**Emotion, Space and Society. Issue 37. October 2020**

**Encountering precarity, uncertainty and everyday anxiety as part of the postgraduate research journey**

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*Whilst there has been a recent rise in research within the social sciences which has sought to explore the topic of ‘precarity’, to date there has been very little discussion around the precarity inherent in the research process or in following an academic pathway, and its subsequent impact on the wellbeing and mental health of the researcher. Within this intervention piece, we expose some of the uncertainties and precarities experienced as part of the postgraduate research journey, in doing so, drawing upon our own personal experiences as doctoral researchers. These have included, for example, the potential of research to fail and perpetual anxieties around future academic careers, preservation and progression in the context of an unstable academy. Academia appears to have traditionally required a commitment to the silencing of emotions and feelings of uncertainty, with very few academics talking openly about the emotions involved in their everyday work. This piece calls for an environment which is more open, supportive and accommodating of both the emotions and mental health of postgraduate researchers.*

1. **Introduction**

In August 2018, as part of the Royal Geographical Society (RGS) Annual International Conference, we convened a session with postgraduate colleague Leila Wilmers entitled, “Emerging voices in political geography: navigating challenges, barriers and failures in the field”. The session was in part motivated by Harrowell et al.’s (2018) work on ‘Making Space for Failure in Geographic Research’, and spurred on by our own personal experiences of encountering various challenges in the field (and beyond) as postgraduate research students. The session was a stark reminder that we are not alone on this journey with many Early Career Researchers (ECRs) and experienced academics alike coming forward with their own array of fieldwork hurdles and future career concerns. Discussions centred on the personal, emotional and practical anxieties brought about through our everyday research, such as the potential for getting lost (both literally and figuratively) and/or becoming immobilised by imposter syndrome (Zorn, 2005). In reflecting upon the session, one participant Dave Ashby (University of Leicester) surmised: ‘It turns out the biggest challenge and barrier to fieldwork is ourselves’ (Ashby, 2018).

The session made us acutely aware of the need to create more safe spaces in which postgraduate researchers can openly discuss feelings of failure and anxiety that may arise as part of the postgraduate journey. The session consisted of a series of papers, followed by break-out discussions on themes of ‘Situatedness’, ‘Positionality’ and ‘Getting Lost’. These were topics and concerns that emerged from the presentations and our own personal experiences as PhD students. At times, the break-out discussions prompted participants to divulge highly emotive experiences of anxiety, apprehension and guilt - these were later juxtaposed alongside a sense of optimism and togetherness as the session went on. We felt the session was a cathartic experience for many in the room, creating a safe and non-judgmental space for the expression of various emotions.

Responding to a call for more safe spaces for researchers to openly discuss feelings of failure and anxiety during the postgraduate research journey, this intervention draws upon personal accounts from the authors as two British postgraduate researchers (who undertake qualitative research broadly within the field of political geography). Emotions are foregrounded across the two accounts, with the paper in part emerging from conversations around how we have felt as doctoral students over the past three to four years. The process of sharing and working through such emotions with one another has in itself been supportive and mutually affirmative.

Drawing on personal experiences ‘in the field’, from unstable researcher networks to moments of political uncertainty, Nick first reflects on the often-contingent nature of our research, reminding us of the perpetual anxieties that can exist alongside the arduous process of completing a PhD. His account draws on his time researching Estonia’s novel Data Embassy and some of the challenges faced in a political ‘elite’ environment, itself continually in flux. Angharad then moves us beyond the challenges of conducting fieldwork to exploring the growing demands and precarity that are frequently placed upon postgraduate researchers and the impact of these on emotional and physical wellbeing. Her account is grounded within her personal experience as a visually impaired student conducting research into disability activism, alongside her interest in pursuing a future academic career.

Bringing these experiences together, we explore how our positionalities, along with our own individual institutional and research contexts, have framed the postgraduate journey and contributed to some of the uncertainties and anxieties of both doctoral research and embarking on an academic career pathway. Crucially, both accounts touch upon a number of commonalities with regards to postgraduate student mental health and wellbeing, as well as many of the structural precarities that sustain the neoliberal academy through precarious employment practices and metric/impact-driven evaluations. Drawing together our experiences alongside those encountered during our RGS session, we conclude with a call for wider dialogue and a ‘shared emotional space’ (Lacey, 2005: 289) in which postgraduate researchers can speak more openly about the individual struggles, concerns and anxieties they may face. There will inevitably be gaps in our narratives and we are weary of any claims to universalism. Nevertheless, we see these accounts as stories that should be told.

