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Abstract

Purpose: We aim to think critically about collaborative working through the practical application of an ethics of care approach. We address the following research questions: *How can we embed an ethics of care into academic collaboration? What are the benefits and challenges of this kind of collaborative approach?* Our contextual focus also incorporates a collective sensemaking of academic identities over the course of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Design/methodology/approach: We focus on the activities of the 'Consumer Research with Impact for Society' (CRIS) Collective at and around the 2021 Academy of Marketing conference. We draw on the insights and labour of the group in terms of individual and collaborative reflexivity, workshops, and the development of a collaborative poem.

Findings: First, we present our 'web of words' as our adopted approach to collaborative writing. Second, we consider the broader takeaways that have emerged from our collaboration in relation to blurring of boundaries, care in collaboration and transformations.

Originality: The overarching contribution of our paper is to introduce an Ethics of Collective Academic Care. We discuss three further contributions that emerged as central in its operationalization: arts-based research, tensions and conflicts, and structural issues. Our application of the 'web of words' approach also offers a template for an alternative means of engaging with, and representing, those involved in our research.

This is a peer-reviewed, accepted author manuscript of the following article: CRIS Collective, Banister, E., Hamilton, K., Piacentini, M., Abboud, L., Allison, S., Bruce, H., Hein, W., Higgins, L., Hoyland, C., Nairn, A., Parry, S., & Tonner, A. (Accepted/In press). Let there be a "We": introducing an ethics of collective academic care. European Journal of Marketing.

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Let there be a "We": Introducing an Ethics of Collective Academic Care

Introduction

Collaboration is an important feature of contemporary academic work. In this paper, we contribute to marketing scholarship through the practical application of an ethics of care approach to collaborative working. We explore what an ethics of care approach can mean, extending our thinking to consider the ways that we conduct ourselves in professional contexts and work collaboratively with others. To do this, our paper focuses on the activities of the 'Consumer Research with Impact for Society' (CRIS) special interest group of the Academy of Marketing (AoM). As part of the 2021 AoM conference, twelve CRIS researchers came together to explore their experiences and challenges during the Covid-19 pandemic. This paper draws on the insights and labour of the group, hereafter the CRIS Collective, involving pre-workshop activities, the workshop itself, and post-workshop activities.

Throughout we paid particular attention to the context in which this collaborative work was undertaken. The workshop coincided with the end of a challenging and unprecedented academic year, amidst a global pandemic when many academic researchers were living their own experiences of what this meant for their personal and academic identities. There is wide acknowledgement that the Covid-19 pandemic has had a devastating effect on peoples' lives (WHO, 2020). As well as individual impacts common to populations worldwide (including health, grief, loneliness, anxiety, job losses and precarity, and financial uncertainties), there are impacts specific to members of the academic community. Normal expectations of academia were unsettled by the switch to online teaching, disruptions to

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academic research (including PhD) projects, additional workload, and feelings of isolation (Leal Filho *et al.,* 2021).

Alongside the context of Covid-19, our work dovetails with academic discussions regarding the meanings and practices of 'care', with a particular concern to engage with the broader idea of carelessness in academic life. This is effectively depicted by Lynch (2010, p. 59) who refers to the "moral status" of carelessness whereby the "pursuit of unbridled self-interest (rationalized in terms of a 'career') has not only been normalized, it has status and legitimacy." We were inspired by Prothero's (2017) detailed account of a less-than-caring formal response to her own health condition within her academic workplace as an example of academics' lived experiences of this context of carelessness. The CRIS workshop experience facilitated our thinking critically about the value of care in academic life and specifically in collaborative working. In this paper, we address the following research questions: *How can we embed an ethics of care into academic collaboration? What are the benefits and challenges of this kind of collaborative approach?* Through a collective reflexivity we consider not only the challenges but also the opportunities for change that can be unearthed by adopting an ethics of care approach. When considering explicitly incorporating care into collaborative academic work, we focus our attention on two main areas: collaborative research and writing, and care in collaboration. The next section reviews relevant literature in these areas.

Literature overview

Collaborative research and writing

New practices for collaborative research within academia are called for (Corbera *et al.*, 2020) and much is written about why academics collaborate (e.g. Lewis *et al.,* 2012), but the explicit benefits of research collaboration tend to be assumed rather than empirically investigated (Lee and Bozeman, 2005). For example, while it is widely agreed that

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interdisciplinary teams are better equipped to tackle complex social problems (Bergland, 2018), and thus more likely to create higher impact (Arnold *et al.,* 2021), the intricacies of how to capitalise on interdisciplinary collaborations are still to be determined. However, it is generally agreed that collective research enables individuals to expand their networks, embrace new perspectives, and learn about alternative methods. Writing in groups can also lead to increased productivity of the group members, resulting in greater numbers of research outputs, which feeds the metrics in many universities, where staff are evaluated based on the numbers of quality papers produced (Gruber, 2014).

However, there are several challenges associated with collaborative writing. Indeed, not all collaborations work, and some may even undermine productivity (Lee and Bozeman, 2005). First, there is the challenge associated with differing individual agendas and the impact of individual research identities (Oberg, 2016) which are fluid in nature. Marketing scholars in research intensive institutions are typically judged primarily by their personal research output, and their research identity and reputation often equates to their 'self-brand' (Shepherd, 2005). Institutional expectations around research productivity (reflected in the UK's Research Excellence Framework [REF] and Excellence in Research for Australia [ERA]) can conspire against collaborative research work. Individuals are expected to have clear research identities, demonstrated through their research outputs, funding activity and research leadership. Promotion criteria can also deter individual researchers from working with others, if they perceive that their contribution will be undervalued. This can occur in several ways, for instance, if they are not first author on a paper or Principal Investigator on a grant (Klein and Kresinski, 2017). Even highly successful collaborations have identified barriers that hinder collaborative writing, including different writing styles, varying levels of participation and unmet deadlines (Davis, Ozanne and Hill, 2016).

