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Curious care: tacit knowledge and self-trust in doctoral training

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ABSTRACT

Building on recent literature on supervision practice that has turned away from previous efforts to construct typologies, and towards ‘dialogic’ models that emphasise iterative feedback processes between students and supervisors *in situ*, this article examines how the curiosity of the supervisor expressed in supervision meetings can both model a relationship to scholarship and collegiality and support the development of confidence and self-trust in the doctoral candidate. Drawing on a qualitative study of video-recorded supervision meetings across multiple Australian universities, this article examines the entanglements of scholarly discourse, interpersonal conviviality, and curiosity within supervision relationships. To understand this, we adopt a ‘post-critical’ approach to doctoral training and borrow the concept of ‘tacit knowledge’ to consider the role of trust, conviviality, and informal ‘know-how’ in the development of formalised expertise. Analysis of exchanges within supervision meetings encourages the consideration of care as a relational structure linked to practices of curiosity and the sharing of tacit knowledge. We argue that although institutional pressures may continue to reshape doctoral candidatures in the neoliberal university, supervision meetings offer important sites for developing doctoral candidates’ intellectual self-trust, including through the expression of curiosity by their supervisors.

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Introduction

‘I feel like I’m trying hard, I feel like I’m giving it my all’, says doctoral supervisor Angela. ‘Nevertheless, those things alone aren’t necessarily indications that I’m doing a good job for the student and for their project’. Students are widely understood to benefit from teachers who care, and recent scholarship suggests that practices and expectations around care can produce substantive learning outcomes (see Dadvand and Cuervo 2020; Miller and Mills 2019). In the context of the doctoral supervisor ‘giving it my all’ but not being sure about doing a ‘good job’, care can also be considered as a reflexive process connected to identity and self-evaluation. One feels one ought to be a teacher that ‘gives’, while worrying that ‘giving it all’ is still not enough. But care as a concept is

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also slippery: care is not achieved or accomplished as a finished product, but is rather a normative ideal that subsumes many potentially divergent approaches to teaching and teaching institutions. Furthermore, despite significant methodological challenges in documenting instances of care, Walker-Gleaves (2019, 94) observes that 'caring pedagogy' has increasingly become an institutional shorthand for a range of prescribed activities, sometimes unexpectedly transactional and outputs-driven, intended to improve student experience. In this way, the analytics of 'care' as pedagogical ideal cannot be separated from important questions about the ways that teaching institutions understand their obligations to students, the ways that risks are transferred to teachers when these obligations are not met, and the ways that students themselves are imagined as objects of caring obligations – whether as learners, clients, or consumers.

The study of doctoral training in higher education heightens some of the tensions around care as a normative category within teaching institutions. In contrast to the array of staff involved in teaching an undergraduate program, the doctoral supervisor often becomes the primary or privileged vector through which the institution is mediated for the student. To care about a doctoral candidate is to care about a student's relationship to a professional world simultaneously embodied and buffered by the supervisor themselves (see Connell and Manathunga 2012). Institutional failures are therefore more likely to be felt as connected to the individual conduct of the supervisor. Furthermore, the extended temporality of doctoral programs can make it impossible for a supervisor to identify one single approach that will work for a given student over time. Rather, supervision is likely to have an iterative and dialogic character (see Sun and Trent 2022), such that competency is more likely to be understood in terms of commitment, attention, and involvement, rather than in terms of discrete supervision techniques. In this way, the urgency in producing supervisors who care – and the potential horror of supervisors who do not – is compounded by the unique features of doctoral training programs.

