

THE ROLE OF RELIGION ON STUDENT WELLBEING

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INTRODUCTION

Recent studies have shown a steady increase in student drop-out (Cotton et al., 2017), suicide rates (Dodd et al., 2021) and anxiety (Kotera et al., 2017). However, resilience has emerged as one protective factor in relation to the stressful situations that students face (Beltman et al., 2011). Still, higher levels of resilience are achieved differently for all individuals, as such, factors implicated in the resilience of different university student populations may vary (Gunnestad, 2006). For instance, research suggest that religious/spiritual university students may have specific factors most likely related to their religiosity, that enable them to develop higher levels of resilience (Pargament, 2013).

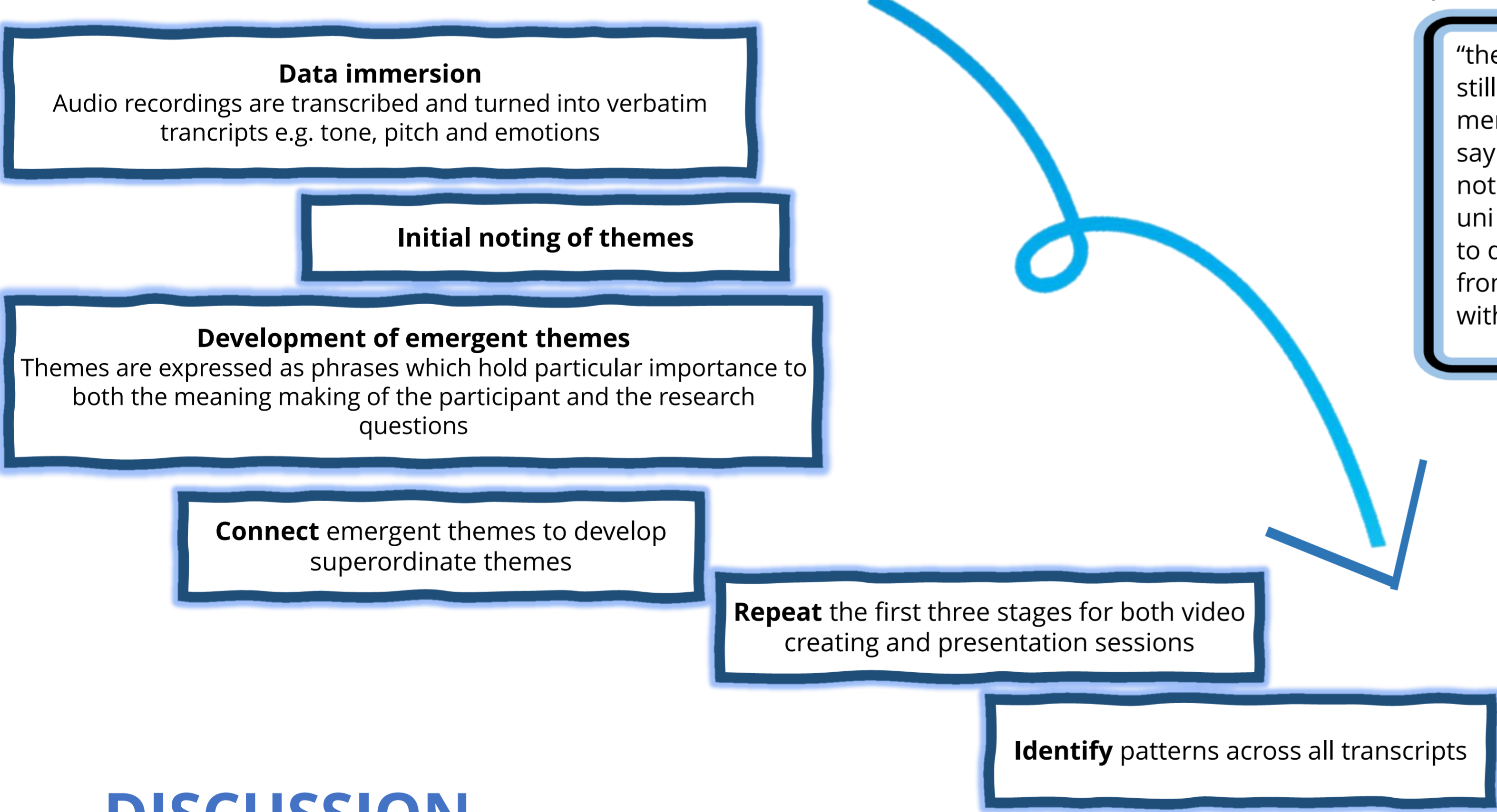
Nonetheless, empirical work in this field equate the experiences of various religious ethnic groups, when there are core differences among such groups. For example, issues of self-acceptance which are linked to wellbeing are likely to encompass colour and its role in the identity of ethnic minorities, while being absent for other non-minority ethnicities (Cousins, 2019). Failing to explore these differences therefore misses a core dimension of the relationship between religion and resilience. For BAME (Black and Asian Minority Ethnic) students, understanding this protective role of religion is crucial as they deal with heightened stressor like institutional racism, leading to poorer mental health outcomes (Cummings, 2018). The situation is worsened by the fact that there seems to be lack of help seeking among BAME students due to less "safe" spaces for them to express their struggles and/or practitioners who are cultured enough to understand them. This highlights a space for further research

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- How do religious BAME students respond to challenges in their university lives?
- Are there similarities or differences between the different religion/spiritual groups?
- Have BAME students mainly relied on religiously focused coping mechanisms? How have these impacted their capacity to handle challenges?
- How do BAME students feel about accessing mental health services in the face of challenge? What role does their religiosity play in these views?
- How do they rate the support that they have accessed? Have these been able to incorporate their religious/spiritual outlook?

