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## Emotional Silos: A Review of Doctoral Candidates' Isolating Experiences and the Role for Academic Librarians in Campus-wide Support Networks

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## Emotional silos: a review of doctoral candidates' isolating experiences and the role for academic librarians in campus-wide support networks

### [Carrie Forbes](#) and [Jennifer Bowers](#)

**Introduction.** Much of the research about how academic librarians can better support doctoral students has focused on information behaviour and advanced research skills but has neglected affective factors. An exploratory review of research literature on isolation and doctoral students suggests that feelings of isolation can have negative consequences for students' progress on the dissertation. The review identifies themes, areas of support, and suggestions for future research.

**Method.** Library and information science, psychology, education, and interdisciplinary databases were searched for papers addressing issues of isolation experienced by United States doctoral students during the dissertation phase.

**Analysis.** Thematic analysis identified the following themes of physical, cultural, and intellectual isolation, as well as strategies to ameliorate these social and emotional issues impacting doctoral student success.

**Findings.** Academic librarians and the services they provide are largely absent from the research describing doctoral students and isolation. Isolation impacts doctoral students' research behaviour. The review results indicate that doctoral students have a strong need for communities of support.

**Conclusion.** To alleviate doctoral students' isolation, recommendations for support include fostering a sense of community, building trust, and creating academic counter-spaces. Additional suggestions comprise enhancing library services to doctoral students and integrating academic librarians into campus-wide support networks.

## Introduction

Feeling isolated is a common and well-documented phenomenon among doctoral students ([Janta, Lugosi and Brown, 2014](#)). Although these feelings may be experienced at any time throughout graduate education, the dissertation phase, in particular, can exacerbate a sense of isolation and loneliness ([Grady, La Touche, Oslawski-Lopez, Powers and Simacek, 2014](#)). No longer taking classes with their fellow students, the dissertation phase is a time of solitary research and writing, when students are expected to become independent scholars, develop a professional identity, and make a unique contribution to scholarship in their field. Complicating this period of physical seclusion, students from underrepresented groups within their disciplinary department or on campus may find that age, gender, racial, ethnic, socioeconomic, or other social and cultural differences from their peers and advisors can create invisible barriers that isolate them further from their academic communities. The dissertation phase is a liminal period when doctoral candidates' identities fall between that of student and professional scholar. Without the authority of a degree, candidates can feel like intellectual outsiders, not yet fully belonging to the academy. If their research interests and ideas differ radically from or are not supported by their faculty advisor, they may also experience intellectual isolation or marginalization. Already a period fraught with a range of emotions, if these are compounded by isolation and feeling disconnected, then students' information seeking behaviour and their commitment to follow through with their research goals may be negatively impacted. Indeed, the dissertation phase has been found to be a time in which students are at increased risk for leaving their programmes and when universities see high attrition rates ([Ali and Kohun, 2006](#); [2007](#); [Berger, 2015](#)). To counteract the isolating nature of the dissertation phase, members of the candidates' academic support network, including faculty advisors, mentors, librarians, and other personnel, need to work together to ensure that doctoral students feel connected and integrated into the university.

As university subject librarians who work closely with social science doctoral students while they write their literature reviews and conduct research, the authors are concerned about how best to support doctoral students during this transitional period. Most graduate students completing a dissertation struggle with general affective barriers to information seeking, such as frustration over not having the correct search terms or having anxiety about finding too much or too little information ([Savolainen, 2016](#)). When these emotions are compounded by feelings of intellectual, physical, and cultural isolation, dissertation progress may be significantly hindered. Understanding the social and emotional, as well as intellectual challenges that candidates face during the dissertation phase, with particular attention to how isolation can adversely affect their dissertation progress, can enable librarians to provide targeted research consultations and outreach programming that not only supports candidates' research goals but which can also enhance their sense of belonging and inclusion in the academic community.

