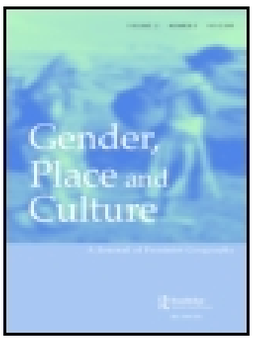

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Experiencing and embodying anxiety in spaces of academia and social research

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ABSTRACT

This article explores how anxiety, and its bodily affects, influences the experience of encounters within and around research spaces. Throughout, I offer up autoethnographic excerpts from field notes which contextualise my experience of anxiety while undertaking social geographical research. Through these vignettes, I ask: What does embodying anxiety in academic and research spaces feel like? How can we understand, conceptualise, and attach meaning to forces which influence how researchers experience anxiousness? And what opportunities for reflexive research practice and critical knowledge production might be created by attending to the bodies and embodied experiences of anxious researchers? Responding to these questions, I position anxiety as an affective state which, as deeply embroiled within the body and subject position of researchers experiencing anxiety, cannot be disentangled from the socio-materiality of research spaces. Recognising the relationship between anxiety and researchers' capacities to feel embodied 'ease' in academic life, I encourage readers to reflect on their own experiences of anxiousness, folding these into their reflexive practices, writings, and research outputs. I conclude by urging researchers to continue to both recognise the messy realities of researcher positionality through a feminist approach attentive to the specificities of researching bodies, and move beyond privileging and perpetuating the fallacy of a detached and always-already stable researcher; tropes which continue to pervade and are consciously privileged within academic spheres. Doing so, I argue, could enable researchers to push against the boundaries of what is deemed acceptable to feel and embody in academia.

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1. Contextualising researcher anxiety: two autoethnographic excerpts

> As I write this, I can very distinctly feel blood flowing through my wrists, an uneasy charge emanating across my body. Today, however over-wrought it may sound, this is a tangible, genuine reaction to productivity guilt: the scourge of every PhD student and the source of daily anxieties for scores of academics and writers. These very physical responses, compounded with endless thoughts along the lines of 'I should be working', 'I have research visits this week, why can't I focus?', make for an unproductive, unenergetic and stagnant working day.
>
> –Excerpt (i) from blog post, 25 May 2018

> These were perhaps the hardest, most anxious days I've experienced before a set of research encounters. All sorts of scenarios ran through my mind – nobody would turn up, I would be so nervous, sweaty and out of breath that I would be unable to fulfil the sessions and would end up running out. Nobody would understand what I was trying to do, the logistics wouldn't work, I'd sleep in, I'd lose control of my muscle functions, my anxiety headache-migraines would deepen and set in for the whole weekend. I spent hours seeking re-assurance from family members and my partner. Anxiety seemed to cloud every thought and control every movement. Carrying this weary anxiety, I arrived at the tube station near to the workshop space. I felt as though I had been torched with an exhaustion so heavy that the workshop looming ahead seemed like an impossibility, a distant goal I couldn't possibly reach …
>
> –Excerpt (ii) from field notes, 29 September 2018

The opening autoethnographic excerpts are taken from two stories I wrote to reflect upon aspects of my experience of conducting research as a research postgraduate (RPG). I chose to start here – the shared office where research is planned, days spent anticipating research encounters, the tube station outside the 'field site' – to demonstrate the diffuse nature of anxiety and anxiousness as moods, tones, feelings, emotions, and affects which circulate throughout social science spaces and the bodies of those who inhabit them. My experience of an anxiety disorder and anxiousness more broadly means that I arrive at every space I encounter with a degree of embodied anxiety that shifts my bodily capacities and even the temporalities through which I encounter such sites. To this end, my anxiousness is neatly captured by Ahmed (2014, 2004, 125), who distinguishes anxiety from fear by examining the tension held between objects and subjects, observing that

> anxiety becomes attached to particular objects, which come to life not as the cause of anxiety but as an effect of its travels. In anxiety, one's thoughts often move quickly between different objects, a movement that works to intensify the sense of anxiety. One thinks of more and more 'things' to be anxious about; the detachment from one given object allows anxiety to accumulate. In other words, anxiety tends to stick to objects. Given this, anxiety becomes an approach to objects rather than, as with fear, being produced by an object's approach. The slide between fear and anxiety is affected precisely by the 'passing by' of the object.

By understanding that fears often 'slide into' anxiety, Ahmed's words here help to explain the varying intensities through which a body, subject or person might experience their anxiety, and the bodily and temporal thresholds which, when crossed, result in particular emotions spilling over into longer-term states of anxiousness.

In the context of *research*, then, following Ahmed, I argue that we might understand certain anxieties as, at least in part, emergent from one's orientation toward the event of research itself (or, indeed, moments or encounters which take place within or in relation to its spaces, processes, bodies, conditions, and subjects.) This understanding of anxiety aligns with scholarship in Psychology which understands the condition as emergent from one's orientation toward 'an event which implies a possible and uncertain danger' (Miceli and Castelfranchi 2005, 294). An anxious, rather than fearful, experience of research, then, is constituted through one's orientation to, and experience and embodiment of, a multitude of 'things': spaces, socio-materialities, or events to which the condition of anxiety sticks. I contend that anxiety therefore extends its reach beyond the body to become embedded in particular spaces, times, and in relation to particular materialities and discursive conditions, whether it is experienced along a spectrum from an ever-present disorder to a surfacing occurring solely in relation to research practices and spaces. The impacts of this spatially and temporally constituted anxiety and anxious orientation toward research practices are particularly exacerbated for those living with anxiety as a disorder or medical condition.

