



Australasian
Association
of Writing
Programs

TEXT SPECIAL ISSUES

Number 59 October 2020

ISSN: 1327-9556 | <https://www.textjournal.com.au/>

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To cite this article: M Saward & S El Sayed 2020 'Behaviours in a peer-only creative writing HDR support group: the experiences of two students of colour', in A Philp, E Jeffery & L McGowan (eds) *Creating communities: Collaboration in creative writing and research*, TEXT Special Issue Number 59, *TEXT: Journal of writing and writing courses* 24, 2 (October): <http://www.textjournal.com.au/speciss/issue59/Saward&ElSayed.pdf>

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Behaviours in a peer-only creative writing HDR support group: the experiences of two students of colour

Abstract:

The experience of the creative writing higher degree research student is unique. The practice-led methodology many candidates apply to their research differs significantly to that of other disciplines, even those arts disciplines where practice is the focus of the research. Student life is further complicated by the need not only to be working towards research publication, but creative publication too. In some instances, feelings of isolation can contribute to HDR students failing to complete their studies. For women of colour, the need for counterspaces in the academy is also apparent. This reflective paper examines and discusses how a peer-only, diverse, horizontalised group facilitates the development of a sense of belonging and critical ‘disappearing’ relational behaviours that sit outside formal, academic supervisory interaction. Of particular importance in this reflection comes from the perspective of two students of colour. Through conversation with these two current members of the group, this paper discusses the behaviours and outcomes of peer-only support groups for HDR students in creative writing. It examines why HDR students of colour may prefer to seek support outside of the predominantly white formal structures that characterise the academy in Australia, and how such groups could potentially create effective counterspaces for students of colour.

Biographical notes:

Melanie Saward is a PhD candidate at the Queensland University of Technology (QUT) and a proud descendant of the Wakka Wakka and Bigambul peoples. She holds a Master of Fine Arts (Research), a Bachelor of Fine Arts in Creative Writing (QUT), and a Graduate Certificate in Writing, Editing, and Publishing from The University of Queensland (UQ). She works at QUT’s Carumba Institute. Her writing has appeared in *Kill Your Darlings*, *Overland*, and *Verity La* and her manuscripts have been shortlisted for the 2019 Harlequin First Nations Fellowship and the 2018 Unpublished Indigenous Writer -David Unaipon Award.

Sara El Sayed is a Master of Fine Arts (Research) student at the Queensland University of Technology (QUT). She holds a Bachelor of Fine Arts (Creative and Professional Writing) and a Bachelor of Business (Economics) from QUT. Her work is featured in the anthologies *Growing Up African in Australia* and *Arab-Australian-Other*. She has written for *frankie*, *Overland*, *The Lifted Brow*, *Independent Education* and *Bedrock*. She was shortlisted for the 2019 Richell Prize for emerging writers. Her debut memoir will be published by Black Inc. in 2021.

Keywords:

Peer-to-peer collaboration – peer support – HDR peer support – women of colour in academia
– relational behaviours

Introduction

The experience of the creative writing higher degree research (HDR) student is unique. The practice-led methodology many of these students are applying to their research differs significantly to that of other disciplines, even those arts disciplines where practice is the focus of the research. Student life is further complicated by the need not only to be working towards research publication, but creative publication too. There are few who understand the unique pressures of balancing research and practice, alongside teaching and other career commitments. In some instances, feelings of isolation contribute to HDR students failing to complete their degrees, which sees supervisors looking for innovative forms of learning and teaching pedagogy – such as peer learning groups – as a way of supporting these students. This paper examines and discusses the advantages of peer-only, diverse horizontalised groups as a tool to provide important networks of support in which students are free to share, problem-solve, and support outside of the more formal, academic supervisory relationships. For the authors of this paper, one of the most valuable aspects of belonging to an HDR creative writing group comes from the fact that in this space, neither one is the only person of colour.

Methodology

Through conversation between two current members of this group, this paper discusses the value of peer-only support groups for HDR students in creative writing and examines why HDR students of colour may prefer to seek support outside of the predominantly white formal structures characteristic of the academy. Questions we consider during this discussion are: how do Indigenous and non-Indigenous women of colour experience a peer-only setting? How do their interactions with their peers in this space differ from the formal frameworks they participate in outside the group? And what value do these interactions bring to their academic lives.