## Research statement

The research literature that examines the intersection of social and emotional influences on doctoral students' information behaviour and the librarian's role in providing support for doctoral students is limited. To address this gap and to understand the isolating nature of the dissertation phase specifically, the following research question was posed:

How can a review of the research literature on doctoral students' experiences of isolation, especially during the dissertation phase of candidacy, be used to inform best practices for librarian support?

During the review, an additional sub-question was identified: Are specific populations more at risk of isolation during the dissertation phase?

## Methods

### Literature search

A literature review was conducted on the topic of doctoral students and isolation. The search query, (isolat\* or lonel\* or exclusion or outsider or marginal\*) AND (doctoral or doctorate or phd) AND (student), was run on May 29, 2018 in: PsycInfo, Library, Information Science & Technology Abstracts (LISTA), ERIC (Education Resource Information Center) and the interdisciplinary database Academic Search Complete. Initial limits were set for English-language, peer-reviewed papers published between 2004 and 2018, to update a previous review (Gay, 2004). Since doctoral education varies by country and since international students face unique social and emotional challenges, further inclusion criteria were established for studies focused on domestic doctoral candidates studying in the United States. Other criteria specified that studies must address the dissertation research and writing phase. Of the 456 unique papers retrieved from the database search and the additional papers retrieved with hand searches, twenty-three titles met the criteria and were included in the final review (see Table 1).

## Thematic analysis

Gay's (2004) paper, *Navigating marginality en route to the professoriate: graduate students of colour learning and living in academia*, provided the framework for the thematic analysis. Although her review of the research literature focused on a specific doctoral student population in the United States, the authors believed that her thematic categories of physical, cultural, and intellectual isolation were still relevant yet general enough to be applied to other doctoral candidates' experiences. Papers were coded according to these predefined thematic categories (see Table 1). In addition, the review identified support strategies to ameliorate these social and emotional issues impacting doctoral student success.

Table 1: Methodology and Thematic Analysis of Reviewed Studies

Reviewed study	Methodology	Themes
Ali and Kohun, 2006	Literature review	Physical isolation
Ali and Kohun, 2007	Theoretical framework	Intellectual isolation
Benton, Androff, Barr and Taylor, 2011	Auto-ethnography	Intellectual isolation
Blockett, Felder, Parrish and Collier, 2016	Literature review	Cultural isolation, intellectual isolation
Dortch, 2016	Phenomenology	Cultural isolation, intellectual isolation
Esposito <i>et al.</i> , 2017	Auto-ethnography	Cultural isolation
Fries-Britt and Kelly, 2005	Narrative, case study	Support (community)
Gardner and Holley, 2011	Narrative	Cultural isolation
Gasman, Hirschfeld and Vultaggio 2008	Narrative	Cultural isolation
Grady <i>et al.</i> , 2014	Focus groups	Physical isolation, cultural isolation
Hall and Burns, 2009	Theoretical framework	Cultural isolation, intellectual isolation
Henfield, Woo and Washington 2013	Phenomenology	Cultural isolation, intellectual isolation
Keefer, 2015	Narrative	Support (academic counter-spaces)

Kosut, 2006	Auto-ethnography	Cultural isolation
Martinez, 2014	Theoretical framework, narrative	Cultural isolation, intellectual isolation
McCoy, 2017	Auto-ethnography	Cultural isolation, intellectual isolation
Moore, 2016	Narrative inquiry	Support (academic counter-spaces)
Pifer and Baker, 2014	Phenomenology	Physical isolation, intellectual isolation, support (academic counter-spaces)
Rademaker, Duffy, Wetzler and Zaikina-Montgomery, 2016	Case study	Support (community, building trust and transparency)
Torres, Driscoll and Burrow, 2010	Mixed-methods	Cultural isolation
Tull, Rutledge, Carter and Warnick, 2012	Case study	Support (community, building trust and transparency)
Twale, Weidman and Bethea, 2016	Theoretical framework	Cultural isolation
Weng and Gray, 2017	Literature review	Cultural isolation, intellectual isolation, support (community, building trust and transparency)