METHODOLOGY

These questions were explored using the digital storytelling procedure. This entails three stages (1) **Initial workshops** (also called focus groups), (2) **video-creating individual sessions** and, (3) **video presentation session**. In stage 1, the participants N=9 (N=6 in group A, N=3 in group B), discussed their opinions and university experiences. Stories emerged as they needed to without imposing any structures or styles. In stage 2, participants were guided to create their own digital story using photographs, videos, voiceovers etc and in stage 3, participants shared their videos, enabling further discussions. Audio recordings made across all three sessions were analysed using the 6 stages of **Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)**.



DISCUSSION

The findings support evidence from previous literature in the field of religion/spirituality and resilience (Pargament, 2013), as well as respond to the specific research questions.

- ✓ By keeping a reflective journal, the student researcher was able to identify and discuss any identities or biases that may have affected her evaluation and interpretation of the themes. As such, she was able to keep a degree of subjectivity whilst ensuring the credibility of the data.
- ✗ Most participants were Christians, thus the data would have been enriched and aspects of the themes that emerged may have been altered, if more diverse perspectives were included.
- ✗ Some participants may have placed their attention on the importance of religion/spirituality in their resilience whilst being reluctant to discuss times where they did not rely on religion/spirituality and/or times where the latter had a negative impact in their lives (Mattis, 2002). These are both critical issues that need careful consideration in future research.

RESULTS

The following themes emerged. (1) Enabling survival; (2) Maintaining a positive outlook; (3) Protecting psychological integrity; (4) Providing agape

Answering our first research question, we found that contrary to traditional perspectives that individuals use religion/spirituality to shield themselves from the realities of their circumstances, students suggested that religion/spirituality gave them hope and allowed them to break the semantic relationship between fact and truth. As such, they were able to distinguish between socially constructed realities and the divine destinies that their God had in store for them, ultimately enabling resilience.

Participant 1

"I remember several time...um...I just broke down and cried because I couldn't find the strength but each time I somehow got hope, I just placed my hope in God knowing and trusting that things are going to get better. I knew that many in my position were dropping out, that is the real fact, but I told myself and my husband, it doesn't have to be the truth for us".

Students responded to their university challenges by also viewing God as a lifeline, thus, founding themselves upon a bond that was unbreakable with God, kept them strong throughout adversities and had positive impacts in their capacity to handle further challenges.

Participant 9

"when all hope was lost, I just repeated Hebrews 6:19 to myself. Like, I had no choice but to grab the promised hope from God, with both my hands literally and never let it go. Not even for a second. Honestly, when everything was falling apart, holding to God, knowing that the bond I have with him is unbreakable, was the only thing that kept me strong".

To answer our second research question, we found that whilst students spoke about different adversities, there was a strong overlap between different religions. That is, each student rendered their religiosity/spirituality crucial and understood all events as part of a larger and divine plan. Consequently, negative events were viewed as challenges and as significant opportunities for both spiritual and personal growth, thus allowing them to maintain high resiliency.

Central to our third research question was the notion of Agape. Some participants in the study suggested that their relationships with other religious/spiritual BAME students helped them to navigate through adversities, especially after being marginalised in the form of discrimination and racism. Students also relied on other religiously/spiritually focussed coping mechanisms and these allowed them to maintain their emotional stability, and by extension, their resilience.



Answering our last research questions, some students recounted both direct and indirect incidents of institutional racism, discrimination and "white privilege". This often had detrimental impacts on their wellbeing and sense of belonging at university and led to negative attitudes/perceptions in seeking support. Others felt that even after seeking support, they had to internalise their issues later on because they were often misunderstood and feared that these may be used to highlight academic incapability.

Participant 4

"the thing with (*name of the university) they are still trying to build counsellors or some kind of mental service that will help BAME students. Like to say I have reached out is actually the biggest lie I'm not going to pretend...and I think it's because the uni is still trying to figure out and understand how to deal with race...how to deal with people that are from like different communities...so let alone deal with religion and race together"

Participant 3

"I requested for support in my second year with one of the mental health services. I started to open up and it was terrible. The appointments were inconsistent, and they didn't know what kind of advice to give me, rather it seems that I had to constantly explain and educate them about Brown culture and my experiences also as a Muslim girl...so that is why I had to turn to my religion and religion helped me instead. There is a verse in the Quran about depression and anxiety...I just came back to that quite a few times...I reached for help, but it wasn't working so I had to go back to my faith and re-evaluate everything...I used my religion to get myself out of that depressive state".

IMPLICATIONS



Our findings urge universities to provide relevant training on equality, diversity, and inclusion, ensuring that staff internalise the importance of challenging racism and discrimination (Bunce et al., 2021). Our findings should also inspire researchers and practitioners to explore more fully the ways in which BAME students use religion/spirituality to challenge particular adversities in the world they live in (Mattis, 2002). Whilst we recognise that professional and institutional procedures cannot be universally altered to accommodate one's personal needs, practitioners should attempt to work within or collaboratively with the religious/spiritual interpretative ideologies of BAME individuals.