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A Co/Autoethnography of Peer Support and PhDs: Being, Doing, and Sharing in Academia


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Abstract

As doctoral students, we were well aware of the social, cultural, and economic isolation experienced by many students working towards a PhD. In this paper, we provide an account of an informal peer support model that assisted us to successfully complete our PhDs. We used co/autoethnography to write into each other's story, seeking to improve our research practice through creative reflection. Data included over 215 emails generated through our "weekly check-ins" during our PhDs, for a period of over 18 months. Following the iterative nature of co/autoethnography, we generated further data through collaborative analysis and reflexive, creative writing. Analysis involved each of us conducting inductive analysis of the data separately, followed by a collaborative process of checking and co-identifying themes, and collaborative writing of the co/autoethnography. We identified three major themes in the data: Being an Academic, Doing Academia, and Sharing in Academia. We continue to transform through the co/autoethnography and lay bare our experience of peer support for the purpose of supporting others undertaking a PhD, including ways to approach writing (or support writing), and ways to navigate the corporate university setting.

Keywords

Co/Autoethnography, PhD, Peer Support, Mentoring, Critical Reflection, Higher Degree Research, Doctoral, Reflective Journaling

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A Co/Autoethnography of Peer Support and PhDs: Being, Doing, and Sharing in Academia

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As doctoral students, we were well aware of the social, cultural, and economic isolation experienced by many students working towards a PhD. In this paper, we provide an account of an informal peer support model that assisted us to successfully complete our PhDs. We used co/autoethnography to write into each other's story, seeking to improve our research practice through creative reflection. Data included over 215 emails generated through our "weekly check-ins" during our PhDs, for a period of over 18 months. Following the iterative nature of co/autoethnography, we generated further data through collaborative analysis and reflexive, creative writing. Analysis involved each of us conducting inductive analysis of the data separately, followed by a collaborative process of checking and co-identifying themes, and collaborative writing of the co/autoethnography. We identified three major themes in the data: Being an Academic, Doing Academia, and Sharing in Academia. We continue to transform through the co/autoethnography and lay bare our experience of peer support for the purpose of supporting others undertaking a PhD, including ways to approach writing (or support writing), and ways to navigate the corporate university setting. Keywords: Co/Autoethnography, PhD, Peer Support, Mentoring, Critical Reflection, Higher Degree Research, Doctoral, Reflective Journaling

Karen's Story

In an instant life changed. I regained consciousness in hospital, in pain, confused, with relentless nausea and dizziness. The cause was a cycling accident that resulted from a head-on impact of 80km/hour, although I remember little if any of it. I sustained various injuries and lacerations, and a fractured skull. In time, I was transferred from ICU to the neurosurgery ward and eventually discharged with a moderate brain injury to monitor.

Only after discharge did the reality of these injuries unfold. I relocated to my mother's home to heal. Being away from town and the proximity of my cycling community and university, I experienced unexpected isolation. My PhD was delayed by 9 months. I wasn't allowed to drive for 5 months or cycle; I lost my independence. My self-identity as a cyclist and a researcher was shifting.

Who I was before the accident was no longer my reality. I experienced fear in returning to the bike. I struggled to plan and set goals. The size of the PhD was difficult to break down. My memory and concentration were affected. I became disoriented easily. Hours would pass of failed attempts to write, with only exhaustion, frustration, and anxiety to show for it.

The Brain Injury Rehabilitation Unit worked with me on strategies to develop executive function, attention, and concentration, and to live with a change of hearing and balance. I was learning to look at the successes in my "failures," but I still needed support to structure my PhD progress, to re-learn how to write and plan.

Michelle reached out during one of my lowest points, emailing me: “I would be happy to work with you, sharing . . . what plans we have, progress we made, what we learned, what worked and didn’t . . . not to be onerous, but to be accountable and supportive.” Perhaps Michelle didn’t realise the gravity of her suggestion—or perhaps she did—and the hope which she brought to weave a way forward to PhD completion through the weight of changed abilities. What became our “weekly check in” evolved for me to become a loving mirror “for me to come back toward myself . . . to reconstitute myself there where I am” (Foucault, 1984, p. 4), so that I could start over again and begin all at once, as I was, with the abilities I had.

Michelle’s Response

During the 3rd year of my PhD, I was on a writing retreat at my supervisor’s home for a week, where Late Professor Rick Speare and his wife Dr Kerry Kelly were hosting me. I had literally “retreated,” from my family responsibilities, my part-time work, and even my home town. In a peaceful, tropical environment, amongst flowering mango trees and warm hearts, I had planned the activities for my week ahead, and I was thriving. I had uninterrupted time to write, and it was divine.

During this time, I noticed an “SOS” from my friend Karen, posted on a social media platform. “How many times is normal to think about quitting your PhD?” This sounded serious—my friend was a positive, high achieving person who rarely reached out in this way. During my next writing break, while Rick and I were drinking tea together, I shared Karen’s question. I asked what he thought was a normal number of times to think of quitting. Having supervised to completion 46 PhDs and many more Master’s students, I trusted Rick’s judgment. “At least once a week,” he grinned back at me.