## Results

The concepts of physical, cultural, and intellectual isolation have defining characteristics, however, there is a significant amount of overlap in the research. While the authors detail the findings in discrete sections to highlight relevant research, in practice these issues should not be separated, but rather considered as a whole. Therefore, the discussion considers common themes across all the areas to offer a more cohesive framework for addressing issues of isolation. Finally, it should be acknowledged that a significant body of research on isolation examines underrepresented students and the compounding effects that racism, classism, sexism, and microaggressions can have on vulnerable populations. The authors have chosen to survey research impacting these populations within the broader discussions of isolation to elucidate the intersectional nature of social categorizations such as race, class, and gender. In doing so, this review of the research literature seeks to emphasize the serious nature of isolation, particularly as it concerns low-income, racial minority, and/or first-generation graduate students.

### Physical isolation

Feeling a sense of physical isolation impedes academic success and can be a significant hindrance to completing an intensive research and writing project, such as a dissertation ([Ali and Kohun, 2006](#); [Gay, 2004](#); [Grady et al., 2014](#)). Physical isolation can refer to many different aspects of the doctoral experience, including being physically absent from campus. It can also refer to the isolation that occurs when students of colour are marginalized or are not included in activities or programmes with their peers. Gay (2004) notes, '*Graduate students of colour ... frequently spend their time physically isolated and feeling excluded from the mainstream dynamics of graduate studies*' (p. 267). Certain types of doctoral students are more likely to experience feelings of physical isolation, including non-traditional and adult

learners, part-time students, and students from underrepresented groups, particularly as it relates to representation within their field of study (Grady *et al.*, 2014). Students who have multiple identities in this population, such as distance students who are also students of colour, experience enhanced feelings of loneliness and physical isolation during the dissertation process.

Physical isolation can also serve as a means of replicating the social stratification that occurs in the outside world (Pifer and Baker, 2014). For example, Grady *et al.*, (2014) found that graduate students often experienced a 'siloing effect' where they are physically isolated from other graduate students across campus (p. 11). Unlike undergraduate students, graduate students often attend classes in only a few buildings on campus and may not participate in extracurricular activities, leading to a sense of physical disconnection with the larger campus infrastructure. Similarly, doctoral education often requires students to move to a new location which may be far from family and friends. This can create a sense of isolation and loneliness that is not only emotional, but physical as well. As newcomers to an environment, they may not interact with the physical geography of a place, instead preferring to stay within the confines of the campus-built environment. This in turn only enhances their sense of physical isolation as they then lack a sense of physical belonging in their new town. Doctoral students may also create their own forced isolation, feeling like they must be constantly working, and therefore they keep themselves sequestered on campus or in their homes (Grady, *et al.*, 2014). Finally, for students who move to an area where they are a minority (e.g. students of colour in a mostly white town), this physical isolation may be compounded by racial microaggressions or other discrimination that makes it unlikely that they will want to engage with their physical surroundings (Pifer and Baker, 2014).

## Cultural isolation

Although isolation can be experienced by any doctoral candidate, those students that identify as members of an underrepresented population on campus can be at increased risk for feeling excluded. Underrepresentation and cultural difference can take many forms, including differences in race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity, ability, socio-economic status, health, age, religious beliefs, and political affiliation, among other socio-cultural factors, or being a first generation, transfer, or other non-traditional student. The underlying experience for these students is that they feel set apart from the majority of their peers, advisors, and academic community. In Gay's (2004) review, she described cultural isolation for students of colour at a predominantly white institution as being '*immersed in a world that is not their own*' (p. 269) and that these students were missing '*a sense of kindredness, a feeling of place and belonging*' (p. 268). This refrain was expressed by doctoral students from other underrepresented groups who also felt like cultural outsiders at their institutions (Esposito, *et al.*, 2017; Gardner and Holley, 2011; Kosut, 2006; Martinez, 2014).

