

## “It’s the end of the Phd as we know it, and we feel fine...because everything is fucked anyway”

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# “It’s the End of the PhD as We Know it, and We Feel Fine . . . Because Everything Is Fucked Anyway”: Utilizing Feminist Collaborative Autoethnography to Navigate Global Crises

Nikki Rutter<sup>1</sup> , Ecem Hasan<sup>1</sup>, Anna Pilson<sup>2</sup>, and Emma Yeo<sup>3</sup>

## Abstract

Unpacking our experiences as trainee researchers navigating a global pandemic; in this research four researchers identify and interpret otherwise individual experiences through a collective lens. These shared responses are collated and understood through the multivocal method of what we term a “feminist collaborative auto-ethnography.” Relational ethics using a praxis of care, in line with feminist epistemology underpin the systematic analysis of our shared experiences to enhance intersubjectivity and the co-construction of knowledge. Individual reflections and collaborative sessions were utilized to immerse ourselves both situationally and critically into the pool of data. Concurrently creating and analyzing our collaborative inquiry. We utilized mind maps, probing, and reflexivity to engage with our individual and shared social, emotional, and structural challenges. Through analysis of the collaborative data we identified that we had all developed safety seeking strategies, and that a focused research method not only provided direction, but provided a support network. The researchers found that collaborative autoethnography is a useful and holistic method of understanding and navigating adversities in the PhD process, allowing for us to interpret multiple levels of adversity and support-strategies during Covid-19 times.

## Keywords

autoethnography, critical theory, critical ethnography, feminist research, ethnography, narrative, action research, virtual environments

## Introduction

Networking is a key feature of academia (Corbera et al., 2020; Paula, 2020; Wright & Lodwick, 1989). How many conferences result in collaborations? How many colleagues become friends over coffee? How often do workshops provide a call for papers? For those in the early stages of their research training the game has changed, as attempts to control the transmission rate of Covid-19 in 2020 led to extreme measures by health authorities and governments globally, and Higher Education institutions were closed to reduce the spread of the virus (Flear et al., 2020; Newey & Gulland, 2020).

While closures have resulted in increasing levels of isolation and mental health difficulties universally (Niedziedz et al., 2021; Torales et al., 2020), PhD students are particularly vulnerable to mental health crises; especially when transitioning to independent research without the opportunity to build trusting

relationships with peers (Gould, 2014; Gonçalves et al., 2014). As PhD students, we found ourselves simultaneously alone and overwhelmed by online meetings and conversations. The increasing virtual relationships, departmental meetings, and international conferences made their way into our homes through a screen meant the impact of the pandemic was as much a social event as a health-based one (Teti et al., 2020). How many intimate relationships do you maintain from a

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distance? Can you touch those you love daily, or are you as likely to *hear* their voices through a text message or telephone call and see their faces on a computer screen? (Pratt & Rosner, 2012).

This research project was initially conceptualized as a method of supporting one another, as a cohort of PhD students, as we recognized the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on our emotional wellbeing, and potential long-term implications to our academic career trajectory (Holt, 2003; Paula, 2020). We have developed and produced this article for three reasons:

1. To promote the use of collaborative autoethnography as a method of understanding adversity.
2. As a process of mutual support and catharsis.
3. To explore shared challenges and identify what adaptive behaviors we employed.

We did this in the hope that other researchers will benefit from what we have learned; and provide evidence concerning how institutions could enhance their Covid-19 support offer.

**Emma:** It was really cathartic to get it out; the general stuff about the PhD and about next year, it's not something I would talk to my friends about because some of them, they're going back to their home countries and they have no idea if they are even going to find a job. If I'm moaning about my life, and these are their problems, that's not the appropriate mix. So, it's been nice to get it out.

**Ecem:** It has been really difficult because I have not been able to write something down. I've realized I have big issues communicating in general, and just being able to express my feelings.

**Nikki:** I've really relied on this team to help me get through such an overwhelming period of my life and doing it this way has helped me process historical issues, as well as current ones. I've learnt so much about myself through all of you.

**Anna:** I've shared my most personal thoughts, and as a team we were strangers a few months ago. I find it really hard to talk to my best mates online . . . It's a really strange dynamic. The process of participating in this project has been extremely cathartic, and I believe it's crucial that first-person accounts of the impact of the pandemic on students are recorded, so that others can experience solidarity in our struggles, and realize that they are not isolated.

### Our Position

During the summer months of 2020, we all navigated political, social, and health-based challenges. The Covid-19 pandemic, Brexit, and the unrest that erupted after centuries of unjust treatment of the Black community led to an unprecedented crisis in all of our lives. How we made meaning of these events has been grounded in our lived experiences, and so this research is underpinned by a feminist epistemology (Ali & Naylor, 2013; Haraway, 1988).

Through collaborative engagement, and to provide focus for the research, we developed two research questions:

- 1) What do postgraduate researchers identify as the "essence" of their lockdown experience?
- 2) How do the researchers feel disconnected from (or connected to) their respective communities?

These questions explore our lived experiences as researchers in two ways: the first is to explore our individual experiences and how we made meaning of these during the pandemic. The second is to unpack how we, as women, construct our social positions within our communities, specifically the academic community, particularly as women are traditionally "othered" when performing outside traditional patriarchal roles (De Beauvoir, 1972). Both questions provide a challenge in terms of how we can *know* anything when we all have unique subjective experiences.