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Second, there is a potential challenge linked to hierarchy, roles and conflicts of interest (Bozeman *et al.,* 2013), which could produce a more career-oriented form of collaboration. For example, Macfarlane (2017) refers to 'collaboration-as-cronyism' which reinforces the power of established networks, and 'collaboration-as-parasitism' which is the exploitation of junior academics by senior academics. Kovacs (2017, p. 53) discusses the idea of the economy of authorship whereby the "logics of intense competition" rampant in academia result in undemocratic abuses of power as a form of symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1990). Such abuse is most often enacted by dominant, senior academics and exemplified through practices of honorary authorship and publication cartels (Khalifa, 2022). Kovacs (2017) suggests that change can only come through "institutional mechanisms" (2017, p. 51) and calls for academia to instantiate "democratic way[s]" (2017, p. 59) of collaboration.

Identifying ways to prioritise and reward the collective researcher over the individual researcher and fostering collective support is important for most academics' wellbeing (Hurd and Singh, 2020). By exploring different and new ways of productive collaborative working, we are concerned with adding value in terms of research outputs, but importantly, also in terms of enhancing academic wellbeing. Such an approach could be said to be partially utilised by the Transformative Consumer Research (TCR) movement in the shape of dialogical conferences, where academics work in small groups to study relevant and pressing problems for consumers and society (Ozanne, 2011). At these conferences, conversations amongst participants are prioritised as "a new model for change-focused scholarship" (Davis *et al.,* 2016, p. 160). However, while such a model incorporates "gratitude, kindness, and mutual support" (Davis *et al.,* 2016, p. 160), this is framed as important for the nature of the scholarship and the ambitious task at hand. While care for broader social problems is clearly embedded within TCR activities, our approach seeks to evolve academic praxis to further value ways of working that enhance the wellbeing and care of researchers. In the following

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section we explore the potential for embedding care more prominently in academic collaborations.

Care in collaboration

It is increasingly recognised that for there to be solid collaboration within academia, there needs to be a more 'caring environment' that has the potential to provide a safe and supportive space in which to be creative and take risks (Leibowitz *et al.,* 2014). Askins and Blazek (2017, p. 1101) suggest this would necessitate an "academia centred around values of generosity, collegiality and the communal." They recommend moving away from a model of individual success, towards promoting a broader sense of accountability including wider colleagues, funding bodies and communities. This perspective is clearly aligned with members of the CRIS Collective, who seek to maximise the impact of their work.

Much scholarship on an ethics of care perspective has origins with feminist researchers, who sought to highlight the political, social, and economic value of gendered care work (e.g., Tronto 1993, Held 2006). Yet care is increasingly recognised as a concept not only applicable for gender researchers, but one that is relevant to all. For example, Noddings (2013) updated the title of her original 1984 seminal text to use the term "relational" rather than "feminine" to better express the fundamentals of caring. The relational aspect of care is captured in the way care ethicists approach its definition. Tronto (1993, p. 103) defines caring as "a species activity that includes everything we do to maintain, continue and repair our 'world' so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, our selves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web." Chatzidakis *et al.* (2020) encourage us to acknowledge the complexities of care, recognising both our needs for - and practices of - care, and the impacts of these. While this wider politics of care naturally incorporates both formal and informal caring roles, it also calls for an approach whereby "care is understood as

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an enduring social capacity and practice involving the nurturing of all that is necessary for the welfare and flourishing of human and non-human life" (Chatzidakis *et al.,* 2020, p. 893). This stands in contrast to the "declining sense of responsibility for others" (Lynch 2010, p. 57) associated with academic capitalism.

In their analysis of the gendered neoliberal university, Lund and Tienari (2019, p. 98) suggest that care is mainly discussed with reference to the teacher-student relationship in a form of "feminized and locally bound care", which tends to be undervalued and unrewarded in terms of career progression. In addition Lynch (2022) identifies the pressure universities are under to deliver more with less, resulting in less time for genuine caring approaches. Tronto (2010) identifies three elements of purpose, power, and particularity that are crucial to relations of care in institutions and need to be deliberately negotiated. They advocate: "first, a clear account of power in the care relationship and thus a recognition of the need for a politics of care at every level; second, a way for care to remain particularistic and pluralistic; and third, that care should have clear, defined, acceptable purposes" (Tronto, 2010, p. 162). However, while care amongst research collaborators undoubtedly exists, it tends to be a largely hidden part of the research process and social support, reciprocity and interdependent relations tend to be valued more informally (Askins and Blazek, 2017). We consider how we can more explicitly embed an ethic of care into our research collaborations. As Gill (2009) reminds us, acknowledging our own affective states offers a starting point for broader transformations in ways of working, a need that has become more salient given the pandemic's exposure of our profession's high stress culture and poor record of work-life balance and equity (Corbera *et al.,* 2020). However, it is also worth acknowledging that Metcalfe and Blanco (2021) suggest that in some cases Covid-19 and virtual working have presented an opportunity for greater care to flourish through friendship and collegiality.

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Successful collaborative groups often experience shared values, shared commitment, and develop a sense of 'we' (Oberg, 2016), and we suggest that an explicitly caring approach to collaboration could provide an important route to mitigate academic isolation. Belkhir *et al.*'s (2019) collaborative autoethnography of Early Career Researchers demonstrates the multiple dimensions of isolation experienced by a group of ten researchers, including geographic, cultural, relational, and technical isolation. For Bayfield *et al.* (2019) it was an online shared space that allowed the academic authors to practice and experience a feminist care ethic, which is recognised as a collective act of resistance to neoliberal individualisation. Their collaborative approach to self-care aligns with McDonough and Lemon (2021) who state that we need to be willing to share our vulnerabilities collectively as part of transforming the ways we work beyond an individual level. Sharing vulnerabilities requires a shift in perspective, to open, honest collaborations which draw on personal experiences (Linabary *et al.,* 2021).