Drawing on ethnographic case studies of doctoral supervision meetings, this article argues that the concept of care often lacks density or specificity to be linked in meaningful ways to the substantive content of scholarly knowledge and learning.¹ For example, when we foreground the utility of altruism in low-trust supervision relationships (Unsworth et al. 2010), or the need for supervisors to be perceived as genuinely supportive (Martinsuo and Turkulainen 2011), we implicitly separate out matters of academic rigour and competency from the interpersonal domains of care, affect, and emotion. Following work on attentive care relations by Nel Noddings (2012) and others, we argue instead that forms of knowing can develop through practices of care as a dense structure of attentive *curiosity*, and that the varieties of knowledge emerging through supervision relationships can depend on these practices of curious care. As a distinct orientation towards students, projects, and academic disciplines, curiosity can be understood not as an *ad hoc* trait of exceptionally inquisitive supervisors, but as a pedagogical relation with particular importance for long-term dyadic relationships. In this context, we suggest that curiosity may assist in cultivating candidates' 'intellectual self-trust': that is, a sense of confidence in the enactment and embodiment of acquired knowledge (see Jones 2012). To this end, we also draw on Karl Polanyi's concept of 'tacit knowledges' (Polanyi 1962a) to better understand curious care as an opening to intellectual self-trust and as a prompt for cultivating sustainable academic knowledges. In making these links between care, curiosity, and knowledge, we do not intend to diminish the role of personal wellbeing in

improving outcomes for students and their dissertations (de Kleijn et al. 2012, 936). However, we do want to avoid quarantining supervision care and student wellbeing as exclusively personal matters, and to instead enrich understandings of care and curiosity as embedded within knowledge formations.

Locating research on doctoral supervision

Across the last two decades in universities worldwide, governments have increased pressures on timely postgraduate completions, and much institutional attention has been predictably concentrated on producing more efficient postgraduate pathways and strengthening forms of ‘contractual’ obligation between students and their institutions (Bastalich 2017; McAlpine, Castello, and Pyhältö 2020; Rawolle, Rowlands, and Blackmore 2017). Institutional efforts ‘to rationalise and routinise higher degree supervision’ (Connell and Manathunga 2012, 9) have also been underpinned by intensified pressure on universities to justify public funding. Such policies can lead to what Green and Usher (2003) call ‘fast supervision’, formalised through mandatory training modules and university registers, with an emphasis on meeting frequency, student feedback, and outputs with measurable indicators of quality and impact.

Against this institutional backdrop, numerous guides to supervision have been published and models of effective supervision promoted. Anne Lee (2008) provides a summary of supervision styles that prioritise different aims and methods: functional, enculturation, critical thinking, emancipation, and developing a quality relationship (270–271). Looking beyond individual style, Halse and Bansel (2012) promote the model of ‘the learning alliance’ as an ethical community distinguished from the alienation engendered by university bureaucracies. This model is closest to the ‘enculturation’ and ‘quality relationship’ approaches identified by Lee and prioritises ‘an ethics of responsibility that is attuned to the consequences of human conduct in the existing context and willingness to take responsibility for them’ (Halse and Bansel 2012, 387). Those adopting this ethical approach often advocate for the use of peer-activated learning communities, postgraduate workshops, expanded supervision panels, comprehensive supervisor training, and student writing groups (Denis, Colet, and Lison 2019; see also Eley and Murray 2009).

In contrast to normative approaches focusing on improved (or more timely) postgraduate outcomes, critical pedagogies have been more likely to foreground what Richards and Fletcher (2019) call the ‘sociopolitics of higher education’, which may include local power relations (e.g., hierarchical department cultures) and broader labour market transformations (e.g., increasing rates of casualisation). As Tara Brabazon (2016) notes, doctoral education cannot be understood outside the uneven global impacts of neoliberalism, which can include ‘short termism, temporary contracts for staff, intimidatory behaviour, bullying and arbitrary control of junior colleagues and students’ (16). In this way, critical ethnographies of education can identify social forces that are obfuscated by the seemingly neutral language of ‘pedagogical development’ or ‘learning outcomes’ (Diamond and Anderson 2019).

We share these concerns about the effects of sector-wide managerialism and austerity on the opportunities available for doctoral candidates to pursue ideas and projects without (perceived) instrumental value for universities. Nevertheless, to support coherent arguments about improved conditions for doctoral training, supervisors may benefit from

more complex stories about what makes particular learning relationships valuable (see Grant 2003). In this context, we adopt what has been called a ‘post-critical’ stance, which acknowledges the role of power and ideology in shaping institutional relationships, without assuming that the coordinates or consequences of power can be known in advance of a specific context (see Hytten 2004; Lather 2001). Within this post-critical frame, we ask: what exactly do supervision meetings do? How do supervision meetings, as one of many aspects of the doctoral experience, contribute to the doctoral candidate’s personal and disciplinary development, and in what ways?

