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Failures of Interest

Abstract

What kind of failure is it to lose interest and detach from a project, empirical scene, or cause? Should we always stay interested in our work and attempt to interest others? Through discussion of two ongoing but perhaps failed projects alongside reflection on various failures over my career, I explore the relationship between affects of failure and the event and relation of interest. Staying with the non-evental dynamics of the ordinary failures that accumulate in the background to all academic lives, I explore how losing interest or not holding interest relates to and expresses the attachments and detachments we have to and through academic life. Via these reflections, I argue that we should pay attention to those ordinary failures – like losing interest – that don't quite fit with institutionally named and collectively recognised events of failure – a rejected paper or grant, for example.

Keywords: Event, Affect, Failure, Interest, Boredom

Ordinary Failures

Two research projects, two failures ... perhaps. Two 'failures' that relate, in different ways, to the theme of my intervention – the non-evental dynamics of some of the failures that accumulate during academic life and gather around how we generate and sustain interest in and through our work.

I'm about to start a new project on boredom in relation to today's precarious forms of living. It isn't funded, I'm just excited to explore what boredom is today and how boredoms differ. A paper on boredom was one of the first I published (Anderson 2004), I was confident I'd never return to it, but I've recently found myself interested again in boredom. It's partly because I think it matters that boredom is unevenly distributed, partly it is a way of thinking through the relation

between economic, political etc change and affective life, and perhaps partly because I remember a really strong feeling when little of not wanting to be boring, and a persistent worry that I was. So, it might be sort of autobiographical, even though boredom lacks the grandeur, the weight, of those emotions that people tend to write autobiographically about. But, at the moment, I'm at the stage of a project where I keep noticing boredoms, and keep following connections. The project exists as an ever growing diary (well, a word file) where I make a note of every time I happen across examples of boredom; television adverts, spoken words, songs, and so on. But, I keep hesitating over how to translate this interest into a research project (something with the coherence and trajectory and promise of a 'project'). How to stay with boredom and make 'it' present, given that it settles and leaves quickly? Where do boredoms surface today, how and for whom? This means beyond the diary and lots of fun conversations with friends the project hasn't yet gone anywhere. Sometimes, hesitation is productiveⁱ. I'm not sure this is. I start thinking about how to translate it into a research project and stop. Really banal ideas come (taxi drivers and boredom! care homes and boredom!), and I recognise them as really banal and decide against them. But, really, I think I'm just scared of ending up doing the project in a safe way, of not exposing myself to people and groups being uninterested, of having awkward conversations about how nothing happens. But I love noticing boredom, and the word file is growing, and I keep getting enthused when I talk about itⁱⁱ.

I've another project. It exists as a set of word files and some drafted chapters. Occasionally, I talk to friends about it, but I do that a bit less now, sort of hoping

everyone will forget that I ever said I would do it (although writing about it here indicates that actually I don't hope this). It's a genealogy of the use of emergency by the British state to govern life and events, from the second world war to the present day. I rashly promised it as a book, and now it has a sort of life as a promise without the hope and excitement that tend to gather around promises. It's something I feel I should get done, and something I think matters politically: we are governed through emergencies in all kinds of harmful and damaging ways. It also has a digital existence - four chapters are drafted, and there is loads of empirical material; too much to make sense of really. Sometimes I print the chapters out to make the 'book' exist as a real, material thing. And then put it on the corner of my desk and look at it. I also know what I want to say. But that's the problem, and I think the reason I rarely if ever work on it (although I tell myself other stories for why I don't, including the catch-all, universally accepted reason of being 'busy'). I know what I want to say, and it's very similar to what I've said previously, as despite all the new empirical work I just haven't really got many new thoughts on the topic of emergencies and how life is governed through them. I feel, it's hard to admit, a little bored by the topic. So, apart from some opening of files and some printing out and occasionally confident declarations in Annual Development Reviews that I'll complete it, I don't really work on it. I've also just got really interested in boredom.

