Finding comfort in discomfort: how two cross-disciplinary early-career researchers are learning to embrace 'failure'

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Failure is implicit in trying something new, trying new paths (Harrowell et al. 2018), it accompanies our lives, shapes our experiences and "it mostly […] feels like shit" (O'Gorman and Werry, 2012, p.1). In this intervention, we, two early career researchers (ECRs), reflect on our paths into academia, focusing on how our experiences of 'failures' are intertwined with feelings of shame, fear or disappointment. We thus turn our attention towards the "cluster of affective modes that have been associated with failure" (Halberstam, 2011: 23). In this intervention, we join those whose voices seek to move beyond the individualising negative affects often associated with failures towards recognising the productive and insurgent potential of failures. Or, to chime with Halberstam: "failure loves company" (p. 121). As such, we want to share how failures have been constant companion to our academic journeys so far and reflect on our own embodied experiences of discomfort and comfort associated with our failures. In addition, we want to outline why, as we continue along our academic paths, we may choose to seek out, embrace and celebrate failures.

In our experience, academic norms and conventions contribute to a demarcation of bodies into those who belong and those who do not. Bodies – which we understand as 'brain-body-world entanglements' (Blackman, 2012) – reflect the complex, heterogeneous and shifting processes of *becoming* (and not just being) in the world. In other words, becoming in the world entails a multitude of simultaneous encounters and processes, which continuously shape our bodies as assemblages of such entanglements. Through multiple entanglements of academic spaces and conventions, we – as ECRs and cross-disciplinary scholars – have become 'messy bodies'. We have moved in student and scholarly spaces and transited through different disciplines . To varying

degrees, our bodies are bodies that are expected to belong to such scholarly and disciplinary spaces and normativities. Understanding our bodies as assemblages has sensitised us to the situated and temporal nature of these demarcations of our bodies (Blackman and Venn, 2010; Blackman, 2012; Wolfe, 2017).

Ahmed (2014) argues that comfort stems from an established social space allowing bodies to fit into it. Discomfort, on the other hand, is "the feeling of disorientation: one's body out of place, awkward, unsettled" (2014: 148). As a result, spaces are welcoming to those who are able – and willing – to conform to their rules and norms. However, as early career researchers who work cross-disciplinarily, our bodies do not conform, we are often 'out of place'. Besides working across disciplines and beginning academic journeys, other factors, such as race, socio-economic background, perceived prestige of department, etc. play a crucial part in *becoming* in academia with huge variations in different countries. To us, fitting in social spaces of academia appears less ambiguous when operating from a more established positioning in academic structures or from within the centre ground of academic disciplines. And although we recognize that 'fitting in' is more the exception than the rule, a hegemonic, sanitizing narrative of 'becoming the ideal type of academic' – often associated with whiteness and extreme entrepreneurial capability – pervades the spaces of academia (see also Ablett et al., 2019). Our messy bodies do not seem to reflect the normativities that have come to make messiness in academic spaces unacceptable. So unacceptable, in fact, that we embody messiness as 'failures' (Harrowell et al., 2018).

As a result, academic narratives and performances rarely reflect any experiences of messiness (cf. Punch, 2012; Avner et al., 2014; Fitzpatrick and Longley, 2014). As academics, we thus perpetuate a university apparatus that incites us to never feel good enough in relation to its measures of performance (Wolfe and Mayes, 2019). More often than not we as academics (consciously or

unconsciously) align with these affective and affiliating assemblages by reorienting our interests, languages and practices. In this piece we reflect on four significant experiences as cross-disciplinary ECRs in relation to such academic landscape and its implication for us as 'messy bodies'. We highlight how in certain academic spaces experiences of 'failure' are interwoven with with feelings of (dis)comfort.

