

Journeying from “I” to “we”: Assembling hybrid caring collectives of geography doctoral scholars

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Completing a PhD is difficult. Within a city and a university recovering from a major earthquake sequence, general stress levels are much higher, and caring for some of the non-academic needs of doctoral scholars becomes critically important to these scholars’ success. Yet in the same situation, academic supervisors may be stretched to the limits of their capacity to care even just for doctoral scholars’ research training needs, let alone their broader pastoral care. The question, then, is how do we increase capacity to provide care for doctoral scholars in this kind of environment? While it has been shown elsewhere that supportive and interactive department cultures are correlated with lower attrition rates (Lovitts & Nelson, 2000), little work has been done on how exactly departments might go about in creating these supportive environments: the focus is generally on the individual actions of supervisors, or the individual quality and independence of students admitted (Johnson, Lee, & Green, 2000). In this article, we suggest that a range of actors and contingencies are involved in journeying toward a more caring collective culture. We direct attention to the hybridity of a “caring collective” emerging in the Department of Geography at the University of Canterbury. Following Callon and Rabeharisoa (2003), our caring collective is hybrid because the actors assembled are not only “students” and “staff”, but also bodies, technologies, objects, institutions and other nonhuman actors including tectonic plates and earthquakes. The concept of the hybrid caring collective is useful, we argue, as a way of understanding the distributed responsibility for the care of doctoral scholars, and as a way of stepping beyond the student/supervisor blame game.

Keywords: hybrid collectives; doctoral study; care; supervision; disaster recovery; communities of practice

Introduction

Completing a PhD is difficult. The process requires advanced project management skills as well as emotional and mental resilience from both doctoral scholars¹ and supervisors. Doctoral scholars face many challenges to timely completion. These challenges are not

necessarily the traditionally highlighted issues concerning a lack of scholar ability or of research quality, but rather they can be about: psychological blocks, negative thinking, project and time management issues, perfectionism, unrealistic expectations, supervisor relationship issues, and personal issues and circumstances that interfere with progress (Denholm, 2012; Miller, 2008). Despite the increase in supervisory training in New Zealand and elsewhere (McCallin & Nayar, 2012), supervisors and doctoral scholars are not necessarily well-equipped in recognising non-academic challenges to PhD completion, or in dealing with them productively. Indeed, the identification of such potentially “fatal” obstacles to PhD completion is rarely an explicit part of the official PhD candidature.

Some would argue it is not the supervisor’s job to be involved in the psychosocial side of doctoral candidature. Although there are many research articles exploring supervision as a key aspect of doctoral scholars success, the vast majority focus on what Lee calls the “functional” approach to supervision (Lee, 2008) – that is, espousing strategies for meetings and the progress management of students that “get results”. Doctoral scholars are indeed responsible for their own PhD projects: they do need to develop the ability to manage their project – and even their supervisor (The Thesis Whisperer, 2014). But this does not mean that the goal of complete autonomy and independence seen as so central to supervisory literature is necessarily the only – or best – way to doctoral completion. As Johnson, Lee and Green argue, the fantasy of the independent, disembodied scholar is being challenged all round by new approaches to knowledge that emphasise collaboration and are less concerned with “demonstrating the appropriate characteristics of the autonomous self” (Johnson et al., 2000, p. 146). They therefore propose that the pedagogies of doctoral supervision also need reconsidering,

especially in these contexts where collaboration is emerging as a more important marker of knowledge production than “the always-already autonomous self”.

