

Pausing again: Reflecting on humility and possibility in pandemic times

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Abstract

Despite continued global strife, the period of exception that has characterised experiences of pandemic times now seems to be changing. As graduate students, the emergence of COVID-19 unsettled our lives and broke our timelines, but we recognise that our experiences of it have also been framed by relative comfort and privilege. In the context of the various and unequal personal, institutional, and societal failures that COVID-19 has caused and amplified, we seek to pause and reflect on how our collective encounter with pandemic times might also be a space of possibility. We respond to calls for more humble and gentle geographies, situating our reflections in recent work on failure in the academy. The pandemic has humbled us, but we also recognise it as an opportunity to practise an ethic of humbleness in our work. While by no means linear, we talk/write through this process as it relates to our engagements with our personal, institutional, and research contexts. Ultimately, by giving space to the “messy” and “mundane” aspects of doing research, we hope to unpack how the pandemic has humbled our ambitions, timelines, and expectations and offer a pause to explore what this means for us and research more broadly, in terms of what we want to leave behind and what we wish to take forward.

KEYWORDS

COVID-19 pandemic, early career researchers, failure, fieldwork, gentleness, humble geographies

1 | INTRODUCTION

More than a pervasiveness of human–viral encounters, the term “pandemic” now also seems indicative of a particular temporality of exception. Waves of caseloads, rhythms of lockdowns, and the affective flows of fear, grief, and hope have together created an ongoing sense of rupture that is contributing to a reworking of life across the planet in deeply unequal ways (Ho & Maddrell, 2021). For us, like many early-career researchers (see Weinstein, 2021), encountering the pandemic has meant adapting to new constraints and confronting both the limits of our agency and the prospect of failure. It has humbled us. Accepting “encounters” as sites of possibility, we see potential for this humbling to be politically

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and pedagogically productive (Wilson, 2017) and feel moved to explore how the crisis provisions that we have made, and the support infrastructures we have relied on in these uncertain times might continue to inform our practice.

As graduate students in Singapore working across the region, we are sensitive to the relative privilege of our pandemic experience, perhaps better described as discomfort than despair. This is not to say that we have been spared hurt through this period; rather, that our sense of relative safety has made this a time to pause and sit with ourselves. It is from this position that we seek to examine “what vies for attention” (Wilson, 2017, p. 464) in our encounter with pandemic times, to reflect on how this period might transform us as researchers, and how we hope it might transform research more broadly too. Our ruminations in this vein have been drawn out in conversations with friends, through regular research group meetings online, and by reading the experiences of fellow scholars on social media – spaces we used to take for granted that have now found new meaning as sites of support and commiseration. To that end, we write this paper to join a broader conversation (Hall, 2021) with a community of peers whose experiences might resonate with ours, and those who can speak to the additional impacts that uneven forms of marginality and precarity have had in these times.

Learning from recent contributions in geography, we begin by reviewing understandings of humility, identifying an acceptance of fallibility, continual reflexivity, and an embrace of collective vulnerability as key principles. Situating these within conversations on failure in the academy, we make note of how transparency about our shortcomings can create a shared space for personal and collective learning and transformation. We then draw on calls for gentleness in geographical research to outline some techniques to practise humbleness in our work in the “field” and when presenting our learnings. Together, these themes of humility, failure, and gentleness evince an ethic that we suggest can relate to our engagements with our personal, institutional, and research contexts.

We take this paper as an opportunity to consider humbleness as an ethic in all three contexts by reflecting on our experiences during the pandemic at different stages of the research process. First, Nikhil recounts how travel constraints and accompanied introspection moved him to reframe his research plans. Ananya then speaks of the frustrations of waiting to do her fieldwork and be in solidarity with her friends and co-researcher activists. Thereafter, Wenn Er reflects on the tension of having to reconcile her expectations with questions of her work’s approach and relevance in these times. These three experiences of humbling our ambitions, timelines, and expectations lead us to close by considering what the ongoing rupture of this pandemic might afford for us and other researchers moving forward, in terms of what we want to carry forward with us and what we do not.

2 | BRIDGING HUMILITY, FAILURE, AND GENTLENESS

2.1 | Conceptualising humility

Drawing from debates in moral psychology and organisation studies, Saville (2021) notes that a core tenet of being humble is a willingness to assess oneself accurately, entailing an openness to being wrong, an appreciation of new people and ideas, and modesty (see Koch, 2020). These points are echoed in debates on social work and nursing, where discussions on “cultural humility” have emphasised the importance of self-awareness and supportive interaction – two values that together frame humbleness as both a personal ethic and relational practice (Foronda et al., 2016; see Danso, 2018). Being humble, then, means being sensitive to the worlds we might be part of. Not just by reckoning with our positionality and limits when working with those less privileged than us, but when trying to understand those more privileged too (Koch, 2020). It entails an acceptance of our fallibility in every direction.

