Conceptualizing Critical Friendship as a Protective Measure in Academia

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Abstract

Critical friendship is often used in the field of education to refer to relationships based on support and critical critique of professional practice. However, we posit that critical friendship has the potential as both a protective measure and mode of functional support for individuals negotiating the lived experiences and consequences of being working-class in the academy. Based on the auto-ethnographic narratives of two self-defined working-class doctoral students living and working in Ontario, Canada, we find that (mis)perceptions of incompetence; negotiating the academy as women; income, debt, and the tensions this creates result in the need for this redefined understanding of critical friendship.

Keywords

Critical friendship, working-class, doctoral student, auto-ethnography, competence, gender, debt

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As PhD candidates, the authors of this article reside in, perhaps, one of the most marginal spaces of academia. As part of the Canadian university system we, as PhD candidates, exist and work in a setting that boasts the second lowest PhD completion rate among 16 peer countries as defined by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (Canada Conference Board 2014). Canadian universities currently face austerity measures which impact students through decreased government funding, increased tuition costs, and related increased student debt. At the same time, however, Canada's universities are experiencing what the Canadian Council for Policy Alternatives (CCPA) has called 'administrative bloat' (2017, p. 10). This 'bloat' has seen 'escalating costs for upper management positions (yearly salaries in excess of $100,000) while less funding is reaching the classroom' (CCPA 2017, p. 10). The systemic fragility of our positions within the academy is exacerbated by the socio-economic, political, gendered, and personal facets of our lives and work, including, but not limited to: negotiating the academy as women, as mothers, with debt, and as commuters. Taken together, the personal and academic conditions of our lives provide a context which requires us to navigate the precarious nature of our existence at once within, or at least perceived by others to be within, the 'Ivory tower' and outside of it. We acknowledge that some characteristics of our being and our

positionality, such as our womanhood, marginalize us. Other components of our positionality, including our identification as white settlers in a settler nation state, provide us privilege. Embedded in power relations of gender, university standing, race, and finance, our own experiences seem to echo findings from an Ontario branch study of the Canadian Federation of Students (CFS) which identify anxiety, money, and a lack of institutional support as greatly impacting the mental health of graduate students (CFS Ontario 2016, p. 1).

This article explores the issues outlined above and, in doing so, conceptualizes critical friendship as both a protective measure and mode of functional support for individuals negotiating the lived experiences and consequences of being working-class in the academy. Critical friendship has been defined as a relationship between individuals, or groups of individuals, where one, or more of those involved, 'asks provocative questions, provides data to examine through another lens, and offers critique of a person's work' (Costa & Kallick 1993, p. 50). Importantly, the work done amongst critical friends aims to push one another outside their 'comfort zones' in order to improve professional practice through 'supportive but challenging relationships' (Swaffield 2007, p. 207). Informed by our own experiences and illuminated through a series of auto-ethnographic narratives, we argue that the operationalization of critical friendships in the academy, through the purposeful seeking out, cultivating, and maintenance of these relationships, can challenge the themes of experience of working-class academics identified by Warnock (2016) including, but not limited to: alienation, imposter syndrome, debt, and questioning the meritocracy. Thus, we wish to extend the understanding of critical friendship beyond its utility for professional development, as a practical method for fostering personal and professional growth and wellness amongst working-class academics.

In the paper that follows we have come together to explore the ways critical friendship has impacted our development both personally and as emerging scholars in the field of education. We begin by providing some clarification on key terms used within this paper. Next, we provide some information about critical friendships and how they came to be important in our lives and work. The development of critical friendship as important to us is closely connected to our ontological positioning, epistemologies, as well as lived experiences, which are explored in the following section. A literature review is then presented wherein we provide some commentary on the ways working-class studies intersects with our own experiences and the work of this article. Next, we move into our findings and discussion. Here we highlight four major themes that arose from our auto-ethnographic narratives: (mis)perceptions of incompetence; negotiating the academy as women; income, debt, and the tensions this creates; and the value of critical friendship. We end this article by both looking back and forwards: back to the ways our own critical friendship has developed, and forward by making suggestions for further research in this area and by providing some specific ideas around the seeking out, cultivating, and maintenance of critical friendships.