Doctoral students who are culturally unlike the majority of their peers and departmental faculty, may experience the phenomenon of feeling like the *only one*. This emotional state can be acute for students of colour but may also be expressed by a range of underrepresented students. McCoy (2017) provides insight into her experience as the only African American in her doctoral student cohort, 'No matter what I said, I would always be seen as the "other" and always compared to the majority, never fully viewed within my own unique culture' (p. 13). She discusses the challenges encountered when one's peers are both racially and ideologically homogeneous. Other studies of African American doctoral students also identified disconnection from their majority peers as a significant source of isolation and loneliness (Henfield *et al.*, 2013; Torres *et al.*, 2010). Cultural differences between students and their advisors may lead to feeling marginalized or excluded. Blockett *et al.* (2016) noted the importance of matching faculty mentors or advisors and their students with similar characteristics or personalities, and emphasized that race 'can serve as a critical variable' in these relationships (p. 103). Although it isn't always possible to pair doctoral students with advisors from their own cultural background, a lack of understanding or respect on the faculty advisor's part was cited by the students as 'an overwhelming impediment to overall satisfaction with their program' (Henfield *et al.*, 2013, p. 130). Moreover, students of colour encounter specific challenges within the racialized environment of higher education, which is compounded when their majority peers or faculty advisors do not realise how racism affects these students' lives (Blockett *et al.*, 2016; Esposito *et al.*, 2017). Adverse climate and racial microaggressions can isolate students and be detrimental to their well-

being (McCoy, 2017; Torres *et al.*, 2010). Feeling culturally isolated contributes to students' psychological stress and can impair their performance, confidence, and self-efficacy (Dortch, 2016; Gardner and Holley, 2011; Torres *et al.*, 2010). Torres *et al.*'s (2010) study of highly achieving African American doctoral students and the race-related barriers they faced found that cultural and racial isolation led to increased stress and anxiety, which in turn affected students' research production (p. 1086). Cultural isolation is not only a problem in itself, but along with other factors can negatively impact progress on the dissertation.

When students differ from their majority colleagues in their department or at their institution, they may feel pressure to change their identities to fit into the dominant culture (Hall and Burns, 2009; Henfield *et al.*, 2013; McCoy, 2017; Weng and Gray, 2017). As Twale *et al.* (2016) write, *'Those who fail to fit the prevailing normative standard or mode may be marginalized or isolated rather than encouraged and supported'* (p. 83). Variations from the norm, whether these are speech patterns, clothing, body language, financial resources, or cultural capital, can move doctoral students to the periphery within their department or institution, and potentially limit their opportunities (Gasman *et al.*, 2008; Hall and Burns, 2009). Kosut (2006) reported that, *'Students from less privileged backgrounds are at a major disadvantage on entering doctoral programs because they often do not possess the vocabulary, speech patterns, and pronunciation skills of their colleagues'* (p. 250). Difference must be modified, adapted, or erased, so that these doctoral students can be accepted fully into their academic communities and therefore be recognized for awards, scholarships, and other professional advantages. For as Kosut (2006) concludes, *'Without the right communication codes, blue-collar students remain silent and invisible'* (p. 251). The research literature underscores this message that non-majority doctoral students may need to relinquish their cultural identities or markers to succeed in the dominant academic environment.

Doctoral students who feel that they do not fit in, or experience cultural dissonance, may begin to believe that they do not belong in the academy. Martinez (2014) described a message of exclusion, *'It's as if there's some cultural standard in grad school that I don't understand and am completely out of place in'* (p. 49). Echoing these sentiments, Kosut (2006) writes about feeling like an intellectual charlatan or imposter compared to the privileged, non-working-class students who seemed so at home in the programme and outlines the ways in which class differences can marginalize students and undermine their self-confidence. Imposter syndrome was noted to be a challenge for students from non-majority cultural backgrounds who had internalized the message of not belonging (Esposito, *et al.*, 2017; Gardner and Holley, 2011).