Trauger and Fluri (2014) apply the work of Haraway (1988) to critique what she calls the "God trick." The "God trick" epistemology asserts that truth or knowledge is there to be uncovered or discovered, with the researcher positioning themselves above, or apart, from that which they research. Trauger and Fluri (2014, p. 33) emphasize that intersubjectivity and reflexivity can facilitate knowledge construction, as we "possess and construct knowledge throughout the research project." Thus, through collaboration, intersubjectivity, and reflexivity we have co-constructed knowledge through this research.

While several autoethnographic and reflective articles have been written by PhD researchers about their experiences of the Covid-19 pandemic (Holt, 2020; Peters et al., 2020), this is the first piece of research we are aware of that uses what we term "feminist-collaborative autoethnography" (CAE) to examine not only shared experiences, but also wider socio-cultural implications of our Covid-19 journeys. We used reflexivity to not only explore our own stories, narratives, and interpretations (Jackson & Mazzei, 2008), but also those of our collaborators.

Furthermore, despite Covid-19 being considered an "unprecedented" event, isolation (Belkhir et al., 2019; Velho, 2020), lack of integration (Hockey, 1994), and even imprisonment (Parveen & Wintour, 2018) are all challenges experienced by some PhD students. As such, we hope that this article demonstrates the wider needs of students both during the pandemic and in general, and how the lessons we have learned are transferable to the many examples of adversity experienced by university researchers.

### Methodological Decisions

As an interdisciplinary group, from education, history, sociology, and social policy, we adopted a methodology which intersects across multiple disciplines. Autoethnography overlaps with both writing, situational narratives, and research practices. It combines perspectives which have their roots in the works of

psychology, sociology, anthropology, critical scholarship, and poetry (Jones, 2008), thus, it allows for interdisciplinary collaboration, while also permitting the integration of different forms of reflective and autoethnographic writings (Pithouse-Morgan et al., 2012).

Autoethnography uses constructivist-interpretivist paradigms, which acknowledge the subjectivity of the researcher and their interactions with the world around them (Belkhir et al., 2019). As the authors were both the researchers and the researched, it has allowed for wider reflexivity, as well as facilitating the emergence of shared subjectivities between us all (Trauger & Fluri, 2014). The purpose of intersubjectivity is to disconnect from the binary understandings of subjects and objects, and recognize that knowledge can be constructed together by building strong connections between individual and shared constructions of realities (Trauger & Fluri, 2014).

### *Criticisms of Autoethnography*

When submitting their writings for academic publications, some autoethnographers have found that the scientific robustness, or scholarly value of their work has been questioned; with some reviewers considering autoethnography too individualistic: Ellis (2009), a strong proponent of autoethnographic writing, has summarized critiques she has received of her own work:

Autoethnographers are navel-gazing, self-absorber narcissists who don't fulfil your scholarly obligation to hypothesize, analyze, contextualize and theorize . . . unwittingly conditioned by the "trauma culture" of therapeutic discourses and reality TV. Get over it and start doing serious, critical social science. (Ellis, 2009, pp. 371–372)

We reject these criticisms and instead see autoethnography as a more ethical form of research which prevents researchers from appropriating the voice of others, instead centring in the research the voice of the researchers themselves (Lapadat, 2017). Furthermore, CAE commits to a theoretical basis and systematic analysis, moving it away from the stereotypical perception of autoethnography as lacking analytical depth (Delamont, 2007; Hernandez et al., 2015). We offer to mediate criticisms of autoethnography through our "feminist-CAE approach," which utilizes a two-fold systematic analysis—through which we were able to further engage with the depth of our experiences which may otherwise have been superficial interpretations.

Roy and Uekusa (2020) identify CAE as a useful methodological approach in a pandemic, but state that CAE cannot contribute to understanding community impacts. We reject this and believe that there is an opportunity to promote intersubjectivity through CAE. We believe knowledge is situated and reflexivity is often used to avoid the "false neutrality" that comes with traditional academic knowledge (Rose, 1997). We posit that our feminist-CAE is one which facilitates intersubjectivity; we are a community, and our experiences, both individual and mutual, are important.

### *Collaborating Autoethnographically*

Chang et al. (2013) popularized CAE as a form of integrated autobiographic study, which facilitates an exploration of the sociocultural situational milieu experiences of researchers through an analysis of their collective understanding (Belkhir et al., 2019). By centring the research within their work, autoethnographers immerse themselves further into their critique of social and cultural experiences, which runs contrary to traditional modes of silent authorship (Holt, 2003). Integrating ethnographic, autobiographic and dialogic practices offers a depth of understanding that cannot be understood individually (Hernandez et al., 2015). By sharing our histories, values, beliefs and lived experiences we constructed our individual knowledge. Probing our individual differences through collaboration facilitated the co-construction of knowledge which would otherwise have been a raw interpretation of very personal experiences (Guyotte & Sochaka, 2016).

