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# Researcher self-care and caring in the research community

**Craig Henry Jones** | **Rebecca Whittle** iD

Lancaster Environment Centre, Lancaster University, Lancaster, UK

**Correspondence**
Rebecca Whittle
Email: r.whittle@lancaster.ac.uk

This paper seeks to begin a discussion on researcher self-care in response to the state of contemporary academia, which sees increasing issues of academic stress and anxiety, and the growing use of facile metrics. Specifically, we wish to explore the potential a critical engagement with self-care poses for ourselves as academics and the communities of which we are a part – what kinpaisby (2008) refers to as the "communiversity." Our central argument is that self-care may be regarded as a radical act that can push against the interests of the neoliberal university. We illustrate how researcher self-care can be engaged as a reflexive process that operates to create and inform change within our communities through recognising ourselves as networked actors, rather than self-contained individuals as the neoliberal ideology would have us believe. This paper is intended as an opening towards a much larger discussion regarding academia – of the communities, work environments, and "impacts" we wish to be a part of and how to begin working towards realising these.

**KEYWORDS**
academia, caring, interdependence, neoliberalism, self-care

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

In many parts of the world there has been increasing discussion of the neoliberalisation of Higher Education (henceforth HE) and its subsequent effects on the HE community, for both staff and students alike (see, e.g., Ball, 2012; Berg et al., 2016; Morrissey, 2013).

This paper is based on our experiences of the English system within which we are positioned. We are fully aware that the international HE scene is not ubiquitous but has been neoliberalised to varying degrees and the extent of this process is dependent on each nation's own specificities (e.g., even within the UK the devolved administrations of Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland have all dealt with fees very differently). Consequently we are writing about England, not because we consider it to be globally central in terms of academic neoliberalisation, but simply because it is the system in which our personal experiences are grounded.

Nonetheless, it is important to recognise that neoliberal ideology has had a strong influence on HE across many countries in the Anglophone world (e.g., the USA, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand), as well as in places like Singapore. The situation in these countries is different in many ways from countries with a more centrally planned model where student fees are low or non-existent and universities mostly take local students.

Broadly speaking, within affected countries, neoliberalism has served to produce a new *raison d'être* within the sector, calling for ever-increasing metrics, growth, and profit. This has had a negative impact on staff and students through producing and normalising anxiety (Berg et al., 2016; Fazackerley, 2019; Shackle, 2019). Indeed, so prominent is this process

within affected countries that Loveday has suggested that the condition should have its own name, with afflicted actors coming to be referred to as neuroliberal subjects:

> Far from taking as its subject the type of competitive, calculating actor envisaged by proponents of the marketisation of HE, 'neuroliberalism' as a mode of governance pivots on the figure of what I term as the 'neurotic academic': an entrepreneurial self who is governed through responses to the anxiety precipitated by uncertainty in the neoliberalising HE sector, whilst being simultaneously incited to take responsibility for the management of those anxieties; those unable to 'cope' with such demands may be compelled to 'exit' the sector. (2018, p. 163)

Although Loveday discusses this issue in the context of staff employed on fixed-term contracts, the increasing scrutiny of all staff's research, teaching, and "output" for various internal and external criteria may be regarded as an extension of this neuroliberal process.[1]

The impact of these pressures and, in particular, how it feels for staff and students to labour under these conditions, has been extensively explored through a plethora of recent papers examining the often intensely difficult emotional geographies of contemporary academia (Askins & Blazek, 2017; Berg et al., 2016; Conradson, 2016; Loveday, 2018; Maclean, 2016; Morrissey, 2013; Parizeau et al., 2016; Simard-Gagnon, 2016; Whittle, 2020). Without exception, these papers point to the structural basis of neoliberalism and highlight the need to challenge this collectively through an increased focus on care in the academy (Dorling, 2019; McDowell, 2004; Mountz et al., 2015). As we highlight later in the article, the COVID-19 pandemic has also placed questions of care centre stage for universities as home and work collide in ways that would have seemed inconceivable just 6 months prior to writing this. However, while the self is often viewed as the first place where the excessive demands of the neoliberal workplace are recognised (Gill, 2009), the literature is less explicit on the role of self-care in enacting resistance to neoliberalism. For example, many bodies of literature argue that therapeutic practices focused on the individual, such as counselling, are just a sop to neoliberalism – a band aid on a gaping sore, rolled out to keep workers functioning in an unhealthy system rather than challenging the basis of these unreasonable demands (Purser, 2019). In this version of events, then, self-care is, at best, self-preservation and, at worst, a capitulation to the system. We agree that there are very good reasons for staying alert to the possibility that self-care initiatives can be co-opted for more sinister purposes (e.g., see Jon Kabat-Zinn's important critique of "McMindfulness" in Booth, 2017). However, the feminist argument that the personal is political has presented us with a much more radical interpretation of self-care, powerfully expressed in Lorde's observation that: "Caring for [oneself] is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare" (1988, p. 131).