Important precedents to understanding approaches to collaboration exist within consumer research. Most prominently the VOICE Group (2008) published their reflections of working together as an all-female team over a number of years. While their collaborative name remained consistent, they acknowledged "natural ebbs and flows in the intensity" of individuals' contributions (VOICE Group, 2008, p. 157). A similar point is made by Feminist Collective in their note surrounding their "random" author ordering which they note reflects "authors made their own different and important contributions over the life of the project" (Parsons *et al*., 2022, p. 460). These approaches and discussions of how these groups came into being and operated contrast sharply with the more strategic approaches to collaboration outlined in the previous section, and informed the understanding we brought to this AoM workshop and wider project.

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Bettany and Woodruffe-Burton (2009, p. 671) highlight the importance of reflexivity within knowledge production and advocate for a place for "different voices, lenses or perspectives." Yet the "reluctance of and constraints" of journals means reflexive research is often either backgrounded or rendered invisible within publications (Bettany and Woodruffe-Burton, 2009, p. 675). In this paper, we explore the value of *collaborative* reflexivity. If an ethics of care approach prioritises "attentiveness and mutual respect" (Parsons *et al.,* 2021, p. 794) across relationships, could an approach featuring collective reflexivity promote a more caring and ethical ethos, a new way of thinking about academia and doing research? We set ourselves the challenge to explore how we could achieve this with respect to the CRIS Collective in a meaningful way. In the following section, we outline our approach to embedding an ethics of care into academic collaborations.

Process and method: Our approach to collaborative poetry

Our methodological approach centred on exploring how we could embed an ethics of collaborative academic care in collaborative working. Our group of twelve academics shared an interest in consumer research with social impact. Some members of our team have known each other for many years, while others were meeting for the first time. We held a range of faculty positions (from PhD researcher to Professor), and came from all tiers of university within the current UK system. We experienced the pandemic very differently from each other, and our diverse experiences led us to think creatively about how we could bring individual perspectives together in a meaningful and caring way. We wanted to engage in a therapeutic activity as a means of promoting our wellbeing as we came to the end of the most challenging academic year we have known. It was these circumstances that led us towards collaborative poetry.

Arts-based inquiry is one strand of interpretive research that speaks differently to the purposes of doing research, the possibilities of change, and the construction of knowledge.

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Work within this tradition demonstrates the emerging acceptance of literary forms and consumer researchers have embraced these novel methods, particularly the potential of poetic methods (following Sherry and Schouten, 2002). Poetic enquiry has been used successfully to explore topics relevant to consumer research with social impact, such as consumer vulnerability (Downey, 2020; Rojas-Gaviria, 2021). Recognising the unique ways of knowing offered by poetry, many researchers have begun to utilise autoethnographic poetic inquiry (e.g. Zhang, 2021; Schouten, 2014). Indeed Zhang (2021, p. 195.)'s autoethnographic poetry about his experiences during the Covid-19 pandemic suggests that "times of complexity and contradiction are exactly the occasions for poetry."

Poetic inquiry within our field tends to be solo-authored by the poet-researcher and the research potential of collaborative poetry has been largely unacknowledged. Collaborative poetry is an established method in the therapeutic arts (Harthill, 1998). Other disciplines have recognised the value of collaborative poetry for "blurring boundaries of creativity and analysis" (McKnight *et al.,* 2017, p. 315) and for initiating conversations and invoking change around important social issues (Kealoha, 2020). Given no team member had professional expertise in collaborative poetry, we decided to employ a facilitator. This also helped to create a democratic space, enabling workshop initiators/convenors to switch roles to become workshop participants. We identified Dr Helen Boden from the Scottish Book Trust Author Directory, whose profile stood out for assorted reasons. First, her listed interests of collaborative poetry and writing for wellbeing both chimed well with our desired outcomes of the workshop. Second, although an independent literature professional since 2003, Helen is also a former university lecturer in English and Scottish Literature, so she could relate to our theme of academic identities. From conversations with Helen, we identified the 'Web of Words' (Harthill, 1998) as our preferred approach to collaboration.

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The web of words is a collaborative writing and performance exercise created by Graham Harthill. Drawing on his expertise on writing for wellbeing, Harthill (1998, p. 53) developed the web of words as an approach "whereby 'soul' can be made in a collective endeavour and primary material can be woven into aesthetic coherence through a simple system of mutual attention." In viewing words as the key to the soul, the web of words is particularly suited to efforts to make sense of change. Harthill's (1998) approach demystifies poetry as open to all rather than a specialized practice reserved only for those with expertise and experience of writing. From this perspective, poetry is understood as the "essence of all expressive language" (Harthill, 1998, p. 48).

The following section describes the web of words approach (see figure 1), and explains how this worked in practice in relation to three stages of: finding the thread, spinning the strands, and weaving the web.