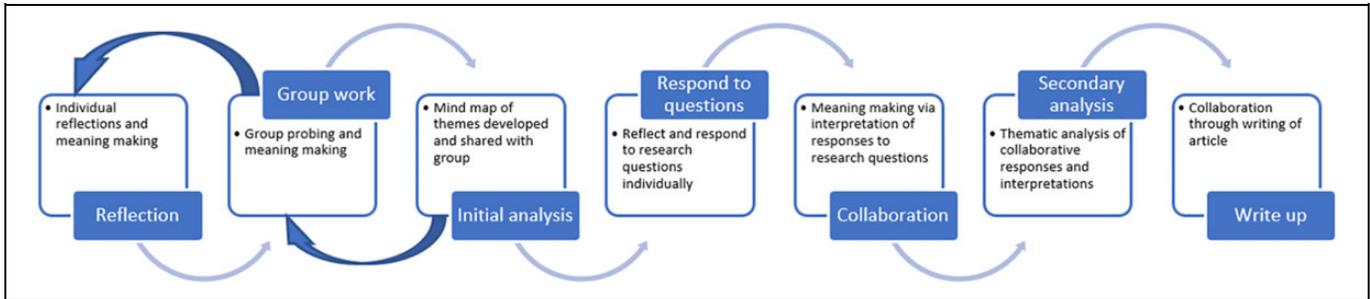
One of the challenges of CAE is the process of confession, as well as a process of catharsis (Pillow, 2003). To share intimate details—and be authentically challenged in the process of autoethnographic research—was exposing to all the researchers. We each shared aspects of ourselves, our histories, and our struggles which led to a level of intimacy and trust within the research group. To fully embed ourselves in the autoethnographic process of reflection and reflective practice, we were required to be vulnerable not only with ourselves, but each other (Lapadat, 2017).

Intimacy suggests the personal is hidden and only revealed to a minor few; through collaboration, this intimacy became true friendship as we learned to "be in [this new] world together" (Tillmann-Healy in Owton & Allen-Collinson, 2014, p. 286). Pratt and Rosner (2012, p. 3) argue that intimacy is not "solely in the private sphere . . . nor is it purely personal," but rather how individuals connect with their environment. Through the process of sharing intimate experiences, we utilized a method underpinned by friendship; not only to get to know one another, but to also learn more about ourselves (Owton & Allen-Collinson, 2014; Tillmann-Healy, 2003).

### *Ethics*

Brydon-Miller and Coghlan (2019) define ethics as a "practical science focused on how we put values into action." It is also the study of relationships; it is how we value these relationships and as a result how we make decisions that position these values and ethics in research (Brydon-Miller et al., 2015). Similarly, after procedural ethics, and ethics in practice, Ellis (2007, p. 3) identified the importance of relational ethics, which "requires researchers to act from our hearts and minds, acknowledge our interpersonal bonds to others, and to take responsibility for actions and their consequences."

Relational ethics underpinned our feminist-CAE due to the intensity and vulnerability which was expressed. While CAE can be an incredibly painful process—and can expose individual researcher vulnerabilities—fellow authors can also be



**Figure 1.** Stages of research.

impacted by the reflections of their collaborators (Pithouse-Morgan et al., 2012). Furthermore, while we did not wish to avoid challenging or controversial topics, critiques of CAE have identified that challenging topics can inhibit collaborators, rather than produce rich data (Guyotte & Sochacka, 2016).

Institutional ethical approval was granted to complete this research. While there is an auto-consent process to this form of research, Nikki engaged with the Head of her departmental ethics board to develop a comprehensive ethical approval application, as we could not have anticipated some of the questions that emerged. This collaboration went beyond our initial expectations; and we shared more evocative experiences and vulnerability than was envisaged at the early stages, nevertheless we remained within the remits of approval granted by being guided by an ethics of care (Corbera et al., 2020).

Once data was collated, each researcher had the opportunity to express if they would prefer certain conversations be removed or not included in this article. This conversation was on-going until the end of writing up data collection as we committed to friendship as method (Heron, 2020; Tillmann-Healy, 2003), meaning we were sensitive to the stories of one another and how they may impact our collaborators if they were to be placed in the public domain. Typically, when friendship is utilized as a methodology in research, it takes place between a researcher and informants, which “requires radical reciprocity, a move from studying them to studying us” (Tillmann-Healy, 2003, p. 735). However, in this case, we were simultaneously researchers and informants, straddling insider-outsider positions. Thus, we were able to quickly embed our reciprocal responsibility to protect and safeguard one another.

## Our Backgrounds

Nikki is a white, working-class, first generation scholar. Navigating self-care while living with multiple “invisible” disabilities which are compounded by stress has made her feel vulnerable during lockdown. Having grown up behind the wire as a “Pad Brat,” Nikki spent her childhood living on military bases around Europe, moving to the UK as an adolescent. A sense of not-belonging anywhere and being from nowhere; a foreigner with a funny accent, has underpinned much of her identity. She is a practitioner-student, and continued her role supporting disabled children and families during the pandemic.

Ecem was born in Cyprus and moved to the UK as a child. Fueled by her different skin color, religion, and first language to those around her, she initially rejected her background and tried to embrace her new-found “whiteness” after being seen as “other” by her peers. As she went through higher education, she realized that it was this “difference” that influenced the way she understood society and found pride in being multilingual, and being able to appreciate her early understanding and analysis of different cultures and their impact.

