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On the (im)possibilities of being a good enough researcher at a neoliberal university

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Abstract

Three years after finishing a participatory research project with a low-income community, we look back at the ways we struggled and continue to struggle under the neoliberal climate we find ourselves in. Specifically, we ask whether the managerialised research infrastructures of the neoliberal university provide a ‘good enough’ environment, and whether we, as researchers, were able to conduct ‘good enough’ research with austerity-stricken respective communities. Engaging with literature on failure and self-care, we offer insights on the (im)possibilities of doing ‘good enough’ research in climates that are harsh to participants as well as researchers. Taking a Winnicottian, psychoanalytic lens of working under ‘average expectable conditions’, we conclude that, over time, we may perhaps create moments of micro-resistance that may make our failures productive; however, these should not give research institutions a free pass to continue their not-good-enough, exploitative practices.

KEYWORDS

anxious research, good enough, neoliberal university, productive failure, resistance

1 | INTRODUCTION

“We cannot continue to work like this” is the tenor of a body of recent geographical scholarship that highlights the affective and political dimensions of what it means to work in the neoliberal university – a diminished model of the university that puts quantity of output over quality of engagement, short-term interventions over long-term planning, competition over cooperation, economic efficiency over social value (Davies et al., 2021; Lorne, 2021; McGarrol, 2017; Mountz et al., 2015). This translates into highly precarious employment conditions that are inherently incompatible with the fragile desires of one’s personal and social life (Hughes, 2021). This overall research climate ignores the immense emotional labour that is required of (especially early career) researchers, and specifically those interested in research that *affects*, such as health, austerity, and other social justice issues (Bondi, 2003; Lorne, 2021). In this vein, Todd (2021) observes the production of the ‘anxious researcher’ whose dispositions are shaped by the socio-materiality of their (academic) holding environments (Berg, Huijbens, & Larsen, 2016) and a general lack of institutional ‘care’, ‘nurture’, or ‘protection’ provided by their employers – to employ a psychoanalytical Winnicottian vocabulary that influences our theoretical perspective here (Gilmore & Harding, 2022; Winnicott, 1965).

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In this commentary, we build on this literature and reflect on our own struggles, failures, and learning experiences when conducting what was originally conceived of as ‘participatory action research with a low-income community’ to cultivate renewed practices of cooperation and commoning under difficult socioeconomic conditions shaped by years of neoliberal austerity (Zielke et al., 2021). Having felt stifled, frustrated, and angry with the conditions we were working under – and to some degree embarrassed by what we ‘did’ to the community in question – three years after concluding our research we have gained much-needed emotional distance, found space to breathe, and taken the time to reflect on the ethical implications and (im)possibilities of ‘good enough’ research, on two levels, expressed as questions to be answered in this reflective piece:

1. Did our place of work, as a neoliberalising, highly managerialised institution, provide a good enough environment for us as researchers?
2. And given these circumstances, as researchers and self-identifying scholar-activists, were we (nevertheless) able to carry out good enough research for our participants and stakeholders?

2 | THE CONDITIONS WE WERE UNDER

Our engagement with ‘the Dingle’, a low-income inner-city neighbourhood in Liverpool, was from the outset marked by struggle against the deteriorating labour conditions of the contemporary university. Though a small internal competitive impact grant of £7100 was secured from the university for 2017–18, the public policy institute for which we all worked at the time failed to provide the support required for such a project, eventually withdrawing almost all resources. Following several years of precarious three-month rolling postdoctoral contracts, two of us were made redundant – or rather had the informal renewal of our contracts ‘discontinued’ – mid-way through the early mapping phase, forcing us to leave the university and the city in search of work in universities elsewhere. Administration of the remaining grant funds was made extremely complicated as the grant-holder was one of those made redundant, resulting in delays and confusing rebranding of who was ‘behind’ this research. We nonetheless persevered with one researcher continuing the embedded work, balancing it with the demands of a PhD, the others supporting where possible from afar, and all of us struggling to meet our own financial and wellbeing needs.