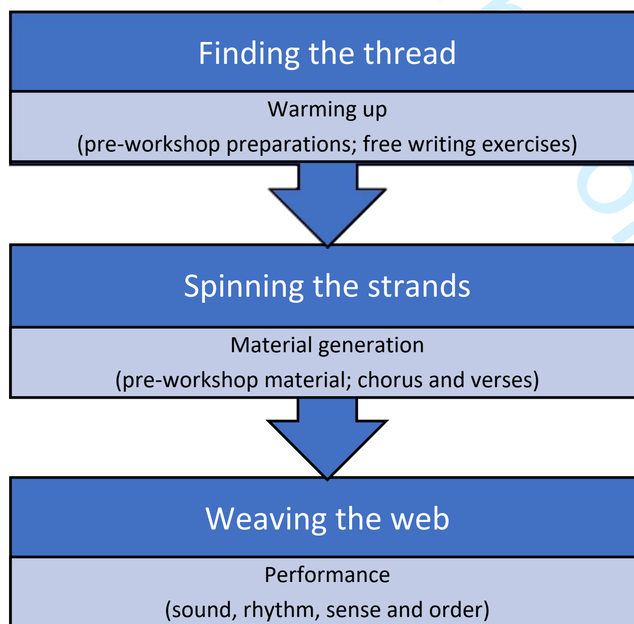

Figure 1: The Web of Words Approach

1. *Finding the Thread*

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'Finding the thread' refers to the foundation activities that act as a warm-up for the web of words. This stage has significant impact on the quality and impact of the final poem. For us, finding the thread involved both advance workshop preparation and warm-up activities on the day of the workshop itself. In terms of advance preparation, every member of our team produced an individual reflective account (maximum 500 words) outlining their academic experiences during the pandemic. Our approach takes inspiration from prior work that has identified reflections on the self as useful 'data' for understanding various aspects of academic careers and academic identities (Prothero, 2017; Belkhir *et al.*, 2019; Quijada, 2021). Unsurprisingly, themes within our self-reflections were broad, encompassing balancing work with caring responsibilities, the challenges of balancing teaching and research during the pandemic, feelings of isolation, the positives and negatives of endless screen time and online events, the meaning of impact, and seeing our research topics in a new light. All participants were open, revealing personal details about their lives and willing to share their researcher vulnerabilities (Jafari *et al.,* 2013) with the group. The reflection formats varied with two members of our team adopting poetry as their preferred approach to self-reflection. Like Belkhir *et al.* (2019), these individual self-reflections were shared with the rest of the team for close reading before coming together for the workshop.

The workshop was held via Zoom and finding the thread activities were ice breakers, aimed at getting us warmed up more generally and poetically. We each wrote a word or short phrase in the chat function about how we were feeling and then individually read these out in the order they appeared in the chat. It provided an early introduction to the value of collective voice, collaborative work and performance (through reading aloud our words). This brief activity revealed much excitement amongst the team and importantly offered reassurance of a shared nervousness, both with this new activity (collaborative poetry) and the different levels of familiarity with each other.

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2. *Spinning the Strands*

‘Spinning the strands’ refers to the material generation process for our web of words. Our web of words is comprised of a chorus and six verses. The chorus was prepared by Helen, our professional facilitator, prior to the workshop, using words and phrases from our individual reflections to create a chorus and ‘bind the web.’ This process is intended to create “aesthetic coherence” (Harthill, 1998, p. 53). During the workshop, we worked in pairs to create the verses. Using our individual reflections as the basis, each pair identified themes with which they particularly wanted to engage, and then worked collaboratively to create a verse drawn from the pre-written texts and workshop conversations.

A crucial feature of the web of words is that all contributors are treated equally. This recognition that everyone’s voice is equally valid means that the format and style of the verses within our web of words differs. Unlike a conventional co-authored research paper where there are efforts to homogenise the writing style for reasons of coherence and internal consistency, the presence of multiple voices within the web of words is regarded as a strength. Editing attempts to improve quality have no place within this approach. As Harthill (1998, p. 61) explains, the verses, “written ‘hot’, are primary expressions, the web as such a holding place for their psychic and emotional content which also provides an integrative aesthetic experience in which each contribution is an essential ingredient, whatever its own literary merits.” This meant that in practice, apart from a few very minor tweaks within each pair, there was no re-writing of the verses for quality purposes. Instead, we retain the authenticity of the different voices at the point in time of writing. Our final web of words is presented in figure 2.

3. *Weaving the Web*

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'Weaving the web' refers to the performance of the web of words. Within our pairs we considered how we wanted to present our verse, considering aspects such as sound, rhythm, sense and order. The performance involved each pair's verse, interspersed with the chorus. Everyone contributed and our performance involved voices in unison, solo voices, silences and interruptions. Our aim was not to deliver a slick presentation that emphasized the final poem but rather to benefit from the process. Another important feature of our web of words is that it not regarded in a linear fashion; rather the verses can be performed or read in any order, interspersed with the chorus. Finally, we enlisted the services of a professional graphic designer to format the web of words. The process of working with an outsider (to the group) and explaining our needs (for the web of words) assisted with the consolidation of the web of words, and confirmed for us the value of presenting the web in a non-linear format.

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Figure 2: The Web of Words: Let there be a 'We'

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Follow-Up

The day after our web of words workshop, we re-grouped for a second workshop with our facilitator Helen. We wanted to explore what we had achieved more fully and establish an ongoing collaboration rather than viewing the workshop as a standalone activity. To enhance our collaborative processes, Helen guided us through an "story-swap" exercise that was grounded by an ethics of care perspective. In brief, we worked in pairs where each of us had to think of a personal impactful experience that we could recount to our partner who then retold the experience with interpretation and emphasis, and without judgement. This exercise cemented the collaborative experience, especially reinforcing the bonds between group members. The open nature of this exercise further contributed to the experience of dismantling of professional hierarchy, where deep listening and sharing vulnerabilities were prioritised.

Reflections and findings: Collective learnings about collaborative working

The poem we produced was something we were all proud of – not necessarily in terms of literary merit, but more as an authentic capture of the range of perspectives and experiences shared in the session. We all discussed how inspiring the experience was; there was a clear sense of positivity and pride in the work we had been part of, "creating a little marvel." However, in many ways we see the poem as secondary to the broader takeaways that have emerged from the workshop. To capture in more detail how the experience had impacted us, we each prepared a self-reflective piece on the key takeaways from the experience. As with our pre-workshop reflections, the format of these varied. Some adopted the free writing approach, some were presented as poetry, some were more structured. Below, we discuss these broader takeaways by drawing on our post-workshop reflections in relation to the blurring of boundaries, care in collaboration and transformation.

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Blurring of boundaries: "Some Bridges are easier to break"

We all came to the workshop as researchers, denoted by our professional roles as Marketing academics and doctoral researchers. While many of us have experience of being a research participant, the more familiar role is that of the researcher. Participating in this workshop, however, blurred many boundaries, such as being both the researcher and the researched and our professional and personal identities. Experiencing these blurred boundaries opened new ways of thinking about what it means to be researched:

> *"This was the first of many points during the process that I found myself in the place of participants and question what we ask of them, and what we expect of our research participants more generally."*

Many of us reflected on what we ask of our participants and how this might make them feel: we ask our participants to bring their lives to us, bring us into their lives, and in so doing we are asking them to reveal and expand on aspects of their lives that are private and important to them. We become privy to some of these very personal insights, and the workshop activities reminded us of the deep emotionality of sharing alongside the trust our participants place in us when they share their stories.