In this reading, self-care becomes a defiant act of resistance and push-back; a route to broader forms of emancipation as multiple acts of self-care draw a battle line in the sand that the neoliberal and the patriarchal cannot cross. This paper takes inspiration from such work but extends it further: first, by exploring what this might look like in academia; second, by exploring an additional transformative dimension of self-care, which we call "leaning in,"[2] and, finally, by unpacking what we mean when we speak about "the self." While this paper is inspired by our experiences of self-care in response to the specific context of neoliberal academia in England, we hope that our reflections on the nature and value of self-care will also be useful across the board.

We will begin, however, with an explanation of how we came to be writing about this topic.

## 2 | CONTEXT

This article started life as conversations over a shared interest in questions of emotion and care within our own discipline of geography and academia more broadly. Through these conversations, we realised that, despite many differences in our circumstances (Craig is a PhD student from North Wales in his 20s and identifies strongly as a working-class academic, while Beccy is 15 years older and is a part-time lecturer and Mum to a six-year-old), we were intimately involved in care work of various kinds within our communities. Of course, there is nothing unusual about this since one of our key arguments here revolves around the fact that we are all intimately embedded in networks within which care flows back and forth – whether we recognise this or not. However, we had reached a place in our lives and work where we did identify very strongly with this centrality of care in our lives. Ultimately, we were motivated to write this paper because our personal and shared recognition of the importance of care felt very much at odds with the way in which care seemed to be overlooked, squeezed out, and rendered invisible by many aspects of neoliberal academia (Berg et al., 2016; Gill, 2009; Loveday, 2018).

In particular, we wanted to better understand and make visible the transformations that we had experienced through care relations: those instances where we felt we had made a positive difference to someone's life – or indeed where they had done the same to us. Crucially, however, in trying to understand these *inter*personal care relations, we realised that we also had to come to grips with the *intra*personal – the self-care that is the subject of this paper. Much like the zones in a perma-culture model, where the area of greatest influence is generally conceptualised to be closest to home (Holmgren, 2002), we realised that *self*-caring had changed ourselves and also generated the potential for transformations in those around us in ways that we held to be deeply valuable but that were not fully captured in the existing literature on self-care. Our aim in writing this article, then, was to revalue self-care and present a strong account of its transformative potential that included – but was not limited to – the feminist notion of self-care as resistance. In the following section, we'll explore our experiences of self-care and explain how this led to a new understanding of self-care as leaning in.

## 3 | PRACTICAL EXAMPLES OF SELF-CARE

Despite increasing numbers of papers mentioning the importance of self-care within academia, very few of these provide examples of what this might look like in practice. A rare exception here is Mountz et al. (2015) contribution on slow scholarship, which suggests a range of actions including cutting back on email and saying "no" more often in order to leave time for things that matter more. This is an important start. However, at the risk of stating an obvious point, any genuine engagement with self-care has to start from the recognition that our lives have a richness and value that extends way beyond the workplace and its associated metrics. Consequently, when we started trying to consider what self-care looked like in our own lives for the purposes of this article, we found it impossible to restrict our discussions solely to the scope of the academy. This is a vital point that we will return to shortly. For now, however, let's examine a technique that we developed in order to explore (self)care in our lives.