Tacit knowledge, care, and curiosity

The supervision meeting is one of the modern university’s least visible pedagogical rituals. Building on a handful of early studies that closely examine dynamics in supervision meetings (e.g., Cargill 2000; Wisker et al. 2003), several sociologists of education made calls for more fine-grained analyses of supervision relationships (e.g., Lee 2008; Li and Seale 2007; Manathunga 2005). However, these cautious steps towards observational methods and frames attuned to supervision have been mostly eclipsed by the aforementioned research focusing on types, models, and processes. Recent literature on supervision practices, shaped in part by a wider scholarly turn towards pedagogies around feedback (e.g., Carless and Winstone 2023), has tilted towards ‘dialogic’ models that seek to better understand iterative feedback processes between students and supervisors *in situ* (see Sun and Trent 2022). This approach helps to better place the supervision meeting not as an ideal form with predictable and prescribable components, but as an opportunity for students to variably develop research questions, or consolidate theoretical and methodological frameworks, or refine organisational skills, or indeed, simply build social relationships within and beyond their institution. In saying this, we do not want to romanticise dialogic relations in supervision meetings as transparent forums for ideal communication, existing outside of the wider complexes of institutional life. As Taylor and Robinson (2009) have argued, the promise of reciprocal dialogue needs to include careful considerations around power relations, and especially around the limitations of the tools and resources available to students. Nevertheless, the concept of the dialogic does help to capture the ways that techniques or strategies of supervision may emerge from cumulative events within a long-term supervision relationship, rather than from an ideal model guiding the supervisor from the outset.

The dialogic character of supervision meetings is not limited to recognisably scholarly matters. Lee (2008) highlights the role of the supervisor in making explicit the forms of academic enculturation that doctoral students typically experience, such as casual teaching and academic conferences. Much of this learning involves the tacit pedagogies that underpin tacit knowledges, such as that ‘acquired through a process of socialisation through observation, induction and increasing participation rather than formal inquiry’ (Barcan 2015; Eraut 2000, 122; Grealy 2016). For its part, tacit knowledge is – in Michael Polanyi’s (1962b) memorable formulation – the domain of ‘things that we know but cannot tell’ (601). Consider riding a bicycle: for practiced cyclists, ‘focal awareness’ is directed to steering the bicycle in the right direction, but this depends on a ‘subsidiary awareness’ of subtle motions required to stay balanced, and these belong to a less easily communicated repertoire of tacit knowledge (Polanyi 1962a, 58). In organisational

settings, tacit knowledge may concern the character of the institution (understanding), how it works (procedures), and how to relate with and to it (rules) (Eraut 2000). For Polanyi (1962a), the most important function of tacit knowledge in universities involves those informal beliefs that underpin our social commitments. This investment of informal beliefs in social commitments is what allows us to take risks and pursue open-ended inquiry:

[Commitment] makes us feel at home in a universe presenting us with a succession of unprecedented situations and even makes us enjoy life best precisely on these occasions, which force us to respond to novelty by reinterpreting our accepted knowledge. (334–335)

Informal beliefs can underpin relations of trust, confidence, and commitment, and thereby allow us to collaborate with the wider community of knowers with whom we construct truths that can be more easily formalised.

Tacit knowledge can also inform our understanding of supervision meetings as sites of care. Michelle Murphy (2015) provides four descriptions of possible meanings for ‘care’:

first, it refers to the state of being emotionally attached to or fond of something; second, it means to provide for, look after, protect, sustain, and be responsible for something; third, it indicates attention and concern, to be careful, watchful, meticulous, and cautious; while its fourth meaning . . . is to be troubled, worried, sorrowed, uneasy, and unsettled. (721)