In this paper, we take up scholarly thinking around autonomy and collectives to analyse our own experimental project with doctoral scholar support. We, the authors, explore our own experiences as not-so-autonomous doctoral scholars in the Department of Geography at the University of Canterbury. The majority of us do not fit the traditional scholar subjectivity described by respondents in Johnson et al.’s (2000) work on “the PhD and the autonomous self”. We come from a range of cultural, ethnic and social backgrounds, including Zambian, Korean, Croatian, Namibian, Pākēha/New Zealand European, British, European-Canadian. While all “geographers”, we range in expertise: climatology, coastal science, community-based learning, civil engineering, development studies, feminist geography, geographic information systems, health geography, hydrology, population geography, transport geography and urban political ecology. Some of us have completed our PhDs (quite some time ago), some withdrew from doctoral studies, some have been studying far too long, while others are progressing or just about to submit. We came together in a time of disruption in a city recovering from a series of devastating earthquakes, in a time where many of the doctoral scholars in our department were suspending their studies, considering withdrawal, on sick leave or facing various obstacles to completion. In short, in the context of a department where many were failing to perform the always-already autonomous scholar “fantasy” that Johnson et al. (2000) describe. What we have in common is a shared interest and need for what we have termed “holistic care” during the PhD process, and an institutional environment that has not always been able to provide this.

The question for us then, is how do we increase capacity to provide care for doctoral scholars in this kind of environment? While it has been shown elsewhere that supportive and interactive department cultures are correlated with lower attrition rates (Lovitts & Nelson, 2000), little work has been done on how exactly departments might go about in creating these supportive environments. In this article, we contribute to this area of research, articulating the range of actors and contingencies that have been involved in journeying toward a more caring collective culture, and reflecting on the role of collaborative research training in establishing a more collective approach to the doctoral journey. Our particular empirical contributions emerge from our engagement with Alison Miller's (2008) book *Finish Your Dissertation Once and for All: How to overcome psychological barriers, get results, and move on with your life*, initially through a reading group set up by co-authors Dombroski and Hart, and then through a variety of interconnected collective caring and scholarly endeavours within our department. We find that the role of doctoral students our/themselves is important in creating more collective caring interventions, as is our context of being a community of people affected by the ongoing consequences of a disaster in the form of the 2010-2011 Canterbury earthquake sequences.

Beyond the autonomous scholar: quakes, cakes and care

In all areas of life, and for all people, caring and being cared for are important. In the field of geography, Lawson (2009) argues that scholarly ideologies of the "autonomous self-made man" should not go unchallenged, pointing out that ignoring the care we receive from others only furthers the myth that all of our successes are achieved as autonomous individuals. This has real world consequences in that we come to believe we have "no responsibility to share the fruits of our success with others" (Lawson, 2009). Feminist geographers, in particular, have highlighted the unfortunate ways in

which the fantasy of the autonomous bounded individual have influenced our scholarly research tradition in this way (Rose, 1993). Scholars influenced by the posthumanist and new materialist turns emphasise the ways in which the research contributions of the non-human (or more-than-human) objects, beings, environments, technologies are not sufficiently recognised in our anthropocentric visions of autonomous, independent geographical scholarship (Cameron, Manhood, & Pomfrett, 2011). Yet in *teaching* geography, a number of our common pedagogical practices (such as group work, residential fieldwork, and reflective assignments) foster supportive learning communities that constitute what Conradson terms “-a collectively oriented response” in the face of increasing proportions of university students experiencing mental distress (Conradson, 2016). As Conradson notes in the context of these geographical teaching practices, “in a supportive learning community, education is understood as a *relational* achievement, rooted in engagement and interaction” (2016, p. 241, our emphasis).

If we can understand, at the undergraduate level, that learning is deeply integrated with collective and relational approaches to caring for students’ wellbeing, surely we can move beyond the autonomous self-made scholar trope as we consider geographical doctoral studies? The answer to this question is not as straightforward as one might think. We return to the widely held notion that the whole point of a PhD is to demonstrate our independence as scholars, our passport into the world of academia, our citizenship in the world of autonomous scholarship. The whole point of the PhD journey, if we are to take up that common metaphor, is to move from a place of relative dependence to a place of relative independence – to journey, as it were, from “we” to “I”. As Miller notes,

Most students have never undertaken a research project of this stature and scope, or at least not in an independent manner. Thus, the dissertation is usually experienced as highly intellectually challenging. It often pushes people to stretch themselves

and go beyond their perceived limitations... Yet the way the dissertation process is designed is bound to make most students feel anxious and wonder if they possess the intellectual skills and capacity they need to finish their degree (Miller, 2008).