Critical incidents are significant events that are esteemed as meaningful by those who experience them and encompass emotional intensities; in fact, emotions are often what makes them stand out as significant (Tripp, 1993; Cope and Watts, 2000). To advance our insights, we first wrote individual introspections of experiences of comfort and discomfort during our academic journeys to date. We shared these with one another and identified two for each of us to shape and illustrate the arguments of this piece. The incidents cover a range of scenarios in the journey of cross-disciplinary ECRs: attending a lecture, presenting in a conference, participating in an intensive course, and daily departmental life. We start with two critical incidents marked by discomfort.

Critical incident number 1: *Towards the end of my PhD studies, I attended a lecture with a renowned international anthropologist on the themes of space, justice, and diversity. These topics were related to my doctoral project exploring activism in a gentrifying inner-city area in Latin America. The lecture was very interesting and inspiring. In fact, it was so interesting and inspiring that I felt the urge to ask a question, which is something I never do out of fear I will mess up somehow. But, this time, for some reason I thought I could just do it. It was a friendly environment; the lecturer was very welcoming. So, I got the microphone and presented myself as PhD student at a business school in the marketing section. I then asked my question about the role of emotions and affects in public space. In the answer, the lecturer mentioned that they had focused on emotions and public spaces elsewhere but maybe not in that specific presentation. The lecturer*

suggested I could read a chapter of their book about the theme, also highlighting the work of other academics on the subject. Through the lecturer's reply, I felt I had made a big gaffe. I had actually read the works they referred to but I felt I should have known these works better. In short, I felt I had messed up. I had made a fool of myself and felt ashamed. To make things worse, the event was being recorded and the video would be online in a couple of days for everyone to see. I could only hope few people would ever watch it.

This incident was so unsettling for me that I was never able to watch the video. I searched for it and found it, but I did not watch it. I just could not do it. Then, when I started discussing my experiences of academic 'failures' with my co-author for this piece, I knew that this experience would be the perfect example. I had failed and there was recorded evidence of it. So almost a year after the lecture, I finally had the courage to watch the video. It was unsettling with the growing anticipation of my 'special appearance'. After more than one hour, there I was – I got up, I presented myself, asked the question, and engaged in the answer with the lecturer. Shockingly, when I was watching the video, I actually did not feel I had made a completely fool of myself. It was unsettling to think how I have recalled that experience as a big 'failure'. I admit that I have also felt a great relief. I then watched the moment of the question and answer again, and again. Throughout the interaction and in the end of the conversation, I started to notice what could have explained the intense feeling of discomfort I associated to this experience. The lecturer's response finishes like this: I am not sure how to integrate the sort of theoretical […] with the more practical planning side of what we are designing for. And I think that is the difference between marketing and someone who is a planner here.

The lecturer ends by highlighting the difference between 'someone who is a planner here' and me, a 'marketer'. This remark contrasts me to others in the room; I became someone who does not

belong. That is, I was pointed out as a stranger (Ahmed, 2000). According to Ahmed, "*some bodies are recognized as strangers*, as bodies out of place" (2014: 211, italics in original). This recognition involves an affective judgement towards the lack of fit between a body and a place. In the Q&A of the lecture, my body was recognized as one that does not belong to the place. Ahmed alerts us that those "who do not sink into spaces, whose bodies are registered as not fitting, often have to work to make others comfortable" (2014: 224). By demarcating cross-disciplinary researchers as out of place, there is also a demarcation of bodies 'in place'. Such bodies are recognized as bodies that reflect back that space without effort; such bodies can feel comfort. In the example above, the 'out of placeness' of my body marked me out as the one that did not quite fit into that place. I was someone who entailed difference ('a marketer'), compared to someone who fitted in ('a planner'). The public recognition of my 'out of placeness' enabled urban planners to feel in 'their' place. That is, my discomfort could have become a source of comfort to other in that room.