When students from different cultural backgrounds try to adapt or conform to the dominant institutional culture, they may end up feeling that they are existing in two worlds with conflicting identities, or *'betwixt and between'* (Kosut, 2006, p. 247). Not only do they experience isolation from the prevailing academic culture of their peers and advisors, but as they develop their professional identity this can make them feel like outsiders sometimes with their family and friends (Gardner and Holley, 2011). For some students, the language of academic discourse was an alienating factor, for others it was the lack of understanding about the demands and rigours of doctorate education, or even the reasons why the student wanted to pursue a PhD that served to create barriers (Gardner and Holley, 2011; Grady, *et al.*, 2014). As Pifer and Baker (2014) explained, *'Experiences of otherness during the process of becoming a scholar had the potential to isolate them from both their personal and academic communities, at a time when they were seeking affirmation and belonging'* (p. 24).

## Intellectual isolation

Gay (2004) discusses the intellectual isolation experienced by doctoral students of colour in the context of Eurocentric graduate curriculum, problematic classroom dynamics, and a general lack of cultural validation. Since this review concerns the post-coursework, dissertation phase, it identifies issues of intellectual isolation that are centred on the candidate's relationship with his or her faculty advisor or mentor, or with the departmental culture. These forms of isolation were reported by a range of students and not just those from underrepresented groups.



Doctoral students work closely with their faculty advisors during the dissertation phase, receiving important feedback and counsel, and the advisor may be the sole point of contact with the university community during this time. Consequently, it is crucial for students and their advisors to develop and maintain a positive working relationship ([Ali and Kohun, 2007](#)). Personality differences can be the root of many advisor and student problems, which in turn can lead to the student feeling isolated ([Ali and Kohun, 2007](#); [Blockett, et al., 2016](#)). If the advisor or other faculty, such as committee members, are disinterested, unavailable, or generally unhelpful, then the student is further excluded from intellectual comradery and support and may begin to mistrust the advisor or even begin to doubt him or herself ([Ali and Kohun, 2007](#); [Weng and Gray, 2017](#)).

The importance of an intellectual fit with both the advisor and the department culture is critical in generating a sense of belonging. Blockett *et al.* (2016) write, '*students must negotiate all realms of fit, especially at the micro level, like faculty/student research interests and alignment*' (p. 103). Indeed, any incompatibility between research interests or agenda was frequently identified as a key isolating factor ([Dortch, 2016](#); [Martinez, 2014](#); [Pifer and Baker, 2014](#)). In her study of African American women doctoral students, Dortch (2016) credited one student's misalignment with her advisors' research agendas as a major factor inhibiting her success; and in Henfield *et al.*'s study (2013), another student described being discouraged by her advisor from pursuing her research topic. Pifer and Baker (2014) found that not only would a disconnect between student and faculty advisor research agendas be isolating, but that students could also suffer tangible consequences without faculty support, such as receiving less research advice or fewer professional opportunities or endorsements which served to marginalize them even more. For some students, the discrepancy in research agendas might manifest itself as different research methods, especially if they choose to employ qualitative methods in contrast to an advisor or departmental culture that values quantitative methods. Benton *et al.* (2011) described such biases faced by social work students in their study. One student was advised by her professor that a '*qualitative dissertation would not be taken seriously*' and that she '*must include quantitative methods to ensure my credibility in academia*' (p. 237). In these situations, using a method that is considered less rigorous may alienate students from their academic community and potentially jeopardize their professional standing with the department ([Benton, et al., 2011](#); [McCoy, 2017](#)).

Intellectual identity was reported as directly integrated with and asserted through the candidate's research interests ([McCoy, 2017](#)). To be successful, students need to enact intellectual identities that are valued by their mentors or advisors and the department. When identities and expectations clashed, then problems arose. Hall and Burns (2009) found that,

Students who question valued identities or seek to develop identities that do not fit the status quo may find themselves excluded. In such cases, students are being sent the message that conformity is in their best interest and in the best interest of the profession. (p. 60).