Emma is a white British woman living in a predominantly white community in the north of England. Emma is working class and is currently living, because of the pandemic, in a working-class area of Blaydon. Emma is the first generation in her family to go to university and that has often shaped her experiences at University. In a very middle-class institution, it’s often easy to feel isolated and out of place. Her 4th and 5th year here, has been the closest she has felt to belonging in the university. This may be as her social networks have shifted significantly. Emma identifies as disabled, with multiple invisible conditions, and her experiences as a disabled person have had a significant impact on the way she has experienced the pandemic.

Anna is a white, working-class British woman who grew up in a village in North Wales which bore the brunt of Thatcherism and its declaration that “there is no such thing as society.” Spending her formative years in an environment that had become introspective, inward-looking, angry and mistrusting of anyone or anything that deviated from the “norm,” Anna became determined to invert this narrative. She has spent the past 15 years as a teacher, working with many marginalized pupils. On account of having PTSD and ongoing mental health conditions, Anna considers herself to be disabled. She feels strongly that a secondary impact of Covid-19 will be a national mental health crisis.

## Our Research Processes

Our research followed an iterative process broken up into stages and activities which we participated in individually and collectively (Figure 1).

The methods were identified by Nikki to promote meaning making and depth-of-inquiry. We engaged with bi-weekly group sessions, bringing reflections to each of these. These reflections offered opportunity to explore our individual experiences, with collaborative sessions engaged to probe the

reflections, promoting reflexivity and providing opportunity to develop intersubjectivity and thus co-construct knowledge. Every group session was recorded and transcribed by Nikki and these transcriptions were sent to all group members to reflect on between each meeting.

### **Stage One: Launching the Collaborative Autoethnographic Inquiry**

As we were all ESRC-funded students in the same doctoral training partnership, we were invited to a “Microsoft Teams” online workspace created by a fellow student to maintain contact during the pandemic, from which Nikki requested collaborators on a project exploring shared experiences of lockdown. A group video call was then arranged where we had initial discussions about our individual challenges, barriers and new experiences relating to Covid-19 restrictions. All researchers agreed that they would take some opportunity to reflect on their individual experiences and share relevant literature through the existing online platform. Two weeks later, the researchers shared their reflections and probed one another to promote a depth of inquiry. Our research questions were formulated based on these reflections to provide direction for the research.

### **Stage Two: Initial Analysis**

Over the following months we continued to engage in bi-weekly meetings and connecting online via email, Microsoft Teams, video calling, and discussed methods of eliciting the data. The individual reflective writing tasks evolved, and other forms of reflection were accepted as data (narrative thoughts, poetry, diaries). Sharing these reflections with the wider group was effective in eliciting further reflexivity from all researchers. To develop intersubjectivity, we wanted to understand what themes we were co-constructing, so all reflections and collaborative transcriptions were sent to Emma.

A collaborative approach was taken to coding. While full “double coding” was not used, the NVivo file containing the data initially coded by our principal author was sent to Emma for further analysis (Boyatzis, 1998):

- Initial coding and identification of themes by Nikki, following in-depth reading of the transcript and reflections.
- Further coding by Emma to sort data, with themes and sub-themes ordered hierarchically (Rutter, 2020).
- The themes identified were grouped in mind maps, which also included relevant key quotes indicative of the emotional sentiments expressed by the group Emma then journaled using these mind maps as inspiration, identifying key questions for discussion by the group in the subsequent sessions (Nowell et al., 2017).

All researchers were sent copies of the mind maps (see supplementary materials), so they had the opportunity to reflect on the emergent collaborative data for the next meeting.

### **Stage Three: Combining Collaborative Data**

The researchers were asked to reflect once again on the mind maps and the research questions for the final collaborative session, with each researcher providing a written response to the research questions based on these reflections. This combination was an effort to co-construct knowledge through intersubjectivity, promoting a more in-depth, feminist approach to internalized and externalized challenges. By the end of our data collection, we had four transcripts with a total of 54,151 words which were coded and grouped in relation to our research questions.

We opted to utilize a reflexive thematic analysis which complements our feminist epistemology, as it permitted an inductive analysis, thus being grounded and identifying our positionality as individuals immersed in the data through what we would consider *living the data* (Braun & Clarke, 2012, 2020).

While the intention had been to use NVivo for secondary analysis, our personal computers did not support the software, and without access to university computers which, in normal circumstances, would have been our location and tool of analysis, a traditional approach to data analysis was employed by Ecem:

- Each research question was given its own Word document
- Each transcript was read closely, and initial codes were labeled and put into a Word document and underlined
- Direct quotes from the transcripts were taken to support the codes.
- Each transcript was read through and codes were extracted in relation to the research questions.
- Codes were grouped together to find key themes.
- Once key themes are established the quotes from the different codes were pulled together
- The sections on the themes were ready to be written up.

Fifteen superordinate themes were identified in total (Table 1) and alongside the quotes from the different codes, we were ready to collaboratively write up our responses.

### **Research Questions, Answered**

Applying research questions to our experiences was a useful prompt for reflection, particularly in an effort to co-construct knowledge through intersubjectivity. Through these reflections, and subsequent collaborative sessions, we were able to identify provocations which underpinned our experiences.