Failure and Futures

Failing to find a way of researching boredom in a way that leaves open the chance I might fail, and becoming bored with and almost but not quite detaching from my own work, are strange types of failure. They aren't eventual. They aren't punctual. For some people, they may not even be failuresⁱⁱⁱ, particularly given that our relations with our research projects inevitably change alongside our attachments and detachments^{iv}. But both concern, in different ways, how we retain interest in the world and our work in the midst of competing imperatives, demands and pulls. They also concern how we do justice to topics that matter to us – politically and personally. Like all academics, I could list the obvious events of failure connected to what counts as success in today's academia. Each of them minor events, felt more or less intensely at the time. Here are some, there are others, including ones that have slipped from memory. A paper stupidly entitled 'What is an emotion?' and rightly rejected from *Progress in Human Geography* (I say 'rightly', but really I still think reject was harsh. It's the only written paper I've never done anything with, occasionally I open the word file and think I might do something with it. I never will). An abstract on something to do with space and relations rejected from an AAG conference session, a few years after my PhD (for some reason, that one really hurt. I remember going to the session, hoping it would be rubbish or brilliant. It was just like most other conference sessions). Multiple grants rejected over the last 14 years - one on scenarios, another on coordination in emergency planning, a few others I now can't quite remember (unlike the abstract, I didn't really care very much about any of them, apart from the coordination one, but that was mostly as I'd enjoyed working with the co-applicant). Rejected for ESRC one year postdoctoral fellowship

at Sheffield as I was working as a teaching fellow there after finishing my PhD. I remember being really upset about that, as well as annoyed when one of my supervisors said it was because I'd done too much as a PhD student (I think they were being kind), although I'd forgotten about it until I'd finished writing this paragraph, and it suddenly came back to me as I was editing the next one. Rejected for numerous jobs before starting at Durham, UK close 15 years ago now, although I think everyone can agree an economic geography post teaching Global Production Networks at Birmingham wasn't for me, even though at the time it was a job and I didn't have one. Applying for three lectureships in geography at Liverpool University over a couple of years. I remember the final time, my partner and I both realising that the Head of Department was unlikely to call at midnight on a Friday, which meant I hadn't got the job. It really was time to take the hint that Liverpool didn't want to employ me. It was also impossible to hold onto the mantra that failure is never personal^v.

There is nothing exceptional about this list. Nor am I going to pretend that rejection and associated failure is a regular occurrence; that would be disingenuous, mark a strange attachment to the position of the academic failure, and ignore my position as a white, middle class man and the very real ways in which failures in relation to what is institutionally and professionally valued connect to unequal distributions of power and privilege (cf Halberstam 2011)^{vi}. Nevertheless, rejection and consequent events of failure are part of academic life, given how often we are exposed to the judgment of others, and the systems of competition for scarce resources that structure working life. Everyone has their own list, with different

relations to the events that compose it. Mine range from being really upset – the liverpool jobs but also, strangely, that abstract - to partial relief after realising I'd applied for something I really didn't want because, well, it was advertised and I didn't have a job – the economic geography job. I still didn't have a job at the time, so the relief was partial. It mixed with intensifying worry and growing concern about ever getting a permanent job. Perhaps something is to be gained by sharing those lists – we all fail. Failure is normal. But does anyone, today, really think that these kind of failures aren't normal, especially in the midst of a discourse and atmosphere around academia which highlights its difficulty and in a system organised around judgments? And does the fact that others fail too make people feel better about their own failures, or might it, as well, reproduce and generate that sense of difficulty, which I think has some unexpected, negative effects, including crowding out space for public discussion of the ordinary pleasures and kindnesses of academic life. I'm not so sure, although hopefully it helps people feel a little less alone and that their failures are not about them. And, perhaps something is to be gained by sharing advice on how to keep going through or even embrace failure, even though I've always been a little suspicious of academic advice as a genre, and I don't think we can or should always be positive about and 'learn from' our failures (c.f. Haberstram 2011). My way has been to try and be really into what I'm doing in the present (although clearly I fail at that), but to be careful about which futures I attach to. All of the activities listed above – a paper, a job, a grant – are future orientated projects. In different ways, they are all enveloped with hope, they are beginnings. Failures involve, in part, stopping, interrupting, pausing, or suspending

futures. So I've been careful about which futures I attach to and invest in. For example, I've never really attached to the grants I've submitted. Rejection rates are so high, not getting them is normal and, this is difficult to admit, getting a grant can itself be difficult (this relation is clearly performative, in that my lack of attachment probably comes across in applications)^{vii}. With papers, I've always tried to be writing more than one thing at any given time so nothing ever rests on one paper being accepted or rejected.