In this encounter, I was someone whose body did not reflect back that space; this misalignment between my body and the space evoked discomfort. Normativity works as a form of comfort, as it allows bodies to extend into spaces that have already taken their shape. As Ahmed points out, "the surfaces of social space are already impressed upon by the shape of such bodies […]. To be comfortable is to be so at ease with one's environment that it is hard to distinguish where one's body ends and the world begins" (2014: 148). In cross-disciplinary encounters, scholars do not experience this seamless relationship; we allow ourselves to remain messy (Avner et al., 2014). As we navigate through different events, courses, conferences, we do not usually experience 'a sinking in' sensation that one has when one is comfortable. Quite the contrary, our bodies are more likely to be pointed out or felt as awkward, unsettled in the multiple spaces we navigate. We often

embody such experiences as 'failures'. Taking again the example described above, I am not even sure what precise emotion I was feeling in that moment, but I certainly felt 'like shit'. But rather than accepting feelings of discomfort (as well as shame and other negative affects), I accepted my 'failure' in that encounter.

Critical incident number 2: *The second critical incident is in relation to a conference I attended about halfway through my studies. My doctoral research looks at the impact of gentrification and diversity through the prism of the high street. . During my studies, I came across a fruitful field of enquiry which first introduced me to the world of business schools and marketing. In the early days of my research, I attended many conferences that were relevant to this emerging field. I was subsequently invited to submit a presentation as part of a panel for a critical marketing conference. I remember reflecting on my trip to the conference that in order to manage the expectations of a marketing audience, I should probably disclaim that I was not a marketer like most attendees. Rather my background was in cultural studies and social policy, drawing on a variety of anthropological and urban studies approaches. I should also mention I was hoping to learn in which ways critical marketing might benefit my research. Of course, I was signposting myself as a stranger, a body out of place. But I hoped that highlighting my perceived marginality would provide an opportunity for attendees to reflect on my presentation from a different disciplinary lens and provide me with useful avenues for further investigation. I also hoped that I had pre-empted a discussion of very specific disciplinary discourses and issues that I may not be able to respond to. During the question and answer session, the panel convenor asked to be granted the permission to ask the first question: 'Your research sounds interesting, but what does this have to do with marketing?' I was shocked. The convenor, who after all had selected my paper to be part of their panel, asked me the one question I thought I had indicated at the start of my presentation*

I would not be able to answer. I cannot quite recall what exactly I answered, but in my memory, I embarrassedly mumbled something along the lines of attending the conference to help me make precisely those connections between my research and the marketing discipline. Another attendee interjected and began answering on my behalf the ways in which my research was of relevance to marketing scholarship. Although I was grateful for the support, it still contributed to my growing feeling of unease. By having someone else speak up on my behalf, the discussion happened between the two scholars without my participation. As they were negotiating the marking of the field of critical marketing, they excluded me from the discussion. As they discussed the fitness of my research – or not – into the field, I was not included. The demarcation between them and me precluded an encompassing 'us'. I could not shape the space I was in, nor could I resist nor assimilate to it either, seen that I could not even join the conversation. I had 'failed' in making connections, I was just out of place. In the end, this feeling carried on for the rest of the conference, as I became too nervous to get actively involved in any of the discussions. I was worried of 'failing' again.

Ahmed (2014) argues that the difference between comfort and discomfort is not the difference between assimilation and resistance to particular spaces; it relates to inhabiting the normativities of a particular space differently. "To feel uncomfortable is precisely to be affected by that which persists in the shaping of bodies " (p. 155). In the incident above, I felt discomfort when the chair questioned my being in that particular space. Then, when the benevolent attendee acted on my behalf, although motivated by being supportive, my discomfort only increased as I felt I could not act whether in resistance or through assimilation. I am certain neither speaker had intended to make me feel uncomfortable. The discomfort I felt resulted from my embodied out-of-placeness. Yet, the actions of these researchers – bodies that seemingly fit into the social space better than me –

made me feel like I was 'failing': their actions framed an affective and affiliating assemblage that seemed out of my reach and control. As Hickey-Moody (2019) argues, "not being in control often feels like failing. The experience of being (…) an outsider trying to belong to a culture that is not one's own, can also at times feel like failure" (p. 5). My embodied experience of doing cross-disciplinary research, although celebrated by funders, journals, and other agents in the academic landscape, was negative.