RQ1: What do postgraduate researchers identify as the “essence” of their lockdown experience?

The “essence” of our experience is presented in four sections based on overarching themes: Barriers, personal histories; time and growth.

**Table 1.** Table of Themes.

Superordinate Themes	Subthemes
Differences in experience	Social media interactions; Disconnected from academia; Different departmental practices
Emphasized inequalities	Accessing courses; Structural inequalities; Second language
Rethinking the mundane	Old normal becoming “new”; Teaching; Lockdown ease and family
Supervise yourself	Resorting to non-supervisory support; Lack of supervisor contact; Lack of engagement; Team miscommunication
Support yourself	“Good friends”; Solo learner; Changing supervisors; Blocks; Communicating online
Researcher identity	Changing direction of research; Misconception of personality; Using terms we don’t fully understand; Academic writing; waiting
Physical engagement	Local community; Doing things normally; Physical connection
Emotional connection	Connecting as a research group; Support between researchers themselves; Helping others
Reaching out	Social media; Connecting online with new people
Fairness/Justice	Do better to others than done to you; Connection to history; Email
Time	Routines; Timing; Controlling time; Working from home; reflection
Connection	Loneliness; Realizing our connection to friends; Anxiety; Bubble
Personal histories	Childhood traumas; Impact of reflections; Knowing what support you need; General mental health
Growth	Adaptability; Change of essence; Adjusting to lack of access to spaces; Coping mechanisms; Change over the course of the pandemic
Barriers	Anger (secondary emotions); Trapped in one place; New responsibilities; Questioning resources; Social inequalities

## Barriers

“The slow erosion of control”

**Emma:** Control is something I really struggled with at the beginning of lockdown. I think that’s why my mental health was so bad at the start. Because I normally control my day. I do things in the same order all the time . . . and it’s like the slow erosion of control made it so much harder because I couldn’t do any of the things I normally do. Coming to terms with having no control was so hard.

Considerations of control (or lack thereof) were evident throughout our collaborative sessions, as each author grappled with the impact of the pandemic on our individual lives. Although each of us has been uniquely affected, just as

“autoethnography supports a shift from individual to collective agency” (Lapadat, 2017, p. 589), the collaborative process we engaged in also allowed us to identify shared experiences relating to Covid-19 and its influence upon our agentic capabilities. The “erosion of control” experienced, as well as our ultimately fruitless attempts to retain or regain control, constituted a central catalyst of the emotional turmoil expressed by the group:

**Nikki:** Initially I embraced my need for routine, systematically structuring the day in order of importance. I embraced my organizational skills, my lists. It worked well initially but the structure of my day is now so stifling, it’s suffocating.

**Ecem:** The more you try to control, the less stable you actually are.

**Anna:** We’ve all been controlled by ourselves, and by the situation, and by influences that we didn’t really expect to have such a massive impact on our lives, it turns out that we had more control over some things but way less control over things. And we’ve been massively controlled by the state. But we still have to control our own behavior. So, I think control has definitely been an essence of our experience: trying to gain control, trying to give over control, being controlled.

## Personal histories

“Control is not safety”

**Nikki:** I think through the lockdown my childhood traumas, and vulnerabilities have resurfaced. I need to be aware of my emotions to stop physical manifestations of trauma. I need to have space to process what’s happening and reflect on it. We have to acknowledge how our relationship to our bodies is connected with how we carry our (sometimes traumatic) histories. This has been a really challenging experience in relating to our own bodies because we’re restricted in terms of diet, movement, and space.

To try and provide predictability to our upturned lives, we utilized routines and practices which could be overly rigid. When unpacking the challenges we faced in controlling our individual ‘worlds’, it emerged that we were all experiencing various anxieties and it was not control that we desired, but *safety*. This resulted in maladaptive safety-seeking strategies (Hacker et al., 2008), compounded for those of us who had previously used physical activity to promote mental wellness and were now unable to access physical routines:

**Ecem:** My energy usually goes into physical stuff but now that’s been removed. I still haven’t found a way to get that into words. So, if you ask me how I’m feeling, I just can’t label or identify what it is I’m feeling.

This spatial challenge of recognizing the trauma our bodies carry (Van der Kolk, 1994), was compounded when we all lost sense of work-life balance. We were not working from home, but “living at work” (Hayes et al., 2020). This was not only stressful, but it also presented huge challenges in terms of

accessing appropriate space, resources and facilities which were required to connect with our research which we did not feel was always represented in the expectations of our workload:

**Ecem:** I've been feeling the increased pressure to provide more work even though I know staff are saying we can take time off and be impacted by all this. But realistically I still feel we should be doing more.

## Time

“Typing into the void [of time]”

**Nikki:** one of my biggest issues is loneliness. I have no time to be an embodied person within the space I'm inhabiting. I constantly have to put on a mask, or some kind of performance. I can't just exist in space with others.

Coupled with this sense of isolation, the pandemic also led to changes in how we experienced time. Covid-19 restrictions “deprive us of our temporal agency” and led to “enforced presentism,” in which envisaging the future became very challenging (Ringel, 2020). With the future undiscoverable, the past took on increased meaning and time in the present became problematic. A nine to five schedule was no longer achievable or realistic:

**Nikki:** I'll just do 10 minutes while he's on a school break. I'll just do an hour now while he's on his lunch break . . . it just feels like that 14 hours constantly. It's just, just getting it in there where you can, while you can.