Anxiety, whether experienced across academic or everyday spaces, might emerge and be experienced in a myriad of ways, and it is unlikely that it is felt equally by all. It might flare up through flashpoints of intensity, or operate as a low hum of background affects that may not rise to the realm of consciousness. It might, for some, build a place in the researching body over time, as the frustrations and complexities involved in researching the lives of others set in. Anxiety might, in sum, inhibit our ability to feel 'at ease' in the research process, or whilst orienting towards research encounters through planning, writing, researching, and teaching. I suggest that this 'ease' might be characterised as a degree of embodied calm and assurance, although others might hold their own understanding of what it feels like to live through embodied comfort and stability.

Although limited attention has focussed on the mental wellbeing of academics, evidence increasingly points to a 'crisis' of poor mental health across academia in the Global North (Gorczynski 2018; Peake and Mullings 2016; Mullings, Peake, and Parizeau 2016). It is experienced across every career level and role in Geography more specifically (Peake et al. 2018). Those undertaking graduate research programmes have been cited as particularly at risk (Levecque et al. 2017), with Peake et al. (2018, vii) noting that

Geography graduate students are likely to experience a 'deep anxiety that permeates their everyday life, which can take an immense toll on emotional, psychological, and physical well-being'. However, although geographical scholarship is becoming increasingly comfortable with acknowledging the existence of emotion and (to a lesser degree) anxiety and mental distress in academic life (see particularly Peake et al. 2018), we are rarely encouraged, should we feel motivated to do so, to incorporate our personal experience of anxiety into our reflexive research practices and outputs. Dialogue around mental health is confined to 'the back-spaces of academia' (Peake and Mullings 2016, 256). As a result, social researchers experiencing anxiety rarely speak to its influence over our research design, implementation, and dissemination, our relations with participants or its embeddedness in research spaces (which extend spatially and temporally beyond the place of research encounter). As Wainwright, Marandet, and Rizvi (2018, 284) expose, geographical researchers do not often 'readily admit discomfort and concern, especially when it is deeply personal and related to our own embodied presence.'

The autoethnographic excerpts I began with speak to this 'embodied presence' in spaces of research and academia, as our experience of these spaces intersect with the bodily and felt dimensions of anxiousness. Indeed, I argue that the excerpts reflect a particular *set of temporalities* that anxious bodies might experience. The excerpts reveal a sense of slowness and constancy, of static, sluggish time wherein I am almost unable to anticipate or orient toward a positive research experience. This temporal deceleration is reinforced through the constancy of self-doubt and questioning and guilt which I describe as 'cloud[ing]' each thought and infiltrating into my muscular tension. The extension of emotional uncertainty produces a relational, multidimensional affective loop of discomfort, which operates between, and is continually produced through, my body, anticipatory relationships with the research spaces, and previous emotional experiences of research I recall. The nexus of forces and surfaces through which this ongoing affective loop of discomfort is produced suggests that my experience is coloured by a temporal non-linearity. This non-linearity might emerge, for example, through a casting back-and-forth through past, present and future experiences of research with a greater intensity or frequency than those less anxious (for a discussion around the intensities through which non-linear temporalities might emerge and become felt see Morrigan [2017] on the surfacing of trauma). Second, the excerpts reflect the *bodily implications* of anxiety. I am conscious of these bodily surfacings and intensities through the felt experience of aforementioned muscle tension, migraines, and viscerally flowing blood. Here, I argue that the bodily experience of anxiety reflects a sense of corporeal weariness emergent from both internal and external pressures and

forces, and the tension between these and my capacities to generate comfort, bodily calm and, broadly, embodied 'ease' whilst constructing and undertaking research.

I focus this piece upon the body and its capacities in order to emphasise the visceral, embodied affects and feelings produced through embodying anxiety in research and academic spaces. By attending to anxiety through this corporeal lens, I also illuminate the *limiting aspects* these feelings might instigate, and indeed (perhaps paradoxically) the *possibilities* they might offer for enhancing research encounters, augmenting reflexive research practice, and developing relations with participants. For example, attending to intense anxiety as allowing one to only 'inhabit' their body along dissociative or detached lines, I argue, allows us to conceptualise and attach meaning to the forces which influence how researchers experience anxiousness, particularly those which pre-consciously affect. Indeed, I align this paper to a broader move, particularly in feminist work, toward a greater recognition of the body's entanglement in research sites as exhausting environments (Sharp 2005), and the researching body's relations with participants' subjectivities and bodies (Wainwright, Marandet, and Rizvi 2018).

2. Writing through anxiety and its movements through academic life and beyond

In this article, I think through anxiety as a set of intensities, affects, emotions, and bodily formations which infiltrate into my positionality, subjectivity, body and situatedness. I seek not to merely position myself and my anxiousness self-consciously, an undertaking which Rose (1997) might understand as producing my 'messiness' as a set of characteristics which can be fully understood and evaluated. Instead, my theoretical approach to embodied anxiousness considers the *movements* of anxiety in my academic life and beyond – its foldings in, out, and between my body, and the spaces and bodies it encounters – to think through both its embeddedness and its capacities to shape every encounter I make whilst researching. I sit with the discomfort of never fully knowing the extent to which my anxiety (or the anxious body I inhabit) influences my capacities to affect and be affected both in research environments and the spaces through which my embodied anxiety is carried beyond. The central placing of my own anxiousness allows me to situate this paper alongside feminist methodological work encouraging researchers to sit with the discomforts of 'messy' research practice (Sharp 2005).