1. **Navigating the uncertainty and unpredictability of fieldwork[[1]](#footnote-1)**

The postgraduate journey is often fraught with unexpected twists and turns, and can be marred by numerous unforeseen roadblocks and obstacles. Exacerbated by many of the pressures and anxieties felt within academia at present (examined further by Angharad in the following section), any setbacks, rejections or wobbles along the way can often feel like personal and abject failures. In particular, the actual processes and practicalities involved in the doing of fieldwork can feel like a precarious endeavour. Things can, and often will, go awry. In calling for greater dialogue and discussion within the postgraduate community, how might we better manage the uncertainties we face while conducting fieldwork? To go beyond the seeming “lack of transparency” (Browne and Moffett, 2014: 224) and fear associated with sharing our personal trials and tribulations in the field, a franker and more honest environment for sharing such experiences may be crucial for postgraduate researchers at different points in their research journey.

When reflecting on his own doctoral research, Darling (2014: 203) notes how entering the field may become a daunting, demanding and bewildering experience. More than simply adhering to stringent university guidelines on best practice, the realities of fieldwork often demand the development of “situated judgements”, which exceed ‘tick-box’ code of ethics procedures and formal research design and training. Such experiences may coalesce around insurmountable barriers in terms of access, navigating tricky power dynamics and relationships with research participants, or simply finding yourself at the mercy of political and socio-economic externalities out of your control. Darling’s personal experiences speak to a growing body of literature, particularly from anthropology, which posits fieldwork as a precarious and unpredictable practice (see, Kovats-Bernat, 2002; Sultana, 2007).

In this section I draw upon some of my own experiences throughout my doctoral research investigating Estonia’s novel Data Embassy. In doing so, I aim to highlight the often-contingent nature of our research. From being required to continually (re-)negotiate and maintain access over a prolonged period of time, to navigating political uncertainties and changes in government, I often felt at the mercy of my research and the environment it inhabited. Preparing for the unexpected and equipping oneself with the resources necessary to deal with such uncertainties may be considered as a key part of PhD training. However, from my own experience, I found that this training was often very basic and generic, while avoiding how we may address the experience of different emotions (such as anxiety, disappointment or disillusionment) during our time in the field. As Gready (2014: 196) notes, there are many unavoidable, unforeseen ‘unknowns’ that may present themselves within the complex and messy world of fieldwork, of which formal, theoretical training can only prepare you so far. While these may not be uncommon experiences for researchers entering the field, it particularly merits discussion within a contemporary postgraduate setting, where pressure can often seem to build (and overwhelm) on producing ironclad methodologies that subsequently lead to flawless results. For many doctoral students, with little practical experience and support to draw upon, common instances of rejection or feelings of failure during fieldwork are usually covered up or overlooked. By sharing some of the uncertainties and emotions felt, during my own time in the field, I hope to join calls to break through our current “culture of silence” (Browne and Moffett, 2014: 11) and to encourage more postgraduate colleagues to reflect upon their own experiences on how best to navigate emotional uncertainty in the field in a more collaborative and solidaristic way.

*2.1. Researching the Data Embassy and a ‘government as a startup’*

Conceptually, the Data Embassy stands as a highly innovative and transformative digital government strategy - providing the necessary steps for the Estonian government to begin extraterritorially storing its information systems and data outside of its own borders (in so-called ‘data embassies’). Its primary aim is to ensure the state can continue to function in the event of a contemporary emergency (e.g. natural hazard, cyberattack or military occupation). For a country that has faced its fair share of digital disruption and threats to its sovereignty in the past, its government believes that by ‘backing up the state’ it can ensure the continuity of its most critical infrastructure and services, regardless of any shortcomings within its own territory[[2]](#footnote-2).

To address the growing conceptual phenomena that surround the Data Embassy, this research required access to, and insights from, those at the very heart of the Estonian government. Securing this access was by no means a straightforward process, particularly over the lengthy process of completing a PhD, but more so as the Data Embassy was still in its inception. The following three snapshots illustrate the somewhat precarious nature of the Data Embassy, and thus my research, as moments of doubt, anxiety and uncertainty were revealed in manifold ways during fieldwork.