Terminology

In using the term *protective measure* we draw from the work of Sidney Cobb, an epidemiologist who studied the effects of life and job stress. Cobb's (1976) work explored the ways high levels of social support, or relationships which make people feel cared for, valued, and part of a social network, function to protect the individual's physical and mental health. In this article we

connect the notion of protective measures with that of *functional support*. Author 1 was introduced to the concept of functional support by an article written by one of her PhD program professors. Richmond and Smith (2012) utilized the concept in their research on Aboriginal youth's sense of belonging in schools. Drawing on both Richmond and Smith (2012) and Cohen and Syme (1985), we define functional support as the characteristics of a social relationship which provide concrete support through action, such as discussion and advice.

Throughout this article we also use the terms *settler-state* and describe ourselves as *settlers.* At this point we feel it appropriate to provide some explanation of these terms. Canada is a settler-state; that is, Canada is a country where the colonizers never left. This requires that we reflect on and explicitly consider the ways present-day politics of place and identity are 'enmeshed with the legacies of imperialism' (Jacobs 1996, p. 4) and the enduring processes of colonialism. As such, our description of ourselves as settler women is a purposeful acknowledgement of the history of colonialism, of Canada as a settler-state, and the benefits we reap as descendants of those who actively settled the land we now know as Canada. Moreover, we use this term as a prompt towards interrogating what Epp (2008) refers to as the settler problem in which we actively confront our own complicity in the ongoing legacies of colonialism as well as the actions we take in an effort to participate in moves towards reconciliation.

Critical Friendship

In the field of education, critical friendship has largely been taken up as a method of professional relationship building aimed at improving educator practice through reflection, discussion, and support. Costa and Kallick (1993) provide what has become, perhaps, the most widely distributed definition, which is worthy of repeating here. They describe the critical friend as an individual who, through action, 'asks provocative questions, provides data to examine through another lens, and offers critique of a person's work' all the while striving to support the success of their friend's work through critique and dialogue (Costa & Kallick 1993, p. 50). Similarly, Swaffield (2007) has described critical friendship as 'a supportive yet challenging relationship between professionals…' (p. 206) that operates to improve teacher practice through flexible and functional support. Bambino (2002) has discussed how time spent in a critical friend group with other teachers offered opportunities for improving teacher practice through the provision of 'structures for effective feedback and strong support' (p. 25). Through this group, Bambino (2002) argues honest, difficult, and critical reflection required teachers to move beyond a deficit line of thinking in order to consider how their own actions may be responsible for their students 'low' performances (p. 26). Like all relationships, however, critical friendships may only be effective if they develop and maintain certain characteristics.

Critical friendship relationships require trust (Swaffield 2005, p. 44), clear communication (Baskerville & Goldblatt 2009, p. 208), and a shared understanding of purpose (Bambino 2002, p. 27). Hill (2002) has identified the skills necessary to engage as a critical friend: attentiveness, reflective listening, being articulate, being inquiry oriented, and encouraging the collection of multiple forms of data. Achinstein and Meyer (1997), however, caution that there is a tension which can, and often does, arise in the 'traditional dichotomy and hierarchical relationship between friendship and critique' (p. 5), and argue that a critical friendship is difficult to create and maintain.

Approaching critical friendship in a different way, Hedges (2010) has offered an argument that there is value in drawing upon critical friendship in research in order to support the co-construction of knowledge between educators and education researchers. Like Hedges, we believe that critical friendship has much to offer the field of education beyond organizational improvement. The literature concerning the role and efficacy of critical friendship in education has been largely concerned with educational leadership programming, standards raising, and collegial relationships amongst professionals working in a school setting (Baskerville & Goldblatt 2009, p. 207). Thus, in this paper, we extend the operationalization of critical friendship in order to elucidate its value for those existing in marginal positions within the academy. In doing so, we work to alter, in some ways, the conceptualization of critical friendship as presented by educational leadership programs, as a formal and professional relationship between colleagues. Instead, we wish to put forth a vision of critical friendship as a valuable relationship that, when operationalized through an acknowledgement of the intersectionality of our lives, can operate at both a professional and personal level. In doing so, we argue critical friendship offers much potential in terms of supporting personal well-being, professional development, and academic growth. As such, we believe critical friendships should be sought out and carefully maintained by those living and working at the edges of the academy.