Several methodological interventions could place the experiences of the anxious researcher at the heart of reflexive practice. However, following others who write in their own voice (or from composite perspectives of those with similar experiences) to expand upon their emotional research

experiences, I undertake autoethnography to write through anxiety, allowing my emotions to become 'a relational, connective medium' through which to explore connections between myself, my research, its spaces, and my participants (Bondi 2005, 433), and to develop 'politicized, practical and cultural stories that resonate with others' who might become encouraged to share their own (Adams and Holman Jones 2011, 111). Although autoethnography remains a relatively marginal means of communicating research experiences, the practice of first-person storytelling is well-established in certain geographical literatures, particularly those that explore the lived experiences of marginalised folk in opposition to social research methods that have ignored or suppressed their voices (Holman Jones and Adams 2010).

Personal, autoethnographic accounts of anxiety and mental health conditions have appeared in recent geographical scholarship. I have been particularly influenced by the work of Proudfoot (2015, 1143), who, in resonance with my own anxious internal dialogue, discusses feeling 'like a fraud' as a RPG, 'consumed by guilt that I was not working as hard as I should and that I lived an easy, government-funded life to which I was not entitled'. Proudfoot (2015) reflexively discusses how these guilty imaginaries began to resonate throughout his work and infiltrate even into dreamscapes and other more ephemeral spaces he encountered beyond research sites, allowing him, as he describes in a later piece (Proudfoot 2019, 160), to attend to his positionality without merely interrogating 'the most obvious markers of social difference'. Instead, Proudfoot's efforts allow him to reach 'that which most requires reflection [...] those places where researchers remain opaque to themselves – in particular, the unconscious' (*Ibid*.). Proudfoot's description of the seepage of academic anxiety into and between his daily life and unconscious self provides a starting point from which to recognise and conceptualise experiences of anxiety which exist or become shaped prior to, or outside of, ones' research experiences, alongside anxieties which surface in, and are carried beyond, research spaces.

Although I am limited in my ability to consider the extent that my unconscious experience of anxiety 'haunts' my research practice, I draw upon Proudfoot's (2015) work to centralise my own unconscious and conscious *anxious* selves in this paper. I use my own voice to reflect upon how my embodied anxiety has coloured my experience of research to date and bring my internal voices and visions to the writing process to be grappled with directly and openly. The anxiety I describe fluctuates through spectra of intensities. Whether visible or invisible, barely detectable or deeply painful, I establish that anxiety has infiltrated each space of my academic life-world. Demonstrating this allows me to reveal that reflecting upon anxiety holds potential for both intersectional reflexivity and self-preservation, without assuming that my self, body, anxiety and the socio-political realms in which

they constantly emerge are 'transparently understandable' (see Rose 1997, 318). Like Proudfoot (2015, 2019, 160) I do not merely seek to 'engage in narcissistic introspection – dredging up and confessing uncomfortable truths that serve to shore up one's sense of being a worthy researcher – but rather [wish us] to take these insights and fold them dialectically into our research where they can inform it going forward.'

In this piece, thinking through my personal story of 'living with' anxiety allows me to reflect upon anxiety as holding an affective presence across my research career to date. Throughout this paper, I use the language of 'I', 'we' and 'our', not to flatten out and homogenise the research experience, and the experiences particularly of those who are racialised, classed, gendered, or otherwise othered in academia in different ways to myself. Rather, I use these personal and collective terms, following Adams and Holman Jones' (2011, 110) turn to becoming 'reflexively queer', to attempt to 'combine us, as authors and readers, into a shared experience', one which could 'reframe', 'motivate', and 'mobilize' readers to drive institutional change and tell their stories. I begin the main body of the piece by examining existing work exploring the affective and bodily conditions of social research. Drawing on recent geographical scholarship, I position this paper alongside efforts to recognise 'failures' as integral to the research process in the writing of feminist research. I then turn to further autoethnographic vignettes of anxiety to shed light on what a reflexive and autoethnographic geography of experiencing and embodying anxiety whilst researching might look like and, in turn, offer critical and reflexive scholarship.

3. Situating researcher anxiety in geography and social science

In recent years, stories of emotion suppression, hidden guilt, and challenges to the idealised detached and always-already stable researcher have begun to resonate throughout the mainstream geographical and social science literature. Autoethnography and narrative-writing in particular have enabled some researchers to relay the often deeply emotional experience of undertaking social research (see, for example, Askins 2009; Askins and Blazek 2017; Caretta et al. 2018; Catungal 2017; Mitchell-Eaton 2018). For example, Catungal (2017) narrates their emotional experiences of their PhD by recognising their anxious uncertainty around their research topic, their experience of institutional ethics procedures in which they were racialised and understood as queer, and their experience of crying whilst researching and conducting analyses of their emotionally-laden research encounters. Having done so, Catungal (2017, 298) encourages social researchers to interrogate their 'felt embeddedness' in emotional and social realms, in order to account for how 'our situatedness in broader social worlds affects our knowledge

production practices as well as how we navigate and feel research sites, institutions and relationships'. These attempts to explore the filtering of embodied emotions experienced in research spaces into geographical researchers' everyday lives are developed by Caretta et al. (2018), who engage in collaborative autoethnography to shed light on their experiences of stress and weariness as early career researcher women within neoliberal academia. I note that deeply embodied experiences of anxiety and anxiousness remain unexplored in these autoethnographic texts.

