failure failure failure failure failure failure: six types of failure within the neoliberal academy

Preface: the first line

~~I am a failure.~~

~~I am not a failure.~~

~~I am a failure.~~

~~I am not a failure.~~

~~I am a failure.~~

~~I am not a failure.~~

~~I am a failure.~~

~~I am not a failure.~~

~~I am a failure.~~

~~I am not a failure.~~

I am not a failure…but I feel like one.

Acknowledging failure in the neoliberal academy

I am not a failure…but I feel like one[1]. As a Geographer working within the contemporary academy I am proud of my achievements[2,3,4]…but I *feel* like a failure, and *expect* to fail, every day of my working life[5]. And when you *feel* like a failure, and *expect* to fail, it is hard to escape the conclusion that you *are* a failure. Even if your CV, profile and performance indicators make a powerful case to the contrary.

Recent theorisations of failure, gentleness, modesty and (un)wellness within contemporary academia have provided important openings to acknowledge the prevalence of failure and fear-of-failure in academic workplaces, disciplines and careers in four senses. First, through these lines of work, there is increased recognition of *failure as collateral damage* of neoliberalisation within contemporary academia. It is

[1] This was not an easy sentence to write. It is not easy to disclose feelings of failure, and I suppose it has taken years (and a certain accumulation of confidence, experience, social capital and ontological security) to feel able to put this into words. More practically, it took many iterative drafts to write 'I am not a failure…but I feel like one'. I spent days wondering how to articulate the co-presence of, and oscillation between, 'not-failure' and 'failure' (as caricatured in the preface). At various stages, too, the wording changed from 'I feel like a failure' to 'I sometimes feel like a failure', 'I often feel like a failure' , 'I always feel like a failure', 'I usually feel like a failure', or 'I know I am a failure' (maybe depending on my mood, circumstances, or how much melodrama I was enjoying playing with in my writing).

[2] I find it interesting that I feel an obligation to begin by asserting my success. (I suppose I want to get across a sense that I am not writing from a bitter place devoid of success: rather, I know I have been fortunate enough to have some significant successes in my field, but feel like a failure nonetheless). It is also notable that I feel uneasy speaking of myself as a success (e.g. I find myself undercutting my narrative with footnotes, parentheses and excessive, self-effacing detail). So while I *could* write an uncomplicated, triumphant account of myself as a success (exceptional academic achievements; first in my family and street to go to university; from PhD to Professor in a decade; from profound shyness to international keynote speaker; £100,000s of research income; leadership and editorship roles; 100s of citations; and all that), I find I just cannot do it. Perhaps I am just inherently bashful; perhaps I am working toward a more self-effacing mode of autoethnographic practice (Horton, forthcoming); perhaps the dramatic social mobility of my career has created such dissonance and dislocation that I feel embarrassed – even ashamed – about how things have ended up; perhaps I am reacting to the overweening ambition and self-promotion I perceive in some colleagues; perhaps I just find it fun and productive to write complex, footnoted sentences. I don't know.

[3] I mean, really… see how easily I tossed aside my life's achievements in that last footnote. I worry that too many of us do this too readily: we are so quick to surrender to a sense of failure, in spite of the considerable, lifelong achievements – and the sheer, day-by-day efforts – that have got us here.

[4] This was the exact point that I started to worry that this essay was, itself, failing. I realised that I was enjoying writing the footnotes much more than the actual argument, which is rarely a good sign. Granted, I have often thought about writing a paper made up of a single sentence with pages of footnotes (like, suggesting how much of what matters goes unsaid, unnoticed, under the radar, in the footnotes and marginalia of life) but I accept many readers and reviewers might find this infuriating or self-indulgent; I also accept that this is one of my many visions for papers, books, projects and creative endeavours which is unlikely to ever happen. So when I start writing footnotes like this it feels both like a warning sign that I am losing focus and a poignant rebuke reminding me of once-exciting plans I have never realised.