We started this intervention highlighting how discomfort often manifests as an embodied experience of failure as we are either feeling out of place or being pointed out as such. But could our feelings of discomfort also be important components for transformations in academic spaces? "Messiness can be an incredibly productive methodological, theoretical, and ethical undertaking full of unexpected and moving possibilities" (Avner et al., 2014: 62). What if we, two cross-disciplinary ECRs, could embrace our messy bodies?? What if instead of feeling ashamed or scared by 'failures', inadvertently perpetuating a culture of sanitising messiness, – we could bypass these feelings of discomfort – and find comfort in discomfort? Maybe we could embrace a pedagogy of discomfort (Boler, 2004; Boler and Zembylas, 2003)? In order to develop these ideas, we now wish to highlight two incidents that were marked by comfort during our academic journeys.

Critical incident number 3: *One of my favourite courses during the PhD was a cross-disciplinary course I took in Norway. Not only many of us came from different fields, but many of us were also doing cross-disciplinary research. The faculty was composed by renowned scholars from multiple disciplines. Throughout the course, no norm and ideal from one specific field became more prevalent than others. Throughout the course, everyone seemed to be genuinely interested in each other's work for their own position, rather than trying to transpose the other's research to our own fields. As everyone was 'out of place', no one was 'in place'. We were not trying to fit our*

bodies into that space and there was something very comforting on that. There was something soothing in not having to do an effort in adjusting my body to that space. In contrast to the critical incident number 1, my body was not recognised as a stranger. Rather, we were some sort of 'common' strangers. Being used to be 'strangers', we recognise the commonality in our 'out of placeness'. We were all a bit messy. We started to embrace the comfort of sharing multiple academic spaces as messy bodies. For example, that course was probably the only one I did not have to justify the position of my research with the field. I did not have to make the effort in justifying my presence in that space. By not having to justify my presence in that space, there was a certain easiness. By not having to justify my presence in that course, my body felt welcomed in that cross-disciplinary space. I did not have to highlight the connections between my research and any field. I did not have to put any 'stitches' between my body and the social space. I could just cross that cross-disciplinary space, and this crossing felt effortless.

Critical incident number 4: *This critical incident is not a singular event, but a number of experiences and moments that have accompanied my academic journey to date and provided me with comfort. I am fortunate to work in a research centre with many cross-disciplinary scholars. Being able to share disappointments or common experiences with others has given a sense of community and camaraderie that has helped me through difficult periods. Similarly, I would occasionally come across articles published by other scholars that would openly explore barriers I have experienced (e.g., Harrowell et al., 2018; Gill, 2009; Kincheloe, 2001). This honesty and public acknowledgement of 'failure' by those more established in the academic hierarchy about the challenges they face, not least in cross-disciplinary work, has not completely alleviated discomfort in those perceived moments of failure; however, it has given me a sense of shared vulnerability among fellow academics. Through this feeling of shared vulnerability, I have realised*

that maybe some of my 'failures' were less the result of my own actions, but rather the result of

me trying to make my body fit into particular academic spaces and structures whose normativities

I did not conform to.

In the critical incidents presented above, we reflect how the negative affect of discomfort can also drive the positive affect of solidarity (Sharp and Nilan, 2017: 71). We start to recognize a utility in 'failure' and messiness (Hickey-Moody, 2019). The two incidents reflect a collective becoming of messy bodies, rather than an individual being-out-of-place. Discomfort can work as an individualization process (as shown in the first two incidents), when we felt we did not perform according to an ideal that entails increasing demands regarding performances, following the neoliberal mode of reproduction and heteronormative hegemony within academic spaces (eg. Clare, 2019). However, we believe discomfort can also work in a reverse way. The last two incidents show how we can instead mark 'messy bodies' collectively, by sharing discomfort we create another space-body in place, a place of comfort (see also Ablett et al., 2019). Through (dis)comfort, 'our messy bodies' can become aligned with 'messy spaces'.