I shared Rick’s reply with Karen that afternoon and offered that we share weekly our plans to progress our respective PhDs. I illustrated my suggestion by photographing the list I had prepared for my week of retreat and asked if Karen would like to share something similar with me. A commitment was made, and a precious connection formed.

Background/Introduction

Our experience of doing a PhD was an isolating one and we are not alone. Doctoral students and their supervisors have reported social, cultural, and economic isolation while working towards a PhD (Ali & Kohun, 2007; Barnacle & Mewburn, 2010; Janta, Lugosi, & Brown, 2014; Mantai, 2015). In response to this isolation, there has been almost 4 decades of experimenting with formal cohort models for improved doctoral student outcomes (Bista & Cox, 2014). Formal peer support provided by doctoral cohort education enhances research productivity and successful PhD completions (Bista & Cox, 2014; Brown, 2011; de Lange, Pillay, & Chikoko, 2011). Formal peer support also improves writing quality and contributes to a developing researcher identity (Wegener, Meier, & Ingerslev, 2014). In this way, formal peer support plays an important role for the neoliberal university to deliver its “goods” to the market: publications, timely PhD completion, and successful grant applications (Rustin, 2016).

In this highly personal account, we share an informal peer support model that assisted the successful completion of our respective PhDs. By “success,” we refer to both the PhD outcomes valued by the neoliberal university, and to our collective navigation of the consequences of current academic environments—precarious employment, gaining an understanding of what universities value, academic isolation, and potential exploitation (Enright, Alfrey, & Rynne, 2017). We have adopted the emergent methodology of co/autoethnography (CAE) as a way to write into each other’s story, and we share this story as a possible resource for other PhD candidates who are also experiencing isolation. We also offer

this story as a possible resource for supervisors supporting doctoral students during this challenging academic endeavor; to collectively achieve formal academic success and navigate the current academic environment.

Methodology and Methods

Co/autoethnography as Methodology

What do you think about writing an article describing how on our weekly emails to each other have helped us be accountable, productive, assisted with cross-fertilisation of ideas, etc. (my experience anyway)—once we have submitted our respective theses, of course! I think there is a lot to learn by reflecting on this process and it might be useful for others? Are you interested (zero pressure)? (Michelle, 21 September 2014)

. . . yes, what a fabulous idea! I love to think that such an article could help others, in some little way, at this critical time of their thesis. (Karen, 28 September 2014)

Our intention to extend our own capacity to “do” research in a considered way, as well as to support others completing a PhD, is in part a reflection of our recent membership in the “community of PhD candidates.” Our intention is also consistent with autoethnographic research (Ellis & Bochner, 2006; Raab, 2013). Others have written about and debated what constitutes autoethnography (e.g., Adams, Jones, & Ellis, 2015; Denzin, 2006; Ellis, 2004; Ellis & Bochner, 2011). Like Lake, we identify with Holman Jones et al.’s definition:

Autoethnography is the use of personal experience and personal writing to: (1) purposefully comment on/critique practices; (2) make contributions to existing research; (3) embrace vulnerability with purpose; and (4) create a reciprocal relationship with audiences in order to compel a response. (Holman Jones as cited in Lake, 2015, p. 20)

In this project, cognizant of Holman Jones’ definition of autoethnography, we explore the additional element of collaboration in autoethnography. A collaborative autoethnography—or co/autoethnography (CAE)—enables us to pool our stories, in which we can find commonalities and differences, and meaning within the socio-cultural contexts of being PhD candidates (Chang, Ngunjiri, & Hernandez, 2013). We use CAE to write into each other’s story and respond with the intention to improve or better understand our own practice as researchers through self-study (Coia & Taylor, 2009). We weave our narratives together, mediated through relationship, critical reflection, and collaboration (Coia & Taylor, 2009; Ellis, 2000; Raab, 2013).

Like Coia and Taylor (2009), our existing relationship, which has been developing since 2005, enables us to learn about ourselves, and each other, and is a strong foundation on which to build this co/autoethnography. Our preference to centralise relationship and collaboration is reflected in our respective PhD studies (McPhail-Bell, 2015; Redman-MacLaren, 2015b) and informed by our values and ontological positioning (McPhail-Bell et al., 2017; Redman-MacLaren & Mills, 2015). We both share a commitment to transformative research and action. As a non-Indigenous public health practitioner and researcher, I (Karen) position myself in relation to Indigenous sovereignty and their “inalienable relation to land” (Moreton-Robinson, 2003, p. 31). This positioning helps me to better understand my

complicity with benevolent practices that normalize Whiteness and construction of people as passive objects (Riggs, 2004). I seek to work in strengths-based ways that move beyond colonial control, towards a place of mutual respect. I (Michelle), a public health researcher with a social work background, am committed to action-oriented research for positive health outcomes, underpinned by love as an act of courage (Frère, 1994). As a White Australian, I achieve this through participatory, decolonising health research with Pacific Islander and Indigenous Australian peoples sensitive to culture, spirituality, and gender.