The Estonian government is keen to profess that it functions very much like a startup company with novel technological solutions often trialled with little burden on their expenditure and initial success rates. While this mentality has proved relatively successful over the years with numerous technological milestones (such as the introduction of electronic-ID and internet voting), it does raise questions over the longevity and stability of such political endeavours. No sooner are technologies conceived and ‘put to work’, are they at potential risk of being stopped or thrown onto the metaphorical scrapheap just as fast. Nine out of ten startups are known to fail (Griffith, 2014) and, like startups, government-led initiatives are likely to face growth and financial challenges, alongside internal organisational struggles along the way. Continually asking myself ‘what if’ in relation to the permanence of the Data Embassy, I would often toy with the prospect of no longer having a project to research.

One of the most striking observations during my time in the field was the merry-go-round nature of the Estonian public sector and its political intelligentsia. Often, between repeated trips to Estonia, I would find interviewees moving between roles, moving in and out of government, in what can only be described as a constant movement of the researcher’s goalposts. Kuus (2013) reflects on this challenge from her own ethnographic experiences in an EU foreign policy setting, where forging relationships with so-called ‘elites’ become ever more complex in an environment that is in a constant state of flux. As much as it is important to get initial access and a foot in the door, writes Kuus, elite engagements equally involve the painstaking process of maintaining relationships “beyond the initial encounter” (2013: 119). This fluidity experienced within Estonia was by no means unique, but as the thesis developed, would often lead to communication breakdowns and the continual renegotiation of access within an ever-changing research environment.

On November 9, 2016, Prime Minister Taavi Rõivas was delivered a vote of no confidence by the Estonian parliament, leading to the fall of his government and subsequent resignation. I remember, at the time, reflecting rather anxiously as to what this could mean for the Data Embassy and my research. Would the new Center Party-led coalition change course and no longer see the relevance for such a project? Might government ministers and civil servants become distracted by such turbulent political times? Writing about his experiences amidst the political turmoil that ensued during a recent national election in Kenya, Chambers (2019: 3) draws attention to the inherent dangers and disruptions we can face during fieldwork in periods of political uncertainty, from disrupted research plans and failed interviews, to the sense of becoming an “entrenched” outsider. Thankfully, the Data Embassy remained on track, but it was a stark reminder that Estonian (as well as global) politics have seldom stood still during the process of completing my PhD[[3]](#footnote-3). As it transpired, such political moments would not come to define my research; yet, the prospect of delay, or the prospect of failure, would continue to affect my day-to-day positionality as a researcher.

Somewhere between the irony of researching state-level anxieties in Estonia and my own anxieties surrounding my research, there are clear messages to be explored regarding the precarious nature of doctoral research. For example, when researching the Data Embassy, not only would large parts of the research design be reliant on successful (and sometimes prolonged) access to elite environments, but also on the overall success of the Data Embassy itself. Arguably, the break-down of research due to many of the externalities described above would not spell the end for my PhD (in fact, a great deal could be learned from such events), but the perpetual anxiety and sense of not knowing what was around the corner would remain an enduring factor throughout. In dealing with the ‘what if’s’, from potential changes in government to the perpetual mobility of government officials, I was forced to develop a certain elasticity to my methodology and research design, along with a renewable contingency plan in the event of any unforeseen roadblocks. At times this led to a renegotiation of the research field, but it was also a reminder of the importance of researcher reflexivity. There may be substance in the claim that by developing a certain degree of flexibility (Chambers, 2019; Doyle and McCarthy-Jones, 2017) and “ethical sensibility” (Gready, 2014: 196), we, as doctoral researchers, may be better prepared for the precarious journey we embark upon. Even more crucial, by sharing those invaluable experiences that invariably befall the postgraduate researcher along the way, we might foster an environment where the practicalities and processes of fieldwork can be a more collaborative, participatory and reflexive endeavour, which aims to reach out beyond current individualistic experiences and discourse. Precarity, however, cannot be regarded as solely a feature of fieldwork, but rather as something that frames the research journey and academia more broadly. Indeed, the heightened pressure and uncertainty doctoral researchers now face before they enter the field, through ever-increasing levels of academic bureaucracy and expectation within the neoliberal academy, is the focus of flourishing scholarship (see, Schneider, 2020; Sluka, 2020). In the following section, Angharad moves on to reflect upon how as postgraduate research students we may often find ourselves living and working in situations of increased precarity, while aspiring to careers in an academic environment that has become increasingly underpinned by competition, audit culture, growing demands and short/fixed term contracts.