[5] Although it is not direct focus of this paper, I am interested in the ways in which feelings and expectations of failure are deeply-felt and embodied. When I say 'I feel like a failure' I do not mean I go around thinking 'ooh…I feel like a failure'; nor am I consciously bothered by this feeling at all times. Rather, 'I feel like a failure' is a placeholder for a now totally taken-for-granted set of bodily-affective-habitual conditions. Like, when giving a lecture, I just accept an intuition that something could go wrong; or, the night before big academic conferences I grind my teeth, sleep fitfully, and have a very specific tension headache; or, after a day at work I tend to worry about small, glitchy moments of awkwardness rather than celebrating the many more things that went well.

increasingly evident that workplaces characterised by intensifying competitiveness, individualism, rationalisation, ramped-up expectations, strategic aspirationalism, marketised hype, performance management, academic celebritisation, and instrumental careerism must constitute failures as well as successes, losers as well as winners, anxieties as well as aspirations (Berg et al., 2016; Mullings et al., 2016). Second, in this context, there is increased acknowledgement of *failure as unspoken*: a typically unsaid, although everyday, experience within the contemporary academy (Horton, 2008; Harrowell et al., 2018). Third, there is mounting evidence of *unspoken failure as harm*. Many studies now demonstrate how normative cultures of silence around failure are constitutive of profound anxieties, stress and multiple forms of ill-health (Gill, 2009; Mountz, 2016; Peake and Mullings, 2016). Fourth, however, one can also find in previous accounts a more hopeful sense of *failure as a grounds for success*. Often, accounts of professional failure posit failure as a stepping stone to success via lessons learnt, triumph over adversity or agile engagements with unexpected adversities (Zavattaro, 2019; or see, for example, phenomena like #shareyourrejections).

This essay contributes[6] to nascent theorisations of failure in the contemporary academy in two main senses. On one hand, I highlight the prevalence of plural, overlapping failures which may intersect and matter in different ways at different moments during academic careers (Elangovan and Hoffman, 2019). In acknowledgment of this plurality I highlight six quite distinct, though related, modalities of failure which are everyday, axiomatic, but often-unspoken experiences of contemporary academic life. On the other hand, running through this discussion, I develop a wider critique of ways in which narratives of failure have, themselves, come to be instrumentalised and marketized within the neoliberal academy. Against a normative imperative of triumph-over-adversity-in-pursuit-of-individualised-success I want to make space for more complex, ambivalent, challenging, hesitant, modest, gentle, self-effacing ways of thinking-with failure – and more care-full, collaborative, collegiate understandings of success within the contemporary academy[7].

[6] I have always felt uneasy about writing this kind of sentence. Making powerful, self-aggrandising claims about my 'contribution' or **IMPACT** does not sit comfortably with me (I don't want any fuss!) However, ironically, I seem to have a talent for writing this way: I have a knack for penning the **SO WHAT** sentence and **BIG** introduction. Every time I do this, I feel the gap between myself and my work gets a little wider, and the relationship between those two things gets a little more complicated.

[7] Just to illustrate the point in the last footnote, I do not speak like this in real life. I mean, look at the state of that sentence: 36 words long, 8 commas, 3 words unrecognised by my spell-checker, plus the phrase 'triumph-over-adversity-in-pursuit-of-individualised-success'. My academic writing style is deliberately characterised by relentless, excessive long sentences (typically featuring semicolons, numbered lists, neologisms, self-deprecating details, snotty criticality and

Six types of failure

While recent critiques have been important in constituting a language, sensitivity and discussion around failure in the contemporary academy, I want to prompt further consideration of the nature of that failure: i.e. what experiences and processes constitute failures (and feelings-of-failure) in practice? To further this discussion I highlight six distinct, though related, types of failure which are everyday, axiomatic, but typically-unspoken within contemporary academic life. While this is not an exhaustive list I hope the following discussion begins to suggest the plurality of *failures* which constitute contemporary academic lives. In so doing I invite reflection on how we participate in, and perpetuate, these failures. I also want to leave space to consider what might count as *success* in and against these failure-rich contexts.

1. Failure in terms of… things not going to plan

Let us give thanks to colleagues who made pioneering, counter-normative calls to consider reflexivity and positionality within our disciplines (WGSG, 1992; Cook, 1998; Skelton, 2001)[8]. Their work opened all kinds of spaces to acknowledge the inherent messiness of academic practices. In particular, many researchers have subsequently reflected upon the messy, contingent, unpredictability of doing research (Askins and Pain, 2011; Billo and Hiemstra, 2013). Surely anyone who has embarked on a research project will recognise that things do go wrong – and data collection and research encounters can 'fail' – despite our hard work and best laid plans. As many reflexive accounts have now shown, practices of research, teaching and scholarly endeavour are widely experienced in terms of the possibility of failure (Harrowell et al., 2018; Frazier, 2019). So, while it remains the case that research is widely written up and presented as flawless, frictionless, authoritative and

opaque in-jokes) and I am quite unapologetic about this (I could lay out my reasons, influences and antecedents, but really don't have time to get into that right now). But my point is there is a gap, or at least a complex relationship, between my writing persona and myself. For example, I often feel that people who know my work are a bit disappointed when they meet me in person (sorry if this has happened to you – I'm not very comfortable in that kind of scenario). I am also very aware that I habitually write in a way which is almost entirely unreadable to most of my family and the community where I grew up. I feel bad about this and when I talk about 'failure' I guess I am always dwelling on these kinds of disjunctures between where I'm from, what I do, and what others expect of me. (Also note that, yet again, I am spending longer writing this footnote than the actual essay).