**Emma:** I can just fit in, if I decide to study at one o'clock in the morning, whatever time of day, that's fine . . .

We were no longer in control of our experiences of time, days dominated by 5 o'clock news conferences and the practicalities of family responsibilities rather than the structures we had previously chosen for ourselves (Ringel, 2020). The lack of control we had over our experiences of both time and place was highly challenging. Working and living in the same space, with little separation between work and home had an impact on us physically as well as psychologically:

**Anna:** I'm in this room 17 hours a day. Probably more. Every single day the same view and the same seating position. I got a bit of health anxiety because my hand was hurting because I'm holding it in a specific position that's not ergonomically right.

## Growth

“I think everybody's essence of their experience has been negative, with positive flashes or positive peaks”

The uncertainty engendered by Covid-19 has been difficult for the authors to rationalize, and this has constituted a clear barrier to progress in our PhDs. However, undertaking this collaborative autoethnographic research has enabled the group to (re)frame the pandemic as a somewhat generative event. Our chosen methodology of CAE, grounded in feminist epistemology and an ethics of friendship, allowed us to divulge personal and intimate information in a safe and supportive environment.

In choosing to be vulnerable, we opened authentic channels of dialogic communication, which underpinned the changing nature of our relationship from acquaintance to friendship.

Tillmann-Healy (2003) states that in the global West, friendship is not obligatory. It is an endeavor entered into and maintained by a number of drivers, some intrapersonal and some external. This project, which began for the group as a monthly obligation within our work schedule, became a pleasure. This outcome developed in parallel to the shifting of our relationship, which was situated firstly in common interest, then alliance, before moving into emotional affiliation (Weiss, 1998). Because our research and data collection sessions spanned across a year, we were able to “pick up where we left off” in each session, and we found that the formal sessions were no longer “enough” for us, as our bond began to spread into our everyday lives. We got to know each other's personal histories, our problems, our day-to-day challenges, our successes, our failures, our desires and our hopes. The group became more than a space for collaboration, it became a source of comfort.

CAE allowed us to “bring together personal and academic discourses, comparing, contrasting, and critiquing them” (Tillmann-Healy, 2003, p. 736). Through continuous reflexivity we were able to experience cathartic moments, via re-evaluating our individual understandings through a sense of mutuality. The emotional ties created provided support, sympathy and empathy. We felt less isolated. We gained trust in each other, but also regained trust in ourselves at a time when certainties had slipped away in everyday life, which had for the team catalyzed introspection and often, negative self-judgment. As Tillmann-Healy (2003, p. 739) found through her own attempts to “approach research as an endeavour of friendship,” we gained mutual and self-understanding and mutual and self-acceptance. Participation in the project proved to be an “affirming experience” (Heron, 2020, p. 405) during an unprecedentedly challenging time.

However, despite the positives, we ultimately cannot escape our positionality as students whose funding is time-constrained, whose projects have been significantly disrupted by Covid-19 and whose ability to complete our PhDs is now dependent upon variables out of our control. It is important for us as researchers that our account herein doesn't sugarcoat the hardships we and other doctoral researchers have faced as a result of “pandemic precarity”:

**Anna:** When we go back over all this data is it going to be a shit sandwich? Are we gonna have any positive stuff? I don't think any of us can say the essence of our experience has been positive. I think everybody's essence of their experience has been negative with positive flashes or positive peaks.

**Nikki:** Personally, I feel uncomfortable with the idea that someone could read this article and think: “Oh it wasn't so bad.” Fundamentally we need to recognize that it's not enough to say to students stranded, isolated or in crisis: “Oh well if we have some Microsoft Teams chats, they will be okay.”

As previously stated, a key intended outcome of this project was to outline the experiences of PhD students during the

Covid-19 pandemic. In doing so, we helped to provide not just a sense of solidarity with any fellow doctoral students who may be reading this, but also tangible (and citable) evidence which could support them in navigating the systemic injustice faced by many students as a result of the pandemic. This includes insufficient funded extension periods, institutional reluctance to allow suspension of studies, lack of recognition for the wider implications of the pandemic in terms of career prospects, employability, and restricted opportunities. We hope that our account is effective, and also affective (Rawlins, 1992, p. 12), acknowledging the turmoil that we and others continue to traverse:

**Anna:** It's like the R.E.M song "It's the end of the world as we know it"? Well, it's like that. But it's the end of the PhD as we know it, but we feel fine . . . because everything is fucked anyway.

RQ2: How do the researchers feel disconnected (or connected) from their respective communities?

The development of virtual relationships was a key aspect of maintaining connection. The importance of our friendship became more pertinent to and interwoven through our experiences, as we engaged in the process of confession, sharing the most intimate aspects of our lives with one another, and considered whether to share them in this article. We have chosen three themes to explore which we believe are most representative of the challenges we faced in being (dis)connected from our communities. These themes are: Reaching out; differences in experience; emphasized inequalities.

### Reaching Out

"The beach is a magical experience"

**Emma:** I went to the beach and it was like a magical experience. It was like that feeling you get on holiday; get out of the hotel and you got the beach for the first time. I had that experience, but it was Tynemouth. That response is not normal.

