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# Editorial: Uncomfortable Geographies

*Forthcoming in Emotion, Space and Society*

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## 1. Introduction

Discomfort, as a state of being, is a common part of our everyday lives; yet, it is also often intangible, diffuse, and diverse. Temporally, discomfort can be a fleeting moment of recognition that may take us by surprise or an underlying feeling that lingers. The 'event' of the uncomfortable can therefore be both immediate and enduring. As geographers, the spatial and contextual dimensions of discomfort are hard to ignore, and its presence is contingent on innumerable combinations of people, materials, and place. As such, while it may be experienced through a personal or introspective set of feelings that may not be articulated or expressed publicly, it is always reaching outward through connections, tensions, and dissonances with the other; indeed, it is *produced through* these outward relationships. Nonetheless, feeling uncomfortable remains manifested in the individual, based on an individual's body, biography, values, and more, operating relationally to these outward relationships. Discomfort is entwined with desire, be it a desire for escape or a yearning for absent comfort. It is experienced as anything from identifiably unpleasant feelings of fear or hurt, through to much more ambiguous senses of unease, awkwardness, or the uncanny.

Whilst difficult to pin down, acknowledging feelings and experiences of discomfort provides the opportunity to understand the minute details of everyday life as well as greater structural issues. Discomfort, like all emotions, is inherently political, drawn-out through mundane encounters with unsettling circumstances that can reveal deeply entrenched power dynamics. In calling attention to these unpleasant emotions, we suggest that discomfort also serves to reveal opportunities for unsettling but meaningful reconfigurations and occasions to challenge established norms (Ahmed, 2004; Brown & Pickerill, 2009). If we draw on the late Lauren Berlant's (2011) influential concept of *cruel optimism*, the affective experience of discomfort may itself be an empowering dis-attachment from the systems of our subordination.

In the years following the inception of this special issue, the world was confronted with clear moments of collective discomfort through the COVID-19 pandemic, and the renewed focus on police brutality and racial inequality in the USA and other Westernised contexts. As a result of the pandemic, suddenly, mundane practices became imbued with a sense of risk and of

bodily danger, as we adapted to changed norms, an unsettling sense of uncertainty, and an indeterminate end to the “unprecedented times”. Meanwhile, the social movements that (re)emerged following the death of George Floyd in Minneapolis at the hands of police (re)invigorated calls for activism and change. Sympathetic onlookers and activists alike were confronted with uncomfortable questions, of what kind of actions are enough, especially for those in privileged positions, and what limits are placed on our activism and advocacy in the name of “staying comfortable”. In other words, in a pandemic, the line between “staying comfortable” and “staying safe” became decidedly blurred. The inspirational work of the late bell hooks, who passed away during the final stages of this editorial, highlighted the ways in which addressing structural inequality and particularly racism was hindered by such desire for comfort, particularly the comfort of the white feminist (1986, 2000). Her works, and the many geographers inspired by them, remain instrumental in acknowledging the need for discomfort as a means to generate meaningful change. Neither the Black Lives Matter movement nor Covid-19 pandemic sparked this special issue, a project that began in 2018, but throughout the publication process these phenomena reinforced the enduring importance of this collection.

Our Special Issue engages with how discomfort can be variously de- and re- politicised through its role in the everyday experience of politics or the policy implications of uncomfortable taboos, as well as how comfort can be weaponized as an aspirational goal of neoliberal subjectivity. In light of, these politics of dis/comfort, this collection of papers argue that a consideration of discomfort may also highlight the potential for change, reflection, and living together differently in turbulent times. The uncomfortable is therefore more than simply the antithesis or absence of the comfortable; it can also be generative in its own right. As Ahmed (2004, p. 147) states, “comfort is very hard to notice when one experiences it”, suggesting that in contrast, discomfort demands attention. Despite this exigency, we would argue that discomfort nevertheless defies easy definition, situated as embodied, indeterminate, and ambiguous. It is within this ambiguity that normativity is negotiated, through the shaping and structuring of everyday life.