Inspired by Gibson-Graham's (2006) work on community economies, the "academic icebergs" that we drew for ourselves (see Figure 1) were an experiment that we developed in order to illustrate the many (care) activities undertaken by researchers that remain a crucial part of life within and beyond the academy, despite their not being acknowledged or valued by the neoliberal order. The visible bits above the waterline reflect what the university wants from us: high-quality papers/theses, (big external) grants, and some aspects of teaching and administration. Meanwhile, the bulk of the work, occurring below the waterline, involves myriad forms of care that cross over between our work and our personal lives.

Clearly many of the forms of care listed in our icebergs could be classed as interpersonal forms of care rather than self-care specifically (e.g., union work [Craig], volunteering [Beccy], trying to link our research into local community/activist groups, and supporting/mentoring friends and colleagues [both of us]). This is an important point that we'll return to in more detail later in the paper, but at this point note that there are also some very specific examples of self-care in this
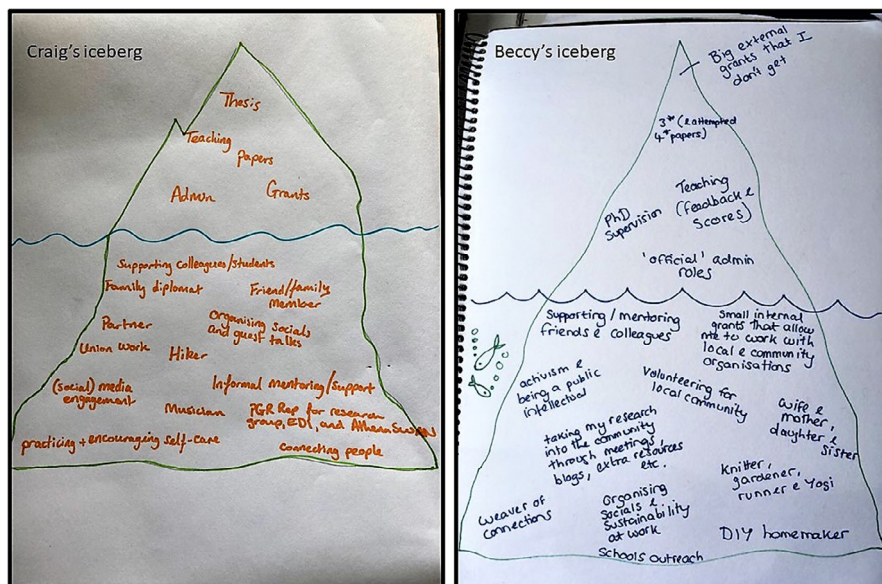


**FIGURE 1** Our academic icebergs. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

diagram (hiking, knitting, music, family stuff, yoga, etc.). Crucially, these examples clearly go way beyond the world of work/the academy as classically defined.

Why is this so important? We'd argue that our ability to nourish those "more than academic" parts of ourselves can form an important mode of resistance because it is a reminder that we are always more than what neoliberal academia wants to see in us.

Thinking in these terms can explain the extraordinary significance of the seemingly ordinary: those moments where something shifts for the better – either for ourselves or for someone else. Our personal experience is that many of these moments involve times when we have been able to be honest with at least some colleagues/students about these "more than academic" parts of ourselves. Sometimes this is about an "identity" (e.g., what it's like to be an academic while also being working class or a parent), or a particular experience (feeling torn in multiple directions by the demands of work while dealing with a family crisis), or even something as simple as a shared interest (hiking, knitting, music). Either way, it seemed that relating to others through these "more than academic" aspects of self created a new point of connection that then allowed for mutual support.

We will discuss the connections between self-care and social connection more in section 5. However, for the moment, we note that self-care is important because it creates a space of honesty for ourselves and others: when we engage in self-care, we become more aware of the multiple identities, relationships, and commitments that we all carry, and that refuse to be subsumed by the demands of the neoliberal workplace. These "more than academic" aspects of ourselves are powerful markers of resistance to the status quo and when we are able to enact and share them we create the possibility for change.

## 4 | RESISTANCE, SELF-PRESERVATION, AND "LEANING IN"

Drawing our academic icebergs and discussing them with others was a helpful way of locating this broader picture of "what matters." Crucially, however, this process involves a very different way of thinking about the radical potentiality of self-care. As we highlighted previously, self-care is generally understood as playing an important defensive/resistance function – creating a protected space around the individual within which the demands of the workplace cannot penetrate.