Much of this was the result of institutional failure. The public policy institute for which we worked was going through a complicated and brutal process of restructuring from above – cutting costs, shedding staff, and ludicrously leaving it for many months without any full-time researchers and staffed only by interim managers. After almost a year, a new management team was appointed to attract larger grants around the ‘sexier’ themes of smart and sustainable cities. This conceptual restructuring jettisoned the distinctive transdisciplinary research agenda that had been slowly and organically curated over the previous years – specifically around the social economy, urban commons, place-making, wellbeing, and democratic governance – an agenda that was just beginning to create demonstrable policy impact locally, nationally, and internationally (Heap, Southern & Thompson, 2020). As a research team we were the ‘throwntogether’ result – in the sense coined by Massey (2005) – of an institutional process that was interrupted by a succession of managerial decisions that left us feeling disjointed and alienated.

Within the socio-organisational structures of the institute, we could observe a rupture in the making. On one side: us, the team of researchers who had become friends, having built an emergent understanding of our local communities of practice; on the other side: them, an abruptly, unilaterally appointed management team that were the result of a neoliberal logic from high up the academic order. Our values and politics often appeared incompatible with theirs; resentment and mistrust grew; a scary feeling knowing that *they* decided whether *our* contracts would be extended and under what conditions.

3 | INCAPACITATED PARACHUTISTS?

But the precarity of the situation did not remain internal to the institution; it quickly translated into serious repercussions for our status in the community we were researching. Already people in the Dingle were wary of what they referred to as ‘parachutists’ – successive waves of researchers or regeneration professionals who “had some money, went in, did some damage, and left”, in the damning words of one interviewee (see also Zielke et al., 2021). Here, such parachutists had helped fuel great resentment and deep mistrust, both towards ‘outsiders’ like us and between local workers and residents.

Those we were just beginning to get to know, develop trusting relationships with, and convince we were not like the others, were seemingly proven right in their scepticism as we were forced to prematurely withdraw from our ethnographic commitments.

By this stage, we were asking questions about how ‘participatory’ our research could really be said to be? Were we merely co-opting a vocabulary that has become all but tokenistic, falling prey to what Ritterbusch (2019) calls ‘participatory bluffing’? On a personal level, these questions left the primary researcher affected by a sense of having deeply disappointed the community – of being a ‘fake’, an ‘imposter’ – resulting in increasing anxieties over socialising with the community, conducting interviews, analysing and revisiting data, and, indeed, writing reports that felt ‘truthful’.

This precipitated larger questions on the possibilities of ethical research. In the words of Bondi, we want to ask: “Can we enter into and sustain ethically acceptable research relationships with others, or are we always at risk of exploiting or damaging either others or ourselves?” (2003, p. 66). For Bondi, an ethical relationship to one’s research environment is where the researcher feels “neither overwhelmed, nor untouched” (2003, p. 72). Being overwhelmed by a participant’s anger, fear, mistrust, or disappointment with wider systems may mean that the researcher becomes incapacitated.

Howell (2019), in her PhD research on the moral economy in Mozambique, reflects on the deeper ethics of carrying out participatory research in geographical contexts that are riddled with inequalities and where, despite the researcher’s effort and desire to ‘do good’, the environment in which the research takes place may structurally inhibit or systematically undermine any positive social change. This, Howell argues, ironically goes against the very grain of participatory research and cannot be simply retrofitted through greater sensitivity or reflexivity (p. 202). Ethical participatory research, specifically in low-income or precarious communities, must therefore move away from the liberal idea that ethics is about how the individual researcher performs research in or with an identified community. Instead, ethics needs to grapple with the socio-historical and material conditions of the research field more broadly, which may in itself be riddled with power inequalities that go far beyond the agential forces of the researcher and their institution(s). “Research may not be the intervention that is needed”, argues Howell (2019, p. 204), pointing towards the failure of her own research and her anger about the support and training her institution failed to provide. Pragmatically, what may be required of institutions in the future is more collaboration with local and experienced stakeholders, who are adequately remunerated, as well as better and more comprehensive ethics training, including post-fieldwork ethical approval by the institution – so long as this does not simply add to the already heavy bureaucratic burden for researchers in managerialised university settings.

4 | GOOD ENOUGH – AN IDEAL STATE

To further frame the multiple and sometimes contradictory conditions of failure and possibilities of being good enough within the neoliberal institution, we dip into educational psychology and the idea of ‘good enough parenting’ (Winnicott, 1965). Here, we find Winnicott’s vocabulary useful because it: (a) reminds us of the important pastoral care and pedagogical roles played by universities in society; (b) provides a workable psychological alternative to a competitive neoliberal logic of ‘being the best’; (c) frames failure as a constructive and necessary condition for personal growth; while, at the same time, (d) stressing the importance of accountability and good will, thereby not giving a free pass to ‘fail or let fail’.