Literature review

HDR students come to research with their own unique set of experiences and expectations. What is evident for HDR students across different faculties and disciplines, however, is a sense of isolation. The pedagogical approach to training researchers ‘often overlooks the dramatic emotions candidates experience during their research degree’ (Batty et al 2020: 357). Research is not carried out in cohorts of students with whom they can expect to share classes; even when students share office spaces or common rooms, there is often not much communication

between them. For students of disciplines such as creative writing, feelings of isolation are heightened as collaborative research is less common for them than it is for their counterparts in disciplines such as the experimental sciences (Fisher 2006: 41), and very few people outside the discipline understand the unique challenges of completing practice-led research while working to maintain a creative practice that is separate from the research. Creative writing candidates sometimes struggle to step away from their practice in order to ‘up-skill in research’ (Batty et al 2020: 359) and can struggle ‘with the shift in gear from intuitive making/doing to research-based planning, doing/making and reflection (Carter 2004 in Batty et al 2020: 359). ‘Isolation,’ Fisher says, ‘can be the factor most likely to lead to long completion times, or even failure to complete’ (2006: 42). The correlation between these feelings of isolation and students’ failing to complete their research, along with the pressure placed on supervisors to improve their supervisory practices (Pearson & Brew 2010: 136), leads them to investigate how different forms of learning and teaching, such as peer learning, ‘might be a productive frame through which to view research education’ (Boud & Lee 2005: 501). Wider literature reinforces the notion that isolation during HDR candidature can detrimentally affect student well-being and learning, and that peer support groups help students to ‘survive’ isolation (Brown 2018; Burford 2014; Conrad 2012; Pyhalton et al 2009; Satchwell et al 2015).

Peer support groups in which a group of students ‘who are going through the same experience, even if their research projects have little in common...can make all the difference in ameliorating the effects’ of isolation (Fisher 2006: 42). Encouraging students is seen as a relevant pedagogical framework for HDR studies, ‘given that many candidates aspire to undertake academic or research roles and will thus be working in professional communities that are influenced and shaped by collaborations with peers’ (Batty & Sinclair 2014: 336). In supervisor-run groups, a member of academic staff is usually responsible for organising timetables and agendas, booking rooms, providing catering, and moderating the meetings, and these groups often follow structured agendas, with students sharing work such as presenting conference papers, talking about individual journeys, holding discussion groups, presenting their individual research findings, and sharing knowledge about ‘practical matters’ (Stracke 2010: 6). Groups run specifically for creative writing students are additionally concerned with sharing and receiving feedback on their creative work (Batty & Sinclair 2014).

Emotional support is also an important aspect of these groups; which can arguably remedy feelings of isolation. Fisher says that ‘[t]he support group can be very helpful in offering a place where you can take your concerns, doubts, frustrations, and speculations that may not be appropriate to take into a supervision session’ (2006: 43), thus allowing students to make better use of their supervisory meetings. However, there is evidence that when a supervisor facilitates and moderates peer learning, student behaviour is affected. A subject in Boud and Lee’s (2005: 507) study spoke of her peers as a group with whom she could be herself without the need to perform as an aspiring academic. However, when students are responsible for facilitating their own peer support without supervisor involvement, ‘barriers of power and difference are assumed to be reduced...In these circumstances, more open communication can therefore occur, allowing for fuller engagement and potentially greater opportunities for learning as distinct from teaching’ (513). Perhaps the value of supervisor-led groups is that many of them

operate as continuations of learning spaces, concerned with developing academic and career-based skills such as peer reviewing, presenting and editing, whereas peer-only groups are simply – but equally as importantly – provide the emotional support that can only come from a more distributed and horizontal conception of peer-learning pedagogy. The need to connect more with students rather than with additional technical academic training may be symptomatic of the support mechanisms, such as writing and editing support, that already saturate formal interactions within the discipline of creative writing.