The third definition is particularly useful for our purposes. In a social relationship, particular ways of observing can further a special kind of care, one that is attentive to specific or unexpected needs. Distinguishing between care and other social goods, Iris Marion Young (2007) notes that care is not indifferent to the circumstance, desires, and aspirations of its recipient, but requires tailored attention to a person ‘in their individuality instead of as types or categories of neediness’ (206). In contrast to a rights and responsibilities framework, which might prioritise the constant expectations across all relationships, a care ethic prompts the question: what is the proper obligation in a *particular* relationship? This connection between care and attention has been further developed by Nel Noddings (2012) in teaching settings: ‘From the perspective of care ethics, the teacher as carer is interested in the expressed needs of the cared-for, not simply the needs assumed by the school as an institution and the curriculum as a prescribed course of study’ (772). For Noddings, care is not a fixed service to be delivered, but a responsive relationship that requires processes of learning and ‘receptive listening’ on the part of the carer (779–780). As an intensification of dialogic listening relationships across a relatively long duration, doctoral supervision provides a particularly challenging case study for understanding how attentive care may (or may not) be functioning.

We want to suggest that in the pedagogy of supervision, the concepts of tacit knowledge and care converge. The informal aspect of tailored care depends on the development of tacit knowledge through subsidiary awareness. For example, Hans Reinders (2010) notes that in medical settings, carers can be engaged with clients for long periods of time, developing tacit knowledge within the relationship, insofar as ‘the quality of professional judgement depends upon, among other things, the intentionality of being attached and attuned to the particularities of the client’ (32). In such contexts, Reinders suggests that tacit knowledge is ‘constituted by the fact of the relationship of the knower to what is known’ (31). Similarly, tacit knowledge in the supervision relationship may contribute to building a relation of care specific to the candidate, including their personal

and intellectual needs. This theme is developed in a study by Crossouard and Pryor (2008, 225–226) of formative assessment in doctoral training, which foregrounded the challenges for teachers in providing feedback that authentically aligns with the student's own intellectual agenda (divergent feedback), rather than expressing – or being received as expressing – the authoritative judgement of the teacher themselves (convergent feedback). The development of tacit knowledge and an attentive relationship of care may allow a supervisor to better understand how feedback can contribute to growing a student's intellectual interests and ambitions, on the terms most meaningful to that student.

As indicated from the outset, the concept of care is not without its shortcomings – especially when instrumentalised in large organisations (see Walker-Gleaves 2019). As critics of care ethics have identified (e.g., Crigger 1997), the enactment of care can lead to 'relativism', whereby the supervisee's well-being is upheld despite conflicting institutional obligations, and 'favouritism', whereby a supervisee receives professional advantages from a supervisor for entirely non-meritocratic reasons. A further, often untested, presumption in the advocacy for care relations is that doctoral candidates desire to be cared for, and that the desired form of care is self-evident. Pyhältö et al. (2015) observe that sometimes too much pastoral support, or support of the wrong kind, is provided to students. Consider this description from our interview with research participant Gen, a third-year doctoral student working on a theatre-based project, talking about her first supervisor:

It was kind of too chatty . . . I didn't feel the main purpose of it was intellectual rigour whereas [with my current supervisor] I do. I go, 'That's why I'm here', it's not a chat, we're not friends, it's not a friendly 'how are you', it's 'this is what you're doing, this is what needs to be done'. Whereas my first one it was very chatty . . . That's not what I need. (Gen)

Gen has had a long career outside academia and does not expect a doctoral program to provide friendship, either from a supervisor or other students. She did not trust that her original supervisor could support her in fulfilling institutional requirements. Feeling secure in the institution matters to Gen, not just feeling secure in one interpersonal relationship. Gen notes that her new supervisor, Mikaela, 'is genuinely interested in the subject matter, which I didn't feel with my previous supervisor'. A person does not necessarily need to feel liked, in a sentimental sense, to feel that they are the subject of care. In this case, Gen was less interested in being liked than in receiving careful attention to her specific research aims and interests (see Behrendt 2001).