It makes sense, in that regard, that our geography doctoral experiences are deeply ambivalent: on the one hand, we recognise and appreciate our need for care and guidance as individuals within a broader community, but on the other hand, we feel on some level we are “supposed” to be more autonomous in our role as scholars but with no clear idea how to get there.

The particular route we took to exploring these questions was via a reading group, initially based around Alison Miller’s (2008) book *Finish Your Dissertation Once and for All*. Produced by a US-based dissertation coach with experience counselling doctoral scholars into completion, the book combines psychotherapeutic exercises with project management training and kindly advice. While reading groups were not new to our department, they had previously been around particular sub-disciplinary texts, and rarely were as widely accessible as Miller’s text. After working through the book together over eight weeks, we planned to write a book review and divided up the chapters to summarise and reflect on. Each scholar produced at least one-chapter summary and one reflection. On collating these, we noted the prevalence of the journey metaphor – not only in the context of the intellectual journey, but also the emotional and self/project management journeys. We also noted the role of the earthquakes in changing our physical and social environment, even for those of us who were not living here at the time.

Our particular context was that of post-disaster Christchurch. The earthquake sequence began in September 2010 with a 7.2 megawatt (Mw) earthquake. This earthquake proved to be just the start of a larger sequence, including more than 4000 noticeable (> 3.0 Mw) aftershocks, and the devastating 6.3 Mw earthquake of February

2011. Adding insult to injury, Christchurch experienced an extreme rainfall event in March 2014, with the resultant flooding effects being more severe due to the effects of the earthquakes on natural and built parts of the urban landscape (Allen, Davis, Giovinazzi, & Hard, 2014). For the period from September 2010 to September 2015, Canterbury averaged 2.4 earthquakes per day, keeping the present risk as well as past events ever present.

The relevance of this context is the particular sensitivity we had to the emotional needs of ourselves and others living in a broken city. In a way, the earthquakes – or the plates – were key actors in establishing our initial forays into collectivising doctoral scholar care. For example, one of us reflected on the stress of beginning her PhD during this time:

I started on 1 February 2011 and 21 days later, an earthquake with a magnitude of 6.3 struck killing 185 people. We were evacuated from the building, not realising at the time that we would not be back in for 3 months. During that time, any essentials we'd left behind like wallets and car keys were rescued and returned to us within a week and in subsequent weeks a time was organised for us to don hard hats and high vis jackets and, with supervision, we were given five minutes to retrieve resources we could carry from our rooms. There was a meeting for PhD students in one of the marquees set up in the carpark for teaching.

Meanwhile at home, doctoral scholars and supervisors and both their families were dealing with the cumulative effects of ongoing aftershocks and the reality of life in Christchurch: many lived in homes without electricity or easy access to potable water for several weeks or longer. People were facing effects for children, family and friends, loss/lack of officemates who did not want to work in the university buildings following the earthquakes, changes to public transport routes, the loss of large numbers of students and scholars (particularly international) from the university, with subsequent financial effects on the university and thus our research funding. Added to this was grief for a

damaged city, loss of entertainment and sporting opportunities, a lack of department seminars for the remainder of the year, merger and closure of primary schools by the Government, hassles regarding damage to homes, skyrocketing housing costs, relocation due to damage to homes and offices and the endless noise of concrete cutters and jack hammers as campus recovery proceeded. This disruption has an impact on the lives of doctoral scholars, other students, staff, families and neighbourhoods, all adding layers of stress to what is a difficult intellectual process at the best of times.

Although only some of us were here for these stressful and difficult initial consequences, those that moved from elsewhere to study here could not envisage the degree to which these ongoing effects and stressors would come to shape our experiences of work in Christchurch. None of us were able to get away from earthquake impacts, even while working. The earthquakes, we might say, continued to act. In July 2014, the entire department was “decanted” into an adjacent building for almost one year as structural repairs were carried out on the geography building. We were all required to share offices – two staff per small office space and PhD candidates all in one large glass-enclosed room in full view of the undergraduate learning space and thoroughfare for staff. Even now, more than five years later, we write this paper to the sound of concrete cutters, beeping cranes, high pitched machine noises, and the sound of steel rods hitting the ground.