When Leaning (2015) observed Mumsnet users, he found that engaging in creating theoretical responses to a zombie apocalypse allowed them to deal with more likely threats in their real lives. Conversely, in our conversations during the lockdown we have repeatedly referenced real and imagined reconnections with people and the physical world as "magical." We have engaged in in-depth fantasies about the world returning to normal and how it would feel both physically and emotionally to reconnect.

**Anna:** I would just think about what it would be like when we get together and how fucking magical it will be to say thank you. Thank you for being there through this.

It was only later that we were to reflect upon the psychologically unhealthy nature of these vivid daydreams about our "fucking magical" imagined futures (Bacon & Charlesford, 2018).

As Emma has remarked about her "not normal" reaction to a quick trip to the beach, seeing it akin to a tropical holiday, our inability to feel connected with our communities had mental health implications for some of us. We felt distanced from the world and in a place where only a return to the past would help us feel better. Like Sleeping Beauty waiting to be woken by a kiss, our early thinking patterns rested on a sense of the world being left in "suspended animation" (Palen, 2020). We waited to be woken by an end to the crisis.

### Differences in Experience

"I have no idea what anyone else [is] doing"

**Anna:** I feel completely disconnected from . . . the university, and from, my department and from, from my supervisor . . . from that human aspect . . .

One of the consequences we have found of the "new normal" produced by Covid-19 restrictions, was a restructuring of our relationships with others. As Powley (2009) has discussed, crises can lead to a "liminal suspension" in which there are non-permanent shifts in "relational structures," leading to reimaginings of relationships:

**Emma:** I definitely feel disconnected. I haven't spoken (about history) to anyone except my supervisor and one friend in 4 months! I have no idea what anyone else is doing. They could be doing anything. We used to talk every day, and now it's not at all.

Being more physically distanced from our communities and support groups has led to increased introspection and (re)consideration of our positionality as not only members of departments, but also in relation to academia as a whole. The often-elitist culture of the academy was also perceived as causing existential unrest, with the so-called "ivory towers" generating "imposter syndrome" (Nikki). For those of us who were questioning their sense of belonging in pre-pandemic times, now began a process of questioning their worth, as the effect of the ambiguity provoked by the crisis translated itself into turning negativity inwards:

**Ecem:** This has made me realize how not academic I am. I already knew I wasn't academic, but coming into this pandemic made me realize. I find it hard to connect and form those relationships with academics. It's amplified that I find it really hard to pitch in, to share my ideas, just because I feel like I don't fit in anyway . . .

However, these self-criticisms were often sparked by the influence of each person's relationship to existing class, gender, race and financial disparities in Higher Education, which Covid-19 undoubtedly magnified.

### Emphasized Inequalities

"It's clear this isn't working"

**Anna:** The pandemic has made me question what's going on in the wider world. Learning about what is getting brushed

under the carpet at universities: people are being allowed to quit; people have been pushed out; people are not getting hired or getting university places because of the color of their skin; because of their socio-economic background. Is academia a place that I want to be? I wanted to be here because I want to fight that from within.

There was a sense in the data of a mutual belief that the machinations of Higher Education don't provide an equitable experience even at the most basic logistical levels, and that this inequality was exacerbated by the crisis. For example, it transpired that despite three of the authors being registered as disabled students, only one was aware of the availability of specialist disabled study facilities at the university library. Discovering disparities in what should have been comparative experiences, served to evidence the illuminating effect of the crisis on inequity:

**Anna:** I've lost months already because of Covid. I've spent loads of time having to sort my new methodology out. I've not done so much reading and writing, because of childcare. And I saw other people who were like, "wow, I can really throw myself into this." It feels a lot less of a level playing field.

This feeling of injustice has been heightened by the uncertainty surrounding the availability of PhD extensions for students. We felt that our projects and researcher identities had been devalued; we became statistics - not individuals. The removal of the security of the future of our studentships and the subsequent impact that might have on our PhD completion, increased pressure on an already anxiously burdened cohort, leading to fear, sadness and resignation.

**Emma:** It's an illusion, isn't it? Higher Education was never level, but now we can all see the differences.

## Writing Up

In this article we co-constructed knowledge of PhD pandemic experience through the development of intersubjectivity. We have employed a feminist-CAE and a two-fold analysis to promote reflexivity and allowed for the co-construction of knowledge regarding the navigation of a global crisis.

By collaborating on the research, we have identified key shared experiences that "re-understand individual experiences through a collective lens" (Torre et al., 2012, p. 174). These "epiphanies" (Denzin, 1989, p. 70) have allowed us to document "multiple levels of the 'problem'" (Torre et al., 2012, p. 180) of Covid-19. In adopting herein Jones's (2005, p. 763) definition of "autoethnography as a radical democratic politics—a politics committed to creating space for dialogue and debate that instigates and shapes social change," we are aiming to record for posterity the experiences of PhD students, in the hope that our relational accounts (Eakin, 1999), will stimulate solidarity, stemming from relatability, recognisability and realism for our readers. In being insiders to the experience of Covid-19 on

postgraduate researchers, we are automatically asserting that this piece possesses epistemic authority (Naples & Gurr, 2014, p. 21), as we are "in a better position to 'see' the world than other people" (Janak, 1997, p. 133).