The articulation between tacit knowledge, care, and attention can be understood as curiosity. Markey and Loewenstein (2014) define curiosity 'as a desire for specific information in the absence of extrinsic reward' (230). As a social relationship, Donna Haraway (2016) links curiosity to ways of being a visitor: 'it demands the ability to find others actively interesting, even or especially others most people already claim to know all too completely, to ask questions that one's interlocutors truly find interesting . . . [and] to retune one's ability to sense and respond' (127). Although commonly considered a personal virtue, curiosity has often been contrasted negatively with seriousness (see Lewis 2020). To be curious is to be *merely* curious – an idle and unserious inclination. The serious teacher is concerned with learning outcomes, but their own relationship to the thing being taught is a matter of indifference. We want to treat curiosity seriously and in doing so we understand curiosity as

more than a haphazard and ahistorical personal trait. Instead, following Richard Phillips (2014), curiosity can be considered as a structured practice that emerges and can be sustained within particular relationships, communities, or institutions. We argue below that the curiosity of the supervisor can both model a relationship to scholarship and collegiality and support the development of confidence and self-trust in the doctoral candidate. Employed in this way, curiosity invites a way of relating to others not in their capacities as subjects within an institution, but as bundles of unexpected or surprising experiences and reflections. To this extent, we use the term 'curiosity' to complement the theme of 'improvisation', which Barbara Grant (2010) uses to explain the playful and risky aspects of supervision pedagogy that 'eschews the didactic (as in master – slave pedagogies) and engages in shared knowledge-making' (274). Curiosity may not dismantle hierarchies – as Grant notes, hierarchies themselves can be objects of play and experimentation – but it may offer pathways that allow for mutual learning within hierarchical settings.

Supervision meetings and Building intellectual self-trust

Our cases studies are based on four supervision relationships at three Australian universities. Supervisors were employed as full-time, continuing academics and varied from early career to senior scholars. Supervisees were all enrolled in PhD programs in Humanities and Social Sciences (HASS) disciplines, reflecting our own experiences of doctoral training. The cohort included domestic and international students, with and without scholarships, and was diverse in terms of individuals' gender, race, sexual, and national identities. Supervisees were alike in pursuing individual research projects entirely distinct from their supervisors' research, unlike many projects in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) fields. That said, there are clear opportunities for further research to extend our study of curious care to STEM contexts, inasmuch as trust-based relationships play an important role in learning across all disciplinary settings. Curiosity is not simply or only a matter of shared interest in subject matter, but an orientation to the other's relations to that subject, the discipline, and the institution.

The project recruited participants for interviews about and observation of their professional practices, including supervision meetings. Three face-to-face meetings were filmed for each supervision relationship across a one-to-four-month period. Reflective interviews on the supervision meetings, conducted separately for supervisors and supervisees, took place in the months following the recording of meetings. These interviews considered participants' perceptions of the benefits of supervision, the purposes of specific meetings, and the anticipated outcomes of the supervision relationship overall.

The project employed the methodological framework of reflexive visual ethnography, supplemented with the qualitative analysis of transcribed interviews. Observational visual methods have been successfully used to analyse interpersonal interactions in intimate spaces (Pink 2013), and digital video recordings offer a discreet means to capture a density of visual information and the possibility of review for all participants (Pearce et al. 2010; see also Raingruber 2003). For Charlotte Bates (2015), video-recording is a 'sensory method' because 'it evokes a sense of feeling – a feeling *there* and a feeling *for* the spaces and people, the animals, things, relationships, and practices that we seek to understand through our research' (1, original emphasis). Insofar as dialogic

communication is mediated by participants' interests and perspectives in the development of the supervision meeting, retrospective testimonial is a limited tool for understanding how particular meetings unfold (Li and Seale 2007). By video-recording meetings, we could identify moments of interest, repeated patterns, and key topics for discussion in the follow-up interviews. Together, these live methods of video-recording and interview provided complementary perspectives of the supervision meetings, and this complementarity was enhanced by sharing videos and transcripts with participants prior to interviews, allowing them to improve their recollections of specific details (Raingruber 2003). Single-camera filming provided discreet access to the typically private environment of the supervision meeting and was chosen as less physically intrusive for participants than third-party observation by the researchers themselves.

