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The loneliness of a long-distance critical realist student: the story of a doctoral writing group

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The loneliness of a long-distance critical realist student: The story of a doctoral writing group

Abstract

As doctoral students from New Zealand and Australia, advised by supervision teams with a diversity of critical realist experience from limited to none, we came independently to the 2018 Critical Realism conference —primed to seek increased understanding, confidence, motivation, and reassurance. We certainly found these things from the pre-conference, presentations, and individuals within the critical realist community. We also found each other, and a virtual writing group was born. This article is a description of what we did, why, and the outcomes we experienced over the final two years completing our theses. It identifies the structures, contexts, motivations, and mechanisms from which our emotional, critical realist and writing-related outcomes emerged. We outline the roles of serendipitous timing, culture, different disciplinary approaches, administrative structures, and types of interactions on the social learning we developed. We anchor our discussion in recent theoretical literature about the role of writing groups in doctoral education.

Keywords: writing group; critical realism; social learning; doctoral writing

Introduction

This article describes the story of three doctoral students who met at the International Association of Critical Realism (IACR) conference in Lillehammer three years ago; the writing group they formed; and a critical realist structural and causal analysis explaining the process of its formation, the form it took and the outcomes it provided.

Catherine wrote a thesis on the causes of family homelessness in Australia and is a sociologist and social policy-orientated researcher. She discovered critical realism in the early days of her PhD, after approximately ten years of practice in applied social research and evaluation, defined by a more pragmatic approach. None of her advisors understood or had a commitment to critical realism.

Angela's thesis explored how a group of Aotearoa-New Zealand rehabilitation nurses documented their contribution for clients with traumatic brain injury and the influences on that documentation. Her interest in critical realism developed after looking at different philosophical approaches on which to underpin her thesis. Similar to Catherine, Angela did not have supervisors with research experience in critical realism.

Karen explored the significance of data in educational systems in her thesis, utilising a critical realist position which informed her social realist research into the impact of the rise of data in schools. Her interest in critical realism originated from an informal recommendation from one of her advisors. While none of her original advisors had any real critical realism experience, her advisory team recruited a further advisor with considerable interest in critical realism following her confirmation milestone. The annual IACR conference is the pre-eminent meeting for critical realist scholars around the world. It allows those interested in critical realism to hear of others' research and share ideas. Since 1997, IACR have seen the provision of resources and academic debate as a valuable method to encourage and support emerging researchers in understanding the essential features of, and in doing so, successfully apply the metatheory¹. A pre-conference workshop aimed at doctoral students precedes the main conference event. In 2018, this included lectures from well-known critical realist scholars and an opportunity for the participants to present their own projects to gain feedback from the invited scholars and pre-conference peers. This was where we met, and plans commenced to form a virtual writing group to maintain the connection.

Writing groups can take many forms and have many names. There is no fixed definition beyond the linking activity of writers coming together 'over repeated

¹ For further information about the IACR (<https://centreforcriticalrealism.com/iacr/>)

gatherings, for doing, discussing and sharing their writing' to support each other and improve the process and product of writing (Aitchison and Guerin 2014, 7). Haas' typology of writing groups (2014, 32-33)—based on literature about successful writing groups—provides both a framework for defining the nature of the group that is the subject of this article, as well as a 'pick and mix' set of defining factors that could be used by prospective writing groups to choose their focus and define their activities.

Using this typology then, our writers' group is a continuous, peer-led, interdisciplinary group with monthly online meetings lasting on average one hour to 90 minutes. It meets Mondays or Fridays around lunchtime (depending on time zones) using Skype or Zoom, initially to support each other in the writing of critical realist doctorates and now to develop a joint article as well as encourage publishing from the theses. The group's main activities are reading each other's work, providing and discussing feedback, swapping critical realist resources and having social contact. Between meetings, members work on goals established at the end of each meeting.

We connected and formed the writing group focussing on our joint philosophical interest in critical realism. Critical realism is a philosophy of science (including social science) that posits a set of presuppositions about the fundamental nature of the world (ontology) and how we can know it (epistemology) (Bhaskar 2016). As a philosophy, critical realism identifies problems with positivism and empiricism and strong forms of interpretivism and constructionism. It offers an enabling platform for, amongst other things, research that seeks a realist causal explanation of outcomes in the social world. Central to critical realist thinking is the need to pursue ontology and not only focus on epistemological research questions (Bhaskar 1975). Importantly, Bhaskar differentiated the observed and the 'real', by acknowledging that what we see at the level of events does not explain what is happening at the level of 'real'. This involves exploring

potential underlying causes and powers and importantly combining explanation of what may be occurring alongside interpretation.