While skills such as writing and editing are taught in a variety of workshops at the university, what is not often taught is what Fletcher (1995: 448) calls ‘disappearing’ relational behaviours. Fletcher’s work, using a feminist post-structuralist perspective, emphasises relational behaviour as being inherent in the under-recognised contributions of women in the workplace. Devenish et al (2009) extend this argument by linking such behaviours to a peer-only study group with no academic supervisor presence, and advocate that such behaviours should be better recognised by institutions for their contribution to academic success. The first of Fletcher’s relational behaviours explored by Devenish et al (2009) is *shouldering*, which refers to ‘taking on activities other than those required by the job and using informal channels to create relational bridges’ (65). The second is *mutual empowering*, which occurs when ‘information is modified to the needs of the learner, potential rifts and explosive situations are dealt with before they develop and barriers are eliminated by anticipating another’s needs’ (65). The third is *achieving*, which occurs when members of the group ‘realise their own goals and may include capacities such as an ability to understand emotional situations and then have others respond appropriately to requests for help’ (65). The fourth behaviour is *creating team*, which involves ‘establishing an environment of trust, cooperation and collective achievement’ (66).

While such relational behaviours are argued to be gendered, the experiences of women of colour in the academy, particularly in settler-colonial states, are a compounded product of gender as well as their positionality in relation to the dominant white culture. O’Sullivan echoes the work of Moreton-Robinson (2015) and Bielefeld (2016) when noting that externally imposed ideas of feminism and equality ‘cannot tidily apply to First Nations’ Peoples or women of colour in the same way as they do for women who experience a power relationship otherwise aligned to the dominant, colonial culture’ (2019: 117). As Gopalkrishnan writes, the under-representation of women of colour in the academy ‘is reflective of the powerful and constitutive impact of discourses of race and difference in Australian society’ (2006: xiv). Kobayashi reiterates that ‘the university has long been, and remains, a zone of white privilege’ and ‘Androcentric and Eurocentric values, supported by the power of “old white boys” networks, have kept women of colour out of the academy very effectively’ (2009: 60). Students of colour in Canadian universities in Henry and Tator’s case were ‘very aware of context’ and had been in situations where they did not ‘feel comfortable in raising concerns about racism, sometimes due to insensitivity of some faculty members and students from the dominant group towards them’ (2009: 48). LaFlamme (2003, qtd. In Henry & Tator 2009: 49) writes that as a graduate student in English literature at a Canadian university, she experienced the ‘mind-numbing effects of Eurocentrism in the curriculum, which rarely included the literature of

racialized people' as well as hostility from fellow students for speaking up about racism and colonialism. Bhopal's (2016) study showed that Black and ethnic minority academics in the US and UK reported experiencing racism, marginalisation and exclusion; many of these academics emphasised the importance of support networks between one another, and how they used them to overcome such issues. The Black and ethnic minority academic support networks enabled them 'to gain emotional, academic and, for some, instrumental forms of support when they needed it' (155). The women of colour in Curtis-Boles study 'made a strong connection between thriving and surviving in academia and being in and providing supportive and affirming relationships'; their connections were 'a source of sustenance and affirmation' and described as 'refuge, safe places, and counterspaces' (2014: 182). What remains an area of limited research, however, is the effects of peer-only support groups for students who are women of colour in Australia. While negative experiences of women of colour in the academy have proven to be overtly racialised (i.e. racism, lack of representation in leadership, and euro-centric curriculum), how these experiences, if at all, prompt the need for peer-only groups for student women of colour remains relatively unexplored.

Origin of group and university context

At the Queensland University of Technology (QUT), the School of Creative Practice is home to many creative disciplines such as visual arts, theatre, dance, drama and creative writing. The School's former HDR coordinator (2017-2020) facilitated a student group which included aspects of peer feedback and support. Though this group was a collegial and supportive environment, a creative writing PhD student continued to feel isolated by the HDR experience. She 'wanted to connect with students who were going through the same artistic, research, and employment experiences' (personal email correspondence 2020).

The student leader consulted with the HDR coordinator and began a group specifically for creative writing HDR students. Her aim was to provide a place of peer support where students could share experiences and advice in terms of publishing, research, teaching, and so on (personal email correspondence 2020). The group first met in June 2018 and initially, meetings were held monthly and were informally structured. Each student in attendance would give an update on their research and writing and they would have an opportunity to discuss their progress, raise any challenges, and celebrate any highlights. In 2019, the meetings transitioned to fortnightly to accommodate an alternating series of more formal meetings in which an academic attended (either in person or via an online platform such as Zoom) to share research and career advice, particularly in terms of research and career development.