In the story-swap activity, listening and trust were important; the trust we had in each other that our story would be listened to and respectfully retold, but also trust that we would be listened to with care and empathy while potentially uncovering new perspectives. This represented a form of collective reflexivity prioritising "attentiveness and mutual respect" (Parsons *et al.,* 2021, p. 794) as key aspect of ethics of care relationships.

> *"I was so struck by the care and attention my partner put into listening to me – it made me feel validated, that my story was worthwhile."*

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> *"We both 'performed' each other's stories/poem - not to impress but to empathise and capture the essence of each other's story."*

> *"For the story-swap activity on day 2 I had never met my partner before, yet we were able to share and recount each other's stories in a way I found somewhat emotional. We were in sync, picking out some of the same words, but it was also powerful to hear the different emphasis that emerged in our interpretations."*

The exercise reminded us of the importance to not only hear, but effectively listen to, those that we research. This interpretive endeavour facilitates an altogether more reflexive, dialogical and empowering experience (Coleman, 2016). One of us expressed this outcome in poetic form:

"Hearing rather than 'giving'

Voice."

Our experiences underscore the importance of attentiveness in academic research, recognising that even those stories that initially seem routine or mundane have value and are meaningful for those telling them. Being open to each other's thoughts, feelings and experiences aided us in providing the supportive space required to collaborate (Leibowitz *et al.*, 2014).

In terms of the blurring of professional and personal identities, our pre-workshop reflections included work-related challenges, but also extended to the sharing of experiences of family, loneliness, care responsibilities, health and illness, challenges of disability; all topics that went significantly beyond the work context. Together with the different levels of unfamiliarity, both in terms of participants and methods, it was an emotional experience for us all, with many of us reflecting on our initial feelings of trepidation around participating in the workshop:

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> *"There is fear of getting things wrong on the day – have we done enough, how do we put work together can we really create poetry this way? But the process is quite fun really, it is a reflexive step beyond the initial writing and a different way to capture the stories of our experiences and everyone's voice can be there"*

> *"Learning I would have to write poetry and think poetically sent me spiralling out of my comfort zone. But, in hindsight research should not be comfortable. We shouldn't live in comfort zones. How do we progress if we stay with what is familiar? How do we advance if we remain rooted?"*

We all experienced this sense of dislocation and apprehension, perhaps enhanced by our knowledge of how poetry has been shown to reveal intense cultural experiences (Canniford, 2012) and vulnerabilities (Downey, 2020). This was new territory, full of "unknown unknowns", and many of us expressed feelings of vulnerability associated with revealing aspects of innermost selves through this alternative and unfamiliar format.

> *"My writing was very cathartic for me ... I feel vulnerable sharing these aspects of myself with my friends and colleagues (some of whom I work with day-to-day). I was also torn around confidentiality issues...These insecurities were all on my mind as I approached the workshop, perhaps adding to my sense of vulnerability and apprehension about it all and how it would go."*

Quite a few of us talked (before, during and after) about possibly having revealed too much of ourselves ("*I felt like I'd over-shared in my reflections"*) or being out on a limb in how we are approaching the work (*"trying to figure out if it is too 'out there'"*). It was clear that despite our fears and concerns, we all immersed ourselves in the workshop. We engaged in a collective and reflexive process through the sharing of emotions, allowing ourselves to be both the researcher and the researched. This provided the foundations for a more collective

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understanding of our evolving academic identities as CRIS researchers to develop. The process also served to emphasise our responsibility to ensure that the way we tell the stories of our participants, our representations and interpretations, are conducted with care.

Care in collaboration: "Power is to come together, to help, to care"

Key to the workshop's success was the development of empathy, care and responsibility. This theme ran right through the workshop activities; from the sharing of our pre-workshop writing, the workshop activities themselves and to our subsequent reflective pieces and associated discussions. Participants were struck by how starkly this approach contrasted with their everyday experiences of academia.

> *"There's a lot of barriers and institutionalised processes to ensure the functioning of careerism… My institution cares only if my caring is publishable."*

While there was existing familiarity between some members of our group, there was a sense of the unknown both in terms of the approach (creative methods) and the technology that facilitated our collaboration.

> *"In the run up, I was nervous but excited to try something that would take us out of our comfort zones. I am so grateful that everyone willingly embraced the creative activities, and openly and generously shared their stories and experiences. We achieved a sense of us being together that I didn't think would be possible online. I felt genuine collegiality – for the workshops, and hopefully beyond, we did create a "we.""*

This attentiveness and openness fed an overall democratic approach: *"It felt democratic, it felt as if everyone was listened to."* Members of the group were aware of traditional

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hierarchies, yet these became challenged through various means (e.g. including the novelty of method, the neutrality of the virtual space). From the perspective of an early career researcher the workshop was regarded as *"a valuable and rewarding opportunity to work with established academics in a different way"*. From the perspective of a more established academic, "*I felt it was important to be honest about how 'senior' people can be vulnerable too."*

The acknowledgement and sharing of vulnerabilities served to de-emphasise some of the hierarchies that create barriers to effective communication and collaboration and contributed to enhancing the outcomes of this exercise. It was also helpful that we engaged the services of an independent facilitator, who was somewhat removed in discipline and familiarity from everyone in the collective. As a collective we could all be participants. We recognised that we each had something worthwhile to contribute, and collectively sought to capture the range of voices and verses in their raw poetic form.

Using our words in their original unedited form was both a challenge and a revelation. 'Successful' academic writing normally incorporates several rounds of editing, in particular collaborative work where one united voice is often sought. However, we established early on that we would not edit each other's work in the poem - rather we sought to capture and represent the full range of experiences as they came to us within the session as pairs within the collective. Participants reflected upon the freedom of this honest approach.