1. **Precarity - reflections on the growing demands and anxieties experienced within (and beyond) the postgraduate journey[[4]](#footnote-4)**

Until recently there has been very little recognition of researchers nor specifically postgraduate students as subjects of precarity (see Dufty- Jones, 2018; Gill, 2009; Peters and Turner, 2014 for exceptions). Academics have often been hesitant to conceptualise themselves as embodying precarity, fearing that doing so may appear narcissistic or self-indulgent (see Gill, 2009). As postgraduates, we are conditioned to recognise ourselves as being in positions of privilege (and arguably rightly so!) (Askins and Blazek 2017), provided with time, space and resources to study things that are often of great personal interest to us. This sense of privilege, echoed in discussions with fellow colleagues, is magnified when undertaking research with social groups who may be marginalised or disempowered. While it would be disingenuous to overlook our privilege, such awareness should not however silence the experiences of precarity and uncertainty faced by members of the academic community. With the rise of campaigns and industrial actions relating to the casualisation of academic contracts and the dismantling of university pension schemes, such issues have increasingly been brought to the forefront while no longer being necessarily stigmatised or seen as ‘self-indulgent’.

In this section, I will draw on some of my own experiences to highlight the precarity and anxiety experienced by some postgraduate researchers. My experiences are situated in my positionality as a white, female, British, disabled, departmentally funded, geography PhD student, studying within the context of a Russell Group university in the UK. My own research explores disability activism in the UK in response to austerity – a topic very close to my heart as I identify as disabled and have first-hand experience of some of the impacts of austerity measures on disabled people’s lives. I consider myself in a fortunate position, in a have bi-weekly social events initiated by students, unfaltering tea breaks, copious amounts of cake and daily lunchtime catch-ups. We are also well connected through a social media platform, which provides students who work away from campus with a form of connection, camaraderie and support. A shared workplace at my institution – in the form of a departmental graduate hub – has been particularly valuable. It is in this space that many of the challenges and obstacles faced by PhD students were shared and discussed, serving as a further stimulus for this paper.

In this section, I move beyond the challenges of conducting fieldwork, to consider the broader academic research environment including the growing expectations placed upon research students (like staff) to: undertake teaching responsibilities; secure additional funding, publish (hence the widely used phrase ‘publish or perish’) and present at conferences; while simultaneously contributing to the wider academic community through sitting on various committees. Such demands may often be placed upon individuals as either a prerequisite for funding or to increase their eligibility and contribution to the academic community (Dufty-Jones, 2018). Expectations are heightened for students who, like myself, wish to pursue an academic career, in an increasingly competitive and volatile environment, where contracts are often short/fixed term, insecure and difficult to come by (Burton and Turbine, 2018; Dufty-Jones, 2018; Peters and Turner, 2014).

With the vast majority of doctoral students living on a low or non-existent salary (Hall, 2019) and often exceeding the length of their stipend, many may also be reliant upon the additional income obtainable through teaching and other employment opportunities. Departments are often not averse to this, with many as a result of tightened budgets increasingly encouraged to reduce costs through employing PhD students and ECRs as hourly-paid teaching staff (Burton and Turbine, 2018; Duffy 2020). While teaching as a PhD student can be an enjoyable and rewarding experience, such work is often irregular, undervalued and underpaid as has been recognised by the University and College Union (UCU). As part of their pay and equality dispute, which led to national industrial action in February 2020, UCU campaigned to “give postgraduate teaching assistants guaranteed hours and proper employee contracts, linked to the national pay spine” (UCU, 2019).

The insecurity of students’ incomes is further heightened by the lack of financial support available for those who may have to take a suspension during their studies due to ill health or other personal circumstances. The vast majority of universities and funding sources do not currently provide paid parental and/or sick leave as common practice to postgraduate research students (Hannam-Swain, 2018). Such structures are likely to further marginalise particular groups of students, most notably disabled and chronically ill students and those with caring responsibilities (Simard-Gagnon, 2016). Recent cuts to Disabled Students Allowance (DSA) have only served to magnify such inequalities, severing opportunities and support for disabled students (Hannam-Swain 2018).

The neoliberalisation of the academy, with its ever-growing audit culture and demands placed upon both staff and postgraduate research students alike (in the form of teaching, publishing, grant income and outputs) (Askins and Blazek 2017; Dufty-Jones, 2018), could be seen to have further marginalised and excluded particular groups of scholars, amongst these the disabled, chronically ill and parents/carers (Dufty-Jones, 2018). Klocher and Drozdzewski (2012) for example, draw attention to how becoming a parent and taking parental leave, is likely to impact upon an individual’s ability to publish and present their work, which can in turn leave individuals often struggling with the requirements for progression. Dufty-Jones (2018) argues that the ideal academic is generally seen as an individual who works full-time, overtime and is able to move wherever required - an image which many parents/carers are unable to live up to.

