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Feeling insecure: a personal account in a psychoanalytic voice

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Abstract

The concept of ontological security has been taken up in human geography primarily through Giddens' (1990, 1991) formulation, but the idea has its origins in the writings of the existential psychoanalyst R.D. Laing. Returning to the psychoanalytic underpinnings of the concept, I use autobiographical vignettes to evoke and explore what it means to feel insecure. Using psychoanalytically-informed illustrations of melancholia, ordinary acute anxiety and unconscious splitting, I develop a personal, subjective emotional geography of insecurity, and I caution against confusing certainty with ontological security.

Key words: insecurity, feelings, psychoanalysis, ontological security, autobiography, emotional geography

Feeling insecure: a personal account in a psychoanalytic voice

Introduction

Arguing for the importance of the concept of “security” across the discipline of geography, Chris Philo (2012, 2-3, original emphasis) drew on the idea of “ontological security”, with its evocation of “‘the closest-in’ human geography” of embodied experience, to make the case for the relevance of questions of security for geographers “wishing to remain close to what they take as the distinctively *human-scale* attributes of human geography”. Geographical usage of the concept of “ontological security” most commonly cites Anthony Giddens’ (1990, 92) formulation:

The phrase refers to the confidence that most human beings have in the continuity of their self-identity and in the constancy of the surrounding social and material environments of action. A sense of the reliability of persons and things, so central to the notion of trust, is basic to feelings of ontological security; hence the two are psychologically closely related.¹

For Giddens, a sense of ontological security is a psychological achievement that enables most people, most of the time, to take for granted – to trust – that our ordinary, everyday worlds are reliable and dependable. To theorise this psychological achievement he drew on the developmental ideas of several psychoanalysts, including especially D.W. Winnicott (1971) and Erik Erikson (1950) as well as R.D. Laing (1959/1965), who, as Chris Philo (2012, 3) has noted, coined the phrase “ontological security”.

Giddens’ account of ontological security has been taken up by geographers in two main areas. First, and most prominently, it has been used in studies of the psycho-social impacts of housing, where debate has focussed on whether, and if so how,

¹ Part or all of this excerpt has been quoted by, for example, Colic-Peisker and Johnson (2010, 353); Halfacree (2006, 49); Hiscock *et al.* (2001, 50); Kearns *et al.* (2000); Skey (2010, 716); and Waite *et al.* (this issue), with closely related quotations from other writings by Giddens used by Davidson (2000, 38 fn4) and Valentine (1998, 321).

housing confers a sense of security upon its occupants (see for example Colic-Peisker and Johnson 2010; Dupuis and Thorns, 1998; Hiscock *et al* 2000; Kearns *et al* 2000). These studies focus primarily on what people have to say about the meanings of their homes and do not seek to delve deeply into their subjective feelings of trust or security in their environments. Indeed, on occasion, Giddens' formulation is described as "overly psychological" (Dupuis and Thorns, 1998, 30). In this literature, therefore, there has been little interest in the concept's psychoanalytic underpinnings.

The second area in which the concept has been taken up by geographers, albeit only occasionally, is in explorations of experiences of stress and distress (Davidson 2000; Valentine 1998; Waite, Valentine and Lewis, this issue). A striking example of particular relevance to this paper is provided by Gill Valentine's (1998) deeply shocking autobiographical account of being subject to a very personal campaign of harassment. She traced the impact of anonymous phone calls and hate mail on her felt sense of the spaces in which she lived and worked at the time, writing of the sense of violation that came from being unable to "secure the boundaries" of her everyday spaces of home and work (Valentine 1998, 323). She provided a vivid account of the shattering of her ordinary taken-for-granted trust in her "personal geography", which, before the harassment began, had been largely invisible to her.

Using Giddens' formulation, Valentine (1998) powerfully evoked what it is like to experience one's ontological security coming under extreme pressure because key features of everyday life have lost their reliability. The refugees and asylum-seekers quoted by Louise Waite, Gill Valentine and Hannah Lewis (this issue), together with the fictional asylum narrative explored by Patricia Noxolo (this issue), also give voice to lives lived in extremely stressful conditions, in which the external world cannot be relied upon. As these and other texts make clear, refugees and asylum seekers suffer multiple losses of security: having fled circumstances felt to be extremely injurious if not life-threatening, they may find that the supposed safety of countries of asylum exposes them to, and traps them within, very precarious circumstances, including forced labour and potentially demeaning forms of impoverishment.