There are currently five members of the group, similar to Fisher's model of a peer support group of 'three to five candidates who meet regularly' (2006). Within this small group there are representatives from different areas within the discipline, different degree types (i.e. Masters by Research and PhDs), and different stages of research. Some students are researching full-time and receiving scholarships, others part-time and receiving no financial support from the university. Most members are employed as sessional academics, and all members are

engaged in the work of being a writer (i.e. actively writing and producing creative work for publication). There is some crossover in terms of supervisors, methodologies and genres, but in general, the group's commonality lies only within discipline and practice. Though members of this small group represent different ages, genders and have different post-study goals, one of the most significant aspects of the group for the authors of this paper is that despite other areas of diversity, we are two of three non-white members of the group, and we both have all-white male supervisory teams.

The group is still run by the PhD student leader who originated it. This student organises meetings, liaises with any guest speakers and books rooms. The group is entirely student run and attended. It receives no university, faculty, or school funding and – except for the occasional guest speaker – is not attended by full-time academic staff. While the group is concerned with matters of post-study employment and building academic careers, it is also a place of support and follows a largely unstructured order of proceedings. The type of support provided shifts based on the needs or the time of semester. For example, at the beginning of semester there is often extensive discussion on who has received sessional teaching contracts, or which supervisors may still be seeking tutors. Towards the end of semester, discussion shifts to balancing teaching commitments with research and practice. The group also provides milestone and teaching support, shares information about resources including workshops and training as well as library resources, advice on managing difficult interactions, shares publication opportunities, and – perhaps most significantly for two competitive industries – shares and celebrates each other's successes. Though the group is small, it is consistently attended by all or most members, which speaks to the immense value of the meetings.

For the two authors of this paper however, one of the most valuable aspects of this group comes from the fact that in this space, neither one of us is the only person of colour in the room. Though our experiences as a First Nations woman and an Egyptian woman are distinct in themselves, we feel that the corpus of literature on academic peer-only groups tends to erase the effects of race when it comes to aversions to formal university support group offerings.

Through conversation the authors as two current members of this group, this paper discusses the value of entirely peer-only support groups for HDR students in creative writing and examines why HDR students of colour may prefer to seek support outside of the predominantly white formal structures of the academy.

Discussion and observations of the HDR writing group

In this discussion we consider how research students who are women of colour experience peer-only groups. Our group is not recognised as formal 'research training' (Stracke 2010: 7), but serves a different purpose; it involves a number of relational or 'disappearing' behaviours (Fletcher 1995: 448). Batty and Sinclair note that their creative writing student group members 'originate from as many different countries...as they do sub-disciplines within the discipline of creative writing' (2014: 339). This is seen as contributing to the diversity in dialogue, but

we wish to further interrogate this point, and analyse how a formula that excludes vertical supervision in favour of purely horizontal relationships affects the dynamic of a peer-only group of creative writers, from the perspective of two members of colour. This discussion is conducted using a multi-voiced approach, as was done by Maher et al (2008), to capture the shared, as well as varying, experiences of the HDR students in this peer group. Including a group perspective in this reflection has allowed us to engage in reflexive practice and consider our positions in relation to our peers as well as the wider academy and literature. However, our experiences are and can be markedly different from each other. In exploring the perspectives of Indigenous and non-Indigenous women of colour, we have chosen to present our individual voices distinctly as well.

Where we started

Melanie: I joined in 2018, soon after HDR students in creative writing separated from the larger interdisciplinary group. I was a part-time Master of Fine Arts HDR student and at the time of joining, I was 18 months into the three-year degree. I split my time between research and concurrent graduate certificate coursework, sessional teaching, and a part-time job outside the university. Though I came to HDR studies from full-time work, I was surprised at how isolating research was in comparison to my undergraduate degree.

Sara: I joined the group in early 2019. I had previously been working full-time outside of the academy and studying part-time. My interactions with the academic community at the university were, therefore, confined to meetings with my supervisors. I had no contact with other HDR students. I had no need for further guidance from academic staff outside of my supervisory team but was missing lateral connection. While many other groups provide technical support or writing resources, ours has become a social support system dependent on shared experience.

