likely to have a positive personal outlook

- The aim of this study is therefore to explore the experience of postgraduate research students from a BAME background who are currently studying in the UK.

Method

- Preliminary **online survey** was conducted but the response rate was poor

- Participants were then recruited through postgraduate online networks

- Telephone **semi-structured interviews** were conducted

- Interviews lasted between 30 to 60 minutes.

- 15 postgraduate research students (PhD) across a range of disciplines and institutions

- Data were transcribed and analysed using inductive **Thematic Analysis**

Demographics

- All PhD students attending UK universities

- Age range 25 to 52, mean age 34

- 4 men, 11 women

- Ethnic backgrounds:

  - South Asian 6

  - Mixed 4

  - Middle Eastern 2

  - South East Asian 1

  - Black Caribbean 1

  - Black Africa 1

Theoretical Framework
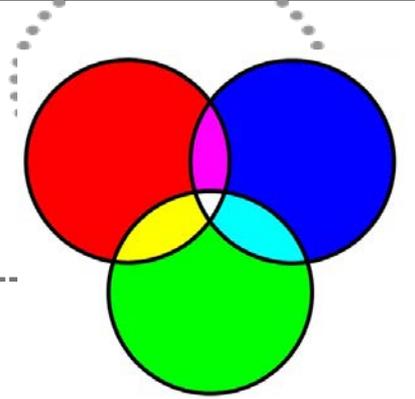
- Needs of BAME PhD students are complex

- Same issues of non-BAME students but in addition they have issues unique to BAME PhD students

  - These factors are **intersectional** with each other (Crenshaw's intersectional theory, 2008) :

    - **Ethnicity**: associated stereotypes and discrimination and lack of representation, feeling like a minority in social events (e.g. if they don't drink alcohol)

    - **Gender**: gender expectations that are specific to different cultures

    - **Privilege** (lack of):

      - Financial hardships

      - Culture capital

      - Nationality

      - Language

    - **Mental Health**- individual attitudes and help seeking behaviours affected by cultural norms and stereotyping

    - **Other factors-** include Sexuality (some are LGBT) and Age (many are mature students)

- All these factors were associated with increased stress and worsening Mental Health

Mesosystem

Macrosystem

Microsystem

Theoretical Framework

- These factors affect different students in ways unique to the individual, but they are influenced by the people and systems around them:

- **Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory** (2005)

  - **Microsystem or self** -Individual students expectations and experiences- Mental health issues and financial situation, stage and type of PhD, nationality, language

  - **Mesosystem** the influence of the **proximate other**-relationships with peers, to the supervisory and/or mentoring teams, to friends, family, and other support network- for BAME students family are often abroad and finding friends is an additional hurdle

  - **Macrosystem (detached other**) -institutions' structures and policies, national and international policies and context- Difficulty with visa applications, lack of funding for some nationalities, lack of diversity in policy makers

Intersectionality (2008) and Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems (2005)