What emerged from this experience however, was potentially an increased awareness of the need to care for each other in the stress and flux of everyday life in a post-disaster environment. The award-winning “all right?” campaign alerted the people of Canterbury to a number of mental health effects of living in this stressful environment, and opened up conversation around caring for mental wellbeing. A number of collective departmental endeavours began at this time: “cake day”, where

both staff and postgraduates were rostered on to provide a cake once a week, connecting over food and conversation and breaking down barriers; the PhD writing group, where a number of doctoral scholars met regularly to read and comment on each other's work; and the particular endeavour that sparked this paper, a reading group arising out of concerns raised over postgraduate student mental health by then-postgraduate coordinator Deirdre Hart. Our efforts to collectivise the care of doctoral scholars and to draw on the “surplus” abilities and contributions of the scholars themselves builds on **the theoretical work and related supervisory experiences** coming out of members of the Community Economies Collective (See for example, Cameron, Nairn, & Higgins, 2009; Dombroski, 2016a, 2016b; Nairn et al., 2015).

When workers in Argentina collectivised factories about to be abandoned by owners affected by financial crisis, they confessed to “waking up each day wanting a job, not a collective”. They were “reluctant subjects” of alternative organisation, but recognised that through collectivising the surplus care labour needed to make a factory run, they could provide jobs for themselves and their wider community through keeping the factories going in times of crisis (Gibson-Graham, 2006). In the same way, in a time where few people were experiencing surplus energy for caring for others – where surplus here refers to anything beyond what we need to reproduce ourselves (Morrow & Dombroski, 2015) – it became necessary to collectivise our caring labour in order to provide care for ourselves and our colleagues in ways that would not be possible in the relatively private and individualistic supervisor-student model we had come to expect.

What emerges then, is that our “experiment” for collectivising care for doctoral scholars was less of an intentional extension of knowledge about learning communities into the experiences of doctoral studies, and more of a contingent and overdetermined outcome of a number of previously unrelated trajectories: more along the lines of what

Doreen Massey calls “throwntogetherness” (Massey, 2005). These include: the norms of doctoral scholarship and supervision in geography and elsewhere, the broader context of the earthquakes, our physical and institutional environment, the personal histories of each of us and the scholarly traditions we connect to, and the presence of a particular book at a particular time that seemed to provide some of what we needed to learn about the emotional and organisational side of doing a PhD.

Rather than reporting on the group as a well-designed intervention of a competent department, we have sought theory that highlights the contingency and throwntogetherness of our “experiment”. We follow Cameron’s suggestion that we take a more “experimental” approach to living in difficult times – not in the sense of isolating and testing variables for cause and effect, but in the sense of an open and playful form of experimentation that tries to find new ways of doing things (Cameron, 2015). In what follows, we report on our experiment with collectivisation, and highlight some of the rich findings and ongoing effects of this “open” experimental approach.

Three intertwined journeys: from “I” to “we” and beyond

The doctoral process is ostensibly about creating an autonomous independent scholar. In some conceptualisations of the doctoral process, known as the “rite of passage” model, the doctoral scholar is meant to be always-already independent and autonomous, “proving” their worthiness of a PhD through their independent and heroic achievements (Johnson et al., 2000). In such a conceptualisation, little care is provided for the scholar, and supervision might look like “benign neglect”. In other conceptualisations of the doctoral process, more prevalent in the physical sciences, a scholar is understood to move from a starting point of relative dependence (for example, in a laboratory group) to a finishing point of relative independence (Lee, 2008). In some ways, this is the opposite of the process that happens after we have completed our PhDs – we tend to

move from relative independence into more and more inter-dependence, as our funding regimes come to emphasise grants and collaboration, and the squeeze on our time as researchers may be intensified while in teaching or positions of administrative responsibility. It is entirely possible that, on completing our PhD, never again will we design and implement a research project in such isolation.