[8] This is a small, indicative, personal selection in recognition of three authors whose work made a difference to me. Gillian Rose's commentary in WGSG (1992) was the first time I found academic writing by someone who seemed to be feeling a bit like me; Skelton's (2001) paper was the first author I found who seemed recognisably similar to me in terms of class, hometown, background and personality; and, although not uncontroversial, Cook's (1998) early autoethnographic writing was the first academic writing to make me laugh out loud. All of those things were important in making me feel a little more 'at home' within academia.

successful, we now have a rich, diverse array of countervailing narratives which make clear that, for example, research projects can be hugely complex or practically ineffective, that research can entail all manner of awkward moments, disquieting situations or troubling power geometries, and that researchers often experience feelings of profound anxiety, stress, distress, hopelessness or horror (Swanson, 2008; von Benzon, 2017). Frequently, these kinds of narratives also highlight how the messiness of research is potentially productive: ultimately, accidental and unanticipated moments can constitute some of the richest, most thought-provoking and exciting data or learning experiences. And, while celebrating the preponderance of accounts of things not going to plan – and valuing the many, unanticipated successes and productive tensions that can follow (Pain et al, 2013) – I also want to introduce a note of caution here. In speaking of academic failures, we need to be careful not to *only* celebrate failures with happy endings. We need to acknowledge that things going wrong can be deeply upsetting, profoundly anxiety-inducing, and personally or professionally catastrophic. My sense is that we still hear or write relatively little about this latter kind of failure, where there is no narrative arc, triumph over adversity or redemptive happy ending.

2. Failure in terms of… performance anxieties in the neoliberal academy

Over the last decade, critiques of contemporary academic work cultures have increasingly highlighted the pervasiveness of individualised performance anxieties in spaces of academia. This work has been powerful in articulating and politicising commonplace anxieties occasioned by not being productive or successful 'enough' in relation to disciplinary norms and workplace performance metrics (Berg et al., 2016; Peake and Mullings, 2016). So, for example, we might feel that we are never productive enough (despite intense workloads and long hours), not writing enough or being cited enough, not generating enough income, not being **REF**able or **IMPACT**ful enough, not being **World-Leading**, authoritative or media-friendly, never on top of our email inbox or 'to do' lists, not tweeting or being tweeted-about enough, not meeting the requirements of all manner of workplace performance management metrics and targets, etc. Many of us share a feeling that we will never be the kind of 'superhuman' academic who aces all these things, but these performance anxieties are typically silenced and individualised. These feelings are deeply-felt, and surely especially acute in institutions increasingly characterised by deepening workplace efficiencies and austerities, individualised performance

management, and precarious, intensely-pressured jobs (Peake et al., 2018). Colleagues writing from such contexts have provided moving accounts of the ways in institutional restructurings, workloads and performance management techniques come to be "etched onto…our academic bodies" and felt as profound senses of personal failure, worry, dread, loss, insecurity, and powerlessness (Wainwright et al., 2014, p.413). There is also considerable evidence suggesting that these feelings of failure and precarity are inequitably distributed and intersect with gendered, classed, racialized, able-ist, aged and other social-cultural-economic marginalisations and exclusions in the academy (Tolia-Kelly, 2017; Oliver and Morris, 2019). This work should challenge us to think carefully and critically about how we explicitly or implicitly participate and perpetuate all of this (Pain et al., 2012), and what steps we should take to be otherwise.