This pressure to reproduce the existing departmental social order can make those students who want to follow their unique research agendas feel like intellectual outsiders in their academic communities ([Benton, et al., 2011](#); [Hall and Burns, 2009](#); [Pifer and Baker, 2014](#)). Intellectual isolation has several detrimental effects, including potential student disengagement from the programme and attrition. If research differences are discouraged and intellectual norms reinforced, then the academic community risks inhibiting a vibrant culture of diverse perspectives and interests ([Hall and Burns, 2009](#)). Furthermore, if students do not feel that they fit in, then they may start to question their right to belong to the academy. Self-doubt and isolation '*create a cyclical effect in which students become less likely to ask for support or professional opportunities, seek out social interactions and relationships, or contribute to informal interactions and formal projects*' ([Pifer and Baker, 2014](#), p. 27). If intellectual isolation impairs students' help seeking, then this can have direct consequences for their interactions with librarians, as well as other academic support personnel.

## Discussion

Although our review found isolation to be a common experience for many doctoral students during the dissertation phase, the literature clearly indicates that non-majority culture and/or underrepresented students are especially at risk. For these students physical, cultural, and intellectual isolating factors often intersect, thereby compounding their feelings of emotional distance and disconnection from their peers, advisors, and departments. Librarians should be sensitive to the particular challenges faced by non-majority culture and underrepresented doctoral candidates at their institutions and take targeted measures to enhance these students' sense of connection and belonging.

To address these issues for all doctoral students, the research literature suggests a number of helpful supports that fall under three broad themes: 1) fostering a sense of community among students and faculty; and 2) engaging in communication practices to build trust and transparency during the dissertation process; and 3) creating academic 'counter-spaces' ([Solorzano, Ceja and Yosso, 2000](#), p. 70).

## Community

In an ideal environment, students should be provided with layers of support, including supervisor and peer support to build a broad community ([Esposito et al., 2017](#)). In fact, more equal relationships (e.g. peers, faculty who are not on the dissertation committee) have been shown to better address isolation, diversity, and distance among doctoral students than support from the dissertation advisor alone ([Rademaker et al., 2016](#); [Tull et al., 2012](#); [Weng and Gray, 2017](#)). Creating collective and collaborative groups through research seminar systems, research development workshops, self-help groups, symposia, and cohort models can also help foster a sense of community among doctoral students ([Weng and Gray, 2017](#)). Collective and collaborative groups are the most effective in disciplinary programmes that have low numbers of underrepresented students ([Tull et al., 2012](#); [Weng and Gray, 2017](#)). For example, [Tull et al. \(2012\)](#) describe the PROMISE programme at the University of Maryland College Park, which features a series of professional development and skill-building opportunities designed to reduce isolation and facilitate degree completion among diverse graduate students in science, technology, engineering, and math. Results from focus groups and surveys of past PROMISE participants have shown that the programmes have played a key role in supplementing weak advising, in helping participating students stay on track and motivated during their dissertation journey, and in providing emotional support. Most notably, alumni of the PROMISE programmes reported a reduced sense of isolation when they connected with other programme participants. Based on these data, the researchers recommend that other universities consider hosting events that bring students together in casual and informal environments as peer-to-peer interactions have the largest impact on reducing isolation.

As noted earlier, departments, programmes, and higher education institutions that promote more collective and collaborative research and learning environments serve as a better support for students experiencing isolation ([Fries-Britt and Kelly, 2005](#); [Weng and Gray, 2017](#)). Conducting research with peers or other faculty members not only helps students learn advanced research skills but can also provide invaluable emotional support for dissertating students, particularly those students who are outsiders to the world of the academy. In a narrative study, [Fries-Britt and Kelly \(2005\)](#) describe their working relationship and friendship as a junior African-American female faculty member and an African-American female doctoral student. Through collaborative research projects and frequent one-on-one meetings, they outline the process of '*retaining each other*', which helped to alleviate feelings of isolation ([Fries-Britt and Kelly, 2005](#), p. 223). They strongly encourage dissertation advisors and students to consider the value of informal networking and research opportunities with faculty members outside of their immediate field of study to form a broader community of support.