To analyse the recordings, a random first transcript was used by each researcher to create initial coding of incidents in the digital videos of supervision meetings. Thematic categories were compared and combined, and the parallel coding process was repeated using a random video-recording, using comparative analysis for the remaining transcripts and video-recordings (Corbin and Strauss [1990] 2014). Axial coding facilitated the organisation of data according to key categories and the identification of themes, including supervision styles, tacit knowledge, care, and curiosity. The coding scheme was influenced by Max van Manen's (1990) categorisation of four existential dimensions: spatiality, corporeality, temporality, and relationality. Although we have also coded for meeting spaces and technologies, our primary focus in this article is the coding of data relating to conversational form (phrasing, modalities of instruction, voice tones, affective responses to criticism) and conversational content (academic, social, professional). We also analysed the semi-structured interviews with supervisors and supervisees according to the same approach.

In one meeting, supervisor Angela leant across her desk and her cup of tea. Third-year doctoral candidate Stephanie had been explaining her need to 'let go' of a theoretical essay that 'you just cannot deal with'. After Stephanie and Angela had agreed that the essay was 'really smart', Angela recommended a more accessible blog that presents scholarly reading as less about mastery, and more about perpetual development: 'I'll send it to you because it's really amazing about the relationship we have with difficult books', says Angela, 'and how it's a lifelong relationship that is not just what we have to overcome in order to become scholars, but just is scholarship itself. It's really beautiful' (Angela and Stephanie, Supervision Meeting). Angela reframed the problem of 'understanding theory' by inviting an understanding of this challenge as one that supervisee and supervisor share, contributing to an informal orientation towards formalised knowledge that may make the formal dissertation project more manageable – and possibly more pleasurable (Grant 2003). This is an instructive example of an exchange where the tacit knowledge required for undertaking academic research is made explicit by a supervisor.

A more oblique example was provided in a different conversation between Angela and Stephanie. Working through her understanding of her inter-disciplinary project, Stephanie sat facing Angela on the same side of a desk set against an office wall. Angela held her hand across her mouth, encouraging Stephanie to speak. Stephanie was clarifying her developing confidence in writing an interdisciplinary project against prior feelings of disciplinary fraudulence. She extended her arm to indicate key figures from whom she wanted to differentiate her own approach, and Angela offered some advice:

When you have a really specific discipline, rigour comes from the sort of like – it comes from the achievement of being able to be technically proficient in that. Whereas for us it's like we actually have to become technically proficient in being able to know how to be mobile. (Stephanie and Angela, Supervision Meeting)

The conversation was interrupted when a colleague entered Angela's office to say that he was off to the pub. Angela introduced Stephanie to the colleague, conveyed the likelihood of the meeting running for another twenty minutes, and extended the invitation to the end-of-day social gathering to Stephanie. The scholarly and the personal were fortuitously aligned in this short sequence. Upon being reassured that her research identity did not need to be fixed in the manner of the 'key figures', Stephanie was welcomed into the social world of her supervisor and colleagues. Against the bookish construction of the disembodied intellectual, Angela encouraged Stephanie to feel like one of 'us'.

Tacit knowledge can help describe our implicit commitments to the 'us' of the research community, whether real or imagined. Second-year doctoral candidate Joseph arrived at a meeting with supervisor Chloe with an A4 notebook listing topics he wanted to discuss, ticking them off as the meeting progressed. Having just returned from an overseas trip to visit family, Joseph expressed to Chloe that his family did not really understand his commitment to his dissertation and to academic labour generally.

Joseph: My grandmother's getting very old.

Chloe: It's one of the things they do.

Joseph: And they also don't really know what you're doing unless you keep explaining it.

Chloe: They never know what you're doing. My grandmother once said, 'Tell me, when you go to work, what is the first thing you do?' [Shared laughter] . . . But [my grandmother] understood teaching and she could understand writing books . . . That made sense to her. But not what I taught. She understood writing books, but not what books. (Chloe and Joseph, Supervision Meeting)

Joseph is seeking recognition from his supervisor about the way that academic research is received outside the institution by a family member. Sharing her similar experience, Chloe offered Joseph a sense that this was an ordinary and predictable feature of academic work. Chloe later reflected on the 'style' – or not – of supervision that she adopts:

I don't think it's ever possible to be really clear about what style of supervisor you are, I think any more than you can be absolutely self-aware in any other part of your life. I don't think you can be quite that conscious about it, if you're really going to be invested, like if you're really going to let yourself be interested and invested and really participate. Then you have to not be quite so observant and controlling as all that, as watching everything. (Chloe, Participant Interview)

For Chloe, there was an implicit rejection of the pedagogical commonplace that teaching could conform to a deliberate set of self-aware practices. Rather, she indicated that interest and investment in a research project – the curiosity of the Other – may be more important, and perhaps less 'controlling', than the adoption of a prescriptive pedagogical style or convention.