While academics have long worked in highly intense environments, reductions to institutional and departmental budgets have led to increased workloads, and the abundance of short-term and precarious contracts, leading invariably to increased stress and reduced mental health within the academy (Berg et al., 2016; Morrish, 2019; Horton and Tucker, 2013). Many will find themselves overwhelmed, overworked and unable to keep up with the criteria required for academic progression (Dufty-Jones, 2018). As a visually impaired research student (and as of recently - Early Career Researcher), I have some experience of the difficulties that can emerge (for disabled scholars) in seeking to keep up with such demands and the increasing speed of academic life (Brewster et al., 2017; Horton and Tucker, 2013). Working harder - or as is usually implied, working longer hours - is not always necessarily an option for myself, due to migraines, exhaustion and reduced vision brought about as a direct result of eye strain from intensive reading and writing. In a similar vein, regardless of how hard I work, it is likely that I will never be able to work at the same pace as my fully sighted colleagues, because it simply takes me longer to access and process visual information. As Brewster et al. (2017) however note, there is often a strong sense among disabled scholars that they must work harder and for longer in order to compensate for their disability, challenge others’ perceptions of them and prove that they can work as well as their non-disabled colleagues. This feeling is one in which I share and has at times led to me sacrificing many aspects of life beyond work and study. On several occasions I have found myself asking – how sustainable is this? What impact might this be having on my mental wellbeing? While this has not served to deter me from wanting to pursue a career in academia (and seeing the wider representation of disabled people in higher education), it has certainly increased my trepidations about following such a career path. The increasing workload and expectations of academics may therefore further exclude, marginalise and impede the progress of disabled scholars, who like myself are likely to find it near impossible to keep up with such demands (Brewster et al., 2017; Inckle, 2018).

While mental health problems are not a new phenomenon within the academy, our experiences have led us to believe that the neoliberalising of academia can be connected to a significant rise in anxiety and mental health problems among postgraduate students (Morrish, 2019). This rise in anxiety may be exacerbated by the lack of space created within academia to talk through emotions, such as anxiety, stress, fatigue and feelings of personal failure. At present, most postgraduate students’ source of support comes largely through their supervisors, with students often not made aware of the wider University counselling and support systems available to them. While I cannot speak for all, it is likely that postgraduates and ECRs experience heightened unease about sharing such feelings with more senior colleagues, fearful of how they may be perceived or the impact that this could have on their future careers, as noted previously by Harrowell et al. (2018). Through discussions with fellow postgraduates, I became aware that this was partly due to supervisors and more senior colleagues being perceived as holding the key to individuals’ future academic careers, as individuals who are often well connected within their subject field. Similarly, I am sure that I am not the only who has expressed struggling with the demands of academic life to a fellow colleague, and received the following in response: ‘a vital part of being an academic is being able to multitask and work well under pressure, it is simply something that you’re going to have to deal with’. Anxieties as a result are often privatised and deemed to reflect an individual’s self-worth and value. This affective response as Gill (2009) argues both silences and isolates, with individuals internalising experiences of their own shameful failure whether these be an inability to keep up with growing demands in terms of research outputs or, as Nick mentioned in the previous section, in relation to roadblocks and anxieties that may arise while ‘in the field’.

Institutions are increasingly investing in training courses and ‘wellbeing’ services on campuses, with a focus on resilience and self-management (Lightfoot, 2018) as a means of encouraging individuals to take personal responsibility for their own wellbeing and demonstrate resilience. Yet such initiatives arguably serve as another way of concealing the structural deficiencies at the core of the problem. As Simard-Gagnon (2016) argues, upholding notions of resilience as an ideal in the context of neoliberalism can serve to individualise hardship and further add to the strain of struggling individuals. Our contention is that postgraduates find themselves in an uneasy environment where scholars are often directly pitted against one another (i.e. for academic progression) and in which the institutional governance structures are slowly dismantling any previous sense of collective endeavour or belonging, placing the onus on individual responsibility and success. In the following section we therefore move to consider the need for greater collectivity, solidarity and a ‘shared emotional space’ (Lacey 2005: 289).

1. **A ‘shared emotional space’**

Despite feminist scholars emphasising the importance of emotions in motivating and sustaining our research, there still remains limited open and frank discussion around the everyday emotions and emotional labour involved in our everyday work (Bellas, 1999; Berg et al., 2016). The expression of emotion has long been seen as synonymous with femininity and vulnerability; sharing one’s everyday mental and emotional struggles is seen to risk presenting oneself as vulnerable, incapable or simply out of one’s depth (Harrowell et al., 2018; Horton and Tucker, 2013). There is consequently a temptation to distance oneself from speaking openly about personal experiences.