In this paper we make our personal growth public in order to make our experience useful for others undertaking doctoral research. As shown in this paper's opening vignettes, our experiences as PhD candidates (and now as early career researchers [ECRs]) are not divorced from our personal lives. We came to this co/autoethnography as more than PhD candidates; we were (and continue to be) whole persons, impacted by and enacting the culturally constructed role of PhD candidates in two different Australian university settings. We did not leave our social and cultural identities at the door when progressing through our PhDs, and in writing this co/autoethnography these ways of being, doing, and knowing (Martin, 2003) remain central to understanding the experience and our ongoing transformation.

Data Collection and Analysis

A concurrent model of collaboration informed our data collection and analysis (Chang et al., 2013), which alternated between solo and collaborative work across three iterations before writing up (Figure 1). Firstly, we generated data through our "weekly check-ins," emailed for an 18-month period spanning the final phase of our PhDs and entry into post-PhD. The emails followed a consistent pattern: (a) probing and responding to the other's previous email; (b) outlining major challenges and plans for the week ahead; (c) populating a table with the week's planned activities, progress to date, and notes; and finally (d) a personal reflection about the impact of the PhD activities on our personal health, relationship with our partner and family life more broadly.

Secondly, we each separately conducted an inductive analysis of the approximately 215 emails in NVivo 11. A broad research question informed our coding: how did we enact peer support as PhD candidates? Our coding began by first reviewing the data as a whole, taking notes about what we observed using the NVivo memo function (Chang et al., 2013). We then segmented and coded data according to patterns observed, mindful of the context of the academic cultural setting (Fetterman, 2010). We individually moved from open coding by sifting and comparing codes to reduce codes to categories (Chang et al., 2013). Subsequently, we spent two blocks of 2 days together to discuss our methodology and data analysis (Table 1) where we explored commonalities and differences in our coding and compared, contrasted, collapsed, and added codes and categories until we realised three common themes. During our time together, we developed one working NVivo file that contained our data analysis and interpretation, from which we then collaboratively worked in subsequent stages by distance.

Thirdly, concurrently with the second stage, we each wrote individual responses to the three themes identified in the data, and to the co/autoethnography process. We exchanged our written responses, to which we each responded in written form by way of reflective pieces, poetry and email, as well as "in person" over Skype (see Table 1). We embedded the analysis and writing processes in literature and broader discourses regarding being PhD candidates, in order to further develop cultural connections. While analysing and interpreting data, we continued to share and reflect upon our ongoing transformation as academics, discussing goal setting, career plans, and challenges of the academic context. These loops of reflection about the autoethnographic data generated new data and understandings. This third stage added another layer of data into the cyclical data collection and analysis (Chang et al., 2013), which

we completed via Skype and email, before writing up (see Figure 1). This process reflected complex, cultural, and dialogical processes consistent with co/autoethnography (Coia & Taylor, 2009).

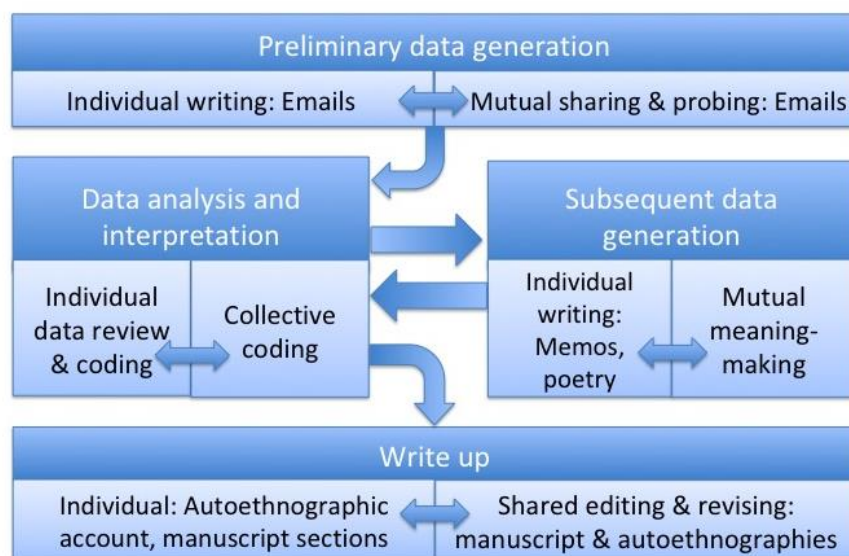


Figure 1: Our concurrent collaborative autoethnography process (adapted from Ngunjiri, Hernandez, & Chang, 2010)