The testimony of those living in such precarious conditions evokes in readers a sense of what it might be like to lose taken-for-granted, external sources of security. At the same time, the accounts presented by Waite *et al* (this issue) resound with a sense of outrage at exploitation, oppression and prejudice. These refugees and asylum-seekers know that they deserve better and the same is true of Valentine's (1998) account. I would argue therefore that, despite significant ruptures in the "constancy of the[ir] surrounding social and material environments", Waite *et al*'s interviewees, along with Valentine, seem to have retained at least a degree of "confidence [...] in their self-identity" (Giddens 1990, 92). This suggests that, in the terms of Giddens (1990) formulation, although under intense pressure, their ontological security has survived, affording some protection to their sense of self-worth and their faith in the possibility of a beneficent environment even as external reality repeatedly lets them down.

In this paper I seek to complement these accounts of ontological security under intense pressure by evoking and exploring ordinary and unexceptional feelings of insecurity that might reasonably be termed ontological, experienced in conditions of material security and privilege. These are not responses to extreme, external pressures like those of the person suddenly subject to stalking, or to members of a family fleeing persecution and then trapped in poverty, or indeed those carrying diagnoses of mental illness. Instead, I contend that these ordinary experiences of insecurity are an ordinary part of ordinary everyday lives, which most of us feel at least some of the time but which are typically quite fleeting and which may go barely noticed let alone acknowledged. My aims in exploring these ordinary feelings of insecurity are twofold. First, I seek to retrieve, foreground and bring to life the psychoanalytic thinking that was integral to both Laing's and Giddens' accounts of ontological (in)security. In so doing I hope to make a richer version of the concept available, one that acknowledges a dynamic interplay between feelings of security *and* insecurity, which, I suggest, together typically imbue our sense of who and how we are in the world. Secondly, my intention is to convey these ideas through the performative evocation of feelings as well as through conceptual argument. More specifically, by evoking ordinary experiences of feeling insecure, I aim to illuminate an understanding of ontological security and ontological insecurity as a continuum along which we all necessarily move, sometimes with great speed, rather than as a

binary distinction that locates and fixes each of us within one of two discrete categories.

To achieve these aims in the next section I offer a brief discussion of my methodological decision to draw on my own experience via autobiographical vignettes to elaborate my argument. I then turn to Laing's original account of ontological security and insecurity, drawing out two key points about his formulation. Following this I present and discuss three short autobiographical vignettes that narrate moments drawn from a period in the second half of 2011 when I was working on – or at least towards – the preparation of an academic paper for publication. In this discussion I draw on several contributions to what evolved into the British object relations tradition of psychoanalysis (for an overview, see Gomez 1997) on which Laing (1959/1965) and Giddens (1990, 1991) relied for their theorisations of ontological security². In the final section of the paper, I develop the analysis further, making particular use of Melanie Klein's (1946/1991) account of unconscious processes of splitting in order to offer what might be called a personal emotional geography of insecure feelings. In so doing I caution against confusing certainty with ontological security.

Exploring (my) feelings

This paper has its origins in an invitation to speak at a conference to the title "insecure selves/feeling insecurities". Such an invitation might be understood as a call to take up a position of expertise in relation to others who are or who feel

² Several distinct traditions of psychoanalysis have developed since Freud's foundational work, sometimes in conflict with each other and sometimes overlapping. Geographical engagements with psychoanalysis have been strongly influenced by a French tradition within which Lacan's work holds a central position. Other traditions, including that of object relations, have also been drawn upon but are less prominent. My decision to draw exclusively on the object relations tradition reflects my own immersion in it as practitioner as well as writer. A Lacanian lens could, no doubt, be applied to much of what I discuss here, but I do not attempt to incorporate that perspective in this paper.

insecure, perhaps especially since I am, among other things, a part-time clinician in the field of counselling and psychotherapy. I might therefore be assumed to know about the felt insecurities that bring people into clinical settings as clients, patients or service-users³. As I wondered about how to respond to the title, I was concerned about the dangers and pitfalls of taking up such a position, perhaps most obviously of “othering” the selves and feelings of which I might, as putative expert, speak. Rather than speaking of others, I chose instead to take the risks of solipsism and narcissism by using myself to illustrate and trouble what might be meant by feeling insecure. So too in this written version, I draw upon myself to offer an exploration of feelings of insecurity.