What is harder to stay with are the small, invisible events that pile up as part of academic life and can't be so neatly separated into success and failure. It is hard to list them, to translate them into a kind of currency to be confessed and shared, with the redemptive hope that they can be learnt from (even if that learning is only that other people fail too and failure it isn't about you). Many of mine, currently, stem from time and not feeling I can quite give enough to activities. Some examples from the last month (although I fear this piece may itself be an example). A prospective PhD student didn't get funding. Had I put enough time into supporting her with the application? I think so, but I'm not sure. I gave a public lecture on boredom in Berlin. I think it was fine, people seemed to be listening as much as people ever do to a 50 minute lecture, but I was left with a sense that I was going through the motions a little bit with it, that I hadn't thought enough about it. My repetition of the word 'think' in recounting these two events testifies to how the line between success and failure can be blurred. Many of our activities don't involve the cold clarity of a rejected grant application or paper. We have to work out ourselves, and hopefully with friends, colleagues and mentors, what for us is success and what

is failure, and how that relates to the ecosystem of institutional and peer judgment we are entangled with and subject to. Very often, success and failure co-exist^{viii}. Let's give an example in relation to the REF. For a few different reasons, I'm really proud of a paper I wrote on emergency and futures (Anderson 2017); it feels different to my other emergency work whilst retaining the wider claim that how emergencies are governed matters politically, I really tried to work through the specifics of emergency as a term in what, for me, feels like a rigorous way, and it opens up a new empirical terrain. It won't be submitted to REF^{ix}, the internal departmental reviews were so so against the criteria for the REF, and I agree with them. And REF is only one way of being successful. Indeed, my current admin role is to coordinate the department's REF preparations, together with a friend in physical geography. At every staff meeting we speak at we emphasise that there are lots of different reasons why people publish, REF evaluates excellence on one set of criteria and there are many others, not everything we do could or should be organised around REF, and the number of publications submitted to REF by any individual is not a proxy for how good a researcher you are. In the context of the REF criteria and the other work my friends and colleagues have produced, not submitting the paper is the right decision, and so it won't count in one of the ways that our work now counts. But, of the papers I've published it's one of the ones which I consider a success – because it feels like I took a risk with it, whilst working through something in a rigorous way. It feels like a beginning, or at least a potential swerve in a research trajectory.

Failures of Interest

Of course, it's a sign of my privileged position that I'm able to inhabit a gap between what I consider success to be and what is institutionally valued (notwithstanding the irony that I'm heavily involved in that system of judgment). Not everyone is able to, and I remain attached, perhaps too attached, to many of the recognised markers of success (an attachment that is itself perhaps a kind of failure – a failure to detach from harmful systems, a failure to not be a subject of the neoliberalising university, a failure to fully feel and act on the criticisms). It is also a sign of privilege to be able to talk openly and publically about failure and, to an extent, detach from some of the failures detailed here^x. But I think holding onto different ideas and ideals of what success is– and building, sustaining and nurturing communities of practice where those ideas and ideals can flourish– is absolutely necessary. Which returns me back to the two projects I began this reflection with. Both projects might currently be failures, or be at risk of becoming failures, because I'm not sure how to conduct them in a way that retains my interest in them, translates that interest into something more (perhaps wonder, perhaps excitement, perhaps commitment to peoples and worlds), and interests others. And, I think, for me my sense of success revolves a lot around interest in relation to something that I think matters politically, intellectually and personally– both in terms of sustaining an interest in the world and in interesting others and being interested by the work of others. For me, we should be interested in the world and in one another's work as the basis to everything else we do. Being interested as an ethic of relating. Interest is a strange thing, though. As Patricia Meyer Spacks (1995) argues, finding something

'of interest' implies, names and evokes a minimal, low intensity, connection. She makes this argument via the modern Oxford English Dictionary definition of interest, which stresses the relation between interest and being moved: "Adapted to arouse interest; having the qualities which rouse curiosity, engage attention, or appeal to the emotions; of interest" (ibid. 114). Something is of interest if it touches and affects. It is a kind of "zero degree feeling", in Sianne Nagi's terms (2008, after William James), in that interest orientates us to and for something and away from something else. Interest, then, animates and underpins the sustained relations that are so important to many of our labour practices; reading a difficult work of theory, working through a problem, returning to a site, writing a rashly promised book, staying with the same group as part of a long-term participatory project, listening to a colleague, another round of revisions on a paper first written over two years ago.