Table 1: Details of our communication

| Communication Method | Number | Date range |
|--|---------------------|---|
| Emails (Preliminary data) | 215 | 30 July 2014 – 10 January 2016 |
| Face-to-face meetings | 2 | 21-23 May and 2-4 July, 2016 |
| Skype meetings | 3 | 5 October and 13 October, 2016; 7 February 2018 |
| Loops of reflection: email, reflective memos, poetry | Ongoing, concurrent | May 2016–July 2018 |

Ethics and Adherence to Qualitative Research Review Guidelines

Ethics approval for the two PhD studies was obtained from Queensland University of Technology Human Research Ethics Committee (1200000425) and James Cook University Human Research Ethics Committees (H3757). We confirm adherence to the qualitative research review guidelines and that we have carefully considered the relevance of the study question, appropriateness of qualitative method, transparency of procedures, and soundness of interpretation. While this co/autoethnography did not require ethics board approval, our reflective approach entailed discussion and collaborative decisions regarding relational ethics and our responsibility to “identifiable others” in our accounts (Ellis, 2007).

Co/autoethnography required us to critically reflect on taken-for-granted aspects of our experiences (Anderson & Fourie, 2015), enabling us to be intentional to be protective of the privacy and rights of those implicated in our stories (Chang et al., 2013). Additionally, our ethical considerations involved protecting each other and ourselves, with consideration to when and how we would make our autoethnographies public (Chang et al., 2013).

Findings

Using thematic analysis of the email data, we co/jointly identified three themes that represented the data: Being an Academic, Doing Academia, and Sharing in Academia (see Table 2). During this section, we include both examples from our email exchanges and our written reflections created as part of the collaborative analysis process.

Table 2: *Main themes, categories and codes for understanding our PhD peer support*

| Codes | Categories | Themes |
|--|-------------------------------|--------------------------|
| Finding work Job applications Questioning an academic path Starting new job Work-practice dissonance Technology | Managing Post PhD transitions | Being an Academic |
| Career planning Commuting Conference Networking Professional development Work environments Travel | Working worlds | |
| Setting boundaries Work commitments | Juggling commitments | |
| Low income | Managing finances | |
| Family Isolation Social-friends | Connecting socially | |
| Accident recovery Energy Fatigue Health and exercise Illness Losing yourself Overwhelm Personal care Personal sharing Positive attitude Self-discovery Sense of failure Time Off | Wellbeing | |
| Decolonising Research collaborations Research data analysis | Working our methodologies | Doing Academia |
| Grant writing | Writing grants | |

| | | |
|-------------------------------------|------------------------------|----------------------------|
| Disappointment about grant outcomes | | |
| Postdoc options | | |
| Shifting goals and deadlines | Planning our research | |
| Difficulty planning | | |
| Extension | | |
| Over-committing | | |
| Plan | | |
| Unplanned Opportunities | | |
| Always takes longer | Writing for academia | |
| Creative writing | | |
| Editing | | |
| Organising writing | | |
| Participant accountability | | |
| Publications | | |
| Strategies to write | | |
| Writing distractions | | |
| Writing experience | | |
| Writing peer support paper | | |
| Writing plan | | |
| Writing progress | | |
| Writing retreat | | |
| Supervisor absence | Managing our supervisors | |
| Supervisor direction | | |
| Supervisor feedback | | |
| Supervisor support | | |
| Thesis finalisation | Achieving the PhD | |
| PhD milestones | | |
| PhD timelines | | |
| Finding the thesis narrative | | |
| Sharing achievements | Enabling sharing | Sharing in Academia |
| Sharing connections | | |
| Sharing learning | | |
| Sharing opportunities | | |
| Sharing Pijin language | | |
| Sharing resources | | |
| Sharing struggles | | |
| Sharing writing | | |
| Accountability | Benefiting from peer support | |
| Affirming | | |
| Connection (overcome isolation) | | |
| Encouraging each other | | |
| Reflective questioning | | |
| Structure | | |
| Supporting each other | | |
| Life-PhD/Life-Work tips | | |

| | |
|----------------------------------|----------------------------|
| Checking relationship boundaries | Affirming the relationship |
| Trust | |
| Valuing the relationship | |

Theme One: Being an Academic

“Being an Academic” encompasses our shared experiences and processing of what it is like to be an academic, in which we grappled with managing post-PhD transitions, working worlds, juggling commitments, managing finances, connecting socially, and our own wellbeing. Together we felt, and responded to, the transformation of our identities as both *being* and *becoming* academics (Enright et al., 2017). At times we gripped onto who we knew ourselves to be—grounded in relationship with ourselves and others—while we juggled our working worlds and commitments, including often constrained finances.