Self- microsystem

Other- mesosystem and macrosystem

Mental Health

Gender

Ethnicity

Intersection
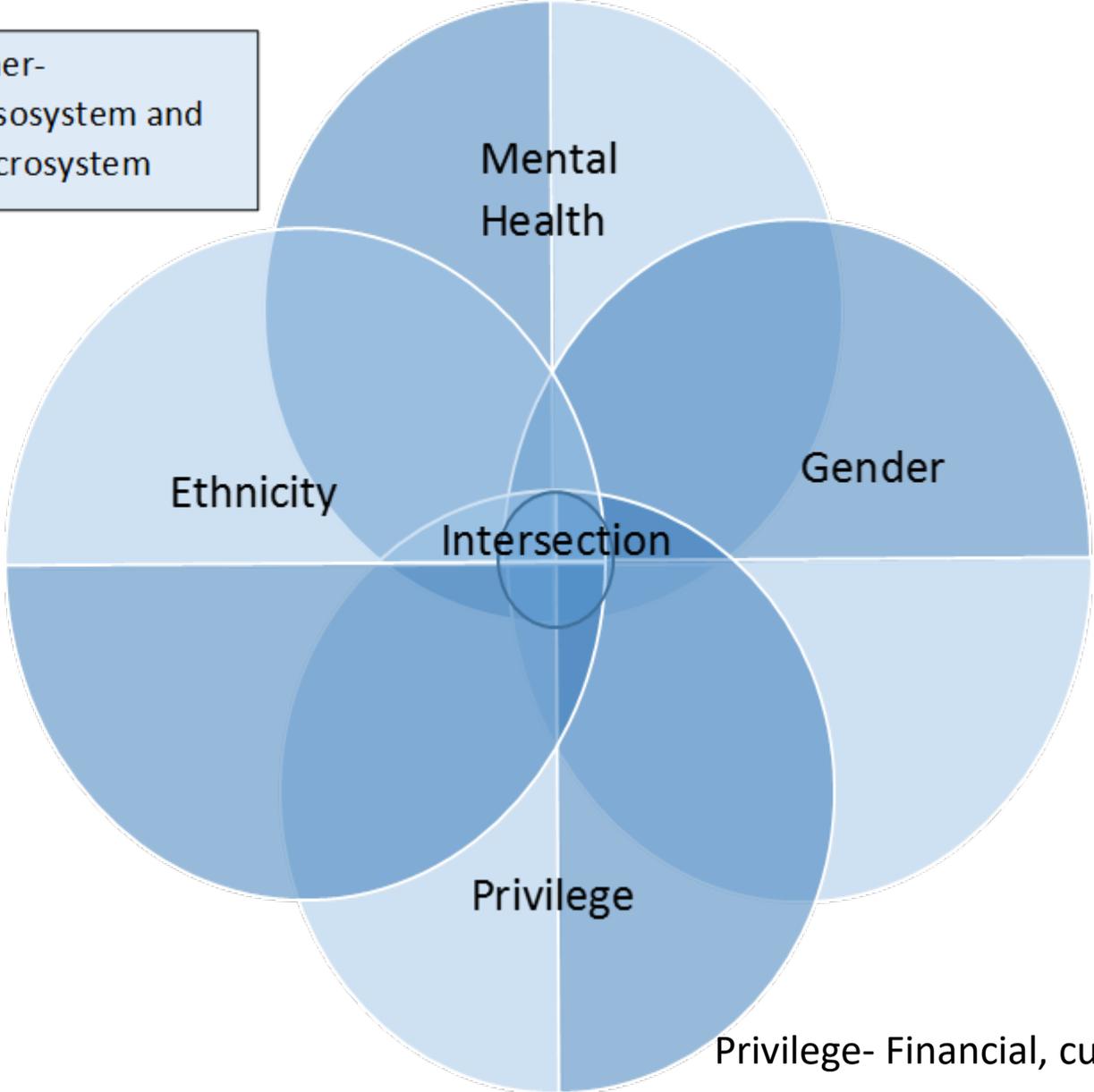
Privilege

Intersection- The combined effect of all the intersecting factors

Privilege- Financial, culture capital, language, nationality

Mental health

- To various degrees, all participants were affected by **stress and anxiety**

- Some was attributed to the **process of doing a PhD** and some students even expected stress to be a normal PhD experience- University's expectation to complete in 3 years, publication demands, teaching etc.

- Some admitted to more **severe mental health (MH)** issues often exacerbated by the PhD and issues specific to BAME students lack of support and isolation from friends and family, financial issues, discrimination, language barriers

- Some students admitted that **cultural stigma** prevented them from seeking appropriate help (intersectional)

- Students felt that university support with MH issues should be **proactive (support should come to the student)** that students might not realise they needed help

Mental health

They do not know about my other severe mental health issue as I am careful who I talk to about it. I worry that there would be chatter and assumptions.

If there was someone from my ethnic background (South Asian), I would prefer not to talk to them about MH because within my community there is a very strong stigma against MH. (P14)

...but I have an issue with that outreach...if you are mentally derailed maybe you yourself would not recognize it. If you have not recognized that their mental health issue how do you go and report. (P5)

Ethnicity

- Some students felt that universities had **diversity policies** but in reality there was **discrimination**-affecting funding, opportunities, jobs, publications, career development – '*saying but not doing the right thing'*(P3)

- For some it was **discreet discrimination** through lack of understanding such as have meetings in the pub for others it was **outright discrimination** – students with years of professional experience doing *'menial jobs'* in the UK

- Students commented on the **lack of ethnic diversity** in academic and other professional groups *' They are all from one particular ethnic group'*(P3). These groups were felt not to deliberately exclude ethnic groups but they were thought to be more comfortable with each other

- Culture affected **help seeking behaviours** for MH issues and the appropriateness of that help. Students were ashamed to ask for help- *'Putting on a mask'* (P14)

- Discrimination, lack of cultural sensitivity and barriers to seeking appropriate help can adversely effect students' mental health

Ethnicity

I think basically because you are not from a certain background because you are from a BAME background. You do not fit our criteria so you are less likely to get a job, or less likely to be promoted, or less likely to be listened to in that sense. Or less likely to develop you (P3)

If you don't drink it can be...if you are older and white and male and they'll go out drinking. Then you can't interact if o don't drink (P14)

Privilege (Lack of..)