We used a thematic analysis approach to analysing our own written summaries and reflections on Miller's book and the process of reading it together. Our reflections primarily record our personal journeys of emotional awareness and project management skills. These are clearly intertwined with the (more commonly recognised) intellectual journey. Our three journeys resonate with Mantai and Dowling's findings on doctoral support in their content analysis of the acknowledgements in Australian PhD theses (Mantai & Dowling, 2015), where doctoral scholars were found to be aware of their reliance on various forms of intellectual support, emotional support, and 'instrumental' (or perhaps 'project management') support in their doctoral journey.

While the metaphor of "doctorate as journey" has come under critical examination (Hughes & Tight, 2013), many of us used and connected with this metaphor in our reflections, and it formed a shared language in our discussion. The metaphor of the journey implies a beginning, and end, and some kind of movement from one place to another. The use of the journey metaphor in other research on doctoral experiences has focused on the heroic voyage or quest, where the hero travails against all obstacles as he² moves from infancy to adulthood, dependence to independence, or perhaps even from a connection with the "we" of ordinary people to the "I" of the autonomous heroic scholar. While there is some degree of connection in our own descriptions – we do recognise growing independence and skills in many areas – our reflections tended to describe the journey as a movement from isolation to

connection, from independent struggle to inter-dependent struggle, from thinking only about “I” to thinking more about “we”. And more than this, the “we” which we come to embody is not just the “we” of our particular group of scholars, but a wider collective of “we” that includes other scholars, others requiring and providing care, and other social, material, and institution networks of exchange we are part of.

Journey of the intellect

The intellectual journey is the best recognised of the three journeys we mention, and is generally the taken-for-granted primary purpose of PhD study. This journey is frequently explored in literature on postgraduate supervision: Andresen (1999, p. 30) extemporises the PhD as a rite of passage whereby “our academic system reproduces itself”, and “the point at which scholarship gives birth to scholarship”; Manathunga (2005, p. 228) cites supervisors who liken a PhD to “an educational journey” where the eventual outcome should be “the capacity to undertake research”. In this metaphor, supervisors are our intellectual guides and accompany us on a journey from research questions and curiosity, to methods of data collection and analysis, from developing expertise, to the ability to communicate our results.

While to some degree this intellectual journey was reflected in our discussions, for many of us it sometimes felt that the PhD journey was an exercise in making us feel more stupid. Written reflections expressed feelings of inadequacy, imposter syndrome, struggling with the basics, or pressure to perform. As we analysed our own reflections, we discovered that while we felt university processes often prioritised the intellectual journey, our reflections more often focused on the emotional aspects of our experiences:

During my PhD I have struggled a lot with anxiety caused by multitude of things – my doubts in my own intelligence, inability to look at a PhD as a set of smaller tasks, family and financial issues just to name a few – all amplified by me being on

my own in a foreign country. [Miller's book] put my struggles in perspective – I am not alone, it is possible to work through the issues, and I would not be alone if I decided not to finish my PhD.

What came through in our discussions and written reflections was the feeling of surprise that others shared our doubts and difficulties with the intellectual journey, and that others who seemed to “have it all together” also experienced stabs of panic or extended self-doubt. We discovered we were not alone in this journey, as we had thought we were. In this way, even on that most well-travelled of intellectual journeys, we discovered a movement from “I”, alone in my angst over my intelligence, to “we”, together struggling with doubt and learning.

Our engagement with Miller's book thus highlighted the degree to which the intellectual challenges of a PhD might be experienced as emotionally overwhelming by all kinds of people. This was especially true for those of us whose identities are tied up with being high achievers and who were experiencing difficulties or significant intellectual challenges for the first time. Thus, while Miller's book touches on aspects important to the intellectual journey (particularly in the chapters on writing and supervisory relationships), for our group, the purpose and value of the book lies in its contribution to the journeys of emotion and self-management which are deeply entangled with the intellectual journey of a doctoral scholar. And, while developing our individual intellectual journey was certainly a present reality, we recognised that the intellectual journey is *also* a journey from “I” to “we” – from “I”, a student struggling to understand new material, to “we”, a group of scholars and colleagues with our own developing areas of expertise. The “we” can also be extended beyond this group of scholars and colleagues and in to the “we” of the collective know-how of scholars in our disciplines, and the institutional, material and social networks that enable us to connect with each other across time and space.