What happens when we fail to be interested in our own work or, rather, in the problems and questions or the sites and scenes or the people and communities that make up our work? Is it an ethical failure on our part if we fail to be interested in the world and others? Ngai (2008) stresses the ambiguities of interest or, in the terms of this piece, how intimate being interested is with its failure and antithesis - being bored or disinterested or indifferent. Finding something 'interesting', which is probably the most oft used aesthetic judgment in academia, involves, for Ngai, an openness to what something might offer a reader or listener or viewer. It is a kind of promise. But, it's an equivocal judgment that indicates we are affected, but we're not quite sure by what and with what consequences. Interest is close to both boredom and wonder. That which is interesting could potentially become either, or neither as

interest expands and transforms to become something different. These ambiguities are further complicated by the capacity interest has for “duration and recursion” (ibid. 786). Interest can be sustained and we can return to that which we once found interesting, but it can also drift away, get lost, and our return to a scene of interest can disappoint (the comparison Ngai draws, after Tomkins, is with the explosiveness of being startled or surprised). The two examples of something like failure that I began this reflection with both exemplify the complicated intimacies between interest and failures to be interested or to interest others. I’ve lost interest in the emergency project whilst continuing to believe that how emergencies are governed really matters, in part as my interest has been interrupted by the other research, teaching, administration, and service tasks that make up work. I’ve detached from it, except when it sits as a pile of paper on my desk, or when I give a talk about it. I think I know I’ve not found a way to do the project in a way that offers the possibility of thinking anew about the topic. But I can’t quite let it go yet. I keep returning to it, and I do find interest, often in the details of how emergencies used to be dealt with, and a desire to make those details public in some form. In the boredom project I have a different problem: a surfeit of interest, in the sense of being affected by numerous scenes of boredom (I’ve just broken off writing this piece to make a note about a song that referenced boredom and I’d forgotten about). But, I’m not sure how to conduct the project in way that gives the project a chance of continuing to be interesting^{xi}. Also, my own hesitation about it as a project, rather than a set of idiosyncratic scenes, is partly a way of removing myself from the

possibility of other failures: a failure to connect with people about their boredoms or perhaps a failure to inhabit the vulnerability of research.

Concluding comments

Interest is one of the indeterminate, mild, affects that animate academic life. It comes and goes as we stay in proximity to numerous claims on our interest. It may become atmospheric, collectively felt, in a reading group or at a workshop. It may be sustained and enlivened and shifted in unexpected ways through conversation with someone you feel a spark of connection with, through reading work that resonates, through staying with an empirical scene, through listening to friends talk about their work. It's fragile though. It may become difficult to sustain as our attention is fractured across multiple activities. We may lack the institutional support to pursue and stay with what interests us, or we may feel all the ways in which being interested is connected to what is considered to be important and valued or devalued accordingly. Failure to be interested is not and rarely feels eventual. It doesn't arrive in an email. Losing interest, even if just momentarily, is one of a number of ordinary experiences of academic life where failure and success simultaneously work and don't work as categories to make sense of experience. But it is a kind of failure that goes to the heart of our relations with ourselves and others, and how we try and do justice to what we think and feels matters^{xiii}. Thankfully, though, interest can return. As Ngai (2008), stresses it's recursive. Interestingly,

writing this reflection makes me want to return to the emergency book project, as have the frequent recent declarations of emergency in relation to the climate crisis, and the continued sense that how life is governed through emergencies matters. Perhaps I'll open the word files and begin work on it.