> *"The poem I submitted was honest… 'my truth' written down in unadulterated, unedited fashion."*

> *"The workshop approach kept me honest. It stripped away the veil (or should that be 'pretence'?) of academic practice that I so often pull over what I say and do when enacting my role as an academic."*

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This overall democratic understanding and what it encompassed aligns with the foundations of our CRIS approach, which emphasises creating space for the voices of marginalised and excluded consumers. We all picked up on how this approach should emphasise the value of all contributors, prioritise attentiveness, mutual respect, and care. In this case it resulted in a meaningful outcome (the poem), encompassing all participants. The poem itself captures our multiple voices revealing different perspectives:

> *"I was struck by the discussions about the value of multiple voices and have been thinking about how to achieve this in a commentary I am writing with a colleague from a different discipline"*.

Workshop participation therefore created a collaborative environment that enabled the development of a shared commitment to a common goal to productivity (creating a poem), to openness and a clear sense of 'we'.

It is worthy of note, however, that despite our collective experience of the workshop as a democratic process, it was in fact highly structured and time-managed. Participants were, for example, placed in breakout rooms that 'closed' automatically after a given time, thus abruptly ending any dialogue, and were asked to undertake clearly specified tasks to build the eventual web of words. We do not, therefore, seek to unduly romanticise the workshop process and acknowledge the "tension between the rising importance of collaborative efforts and the practical and structural challenges in establishing and managing such collaborations" (Binz-Scharf *et al.,* 2014, p. 531).

Many of our comments supporting this democratic perspective were made 'outside' the group environment, in our individual post-workshop reflections where the outcomes of the workshop were considered alongside participants' wider responsibilities:

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> *"Even pre-pandemic I often questioned why I am doing what I do, what the point to my work is. On the one hand longer-term these heightened questions and concerns will inform my research and teaching. On the other, I need to develop acceptance that it's ok: I'm not saving lives, but rather to be confident that when delivered with care and attention my work matters."*

The above reflection relates to what we reveal of ourselves through the research process, in terms of thinking about our authenticity as researcher, and how our researcher position is revealed and represented through the research. The workshop approach went some way towards creating a much-valued sense of democracy within a suitably structured (and controlled) setting while facilitating the space for individuals to reflect on what this meant for themselves and their work.

Transformation: "New ways of being, ways of doing"

An emerging theme in many of our post-workshop reflections and discussions was how participation in the group had fundamentally changed us, as academics and as people more broadly. This was succinctly captured by one of us at the end of the second workshop: *"I am not the person I was two days ago!"*. Although all of us in the CRIS Collective are interested in research that has impact in broader society, we can lose sight of the enormous potential of our research to be impactful on the lives of the individual researchers and participants involved. The transformations we spoke of were positive and indicated a renewed enthusiasm for our academic identities:

> "*There was something about connecting with the other academics in the workshop that made me feel empowered and, in some ways, even physically stronger and more confident in myself, and possibly my identity as an academic."*

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> *"After being away from the conference scene for a few years, this experience has sparked the confidence that I need to re-build my identity as an academic."*

Once again we are reminded of what we ask of our research participants. The acknowledgement by one of us that "*the workshop experience certainly got under my skin"* was an important reminder of the potentially deep emotional responses and both short- and longer-term impacts that research participants can experience.

The workshops were a catalyst to prompt us to take forward new self-care practices. Many of us reflected upon the broader impact of the workshop on our wellbeing as research-active academics. The seemingly constant demands for productivity and output became particularly salient during the pandemic, when we all experienced increased pressures across our work, personal and social lives, leading many of us to mourn the loss of our "*precious research time"*. The workshop was a welcome return to a research environment, as well as an opportunity to exercise self-care in reflecting upon the challenges of recent times:

> "*We stopped and we considered. 'What happens in our frantic personal paddling below the surface of the millpond as our calm professional swan glides calmly towards the next milestone?' And this made us very happy, and connected, and fulfilled and joyful and real."*

> *"The exercise made me realise the importance of starting the day in a reflective mental state and being in touch with one's emotions."*

Many reflections also drew attention to plans to transform working practices. These included renewed insight into including new tools and techniques that could be used in research, teaching, writing and wider collaborative practices:

> *"I emerged from the workshop energised, inspired, and just really motivated to do more of this kind of creative work"*.

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"It also opened me up to a unique, sensitive and immersive methodology which is refreshing"

"Actually, this approach using pairs will make me rethink my teaching where a great challenge is to encourage everyone to engage"

As a group, we had varied levels of experience with arts-based research approaches, some of us had "battled" to legitimise arts-based research projects, some had successfully published and attracted funding for arts-based projects, and some of us had never been involved in arts-based research approaches. No matter our experience level, we reflected on some of the lessons we had taken from the workshop:

"If we can conduct research in a manner that somehow frees participants up from any barriers, be they conscious or unconscious, we might be able to access their raw truths. From there, I believe we can create societal impact."

"Research does not have to have set outcomes in mind to be effective – often exploratory, meandering, open-ended investigation can make a contribution; let's champion clean-sheet research."

Challenging assumptions of what makes good research has long been on the agenda of interpretive researchers (Denzin, 2009) who have worked to expand our ways of knowing and our conceptualisation of impact.

Discussion: Ethics of Collective Academic Care

Building on the activities of the CRIS Collective, the overarching contribution of our paper is to introduce an Ethics of Collective Academic Care. In the following sections, we discuss three further contributions that emerged as central in our operationalization of an

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Ethics of Collective Academic Care: arts-based research, tensions and conflicts, and structural issues.

Arts-based research and Ethics of Collective Academic Care

Tronto (1993, p.103)'s definition of care emphasises an understanding of care as being goal-driven: "everything we do to maintain, continue and repair our 'world'". From this perspective, Tronto (1993) considers that creative or arts-based activity does not fall into the realm of caring as these can be considered an end in themselves. However, we follow Fisher (2020, p. 7) in challenging this perspective and recognising that creative activities can constitute "an interrelated engagement with artistic creation and social responsibility." The web of words produced by the CRIS Collective activities was not intended as an end in itself, but rather it was an important means to "maintain, continue and repair" our academic identities within a difficult institutional context. The engaged nature of arts-based activity can offer a form of "occupational self-preservation" (Alacovska, 2020, p. 739) and self-care (e.g., Bettany, 2022). As noted by O'Dwyer *et al*. (2018, p. 244-245), "self-care requires a radical departure from the performative and measurable cultures of the neoliberal university." Drawing on O'Dwyer *et al*. (2018), our web of words could be considered a form of collaborative resistance through creating space for and promoting collaborative reflexivity.