Seeking out critical friendship

The critical friendship established by the authors of this paper evolved, in part, due to the nature of our academic work, that is, both authors are doctoral students in the field of Indigenous education. Our positionalities are informed by our self-identification as settler women, as described above, and our personal and academic interests in decolonization. Without using decolonization as a social justice framework to avoid our own complicity in the ongoing colonial project (Tuck & Yang 2012), we understand it to be in relation to colonization, where decolonization makes way for 'possibility, a way out of colonialism' (Smith 1999, p. 204). Although working in diverse areas of this field, each author is interested in disrupting colonial knowledge and the systems that privilege settler peoples. Given that we often put at the forefront our settler, female positionality, we appreciate Zweig's (2016) work which acknowledges that '[b]ringing class questions to the fore should never be a recipe for ignoring racial, gender, and ethnic claims for justice and equality' (p. 19), and as Gillbourn (2012) writes, 'race and class inequalities cannot be fully understood in isolation' (p. 29). Thus, we view our positionality as the outcome of ever-changing and intersecting subjectivities. We are then making an argument that we are molded, influenced, and impacted by the multiple personal, socio-political, cultural, racial, gender, socio-economic (and more) facets of our lives. In doing so, we draw on feminist standpoint theory which works to explain the ways women's experiences, as fundamentally differing from the male experience in androcentric-based systems of power, produce particular knowledge(s) (Harding 2004). Standpoint theory has drawn significant criticism since its emergence in the 1970s and 1980s. These criticisms have questioned the existence of a women's 'standpoint,' describing it as essentialist and as ignoring the ways gender, race, class, and colonialism (among others) impact experience and knowledge development (Harding 2004). Our claims of intersectional positionality and our existence as individuals experiencing both privilege and marginalization in our lives, then, are supported by the work of Patricia Hill-Collins (1997), who describes standpoint theory as an 'interpretive framework dedicated to

explicating how knowledge remains central to maintaining and changing unjust systems of power' (p. 375). As well, the words of Wolkowitz, Lovell, and Andermahr (1997) advocate for the understanding of relationality in standpoint theory rather than the presupposition of a single, and inevitable, women's experience.

Author 1 and Author 2 were introduced to each other while attending the same doctoral program. Because so few students in the program focus on Indigenous education, it became vital to develop a professional relationship, which soon became a personal friendship as well. While discussing program milestones, family history and current circumstances, important readings related to our field, and the challenges of being commuter students, we came to realize the importance of developing a critical friendship where we could share, question, critique, and support each other. Through these conversations, subsequent discussions related to this paper, and in other work we have done together, we realized that we too identify as part of the working-class given our partners' occupations, the intellectual labour we contribute to the university, other employment positions we hold, and our marginalized status in the academy. In the literature review below we explore the term 'working-class' in order to support our use of this category of understanding and to introduce the ways it is implicated in the analysis which follows.

Literature Review

While 'working-class' has been defined across the social sciences (Attfield & Giuffre 2016), Linkon and Russo (2016) describe class as involving 'relations of power, based in economic positions that shape individuals, culture, history, and interests' (p. 5). Therefore, class is used to describe this broadly understood culture, or is used as a category of analysis (Linkon & Russo 2016). With its roots in labor studies (Russo & Linkon 2005), working-class studies investigates 'the organization and deployment of economic power in the labor process and in the military and political arenas; and the creation and operation of culture and identity' (Zweig 2016, p. 17). However, work in this field from the 1980s and 90s is described as being a platform for white, working-class men, with a particular closeness to whiteness studies (Russo & Linkon 2005), while more recent scholarship advocates for an intersectional approach (Warnock 2016; Zweig 2016) that brings together the 'complex entanglements of class with race, gender, and other identities and cultural groups' (Zweig 2016, p. 18).

One of the ways working-class studies has incorporated this intersectionality is through the examination of class and gender (Linkon & Russo 2016). For example, Arner (2014) describes the role of gender and class in hiring practices, specifically for English professoriate at the Modern Languages Association convention. She suggests that these intersections impact where students, and future professors, study; how prepared one might be for a job interview based on past academic and personal experiences; and the prestige of institution one might find work at.