3. Failure in terms of… regret, or wanting to do more

A third sense of failure stems from a sense that we could do, or could have done, more through our scholarship, practically or politically. Many reflexive accounts of research articulate this kind of anxiety, particularly a regret that one could have done more to improve the lives of participants and communities engaged in research (Klocker, 2015; Harrowell et al., 2018). Or, perhaps many of us feel a sense of the inadequacy of our work in the face of intractable injustices, political-economic crises or anthroposcenic emergencies. Moreover, we might feel we could do more to resist unjust workplace contexts, structural inequalities and unethical working practices within the neoliberal academy. We might regret things we have done or, perhaps more so, things we *ought* to have said and done in particular situations. Sometimes this sense of failure is individual, specific and localised ('I wish *I* had acted differently in that moment'); sometimes it can be more extensive, collective and (sub)disciplinary in scale ('as Human Geographers, our response to x is inadequate'). Sometimes, to be frank, this sense of failure is quite timely and justified: individually and collectively, it is important to consider how we might do more, or how we might have acted otherwise, in relation to all manner of profoundly challenging situations in spaces in which we work. This kind of critical reflexivity can be galvanising: reflecting on our silences, anxieties, hesitations and regrets can prompt us to act differently in future. However, there is also a sense that this sense of failure can lead to inaction: our sense that we are not doing enough can make us feel hopelessly inadequate and dwell on our failings, which can

discourage us from trying to do *anything*. I worry that this sense of inadequacy is intensified by discourses of research 'impact' in the contemporary academy, where particular kinds of (big, auditable, self-assured, heroic) forms of **IMPACT** are systematically valorised and rewarded through mechanisms like the UK Research Excellence Framework (REF), Research Council 'pathways to impact', and HEI marketing (Pain et al., 2011; Evans, 2016; Horton, 2020). As Askins and Blazek (2017) argue, these logics of **IMPACT** must not make us lose faith in the more messy, collaborative, circumspect (and less lucrative and glamorous) work through which most of us 'feel our way' in attempting to care and act affirmatively within our research, in ways which might be variously quiet or loud, visible or modest, ever-present or circumstantial (Pottinger, 2017; Maynard, 2018)

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4. Failure in terms of… not belonging

Many of us feel acutely out-of-place in key spaces of the academy. In spite of our successes – and despite the many important forms of academic generosity, care, support and collegiality that exist – many of us feel like we are never going to 'fit in'. This feeling is variously described: as an intuitive sense of not belonging, or of feeling like an 'imposter'[9], or of being unable to speak, or of outright exclusion, or of visceral panic, or of being unable to make it as 'one of those (popular, confident, charismatic, eloquent, media-friendly) guys [sic]'. Authors writing from these feelings have repeatedly highlighted the longstanding valorisation of particular performative styles within the academy, whereby tacit, normative expectations of behaviour, dress, comportment, appearance and accent serve to marginalise particular bodies and identities[10] (Hall, 2019; Wilkinson, 2019). Thus, in many spaces of the academy, certain bodies are habitually centred as authoritative, while others are rendered out-of-place and awkward, in ways which undoubtedly perpetuate forms of

[9] I know many colleagues find the concept of 'imposter syndrome' helpful as a rallying point for this point of critique, but personally I find it less useful. I think the idea of imposter syndrome sometimes disallows the possibility that there genuinely are situations or activities which one might find very difficult. It is not just that I feel like an imposter in some spaces of academia; it is actually the case that the norms, expectations and workloads of those spaces *are* extremely challenging for anyone to deal with. Also, as discussed, I am well aware that I have been fortunate and successful: for me, feelings of failure come not from inability to achieve the performance targets of the contemporary academy, but from a sense of disappointment, conflict and discomfort that persists *despite having met those targets*. Apparently, success is no safeguard against feelings of failure in this context.

[10] I am sure many readers will have their own angsts and stories relating to this. I certainly feel this very deeply: mine is a body which speaks in a broad, classed, stereotypically-unintelligent regional accent which is sometimes hard to understand; which looks casual and scruffy even in the newest apparel; which shies away from the limelight; which apparently does not have authoritative or assured comportment. I once appeared on a TV news segment and, after five attempts, the increasingly irate director abandoned attempts to film establishing shots of me walking on campus because I 'was not walking confidently enough'. Conceptually interesting but cringeworthy.

marginality constituted by the still gendered, classed, ableist, not-decolonised, heteronormative, aged academy we inhabit (Oliver and Morris, 2019). The persistence of this out-of-place-ness should make us question taken-for-granted spaces of academic life and the ways in which we may unwittingly contribute to the discomfort of others[11]. For example, we might ask: who feels comfortable being lauded as an expert or authority in the contemporary academy? Who feels confident during a panel discussion, on a stage, in a lecture theatre, or holding forth in a committee room? Who feels at ease at conference wine receptions, or in scarcely post-colonial learned society buildings, or in the ballrooms and boardrooms of luxury conference hotels, or at boozy post-conference meals at high end restaurants? Who feels entitled to put themselves forward for promotions and leadership roles? And what does all this mean for those who feel marginalised, hesitant, sad, precarious or ambivalent in these kinds of situations?