Trust was important among the group to ensure that individual perspectives would be honoured and represented, and ultimately that care as "a social capacity and activity" (Care Collective, 2020, p. 77) would prevail. Previous work also identifies trust as important to academic collaborations, for example, Belkhir *et al.* (2019) indicate that trust was established amongst their group of 10 researchers by working together for more than four years. For us, the establishment of trust was catalysed, and we developed a sense of "We" quickly, something we attribute to our non-conventional approach to collaboration. Using an arts-

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based approach supported a collective 'opening up' as group members shared their personal experiences. Typically within academia, being perceived as *professional* is a key concern. However, what professionalism meant took on a different tone throughout this process. Being professional developed into being human, showing humanity. We see this as the first stage towards attending to the 'crisis of care' (Chatzidakis *et al.,* 2020) in academia exposed by the pandemic. For the CRIS Collective this means that caring is not just in the topics we research, which have been understood as reflecting a care-less marketplace (Hutton, 2018), but is multi-layered, also entailing a caring approach to our collaborations. In academia, an outcomes-based, competitive audit culture dominates (Loveday, 2021). Yet, in this moment of respite, we experienced an approach that delivered a set of other outcomes around care and empathy that we hear much of, but are not easily delivered (Burton, 2021).

Much has been written about how hegemonic publishing practices produce hierarchies of knowledge that make it difficult to offer alternatives that fall outside the dominant standards of "*proper* deliberation and writing styles" (Kravets and Varman, 2022, p. 131). Arguably, some progress has been made with the move towards less conventional formats for outputs that capture diverse ways of knowing [e.g. poetry (Sherry, 2018), film (Rokka and Hietanen, 2018), published interviews (Chatzidakis, 2017)]. This represents a positive development, and as we become more familiar with alternative formats, we become more skilled at capturing and representing research, offering a more dialogical format. However, even when publishing in alternative formats, authors are still subject to review processes that follow taken-for-granted practices of offering suggestions for revision and quality judgements remain under gatekeepers' control. The inclusiveness and lack of hierarchy inherent in the web of words approach stands in stark contrast. In "claiming a right" to our experiences (Harthill 1998, p. 61) in a way that retains the authenticity of the different voices at the point in time of writing, a review system that demands changes to the web of words have no place

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in this approach. This raises questions about reviewing more generally that could usefully be explored in future research.

Our experience has also highlighted the value of working with third party professionals. Other researchers have successfully partnered with professional artists to support reflexive knowledge dissemination of multisensory consumer research (Scott and Bradford, 2022). Within the CRIS Collective, such collaborations were considered within the context of our Ethics of Collective Academic Care as a means to level academic hierarchies to some extent. The professional facilitator in our workshops was crucial in this regard, and this success encouraged us to seek further professional input later in the process. A key element of our collaborative activities was the performance of our web of words (described as "weaving the web"). Bringing our voices together reflected a form of embodiment identified as important for acts of self-care (O'Dwyer *et al.*, 2018) adding an emotionality that is rarely experienced within professional and individualised academic environments. We then grappled with how we could textually represent our web of words. Our approach was to partner with a professional graphic designer who developed alternative representations of our web of words that the group then voted on in order to pick the favourite (see Figure 2). The expansion of our group to include third party supporters suggests multiple benefits for group dynamics that may be helpful for other researchers participating in large collaborations.

The proactive effort required when experimenting with, and ultimately transforming, academic practices has been recognised in other studies (e.g. Shahjahan, 2014,). For Dwyer *et al.* (2018), they managed to "resist the demands of a performative academic culture" (p. 245) by writing in an entirely and solely different format (in their case, a poem). In our work, we have attempted writing a transformational piece, that embodies a different form (the poem) and approach (genuine collaborative writing).

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Tensions and conflicts associated with Ethics of Collective Academic Care

Reflecting on the benefits and challenges of this approach, we are all too aware that these collective learnings come across as very positive in tone. It has long been recognised that care involves conflict (Tronto, 1993) and we faced several challenges instituting a care approach in a group setting. As Penniston (2022, p. 69) states, "at the heart of all successful collaborations, no matter how large or small, attention to dynamics and cooperation between individuals is needed". Our group was similar to other large writing collectives (e.g. VOICE Group, 2008; Gurreri *et al*., 2022; Parsons *et al*., 2021), insofar as our members had varying experience of academic writing and publishing. Additionally, we had different levels of experience with large group writing, and this unfamiliar territory (for some) brought challenges. While we all accepted that working and writing in a large team would have a strong learning-by-doing dimension (Jones, 2021), some of our members described feeling nervous about their contribution and of being careful not to 'step on toes'. One area that is particularly relevant for discussion is how to enable different voices within the one multi-authored manuscript. Academic journal conventions tend towards co-authored manuscripts being presented with one voice to create a cohesive paper where differences of opinion and voice amongst the researchers are filtered out. When writing collectively, there are compromises to be made in the extent to which a singular voice is achieved, and indeed, an acceptance that this is not achievable or desirable, since it risks losing the very essence of the collective 'we' voice.

Inevitably, with any work such as this there is the potential for uneven contributions. Others have classified authorship of manuscripts in terms of a hierarchy of tasks associated with writing, described as core (e.g. study design, manuscript writing), middle (e.g. data

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analysis, project management) and outer layer tasks (e.g. technical assistance, sample provision) (Danell, 2014). Our aim was for everyone to participate in a core and/or middle layer task and to develop a strong collaborative and impactful team, one where success was not attributed to the reputation of impact of individual team members (e.g. Ahmadpoor and Jones, 2019; Jones, 2021). However, in taking this more inclusive approach, some members did take more of a leadership role and, conversely, some members did not involve themselves or have their voice heard as they or the overall team might have liked. Gustafson *et al.* (2019) faced similar issues, especially in relation to power relations, contributions and representation of voices. For the collaborative paper writing we did not fully establish prior agreed ways of engaging with the writing process (contrasting with our approach to the poetry workshop) and in the absence of stated protocols, we partially reverted to established ways of doing things. From an ethics of care perspective, one could argue that the care focus gave an 'out' for people who were too busy with other things in their lives, and indeed this is an important feature of caring work, i.e. being cognisant of, and responsive to, such challenges. However, for this to work fairly, there needs to be a set of expressed shared values, and agreement to such variability. In retrospect, we could have spent more time agreeing common values and associated commitment to the collective work.