As the examples of Stephanie and Joseph suggest, the supervision meeting can help supervisees to reflect on the deep commitments underpinning doctoral study. The accrual of tacit knowledge in the commitment to social worlds leads to what Polanyi (1962a) calls a fiduciary, or trust-based, epistemology:

The overwhelming proportion of our factual beliefs continue ... to be held ... second hand through trusting others, and in the great majority of cases our trust is placed in the authority of comparatively few people of widely acknowledged standing. (221)

Much of what doctoral candidates can learn about institutions comes through trust placed in others, rather than through formal training. As academic subjects, many of our commitments are secured through a sense of the collective for which these commitments could have reliable meanings. Correspondingly, Jacquelin Mackinnon (2004) argues that the metaphor of a 'fiduciary relationship' can help us to understand how a student's trust in their supervisor also places obligations on the supervisor themselves, including a responsibility to remain attentive to possible shortcomings in the supervision relationship. In this context, we might understand 'trust' not simply as an attribute to be developed in supervisees, but as the result of a trusting environment in which intellectual and interpersonal obligations need to be upheld by the supervisor.

Intellectual trust is not simply about finding enough people who agree with our opinions, although it can be that, too. It also concerns how the limitations of our knowledge acquire significance in asserting what we do know. Karen Jones (2012) has theorised intellectual self-trust as a 'stance that an agent takes towards her own cognitive methods and mechanisms, comprising both cognitive and affective elements, and revealed in the agent's perception of reasons to withhold or defer in her judgement on the basis of their deliverances' (238). Jones offers the simple example of checking and re-checking one's passport on the way to the airport. This can happen because we are anxious about the consequences of a mistake, rather than any *actual* epistemic issue in identifying our passport (Jones 2012). The supervision meeting is a key context for testing this out with another party whose feedback can be incorporated into one's self-trust. What Jones (2012, 247) calls 'mutual epistemic calibration' is used to manage these limits, not by rallying support for specific claims, but in relation to our social identities as knowers, speakers, writers, and so on. As Casanave (2019) has more recently suggested, these identities formed within supervision relationships are also important as testing grounds for future 'performances' of expertise for wider academic publics, especially in settings where the supervisee – and indeed, sometimes the supervisor too – may feel the acute need to hide feelings of uncertainty.

Trust in the supervisor can act as a substitute for the self-trust in one's capacity developed through experience. In a supervision meeting, Stephanie was expressing concern about her ability to produce the singular object of the dissertation.

Angela: You've never written an 80,000 word document. So you don't have the conviction that it is doable because you've never done it. Only other people have done it and then that makes you feel like shit about yourself because what if you're the one person that can't do it?

Stephanie: That can't do it, yeah.

Angela: And that is just a really normal feeling because you don't have any – you have no embodied memory that that is a possible thing, nor do you have that sense of how to recognise its shape and scale when you're doing it right. So I think that is just one of the inevitabilities of doing a PhD and everyone feels like that. (Angela and Stephanie, Supervision Meeting)

Stephanie was visibly reassured by this exchange. Without the lived experience of having done something before, the supervisee must trust in the supervisor's assurance that it is, in fact, 'doable'.