In an ideal world, one’s institutional home, much like our parental home, should provide a nurturing, protective, caring environment that allows for curiosity-driven exploration, personal growth, and development of an ethical, reflective disposition to the world around us. However, such an environment does not necessarily need to be world-leading or outstanding – to invoke some of the neoliberal vocabulary often used in the British context of generating Impact and being REF-able (Horton, 2020). In opposition to a language of excellence, Winnicott (1965, 1967) argues, it suffices if one’s parental home provides “average expectable conditions” – an argument we wish to extend to the institutional home of higher education teachers and researchers but also to many other institutional and environmental contexts, such as those conditioning the life chances of urban communities, as we explore below. Winnicott describes these ‘average’, good enough conditions as a holding environment, a place that is driven by a general devotion to care for someone else and a drive to develop their inherited talents (in the widest sense). But it is not free from failure; in fact, it feeds off failure, namely by providing a way to make sense of and grow from life’s inevitable frustrations, anxieties, and anger – thereby building resilience, independence, and a sense of self and belonging (Petriglieri et al., 2019). Harrowell et al. (2018) point out that failure is at the heart of the research process and can be used to proactively improve it. Similarly, in a recent special issue on failure in geography (see Davies et al. 2021), Dorling (2019) challenges us to look at kindness, generosity, and friendship as new kinds of academic rigour – a

much-needed tool to help us work through the inevitability of failure in the neoliberal, neo-colonial, and hostile research, teaching, and political climates researchers increasingly find ourselves in (see also, on gentle approaches to human geography, Horton, 2020).

In Winnicottian terms, engaging with the contemporary academy's scarcity of socio-emotional, material, and organisational resources – and the frustrations this entails – is crucial for developing an autonomous, healthy sense of self. Not least because our frustrations with our environments create healthy ego-boundary between the 'I' and 'not-I', between me and my (un)caring holding environment. Of course, this boundary between 'self' and 'environment' is to some degree artificial and, as one reviewer of this paper pointed out, not always intellectually helpful. Although we can draw analytical ego-boundaries, the 'self' is still co-constituted through and vitally dependent on its environment:

Individual maturity implies a movement towards independence but there is no such thing as independence. It would be unhealthy for an individual to be so withdrawn as to feel independent and invulnerable. If such a person is alive, then there is dependence indeed! (Winnicott, 1967, pp. 16–17)

In a similar vein and reflecting on self-care, Jones and Whittle (2021, p. 385) suggest that the falsely created belief of an individualised self can be interpreted as profoundly neoliberal (as it pits each against all and allows those responsible to pass the buck onto the individual) but also psychologically useful; separating the self from its environment by creating safe, protected spaces around us is “as necessary as it is impossible”. Necessary because taking care of one's self might allow us to be nicer to others and delineates 'I' as an agent to act. Impossible because on a practical level, taking space and time out for one's self perhaps means that others have to pick up the slack. Creating a healthy boundary for my self might at the same time cross another's boundary. Healthy boundaries do not line up neatly. They often imply an inevitable violence of boundary crossing and (re)drawing that ought to be negotiated transparently.

And while drawing boundaries and distancing ourselves from hostile environments is complex and entails a number of practical ethical dilemmas, Winnicott would argue that it is still important to be aware of the split between that 'I' and 'not-I'; knowing that, ontologically, the environments that hold and condition my agency are different to my 'true' self (Winnicott, 1964). Coming back to the notion of failure, a healthy distance between 'I' and 'not-I' gives those on the side of 'not-I' (that is, our environments, our institutions, our colleagues, and others that care or ought to care for us) the room to make mistakes and, importantly, gives failure some space, so that we may experience and interact with it in the present-tense, and not as a hindsight sense-making-activity (Whittle et al., 2020). We can then allow others to hurt, disappoint, and even fail us in the moment; we can experience failure, knowing full well that it does not affect *who* we are. With a healthy ego-boundary, failure can happen without over-identifying oneself with that failure.