On a practical level, we faced operational challenges associated with a large team. We had competing demands on our time and not everyone could participate in all sessions. Being flexible is an important aspect of a caring approach to the collective, and just as the VOICE Group (2008) reflected on the interaction of personal and professional boundaries, we needed a fluid approach to our activities to accommodate the varying circumstances of our members, particularly given our activities took place alongside a global pandemic. Further, the arts-based method was unfamiliar to most members. As Savigny (2017, p. 646) notes, “auto/biography is a method associated with feminist and feminine writing”, giving rise to the

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expression of everyday lives – but we could not assume that all contributing members were comfortable with the biographical methods and personal sharing involved. This meant that some members were faced with challenges of new ways of being in academic work. Despite our goal being one of being truly collaborative, there was still work to be done in terms of organising the writing efforts. Small sub-team working helped with this process, as did efforts to devise a series of individual activities to keep the full team on board throughout the review process. For example, we made further use of poetic method and anonymised digital forms (e.g. Padlet) for gathering individual insights that fed into the paper. Through these practices, we endeavoured to address the challenges in a proactive, supportive and caring way. Together these challenges represent practical costs of being part of this writing group (as discussed in Gustafson *et al.*, 2019), and are challenges to navigate as we continue to work in this way.

Structural issues associated with an Ethics of Collective Academic Care

One of the questions we are left with is can there be a longer-term impact of this project for ourselves as a collective? Also, can this project have wider consequences beyond the workshop, the poem and this published article? What could be the impact on ourselves and beyond? We recognise how structural issues inform, encourage and limit ways of working and have provided an illustration of how we as a group sought to do something different. Yet we find ourselves writing this experience up for publication in an academic journal and necessarily fitting within conventions and quality standards for such a journal, recognising that these standards have been established through hegemonic masculinised structures (Savigny, 2017).

There is a sustained drive and pressure on academia to create impactful research, with the UK REF frameworks and AACSB accreditations seeking evidence that our research

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makes a positive contribution beyond our boundaries (Ozanne *et al.*, 2022). Yet beyond these external drivers, our shared interest in a CRIS agenda means that we also have strong internal motivations to create impactful work and have been considering how best to understand and achieve impact with the kinds of social impact organisations who use and collaborate in our work (Piacentini *et al.*, 2019). Despite our concerted efforts to tackle the writing up of this project ‘differently’ (Gilmore et al., 2019) any attempts to publish might be considered a return to the familiar “institutional gaze” (Clarke and Knights, 2015, p. 1865) from which we sought to break free. If our article were not to be published, would we still see value in our experience? We would like to think the answer to this question is yes, even while acknowledging that our experience of writing together is still a work in progress.

Our approach to the workshop and what we produced was a product of the structures in our academic environments and our (temporary) release from these. The endeavour to disrupt regular work patterns chimes with feminist approaches which seek to question dominant approaches and encourage the “reimagining of alternatives that are life affirming, emancipatory and have the power to oppose the neoliberal hegemonic patriarchal onslaught on life” (Fotaki and Harding, 2018, p.189). Our experience provided welcome relief from these structural concerns, directly contrasting with the endemic careless-ness of the academy that Lynch (2010) refers to. In this respect the introduction of an ethics of care became an everyday political practice (Bayfield *et al.,* 2019), a potential form of resistance (Bergland, 2018) providing commitment to “challenging established power relations” (Bell *et al.,* 2020, p.177).

In their paper focused on a University restructuring programme and its aftermath, McCann et al (2020, p. 446) urge “academics committed to the notion of the university as a public good… to move into leadership positions and help build a rampart against managerialism”. This could be one part of the answer to our ‘where from here’ question, to

commit to not only being considerate, caring colleagues but to actively seek positions where we can make a difference. Our experiences demonstrate alternative approaches to leadership – for example how powerful the display and sharing of vulnerability can be. Gill (2009) connects vulnerabilities with being open in the world. In Gurrieri *et al.* (2022), the authors describe in detail the establishment of a feminist organisation – GENMAC (Gender, Markets, and Consumers; genmac.co) – with a specific aim of counterbalancing and challenging systemic issues impacting gender scholarship and scholars, emphasising the importance of creating caring (feminist) spaces and the power of collective action. We suggest that such approaches: organising effectively, taking on leadership positions, the creativity, shared vulnerability, commitment and caring we have experienced could provide key ingredients for a re-imagining of academic life. In effect taking on board McCann *et al.*'s (2020, p. 447) encouragement to "develop new ways of understanding the challenges we now face as part of a concerted effort to develop new tools with which to confront it".

Conclusion: "Let there be a 'We'"

To conclude we return to our title, 'Let there be a "We"'. Through this work, we have created a 'We', coming together in ways we could not have anticipated or imagined. This work revealed that through mutual attention, we can bring the soul into our collective endeavour (Harthill, 1998) and we hope other researchers may consider the web of words or other forms of collaborative poetry as useful additions to their data collection toolkits.

Our experience has shown that the 'We' exists at multiple levels. The most intimate 'We' is found in the researcher and participant relationship in qualitative research. Moving up, we have the 'We' of our relationship collaborations which can include friendship groups, academic colleagues in the same institutions and even supervisor-supervisee relationships. 'We' are also part of the CRIS Collective and the broader academic community, and we are

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members of our institutions. In all of these ‘We’s’ issues of empathy, care, nurturing and belonging are crucial to the success of the relationships and ultimately the experience of our academic identities.

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