Both: Our shared experience is that we both received what we needed in terms of research guidance from their supervisors, but both sought lateral connection with students with whom we shared more than simply belonging to the same faculty.

Melanie: Soon after enrolling, the university discontinued an optional post-graduate creative writing workshop which effectively ended the opportunity for writing HDRs to form a cohort of peers. While HDRs do undertake some mandatory coursework, these units are interdisciplinary and at the time of my enrolment, all my peers in these courses were researching full time, with many of them on scholarships. Because their disciplines, methodologies, and time and financial pressures differed so significantly to mine, this coursework only served to exacerbate the isolation I was feeling. The creative writing peer support group was populated by students with whom I shared a similar working style and similar academic pressures, and was a welcome reprieve from this isolation.

Both: The establishment and maintenance of the group by students reflects the relational behaviour of *shouldering* (Devenish et al. 2009; Fletcher 1995), as it is not considered to be

part of or contribute to formal research training. The facilitator is a fellow HDR student, who performs parts of the supervisor's role as in Batty and Sinclair's (2014) case study: they book a regular room and ensure members know the date and time of the meetings. However, there is no allocated budget for catering, and all food provided is at the personal expense of members – most often the student facilitator. It is devoid of the structured activities that Stracke (2010) advocates for, and the peer-review process illustrated in Batty and Sinclair (2014). Our discussions are rarely centred around written content or critique, and though some members have offered to act as critiquing partners or beta readers any critiquing that has occurred happens outside of the group. This suggests that, in our case, we do not seek further writing support and critique in a group setting. As creative writing students, the nature of our study has been centred around writing and critique. This, combined with the critique we receive from our supervisors and the writing support we may receive from other formal writing workshops provided by the university, has created a natural aversion to the structured activity of writing and critiquing.

Talking across, not up

Sara: I believe our group works well without a supervisor present. In our group, there is no preparation for the meetings. There are no required readings. There are no milestones to reach. There is a shared understanding of the need to connect, on an informal level, through sharing stories of the realities of our study and work. When a senior member of academic staff is in the room, the conversation changes, consciously or not.

Melanie: Though I enjoy being critiqued and edited and would have no problem if we were to incorporate peer feedback into our group in the future, there is something nice about simply being able to take a slight step away from work without the need to prepare or the pressure to perform. It creates mental space to decompress without fully disconnecting from work and I often find I am more productive after a group meeting. However, in the more formal meetings where a member of academic staff attends, I feel a shift in my own behaviour, and though it is not expected, I do prepare for those meetings by writing lists of questions. Though the meetings with academic staff are run with the intent to share experiences with us, I feel as though I am always looking for opportunities to engage and present myself as a trainee academic myself.

Both: As noted in Boud and Lee, the verticalised structure of the supervisor-to-student relationship is characterised by 'highly determined relations of pedagogical authority' (2005: 509). This impacts what students feel they can discuss in the absence of non-peers, with one student in the study stating: 'we can just say the things that you just, like I don't feel constrained in that group in terms of being careful about what I say' (508). There is a greater desire to demonstrate success rather than talk through failure in the presence of those engaged in verticalised relationships with us. Boud and Lee's interview with another student highlighted this, noting that with her peer group 'she could be more open and not perform as an aspiring academic' (507) and Melanie's experience is similar. With non-peers present, there is a greater onus to 'perform' rather than express without constraint. In this context, we are particularly

interested in exploring how whiteness in the academy effects aversions from a verticalised influence in peer groups that include women of colour.

Sara: While I've received a lot of support during my studies from my supervisors, the fact remains that they are both white men. If I encounter an issue, I feel comfortable bringing it up with them, based on the supervisory relationships we've built, but I don't necessarily feel we have a great deal of shared experience. The peer group is the only interaction I have at university with other women of colour. I feel there is a greater sense of understanding and solidarity that comes with simply speaking with and being around other non-white people. Practically, also, Melanie and I have been contracted by the same publications – one in particular that publishes work by people of colour. We've been able to connect through that shared experience. We have acted as sounding boards and trouble shooters for each other. For me, this has reinforced my confidence in my professionalism, developed my professional judgement, and allowed me a greater ability to traverse the volatile landscape of freelance creative writing as an emerging writer. The group also gives us the opportunity to share resources and learnings relating to the units we are teaching. As an aspiring academic, it is comforting to know that there are colleagues who have experienced the same environments. Whether or not there is an immediate solution apparent to problems that arise, the act of sharing experience validates my experience.