In Geography, a turn toward deconstructing the bodily experience of academia and acknowledging emotions which might be read as undermining the credibility of research processes, has led to interventions questioning the absence of emotional and bodily affects in geographical research outputs. For example, in their drive to elucidate their subject positions, geographers have historically avoided acknowledging researchers' sexual experiences and desires, and the sensuality of the fields in which they conduct research, rigidifying the fluidity of researcher positionalities (Kaspar and Landolt 2016). Indeed, De Craene (2017) notes that these 'erotic subjectivities' and bodily narratives of desire are supressed to maintain rigour and credibility, a suppression which for Cupples (2002) reinforces colonial discourses circulating around research which fail to address the contradictory assumed stability of our researcher positionality. Indeed, social researchers are assumed to be asexual in order to maintain a 'good researcher' narrative (De Craene 2017); one which serves to underrepresent the delicate balance of power relations between researchers and participants (Kaspar and Landolt 2016). With these assumptions in mind, I question: Have researchers' embodied anxieties been similarly suppressed and subsequently made less visible through the reflexive narratives we are encouraged to create?

As Brunila and Valero (2018, 77, original emphasis) note, anxiety in academia manifests as 'a *public secret*, a kind of taboo that nobody mentions and that all hide, so the apparent vulnerability and precarity of the individual do not become revealed in the "wrong way".' However, the absence of reflection upon anxiety in reflexive research accounts is somewhat surprising, given recent geographical work which has moved discussions of health and wellbeing beyond medicalised spaces, and has been instrumental in exploring the affective dynamics of anxiety, exhaustion, violence, and fear as structures of feeling that are diffuse, pervasive, and controlled through neoliberalism, austerity, and capitalism (Anderson 2016; Askins and Blazek 2017; Brunila and Valero 2018; Wilkinson and Ortega-Alcázar 2019). Indeed, recent work exploring academics' wellbeing and working conditions has placed anxiety and stress as central nodes in the formation of the everyday backdrop of academic life in the neoliberal academy; this is particularly the case for those bearing the burden of marginality or multiple oppressions (Berg, Huijbens, and Larsen

2016; Brunila and Valero 2018; Caretta et al. 2018; Mountz et al. 2015; Mullings, Peake, and Parizeau 2016; Peake and Mullings 2016; Radice 2013). This work has recognised that, as bodies engaged in social research and academic life, we are increasingly encouraged to simultaneously inhabit multiple subject positions as researcher, educator, collaborator, worker, and activist, and to manage and survive our increasing economic precarity (see Brunila and Valero 2018; Dowling 2008; Peake et al. 2018). However, this experience has rarely been situated *within* the researcher or their body (although see Johnson 2019; Mountz et al. 2015).

Although the specific affective, personal, and bodily geographies of anxiety in academia are not yet well established, a number of sociological and other social science writings have noted the *emotional toll* qualitative research takes upon researchers. However, this work has primarily considered the emotional 'risks' and dilemmas qualitative researchers might be exposed to, and the strategies they take to mitigate this exposure and, in turn, enhance their response to emotional risk (Dickson-Swift et al. 2007; Sampson, Bloor, and Fincham 2008). For example, Fitzpatrick and Olson (2015, 52) focus on the 'deep emotional' labouring of academic research, and the anxieties which emerge around discursive pressures to maintain a level of supposed emotional professionalism and normality in research spaces, through such means as emotional concealment and 'bodily work' to control expression. However, this paper serves to reflect that the majority of academic work exploring the anxieties of research has discussed anxiety as emergent from the research encounter itself, rather than thinking through the explicit experience of anxiety as a condition or presence which pervades through the life and body of the researcher *outside of*, around, prior to, and following, immersion in research spaces.

Nevertheless, other scholars have demonstrated the relevance and potential productivity of examining relative researcher 'ease' across research spaces and beyond. For example, Langer (2016) uses an extensive 'research vignette' drawn from his experience of a laboured, oppressive encounter with a research participant to open a dialogue between his readers and the writings he crafts, and to pull apart the differences and disparate worldviews which he and his participant occupied in the field, allowing him to reflect on the apprehensions and struggles he experienced throughout his research. Meanwhile, in line with the ambitions of this paper, Brunila and Valero (2018) bind multiple academics' stories to fictional writing to position anxiety as an affective force which constitutes the subjectivities of researchers and research subjects. These writings can be aligned with work which has highlighted that many researchers cannot (or can only rarely) expect to feel or embody ease in their researching lives, or indeed across spaces and times which extend beyond their academic practice. Indeed, spaces of

geographical research and academia, like most everyday sites, are produced through affective dynamics that privilege particular subjects result in certain folk being subject to particular exclusions and marginalisations. For example, reflecting the experience of academia as multiple, diverse, and often discriminatory, particular subjects might experience racial marginalisation, exclusion, and normative whiteness in academia (see, for example, Ahmed 2007, 2012; Faria and Mollett 2016; Johnson 2019; Pulido 2002, Tolia-Kelly 2017); others might be (additionally) classed (see, for example, Reay 2004), gendered (see, for example, Caretta et al. 2018; Doan 2010), or otherwise othered. These practices of exclusion often occur across multiple, intersecting axes of bodily and social difference and oppression (see Oliver and Morris 2019).