## **2. Uncomfortable Geographies as Geographies of (Political) Emotion.**

Addressing the lived experience of emotions, both collectively and individually has been one of the key strengths of geographers concerned with affect and emotion, as practised, experienced, enlivened, and encountered (Ahmed, 2004; Anderson, 2014). This work has built on long-standing considerations of what it means to *be in* the world, considering the more-than-representational geographies of social life and questions of justice, not only the phenomenological experience of individuals (Thrift & Dewsbury, 2000). Within recent work on emotional geographies, in parallel with writings on affect and atmospheres, there has been a modest yet growing interest in the meaning and nature of ‘comfort’, ranging in focus from materialities (Miller, 2008; Price, 2020), public spaces (Boyer, 2012, 2018), nightlife spaces (Held, 2015; Ural, 2017), domestic settings and home (Fields, 2011; Pickerill, 2015), mobilities

(Bissell, 2008), intimacy (MacClaren, 2014; Smith & Snider, 2019), and hospitality (Craggs, 2014). However, as argued in *Geographies of Comfort*, McNally *et al.*'s (2020) pioneering anthology which our Special Issue sits alongside, “[w]hen we introduce or identify comfort there is always discomfort – it is a sensation that sits at a border, or boundary”.

Indeed, in *Cruel Optimism*, Berlant (2011) reminds us that those things that make us feel comforted can have a darker side: aspirations to the ‘good life’ and middle-class dreams of suburban comfort consistently fail. Reflecting the above argument of McNally *et al.* (2020), this special issue, therefore, views comfort, and our desire for it, in a tense relationship with its antitheses: discomfort and the uncomfortable. However, despite the undeniable importance of emotion, throughout this Special Issue, we seek to present ways in which discomfort can be conceptualised in terms beyond being simply ‘another emotion’ (Pile, 2010).

This Special Issue, as a written compilation of presentations selected from our 2018 RGS-IBG Annual International Conference session of the same name, offers a collection of critical studies that engage with unpleasant, unsettling emotions and atmospheres that directly engage with discomfort. Through these, we can consider how discomfort is encountered, produced, experienced, and embodied, and the diverse ways it leaves its imprint on the social world. Whilst a rich and diverse area of study, three themes emerge as particularly prominent among the papers in this Special Issue: identity and difference, embodiment and practices, and methodological enquiry.

### **3. Navigating identity and difference**

Identity, as a representation of the self (and other), is inflected with multiple, conflicting meanings and emotional resonances that can generate comfort and discomfort when different identities are put into contact. In the last couple of decades, a growing awareness of the intersections of different identities, and the overlapping oppressions and privileges afforded by them, has highlighted how our situated knowledges and navigations of space constitute a terrain of action and interaction that can have substantial social and political effects. This terrain can also produce comfort and discomfort through various forms of awkwardness, reassurance, un/certainty, and surprise that arise from particular moments and spaces. Several papers in this special issue speak to the coupled themes of identity and difference, whereby different lives, values, and bodies are pressed up against one another, both in daily practice and through the memories that live on in the present (see Walker, 2021).

One of the central means through which geographers have sought to understand actions and interactions across difference has been the notion of ‘encounter’, which highlights the everyday and often unarticulated moments and spaces where difference is negotiated in practice (Valentine, 2008; Wilson, 2017). This is the topic of Helen Wilson’s paper in the special issue, in which she turns away from more commonly-studied unchoreographed encounters in daily life and towards the deliberate pedagogical generation of discomfort in ‘staged encounters’ designed to help people acknowledge and address inequalities in society.

In doing so, she asks us to consider what discomfort can (and can't) achieve when seeking social change.

In contrast, Charlotte Eales and Huw Thomas explore the decidedly more *ad hoc* encounters between young Travellers and non-Traveller groups on public transport. Travel and transport have been a common subject of discussions about difference and identity (see Ince, 2015; Lobo, 2014; see also papers by Pettit and Muñoz, this issue), as a site where differentially-positioned groups are put into contact. For Eales and Thomas, a binary identification of 'Traveller' and 'non-Traveller' is a key tool through which young Travellers perceive the world around them, partly reinforced and partly challenged by older generations. This binaristic worldview, and their performance of it in public actions and interactions, is at once a source of discomfort and reassurance in different forms. Travel and mobility continue as a key dynamic in Shakthi's paper, in which her intersectional identity is the source of a variety of discomfoting experiences according to her positionality within, and outside, the 'field' in research practice. This highlights the importance of attending to the interactions of racial and researcher identities, and how these uncomfortable affects reveal broader issues of racialised and gendered forms of difference.