This study was motivated by our recognition of the importance of the doctoral writing group to supporting our developing understanding and application of critical realist ideas. Therefore, we aimed to develop an explicitly causal explanation for the writing group's formation, the form it took and the outcomes it provided, by theorising the implicated structures, conditions and causal mechanisms in these processes. Our additional aim was to provide an account of our work together which would inspire and encourage emerging critical realists. First, by providing an example of applied critical realist-informed research. Second, by illustrating the benefits we found working together and offering writing groups as a potential format through which scholars new to critical realism can support each other. Our analysis has been informed by existing research on the functioning and benefits of writing groups for doctoral students. The article contributes to such literature by providing a critical realist explanatory case study account of one such group's formation, form, and outcomes. It introduces a depth ontology currently absent in causal explanation in research about writing groups, social learning and communities of practice. The analysis of our writing group found two main sets of outcomes. First, those outcomes that are associated with other successful doctoral writing groups, such as the social learning that facilitates improved writing and the development of academic confidence. Second, those outcomes that contributed to the development of our critical realist 'underlabouring muscle'. Bhaskar (1989, vx) sought to '*underlabour*—at different levels and in different ways—for the sciences and especially the human sciences'. Early on, our group latched onto the idea of critical realism as an underlabourer for our research. A shared aspiration to 'get better' at

critical realism, we started expressing as a desire to develop our ‘underlabouring muscle’. Aitchinson (2010) states that:

(P)eer interaction in writing groups is doubly powerful because peers test and extend their conceptual knowledge as well as their capacity to communicate this knowledge through writing (87).

The activities of the writing group, that tested and extended our conceptual knowledge about critical realism and our capacity to communicate it, were key to developing the ‘underlabouring muscle’ by which critical realism supported the weight of each thesis.

The article begins with an introduction to literature establishing a role for writing groups in doctoral education and the process of social learning. It particularly focusses on the ideas which were most significant to developing a theoretical causal explanation of the outcomes of the writing group. After describing the methodological approach taken in the project, we introduce and describe the structure of our explanatory model. Finally, we move to a discussion of the model in more detail, describing the mechanisms and their interactions, and providing an explanation for the outcomes of our writing group.

Doctoral writing groups

Scholarly writing is an essential skill within the doctoral program, given that a candidate’s written output is the principal component which is essential for graduation (Bergen et al. 2020). That said, there are many barriers to learning writing skills.

Including whether it is the role of a supervisor to teach academic writing (Kumar and Aitchison 2018), the level of institutional support for the general pedagogy associated with doctoral writing, and the sometimes-intense pressure on writing for publication (Aitchison and Guerin 2014). While these imperatives are given, there is an emerging body of literature suggesting that writing groups for doctoral students and early career

academics have the practical outcome of developing research capabilities and supporting publishing outcomes (Bosanquet et al. 2014).

Definitions

Whilst there are different writing group formats discussed in the literature, the definition from Aitchison and Guerin (2014), describes writing groups as when ‘more than two people come together to work on their writing in a sustained way, over repeated gatherings, for doing, discussing or sharing their writing for agreed purposes’ (7). Formats used are a ‘shut-up-and-write’ structure, often employing the Pomodoro method, which has sustained writing in 25-minute periods (Doody et al. 2017); and/or review sessions, where time is allocated to specifically review one group members writing (Doody et al. 2017; Vacek et al. 2019; Wegener, Meier, and Ingerslev 2016). Also common is a combination of individual feedback, goal setting and group writing (Bergen et al. 2020; Tyndall et al. 2019). Yet other writing groups incorporate structured reading relating to book chapters on academic writing (Bergen et al. 2020) or formalised writing instruction sessions from a faculty member (Lassig, Dillon, and Diezmann 2013).

The format, composition and time frames are not always discussed within the literature. However, many meet weekly (Bergen et al. 2020; Doody et al. 2017; Tyndall et al. 2019; Vacek et al. 2019). Some of the writing groups are formed within the same discipline (Kumara and Aitchison 2018; Lassig, Dillon, and Diezmann 2013; Vacek et al. 2019; Wegener, Meier, and Ingerslev 2016), while other authors express the benefits of interdisciplinary groups (Bergen et al. 2020; de Caux et al. 2017; Doody et al. 2017). Another structural difference discussed within the literature is the temporal nature of engagement, with most appearing to meet in real time, in person or virtually. Though, Kozar and Lum (2013) also describe asynchronous groups, which are groups that

function through ‘exchange of text, audio and/or video messages’ (A-136). This mode may be advantageous when the groups’ members are not in the same time zone, as the interaction is not conducted in real time.