Working-class studies also investigates the lives of working-class academics more broadly. Drawing on eight autoethnographic collections written over a span of 30 years, Warnock (2016) identifies seven themes or patterns of working-class academic life: feelings of alienation, feelings that one lacks cultural capital, experiences with stereotyping and microaggressions, experiencing survivor guilt and the impostor syndrome, the struggle of passing as middle-class,

accumulating high student debt, and misuse as adjunct labor. Also drawing on 'autobiographically-inflected literature' (Brook & Mitchell 2012, p. 588), Brook & Mitchell (2012), and Rennels (2014), identify that many working-class academics struggle to speak about their families or life in the university. With particular emphasis on her dedication to community as an Indigenous faculty member, Sellers (2014) identifies one's relationship with community, one's geographies, as something which is not supported by middle-class views of sacrifice, prestige, and success. She further identifies advantages for staying in one's community:

> For local working-class faculty, we have the strong advantage of living in our home communities and the strength of those roots to carry us through our lives and into old age—those are the roots we can count on regardless of our income (para. 10).

Brook and Mitchell (2012) similarly identify the ways in which working-class academics can use their positionality to support students of low socio-economic status. These professors understand the isolation and exclusion, the need to 'pass' as middle class, and the challenges associated with linguistic and institutional practices.

Like the marginalization experienced by some working-class academics, graduate student status is another site of intersection. While working-class academics are often stigmatized, graduate students in particular need to negotiate 'rising tuition costs, decreased assistance, and an increased pressure to perform a middle-class professorial role without the means to do so' (Rennels 2014, para. 62). Similar to Warnock's (2016) work, Jensen (2014) found survivor guilt to be one of the 'psychological difficulties' (para. 11) for working-class students based on her own experiences and information gleaned from other research.

Aligning with the use of autobiography and memoir as an important source of data for working-class studies, and with clear interest in the lived experience and voices of working-class people (Russo & Linkon 2005), we also turn to the tool of auto-ethnography as a means to document and cultivate our critical friendship. Recognizing that our declaration as working-class intellectuals is 'self narration and self disclosure' (Busk & Goehring 2014, para. 2), we posit that critical friendship can be used to negotiate our working-class status in a 'white collar' environment.

Methodological Decision Making: The Value of Auto-ethnography

Ellis, Adams and Bochner (2011) explain auto-ethnography as an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze personal experience in order to understand cultural experience. Auto-ethnography as a method disrupts canonical research and presentation while embracing both political and conscious self-interrogative acts. In this way auto-ethnographic research operates from a position that acknowledges it is not only the content shared that matters: the process of accessing the content, the forms in which the content is produced, and the ways the content is shared, are also part of the autoethnographic process. Through narrative, co-constructed via various means such as relational dialogue, interactive interviews, or personal narratives using various lenses, auto-ethnography reflects the stories we choose to tell.

In making the decision to pursue a cooperative auto-ethnographic research project on the development of our critical friendship, we work with the notion that language is both individual as well as an opportunity to build connections with others. We draw upon the work of M.J. Barrett (2005) who posits,

> the cultural narratives, or discourses to which we have access, make certain subject positions available, and others inaccessible. With each utterance or action, we take up particular subject positions within or in relation to discourses that are available. At the same time that we attempt to (re)position ourselves, we are positioned by others (pp. 84-85).

Situatedness, or positionality, places us in a context that makes and acknowledges meaning making. By this we mean that 'from a given subject position, only certain versions of the world make sense' (Davies 2000, cited in Barrett 2005, p. 84). Auto-ethnographic research, through the act of self-reflection, promotes the acknowledgement of a researcher's limitations accompanied by efforts to confront said limitations. In this way, auto-ethnographic research supports personal connection to one's work and reflexive research practices, particularly the exposing of personal biases and how they affect one's work. When working with personal experiences and human beings who are full of experiences and emotions, we find it incredibly difficult to leave out the psychological, spiritual, soulful, emotional, and loving parts. These parts make up the whole and are pieces of a larger, integral 'system' of who we are. The making up of these parts, how we view these essential parts, and how we piece these parts together are so crucial in understanding who we are. We pursue this auto-ethnographic and reflexive research in a way that focusses on the intersectionality and relationality of our experiences. In doing so, we acknowledge that our experiences, our 'standpoint(s)', do not represent the experiences of all women (Harding 2004). We hope, however, our reflections, words, and ideas may shed light on at least some of the systemic issues which contribute to academic poverty as well as offering a way to combat these issues through critical friendship.