Let us return to the earlier statement about the overly chatty supervisor. Intuitively, we may think of friendly approval as an important antidote to social hierarchies and institutional alienation. But doctoral candidates may not necessarily desire the approval of the Other. Simple approval and endorsement can also be substitutes for attention, or can even signify inattention. For Gen, approval may be less important than the curiosity of her supervisor about her project. This theme emerged from all our case studies, where enthusiasm for the project was mentioned often. Supervisees were not simply seeking supervisors' affirmation of their knowledge claims, but were responsive to the tacit commitments from supervisors to what the project itself promised from a scholarly viewpoint:

Sometimes I think about nothing and it's really crap, but Angela will be like this is what is exciting about what you're doing. This is your contribution to new knowledge. She's been wanting to find that thing and she seems to know what it is That alone is enough to keep trying to get it out. She seems to have an endless faith in this project and in me being able to write it. Probably her confidence I am trying to translate into my confidence. (Stephanie, Participant Interview)

Joseph noted that 'Chloe talks herself into enthusiasm about my project every time, and I find that so incredible' (Joseph, Participant Interview).

Supervisors also understand curiosity as a way of supporting doctoral projects outside their own disciplinary expertise:

I do worry with a student like that for example, that there are these huge glaring omissions that I won't know about, because what I'm doing is helping her articulate what she's giving me, not what I know to be outside of that. (Angela, Participant Interview)

Angela was happy to explore questions around personal identity in writing the dissertation. By contrast, supervisor Mikaela preferred a formal style of communication that would not be identified with a sentimental understanding of care. Nevertheless, all these supervisors' doctoral students foreground the importance of their supervisor's curiosity – as distinct from their expertise, their institutional status, or their capacity to confer approval. To borrow Lacanian phrasing, the supervisor was less the 'subject who is supposed to know' (see Frow 1988) than the subject who *wants* to know, cultivating an interest in information without any anticipation of extrinsic reward.

We do not mean to trivialise pastoral support. As doctoral candidate Joseph puts it, 'you do want people to consider you as a human being, I think, who is more than a set of opinions about books and ideas' (Joseph, Participant Interview). However, it is important to think carefully about what 'pastoral' care might mean,

from the viewpoint of tacit knowledge, self-trust, and curiosity. It may be easier to praise than to create the feeling of genuine curiosity. Watching the supervision meetings, instances where Chloe praised Joseph were rare, outside brief moments where deadline anxieties were assuaged by comments such as ‘if it was tomorrow, I’m very confident you could produce something’ (Chloe and Joseph, Supervision Meeting). Praise can convey a general attitude, but curiosity requires persistent attention to the specificity of the Other.

The role of curiosity in supervision raises a broader issue for thinking about pedagogy. A knowledge claim does not simply circulate because it contains truth: it circulates because it captures and *excites* us. Scholarly communities must be, as Michael Polanyi (1962a) insists, intellectually convivial. To build intellectual self-trust, then, may be about fostering contexts such as supervision meetings where doctoral candidates’ knowledge is received as exciting, as the object of supervisors’ curiosity, and as portending future ideas in which others might share.

Conclusion

This article began with care as an important concept in contemporary studies of doctoral supervision and suggested that researchers need to pay more attention to the different things ‘care’ might mean to doctoral students. To make this category more than a perfunctory description for offering praise and emotional support, we suggest that intellectual curiosity is an important correlate to what Karen Jones (2012) calls intellectual self-trust. In developing this theme, we have attempted to suspend the drive towards determining ideal models of best practice supervision; rather, the intention is to better understand the entanglements of personal and disciplinary concerns within the tacit pedagogy of the supervision meeting. As doctoral supervisors who are also caught in these entanglements, we also recognise that our thematic emphases and orientations to interview transcripts are unavoidably motivated by our own heightened sensitivities to the unique tasks performed by supervisors, and in this respect, we must acknowledge the risks in over-stating the importance of supervisors in the wider institutional ecologies of higher degree research training and student support services. Nevertheless, we do hope to have encouraged a shift from thinking about care as a quantity, of which there could simply be more or less, to care as a relational structure linked to practices of curiosity and the sharing of tacit knowledge. To this extent, the supervision meeting emerges as a key site in which this application of care to the formation of tacit knowledge and self-trust takes place.

Note

1. This research project from which this article is drawn, ‘The Supervisor and the Supervisee: A Critical Study of Pedagogical Practices in Higher Education’, was approved by the University of Sydney’s Human Research Ethics Committee (Project No. 2016/301). Pseudonyms have been used for all research participants in this article.

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