Inevitably however, as anyone who currently is (or has been) a PhD student will know, emotions cannot always be so easily controlled. There are times when things simply get too much and emotions flow out of us, destabilising us in the process. It is certainly not uncommon to find oneself emotionally supporting or being supported by a fellow postgraduate at various stages during the journey. Online spaces such as Twitter can also prove hugely valuable, with some feeling more able to freely and openly share some of their anxieties and trepidations on this platform, helping to create a more supportive environment in which the practice of sharing becomes to a greater extent normalised and accepted[[5]](#footnote-5).

As postgraduate research students it is important that we become more aware of our own practices in excluding emotions, because not doing so is likely to jeoparadise our emotional wellbeing and academic longevity. Furthermore, it runs the risk that the practice of overlooking such emotions becomes normalised. Over recent years, we have observed the rise of numerous blogs (e.g. The Thesis Whisperer, Get a Life PhD), newspaper articles and PhD comics (phdcomics.com) that often seek to utilise humour in order to promote solidarity amongst research students and foreground the emotional turmoil that research students may at times face. We have ourselves been involved in contributing to the RGS PolGRG Postgraduate blog, which seeks to bring some of the challenges encountered during the postgraduate journey to the foreground, recognising the way in which reading (and writing) about such issues can in itself be therapeutic and work to build solidarity amongst students[[6]](#footnote-6). The PhD process is not necessarily a lonely one but often one of camaraderie, in which strong friendships and support networks can be built. From our own experiences of undertaking a PhD, we have found the unique nature of the process to help in creating strong solidarities between peers, particularly as it is often difficult for those outside of academia to relate to the unique hurdles and challenges which are part of the process. It is thus not uncommon to hear students nearing completion reflect upon the value of being surrounded by individuals who are undertaking a similar process (as we have ourselves during the completion of this paper). These networks may not only consist of individuals at one’s institution but connections made with members of the wider academic community. There is certainly value in being able to discuss, reflect, laugh about and garner action around some of the shared challenges and trepidations we face as postgraduate students.

Evidently there is still a need to build upon what Lacey (2005: 289) has termed, a ‘shared emotional space’, a space in which individuals can ‘be emotional’. This space may, for example, take the form of online discussion forums, informal gatherings (e.g. ‘PubhD’ - a cross disciplinary, national network of PhD students hosting events across various UK cities), coffee breaks or informal meetings at a departmental and/or institutional level. Importantly however, structural change is also required to address the issues of mental health and wellbeing amongst PhD students. This process may begin by ensuring that research students are represented on staff-student committees, making it clearer where one might go for support and also increasing mental health training across the university. Universities UK have recently recognised mental health as a strategic priority, with a whole university approach required (not solely initiatives at a local and individual level) (UUK, 2019).

Through creating spaces for shared vulnerability, in which issues of mental health can be spoken of, we hope that a more supportive and solidaristic community can be built whereby individuals may feel more able to openly share their experiences and anxieties. In doing so, feelings of shame, self-blame and isolation could hopefully be reduced with individuals recognising that they are not alone in facing such difficulties. At an individual level, we have been very open in sharing some of these personal anxieties and vulnerabilities, and in putting them on the agenda at student committees and within publications such as this one. Without the support of an empathetic academic community, it is likely that scholars will continue to individually internalise this emotional burden, rather than coming together to recognise and resist the ways in which the very structures of academia are leading to increased hardship, deteriorating mental health, stifled creativity and a less diverse workforce.

What the two accounts above highlight is how the postgraduate journey is framed by ourselves, our bodies, along with that of our research and institutional contexts. While we may have control over some elements, there are other aspects that are simultaneously out of our control, and contribute to the uncertainty and unpredictability of the PhD process, along with that of embarking upon an academic career pathway.

1. **Conclusions**

The process of sharing one’s emotions and insecurities can at times be incredibly challenging. However, through our convened session at the RGS, we learnt that the sharing of difficult and uncomfortable experiences with others could have the potential to be hugely therapeutic and cathartic. Where should we go from here? Apart from, first, calling on our fellow postgraduate students to join us in establishing more forums to have such open and challenging conversations about their research journeys, we also believe that our academic institutions must play a key role in supporting students.