Look at the examples shared in the previous paragraphs, however, and we can see that this is only part of the story. In that shared conversation about music or parenting, transformation is made possible through "leaning in" and integrating these different facets of ourselves more.[3] Drawing closer to these "more than academic" parts of ourselves can involve a willingness to be vulnerable that allows for a greater sense of connection and mutual transformation (Brown, 2012, 2015).

Our point here is not that leaning in is a more important function of self-care than self-preservation or pushing back, since all these strategies may be appropriate at different times and they are not mutually exclusive. In the mindfulness literature, this is often understood through a martial arts metaphor, where experienced practitioners learn when to attack, when to retreat, and how to skilfully turn an opponent's force to one's own ends (Kabat-Zinn, 2013).

This ability to use a range of strategies is vital in order to account for the fact that, while we are all part of the system that we are trying to change, there will be times and spaces where we will have more agency than others. To return to the context that we started this article with, we have to remember that neoliberal academia remains a deeply unequal, hierarchical system. In particular, Macfarlane's (2011) description of "para-academia" provides an excellent description of the chronic insecurity born by many university employees. The honesty and transparency that we have been advocating here is therefore harder at some stages of your career than others. For example, while I (Beccy) am happy to be an advocate for part-time working now I have a permanent post, this would have been unthinkable when I was a contract researcher. Indeed, even when I had my permanent post, I felt it was something I had to disguise or apologise for while I was on probation.[4] Furthermore, while drawing our icebergs, I (Craig) was conflicted about including my union activity due to the stage of my career. Consequently, it is important to acknowledge that self-care can take different forms for different people at different times and that being open and honest as a form of resistance may not always be possible or desirable. Though we advocate for self-care as a radical act, we accept the need to recognise and acknowledge how power and hierarchy can influence our ability to partake in and practice self-care to a variety of degrees.

Nonetheless, our experience is that even small and protected moments of honesty can be valuable. We might not be willing to shout about something on Twitter or announce it to the Dean. However, we've witnessed times when just a quiet conversation with a colleague while waiting for the kettle to boil can lead to a significant shift in something.

Having identified leaning in as a lever for transformation, it's now important to return to the big question underlying this article: does it actually make sense to talk about "self-care" as a way of being that is qualitatively different from the other kinds of interpersonal care that we have included in this article?

# 5 | CARE AND THE NETWORKED SELF

At the start of this article, we suggested that self-care sometimes attracts criticism from the progressive left on the basis that it leaves the underlying mechanisms of neoliberalism untouched and lays responsibility for wellbeing solely at the door of the individual ("Let's patch up the workers with a few free yoga classes and then send them back to the coalface …"). We'd agree that there will always be tendencies for self-care to be co-opted in this way. However, the argument that self-care is a neoliberal accomplice ends up drawing a false dichotomy between personal and systemic transformation. In doing so, it runs the risk of reifying the very idea of a separate self that is central to contemporary neoliberal thought.

Herein lies the rub. Our own lived experiences, some of which are recounted in this article, tally very much with perspectives that see the self/other dichotomy as a false one. For a reminder of this, look back to the icebergs in Figure 1 and note that care activities focused on the self (hiking, music, knitting, yoga) were supplemented with interpersonal care work (volunteering, union work, parenting). Concepts like interdependence and relationality form a strong cornerstone of feminist scholarship and work on care (Ahmed, 2004; Mountz et al., 2015; Whittle, 2019). However, they also have roots in many cultures, both ancient and modern, in which it simply makes no sense to think of an individual in isolation (Eisenstein, 2018; Kimmerer, 2013). Think, for example, of the Nguni Bantu concept of Ubuntu, which is often translated to mean "I am because we are."[5]

What, then, of self-care? If the separate individual of neoliberal thought is a fiction, does this mean that it is not helpful or appropriate to think in terms of self-care? We'd argue not for a number of reasons. First, while we might wish that this were otherwise, the idea of the separate self has a strong place in UK society (Rose, 1999). Rather than just argue against this intellectually, an altogether different approach, which also draws from the idea of leaning in that we spoke about previously, is to go with that concept of the separate self as if it were true and see what happens experientially when we do.