To this end, some scholars of social work have called for a move from “mastery to accountability” (Fisher-Borne et al., 2015, p. 1) – a charge for care providers to refute the essentialising idea that one can become culturally “competent” and to instead embrace a commitment to individual and institutional reflection and change. This processual view of humility resonates with recent appeals in geography for “deep listening” (Koch, 2020) to better recognise the partiality of our understandings. Such calls do not insist we uncritically reproduce our interlocutors’ convictions, but rather remind us to also turn that critical gaze back toward the academy: to be equally suspicious of our own assurances and commitments (Koch, 2020; Saville, 2021). In this way, humbleness is framed as dwelling in uncertainty: accepting that our knowledge is situated and our research contingent, and relying on continual reflexivity to keep us accountable.

Maintaining and managing such uncertainty – of the “field,” of our methods, and of ourselves – is understandably difficult. If every new context demands new provisioning, then our practice becomes a series of experiments to apprehend new meanings and forge new ambitions; and experiments fail. Hence, we understand that humility must also involve an embrace of mutual vulnerability about our attempts and failures with our collaborators, peers, and discipline more

widely (Nagar & Shirazi, 2019; Saldaña, 2018). This is what we seek here: to come to terms with our personal fallibility in the context of a situated and collective reckoning.

2.2 | Transformative potential of failure

As early-career researchers trained in individualistic, competitive, and precarious environments, we often cannot afford the freedom of failure. Thus, many cloak the embarrassments and messiness of the research process to emphasise academic triumph (Horton, 2020a), eliding incidents of things not working out as expected or stories of unmet expectations, and the multitude of emotional reactions such experiences bring to the fore (Pollard, 2009).

Recent geographic works (see Halberstam, 2011; Harrowell et al., 2018; Horton, 2020a) seek to turn this tide by critically reclaiming failure from within the neoliberal academy, giving space for imperfect research, messy methods, and uncertain timelines. Frazier (2020) argues that being transparent about failure in fieldwork is crucial to improving research methods and outcomes. Unsettling these silences are also a key part of Halberstam's call for "failing well, failing often, and learning" (2011, p. 24) that locates failure's transformative potential in looking inward to articulate our emotional experiences, then moving out toward more caring ways of shared knowledge production.

We thus understand transparency about our setbacks as transformative on both individual and collective levels. Individually, unveiling our emotional trials can help us move beyond just intellectually embracing failure, to infuse emotional wisdom in thinking through failure differently (Whittle et al., 2020). Collectively, being transparent can foster a shared space to exchange our experiences of failing with one another (Harrowell et al., 2018). Such community and solidarity may be particularly helpful in countering senses of pandemic isolation. A "shared emotional space" (Lacey, 2005, p. 289) might also allow us to equate failure less with rejections, closures, and endings than with continual negotiations of planning and doing research.

This approach has political salience too, challenging the neoliberal imperative of success and productivity. Dedotsi and Panić argue that "our stories of transformative research within the neoliberalising academy, are neither of 'success', nor of 'failure'. Instead, they are stories of resistance" (2020, p. 4). Despite neoliberal pressures, our resistance lies in associating failure with hope, opportunity, and possibility. After all, "fieldwork is not innate but learned" (DeLyser & Starrs, 2001, p. 6) and because any learning process inherently involves missteps, failures, and impediments, practising humble and honest discussions is central to our collective learning.

2.3 | Practising humility through gentleness

What then, does practising humility in research look like?

First, humility shapes our approach to the "field." Saldaña suggests that being a qualitative researcher requires a posture of "humble vulnerability" (2018, p. 6): allowing oneself to be wrong, confused, and led in different directions by others. A sensitivity to our personal and contextual limitations underlies such openness (Saville, 2021), practised by asking questions like "can it be that I am wrong?" (Koch, 2020, p. 57), and abandoning pride to admit our initial points of inquiry might have been ill-chosen. This may sometimes entail starting from not-quite scratch (Saville, 2021). Success is thus not the necessary endpoint of initial failings. Rather, "failures with no happy endings" (Horton, 2020a, p. 5) are equally valid, presenting opportunities to practise gentleness on ourselves. This may include recognising and refusing the frameworks and stories we come to feel inappropriate to enact or represent ourselves (Tuck & Yang, 2014). Humility thus embraces the non-linear path progress takes and attests to the inevitability that such "messiness" might never be reconciled.