## Building trust and transparency

While peer-to-peer and community networks are important for the success of doctoral students, the dissertation chair can also play a pivotal role in helping students facing isolation through the use of open and transparent communication techniques (Rademaker *et al.*, 2016). The findings in a few research studies suggest that doctoral students may still make good academic progress even when they have difficulties with their advisors, but a lack of a personal relationship with their advisor magnifies feelings of isolation (Rademaker *et al.*, 2016). Rademaker *et al.* (2016), in their exploration of how sixteen dissertation chairs developed trust with distance doctoral students, noted that chairs felt that they reduced students' sense of isolation by using strategies to establish trust, and by recognizing and addressing issues of vulnerability. To build trust, the most successful chairs engaged in ongoing and consistent feedback and worked to create personal connections with students. The ability to establish personal connections was one of the most important techniques for reducing isolation. Therefore, chairs need to get to know students beyond their academic work and also share anecdotes concerning their own sense of isolation when they were students (Rademaker *et al.*, 2016). Several studies in this review also described how students showed vulnerability by discussing with their advisor their anxieties about having inadequate academic competencies related to research and writing (Esposito *et al.*, 2017; Rademaker *et al.*, 2016; Tull *et al.*, 2012; Weng and Gray, 2017). These anxieties were more pronounced during the dissertation phase when students were no longer receiving regular feedback on their work. Supportive chairs worked to reduce students' sense of isolation through frequent phone calls or Skype appointments (Rademaker *et al.*, 2016). Coaching students step-by-step through the dissertation process also resulted in less anxiety for students (Rademaker *et al.*, 2016; Weng and Gray, 2017). Overall, the most helpful communication technique for chairs to employ was simply expressing their own vulnerabilities and anxieties as researchers to their students (Esposito *et al.*, 2017; Rademaker *et al.*, 2016; Tull *et al.*, 2012; Weng and Gray, 2017). This method helped students open up and reflect on how they could overcome anxieties and a sense of isolation.

## Academic counter-spaces

Much of this research implores faculty and others working in higher education to consider the creation of intellectual 'counter-spaces' where doctoral students from diverse backgrounds can advance their own learning within a supportive environment where their experiences are confirmed and viewed as important knowledge (Solorzano, Ceja and Yosso, 2000, p. 70). Solorzano *et al.* (2000) define counter-spaces as 'sites where deficit notions of people of color can be challenged and where a positive collegiate racial climate can be established and maintained' (p. 70). While their research did not focus specifically on doctoral students (and is therefore not included in the results), much of the literature on graduate students in this review has employed this idea as a method for countering isolation during the dissertation process. The concept of counter-spaces moves beyond the idea of simply holding workshops for students or increasing communication, but instead involves a radical revisioning of support networks. Keefer (2015) noted that supportive comments from peers and mentors did not always relieve the sense of isolation for doctoral students, but instead often made students feel guilty for not being more in control of their feelings. Students did best when chairs and peers directly asked about feelings of isolation and loneliness and gave students space to talk about their fears. In many ways, students must overcome these issues on their own, but knowing that it is normal and having an advisor who shows empathy and compassion can help them move forward. Pifer and Baker (2014) conclude, 'There is a need for research that advances understanding of how personal identities intertwine with professional experiences in doctoral education' (p. 27).

Within this context of conflicting personal and professional identities, many doctoral students find comfort in creating their own academic counter-spaces by using their dissertation research to learn and apply methodologies that challenge traditional notions of knowledge in the academy (Moore, 2016). For example, Moore (2016) discussed her sense of isolation and liminality as a doctoral student when the epistemologies she was learning in her programme conflicted with her identity as a biracial woman. She described her efforts at trying to reconcile these tensions, 'If reconciliation implies settling upon some kind of "pure knowledge" that discounts or denies complexity and multiple perspectives, it is certainly impossible for me' (p. 719). Rather than allowing this sense of intellectual isolation to stop them, doctoral students who find themselves in this situation benefit from inclusion in both virtual and physical spaces with other scholars

challenging positivist paradigms and finding new ways to engage in critical research. It is particularly important for doctoral students to find an advisor who agrees with or at least supports the epistemological ambiguity and questioning that occurs when doctoral students feel isolated ([Keefer, 2015](#)).