Privilege - includes Financial, culture capital, nationality, language

Lack of these Privileges add stress to the BAME PhD student experience

- **Financial**- Higher fees, less scholarship and other funding opportunities for international students (courses, conferences, proofreading) – adds stress and reduces career opportunities,

- **Culture capital**- often first generation to attend university- less support from family need to negotiate the UK HE environment alone. Students felt less formal supervisory meeting were more constructive

- **Nationality**- Less opportunities for non-UK, non-EU students

- **Language**- English as second language additional barrier, students judged by their English and not their ability. Some students were afraid to speak at meetings because of their accent. Family unable to help with proofreading

Extensions, conference attendances are more arduous for international BAME students as they need visas and extensions have financial consequences

- These issues create barriers that can unfavourably effect students' mental health

Privilege

I did finish my deadline but my supervisor told me I need extra time to write some more,...so then I wanted to extend my student registration and for that I needed an extension of my visa as well,...I am not a fully scholarship student, so I was really struggling in terms of... finances and stuff (P4)

We weren't brought up with any academic expectations placed upon us....you know these higher levels of academic achievements, you know they weren't even a concept at the time. I suspect that it is still the way that some Black children view things today (P7)

Gender

- **BAME female** students felt more disadvantaged that men of the same ethnic group or other white females

- Students felt that as women they had to be **assertive and aggressive** to be listened to in meetings

- There was often a **negative stereotype assumption** about gender in certain ethnic groups

- In addition there was an belief that students of the same gender and ethnic background should be '**mates**'

- Students found it **difficult to separate** their gender from the issues associated with ethnicity

- Being disadvantaged by gender can influence students' mental health

Gender

...My husband ...hasn't had the same experiences as me because he is a man and he is white ....as a white man it is easier for him to get positions and people will listen to him.

Whenever I am in meetings I find that other female academics have to be so much more aggressive and assertive to get their point across. ...and particularly being a woman of colour sometimes there can be an assumption that you are a foreign student and that your English might not be very good (P14)

But the biggest insensitivity was actually about gender... well with me being Asian, it's always assumed that you know Asian women are weak [laughs] and they won't speak back. And I mean I've been called cute so many times for example by male colleagues (P11)

Sexuality and age also have an impact

...And because I'm a feminist for example so I've been called aggressive. ...I guess I am the poster child of all of that. So I am Muslim and LGBT and woman and everything. So I think maybe it just strikes to me a lot harder than most. (P11)

...Again it would be helpful if there were maturer (more mature) students that I had access to... I suppose that's the thing that is more of a challenge to me than ethnicity related concerns... because we just have a different perspective, you know, we largely developed the soft skills, the transferable skills, the leadership, whatever it might be, we've got all of that...(P 7)

Summary

- **Numerous intersectional factors** can affect the experience of BAME PhD students especially with regard to mental health

- Difficult to separate the effect of each factor as they are **not mutually exclusive**

- BAME students are affected by the conscious or unconscious **non-inclusive behaviour** of other individuals and groups

- BAME students experience is shaped by **all layers of the HE system**

- More **proactive** approach to support is required for BAME students

Implications

University systems

- The '**Nudge' effect-** outreach to vulnerable PhD students- Proactive sign posting of MH and other relevant services

- **Cultural competence** university staff

  - Sensitivity to culture- alcohol at meetings, religious celebrations

  - Awareness of own cultural believes

  - Policies that are culturally sensitive

- **Financial** support

- Other **practical support** – visa applications, conference attendance, accommodation (older students, families)

- **Counselling** etc. that is culturally appropriate

- But also being aware of **intersectionality** and the various layers of stress and challenges that BAME students may face

Diversity

- Appropriate **representation** of minority groups in management positions in universities and other academic groups

- Policies development by engaging with **representative groups**

- Fighting **publication bias** (too focused on western societies)

- Create **opportunities f**or BAME students

- Universities need to have a 'more human' approach to individual students.

Future Research

- Quantitative study to quantify the relationship between BAME PHD students experience on stress and wellbeing

- Further exploration of experiences