Regardless of what is being studied, our biases impact what we study, how we study it (methods and analysis employed), how language is used to communicate results, where the work is published, and how the work is shared. Auto-ethnography confronts these biases openly as an essential methodological consideration or tool central to the process and relation of research. Thinking about the many hours put into this work reveals how this project was a much richer process than compiling works/data of others to 'prove' our story. Our work included the thinking; the recollection of memories; the decisions behind what stories to include; the decisions behind repeated editing and reframing; and the time tuning into the resonating voice within.

Methods

A mixed methods, auto-ethnographic research approach was used for this collaborative project. In working through a system of combined methods we investigated how our own stories intersected and diverged (Marshall & Rossman 2011). We each individually crafted a multimodal narrative which included images, audio clips, music, and writing addressing our

experiences in the academy. We then shared our narratives, or our stories, with each other electronically, owing to the physical distance between us. Using a rubric guided by the themes from the call for papers of this special issue, we independently coded our own narrative to identify recurring themes. Following this, we came together to share our individual findings. After this conversation we took time to code each other's work and then reconvened to identify and analyze the commonalities and differences within our stories and experiences. Both conversations were recorded to aid in capturing nuances and crucial information in support of our findings. This process strengthened our critical friendship and support for one another as we moved through the writing process as working-class doctoral students.

Findings and Discussion

(Mis)perceptions of competence

Author 1: *I look at the stick, it is a very clear positive. We are now expecting our second child. I am thrilled, then almost immediately I am struck with a sense of fear. How will this be accepted by my supervisor, by the Faculty. The academy is not a place for working mothers, certainly grad school is not a welcoming environment…*

Author 2: *Because of my family and their choices, I often feel like an outsider in the academic world … [I] feel as though I am an imposter in the world of thinking, researching, writing, and publishing. I ask myself: who would want to listen to what I have to say? My family consists of a bunch of degenerates. Often I wonder, do I belong?*

We have identified Warnock's (2016) patterns of experience for working-class academics, including stereotypes and microaggressions, alienation, and lack of cultural capital, as resulting in our (mis)perceptions of competence. Our perceptions of place in the academy manifest in the ways we position our research as settler women interested in Indigenous education. More related to the topic of this paper, the ways in which we express, or do not, our understandings of what it means to be working-class women in a university setting based on our choices, family background, et cetera are made based on the often high expectation that we will have negative encounters based on this identification.

Stereotypes and microaggressions, often encountered by working-class academics from colleagues and students (Warnock 2016), can contribute to one's perception of competence. For Author 1, deciding to have a child while completing her degree solicited hurtful looks, comments, and continued delegitimization of her needs:

> *When I returned to program activities more fully I realized how unwelcoming a place the Faculty and university is for moms. Nowhere to pump, nowhere to store milk … [and] nowhere to change baby when I, on rare occasion, need to bring them with me.*

These negative experiences related to motherhood in the academy challenged Author 1's sense of competence in the university and caused her to question if she would be able to complete her degree and how motherhood would impact her job search in the future.

For Author 2, a sense of having little cultural capital, and 'the signals this lack emits of difference – read by the middle-class as inferiority or lack of dubiously defined 'fit'– that lead to social, cultural, and professional exclusion' (Warnock 2016, p. 31), results in (mis)perceptions of competence. As a first-generation university student with family members occupying extremely marginalized social positions, Author 2 questions her status in the university: '*Often I wonder, do I belong?*' Author 2 also found '*pressure from … school via deadlines, progress reports, emails about my peers' proposal presentations, et cetera to get everything done*' while trying to support her younger brother, as a source of anxiety with regards to her perception of competence.

Negotiating the academy as women

Author 1:   Now I struggle to find a balance between work and life, as many do. Our oldest is in part-time childcare - the cost of which takes up a significant portion of my PhD stipend. Our youngest is cared for by my family and friends who I rely on too much. I work at night, and on weekends, and while away at my in-laws trailer for a family weekend because my husband is available to [be with] the girls. As my first daughter gets older she commonly states that she too needs 'to work' and I wonder how my constant refrain of 'I have to work' and papers stacked high on our dining room table is impacting her.

Author 2: While my partner and I try not to buy into stereotypical roles, it happens. I do the cleaning, organizing, administration, and cooking – which could make up a full-time job. Sometimes I feel as though my partner does not understand the time it takes to complete these tasks, plus the full-time job I have as a student and teacher.