5 | GOOD ENOUGH UNDER CONDITIONS OF ADVERSITY

However, in Winnicottian terms, this healthy ego-boundary between 'self' and 'environment' can disintegrate in adverse climates: for example, on entering a new job, moving to a new city or country, or being thrown into a highly competitive, neoliberal early career research environment (Gilmore & Harding, 2022). The anxiety and psycho-social disintegration that could result may well pull us back to a primal, infantile state of dependency and deep vulnerability; a state that Winnicott (1964) would deem 'unhealthy', where an adult is incapacitated to move towards independence and instead regresses into states of helplessness. If this fragile internal state happens while at an institution that is indeed not good enough, in a setting that is not devoted to care, the anxious researcher over-identifies with their institutional holding environment, the purported care-giving infrastructure. 'I' begins to blur with that which 'I' wants to distance itself from; a process of self-annihilation.

In other words, without (temporarily, analytically, and artificially) distancing myself from my environment, I cannot be anything else but that which I think of my environment; if I think my institutional environment is bad, then I, being not able to see myself as independent, would think of myself as bad, too. This sense of self-doubt ('am I a bad person; am I a bad scholar?') and sometimes equally misguided over-compensating self-esteem mechanisms ('of course, I am so much better than my boss; let me show them') was palpable throughout the entire research process. A neoliberal university, with neoliberal management structures, in a neoliberalising research field encourages a neoliberal mindset (how can I as an individual survive economically; how do I navigate the ethical dilemmas I encounter; how can I produce the best research output, look good on paper, and harness more funding?). Within such problematic dependencies, and taking the well-criticised context of neoliberal universities into account, in reflecting on our participatory action research project in

the Dingle, it is hard not to come to the conclusion that the conditions at the time were insufficient for us to flourish. Our institutional and social holding environments were not good enough.

Perhaps, as researchers, we were not good enough, either. Not because we messed up – that is human and expected – but because we possibly stopped caring about what kind of environment our research interventions created, giving people false hope, and not asking whether our research was really the care that was needed in the Dingle (see Howell, 2019). Our research intention shifted as we became increasingly incapacitated over the course of the project (Bondi, 2003) and too busy to survive and care for ourselves, too caught up in anger and resentment. Whereas in the beginning we were devoted to care for and with our participants, as was the initial idea in our participatory design, slowly our own needs being unmet gathered greater attention. Feeling tired, overworked, resentful, we felt increasingly unable to listen to any more stories of despair and anger, unable to genuinely care. This is a tendency also observable in the community we were studying, a sign of the stressed, austerity-starved space in which many of our research participants were struggling to operate, as community development workers, charity volunteers, or activists: “you just have to get on with it and not care too much about it all”. Here the interviewee, in a matter-of-fact voice, indicates that caring might stand in the way of moving forward with practical tasks, such as finding the resources to survive as a third sector organisation; that caring (about each other) is perhaps even counter-productive. Similarly, our focus shifted from one of wanting to take care of our (research) community to initiate some kind of social change, to one of getting enough data, producing a final report and moving on. This was an act of survival, an act of self-care, an act of resistance (Mountz et al., 2015).

As one reviewer reminded us, rather than making a clear distinction between care for ourselves and care for others, we may also frame these experiences as something that could build solidarity. In being gentle with ourselves, as Holton has it (2020), we might be able to make generative connections between the humiliation, anxiety, self-doubt, and unease we felt with those structurally similar feelings our participants experienced. The neoliberal governance culture that increasingly conditions institutional and everyday life in Liverpool created a hostile climate in the neighbourhoods we researched (to which, incidentally, two members of the research team lived adjacent) as well as within the university where we worked (a mere 20-min walk from the Dingle). Neoliberal failure unfolds and intersects unevenly across different institutional settings, and it is our job not just to ‘do better next time’ but to hold accountable the structures behind these multiple failures (Clare, 2019).

At this point we can provisionally answer our initial two questions with a simple ‘no’: neither our institutional environment nor we as researchers were good enough; neither provided an adequate expectable holding environment to learn and grow from frustrations and failures. And we may just stay here, in a kind of self-indulgent victimhood, saying: we blame the institutions; the managers were not good enough; we were not good enough; we blame ourselves; the community was not ready; we hold neoliberalism (or any of the other -isms) ultimately accountable; all is bound to fail; no output, no career, no community development, no local transformation, defeat, resignation. But maybe the more interesting question is whether we can, over time, become good enough. Can good enough-ness be reassigned? Can we, as psychotherapy would have it, talk forgivingly to our vulnerable, younger selves by mobilising unresolved dynamics into productive learnings? Can we, through time, change in our inward and outward dispositions to become good enough, in retrospect? Can we, through critical reflection, (re)capacitate ourselves?