Writing groups also differ in their origins. For example, some writing groups are initiated, maintained, and enjoy continuous input from faculty members. While others may be started by faculty and then are left to manage the ongoing process. A third category of writing group are student-initiated and led, where the writing group relies solely on its own initiative and agency. Tyndall et al. (2019) believe that writing groups without the support of faculty staff are challenging to sustain, and others have endorsed the advantages of being established by, and/or encompassing supportive academic staff (Bergen et al. 2020; Lassig, Dillon, and Diezmann 2013). However, Kozar and Lum (2015) report positive benefits that are not dependent on whether or not the groups are facilitated.

Benefits

There are a range of possible social, emotional and writing-related benefits for doctoral students in writing groups. Studies draw attention to the role of stress and social isolation in doctoral attrition rates and the difficulty associated with finding a sense of balance between work, life and study (Doody et al. 2017). Collective learning and engaging with a community, where sharing feelings promotes a sense of support as well as motivation, encourages forward momentum and a recognition of personal development (Doody et al. 2017; Guerin et al. 2013; Kozar and Lum 2015; Kumar and Aitchison 2018; Lassig, Dillon, and Diezmann 2013). Guerin et al. (2013) highlight the positive role that individual accountability has in producing work for group members to critique. The literature supports that a sense of community provides social and

emotional advantages to doctoral students, individually and collectively, which facilitates their motivation and commitment to their doctoral project.

Further studies discuss the development of writing skills when critically reading and discussing other students' work (Doody et al. 2017). Writing groups are understood to increase competence and confidence in writing skills (Lassig, Dillon, and Diezmann 2013; Wegener, Meier, and Ingerslev 2016); develop peer networks; higher levels of productivity (Tyndall et al. 2019), increase motivation to write and promote a general sense of wellbeing (Doody et al. 2017; Beasy et al. 2020). Tyndall et al. (2019) also highlight the importance of trust within the group, drawing a positive correlation between levels of trust and group members' engagement. To provide opportunities to collectively practice academic writing skills and be confident in the giving and receiving of feedback, the group must have developed mutual trust (Guerin et al. 2013; Kozar and Lum 2015; Tyndall et al. 2019). Guerin (2014) argues that gift exchange theory offers a useful lens for understanding writing groups. She argues the offering and acceptance of feedback and indeed alternative insight, emphasises the critical relations of joint responsibility, reciprocity and eventually trust.

Challenges

Less frequently referred to are the potential adverse effects of the doctoral writing group, for example, over-familiarity, rivalry between group members, and a lack of commitment in engaging in group activities or meeting deadlines (de Caux et al. 2017; Wegener, Meier, and Ingerslev 2016). Group expectations and time commitments need to be agreed upon otherwise they may become a source of tension. Lassig, Dillon, and Diezmann (2013), attempted to write a joint paper on the experience of their doctoral writing group. However, the larger writing group was unable to reach consensus due to an inability to unify their writing styles. Additionally, deadlines that may be motivating

for one group member, may just add to workload stress for another (Guerin et al. 2013). There are also accounts of anxiety regarding editing another member's writing and reticence in providing feedback (Lassig, Dillon, and Diezmann 2013). In addition, Vacek et al. (2019) reflect on situations where advice may have been better sought from supervisors rather than the peer group, due to groups' limited knowledge of the entire doctoral journey.

There are also unhelpful presumptions relating to successful academic writing. First, that writing is a specific skill which some people possess, and others do not (Doody et al. 2017). This presumption can magnify a student's feelings of anxiety and doubt about their writing ability (Guerin et al. 2013; Wegener, Meier and Ingerslev 2016). Second, that doctoral writing should be an independent activity, which dissuades a student from joining a group format and may augment a student's feelings of social isolation (Doody et al. 2017; Wegener, Meier, and Ingerslev 2016). These issues may be magnified for students who are learning by distance where the opportunity to create and then develop a scholarly identity through writing is less supported (Kozar and Lum 2013). In this respect, regular contact with others experiencing similar difficulties, has been shown to support an emerging sense of confidence in one's writing skills and a lessening of this sense of loneliness (Doody et al. 2017).

Supporting doctoral writing groups

There are many key components which have been identified as supporting the successful nature of writing groups, particularly those of an interdisciplinary nature. Stemming from Lattuca's (2002, 720) aspects of interdisciplinary learning; relational, mediated, transformative and situated which notes that 'learning occurs in interaction and in situ', Bergen et al. (2020, 1) recommend six factors to consider prior to forming and interdisciplinary writing group: '1. vision and purpose; 2. dedicated time and space;

3. institutional support; 4. readings or educational material; 5. socialization opportunities; and 6. shared responsibility'. These considerations acknowledge the nature of interdisciplinary interactions as spaces for social learning, the necessity of neutrality (yet conversely exposure to other ways of thinking), and also the emergence of practical social relations and social capital (Bergen et al. 2020).