References

Thanks so much to the two anonymous reviewers whose recognition of what I was trying to do in the piece and generous engagement really moved me. Huge thanks to friends who offered careful comments and thoughts on my reflections: Harriett Bulkeley, Jonny Darling, Alex Densmore, Esther Hitchen, Sarah Hughes, Elizabeth Johnson, Colin McFarlane, Ruth Raynor, Helen Wilson. The aim of this piece is to open up rather than close down responses, so rather than rewriting the piece and removing its flaws and assumptions, as if that were ever possible or desirable, I've incorporated some of their reflections and questions in endnotes.

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ⁱ One reader suggested I clarify whether this hesitation is specific to a project on boredom, to a project on affect (so the same problems would occur if the project was on 'fun'), or to research projects in general (or at least my relation to them). Whilst I think there are unique research challenges in relation to boredom - how quickly some boredoms pass and how to pay attention to all that is happening as nothing is happening, for example - that doesn't really answer the question, as I think researching any affect brings with it a set of unique, specific challenges (as well as generic challenges around affect). So, I'm unsure what to attribute my hesitation to.

ⁱⁱ As one reader pointed out, perhaps the failure here lies in reproducing the idea of the time limited, bounded 'project', rather than seeing this accumulation of diverse empirical scenes and the book writing as the project.

ⁱⁱⁱ As a couple of people pointed out, the assumption in this piece is that loss of interest is somehow not inevitable and, despite my arguments elsewhere about boredom (Anderson 2004), that the event of boredom is negative. This downplays the work of opening up that the event of detachment which is so important to boredom can do. Whilst they differed a little, their position was that interest cannot be sustained, to hope it can be is a kind of failure in that it involves an attachment to an impossibility, and what matters is how to continue on despite the loss of interest e.g. imagining the end of a project.

^{iv} As one reader pointed out, detachment can sometimes be a marker of an interest that has gone too far and surpassed a tipping point e.g. we may become exhausted by our research when we become too close to it. Boredom here would be a symptom of exhaustion and a kind of protection.

^v The mantra is necessary but difficult to hold onto, because failure can stick in a way that feels intensely personal and failure can individualise. And, as one of the readers pointed out, sometimes failure does relate to us. For at least one of the Liverpool job interviews I did what I can now see was a fairly poor job, pitching the talk badly and so on, although I probably wouldn't have got the job even if I hadn't.

^{vi} It is possibly for this reason that one reader observed that there was no sense of threat in the list of failures, no sense that one or more of the large or small failures could have functioned as a tipping point leading to some kind of significant loss. I think this observation is right in terms of how I've written this retrospectively, whilst also feeling that some of the failures felt deeply consequential at the time, especially those surrounding employment.

^{vii} As a couple of readers pointed out, why not attach to all the future projects expressed through grants and learn to better deal with the disappointment? Is the failure expressed in this piece really a failure to deal with disappointment, to develop what might be called resilience (if we understand resilience as the name for a kind of coping and continuing on). As they both acknowledged, this position risks becoming an injunction to 'deal better with failure'.

^{viii} When success and failure coexist and are blurred, say the conference paper you feel went terribly but someone you respect in the field and your friends congratulate you on, it matters who or what is naming something as a success or failure. This is also the point at which hierarchy can be performed

with all kinds of uncertain effects and affects – my thanks to one of the readers for emphasising this point.

^{ix} REF refers to the ‘Research Excellence Framework’. The REF is the UK system for allocating ‘Quality Related’ funding to universities i.e. research funding that is not attached to individual projects funded through grants. REF involves an assessment of the ‘quality’ of a unit’s (e.g. a department) research in relation to the research environment, impact and outputs (journal articles, books, book chapters). Under the rules for the current REF, individual researchers can be attributed a minimum of one and a maximum of five outputs (with the outputs becoming publically available during a set period of time).

^x My thanks to two of the readers who asked the question of who can speak of failure or, more precisely, for whom is it a risk to speak of failure. Their point being that, despite the personal qualities of this piece, they did not consider it a risk for me to speak of failure. This opens up questions of how failure is attributed, owned, marked and lingers.

^{xi} As a reader noted, in even posing the problem as one of sustaining interest I show I am too invested in the promise and fantasy that research work should be interesting, and haven’t properly thought through and practiced other ways of keeping going.

^{xii} A reader noted that the account is celebratory of interest and linked this to career stage where, as a professor, you typically do a lot of work that is coded (even if not necessarily experienced) as lacking interest.