As Avner et al. (2014) point out, embracing messiness is a political and ethical stance researchers can take to remain critical towards and challenge academic traditions and conventions. By being 'messy bodies' as well as creating 'messy spaces', we can help break down the hegemonic normativities that make 'failures' appear impermissible in contemporary academia. As it stands, for us, the aftermath of such incidents was marked by ambiguity, uncertainty and disorientation in which we often felt discomfort in the spaces in which we found ourselves. Spaces, in which our 'messy bodies' did not fit. Even though such experiences were uncomfortable, they were also very important for us. These encounters have highlighted to us that sometimes, what we may perceive as 'failures' may be the result of associated emotions in particular situations, stemming from our

own positionality as messy bodies in academic spaces. They also highlighted how we encountered comfort in other spaces, in messy spaces. Thus, we believe that we can reframe how we interpret moments of 'failure' in PhD education or cross-disciplinary work (see also Fitzpatrick and Longley, 2014). We believe such experiences can also become sources of comfort, personal growth and transformation.

A pedagogy of discomfort invites students, ECRs, mentors and educators to recognise how emotions shape who we are (with), what we see (and don't see), how we work and (dare to) research, as well as how we create academic spaces that embrace the discomfort in 'failing' (Boler, 2004; Boler and Zembylas, 2003; Bryan, 2016; Hess, 2018) – and even feel quite comfortable with that. We believe that both 'failure' and discomfort can be transformative, not just for ourselves, but also for the academic spaces in which we move. Wolfe and Mayes (2019) highlight *our response-ability* as academics in *our own entanglement* with academic assemblages. The scholars point out how we academics often engineer our value "through engaging and affiliating within boundary making processes: ones that reward pre-defined knowledge practices and thus exclude others" (p. 284). They argue that our *becoming* as academics happens with the university assemblage, not separate from it. We want to start thinking about how we can use *our response-ability* to enable alternative entanglements within academic assemblages.

In the meantime, we want to thank those who have already started this process by showing us other possibilities of *becoming* and *happening with(in)* existing university assemblages. We would like to thank those who accepted our 'messy bodies', encouraged us to be lost, taught us how to seek comfort in those uncomfortable 'failures' and sometimes even discouraged us to seek comfort at all. Through such encounters we are have been able to start embracing 'failure' in multiple ways. Sometimes we can still 'feel like shit', whereas other times we can start rejoicing in such feeling.

Nevertheless, we would like to explore these multiple possibilities of 'failing' – through both comfort or discomfort – with fellow cross-disciplinary ECRs. In line with O'Goman and Werry (2012), we want to explore failure not as part of a journey towards success, but as "a generative, unsettling and revelatory force" (p. 1). As Halberstam (2011) has argued, failure can be both a style of navigating academia and a method for learning other ways of doing research – one that encompasses messiness and refuses to normalize knowledge systems. We, cross-disciplinary ECRs, as messy bodies could then also start having fun with such processes. For example, we could start enjoying the feeling of getting lost in the research process, or we could start seeing some failing 'unsettling encounters' as therapeutic ones that uncover so much about *us*, *others* and *our fields*. In sum, we believe that by embracing our failures and discomfort we can together create 'messy spaces' that are transformative. We can together reject available scripts for living, loving and researching, "along with an excitement in the face of the uncertainty of where the discomfort may take us" (Ahmed, 2004, p. 155). As "the process of being together re-makes us" (Hickey-Moody, 2019, p. 11), we now realize, like Halberstam (2011), we not only want to fail more, but also better, by failing together with others.

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