While a number of structures may drive the creation and sustainability of writing groups, there is a recognition of a commonality of experience centred on writing which is inherent in many narratives, that of the production of 'thoughts, ideas, reflection and texts' as one doctoral student put it (Doody et al. 2017, 151). In addition, interdisciplinary writing groups recognise the social nature of writing and the subsequent and sometimes forgotten notion that doctoral writing is actually directed at a broader community of peers (Beasy et al. 2020, Doody et al. 2017). Accordingly, writing groups and the interdisciplinary interaction that emerges can be seen as social practice that serves to enable the development of agency and enriched learning (Bergen et al. 2020).

Key aspects which are reported as enhancing doctoral writing groups are a) voluntary membership (Ferguson 2009); and b) agreement of commitment levels (Lassig, Dillon, and Diezmann 2013). As previously discussed, involvement of faculty staff, structures and format of the group are associated with levels of engagement and accountability for giving and receiving feedback. This brief literature review has focused on doctoral writing groups and their intended, and sometimes unintended outcomes. Findings from the literature review indicate that while there is considerable research into the institutionally supported writing group, there is a smaller evidence base concerning the mechanisms that enable student-originated and indeed student-driven writing groups. Building on this literature review we set out to explore the nature

of our own writing group by seeking insight into the complex social relations that emerged from our interactions and the subsequent leap in understanding that resulted. We asked: how do we explain the process of formation of our doctoral writing group, the form it took and the outcomes it provided us as developing critical realist scholars?

Methodology

Two years on from the conference at which we connected—almost to the day—we met online to talk about ‘what next’ for our writing group. In August 2020, we had each submitted and we were at various stages in the examination and conferral process. However, there was already a shared agreement that the group had contributed improvements to our writing, been a platform for our development as critical realist inspired scholars and provided valued peer support throughout the development of our individual doctoral projects. To understand our good fortune, we decided to undertake a research project to clarify the group's outcomes and seek to understand the structures, mechanisms, and conditions from which these outcomes emerged. The research project in the form of a case study (Yin, 2017). The primary data source was an auto-ethnographic account from each member in response to question prompts (Chang 2008).

Choosing a critical realist approach to auto-ethnographic research provides a philosophical framework that accounts for the reflexive nature of the exercise and yet notes the ontological reality and the epistemological possibilities (Davies, 2012). Our research approach was underpinned by critical realism, which posits that reality consists of the domains of the real, actual and empirical, is stratified and emergent, and that causal mechanisms are discovered through conceptual abstraction and theorising (Bhaskar 2016). In essence, critical realism requires a researcher to move beyond what is observable empirically (at the level of events) and develop theories of the fundamental transfactual structures, mechanisms and conditions (Danermark et al.

2002). Therefore, our analysis sought to go beyond a description of what happened with our writing group to try and understand why it developed as it did and delivered the results we identified.

The utility of critical realism-informed auto ethnographic research assumes a fully developed reflexivity anchored in a social realist approach that seeks both explanatory purchase, yet also leaves itself open to continued questioning and discussion (Davies, 2012). As Davies (2012, 21) notes “Critical realism promotes a creative tension between the empirical, the actual and the real to produce explanation without encouraging flights of theoretical fancy”. As part of ethnographic practice, this reflexive awareness reaches beyond our own epistemological understanding to recognise an ontological reality, which forms a solid platform to argue for both positive and negative theoretical abstractions (Davies, 2012). There is a danger in auto ethnographic research to face inward, to become absorbed by what is right in front of us. The philosophical foundation of critical realism disrupts this tendency and supports a focus on the multiplicity of perspectives not immediately apparent. Therefore, our analysis sought to go beyond a description of what happened with our writing group to try and understand why it developed as it did and delivered the results we identified.

Essentially, our analysis focussed on: how and why did our writing group develop, what benefits did it deliver to its members, and why were these outcomes generated in our specific context? Following the critical realist ontology of depth reality, we asked what are the structures, contexts and mechanisms that could explain the outcomes we observed over time and as the group developed. This paper is motivated by a desire to offer practical inspiration to other ‘early career critical realists’ by offering an account of the transformation our writing group engendered in us as

scholars, as well as the conjunctural and contingent causal pathways through which we theorise these outcomes were realised.