## Recommendations for library services

The services provided by academic libraries were not discussed in the literature, but the authors have added recommendations for enhancing library services to help inform best practices in alignment with the support strategies discussed above. Opportunities for librarians to foster community, build trust and transparency, and create academic counter-spaces could include:

- Working with campus partners to offer workshops, events, and informal gatherings to bring graduate students together across campus to engage in discussions about social and emotional issues impacting the dissertation process;
- Fostering stronger relationships between librarians and doctoral students by expanding the services of subject librarians to encourage a more active role in the dissertation process, such as serving on dissertation committees, providing one-on-one required consultations as part of the dissertation proposal process, and participating in collaborative research with students;
- Embedding subject librarians into courses across the disciplines which prepare doctoral students for dissertation research and writing;
- Allowing time and space during research consultations to listen to and empathize with students' social and emotional concerns, as well as their research challenges;
- Designating librarians as mentors or personal librarians for individual doctoral students based on shared cultural background, research interests, and/or disciplinary specialization; and
- Creating spaces in academic libraries for graduate students that '*promote, academic and social community building*' rather than only offering research carrels which isolate them further ([Gessner, Jaggars, Rutner and Tancheva, 2011](#)).

## Conclusion

How can librarians participate in campus-wide communities of academic support for doctoral students? Academic librarians and the services they provide are largely absent from the research describing doctoral students and isolation. Much of the research on how academic librarians can better support doctoral students has focused only on understanding doctoral students' information behaviour and creating educational workshops to support advanced research skills training ([Baruzzi and Calcagno, 2015](#); [Blummer, 2009](#)). By concentrating exclusively on academic skills, librarians may be missing a key area of need for doctoral students. Many factors impact the information seeking and research behaviour of doctoral students, including physical, cultural, and social isolation. The results of this literature review indicate that doctoral students have a strong need for communities of support related to both intellectual and academic needs, as well as to social and emotional supports ([Esposito et al., 2017](#); [Rademaker et al., 2016](#); [Tull et al., 2012](#); [Weng and Gray, 2017](#)). Isolation during the dissertation phase is not linear, but rather complex, occurring through a great range of experiences. All personnel who have regular contact with doctoral students have the responsibility to examine how isolation is occurring and how it can be alleviated (or at least mitigated) in thoughtful and effective ways. While some initiatives may already be in place at the level of the graduate school, the college, or the department, librarians, who may have frequent informal interactions with graduate students outside of class, could serve as another important layer of support. In an article examining the role of academic librarians in teaching critical information literacy, Simmons ([2005](#)) notes,

Librarians are simultaneously insiders and outsiders of the classroom and of the academic disciplines in which they specialize, placing them in a unique position that allows mediation between the non-academic

discourse of entering undergraduates and the specialized discourse of disciplinary faculty. (p. 299).

While Simmons' study focuses on undergraduates, the concept of a mediator may be an applicable role for academic librarians to play in supporting students at all levels and across both academic and emotional needs. This suggestion does not imply that librarians should become counsellors, but rather, that by being aware of these issues, librarians might research the ways in which libraries and librarians can help foster community among graduate students to create academic counter-spaces that offer supports for not only research skills, but the wide range of social and emotional issues, such as isolation, that impact academic success. At the very least, research librarians meeting with dissertators could deploy communication strategies that address more holistic aspects of the dissertation experience, rather than only searching or literature review strategies.

This holistic approach to supporting graduate students is not without its challenges and more research is needed to determine how librarians might best support graduate students experiencing isolation. For example, research is needed to explore if academic librarians have the types of trusting relationships with graduate students necessary to facilitate community building. Further research could also be conducted on the mentoring or pedagogical strategies librarians could employ to optimize their many interactions with graduate students to help address issues of isolation. Finally, since issues of isolation disproportionately impact students of colour, academic librarians should integrate culturally responsive approaches into their work with doctoral students and familiarize themselves with evidence-based practices to improve services for this population.

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