Journey of emotions

Getting to the point of completion in a PhD seems to be just as much about stubbornness and what Miller calls “grit”, the ability to push through difficult times and keep going to the end. Some people might call this “resilience”, but for people in the Christchurch post-earthquake context, resilience is a word that has been over-used and come to be resented in many quarters especially when it is used to smooth over injustice or ignore the need for care and compassion (Hayward, 2013). Our content analysis certainly revealed grit, but also a profound relief in discovering that other doctoral scholars and faculty were struggling too. For some, this realisation came from reading Miller’s book itself:

It put my struggles in perspective – I am not alone.

This was true even for those of us who withdrew from PhD studies – the book provided a context for withdrawal beyond our own department, it was an option and not necessarily a “failure”.

In general, however, it was the collective of care that assembled around the book that provided the emotional and social support:

...it was the coming together through the collective care process and the reading group that followed that has been instrumental in making my journey fun and not so lonely.

Miller’s book played an active role in enabling interaction and open discussions around emotional difficulties in ways that more casual cake and coffee mornings could not.³

This was partly through providing a new shared language of emotional support, particularly around the concepts of “perfectionism” and “self-care” and “awfulization”, for example, the following two reflect:

I have always been a perfectionist. However, it wasn't until I read the section on “Overcoming Perfectionism” that I realised how the way I was writing was creating a huge block on my creativity. ... It's taking practice and patience but it's very encouraging to see a big leap in my productivity now that I'm not trying to be perfect from the start.

I have tried to implement this strategy in playing a more active role as a self-nurturer in my own life and constantly evaluating whether I am playing it sufficiently. This has also led to self-care activities being listed on my weekly, daily, monthly and long-term planning without feeling guilt.

Miller's work on addressing typical thinking traps such as “awfulization” was valuable in reframing our “awfulized” and exaggerated thoughts based on our overwhelming feelings, for example, one of us reframed the thought that “the criticism of my supervisor is too harsh to bear” to “I am feeling overwhelmed by the amount of work my supervisor has suggested I do”. Similarly, another reframed “I never get any feedback from my supervisor” to “I am feeling frustrated with the amount of feedback I receive from my supervisor”. In some ways then, many of the authors were able to increase capacity to deal with negative emotions – which is Miller's aim in the exercises included in the book. But in another sense, our emotional journey was less about what one of us called our

... inexpert attempts to engage with complex psychological exercises

and more about moving from relative isolation in our emotional struggles to greater connection beyond ourselves. That is, another move from “I” in my awful feelings alone to “we” connecting together over our shared experiences of struggle and uncertainty, where someone else can care for me by putting things in perspective and I can likewise do the same. The “we” is greater than our group of scholars meeting here, and extends to others in our department and community, our families and our extended support

networks of friends and social services we might require, and the material, social and institutional conditions that enable these services and networks to exist and act to provide us with care.

Journey of self-management

Identifying oneself as project manager of our thesis is something quite different from believing you are intellectually capable of a PhD. In fact, those of us with supervisory experience note that A grade records do not always signal a scholar who will experience the smoothest sailing PhD experience, especially if they have little or no work experience in environments requiring self-management. Miller's book actively teaches self-management and project management skills in some of the core chapters on overcoming obstacles. Miller notes the connections between what we have termed the emotional journey and the work habits of doctoral scholars: anxiety around perfectionism, it seems, breeds procrastination. For example, one of us writes:

I would sit at my desk and try to phrase my sentences and paragraphs perfectly as I typed, with the spectres of my imagination (supervisors, colleagues, my grammatically orientated mother-in-law!) peering over my shoulder, ready to shout judgement on me if I did so much as put a comma in the wrong place.

Clearly, this kind of perfectionism is not bearable for significant periods of time, and the scholar must find relief or put off the experience indefinitely while other more immediately rewarding tasks are prioritised. Miller encourages us to take responsibility – not for perfect first drafts, she insists, but for the achievement of our own goals such as meeting deadlines.