The data collection and analysis were undertaken in three collaborative stages, which were designed and agreed at the start of the project. First, we developed questions intended to capture data on which our structural (and later causal) analyses would be based. Each of us wrote a statement outlining our individual response to the questions:

- What motivations did you have to join? How did these motivations change over time?
- When deciding to join, what did you initially think the group might be (activities) or might be for (objectives)?
- What contexts and conditions supported the establishment and continuation of the group? What was in place before? Or what was lacking?
- What actual activities did we do? What work did we undertake when we met and because of meeting? What was the nature of our interactions and the assistance we provided/received?
- From a personal perspective, what outcomes did the group give you?
- How do you think your doctoral writing experience would have been different without the group?

Second, we made a thematically organised table capturing abstracted structures and their theorised causal mechanisms, the contexts in which they operated (or not), and observed outcomes. The process of collation and synthesis of the data from our three ‘testimonies’ was an iterative one, with each of us working into one shared document over time and discussing our progress at Zoom (virtual) meetings. Through conceptual abstraction—identifying the properties that determine the nature of a phenomenon or

that makes it what is it, and not something different— and reflexive awareness (Davies 2012), we developed a structural model for the preconditions and features of our writing group as it developed over time.

Bhaskar describes the process of causal analysis as ‘imagining a model of a mechanism that, if it were real, would account for the phenomenon in question’ given a particular set of circumstances and when combined with other mechanisms in specific combinations (2016, 79). To this end, we asked retroductively-oriented questions to theorise the social relationships, social actions and motivations, the generative mechanisms and processes that produced the outcomes we identified and which made the writing group possible (Danermark et al. 2002; Armet 2013). Our explanation, and how we evoked the mechanisms generating outcomes, also involved a redescription or recontextualisation of what we observed in theoretical language (abduction) (Porpora 2011).

In the table, we made additional notes inspired by counterfactual thinking, consideration of the effects of potential absent mechanisms, and description of the contingent relationships we identified. We also captured references to concepts from recent theoretical literature about the role of writing groups in doctoral education and the mechanisms of social learning. This literature—as well as the different ways in which we had ‘operationalised’ aspects of the critical realist philosophy in our doctoral work—underpinned a dialogue between our descriptive narratives and developing theoretical causal understanding of the development, functioning and outcomes of the research writing group. Finally, we used what was captured in the table to develop a diagrammatic representation of the structures, relationships, conditions, and mechanisms we understood to provide the best causal explanation of its generation, success and value to us as members.

<< Figure 1 approximately here >>

Explanatory Model

In the explanatory model summarised in Figure 1, rectangles contain the label for an event, condition, or structure, with the mechanisms of each listed below. Arrows suggest the causal connections and emergence pathways leading to the outcomes the writing group provided. The diagrammatic representation of our model is conceptualised as four linked segments. The first segment (labelled A) contains the connected structures and causal mechanisms which we have identified as prerequisites conditioning the formation of the group. In short, they are our motivations for attendance at the IACR conference in Lillehammer in August 2018 and the outcomes relating to our participation. The next segment (labelled B) contains associated conditions or contexts that enabled the writing group to form and contributed to its sustainability. Under the heading of 'Writing Group', the third segment (labelled C) captures the activities and features we identified as defining the structure of the group and the mechanisms of each of these attributes. Finally, the writing group's outcomes are listed in the fourth segment (labelled D). The use of segments in the diagram is designed to facilitate navigation of the model and suggest emergence over time.

Discussion

Having introduced an overview of the explanatory model (Figure 1), we now turn to a fuller discussion of the structures, contexts and mechanisms implicated in the establishment, nature and outcomes of the writing group.

The prerequisites for forming our writing group

Recognised lack of writing group. When we reviewed our initial motivations, we found that there were many similarities and themes that resonated with all of us. There was a

sense that we were already **primed** to be looking for a peer network, noted by the fact that we had enrolled in the pre-conference workshop and conference at Lillehammer. Through different mechanisms in our academic backgrounds, we also were inherently aware of the potential value that regular writing, feedback from peers outside of our supervision teams, and creating mini deadlines could afford.

Limited critical realist supervision. Only one of our group had a supervisor with a background in critical realist research. Collectively we were motivated to find the support of critical realists external to our advisors and felt we would benefit from further critique of our critical realist writing.

Immersion in pre-conference workshop. The pre-conference workshop was a total immersion of critical realist thinking, providing formal and informal opportunities to discuss each other's research projects. A component of this program was to present our research and actively participate in discussions of our projects. This opportunity to connect with others was well timed. We three were all in a similar position, where we felt ready to discuss our thinking and current outputs. Additionally, the pre-conference PhD project discussions focussed on the application of critical realism within research as opposed to exclusively abstract theoretical constructs. Collectively we identified the critical realist community as approachable and supportive. There was great generosity of leaders in the field giving of their time. Environmentally, the venue also assisted, as we were all housed together in one hotel, which enabled discussions to continue outside of the conference schedule. Alongside our increased knowledge and application of theory, we also formed new connections with researchers from different disciplines and from different parts of the globe.