While precarity and everyday anxiety will always be an inherent part of the postgraduate research journey, it is important to recognise how these feelings may be increased by the neoliberalisation of higher education. These anxieties lay alongside the multiple challenges that can arise while in the field, including the potential for research to lose its direction, become unsustainable and/or trivial due to changing contexts. Instability induced through such conditions has the potential to bring about great anxiety and poor mental health for students[[7]](#footnote-7). There is, therefore, a need to consider how we might create spaces for shared emotional vulnerability, whereby postgraduate research students recognise their challenges as being shared rather than solely individualised. Similarly, there is a need to move beyond recognition of emotions as individualised, to viewing emotions as frequently shared and socially circulating within institutional structures. We argue that we need to better understand how individuals become isolated and advocate for the development of different spaces within the academy, serving as a form of ‘in-here’ activism, changing the environments and cultures in which we work (Castree 2000:969).

Overcoming the liminality of a postgraduate space may foster better senses of belonging to the wider academic community (Ey et al., 2020). Institutional change is needed for greater recognition and visibility of postgraduate research students, for example through access to physical bases (i.e. offices) within their respective departments to help in the creation of support networks (Dufty-Jones, 2018). Mentoring for postgraduate students would also be of value at a departmental and institutional level, along with the development of collegial spaces (e.g. seminars and reading groups), in which an ‘ethic of care’ could be built along with a sense of solidarity and collectivity (Dufty-Jones, 2018 Ey et al., 2020). Building on the success of blogs and social media platforms, such as The Thesis Whisperer and PolGRG’s Reclaiming Success project, we must also reclaim online spaces as spaces of conviviality and togetherness, not competition and friction.

Feedback from our session at the RGS indicated both the value and need for such open and honest spaces for discussion, both online and offline, in which individuals can work ‘vulnerably’ together through the anxieties brought about through their research. Such an approach would likely require us (as research students) to be brave in expressing our emotions and anxieties in order to break the existing “culture of silence” (Browne and Moffett, 2014: 11) in academia at present. According to Browne and Moffett (2014) there is very limited discussion of the emotional and practical challenges brought about through fieldwork or the research process as a whole. Consequently, they note the potential value of establishing an interdisciplinary field research network amongst doctoral researchers to enable mutual support amongst students engaging in qualitative fieldwork (Browne and Moffett, 2014).

In seeking to dismantle a wider ‘culture of silence’, we would need to take the time to listen to others, encourage peer-support and fundamentally build alliances, which are underpinned by empathy. Reflecting upon our personal experiences of undertaking research, we might also open up a wider dialogue around individual stumbling blocks and failures, along with offering peer support and advice to one another. Research is (and will always be) a personal journey, but it need not be a lonely one.

1. **Epilogue**

During the final stages of revising this paper, the world changed dramatically due to the Covid-19 crisis. While we could have made subtle changes to the text to reflect new perspectives from the supposed ‘new normal’ we are now living in, we felt that this would not do justice to any of the issues and emotions addressed in this paper (and Special Issue more broadly), nor any of the personal circumstances of friends/ colleagues in academia at present. Thus, we felt that this final section would provide a space for us to add some more detailed reflections on the pandemic’s impact (so far) and how these tie into some of the themes already addressed.

As authors, we recognise the pandemic has accentuated many of the anxieties currently experienced across academia. For postgraduate scholars in particular, Covid-19 has brought into stark reality many of the structural precarities that exist within academia at present, while at the same time radically altering (or in some cases, thwarting) fieldwork practices. As Günel et al. (2020: n.p.) recently posited, “The pandemic has evaporated many a future fieldwork plan and the prospect of continued ethnographic research in the same vein seems uncertain”.

Although we are both in the final stages of finishing our PhDs, we feel quite fortunate that we are at a stage with our doctoral research where the finishing touches are being applied to three to four years of (what seems now, in comparison, relatively uneventful and carefree) research. However, for those researchers in the early stages or middle of their PhDs, this has not been the case as planned fieldwork, research visits and internships have all been paused, postponed or – worst still – lost at crucial moments in their research journey. The true impact of Covid-19 upon PhD fieldwork and future careers will likely take time to fully materialise and register, but personal stories already point to the abundant uncertainty and anxiety many have experienced over the past few months (Lin, 2020; Primack and Setash, 2020). While we welcome attempts by some research bodies and universities to support students through funding and deadline extensions, it must also be stressed that some of the impacts of Covid-19 are not quantifiable through ‘lost’ workdays or ‘lost’ interviews and conferences. Indeed, we must not lose sight of some of the ‘hidden’ impacts this pandemic has had and ultimately will have on the mental health and wellbeing of postgraduate scholars over the coming year(s).