I argue that atmospheric and affective registers which circulate in many spaces of research, as a result of their ever-unfolding socio-material composition, serve to produce such sites as tense, hostile, exclusionary and exhausting environments for those who feel the effects of discrimination, othering, and other forms of exclusion. As a result, ideas around the belonging of certain bodies are constructed in certain academic spaces; through such discourses, particular bodies are read as not belonging, their presence feared, subject to surveillance, or otherwise constructed as 'outsider' (Ahmed 2012, 2017; Oliver and Morris 2019). However, as Johnson (2019) explains, such practices of othering cannot simply be mapped *onto* the body. To account for the experiences of Black Muslim women, for example, Johnson (2019, 4) calls for 'room to examine how our identity performances shift across different social situations and spaces, and how our beings are more than just oppositional to a white Self'. Following this logic, then, the researcher's experience of anxiety becomes merely one of many intersecting layers of difference and potential othering which contribute to unease, embodied instability, weariness, frustration, and other conditions influencing the spectrum of (dis)comfort researchers undergo and are often, when particularly marginalised, forced to negotiate. However, with the aim of exploring both how the affective and bodily *specificities* of my anxiety are entangled in my research practice, and how reflexive reflection upon these entanglements and their varying intensities might shape research practices and encounters, in the following sections I offer my anxiety voice and afford it agency.

4. Anxious vignettes

4.1. Inhabiting the anxious body to and through research spaces

I begin here with field notes I wrote at the end-point of a workshop series I ran in collaboration with young people to explore their emotional and embodied experiences and life histories. Aiming to craft a space for voice-raising in a supportive and creative environment, I had been experiencing a

deep sense of dread in the days leading up to our meeting for the first time. On the day of the workshop, I walked out to buy some craft materials with a heavy, fog-like feeling of worry in my head, and an embodied sense of anxious emptiness which I carried through crowded streets. I wrote material for the following excerpt on the late night train home from the workshop, typing brief notes into my iPhone with a sense of reluctant satisfaction:

> That was really, really difficult. Each time I travel for research, and every time I have made this journey, I feel a sense of dread writhing around in my belly. No matter how much re-assurance I've drawn from others, no matter the level of preparedness I concoct leading up to the research, and no matter how much I reflect on my love of my research and the deep sense of care I have for my participants and my project, this deep, visceral trepidation still sits at the forefront of everything I do. It travels with me through shaking hands, through the deep breaths I draw from God-knows-where to propel me forward. It sits as a frothy fuzz behind my assured handshake, and hangs in the air in spite of the smiley 'hello!' I echo into the workshop space, as I take in the comfy chairs and the room's warmth. Anxiety vocalises itself through obsessive and compulsive thoughts directing me to place a pen down in the exact right way on the table. Regardless, I scatter the research materials I've gathered – crafts, pens, paper, consent forms – across two tables. Perhaps, I wonder, others cannot see this tension. Perhaps they feel it too, in their own insecurities and anxiousness, and in their eagerness to share and be heard. I carry on regardless. Another voice, one I've trained to emerge at these moments, reverberates around in my head as I'm laughing and joking with participants, genuinely enjoying their presence and stories in spite of everything: 'Push through, enjoy this, make a difference.'
>
> – Excerpt (iii) from field notes, 3 September 2018

A second excerpt tells a similar story. At the time of this encounter, I had been experiencing a period of relative calm and only whilst travelling to the research site did my anxiousness around the research itself begin to surface. Again, I hastily typed notes into my phone while waiting for participants to arrive, later using them to construct the following narrative:

> I travelled on the train to meet with a small group of young trans people, and was so excited to enjoy a couple of hours hearing what they had to say. Taking stock of the research I had completed earlier in the week, I felt tired and the familiar low hum of anxiety began through self-questioning, before worries around preparedness and familiarity with the participants' life experiences started filtering through. By the time I reached the workshop space, I was feeling downtrodden by thoughts that I wouldn't be able to fulfil my aims, that my research wouldn't be 'good enough', that I couldn't possibly do justice my participants' voices and experiences. Waiting for the young people to arrive, I attempted to switch these thoughts off, to push the realities of the situation to the back of my mind.
>
> – Excerpt (iv) from field notes, 11 December 2018

Reflecting on these experiences was emotionally demanding. In both cases, I remember the combined sense of triumph and weariness I was experiencing

as I re-formed my notes into an emotionally-bolder autoethnographic diary. This I intended to be filed in my desk drawer given that all-too-often engaging with such research materials had become an anxious experience in itself. Retrieving the writings for the first time, I began to reconfigure my understandings of my own anxiousness in relation to 'the field' of research. In these excerpts, the extent to which my anxiety is corporealised is emphasised. Indeed, I seem to be inhabiting my body in a dissociative, detached manner as anxiety envelopes and travels with me. Occupying this body through the workshop space, and spaces which extend beyond the field site (the train, spaces where reassurance is obtained and preparedness is established, and so on), results in anxiety directly influencing my ever-fluid subject position with intensity. In turn, bodily anxiousness influences the ways in which I develop and conduct my research, and indeed the processes through which I come to relate to participants and gatekeepers prior to, during, and following immersion in a workshop.