Collegial reassurance. One of the benefits of conference attendance was to allay an underlying fear of getting 'it' wrong. We were motivated to seek expertise to ensure

our application of critical realist concepts aligned with philosophical constructs. The opportunity for deeper engagement with the tenets of critical realism and the social relations that emerged fortified our beliefs that we were in fact on the right track. What we found was that the alliance with peers added confidence and support of our thinking.

Leap in understanding and confidence. The conference experience similarly led to increased understanding and confidence levels, and this engendered a desire to keep our renewed focus and motivation active. This in part may have been due to the immersion in the topic, as may be anticipated in a multi-day event. However, increase in confidence has been recognised in communities of practice literature. Exposure to interdisciplinary application of a methodology encourages assurance of one's own understanding and legitimacy in academic status (Kozar and Lum 2015).

In addition to the outcomes generated from our participation in the IACR conference, we identified two additional contextual factors that facilitated establishment of the writing group by making it easier to regularly commit to engaging with each other on critical realist content.

Geographical context. There was certainly a convenience in similar time zones as we progressed in our electronic meetings—there was never more than a three-hour time difference. Also, we shared a similar culture and language, which assisted connection through joint norms and expectations, as well as analogous humour.

Shared doctoral timelines. We were at a very similar stage in our doctorates, with commonalities of experience and requirements in meeting writing expectations. Additionally, there was a joint sense of disconnection from the broad critical realist community given our geography and dearth of local groups available. These mechanisms culminated in the necessity and valuing of 'a tribe'. In this case, a socially

constructed grouping of like-minded individuals with shared interests and goals, prepared to support each other.

In summary, our structural and causal analysis—incorporating counterfactual thinking and hypothesising about why another potential member chose not to join—found that the mechanisms of several motivational factors and contexts operated interactively as preconditions for the development of our writing group. We each felt a need for a critical realist peer-network to supplement or support the guidance available in our supervision panel and allay our fears of ‘getting it wrong’. These needs motivated each of us to attend a specific IACR conference, the benefits of which fuelled our desire to maintain contact and continue in an activity to prolong and extend the confidence, focus, enthusiasm and general well-being engendered by the meeting and interaction with its participants. Our motivations existed in the context of geographic proximity and a serendipitously shared experience of where we were placed within the doctoral writing journey.

Research writing and peer support outcomes

Seeking to identify the outcomes of our writing group, we realised that there are broadly two areas in which they cluster. The first are generated from the structures and functions of a research writing or peer support group and reflect existing thinking about the use of social learning in doctoral writing. These could reflect the outcomes of any successful writing group. The second relate directly to the development of our individual and collective critical realism ‘underlabouring muscle’—that is, our improved capacity to do research in which our thinking at every stage is informed by critical realist meta-theory. Each of these clusters of outcomes, and the mechanisms through which they are generated, will be elaborated in turn.

Meeting Structures. We met monthly. In our context, working full-time or remotely to the university, we think this made the group more sustainable than if we had aimed for a fortnightly or weekly appointment, which is more common (Bergen et al. 2020; Doody et al. 2017; Tyndall et al. 2019; Vacek et al. 2019). We found the frequency manageable within our schedules, yet regular enough to maintain continuity. The date and time for the next appointment was confirmed at the end of each meeting, as well as the member responsible for ‘presenting’ their written work for specifically orientated feedback or setting the agenda for discussion. With a small group, this structured approach still allowed for flexibility in the face of diary conflicts, but it was enough formality to motivate us by creating mini-writing and feedback deadlines. The structures generated momentum and facilitated continuation of the group—providing an energy and sense of obligation to oneself and others more powerful than the competing work, study, and personal demands on our time.

One theme of the literature is that writing groups are difficult to make work because of these competing demands on students’ time and should not be considered as a key approach to doctoral learning. Yet as Aitchison and Guerin (2014) argue, the social practice pedagogies and subsequent social learning found within writing groups actually mirror the required emerging research scholarship and writing skills that need to be developed in a doctoral student. Therefore, the process of overcoming competing demands to enable continuance of a writing group and generate successful outcomes, is itself a component of doctoral learning.