The theme of womanhood deeply permeated our narratives and relates to Warnock's (2016) findings of alienation, and stereotypes and microaggressions among working-class academics. In negotiating the academy as women we find that our lives and work are complicated by both physical and symbolic barriers. For Author 1 the physical barriers are intimately connected to the physiological repercussions of bearing children and being a nursing mother: '*please excuse me while I extract the milk from my breasts for my infant in this literal closet…*' The lack of suitable locations to pump breast milk has, and continues, to severely limit Author 1's ability to participate in campus life and community. In the rare cases she is able to secure a location to pump it often requires informing several people, and often those in positions of power and authority within the university, what she is doing - about an intimate part of her physical and emotional life. These experiences have prevented Author 1 from applying to several paid positions within the university, thus contributing to a sense of alienation in the university, her continued economic fragility, and likely impacting her capacity to secure an academic position in future.

This gendered experience has also manifested through symbolic barriers. One such example is that both Authors have experienced the misconception that our partners are somehow intellectually incompatible with us, owing to their jobs in trades which rely heavily on the exchange of physical labour for wages. This questioning of our partners and the relationships we have with them, by peers, colleagues, and at times university 'superiors' creates a symbolic barrier to our participation in the academy as we divest time from our research to defend our

lives and partners. Moreover, both authors have found that owing to the fact that we live and work primarily away from the university campus, the burden for home administrative tasks and cleaning have fallen to us. For Author 2 this has resulted in trying to overcome the difficulties of *'maintain[ing] a coherent work day in the same place where I live.'*

Money, debt, and tension

Author 1: I constantly wage a battle between the work I do for money and the work I do for my dissertation. Knowing that prioritizing work-for-money now will end up costing me more in the long run.

Author 2: I have applied for OSAP[1] at the three different institutions I have attended … [for my] nine years of post-secondary learning [...]. I'm nervous for what the next nine years will look like, that is, the period student loans are amortized over, given the state of hiring for full-time faculty in the arts and humanities. I have had to make conscious choices to ensure that I will have some sort of stable employment after I am done with school, most notably that I have been hired to [a school board] as a supply teacher, but [I] will need to be careful that this new work does not encroach on the time I need to complete my doctorate.

Like Warnock's (2016) findings of growing student debt and increased use of adjunct labor in recent auto-ethnographic accounts from working-class academics, we too identify these as a theme in our narratives. Warnock (2016) suggests increased debt is a 'roadblock to mobility, one so large that some working-class academics question whether they will find financial stability or success in academia at all' (p. 36). For Author 2, this resulted in seeking out additional employment while completing her degree, while for Author 1, these questions bring into focus the ongoing problem of time: *'Time is a constant source of anxiety and overwhelming pressure for me. How can I find time to get my dissertation work done, to publish, to provide for my children, to work and make money to contribute to our household.'* The data clearly indicated that both authors are conscious of their financial situation and the impact this has on their progress in the doctoral program, family, motherhood, and future employment options.

Operationalizing Critical Friendship in the Academy

Author 1: I had never felt as alone as I did during my Masters. I was the only person in my cohort completing thesis work, original research, my supervisor would take whole semesters to return feedback[2], and I felt woefully unprepared to be writing. ...We had a MA Geography student lounge and it was in this space that I came to understand the power of friendship in academic work. Those in years above and below me came to have important places in my life as we came together to encourage, gripe, work, play, and reflect together. … All that I have talked about is caught up in a larger sense of being an imposter. …I remain lonely and feel this way

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[1] The Ontario Student Assistance Program (OSAP) offers student loans for Ontario residents attending in-and-out-of province post-secondary learning institutions.

[2] I wish to make clear that this is in no way intended to be a personal attack on a supervisor who offered me much support and compassion during my program. Instead, I hope it provides insight into the lived consequences of a post-secondary education system which over-burdens its professoriate. I also wish to acknowledge that my MA supervisor was also attempting to negotiate the complexities of the academy and their own personal life.

often, my husband and partner does not really know what I do on a daily basis (when it comes to my work). He, and my family do not understand the inner workings of the University so my complaints fall on well-intentioned but confused ears.