In the first vignette, anxiety, as an active agent in my experience of the field site and its contents, performs its emergence from the deep interiors of my body, before surfacing through running sweat and shaking hands, and through the scattering action I perform in defiance of an intrusive thought. Despite this surfacing, and the material traces it leaves behind, the visibility of my anxiety is perhaps lost on others present in the spaces I move through. Indeed, in the vignette I question whether others – participants, gatekeepers, passers-by – can even 'see' the tension that holds me within its grasp. Following Ahmed's (2014, para. 8) attention to the *angles* at which we reach particular sites, arriving into the research space with an anxious body, one which is 'out of line' and 'not at home in the world', means that its anxious affects become disruptive, altering the research encounter from the course it might otherwise have taken. Anxiety, from this perspective, pouring out of my body as it moves through the research space, sticks to bodies and materials within, and means that 'everything that happens makes me feel more anxious', generating the atmospheric heaviness of the space itself (Ahmed 2014, para. 9).

What also emerges from these accounts is a sense of what I term 'anxious stability', an ability to manage (or, enjoy, endure, or stabilise) the processes of research which persist in spite of my embodied anxieties. Here, this persistence is reflected in my internal narratives, and is seemingly drawn and recalled from an obscured bodily location, having already been learned through repetition during previous research encounters, to 'push through' or 'push the realities of the situation to the back of my mind' to prepare for emotional labouring with participants. This stability, performed through actions and objects such as the materials I scatter on the table, and the warm engagement I attempt to craft with participants I am meeting for the

first time, is actively worked for, and represents a level of agency I am able to exercise to mitigate potential affects and unknowns which might otherwise emerge through my anxiousness. The neoliberal academy teaches us to perform these iterative acts, and to construct our research along lines of impact and productivity with limited concern for our own individual emotional capacities (Brunila and Valero 2018). I wish to question here the hold these stabilising performances have over the research process, to consider how traditional aspects of the research role (developing participant reciprocity, data collection and so on) might be impacted, or even augmented, through the embodied experience of anxiety. Seeking to move beyond sanitised, generalised and assumed notions of the research process (whereby the stable researcher narrative is upheld), in this case through autoethnography, offers opportunities to develop reflexive accounts with potential possibilities for challenging the dominant academic norm, and to complicate assumptions made around the dormancy of the body, subject positions and emotions of the researcher-while-researching. The first step in doing so involves reflection from the position of the researcher experiencing anxiety.

4.2. Anxiety, the unknowns of research, and a spectrum of embodied 'ease'

The following excerpt was written after returning from a fieldwork session, one wherein I had enjoyed engaging with participants' stories and work on rich, creative compositions. Despite this enjoyment and the successes we co-created, my initial experience of the space was clouded by anxious uncertainty:

> After 10 minutes wherein nobody had approached me to join my session, I felt nervous and despondent, fretting that my session wasn't attractive enough, or that nobody would join from the main group at all. I remember the unknowns lurching in my stomach and clouding my thoughts: Who might participate? Will any of the young people 'take' to the session? Will I be able to help them feel that they have significant things to contribute? Will the session fall on a good day for turnout? Will I be able to rely upon the youth workers to help facilitate and offer their gatekeeping? Many of these questions were unfounded, and beyond my control, but still I felt them swirl endlessly as though a muddy pool of thoughts which, when drawn from, only flared up the anxious unease simultaneously coursing its way across my chest.
>
> – Excerpt (v) from field notes, April 2018

Again, this vignette reveals what it might look and feel like to inhabit or occupy an anxious body while researching, and the affects which coalesce around this body during its journey to and through the research space. Here, anxiety emerges from the *unknowns* of the forthcoming research encounter. In turn, these unknowns are impacted by the nature of the field

site as a *space* of unknown. To an extent, qualitative research 'in the field' must always involve a set of unknowns – the unknowns of participant engagement and the stories they will bring, of the space itself, and of the bodies, materials, and social matter which co-construct the research encounter as it unfolds in front of us. Looking to feminist work which advocates for us to sit with the messiness and discomforts of qualitative research helps us to cherish these unknowns and the anxieties they cause, and suggests that we can use our acknowledgement of their existence to reflexively interrogate our methodological styles and the knowledge produced in our research encounters. To develop this argument, I contend that writing through *anxiety* (whether experienced as an ongoing condition or as a temporary surfacing produced through the act of research), and attending to the materialisation of anxiousness from the unknowns of research, can offer a productive path through which we can think through our own position in each research stage with greater nuance. In my research, exploring my anxieties through field diaries allowed me to interrogate assumptions I held around reflexivity and participatory research. By writing through my anxieties, I could examine assumptions I had made around what my subject position *should* look like. By interrogating my writings and subsequent readings, I could examine whether my research should ever be considered stable when my field sites, my subject positions, and my body were constantly in production and influenced by a vast amount of forces and emotions which ebb and flow throughout each research encounter and space. Indeed, I came to increasingly understand that my anxiety mediated every interaction I made in the field site whilst occupying an anxious, unstable body.

In order to move past assumptions around researcher stability, a new conceptual language must be developed to explore how anxiety and mental health play an active role in the development and implementation of our qualitative research, and to recognise the relationship between anxiety and the capacities of the researcher to feel 'at ease' in research spaces. To this end, perhaps we should consider research as operating along a spectrum of embodied researcher (and indeed participant) 'ease'. Rather than perpetuating a continuum of anxiety, whereby anxiety might be understood as static, or as operating within a social vacuum, unaffected by societal forces and structures, this approach should involve researchers using their own narratives and means of storytelling their academic lives. Such efforts would allow researchers to recognise the place held by anxiety and mental health in relation to the forces, identities, emotions and bodily experiences which constantly shift their subjectivities. Considering anxiousness as just one of many forces implicated in this ever-changing web of factors at play in the unfolding of our subject positions in research spaces, allows us to continue enlivening our intersectional approaches to reflexivity. For example, as a gay, white,