Added to this, and beyond the PhD process itself, we have also been deeply disheartened to already see friends and colleagues laid off from precarious teaching contracts and lectureships, while postdoc and fellowship opportunities have either disappeared or been rescinded due to Covid-19. In turn, many postgraduates, ourselves included, are concerned and fearful for their future academic progression and question the current feasibility of pursuing an academic career.

While this has been an unsettling time for many, and we express solidarity with any fellow researcher affected, we must also use this period as an opportunity to learn and possibly reshape some of the functions, structures and practices of academic life moving forward, be that from the way in which we conduct fieldwork to how we engage with our fellow colleagues. For example, the decision by a number of UK research councils and individual institutions to offer final year doctoral students a paid extension to their candidature should be commended (we also hope that this can be made available to all PhD students, as the impact of the pandemic is likely to be long-lasting). Our hope is that, in light of this crisis, such inclusive and supportive practices also become more normalised within academia, in particular around mental health support, extensions to candidature and sick leave for PhD students.

Now, more than ever, is it crucial that postgraduate scholars are afforded greater opportunities to communicate and share their uncertainties and everyday anxieties as researchers, whether they are stories regarding research funding, stipend extensions, precarious teaching contracts or future employment opportunities. As researchers, we have been moved by the powerful and solidaristic accounts of employment loss and job rejections across social media throughout this difficult period, but we also call on fellow academics, particularly those in more secure employment, to speak up on behalf of those with precarious futures and challenge the careless and unjust employment practices currently displayed across the academic sector (see, Collini, 2020; McKie, 2020). As an academic community it is important that we become united in our resistance.

**Funding**

Angharad Butler-Rees was supported by a University of Southampton School of Geography and Environmental Science Studentship along with a Postgraduate Research Award from the Royal Geographical Society (with IBG). Nick Robinson was supported as part of the EPSRC Centre for Doctoral Training in Cyber Security of Royal Holloway, University of London (EP/K035584/1), and partially from the Dora Plus program funded by the European Regional Development Fund.

**Acknowledgements**

We would like to thank the RGS Political Geography Research Group for supporting the session from which this paper emerged, along with all presenters and attendees for providing such valuable, honest and insightful contributions. Further to this, we would also like to express gratitude to the reviewers for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

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1. This section is written by Nick. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. In 2007, Estonia fell victim to what is widely believed to be the first instance of a state-sponsored cyberattack, temporarily crippling vital information systems and government portals. It was seen as a major wakeup call for the Estonian government, highlighting the fragility of its digital ecosystem and a reminder that many state institutions would struggle to return to classic ‘pen and paper’ in the event of a crisis. Ongoing tensions in Ukraine following the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 have also set the government on a heightened sense of alert, with many commentators speculating on whether the Baltic states could be next. For a country that spent more than half of the 20th century under occupation, the notion that ‘it might happen again’ still rings true for many Estonians. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Throughout the process of completing my PhD, there have been two Estonian national elections and a change in presidential leadership. With the Data Embassy yet to be fully established as a project, there would be times where the change in government led to a period of uncertainty for my project. During this time, a number of key individuals also left positions working close to the project, requiring changes to my research plan and to renegotiate access with those in government circles. External political events, such as the election of Donald Trump as U.S. president and Brexit, also had collateral impact on my research; the former leading to greater insecurity across the Baltics after Trump described the NATO Alliance as ‘obsolete’, and the latter leading to uncertainty over the location of the first Data Embassy (the U.K was a potential location before its decision to leave the EU). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. This section is written by Angharad. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. We however recognise that Twitter can also have the reverse effect - sometimes creating an unhelpful, exclusionary space that is often underpinned by self-aggrandisement and (institutional/publishing) competition. As authors, we have experienced both sides of Twitter, and wanted to express a degree of caution regarding its effects upon researcher’s mental health and ‘sense of place’ within the wider academic community. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Our PolGRG Postgraduate Rep successors, Hannah Dickinson, Laura Shipp and Viktoria Noka, followed up our RGS session with a call to ‘reclaim’ and ‘rethink’ success within academic discourse. Their session led to the launch of a blog entitled “Reclaiming Success” – offering a platform for researchers to “challenge the everyday pressures of the neoliberal academy”. For more information, see: www.reclaimsuccess.wordpress.com/. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. A recent worldwide survey of 6000 students found that one in three PhD researchers have sought mental health support during their studies (Baker, 2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)