Melanie: My experience is a little different. Though I too have white male supervisors, I also can engage in student spaces at the university which exist specifically for Indigenous HDRs, and I am an employee in the area. Here, I not only interact with other Indigenous students in a variety of settings, but I am mentored by and work with Indigenous academics. I am, at the time of writing, the only Indigenous creative writing HDR student at our university, so the creative writing group provides a slightly different kind of value. I need the group because of our shared similarity: we are all working in the same discipline. In the creative writing space, I do not have to contextualise my methodology, the way I might in a mixed-faculty space. The students in the creative writing group know how I am working, who my supervisors are, and we even teach into many of the same subjects. This is not to diminish the value of the support I receive in the Indigenous space, but for me there are different needs met by each group. This is also not to diminish the value of having another woman of colour with whom to connect in the creative writing space. There are challenges we face as academics in training, sessional teachers, and professional writers who are also women of colour that others in the group cannot support us through, no matter the level of empathy they might have. The example provided by Sara – our shared experience writing for a publisher who publishes writers of colour – is an important distinction here. There is so much value to be gleaned from having the space to share and discuss with someone who in some way shares our experience.

Both: The idea of a 'refuge' (Curtis-Boles 2014: 182) from dominant white spaces does not apply neatly to Melanie's university experience as a whole, as it does for Sara's. There is commonality, however, in the position we share as creative writing students who are women of colour. In this space, we demonstrate what Fletcher described as *mutual empowering* (1995: 449). We provide each other with advice that is not necessarily provided by

employers/supervisors/publishers on how to approach potentially difficult situations as students, tutors and creative writers.

Part-time study and isolation

Sara: As a part-time student, who spends little time on campus, with no dedicated office space provided on campus, I not only experience emotional isolation and loneliness, but physical as well. I was not seeking extra-curricular social interaction, like a club might provide, but seeking engaged discussions of creative work, careers, wins, and grievances with people who were in similar circumstances.

Melanie: For most of my master's degree, I was also part-time and had no dedicated office space on campus, and I had the added challenge of also maintaining a busy professional role working outside of the university. The isolation was intense; even when I was completing my mandatory coursework, there were no other HDR students who shared my unique set of experiences. These feelings were so serious that during the first twelve months of the degree, I came very close to withdrawing. But it was joining the HDR group in my second year and engaging with Indigenous support mechanisms at the university which kept me enrolled. Though I still have not encountered another student who shares these exact same pressures with me, the HDR group has provided a space where I have been able to form an important sense of belonging at the university and in my degree.

Both: Feelings of isolation and loneliness were evident in Boud and Lee's (2005) interviews with a full-time student, who was in the same physical environment as other students on a day-to-day basis. For part-time students in our groups, this feeling was exacerbated. We found, as Fisher argued, that meeting with peers who 'are going through the same experience' (2006: 42) helped to ameliorate the effects of isolation and provided a space for us to discuss our 'concerns, doubts, frustrations, and speculations' (42). However, our discussions are not necessarily related to our research or supervision, contrary to Fisher's case (43). The group discusses a myriad of subjects relating to our study and work. We see our group as a counterspace (Curtis-Boles 2014: 182), as it sits apart from formally recognised and institutionalised research training and development practices.

Collective achievement and success

Sara: When I first began attending this group, I didn't know whether I wanted to pursue an academic career. My fellow members have helped give perspective by sharing their own goals. We also share our wins with each other, which is highly validating as we understand the work and effort that goes into our ambitions – markedly more than friends or family who are outside the discipline of creative writing and academia.

Both: The relational behaviour of *achieving* (Fletcher 1995: 449) is apparent here as we often discuss our goals, particularly goals we are still developing.

Sara: In late 2019 when I successfully acquired my first book contract, the group's excitement for my success and encouragement was extremely validating. While I gained affirmation and encouragement from my supervisory team, the reaction I got from my peer group was markedly different. I received a mix of advice as well as interest in the process of gaining the contract. I was met with unbridled enthusiasm and support.