This email to you is not going to be pretty—I confess to feeling overwhelmed and underpaid right now—have just been through the list of things I need to do, and I am speechless. I am not sure what I was thinking when I took on a role that was previously filled by a 1.0 FTE and I now do 0.5FTE . . . plus PhD finishing, plus Pacific work and a commitment to helping at the upcoming . . . on 0.7FTE and an actual pay cut of \$250/FN in the bank. . . . Not easy on the family. I need some meditation, exercise and rest . . . there just feels too few hours to go around. (Michelle’s email, 3 May 2015)

Michelle’s experience of *overwhelm* and *underpay* reflects a phenomenon of Australian university expectations for ECRs—such as us—to be “the academic super-hero, capable of being everything to everyone” (Pitt & Mewburn, 2016, p. 99) in a market oversupplied with research candidates for available positions (Group of Eight, 2013). Outside of Australia, financial worries and debts are major stressors experienced by PhD candidates (Biron, Brun, & Ivers, 2008; El-Ghoroury, Galper, Sawaqdeh, & Bufka, 2012). In navigating an environment where universities increasingly seek to minimise their costs and extract more “value” from their labour (Rustin, 2016), we encouraged each other to continue the search for the “right mix” of commitments in life, and to set boundaries. We supported each other as we tried on “new shapes” in academic life.

In response to one of your questions: I have not reduced my hours at the [university] . . . I have tried to reshape my life post the PhD . . . I am now working 4 days a week and trying not to work on weekends (well not much, and not to intrude on family life). It is a strange transition time . . . and I am uncertain how it will end up. I talked with a friend who taught . . . with me in the School of Social Work (she has since left the university sector)—she just burst out laughing when I told her I was going to contain my work at Uni. I am really struggling with the number of commitments I have already made and the limited time I have to address them . . . do you think it is possible or unrealistic? (Michelle’s email, 1 June 2015)

. . . Good on you for reshaping your post-PhD life—4 days a week is a great idea, given how much you've been investing, for so long now . . . Nothing is set in stone, and you can change things along the way, as you need. In that way, I think it’s realistic—you never really know until you try hey? (Karen’s email, 4 June 2015)

As we wove our ways of *being* an academic, the challenges of being social and maintaining our *wellbeing* featured regularly as unresolved endeavours. Even the notes column of our weekly table of planned activities morphed itself from a focus upon work—“Not quite sure what more/less the gender vignette will contain” (Karen’s email, 30 July 2014); “Send updated manuscript to co-authors this evening” (Michelle’s email, 11 August 2014)—into plans for exercise and social events— “Must do some exercise, walk/run along Ross River (probably both!)” (Michelle’s email, 22 December 2014); “intervals training/Ride to [university]” (Karen’s email, 7 April 2015). We regularly shared our efforts to counter the physical and mental impacts of doing a PhD, even into the post-PhD “recovery” period.

I tried to finish the “deep edits” on the findings and got through all but one “yellow editor’s notes” in the findings . . . and I hit a wall. I just couldn’t think anymore, was so mentally exhausted. I just had to lay down—my physical fitness didn’t even carry me through this one! (Karen’s email, 9 August 2014)

You asked about my energy levels and wellbeing . . . not great yet but improving. I think it will take quite some time, given I haven’t been able to take the break I had hoped for post submission. I like the idea of continuing to (share our weekly) plan as a way of sharing the “recovery phase” of the PhD . . . it is still very valuable, and I missed it when you were away and I didn’t “need” to do it. (Michelle’s email, 2 August 2015)

Core to our mental health and wellbeing was our need for connection between ourselves and within a team environment. Connecting, however, was not always easy in the context of a PhD.

As for me, I think I did have the PhD blues [after submitting for examination] . . . But I know this is just a transition stage and actually there are so many magnificent things too; I think the tiredness really hit me and affected my perspective . . . I am slowly listening and re-engaging with who I am—I’m still me, but I’m a bit different. I’m also finding how I’m a bit different from things with the accident, now I have no PhD taking over. All fine, but just taking time to sit with and listen and feel—to have the energy for curiosity again . . . I do long to work in a team again, and to be connected with a network of stakeholders like I was in Queensland. It will happen. (Karen’s email, 30 August 2015)

I noted you miss working in a team—me too! I think Uni is incredibly isolating . . . it suits the academic types that want to be in their heads and accumulate knowledge, but that is not sufficient for everyone. (Michelle’s email, 30 August 2015)

The mental health impacts of current academic working conditions are recognised, especially for PhD candidates with somewhat bleak career prospects in and outside of academia (Levecque, Beuckelaer, Van der Heyden, & Gisle, 2017). Our experiences reflected this phenomenon where, alongside balancing the PhD with numerous demands, ideas, and actions for post-PhD transitions featured regularly in our emails. At times, our respective weeks involved writing job or grant applications, finding work, or commencing paid work. These work roles brought with them requirements to do research work and practice other than our PhDs, at times presenting a work-practice dissonance.