In our experience, one of the first things that happens when we try to put self-care into practice is that we try to create that sense of protected space around ourselves – a zone that is utterly separate from work and others and in which our needs and activities take priority. This exercise is as necessary as it is impossible because, when we try to practice self-care, we come up against the limits of the individual self as a concept. We might manage to take better care of ourselves and realise that we are able to be nicer to others as a result. We might manage to take better care of ourselves but realise that our colleague is crumbling under the strain because they have taken on our work. Or we might fail to take care of ourselves because our line manager is a workaholic. The point of these clichéd examples is that regardless of whether self-care "succeeds" or "fails," it reveals our entanglement in networks of mutual interdependence both within and beyond academia (Brown, 2015; Mountz et al., 2015; Simard-Gagnon, 2016).

Rather than talking about self-care in relation to the individual, self-contained "self" of neoliberal ideology then, we build on the work of scholars such as Giddens (1984) and Bondi (2005) in suggesting it is helpful to (re)conceive the "self" as a networked site: a networked self. We are back to Ubuntu again and yet not quite back where we started because there is a second crucial reason why, for all its limitations, it can be helpful to focus on the "self."

The examples in Figure 1 show that any form of (self) care is always expressed in action and not just acknowledged with the critical intellect. Granted, these actions may be small: a day off to go hiking, reassuring a student that you understand what it's like to be the first person in your family to go to university because that happened to you too. However, the point is that they matter, and that we can do them. The "self" part is crucial, therefore, because it brings with it a responsibility to act. Acting is what enables self-care to refute neoliberal co-option and become a regenerative and emancipatory action. Admittedly, we often find ourselves in situations where we can do very little because of the vulnerability that comes with our personal circumstances or career stage. And when we try and enact self-care we often fail because of all the factors that mitigate against it. However, our experiences suggest that these faltering micro-shifts can lead to something bigger as others respond to our (often clumsy) efforts with actions of their own.

In short, therefore, we acknowledge that we are part of the system and, therefore, the way(s) we act and engage with our research, teaching, and, ultimately, one another influences, informs, and (re)creates the environment within which we work (Kimmerer, 2013; Urry, 2003).

Indeed, as scholars, we are situated within departments, within universities, and our actions can be helpful to our communities or selfish, constructive in their intent or destructive (Batterbury, 2015; Dorling, 2019). We may thus begin to look on researcher self-care as a radical act with impact when situated in the context of the neoliberal university, as Batterbury writes:

> A radical scholar is a term that now includes something more than a certain type of scholarship … It is also about rejecting conformity with the behavioural norms that neoliberal, cash-strapped universities have forced

upon us. It is about solidarity with those in the university sector that are oppressed – e.g. low wage, those threatened with dismissal, and the thousands scraping a living on adjunct status. But it is more than that – it is also about doing what the neoliberal search for cash tends to marginalize – *teaching*, helping others, *niceness/goodness*, and selflessness. (2015, n.p.)

Through practising these things personally, we may challenge the neoliberal university and the behaviours it seeks to normalise, self-care thus operating as a radical act through not only embodying the change(s) we wish to see in our communities, but holding radical potential through creating the conditions under which such modes of being are possible (Dale, 2012). In this way, self-care comes to shape our work environments and support our colleagues.

## 6 | CARE BEYOND COVID

It follows from the previous section that more people practising self-care – and, where possible, being open about the rewards, challenges, and failures of doing so – would be a big step in the right direction. In our experience, it is also helpful when those in leadership positions are able to actively practise and advocate self-care. Thankfully this has been our experience with our current Head of Department as his active engagement with these issues is starting to enable all forms of care to be a valid topic of discussion and action.

This is especially important in the context of COVID-19. As we write these revisions, the repercussions of the pandemic are being felt everywhere. With campuses closed and staff and students being asked to work at home, the personal and the professional are colliding more than ever and care in all its various forms is suddenly at the forefront of many discussions: for example, what does it mean to try and work or study from home while entertaining/schooling children? Or caring for sick or vulnerable family and friends? Whatever the circumstances, it is clear that the pandemic has both amplified and redistributed the need for care across society and we are all still trying to come to terms with what that means both now and in the future. However, while it is still early days and the evidence is anecdotal, conversations with colleagues suggest that those departments and local groupings of staff who had already been actively working on creating localised cultures of care are in a better place to protect and help each other in the face of the inevitable pushback from central management.