Author 2: *While I have faced challenges as a female, commuter, mother-like big sister, first generation university student, I have found support through meeting and talking with other graduate students in formal and informal spaces. ... Through discussions about our personal lives and academic pursuits, sometimes over a glass of wine or phone conversations paused by screaming babies, I have come to realize that I am not alone: other graduate students are facing personal and professional difficulties as they navigate the murky waters of life as a PhD student in the twenty-first century.*

The findings discussed above are representative of some of the ongoing challenges we face as we attempt to progress through a doctoral program in education. In many ways these themes of (mis)perceptions of competence, negotiating the academy as women, and money, debt and life tension are also intimately interconnected, indeed, co-constitutive of, a broader sense of isolation and being an imposter. As we came together to discuss the coding results of both our own work and one another's, it became evident that the more isolated we felt, the more like an imposter we felt. Relatedly, the more like an imposter we felt, the more we questioned our ability to progress through the doctoral requirements. In this way, critical friendship has operated as a life-buoy as we attempt to wade through the murky waters of academia. For both authors, the ability to converse with someone experiencing a similar sense of doubt, of fear, and of isolation has created opportunities to break the pattern of seclusion: to emerge from a sense of despair with a sense of hope that we do, in fact, know things and we can, in fact, do this.

In addition to the personal life-line this critical friendship has provided, it has also created real possibilities for professional and academic growth. The authors have spent many hours talking about our research, writing, and teaching. Through these discussions we have both come to be introduced to new concepts, new scholars, new resources, and ultimately new capacities to navigate the world of academia. Our critical friendship has prompted us to work outside of our comfort zone, to expand our understandings of education, and importantly to be critically reflexive of our positionality and its impact on our lives and work. By maintaining our critical friendship we have worked to improve our writing and presentation skills as well as our teaching. In many ways this critical friendship has also helped to keep us accountable to ourselves and our progression through the doctoral journey as we encourage one another to be productive but also, and perhaps more importantly, to take steps to care for our physical and mental health.

Conclusion

We wish to conclude this article by looking both backwards and forwards. When we look back on the feelings of loneliness, worry, and fear present throughout our graduate studies we understand that these feelings contributed greatly to the feeling of being an imposter, of not being good enough. We reflect on the ways multiple aspects of our positionality have come to intersect in a way which has positioned us, in some ways, at the margins of university life. We are reminded that this intersection of womanhood, commuter status, research interest, political beliefs, and more brought us together in what we now deem to be a crucial component of our

professional and personal lives: critical friendship. As we look forward we would like to position critical friendship as a critical component of the lives and work of working-class academics.

Central to our advocacy for the value of critical friendship is the ability of such a relationship to provide concrete, realized support, or to draw on Richmond and Smith's (2012) work, functional support. By this we mean that critical friendship must be structured and maintained in a way that operationalizes the relationship through tangible actions rather than merely the potential for support. The critical friendship, then, must be active; it must be a part of one's professional identity. Importantly, the critical friendship must be called on in times of both strife and joy. Thus, the relationship must be carefully and purposefully cultivated through ongoing communication and the creation of consistent opportunities for professional growth alongside personal support.

Though the authors of this article share similar ontological beliefs, epistemological positioning, and research interests we wish to make clear that the value of critical friendship can, and perhaps should, cross disciplinary lines and university status. We both maintain critical friendships outside of the ones discussed here, with individuals from a variety of disciplines, including the 'hard' sciences and humanities, as well as with professionals, including teachers, who work outside of the academy but who are closely connected to our own work. In all cases the value of critical friendship lies in its ability to act as a protective measure through the provision of functional support. These critical friendships are integral to our emotional, social, academic, and professional well-being. Having experienced first-hand the value of critical friendship, we call upon university faculty members and administration to both promote and support the development of such relationships, particularly for academics, working-class and otherwise, who are at vulnerable times and places in their academic careers. Looking forward, we also encourage continued research into the efficacy of critical friendship for professional development and personal well-being in the academy.

Lastly, there is, in our minds, a requirement that the foundational characteristic of the critical friendship is accountability: accountability to one another through the expectation of reliable, functional support, and the expectation that our professional knowledges, skills, and experiences will be broadened through careful and considerate critique. Moreover, there is accountability to ourselves: an understanding that the critical friendship will help support professional development and personal well-being in order to support the ultimate goal of carrying out meaningful work within the academy. The critical friendship, understood this way, is not a place to wallow one's self into academic paralysis but instead a place to find a way through the difficulties of academic work and our precarious positions as working-class academics.

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