Our differing pandemic experiences are a product of our histories and intersecting identities; three authors identified as disabled, one has English as an additional language and most identify as working-class. This autoethnographic process allowed us to (re)consider our identities and (re)position ourselves against macro-level societal themes. Covid-19 has (re)framed our identities as existing within and across wider systemic inequality. Nevertheless, we recognize our privileges, and accept that the inequality we face is mild compared to the inequity engendered on a wider scale by the pandemic. It is evident that Black people have been disproportionately affected by the virus (Kirby, 2020), as well actively racist social and political injustice. Disabled people have been treated with a more insidious governmental violence in the form of a "narrative of absence" (Pilson, 2020), in which they are not visible in policy or practice-based recommendations. While young people from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds experienced higher rates of downgrading in the 2020 A-Level scandal (Adams & McIntyre, 2020).

Nevertheless, it is difficult to fully separate our experiences from this worldwide turmoil, as not only has the pandemic had wide-ranging and immediate effects on our personal circumstances and PhDs, but the predicted "scarring effect" (Allen, 2020) of Covid-19 will blight our future labor market chances. Although this project was not initially conceived as a means of "capitalizing" on the pandemic, its future publication may help us to mitigate the impact of the crisis on our employment prospects. In the current academic climate where citations are king, the Covid-induced uncertainty that continues to shroud our PhD projects' futures was a source of anxiety for all.

**Anna:** I honestly think I am about 3 to 4 months behind schedule. God, it would be good to know that we could have an extension . . . [it would] take away the uncertainty.

**Emma:** I haven't even started yet and I'm already going to be months behind . . . I don't think anybody's gonna be in the position they were before.

However, the collaborative research process has brought a semblance of hope that our pandemic experiences will not be in vain:

**Nikki:** I'm hoping this article might help people who have really struggled and not been able to evidence that they needed extra support, that they need time . . . I hope our experiences resonate with others and that this is useful.

This deliberate outreach is particularly important when considering the importance of developing an ethics of care in academia, especially in response to the undue challenges placed on PhD students and researchers by Covid-19. Mirroring a wider-held critique held by PhD students in the UK

(UKRI, 2020), the research team struggled to comprehend the nature of the response of Higher Education to the crisis.

There was a sense that economics was the driving force behind reactive decision-making processes to this “very social disaster” (Connell, 2020, p. 1). We often felt invisible in the eyes of the decision-makers, therefore the ability to connect and collaborate in the creation of this piece was invaluable in supporting our wellbeing during this time of crisis. In embodying an ethics of care throughout the research process, we ensured that our team always had an academia-based source of support, when other “official channels” didn’t seem forthcoming.

It is important, however, to introduce a caveat. It is necessary to reflexively examine how our positionality might impact on the legitimacy of our analysis, by pausing to briefly “deconstruct why one story is told and not another” (Jackson & Mazzei, 2008, p. 300). We accept the limitations of our project, recognizing that “researchers’ experiences both constrain and limit what is knowable, what is representable, and how the story is told” (Jackson & Mazzei, 2008, p. 314). However, in honestly outlining how our experiences may have unwittingly manipulated the trajectory of this narrative, we are enhancing the methodological robustness of this piece as an autoethnographic account by “embracing vulnerability with purpose” (Jones et al., 2013, p. 22). In recounting our situated experiences, we not only provide accounts for others to reflect against, but we allow ourselves to regain some control of our experiences in beginning to cathartically process them. In this sense, as Jones (2016, p. 230) states, our “stories are windows—and doors—to understanding, and the more complex, nuanced, and multiple our stories become, the greater our understandings become.”

We recommend that Higher Education policymakers listen carefully and continuously to the “peri-pandemic” experiences of their students as individuals, as well as cohorts, in reflecting on how to move forward. Some students (including, but not limited to, those who are disabled, Black, women, mature, LGBTQ+, or from lower socio-economic backgrounds) have long been marginalized within the sector, but their experiences have often been hidden or ignored until the pandemic:

**Anna:** Now we’re seeing these inequalities that this pandemic has uncovered, engendered, created. All of these factors, which were always having an impact on certain students, have really come to the fore.

## Conclusion

We expect that this will not be the last CAE piece we write as a research team as the impact of Covid-19 on our experiences as early career researchers will have long-term implications. Thus, allowing not only a long-term cathartic experience but also further development of this feminist-CAE research method to evaluate how it can be applied longitudinally. Furthermore, as already explored, we considered retrospective, and prospective imaginings as “magical,” due to them feeling as impossible as visiting a mystical place would be, as the way

we were able to live our lives before the pandemic became foreign to us. This highlighted the importance of exploring in-the-moment reflections and how we make meaning of social, emotional, political, and physical challenges.

Finally, the aim of feminist research and theory is to induce political and social change (Sandford et al., 2015). Understandably, a single article written by a handful of PhD students that develops a pre-existing method realistically cannot have a measurable political, social, or academic impact. Nevertheless, we hope that it can help current and future students who are reading this, who have come across barriers or difficulties in their research, can relate to and sympathize with our academic, personal, and social struggles, and feel less alone in the academic abyss.

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## Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

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