Second, humility can be exercised when sharing our learnings. Writing on gentle methodologies, Pottinger (2020) suggests that making room for the mundane in our writing and presentations sheds light on the nuanced acts of care and reciprocity that govern our relationships with our respondents and fieldsites. Although often edited out in favour of conceptual discussion (Pottinger, 2020), these moments crucially clarify the experiences and approaches that shape our theory. To this end, aligned with the work on reclaiming failure, dwelling on feelings of discomfort, awkwardness, and uncertainty (Horton, 2020b) allows us to give voice to the emotional responses (Pottinger, 2020) that are intrinsic to the research process. In addition to *what* we write, Fisher et al. (2015) note the importance of attending to the politics of *how* we write too. This can extend to fostering spaces for exchange and support, both through peer groups and online resources that encourage practising gentleness (see, for instance, the Twitter account @CountsAsWriting).

In our reflections, we seek to practise these techniques through open sharing to work through the complicated feelings of privilege, guilt, and frustration that have arisen as our ambitions, timelines, and expectations have been humbled by the pandemic.

3 | REFLECTIONS

3.1 | Humbling ambitions (Nikhil)

As an Indian citizen who has never lived in India, my life has always felt contingent on visas. I have never felt “permanent” in any place I have called “home” – a way of life that I know is sustained by many privileges, including being able to travel when needed. However, unpredictable lockdowns and cancelled flights have disrupted that schema in unexpected ways, and somewhere in my resultant fixity, inability to be there for loved ones elsewhere, and sense of powerlessness against widespread tragedies and specific harms, I realised I do not have an emotional framework to understand a rooted sense of place. Being “home” in Singapore, where I have lived on a visa for most of my life, feels strange without the counterpoint of inhabiting the other worlds I hold dear.

Before the pandemic, my two-year master’s by research thesis was focused on how some residents in Yangon, Myanmar maintain and improve their shared spaces together, and how such collaborations impact their notions of community and “home.” After briefly living there some years ago, I saw my thesis as an opportunity to understand the city better through a personally significant frame. But as the prospect of travel faded and my reflections as above intensified, I found myself confronting what felt like two failures in my plan – a failure of its procedure from the pandemic’s practical constraints and another more ambiguous sense of failure in its conceit.

Feeling unmoored by immobility made me realise I had not adequately grappled with who I am in relation to the experience – a situated commitment to a place-as-home – I was looking to find in Yangon. I believe my intentions were valid; after all, research is driven by a desire to learn. But my planned project increasingly felt like an exercise in imported empathy to apprehend lived experiences I had not yet learned to process for myself. In writing, this might seem contrived, but in the throes of the early pandemic it came to me viscerally: “Who am I to this work?” I thus felt prompted to reckon more keenly with my positionality and the intellectual and emotional “border crossings” (Nagar, 2015) I needed to make. In that process, I was moved to rethink my thesis.

Tuck and Yang (2014) frame refusal, when grounded in the particularities of a researcher’s motivations and commitments, as a generative constraint that can counter settler-colonial logics in research. While I would be remiss to expropriate their conceptualisation wholesale for my context, I am drawn to its ethical prompt to humble our ambitions. In questioning what routes of inquiry feel appropriate for me to learn what I seek to learn, I was moved to pivot my thesis’s focus to how professionals who facilitate collaborations like those I wanted to study connect with and learn from one another across space. Researching how translocal links shape situated practices seems to be a phenomenon I can speak sensitively to, cognisant of how and why I am examining it, and interviewing these practitioners in their cities while I remain in-place seems methodologically viable and fitting.

Just as the pandemic has charged researchers to be more adaptive in how we apprehend information (see Lupton, 2020), I believe it is also clarifying our ethical imperative to chart our routes to our work more carefully: to decentre ourselves as theorists (Maringanti, 2020) and be more open to refusing plans that come to feel inappropriate in order to generate alternative possibilities. I have learnt many times now how little I can do for the people and places I love that are being ravaged by the virus, a military coup, and other injustices that have sharpened in these times. But in reckoning with those limits and more, I think I am learning to craft more personal trajectories for my work.