Our findings reflect those of other research that articulate practices hindering or enriching face to face research writing groups, including having voluntary participation and a small group size (Ferguson 2009), joint development and articulation of meeting procedures from the outside (Boud and Lee 2005), and distributing writing in advance

and with specific questions to guide feedback (Maher et al. 2008). Focusing specifically on virtual or distance modes of writing group implementation, Kozar and Lum (2013) discuss the available literature evaluating facilitated versus ‘teacherless’ writing groups. Although there is research suggesting that a facilitator is beneficial to writing groups, there is less evidence about the efficacy and sustainability of non-expert-led groups. Nonetheless, these authors hypothesise that the capabilities, autonomy, and independence of doctoral students are better developed in a student-led model where having more freedom results in forms of agency (Beasy et al. 2020) Our experience was that we developed a sustainable model without expert intervention—although as ‘mature-age’ students, with established and relatively organised work practices, we had useful skills and experience from which to draw. It is also likely that our critical realist-related motivations and justifications for the group provided additional energy and sustainability to our commitment, both to the activities of the writing group and our colleagues.

Writing Group Activities. Research writing groups come in all shapes and sizes, but many are either established to provide a forum to encourage a regular writing practice or to improve the writing quality of members by creating opportunities for peer feedback (Aitchison and Guerin 2014). In our case we conceived the writing group as an opportunity to give and receive regular feedback on our writing. Potentially, at the micro-level of sentence and paragraph editorial advice, but also more broadly in terms of providing feedback on our development of an argument, thesis structure (the role of individual chapters) and our incorporation and sequencing of theoretical and empirical elements. We experienced that receiving feedback, and maybe even more importantly giving feedback, improved the quality of our writing, the cohesiveness of our thesis arguments, and our critical capacities—enabling more informed and confident decision-

making in the development of our individual theses. The need to meet group-set writing deadlines also created helpful ‘artificial’ chapter and paper writing deadlines within the looser doctoral project timeline.

Informal conversation. We certainly used our time ‘formally’ to discuss our writing, the questions we posed for each other about critical realism and our individual theses. However, we also developed a collegial friendship, facilitated by mutual encouragement, commiseration, and celebration as we navigated the development of our theses and reached important milestones towards completion. Although not perhaps an initial objective, the group ended up delivering emotional support and a space of wellbeing during the doctoral process which we each identified as a valued outcome (Beasy et al. 2020).

In summary, we identified that the meeting structures we established and maintained, the activities of our writing group, and the informal conversations we engaged in over two years, generated a sustained momentum for a program of activity that improved our writing and confidence, as well as providing emotional support along the way. Aitchison and Guerin (2014, 12) argue that ‘writing groups do a lot more than simply develop writing skills: writing groups also provide an important emotional space for doctoral students and early career researchers’. They contend that the connectedness, belonging and companionship of writers’ groups are part of the process of developing researcher identities. The mechanisms explaining the increased confidence of writing group participants are further elaborated by Guerin (2014), employing Mauss’ *gift exchange theory*. She explains that the acts of offering gifts, and the mutual obligation that ensues from accepting gifts, brings writing group scholars into a relationship of trust and mutual obligation in a collective context. The belonging and connectedness of

a research writing group therefore increases confidence through feedback that ‘takes on different meanings from that provided more formally by supervisors’ (128).

Development of a critical realist ‘underlabouring muscle’

When we reflected on what had emerged from our writing group interactions, we found ourselves instinctively thinking like critical realists, searching for mechanisms, like clues, considering context and working back through the process initiating a retroductive response to the data. This evaluative method felt practiced and proficient, however, this ‘underlabouring’ had not always been so automatically reflexive. Our early commitments to critical realism were challenged by the relative paucity of exemplars of applied work in our existing communities of practice, little was available to improve our general understanding of applied critical realism. Finding like-minded researchers also proved frustrating and it was not until we met at a critical realist conference that understanding began to take shape. Finding a critical realist community became a turning point, and the establishment of our writing group provided the concrete support and motivation that we had yet to fully articulate as absent. Being part of our writing group allowed us to practise being critical realists in a safe space, where the exchange of ideas across disciplines became an important part of the monthly meetings.

Central to the emerging social relations of a writing group is the knowledge-sharing where writing groups act as powerful mechanisms for change. Kozar and Lum (2013) argue that writing groups provide further benefits in that they strengthen participants’ identities as academics, while also promoting a sense of professional community (Aitchison 2010; Boud and Lee 2005). This claim is embedded in a *community of practice* framework (Lave and Wenger 1991) proposing that people receive several professional and personal advantages from reciprocal interactions with

others engaged in a shared practice (Kozar and Lum 2015). Successful writing groups like ours function as socio-cultural spaces that grow responsibility and agency, and often rely on peer to peer learning as the pedagogic discourse rather than a focus on supervision or even the more recent advisory mode of doctoral education (Boud and Lee 2005).

Our writing group supported the further development of our critical realist ‘underlabouring muscle’. If we call the conference in Lillehammer the original boot camp, the writing group certainly allowed us to build on, tone, strengthen and flex what we began to develop there.