Lucy Jackson's paper shifts away from identity as a marker of difference and towards identity as an anchor for tradition and inertia, specifically concerning debates around abortion legislation in Northern Ireland. Here, not only is public discourse filtered through various intersecting identities that are closely connected to regional culture and politics (gender, religion, nationality) but crucially, the discomfort produced through the topic of abortion provides opportunities for policymakers to default to the comfort of the status quo. Discomfort operates as a political tool, shaping discourses through the emotional consequences of discussing taboo topics. Here, considerable political 'work' is done by the feelings and emotional resonances that are tied intimately to (Northern) Irish Catholic identity, with material effects in terms of policy inertia.

In many of the papers in this special issue, the discursive construction of certain topics as uncomfortable lends the emotive dimensions of discomfort significant power beyond subjective experiences. These discourses, whether located in everyday spaces (e.g. Eales and Thomas) or official statements (e.g. Jackson), regulate behaviour, determine belonging, and can impact broad-reaching policy decisions. Thus, rather than a quirky sidenote to 'real' politics, uncomfortable geographies can contribute substantially to structural divisions and inequalities, or indeed challenge them (e.g. Wilson).

#### **4. Embodied and practised discomfort**

Discomfort is fundamentally understood as an embodied phenomenon, and with this special issue, we contribute to an established tradition of embodied and emotional geographies within *Emotion, Space and Society*. These collected papers respond to calls to attend to how emotions are sensed and experienced in bodies and between bodies (Pile, 2010; Thien, 2005),

how these emotions are expressed and practised by bodies (Everts & Wagner, 2012), and to consider the political implications of such embodied experiences and bodily configurations (Bissell, 2008; Doshi, 2017; Gorman-Murray, 2009). We argue that it is not necessarily enough to only consider how we experience these emotions, and a number of papers in this collection illustrate how discomfoting narratives, practices, encounters, and their related bodily experiences, can illuminate the politics of being *made* uncomfortable. It is through such embodied encounters and experiences that social norms are (re)configured, reconstructed and behaviours policed, discomfoting certain bodies as a political exercise (Butler, 1990, 1993). Many of the papers within this collection illuminate the role of discomfort in how bodies are politicised, following Ahmed's (2004, p. 155) assertion that "discomfort is... *about inhabiting norms differently*" (original emphasis).

In Lucy Jackson's paper, she confronts bodily politics in Northern Ireland and discusses how bodily practices of reproductive rights and abortions are positioned discursively as an uncomfortable topic, highlighting how discomfort is rooted not only in the sensory realm but in representations and narratives that themselves can be uncomfortable to encounter and study. Similarly, Jonathan Ablitt considers how encountering 'inappropriate' or 'private' behaviour in public parks invokes discomfort, for those who are encountered and for those who 'stumble across' unexpected scenarios. Daniel Muñoz in turn discusses how infrastructures of public transport create bodily experiences of pain and discomfort as turnstiles on buses perpetuated standard expectations of 'acceptable' body types. These discussions illustrate how public spaces are produced by embodied practices and bodies themselves, and how boundaries of public/private spaces are reconfigured when we attend to such practices. Deviant bodies are constructed as creating discomfort within wider society, catalysing embodied responses of disgust and horror as societal norms and behavioural expectations are defied, reflecting existing work on 'leaky bodies', revulsion, and marginalised bodies (Evans et al., 2021; Longhurst, 2012).

These three papers illustrate how the embodied experience of discomfort establishes moral order and constructs certain practices and certain bodies as 'normal' and 'abnormal', as well as how these are tied to particular places with established conventions. This highlights how we can understand discomfort as not only embodied in a straightforward physical sense but also fundamentally social and shared, rooted in collective affects and shared societal norms about bodies. Discomfort, therefore, highlights both the embodied experience of being uncomfortable and how bodily practices, capacities and behaviours are moderated through such experiences.

## **5. Discomfort as method**

The comfort of participants is a familiar consideration of research, from ethics to research design, data collection, and dissemination, and holds particular weight in discussions of risk and vulnerability (Liamputtong, 2006). Discomfoting accounts of fieldwork include danger and physical safety (Lee, 1995; Sampson & Thomas, 2003), emotional distress (Hall, 2014;

McGarrol, 2017), harassment, sexualisation, and sexism (Blackman, 2007; Haddow, 2021; Lumsden, 2009). These come with their own warnings, tactics, and techniques, both in 'the field' and beyond it. Participants and researchers are unlikely to be entirely unaffected by research encounters, and the majority of methodological advice focuses on minimising possibilities for discomfort or reflecting on instances where it does emerge, usually as a result of vitally important ethical considerations. Yet, as the papers in this special issue show, discomfort should not always be minimised and can be an integral part of research methodology.