3.2 | Humbling timelines (Ananya)

As a second-year PhD scholar, 2020 was the year I was supposed to consolidate thesis fieldwork plans. I had intended to return home to Delhi, India to explore the spatialities of current youth activism. However, as the pandemic raged on, I found myself planning for an unknowable future and grappling with a messy present – not only as a PhD scholar failing to keep up with institutional timelines, but as a youth activist, failing to get back home to support my peers. As my fieldwork strategies and methodologies went through multiple iterations, I found myself constantly thinking about the “what ifs” of my research, painfully aware of what could have been and what ought to be. Despite being overwhelmed by

conjoined feelings of fear, sadness, anxiety, and loneliness, I was grateful for having the privilege of being able to sit in my home space, waiting and self-reflecting.

These acts of waiting and self-reflecting dwell in a space of in-betweenness. For the waiter, the experience is “at the crossroads not only of the present and future, but also of certainty and uncertainty” (Gasparini, 1995, p. 31). A wait with an unknown endpoint – as is the pandemic – creates immense uncertainty for the one who waits. For me, this uncertainty fomented urgency and restlessness, but not just in terms of meeting deadlines. While lockdowns barred activists in India from holding public demonstrations, the slowness of their days were juxtaposed with the state’s haste to intensify surveillance, control systems, and mass arrests (Libal & Kashwan, 2020), creating a heightened sense of urgency to act, and act now.

My fellow activists thus describe their lockdown experiences as an impatient need to physically act, to “do something,” in the hope that countering injustice through action will combat inertia. This stark clash of temporalities has caused immense anxiety and trauma. Stuck in Singapore, listening to their experiences but cut off from their worlds, I felt powerless and ashamed. How can I help, being out of India? Of course, the very act of speaking out, of incrementally co-producing knowledge and amplifying it, is a vital form of resistance under the most extenuating circumstances, but is it enough? In these contexts, the possibilities of slow research and slow action is an unaffordable luxury.

Even though my “failure” to be physically present in my field creates a deep sense of guilt, it has also opened other processes of becoming and being-in-action. Lockdowns in India meant that most youth activists began increasingly communicating digitally. This has helped us cope together, shape transnational links of solidarity, find new strategies of resistance together, and be involved in a community by co-producing knowledge, highlighting the mutually constitutive relationship between humility and what we are called to be as “knowledge producers and disseminators” (Saville, 2021, p. 4). In this case, then, disruptive failure has been a constructive force, driving us to look for new and more creative ways for fostering a shared collective in times of deep uncertainty.

Moving forward, this pushes us far more decisively to dwell in waiting actively and intentionally (Bissell, 2007) – so that time and space become objects of reflection (Jeffrey, 2008) – as a catalytic process in which new ideas, political strategies, and ethics of care are consciously forged. This allows me to be bolder in demanding that we reclaim our personal as well as intellectual solidarity work as equally productive forms of research and that we continue to engage in honest, critical reflection together.

3.3 | Humbling expectations (Wenn Er)

Perhaps conditioned by the linearity of “progress” in the Singaporean education system, I felt the “structure” of a PhD would be no different. Coursework completed and teaching obligations fulfilled, I was itching to start fieldwork. A week after passing my qualifying examinations, a nationwide partial lockdown was announced. Despite anticipating “messiness” and the necessity of “flexibility” (following Billo & Hiemstra, 2013), I naively thought that the worst would pass, leaving my research unscathed from having to answer questions of the pandemic’s implications. Being in Singapore in these times has been an undeniable privilege, but while the country has gradually reopened, fieldwork as “intended” remains untenable.

My research looks at public spaces within Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) in Singapore. Continuing with Zoom interviews, I initially clung on to my planned schedule, refusing to concede that the pandemic would reshape people’s relationships with public space and alter my research scope. Misplaced expectations of what my research should look like meant I was closed off to new avenues of inquiry tangential to my original focus. By neglecting to place my respondents and their concerns at the forefront, I had failed to empathise and listen deeply (Koch, 2020), to bear witness and validate their everyday experiences as I listen and document (Saldaña, 2018, p. 4). Offering respondents the space to speak about the cost of the pandemic to their lives and their businesses, even if it veered off the initial research focus, better reflected their realities. While it was painful to let go of years of accumulated expectations, re-learning, re-centring, and re-starting the research focus allowed for more empathetic sharing that considered the pandemic’s emotional toll.

Beyond the emotional spaces of interviews, the physicality of my fieldsite (public spaces within precincts) had also been altered drastically. In view of safe distancing measures, public spaces became characterised by hazard tape and cautionary stickers – tangible articulations of an invisible contagion. A quirk of the Singaporean context at the time and the relatively low number of daily cases of COVID-19 infection meant that the Ministry of Health issued daily updates, including a list of recent places the person had visited while infectious. These places thus took on an added dimension, where one moment they were like every other, but the next viewed with suspicion of the risk of infection.