In this reflective piece, we have argued that even though our scholarship may have been incapacitated and incapacitating, disappointing to ourselves and others, perhaps we could through time reposition our scholarship at a distance to the environment that may have, subjectively speaking, crippled it. That through time, through becoming parts of new personal, social, and political environments, through entering different kinds of caring relationships, we can productively grapple with past failures, repositioned in their time and place, knowing that our communities are more than the research we did ‘on’ them (see Ritterbusch, 2019), that we are more than the injustices done to us.

Freeing ourselves from this unilateral victimhood, we can carve out new possibilities to heal, reflect, to think, to write, to act. Now three years after the initial project concluded, we feel that we have perhaps become good enough. Good enough because we found that healthy distance between ‘I’ and ‘not-I’.

In writing this piece collectively, we also recognise that we have each come at these reflections from varying vantage points, with differing emotional distances, attachments, and responses to the deeply subjective experience of research. This process of reflecting on the project and writing about it together has prompted a number of concerns that we have asked of each other and of the paper.

We ought to examine if and how we internalised neoliberal dictates to be more productive, to self-manage our alienation and stress so as to ‘bounce back’ or ‘build back better’ (to echo the ‘resilience’ discourses of the moment) in ways that ultimately benefit the research outputs of our host institution. Here, we could further argue that the psychoanalytic narrative we have sketched out above is yet another example of internalisation and individualisation of structural

constraints that reframes these as matters for personal development rather than collective struggle. There seems to be a risk that our line of thinking may depoliticise deeply political issues about the structure of the contemporary university and its relationship with society. Still, we are not sure how these individualised, psychological coping strategies could be transformed into strategies of collective resistance, and what they might look like in practice.

These are big questions about organisational strategy – about how to strengthen solidarities between otherwise competitively-pitted or polarised positions within the hierarchical and atomised academic labour market. We believe the struggle to build solidarity, to engage in collective action, is founded on reflexive micro-practices and an ethics of care – care for ourselves and each other. Petriglieri and colleagues argue that the creation of personal holding environments may afford moments of micro-resistance, an emancipatory space that makes their participants' “vulnerability a marker of courage, and their struggle less of a product of circumstances and more of a personal choice. If they could not be free without risking falling apart, they could at least, over time and on the best of days, *fall apart productively*” (2019, p. 152; emphasis our own).

We need to be careful not to ‘sanitise’ (Clare, 2019) our failure, to pretend as though we have gained great insight from it, extracted what we need from it to ‘fail better next time’, speaking of failure from a position of authority, in hindsight, from a point of ‘happy ending’ (Whittle et al., 2020); although to some degree this seems inevitable because the very fact that this paper is written and published speaks to something productive coming out of our experiences with failure.

DISCLAIMER: THERE WAS A PRICE TO PAY

Falling apart productively sounds promising, to be productive on our own terms. Building micro-resistances over time, however courageous and productive they may be, also comes at a price. The price is often a personal one as we carry our worries about failure with us into new jobs (if we are indeed lucky enough to get one) and into our social and familial relationships. The struggle of becoming good enough in harsh neoliberal conditions continues to etch itself onto our bodies in the form of stress and lasting anxiety about the (institutional) environments we continue to find ourselves in.

Just because we can survive and are surviving (although, for some of us, *barely* as we are anxiously marketing ourselves for permanent or at least less precarious employment contracts) does not give the neoliberal university a free pass to continue in this neo-Darwinian, managerialist mode of regulation, what Fisher (2009) called ‘Market Stalinism’. Whether universities of the future can or will provide the space and caring infrastructure to break this toxic cycle is another question entirely – a question of our commitment as scholar-activists to political struggle over the structural trajectory of the neoliberal university. It is at this point where we find the limits to the psychoanalytic perspective we have explored in this paper, and the urgent need for strategic, sustained collective action to transform neoliberal research institutions into more caring environments for all concerned.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing is not applicable to this paper as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

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