I have noticed a whole lot of new challenges though and have not been in a great place in terms of where-to-next. I don't want to keep working night and day, and for some reason, I am still working night and day! I have missed the (more) singular focus on one thing that the PhD provided. I have also missed planning my week with you and am pleased to be back into it. I am not sure what will happen next re our shared planning, but am open to suggestions—this is a good habit! . . . Karen, I am really not sure academia is for me . . . there are so many expectations and I feel like it is very hard to say no, delay responses, not get things done on time . . . it is against my grain, so to speak! Any suggestions? (Michelle's email, 21 July 2015)

. . . I'm back working "in the health system" where the norm is to talk about the "community" in terms of deficit and numbers to measure "health equity" . . . I feel far from my love of progressing a decolonising agenda in health. (Karen's email, 14 December 2015)

In our emails we processed experiences of our shifting identities as academics, intertwined within pre-and post-PhD identities, ways of working, and life commitments. We discussed the transition from the singular focus of the PhD to the reality of a new way of engaging with academia after our PhDs were submitted. While grateful for our respective employment, we were trying to make sense of our working worlds, such as commuting, career planning, conference commitments, and returning to professional work. We traversed the experience of our identity transforming to *be an academic* and its impact on many facets of our lives.

Theme Two: Doing Academia

In our emails, "Doing Academia" involved grappling with matters of *doing* in order to progress our research and achieve goals relevant to an academic career. Our activities and goals centred on developing our methodologies, planning our research, writing for academia, achieving the PhD, and managing supervisors.

We discussed our methodologies, including our shared commitment to enacting research and practice according to values of decolonising research methodologies.

. . . we have been exploring the decolonising tenants about power on the micro level in . . . co-interviewing—including assumptions about power i.e. assumptions that the (white) researcher always has the greater power in an interview situation. (Michelle's email, 25 August 2014)

I want to bring home the message that ethical health promotion practice involves drawing on/engaging with decolonising agendas—affirming health promotion's principles but calling for doing things differently in practice. (Karen's email, 24 March 2015)

Our values and ontological positioning (see above) informed our methodological commitments, including the type of research questions we asked. We chose an academic pathway to use the privileges afforded to us, including the opportunity to do a PhD, to work in strength-based ways to redress harmful impacts of neo-colonial, neoliberal power imbalances and structures. Indeed, our chosen pathway itself—health research—had a role in perpetuating impacts of colonisation (Thomas, 2004).

For us, Doing Academia involved sharing plans, templates and activities oriented towards creating and achieving research targets and processes. Our thesis completion plans were frequently set in balance with other work and personal commitments—we were constantly shifting goals and milestones. When one of us got “stuck” the other often stepped up and provided a suggestion, an alternate framework, a possible way forward.

My updated “word” goals are:

Week beg:

4.8.14 4 days = 4000 words ACTUAL 2,000 (Methods Chapter)

11.8.14 5 days = 5000 words

18.8.14 5 days = 5000 words

25.8.14 3 days = 3000 words CHANGED to 5,000

8.9.14 4 days = 4000 words

15.9.14 2 days = 2000 words

TOTAL: 23,000

Plus 2 weekend days

25,000

(Michelle’s email, 11 August 2014)

I like your word goals for the coming months. I've wanted to set some goals like that, but really didn't know how to determine accurate/realistic/necessary word goals. My supervisors say everyone is so different, it's up to me to choose my own goals. Some days, word numbers help; other days, sections of pieces I'm working on make better targets. Right now, I don't know! :-). (Karen’s email, 11 August 2014)

Our focus upon productivity and output reflected the academic environment that demanded research activity and output: research translation, publications, conference presentations, writing and submitting grants (Carpenter, Cone, & Sarli, 2014; Nygaard, 2017). We regularly participated in the virtual Shut Up and Write Tuesdays on Twitter (O’Dwyer, 2018). The need to apply for, and win, grants generated many reflections and at time stress, particularly due to pressure to win grants or lack of support to write grants.

. . . the biggest thing which has pushed me off balance was the news I received on Friday that I didn't receive an NHMRC Early Career Fellowship. I knew I was an outside chance and that NHMRC is like a lottery. . . . However I had had great feedback from the [university] Research School about my chances, had written the application very carefully to the criteria and seemed competitive when compared to the descriptions of successful applicants last year. (Michelle’s email, 20 October 2014)

A few academics I have met have recommended I apply for small grants now, as that will help build an academic career. But—how do I do that when I am not attached to a university in Sydney? I have made contacts but not worked with anyone down here [since moving] . . . (Karen’s email, 20 April 2015)

The time-bound PhD experience means that the cost of writing a grant is at the expense of time spent completing the PhD. The success of our PhDs relied upon our ability to manage our workload, and the relationships and time commitments being requested of supervisors. Our weekly table of planned activities was one workload management strategy. We also shared

progress monitoring and communication tools, including tables inspired by the Thinkwell model (Kearns & Gardiner, 2009).

I love the table you have for monitoring your progress. I had something similar a little while back but yours captures more info e.g. the level of draft it is up to. Looks a good way to communicate progress with supervisors too. (Karen's email, 28 September 2014)

While Doing Academia was in many ways about getting the PhD, skills, networks, track record and navigating bureaucracy, it was more than this too. The sharing of research tasks, and the reality of enacting research plans was a part of us learning to *do academia*. As peers together, we could support each other as we became independent researchers.