Holding these abstract emotions in tension when considering a place reinforces the depth with which we view public spaces. Scholars elsewhere have reflected on these emerging challenges, concomitantly reaffirming the importance of public spaces as a site of encounter, engagement, and difference (see Kasinitz, 2020; McCann, 2020). Notwithstanding, the intermittent rise of new variants and waves means that our confidence in the safety of our public spaces and its publics, wavers. It underscores that progress toward a “new normal” does not follow a neat, linear trajectory but rather requires dedication to grapple with the “messiness” of an ever-changing landscape to unpack our own relationships to these places. It requires patience and persistence, and the willingness to reconcile our expectations of what used to be with present reality.

With the fieldsite I had imagined no longer existing and the project I had conceived significantly altered, fieldwork during a pandemic has been marked by this indelible tension between the “expected” and reality, and having to exist somewhere in between. I have learnt that humility in my research is not a point of clarity, but rather an evolving process of reconciling expectations (of myself, of how research should be executed) and reality (of what respondents feel and need, of what fieldsites actually look like now).

4 | CONCLUSION

Although the pandemic struck the three of us at the same time, it left us stuck at different points in our work. Our reflections on how this period has humbled our ambitions, timelines, and expectations thus also examine how humility might be practised at three moments in the research process: project framing, “fieldwork” preparation, and entering the “field”. However, in holding our experiences together, we have been dispelled of any notion that these phases are discrete and sequential. Rather, confronting the “multiple temporalities” (Wilson, 2017, p. 464) of our collective pandemic encounter has helped us refigure “constraints” at any given stage of research as openings for new possibilities in another. More than the trope of searching for lessons in every failure, this has been the challenge of finding value in sitting with the discomfort of unexpected disruptions and unsalvageable plans. This movement back and forth from progress to new possibility is taxing, but we feel productive in working with – not against – the gaps, partialities, and diverse commitments that characterise all knowledge production.

Of course, the privilege of pause is immense, and we write cognisant of the increasing inequities the pandemic has brought to the fore. We cannot speak for the tragic suffering being experienced by so many across the globe. Indeed, it is jarring that in April 2021 – as some of our loved ones were experiencing tragedy across India – Bloomberg's COVID Resilience Ranking declared Singapore the “World's best place to be during COVID” (Hong, 2021). While writing this paper, there have been restrictions imposed and lifted to varying degrees; variants of concern have emerged, but so have vaccines, with uneven distribution and grossly inequitable access. As noted elsewhere, the pandemic has deepened existing faultlines, exacerbating “multiple intersectional burdens” (Ho & Maddrell, 2021, p. 3, emphasis original; Hall, 2021). Shortly after Bloomberg's ranking, cases surged in Singapore again, and that movement back and forth has continued. The rhythms that the “new normal” was to have keep changing erratically, leaving us to confront the non-linearity of progress.

To this end, what vies for attention in our collective pandemic encounter is how our present humbling might inform our practice more broadly. We suggest that humility, failure, and gentleness offer lasting methodological tools to grapple with the “messiness” of research (Billo & Hiemstra, 2013) and the unknowable contingencies and timelines of progress that are sure to persist. As such, grounded in our reflections, we offer three considerations. First, to be more suspicious of moving from framework to “field” in a straight line, and to embrace the refusal of plans we feel inappropriate as a generative constraint. Second, to rethink disruptions not as wholly detrimental, and to instead consider waiting as an agentic act. Third, to accept that some plans will just remain plans, and to find and follow emergent trajectories of inquiry, as “messy” as they may be. These three learnings are particular to our experiences but offer a start for the range of ways we might personally practice humbleness moving forward.

Looking beyond ourselves to our institutional and research contexts, an ethic of humbleness grounds the possibility of opening up the research process and building better partnerships and solidarities with others. Beyond peer-support infrastructures, we believe this widens possibilities for different ways of doing research. For example, in a graduate workshop held at our university in 2021, fellow students shared how travel restrictions had moved them to work more closely than planned with partners at their existing fieldsites, amplifying their comparatively marginalised collaborators' voices in the work. In this way, practising humbleness offers routes to challenging broader political arrangements in the academy. While mindful not to overstate this importance, veering off our carefully planned routes opens space for the unexpected, and to rethink what reflexivity and solidarity might mean to us now. To reflect on strain, and struggle,

and guilt, and shame, and solidarity, and hope, and to choose what we want our research and our practice to be moving forward. Pausing again, then, is as much about what we want to carry forward as it is about what we humbly accept to leave behind.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

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