cisgender, young man of a certain background, body size, and so on, my bodily experiences, and the ways that my body is read and gazed upon by others in the field, is likely to form a certain set of embodied privileges. This type of reflexive thinking involving listing axes of difference and identity is not new. Yet, I argue here that involving anxiety, and mental wellbeing more broadly, at the interplay of these reflexive considerations through a kaleidoscopic, non-linear approach to research anxiousness – from its internal geographies (excerpt iii), or its flaring across a particular part of the body (excerpt v), to its role in constructing participant relationships (excerpt iv) – allows us to further evaluate and contest the conditions in which academic knowledge is produced and embodied. In the following penultimate section, I return to the idea of an 'anxious stability', configuring my anxiety 'coping mechanisms' as also significant in my experience of embodied anxiety.

4.3. Coping, stability, and enlivening research through anxiety

I structured the following vignette as a formulaic intervention to remind my future researching self of my ability to craft a level of bodily and mental stability in order to maintain, and ultimately enjoy, research spaces. In this excerpt, I return to the tube station of 29 September 2018 and the impossibility I saw ahead of me. These are the internal narratives I attempted to hold close, in order to render this impossibility possible:

> I think, crucially, I knew deep down that I was prepared. Beneath migraine and weariness, I pushed mental energy towards a mantra to get me through:
>
> 'You have collated materials, negotiated access, space, and collaboration, you have been an administrator, have prepared travel, and funding, you have created a workable session plan, you have liaised, and gathered input from others, taken a beta blocker, and you're ready to go.'
>
> As I crossed the street, taking time to take each step, I again spoke from the perspective of someone outside looking in, to remind myself of the enjoyment I derive from researching and to remember the importance of my research:
>
> 'You love listening to young people's stories, and engaging them in storytelling.
>
> You always return, re-invigorated, newly confident, and brimming with ideas for moving forward.
>
> Your research serves a distinct purpose: to draw attention to stories and narratives which often go ignored, to afford young people with opportunities and voice. You have a deep sense of loyalty to them, their experiences and views, and you care deeply about the project and its future outputs.'
>
> Finally, I reminded myself of the power of relative ambivalence: Even if everything I imagined could go wrong did materialise, what could possibly be the worst

> outcome? Occupying an ambivalent approach to research is perhaps surrounded by stigma, but unjustifiably so. Allowing myself to briefly detach emotionally and bodily from the physical sensations, intrusive thoughts and 'unknowns' which come hand-in-hand with researching while anxious (or indeed while caring deeply about my participants and research), is not to say that I will not give my all to the research setting. To the contrary, in order to project myself, my participants and to do justice to the research I want to undertake, a less materially *present*, more removed subject position focussed upon doing the best I can under the circumstances, will become a coping mechanism through which I can approach this.
>
> – Excerpt (vi) from field notes, 29 September 2018

This excerpt speaks to how I craft stability and endurance in defiance of the bodily realities and affects engendered through the research space and its entanglements with my mounting anxiousness. This perseverance constitutes an outcome of what might be considered 'coping mechanisms'; according to Miceli and Castelfranchi (2001), as conscious, deliberate revisions to one's attitudes, such efforts contrast with 'defense mechanisms', which involve the unintentional, unconscious manipulation of attitudes such that the avoidance of suffering overrides the goal of epistemic accuracy (see also Cramer 1998). Throughout the excerpt, a level of stability again emerges out of my internal dialogue, which re-focusses my attention toward positive experiences of research, the potential outcomes of the research, and participants' productive enjoyment, comfort and safety in the workshop. Stability is also crafted internally at the level of the hormonal, with the regularity of my taking a beta blocker to suppress the circulation of adrenaline and the force of my heartbeat demonstrating a drive to balance the internal anxious tensions circulating throughout my body. This projection towards stability encapsulates the performative nature of social research; my field notes demonstrate a well-worn process, a series of delicate constructions woven together in order to alleviate my anxiety in the field and create an enabling place for participants. However, the infiltration of the neoliberal academy into this process is also revealed: my focus on 'distinct purpose' and outputs represents a drive to perform through a subject position neoliberal academia requires us to pursue, along lines of 'individuality, effectiveness, and the ability to be in charge [...] excitement, satisfaction, pride when getting it "right"' (Brunila and Valero 2018, 83).

Yet this performance of anxiety suppression is not all that is at play here or indeed throughout my research to date. Indeed, throughout I have, enlivened by the principals of queer research advocating for incorporating researcher openness and story-*sharing* alongside absorbing participants' story-telling, talked together with participants about our individual experiences of anxiety. These conversations have emerged organically, for example, in relation to participants' own experiences of weariness and anxiousness, in

the hope that sharing my own story offers opportunities for both participants and myself as researcher to feel at ease with one another, and comfortable in the space which envelops us. Here, although important, my aim has not merely been to advance participant reciprocity, but to develop a space through which stories, lived experiences, and bodily narratives emerge with fluidity and mutual trust. Weaving my anxiety into the shared dialogue which springs out of encounters with participants, in turn becoming comfortable with the discomforts which anxiety creates, offers opportunities through which to co-construct our researching space together. Indeed, these story-sharing moments exemplify that anxiety does not have to become the embodiment of a set of affects that solely hold back anxious researchers. Instead, I demonstrate that anxiousness can be a way of living that can enrich and enliven research practices.