Theme Three: Sharing in Academia

Three qualities in the data reflected "Sharing in Academia": enabling sharing, benefiting from peer support, and affirming the relationship. Our trust-filled, reflective relationship meant we could Share the complexities of Being an Academic and Doing Academia, in which we enabled and affirmed each other and benefited from our peer relationship. The support provided in the sharing and reflecting upon the other's work was a source of great strength. We shared struggles, resources, opportunities, connections, learning and more, with some tangible results including publications, new relationships, job applications submitted, and networks broadened. We regularly celebrated each other at milestones, while keeping a steady path during the challenges. While these actions nurtured the sharing between us, they also produced benefits.

I have learnt a lot with you this week about managing the writing of a thesis. I have also enjoyed being held to account, in the nicest possible way! (Michelle's email, 3 August 2014)

It is the "reframe" that Michelle often offered me, along with a focus upon what I can do, which so often helped me get through the tough times. Many of those tough times involved shifting or shortened timelines, or simply falling behind and having to develop (yet another) a timeline. (Karen's memo reflection, 4 July 2016)

Bound up in our experience was our relationship to the academic environment. In particular, our weekly emails demonstrated the power of, and attention to, our connection with each other in that academic experience. Our sharing with each other, within the academic context, involved reflective questioning of ourselves and of each other, identifying the benefits of peer support and affirmation of our peer-to-peer relationship. Our Sharing in Academia meant our place and pace in academia and our relationship could be made explicit. This sharing countered isolation (see above): a substantial benefit within a highly competitive higher education sector (Group of Eight, 2013).

You have made great progress on the sections of the vignette, great news. All the best for your meeting in the morning. Btw, I couldn't let you rest without you knowing that sharing our progress is super encouraging for me too, thank you! (Michelle's email, 31 July 2014)

Thanks for checking in. I find these weekly check-ins an invaluable part of the thesis write-up process, not only for its practical value but because I enjoy hearing how you are going and being able to share my progress too. I feel very blessed to share this journey with you; thank you. :-) (Karen's email, 11 October 2014)

Through attention to the *way* we shared and affirming our relationship, we could be and do together—connected in the individualised environment of the neoliberal university (Rustin, 2016). We could step towards an “ethics of care that challenges these working conditions” to create the space we continue to share together today, where possibilities and alternatives to that presented by a corporate university exist (Mountz et al., 2015, p. 1236).

We shared updates, achievements, histories, challenges, strategies, research approaches, reflections and encouragement—and we checked with each other regarding the nature of the peer support, mindful to keep it valuable and respectful. Benefits included gentle accountability, affirmation, sharing resources, reflection and more. I felt strengthened in sharing the mundane, struggles and successes that would otherwise have been borne in isolation. I experienced solidarity in my connection with Michelle regarding the impact of the PhD, with space for differences in our experiences too. I still now (even today!) find that Michelle's questioning and alliance boosts me on my journey to “be” a researcher. Peer support may not be for everyone, but the components of our experience may assist others to benefit from peer support for PhD success. (Karen's memo reflection on Sharing in Academia, 12 October 2016)

The Collaborative Analysis Process

As the codes collapsed into categories, and three themes drew together through analysis, the collaborative process of coding and writing itself inspired a response within each of us too.

Karen's reflections on the process (12 October 2016)

I approached Michelle's coding table with the familiar enthusiasm with which I opened Michelle's emails during my PhD candidature. I noticed codes and sub-categories familiar to me from my NVivo coding, in this one coding table that represented the “co-mingl(ing of our) voices” (Chang et al., 2013, p. 39). The table's contents held more similarities than I anticipated after Michelle's observation that her coding seems more “rustic” than mine. Viewing the table triggered my memory of coding, including the tension of moving through the 470 landscape pages of emails, efficiently and systematically, all in my “spare time” . . . it was a labour of love and I was drawn to connect... We are effectively “outing” our experiences through our co/autoethnography (Chang et al., 2013, p.18) as we become researchers (Redman-MacLaren, 2015a).

Michelle's response to Karen (15 October 2016)

I write into your words,
You weave light into mine,
Over, under, tugged right through,

A base is lain.

We build new understandings,
While honouring the old,
Redraw a way together,
To understand the whole.

The pattern not always easy,
We weave on anyway,
Take a chance, add some colour
Send a SOS.

Creating co/llaboration

The Offering: Benefits for Us and Potentially Others

We began this paper at a point of life trauma, not because we believe significant life events are essential to forming PhD peer support processes, but rather because we believe that life complexity and feelings of inadequacies, such as those shared in the vignettes, are common to completing a PhD thesis (Lenette, 2012; Wegener et al., 2014). Through the act of writing and dialoguing in the development of this co/autoethnography, we hope to provide a way for the reader to connect with, and better understand, our lived experiences of informal peer support during our PhDs. We write the lessons we continue to learn as a result of the process, intending to assist others to think about their own experience of being academics differently. We also connect our personal experiences to the cultural setting of academia to empower others in their PhD experiences, and show alternatives to the “success” typically expected within the corporate university (Rustin, 2016). In this way, there is a broader context to our “Being an Academic” together.