While Miller's advice was useful on an individual level, the role of the collective in caring for each other's self-management journey was around providing additional diverse perspectives on what we took responsibility for. For example, some

of us connected more with what Hughes and Tight (2013) call the “hard work” metaphor of doctoral studies,

I did not share the anxiety of worth or self-doubt, in fact, it didn't occur to me at all as I assumed I would have to work hard and if I did so then it would be alright. ... My issues centred on managing my life outside of the university.

And:

With ample teaching experience and a few papers under my belt, what was holding me back was the completion of my degree. I needed to finish it, as soon as possible, for the sake of feeding my children if nothing else!

This provided some context for others in achieving reasonable balances in what we decided to (and not to) accept responsibility for.

In addition to these diverse experiences, the group spent a considerable amount of time discussing the degree to which we were responsible for our own self-care and the care of others. While Miller's strategy of including self-care and social activities on our thesis timelines and daily schedules was a shift in thinking for many of us who had been squeezing these in around the edges, it was still primarily an individualistic approach to care – what one of us often referred to as “drinking neoliberal Kool-Aid”. Individualistic approaches to “self-care” do run the risk of obscuring other kinds of care we also depend on, and can be easily linked to the neoliberal project of creating an “active, self-managing and responsible citizen” (Cupples & Ridley, 2008, p. 256) and the “neo-liberal values of individualism, where personal motivation is all that is required to succeed” (Hughes & Tight, 2013, p. 773), **taking an ‘isolating psychic and physical toll’ on scholars all over the world (Mountz et al., 2015)**. This problem was consistently before us as we tried to think how we might care for doctoral scholars in an environment built on neo-liberal educational values.

While we still do not have any clear answers here, we can identify a push back from our particular group of scholars against being completely responsible for developing the skills necessary to manage their own project and supervisor. The push-back helped us identify that doctoral scholars need additional care in the area of broader research training – but not research training out of a box, in centrally run training courses, but in a responsive and targeted way. Our collective went some way to beginning this process: the connections developed through meeting together and caring for each other resulted in the sharing of time management strategies, thesis proposals and ethics applications, one-on-one training in software, presentation skills and more. This kind of care around self-management demonstrated a shift from “I”, finding ways, through trial and error, to manage my time and research to “we”, caring for each other and sharing skills we have developed elsewhere to perhaps shorten the trial and error journey of self-management for each other. While we preferred this interpersonal approach to learning self-management, we can also broaden our “we” to the places and experiences that have enabled some of us to develop these skills and share them – the institutional, material and social networks that each of us are embedded in and draw from as we share our learning with those we care for in our more immediate collective.

Journeying collectively: “I” to “we” and back again

The doctoral process has often been likened to a journey, a quest, or a heroic voyage. While this approach no doubt appeals to many attached to the “autonomous scholar” trope (Johnson et al., 2000), we have also identified some limits to this approach, especially in the context of a broken city where plenty of other obstacles and travails are testing and tiring the “resilience” of the people of Christchurch. Hughes and Tight show how the intellectual quest metaphor might obscure the work habits that must be developed in order to complete the doctoral degree, where

...travailing against all obstacles, through the strength of inner spirit, speaks strongly to neo-liberal values of individualism, where personal motivation is all that is required to succeed. It leaves the analysis at the affective level, where resilience is the key. Whilst there can be no doubt that these are required qualities for successful doctoral study, what is missing is any consideration of the development of habits, rigour, knowledge and skills (i.e., the relevant work processes) that are also essential components of the successful PhD (Hughes & Tight, 2013, p. 773).