This special issue situates these conversations within an established tradition of this journal, that engages with the vital emotional aspects of conducting research and interrogates the meanings, experiences, and relevance of unpleasant emotions elicited in the researcher. These engagements have included illustrating the agency of the participant (Blazek, 2021), exploring the potential for action in light of difficult encounters (Tembo, 2021), and the importance of listening as methodology and engaging with emotional responses to address researcher prejudice (Qhogwana, 2022). Additionally, the traumatic impact of research explored was in detail throughout a special issue focused on *Research and Trauma* (see Drozdowski & Dominey-Howes, 2015; also Drozdowski, 2015; Coddington and Micieli-Voustinas, 2017; Qhogwana, 2022). As such, *Emotion, Space and Society* as a journal has acted as a key resource for reflecting on the role of difficult emotions within the research process and illustrates the vital importance of this focus for sensitive, reflective, vigorous research.

Following this established focus, all the papers in this special issue present examples of the importance of attending to discomfort in the process of *doing* research, as well as in its analysis. We argue that attending to discomfort can be an opportunity to better engage with our own embodied or emotional experience of research (see Owen, 2021), not only to illustrate our positionality within the research process but to acknowledge how the methods we employ may reinforce or challenge societal norms, which themselves engender discomfort when they are breached. This encourages greater ethical reflection on the nature of our research endeavours and interrogates the academic praxis that may otherwise remain unchallenged in our work (see Askins, 2016).

Throughout this collection, the authors identify how positionality provided opportunities to engage with discomfort. Shakthi highlights how discomfort can be employed within the reflexive practice of the researcher to engage with debates around difference throughout and beyond the research process. She examines how in different locations and contexts, her racial identity is experienced and (re)presented differently, highlighted through her reflection on her own discomfort. Building on these ideas of reflexivity in research, Harry Pettit presents a discussion of the discomfort that can be embedded within ethnographic practices. Pettit outlines the complex power dynamics experienced in his fieldwork in Egypt, as he negotiated a role of both researcher and foreign 'friend'. He argues that discomfort can be considered to better engage with the ethics, tensions and 'cruel optimisms' of research when the researcher can represent ideas of aspiration and hope. The uncomfortable experiences illustrated in both

these papers highlight how these relationships are situated within complex post-colonial research contexts, encouraging reflective practices that engage with the nuances of such political settings.

We argue that the discomfort of the researcher is a useful tool, as evidenced in the papers of both Ablitt and Muñoz when discomfort can be used to highlight moments when bodies and behaviours have transgressed expected (and often unspoken) norms in public spaces. Additionally, Muñoz's paper presents a novel way of presenting discomfort in research, through a visual medium that records and conveys instances of passengers' discomfort on public transport. These examples indicate that there is a range of possible means through which researchers can portray discomfort and highlight the question of how we might go about communicating these experiences in our work.

## **6. Conclusion: Leaning into Uncomfortable Geography**

This collection builds on a desire to make the geographies of the uncomfortable more visible, by drawing connections between taboo topics, the politics of discomfort, and the nature of research as an uncomfortable endeavour. This special issue traces discomfort through a variety of spaces and contexts, to engage not only with the experience of feeling uncomfortable, but also what these emotions may reveal about negotiations and engagements of difference, bodies, and the spatialities of social norms. In doing so, a consideration of the uncomfortable may illuminate existing geographical debates or send them in new directions. This Special Issue, however, does not form an exhaustive collection of how we might do uncomfortable geographies, but rather, hopes to stimulate further engagement by illustrating some of the many possibilities of how geographers and the wider social sciences can work with discomfort as both a concept and a topic of empirical study.

The papers which make up this Special Issue are an insight into the fruitful potential of attending to discomfort in research, both as an opportunity for engagement with lived emotive experience but also as a lens through which to address questions of power. Therefore, we position this special issue as a call for geographers, and social scientists more broadly, to sit with and in discomfort in their research and wider lives. If we dwell in comfort, are we, therefore, positioned in apolitical compliance with established structures of power and marginalisation? To follow Ahmed (2004, p. 147), "[n]ormativity is comfortable for those who can inhabit it", and vice versa for those who are unable or refuse to. So, discomfort is, we argue, an inevitable and deeply needed means to individually and collectively negotiate shifting political landscapes, with potential to catalyse meaningful change shaped with empathy and understanding.

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