Critical Realist Discussions. Our writing and discussion sessions forced us to articulate what we had previously, and only tentatively, put to paper. This verbalising provided a safe and secure space to practice which supported the iterative layering of abstract concepts (Beasy et al. 2020). In essence a place to practice doing critical realism. Through a process of social and professional learning, this interaction between social and cultural structures and our own personal emergent powers, enhanced individual reflective practices and a better understanding of what Haggis (2003) identifies as the ‘situatedness’ of our social practice.

Our developing knowledge of the practices and norms of the critical realist world emerged from the peer learning and communities of practice described by Lave and Wenger (1991). We valued this situated learning and recognised it as an important part of our scholarly progression in a space where it is sometimes difficult to move from social ontology to what Archer (1995) calls practical social theorising and the necessity to provide explanatory critique.

Critical Realist Resources. Each of us, at the beginning of our doctorate, started with limited or no knowledge of critical realism. Therefore, a large and time-consuming

part of the process was individually getting to grips with the spectrum of literature, resources and groups that are part of the critical realist world. Coming together as a writing group allowed us to pool our resources, to share the materials we had each found in our discipline or through personal experiences and interactions with other critical realists. Due to the nature of our projects and their specific needs, to some degree we gravitated to different aspects of the literature or to different critical realist inspired analytical frameworks. Having the opportunity to share our approaches and the work on which they were based, increased the breadth of material available to each of us and sometimes filled some (obvious in retrospect) gaps in our knowledge.

Interdisciplinarity. We realised the importance and opportunity of the interdisciplinary perspective we each brought to the table. The principal benefit of our different backgrounds in health, education and sociology was that the focus of our sessions remained on the application of critical realist theory to research practice. Although interested in each other's work, and with a capacity to respond as a 'lay' critical reader, our lack of depth subject knowledge meant the focus more naturally and easily stayed with the 'problem' of applying critical realism. As mentioned above, our interdisciplinarity also enabled cross-fertilisation of literature.

Sharing our resources, learning to speak and write more fluently about critical realism, and engaging in research discussions that transcended disciplinary lines developed our critical realist 'underlabouring muscle'. We became more confident to talk about and see how the structure and arguments of our writing were developing along critical realist lines. We became more confident in our written outputs, but also our ability to verbally articulate the role of critical realism in our projects to a variety of informed and uninformed audiences. Each of us reported feeling that our thinking about

critical realism had grown more nuanced and developed greater breadth through participation in the group.

Conclusion

The formation of our writing group was aided by mechanisms reflecting the similarity of our interests in critical realism, and our needs and motivations as emerging critical realist scholars. Vivaly, the contextual factor of our attendance at the same 2018 IACR conference, together with our relatively close geographical/cultural locations and shared position on our doctoral timelines, enabled the identified mechanisms to operate. Our writing group took a particular structural form, reflecting the activities we engaged in and approaches to framing our interactions. The mechanisms we identified, embedded in the group's operational structure, generated both successful social learning outcomes and developed our capacity to *do* critical realism. Our analysis was supported by existing literature on doctoral writing groups, Mauss' *gift exchange theory* (Guerin 2014) and Lave and Wenger's *community of practice* framework (1991). This literature gave us theoretical frameworks to identify mechanisms within the writing group's structures and the conditions in which they may be operating. Alongside our analysis, this literature provides evidence for what writing group features may work in other contexts to support scholars new to critical realism.

The title of this paper started as a bit of joke, knowing the name of the Sillitoe short story, *The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Runner*, but not its plot or themes. Even after recognising that there was no useful metaphorical connection that could be made between the short story and our writing group experience, we kept the title regardless. It expresses a truth about our situation, mid-way through our theses, as we came individually to the 2018 IACR conference. Each of us felt the loneliness of isolation from, what we experienced as, a geographically and intellectually distant

critical realist community. We identified as students—obviously in terms of our enrolment as doctoral students—but maybe more crucially, as budding critical realists. Our writing group helped to mitigate the distance. It gave us social learning that encompassed how to *do* a thesis, whilst at the same time increasing our confidence with critical realism and improving the quality of how our research and writing was informed by it. We also gave and received important emotional and practical support.

By reflecting on our experience and seeking to explain how and why our writing group supported us as emerging critical realism scholars, we hope to inspire other students and early career researchers to ‘find a tribe’ of similarly motivated, supportive, and at the same time, critical colleagues with a shared goal. We hope that the analysis will inspire and, together with the literature that helped us understand our experience, provide guidance and direction to anyone seeking to replicate or discover a similar writing group structure for themselves.

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