Even here though, there's a danger that self-care gets forgotten in these discussions when the focus – perhaps inevitably – ends up being on care responsibilities to others. And yet we'd argue that self-care is vital during these times. Not because it is simply a precursor to caring for others, as described by the famous oxygen mask on a plane analogy, but because the two are intimately related in ways that we in the West are only now beginning to comprehend (Kimmerer, 2013).

## 7 | CONCLUSION: A NEW CHAPTER FOR ACADEMIA?

We have argued that engaging our networked selves through practical self-care has massive transformative potential that can lead us toward a more compassionate HE environment.

In particular, we have proposed that the ability to engage – and whenever possible, be honest about – those "more than academic" parts of ourselves can have particular significance as a form of resistance. Indeed, to build on the iceberg metaphor and repeat a very insightful question that we received at the RGS-IBG annual meeting, given the pressures currently operating on the sector and the massive upheaval of COVID, what happens as the icebergs begin to melt? Is this an opportunity for all those things below the waterline to come to prominence?

Either way, we have argued the case for self-care as an alternative form of "impact" within the sector. Looking after ourselves, one another, and our communities does not produce measurable results by the standards of "metrics" or "alt-metrics," nor does it obtain lucrative grants. Thus, the process that we have described here troubles the neoliberalised HE sector where "impact" is generally used to describe "spectacular," outward-facing activities with the promise of measurable change (Batterbury, 2015; Finn, 2015). Challenging these notions is a crucial part of the process of reclaiming impact, since a key contribution of feminist scholarship has been to reclaim the importance of the (seemingly) small, slow, and contingent, and to dismantle the fallacy that impact is generated through isolated individuals.

The "impacts" of self-care that we have described here necessarily elude quantification. Indeed, we argue that recognising the transformative capacities we possess is more impactful than what any "metric" or "alt-metric" can ever evaluate. The impact we have, through our work and our very being, is shrouded in a multitude of invisibilities that elude capture by impact assessments, no matter their guise. Ultimately, we have argued that the most transformative impact we may have in our capacity as academics rests within the seemingly mundane, in our modes of engaging with ourselves and one another,

how we act within and on our communities, and in our everyday, moment-by-moment relations to the people and spaces we encounter.

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## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

## ORCID

*Rebecca Whittle* https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6134-3363

## ENDNOTES

[1] However, as we will explore later in the paper, it is crucial to be mindful of continuing power differences – for example, regarding (in)security of employment status – when discussing these impacts.

[2] The concept of leaning in is one that I (Beccy) have found very helpful on my own journey towards (self) care and hence we have adopted it here. I can't claim any credit for its creation or cite it in the way I would with an academic reference but it is used a lot in yoga, mindfulness, and coaching to signal the value in getting close to things that you would otherwise turn away from (e.g., challenge or discomfort). However, I do really want to thank those who have inspired me through their use of it – some of them are named in the Acknowledgements in this paper.

[3] As far as I (Beccy) am aware, "leaning in" is not an academic concept and does not have a concrete definition. Rather, it's something that I've seen used in various communities I'm part of (including yoga, mindfulness, and connected parenting – please see the Acknowledgements for particular people who have inspired me in this regard). My understanding of it – and the way in which we are using it here – is about trying to initiate a gentle, inquisitive coming closer to situations or aspects of ourselves that we might otherwise be inclined to pull away from, often because they provoke some level of fear or discomfort for us. In this context, for example, an example of 'leaning in' could be when we decide to share a personal experience or value that we might normally keep hidden for fear that it might seem unprofessional.

[4] In the UK, "probation" refers to the period of time that follows your appointment to your first permanent post. It usually consists of a series of tasks that you need to successfully complete in a given timescale in order to have your contract made more secure.

[5] Thank you to one of the reviewers of this article who suggested the example of Ubuntu. We appreciate that there is much in this term that we cannot unpack here due to space constraints but we felt it was still important to use it, partly because it is an excellent illustration of how patriarchal and colonial the neoliberal notion of the self seems in comparison. However, Ubuntu is also an important reminder that Western academia does not have a monopoly on the ideas of relational selfhood that we are exploring in this paper.

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