5. Discussion and conclusions

As Tolia-Kelly (2010, 363, original emphasis) reminds us, feminist work asks social researchers to '*feel* the formation, dissemination and analysis process that lead to the production of cultural geographies,' and to consider the affects which emerge out of bodies which are produced as 'other'. Doing so, Tolia-Kelly argues, can allow researchers to live through the body as an instrument for 'pushing the edges and folds' of knowledge-making (*Ibid*.). In this paper, I have positioned the affective condition of *anxiety*, and indeed the *anxious researching body*, as holding the potential to shape every research encounter made by anxious researchers. I have recognised the bodily impacts and implications of anxiety, its felt dimensions, and the influence it holds in altering the temporalities through which those experiencing anxiousness negotiate and live through. In doing so, I have used autoethnographic field diary excerpts to encourage readers to *feel* and make sense of the bodily affects which emerge out of anxiousness in the spaces and times which they encounter in and around their research. By describing anxiety as both a condition and an active agent which affects their bodies and bodily encounters across various spaces, places, and times, I further appeal to readers to push the boundaries of what is deemed acceptable to feel and embody in academia. Considering our own experiences of anxiousness (in relation to our selves, bodies, participants, the spaces of research, and the spaces and times of our everyday lives wherein anxiety is also felt), and folding these into our reflexive practices, writings and research outputs, I argue, is one means through which to achieve this repositioning of values.

Throughout this article, I have referred to the messy reality and specificities of my researching body and subject position through a feminist approach attentive to the interactions between embodied anxiety, social

research processes, and academic and everyday life. With this, I have extended the boundaries of reflexivity and critical scholarship as involving an always-already unfinished set of processes, events and encounters which are shaped by our emotions, bodies, and situatedness as they are produced through multiple and intersecting forces. I have aligned these efforts with the work of other scholars who continue to move beyond the privileging and perpetuation of the fallacy of an emotionally and bodily detached, always-already stable researcher. To this end, I argue that reflexive accounts of the research process and of our experiences in academic life and beyond cannot solely reflect upon what we, our research participants, and our 'field sites' can feel, see, hear and touch. Indeed, recognising the bodily realities and spatial and temporal dynamics of anxiety, through autoethnographic reflection, has allowed me to hold on to and examine that which seems invisible or irrelevant, experienced directly only by my own self and body as a detached researcher. By recognising the temporalities that are induced through experiencing and embodying anxiety, I have further demonstrated its life-altering reach. Yet my own narratives of anxiety are only partial of my own anxious experiences, which also emerge outside of academic and research spaces. Although I have shown that researcher anxiousness is deeply entangled in the socio-materiality of academic life, I argue that attending to the shaping of anxiety outside of the spatial and temporal folds of academia will allow further emphasis to be placed on the always-unfinished formation of researcher subjectivity. Indeed, given its shaping through discourses, spaces, events, practices, and embodied encounters of everyday life, anxiety is often both co-constituted and established within, and carried spatially and temporally beyond, academic spaces.

The arguments I have presented in this piece also feed into a recent, wider conversation in Human Geography around how positionalities and situated knowledges are interpreted and represented in reflexive scholarly work. Specifically, my analytical work in this paper generates a space for potential future research around the ways in which the embodiments and experiences of anxieties in academic life might be conceptualised and written through in future texts. Following Simandan (2019) and their proposed 'four epistemic gaps' through which situated knowledges are always-already interpreted, allows distinctions between the felt, embodied experience of anxiety and its representation in reflexive interrogations of the self to be made to develop a directive channel for this future research agenda. The first 'gap' proposes that we always-already 'underestimate the low probability of the current world and therefore fail to attend to the manifold ways in which the present could have turned out very differently' (*Ibid*., 130). Taking this into account enables us to conceptually (if messily) distinguish between anxious, anticipatory relationships with research spaces and encounters, and the anxieties that take place in the research encounter proper, which, as I have demonstrated,

may in actuality generate possibilities and potentialities. The second and third 'gaps', which speak to the distinctions between the realised world and its encountered or witnessed situation, and those between this latter viewpoint and the remembered situation, respectively, allow further conceptual distinctions to be made between how anxieties are lived through, remembered, witnessed, encountered, interacted with, and re-formed. Thinking through anxiousness in relation to the final 'gap', in its addressing of the distinction between how situations are witnessed and consciously remembered and recalled (or indeed forgotten), allows for the unavoidable space between what is remembered of one's embodied anxiousness, and what is then re-told in the sharing of one's stories of anxiety, to be conceptualised. Indeed, while writing this paper, I was confronted with the unease of representing and telling my own story, and was at times hesitant, even fearful, of sharing aspects of my embodied life. Nevertheless, throughout the paper, I have confronted my always-incomplete capacity to be fully aware of, and represent, my (un)conscious experiences of anxiety.

Indeed, my autoethnographic writings cannot capture the diversity of anxious, othered, or otherwise marginalised bodies working in academic and social research spaces. Indeed, if poor mental wellbeing and anxiety currently pervasive throughout academia is to be countered, the voices of those whose lived experiences are often suppressed further than my own – including women, people of colour, disabled people, trans and non-binary folk, and other queer people – must be upheld, and social researchers should seek to overtly offer them our collaboration and support. In summary, then, I urge researchers, should they feel comfortable to undertake this emotional labouring, to recognise the placing and experience of anxiety and similar conditions throughout their work, to give voice to their bodily experiences of anxiousness and mental discomfort, and indeed their resilience, in research.

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