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Exploring Care-full Doctoral Subjectivities: The Experience of the Doctoral-Student-Mother in Doctoral Education

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Abstract: In this paper we closely analyse two self-portraits and related diary-interview data produced via empirical research in New Zealand in order to explore the discursive space which surrounds carers in doctoral education. In our analysis of the visual artifacts of one participant named 'Gertie', we identify the significance of parental care in shaping her doctoral experience, and consider how the discourses of 'intensive mothering' and 'the autonomous and unencumbered doctoral researcher' operate to produce the doctoral student-mother as a non-ideal form of doctoral and parental subjectivity. While the discourse of 'intensive mothering' calls mothers to devote significant time and emotional energy to their children, this often conflicts with idealised forms of doctoral subjectivity, which remain associated with autonomy, and a singular focus 'unencumbered' by care responsibilities. Our analysis reveals how Gertie, as a doctoral student-mother, is squeezed between these two seemingly contradictory discourses, causing her significant strain.

Paper: Across debates about widening participation in higher education there has been increasing recognition of 'care' as a key dimension of the student experience, and 'carers' as a category of student who face particular challenges in accessing higher study (Brooks, 2012; Moreau, 2016; Andrewartha & Harvey, 2021). Within the literature on graduate students with care responsibilities, scholars have identified how the designation of care as out of time/place can produce significant inequalities for doctoral students, such as higher risks of attrition. For example, Danna Lynch (2008) found that graduate student mothers had significant economic difficulties alongside difficulties negotiating the dual identities of 'mother' and 'student'. 'Care' is increasingly viewed as an equity concern for doctoral students in the public sphere too, with a growth of online articles (e.g. Mantai, 2017) and blog posts (e.g. Loane, 2014; Mason, 2009; Turvill, 2014). Social media has been a key space where issues surrounding doctoral carers have been discussed, including online fora such as PostgradForum as well as the communities that build around Twitter handles such as @parent_phd and hashtags like #PhDparent, #PhDparenting and #PhDMom. Across these accounts much of the discussion foregrounds the challenges of balancing work and life and often offers practical tools such as time management strategies and advice for communicating with family members (Govaerts & Saez, 2020). While sometimes these debates are framed as structural and ideological, often a discourse of individualisation prevails (Moreau & Kerner, 2015).

In order to contribute to these ongoing conversations, in this paper we explore the discursive space which surrounds carers in doctoral education in greater depth. To do this, we focussed on a single case of a doctoral student named 'Gertie', closely considering two visual artifacts she produced and supporting diary-interview data which was gathered as part of an empirical study of doctoral student experiences in Aotearoa New Zealand.

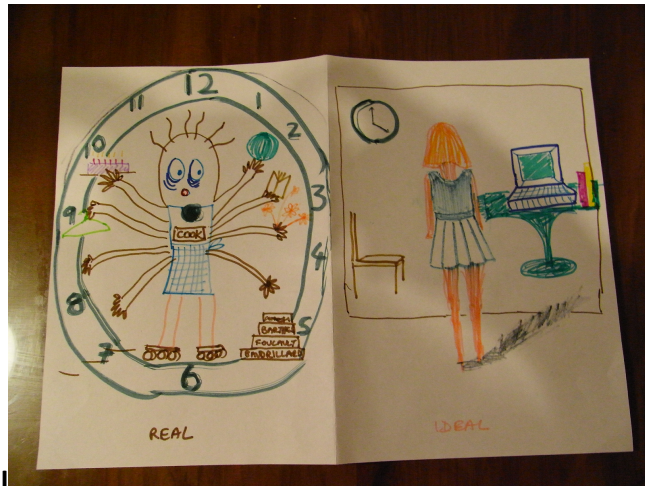


Figure 1. Gertie's self portraits

In the image on the RHS of the page, Gertie has represented her 'real' doctoral self as an exhausted octopus on roller-skates, who is contained inside an enormous clock. Her hair is standing on end, her eyes have dark circles under them, and her mouth has a worried expression, as if to say 'uh-oh'. It is with her many arms that Gertie tries to balance a clothes hanger, a birthday cake, a netball, a book and flowers. Gertie's representation of her ideal doctoral experience (LHS) contrasts starkly with her 'real' doctoral experience. In this image we see a woman standing with her back to the viewer, poised to cross the threshold of a study or office space. Gertie is alone, and the room is characterised by an absence of clutter and activity. Gertie appears to be a doctoral woman positioned to create and think in solitude.

In our analysis of these texts, alongside Gertie's diary-interview data, we demonstrate how the discourses of 'intensive mothering' and 'the autonomous and unencumbered doctoral researcher' operate to produce the doctoral student-mother as a non-ideal form of doctoral and parental subjectivity (Aitchison & Mowbray, 2013; Johnson, Lee & Green, 2000; Leonard, 2001). While the discourse of 'intensive mothering' calls mothers to devote significant time and emotional energy to their children, this often conflicts with idealised forms of doctoral subjectivity, which remain associated with autonomy, and a singular focus 'unencumbered' by care responsibilities. Our paper evokes what it feels like for doctoral carers to be subject to these often-competing discourses which pull them in different directions and can create significant turbulence for both carer and student identities.

While sometimes we see a desire to move post- and after- some gender concerns in HE, our paper points to powerful continuities in the unequal gendered division of care. The images we analysed

evoke the ongoing significance of care to the lived reality of doctoral students, and the impact of being torn between different kinds of 'carer' and 'doctoral' ideals. There are broad implications here not only for higher education institutions but also for the institution of the family. Universities remain an important locus for change, both at the curricula and policy level (e.g. via timetabling, policies to allow children on campus etc). However, there is also a need for wider social change to shift the ways in which communities value and pay for care labour and to confront the uneven distribution of care responsibilities. We conclude our paper by considering what greater attention to the concept of care might offer for a wider re-imagining of doctoral education.

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