Melanie: The group has always been a place of commiseration and celebration, but never jealousy. When Sara first shared her news, it felt as exciting as if I'd received the contract myself! And members of the group have been just as enthusiastic when any of us have had any publishing, career, or academic success, no matter how big or small those achievements are. There is something very affirming in being a part of a group where we all understand exactly how hard won each little win is.

Both: The behaviour of *creating team* (Fletcher 1995: 450) is apparent in our group, as we have developed enough trust to enact the 'cone of silence' when sharing news that may at the time be embargoed. This contributes to our ability to celebrate each other's successes.

Melanie: There is something quite special about being invited into that cone of silence as a group member. We are not only being trusted with the news but invited into the early celebration of achievement. This perhaps speaks to the excitement I felt at Sara's book contract, and that others have expressed when sharing other news. It should be noted too, that the group is not unproductive: individually, we have a good track record of both creative and academic publications, as well conference presentations. Members of have placed highly in – and even won – esteemed Australian literary prizes (such as Dr Emily O'Grady who won the *Australian/Vogel's Literary Award* in 2018, and Dr Ella Jeffery who won the *Puncher & Wattmann prize* in 2019). Many of us enjoy relatively secure sessional academic employment, and since the group began in 2018, three members (including me) have graduated.

Both: Groups such as ours may be dismissed because we do not come together with an agenda or a set of learning outcomes, and we do not have documented milestones to reach. We may be perceived as less valid simply because we provide each other with an emotive space rather than as a scholarly one. However, Tinto says that in order for students to persist to completion, they must 'come to see themselves as a member of a community of other students, academics, and professional staff – in other words, that they matter and belong' (2017: 3). Though Tinto's work largely focuses on undergraduate student outcomes, the same is true of HDRs. To that end, we argue that the sense of belonging, coupled with the relational behaviours we display, present a valid and productive formula that directly contributes to our success in academia and beyond. Members have and will continue working collaboratively on research projects and papers, but this is secondary to the group's purpose of providing horizontal support which creates a strong sense of belonging and encourages relational behaviours. While members of the group understand we are in the ideal position to collaborate to produce outputs while we are completing our research training, there is a concern that by turning the space from a place of informality into a place of aims and objectives, we might disrupt the dynamic that works for this group. While all group members are eager to produce work and research together, we see

our main form of collaboration being to work together to provide the space each member needs to reach their own unique goals for their research studies and beyond.

Discussion and conclusion

While Fisher argues that ‘it is less important to form a group with candidates from the same discipline area’ (2006: 44) the group’s success relies heavily on our shared experience in the discipline, in the industry, and for some, as women of colour. We have found that, in our case, a peer group that exclusively involves horizontal relationships allows for formally undervalued relational behaviours to be embraced. From the perspective of two women of colour, the group alleviates the compounding effects of all-white vertical supervisory interactions and creates counterpaces in which to share our experiences. That such networks are considered influential in academic success of women of colour brings into question why they sit outside the formal frameworks of research and research training. Why is it that a practice that prioritises relational behaviours and senses of belonging is not integrated into formal structures with the same enthusiasm as, for example, technical writing workshops? Or, why is it that a group that sits outside of the formal structure is appealing to us? In future research, we hope to come closer to answering these questions by expanding beyond the reflective structure of this paper to measurable qualitative and quantitative studies which survey each member to understand the role the group plays in individual HDR studies. Expanding the scope to survey groups which are facilitated by staff members and/or operate with different goals to compare student attitudes could also provide rich territory to explore. There is also scope to expand to quantitative analysis which examines completion rates and graduate employment rates after being part of HDR support groups. There is also potential for deeper analysis of the characteristics that distinguish the experiences of Indigenous women as opposed to non-Indigenous women of colour. Though HDR pedagogy often overlooks the emotional and social needs of research candidates, the lack of discipline-specific learning, the pressure to perform as future academics, and the predominance of white formalised learning structures can leave students – particularly those who identify as people of colour – feeling isolated. Discipline-specific HDR groups provide a valuable space for candidates to share and support each other through the experience of research training. Placing more emphasis on horizontalised support may have an effect on student completion rates, satisfaction and graduate outcomes, and the value of these groups should not be overlooked.

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