The impacts of the competition-driven, neoliberal university result in pressures on mental and physical health, which are written on our bodies (Mountz et al., 2015, p. 1245). We have learnt that we have internalised these ever-increasing expectations to do more. By critically reflecting upon our PhD experiences, we have also re-learned that we value self-determination over speed; collaboration over competition; collectivity over individuality. Through the co/autoethnographic process we continue to learn strategies to resist the temporal regimes of the neoliberal university (Mountz et al., 2015). For us, success was indeed completing our PhDs and delivering appropriate “products” (including grants and publications). However, success was also about staying connected, overcoming isolation, and achieving wellness despite the ever-increasing demands of our respective universities.

Our email exchanges entangled the personal with the professional, making our exchanges a space in which we could reflect upon and explore our transforming identities. We bring our personal experience into the public, knowing this to be a potentially political act in that we reflect power relationships (Hanisch, 1970). In exposing our personal experience of academic contexts, and the impact of undertaking a PhD, we practice an uncommon approach in the current competitive environs of academia (Hil, 2012; Tynan & Garbett, 2007).

In “Doing Academia” together, we could plan ahead, swap feedback, and strengthen our positions in the vulnerable space occupied by early career academics (Laudel & Glaser, 2008). In our “Doing Academia” there was an endless adjusting of timeframes, with goals dependent upon our health, our energy impacting our ability to continue, supervisor feedback, family commitments—just constant adjusting! Our experiences of “Doing Academia” together

throughout the PhD now continue into our working lives as researchers, and as co-authors on this paper. Another recursion in process.

Through this process of co/autoethnography, we have revealed our internalised unhealthy habits. Our respective construction of the thesis became “the thing” that prevented us from being as fun as we felt we were before the PhD took our time, made us tired, sick, mentally unwell: Why did we let it? How did we start so well and then crash out? These traits are inherent to the corporate university (Berg & Seeber, 2016), and are arguably symptoms of the neoliberal conditions of academia (Petersen, 2011). By taking time to dialogue and reflect on “Doing Academia,” we cultivated resilience in our intellectual life as we traversed the pathway to and into academia. We created supports to enhance our work satisfaction and productivity; we moved beyond individual coping narratives associated with early career researcher-academic attrition (Petersen, 2011). We continue to examine and rebalance our behavioural patterns and “workaholic tendencies” (as one friend suggested of Karen).

There are many layers in the theme, “Sharing in Academia.” At the personal level, we are both willing to widely share our information and knowledge with others, when the neoliberal setting rewards competition. Our peer support equated to developing the personal, the collective, as well as a structural resistance to the individualised experiences of neoliberal time, pressures, and structures (Mountz et al., 2015). Our primary relationship now weaves into a broader community of researchers interested in a different, more reflective way of “Doing Academia” within our respective universities, across our research networks and with others beyond our immediate networks.

Co/autoethnography has provided a platform for us to explore how the commitment to weekly email exchanges and other collaborative activities assisted our completion of our respective PhDs. Our peer support continues through the collaborative process, where we each play a role as listener and as story-re/teller regarding our personal narratives. Not only does the co/autoethnographical process reinforce the importance of a witnessing role that can be used to check on self-reported actions (Anderson & Fourie, 2015), it has also offered us a way to slow down our analysis of our own experience to understand political and ideological agendas hidden in our texts (Bochner, 2001). By sharing our experiences, we have illustrated the facets of the cultural encounter of “Being an Academic” and “Doing Academia.” and ways to negotiate and support each other by “Sharing in Academia.” We hope this explication of the personal amongst our professional endeavours assists other higher degree candidates to explore the role of the social construction of a higher degree researcher.

As noted earlier, our long-standing relationship provided a basis from which our peer support could grow organically. We do not believe a pre-existing relationship to be essential, but a successful peer relationship would require commitment and investment in time to nurture trust and mutual value. The experience of peer support for others, even if using a two-person peer framework, would likely be different in each situation, given each individual brings different factors to the relationship. Peer support situated within a group framework would likely result in a different experience to ours, for our peer support began with two individuals who had an existing relationship.

In this paper, we demonstrated structures, processes, and tools used to facilitate peer support during our PhDs. Collaborative reflective practice played a key role in our peer support, including through this co/autoethnography, which has strengthened our personal and professional relationship and our own self-understandings in becoming researchers. The collaborative reflective practice has also positioned our experience within the broader structure context of academia. There are many ways to approach doing a PhD, but regardless of the path taken, we agree with Wegener et al. (2014) that peer learning is crucial for making the “doctoral journey a less fearful and more joyful and constructive experience” (p. 2). As such, this paper is not so much about “how to get a PhD” or other predefined measures of “success” but rather

about the human level of relationship. We share our reflections to foreground peered collaboration and to enable collective being, doing, and sharing in academia.

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