Miller's (2008) work goes to some length to address this gap: teaching doctoral scholars how to change their habitual emotional pathways, develop their self-management skills and "finish their dissertation once and for all". Yet her approach is still mostly intervening at the individual level. We acknowledge the value of her intervention, while still insisting that there is a role for care beyond self-care in the doctoral process. This is partly related to our experiences of living in a post-quake city, where, like in many post-disaster situations, it has been revealed that resilience is also about social connectedness and being cared for rather than individual resourcefulness (Thornley, Ball, Signal, Lawson-Te Aho, & Rawson, 2015; Walsh, 2007). As Sepie writes in her overview of psychosocial recovery literature, what the wider Canterbury community currently needs is

... to experience consistency, predictability, transparency, feelings of hope, a sense of progress, and bear witness to good intentions (with satisfactory follow-through or confirmation), in order to feel like they are valued and listened to, supported, validated, included, and connected in meaningful ways with other people (Sepie, 2015, p. 47).

We would argue that beyond post-disaster recovery, these sound like pretty good expectations for making the doctoral journey less of a heroic struggle, and more of a difficult but manageable job. Our open experimental approach has been one of introducing or enhancing these various elements of psychosocial wellbeing into the

doctoral experience, through collectivising responsibility for care away from the individual autonomous scholar (whether the candidate or the supervisor) and towards a wider collective of doctoral scholars within and beyond the department.

We recognise and acknowledge the work of other scholars practicing and publishing on similar doctoral communities of practice (Aitchison & Guerin, 2014; Mantai, 2017; Mantai & Dowling, 2015; Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002).

However, what we have done differently in this paper is pay attention to what one might call the practice of community, where community is a hybrid collective that includes the institutional, social and material elements that have enabled our collectivisation: the particular materialities of earthquakes, books, cakes; the particular institutional realities of neoliberalising doctoral education; the particular socialities of resilience, social connectedness, meeting together face to face, and identifying beyond our local group of scholars including supervisors and students. We thus direct attention to the *hybridity* of our experimental “caring collective”. Following Callon and Rabearisoa (2003), our caring collective was – and is – hybrid because the actors assembled are not only the supposedly autonomous human students and supervisors, but also wider networks of human institutions and socialities, and the wider networks of non-human materialities of technologies, objects institutions and other nonhuman actors including tectonic plates and earthquakes, cakes and books. This is an important contribution because this broad and hybrid collective very clearly challenges the fantasy of the autonomous scholar with which this paper began. The concept of the hybrid caring collective is useful, we argue, as a way of insisting on the distributed responsibility and exchange of care for doctoral scholars, and as a way of stepping beyond the individualised approach to “managing” students or supervisors.

What does this all mean for our original question of how we might increase the capacity to care for doctoral scholars within the constraints of our systems and circumstances? The answer lies in putting aside the fantasy of autonomy suggested in our questing and voyaging metaphors for doctoral study, and looking for ways in which care is already being distributed across networks of exchange. Once we are able to see how care is always-already distributed between multiple human and nonhuman enablers, we might work to further collectivise care through open experimental interventions that thicken and strengthen the threads of connection already present. In this way, we might be able to shift our attention from the “I” of self-care, personal resilience and responsibility so typical of our times, to the “we” of caring for each other in ways that enhance the wellbeing of our doctoral scholars and wider disciplinary and academic communities.

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Notes

1. We choose not to use the word “students” because some of the authors of this paper feel that the term contradicts the degree of self-direction that is inherent in the doctoral process.
2. We use “he” advisedly here: Johnson et al. (2000) argue that the autonomous scholar hero fantasy comes out of a particularly masculinist notion of the scholarly journey of the “Man of Reason”. Traditionally, women were excluded from this, particularly in rationalist traditions drawing on Kant, where what he calls “the entire fair sex” somehow fell short of the humanity required of the subjects of Reason. We also note that much of the newer work challenging the autonomous scholar trope is written by collectives of women. See for example, the work of Jenny Cameron, Karen Nairn and colleagues, Lilia Mantai and colleagues, and Claire Aitcheson and colleagues, and Alison Mountz and The Great Lakes Feminist Geography Collective. Despite this excellent work, the PhD scholars involved in this article could still easily identify the widespread presence of the trope of the

autonomous self-made scholar in our department and wider disciplinary community of practice.

3. We make this observation from the point of view of colleagues who have shared considerable amounts of cake and coffee.

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