5. Failure in terms of… assessment criteria and procedures

So far I have highlighted modalities of failure which are often tacit and hidden in practice. However, in the context of a Special Issue on failure in the academy, I feel it is also important to address the way in which many of us participate in overt, institutionalised assessment processes which routinely label some students and some academic work as 'fails' (see also Turner, 2019). Ironically, though there is growing acknowledgment of unsaid experiences of failure in the contemporary academy, the more explicit, formalised business of judging the success (or otherwise) of students and work in Higher Education Institutions has rarely been problematised in this context. Many readers will be directly involved in work with assessment procedures, grading criteria and degree classifications which (re)produce a particular lexicon and emotional-affective condition of failure. Each institution's procedures and regulations constitute numeric, alphabetic or narrative descriptors for failure. For example, at my institution, at undergraduate level, 'F', 'F+' and 'F-' grades denote gradations of 'work which fails to meet minimum standards for this task', while a 'G' grade is reserved for 'work submitted is of no academic value / nothing submitted'; there are also significant status distinctions between work

[11] In my own case, I guess I am quite avoidant, diffident and self-contained in many spaces of academia. I also often politely decline invitations to events and appearances, perpetuating the invisibility of diffident, regionally-accented, unconfidentally-walking bodies from such spaces.

adjudged to be of 'basically satisfactory' ('D' or 'Third Class'), 'sound' ('C' or '2.2'), 'good' ('B' or 2.1), or 'excellent' ('A' or 'First Class') quality. I mention this not to question grading practices, criteria and Quality Assurance procedures per se (although some would), but more to highlight just how readily many of us slip into a mode of making judgements and assuming the authority to define some work and some individuals as 'fails'. Assessment is normatively central to most Higher Education learning and teaching, and the logic that work can be unequivocally classified into 'passes' and 'fails' generally goes unquestioned[12]. Against a backdrop of deepening self-reflection about failure in the academy, it seems problematic that relatively little attention has been paid to the ways in which we routinely codify some work and some people as 'failures' and, moreover, constitute acute feelings of failure, disappointment and distress for those who do not achieve their desired grade. The task of critically reflecting on the language and assumptions of assessment is especially urgent given mounting evidence of systemic and disciplinary Higher Education attainment gaps which perpetuate inequalities in terms of ethnicity, gender, class, disability, background and prior attainment.

6. Failure in terms of… (triumphing-over-)adversity

This essay forms part of a Special Issue which seeks to *reclaim* failure within the contemporary academy. This is an important and timely intervention, but here I want to sound a note of caution. I worry that failure is already being claimed, monetised and enclosed in some particular, troubling ways in this context. I would particularly highlight the way in which failure has, over the last decade, been a key focus for a vast, growing, lucrative international infrastructure of training organisations, management consultants, career coaches, leadership gurus or entrepreneurial self-help guides. In these contexts, failure – specifically one's ability to narrate a 'triumph over adversity' – is explicitly targeted as a kind of currency or capital to be deployed by those seeking to get ahead in business, management, leadership or entrepreneurship. The influence of this kind of discourse is evident, for example, in the very widespread use of 'the Failure Essay' as an application

[12] A similar argument could be made about doctoral examinations, job interviews, workplace performance management reviews, or peer review of journal articles or grant applications. Again, this is not to question the validity of these processes, so much as to highlight how readily, and in how many contexts, academic work entails passing codified judgement on others.

exercise or assignment in Business Schools and MBA courses worldwide: here, candidates are required to write to the title 'a time I failed', or similar. Likewise, many MBA and entrepreneurship training programmes now include a range of sessions on failure, such as the increasingly prevalent 'failure wake' workshop where participants deliver presentations testifying to their biggest mistakes[13]. Through these and other activities, acknowledgment of failure is explicitly, instrumentally coached as a performative strategy to cultivate empathetic 'soft skills' and hone an inspirational narrative of personal development. MBA textbooks repeatedly emphasise the importance of selecting the *right kind of failure* and the right kind of narrative for these kinds of activities. So, for example:

> "The 'failure' essay can be compelling but only if you can write about how you created a success out of that failure or have shown significant development as a human being from that failing. If the failure is going to cast a bad light on you as a student or person, *do not choose it*" (Bedor, 2015, p.82).

Or, again:

> "The weakness-failure-criticism essay is your greatest opportunity to separate yourself from the crowd…[U]nderstand that the committee does not set the failure essay to see if you have weaknesses or have failed…They want to know not how you avoided failure, but how you managed it, what you learned, what insight into yourself you gained, and *how you grew from there*" (Gordon, 2010, p.111).

Here, then, there is an imperative to acknowledge failure, but exclusively in terms of redemptive and teleological narratives of triumph-over-adversity, creating success from failure, and personal-professional growth. The triumph-over-adversity narrative is explicitly figured and coached, in these settings, as a technique for marketing oneself, leveraging competitive advantage, securing investment, and getting ahead in corporate and entrepreneurial contexts.

So, in considering failure in the academy we must do more than tell tales of triumph-over-adversity. Of course, learning from failure can be hugely positive and spaces like this Special Issue provide opportunities to celebrate the resilience of colleagues living with, and overcoming, diverse adversities. However, we should

[13] One might also trace the extensive (mis)quoting of the aphorism 'FAIL BETTER' in workshops, Powerpoints, motivational posters, tweets, talks, memes and décor which are far-removed from its original Beckettian context. I once visited a Business School office where 'FAIL BETTER' was painted in 10 foot tall letters in neon pink. The occupant was unaware it was a Samuel Beckett quote, but had been inspired by a motivational leadership seminar where this mantra was chanted.

take care not to *only* valorise this kind of narrative. We should guard against an impulse to speak about failures in ways which become instrumentally self-aggrandising, which perpetuate a sense that failure should lead to individualised success or personal development, or which exert a kind of pressure to triumph-over-adversity. Instead, a more critical and careful apprehension of failures in the academy should permit other kinds of less acknowledged experiences: of failures with no happy endings; of failures which just go nowhere; of situations where there is just no good news or redemptive story; of anxieties caused by an imperative to 'triumph-over-adversity'; of disappointment, distress, devastation, hopelessness; or of modesty, gentleness, diffidence and loserdom (Katz, 1996; Harrison, 2015; Horton, 2019; Finn and Jeffries, 2019) for example.

Thinking about success in the contemporary academy

In this essay, writing from a sense that 'I am not a failure…but I feel like one', I have tried to identify some forms of failure which pervade everyday lives in the contemporary academy[14]. Having said all this, I find myself thinking about success: what might count as success in and against these contexts of failure, and how might we think of success in ways that are more care-full and critical than the valorisation of individualised triumph-over-adversity? So, by way of conclusion, I hope the following questions will serve as prompts for thinking-with failure and fostering more collegiate, critical ideas of success in the neoliberal academy.

1. How might we create more spaces to disclose things not going to plan, in ways that are helpful, supportive, not-self-aggrandising and which accommodate diverse forms of failure (including failures with no happy endings)?

2. Who is (and is not) able to speak of failure in the academy? For example, how do feelings of failure intersect with gendered, classed, racialized, able-ist or aged inequalities in the academy, and why are these intersections rarely disclosed?

3. How might we support colleagues who experience profound performance anxieties in the contemporary academy, and what practical steps can we take to change the mechanisms, norms and processes which constitute this kind of anxiety? How can we help each other to think about failure *not* in terms of individual failings or imposterdom, but in terms of the conditions, norms and discourses that make us feel like failures despite the amazing stuff we do?

4. How might feelings of personal-professional regret galvanise new, collective kinds of work to care and act affirmatively within our research practices?

[14] By this stage in the paper I was actively tired of dwelling on, and playing with, negative feelings that pervade contemporary academic life. Writing this paper has been tiring. Time to get on with writing something more hopeful and enjoyable.

5. How might normative spaces and performances of academia be reconfigured to be inclusive and welcoming for a more diverse community? What other kinds of spaces are possible? What practical steps might we take to avoid perpetuating the marginalisation, discomfort and not-belonging of others?

6. How might techniques and languages of assessment (whether in relation to grading, examinations, peer review or workplace performance management) incorporate greater care to mitigate disappointments, failures, anxieties and distress?

7. How might we challenge the prevalence of narratives of triumph-over-adversity, to allow more complex, ambivalent, challenging, modest ways of thinking about failure in the academy?

8. How should we think of and constitute *success* in the academy? What and how should we celebrate? How can we praise achievements, value ourselves and disseminate our work in a way that does not turn into self-aggrandising, alpha scholarly-heroism?

And, next time you feel like a failure, try to identify the workplace, institutional, sectoral or societal norms which are constituting that feeling. The problem is not you; it's them.

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