Geographers have turned to themselves for source material for a variety of reasons and in a variety of ways (Moss, 2001; Purcell 2009). Most common, indeed sometimes routine, are reflexive commentaries on the interplay between the subjective worlds of researchers and their research participants. Such commentaries are deployed to contextualise empirical material, to show how it is situational and co-constructed, and sometimes to emphasise interpretive doubts and limits (Finlay 2002; Rose 1997). They do not, however, usually centralise researchers' own experiences as their primary focus, which, within geography, is a move made more rarely. When a more explicitly autobiographical move is made, it may entail presenting a self-narration for a particular purpose, such as offering a personalised perspective on particular events (see for example Billinge, Gregory and Martin 1984), or speaking out about and against normative assumptions of the discipline of geography and routine practices of institutions of higher education (for example Domosh 2000; Pulido 2002; Purcell 2007), or bringing to life the human consequences of geopolitical processes (Sidaway 2008). Sometimes the personal material is used analytically to illustrate a theme, as in Gill Valentine's (1998) account of the geographical impacts of harassment, and Robyn Longhurst's (2012) discussion of the spaces and politics of weight loss. In this paper I use myself in a

³ This proliferation of terms for those who consult clinicians is at least in part a manifestation of the contested power dynamics of clinical settings (Proctor 2002; Smail 2005). My own clinical practice has always been within the voluntary sector in settings open to self-referral and which do not require or entail formal diagnosis.

broadly similar way, seeking to convey psychoanalytic ideas about what it means to feel insecure by drawing on autobiographical vignettes constructed to speak of moments in my working life (also see Bondi 1999).

Methodological challenges abound in any exploration of feelings, as numerous contributions to the fields of affective and emotional geographies attest (for a small selection see Bennett 2009; Bondi 2005, in press; Evans 2012; Harrison 2007; Pile 2010). Turning to one's own experience may avoid some of the pitfalls of speaking of, with and through the voices of others, but it raises as many methodological difficulties as it resolves. Gillian Rose (1997, 311) has criticised (feminist) researchers' efforts to make themselves "transparent" to their research participants and to their readers as yet another "god-trick" (or "goddess-trick"), insisting instead on the fallibilities of all the knowledges we produce. Claims to knowledge based on introspection and first person testimony are no different from those grounded more externally. Contributors to non-representational geographies have advanced related arguments about the "complexity and indeterminacy hidden behind seemingly straightforward" testimony (Carter-White 2012, 287; also see Dewsbury 2003; Harrison 2007). Also in this vein, Patricia Noxolo (this issue) explores bodily practices of security via a novel narrated by a deeply ambiguous narrator whose "testimony" repeatedly induces uncertainty in the reader about what to believe and with whom to identify.

In a psychoanalytic register, the centrality of the unconscious means that what any of us might say about ourselves is always a cover story that disassembles, perhaps seeking to conceal other, potentially more significant, truths (Callard 2003; Phillips 1995). The autobiographical vignettes in this paper are no different. In turning to myself as source, therefore, I do not claim to know myself or to be secure in my knowledge, if not in my being. My intention instead is to draw on myself to explore how I sense, narrate, and reflect in ways that variously express, perplex, surprise, worry, defy my own changing sense of who I am in the world⁴. Implicit in this framing

⁴ Writing of one's own experience can be therapeutic, helping us to make sense of who and how we are in the world. In this paper I do not dwell on what might be curative for me. However, I inevitably draw on forms of self-reflection that have

is the idea that the first person singular voice on which I rely is a construct or something I perform, the frayed edges of which I wish to evoke. In this I implicitly echo Judith Butler (2005), who, drawing on Adriana Cavarero (2000), has argued that to give an account of oneself is impossible without the intimate involvement of others. The tradition of object relations psychoanalysis, which informs the account I offer here, understands personhood as inherently relational, constructed through our unconscious need for and interactions with others, especially but not only our primary caregivers.

Writing is itself a relational process that depends on actual or imagined readers to produce me as author. In seeking to evoke the feelings of which I write, I am explicitly inviting readers to identify with elements of my account. This process of identification refers to the experience of recognising in someone else aspects of oneself and one's own experience. Recognising oneself in the other can be deeply problematic, particularly if it rests upon, or leads to, an assumption that the other's experience is just like one's own, or vice versa. This risks effacing or colonising the other's experience, denying their difference and thereby necessarily mis-recognising them⁵. Although processes of identification carry these risks, especially if enacted easily and without any sense of dissonance, when tentative and partial, they also hold open the possibility of forms of recognition that neither deny nor expunge difference, and which support a sense of shared humanity⁶. In the context of the pitfalls and

become integral to the training and practice of counsellors and psychotherapists (Bolton 2004; Wright and Bolton 2012).

⁵ This effacement of the other is sometimes also attributed to empathy (for example Watson 2009). Elsewhere (Bondi 2003) I have argued that empathy draws on identification but differs from it in that it also entails a sustained awareness that the other's experience is not the same as one's own. Identification tends to be less "thought" and less effortful, whereas empathy involves much work and is accompanied by a constant sense of fallibility (also see Bondi, in press). I would argue that compassion, for which Waite *et al.* (this issue) advocate, is closely related to this understanding of empathy.

⁶ My use of the first person plural in this paper is intended as a gesture towards this sense of shared humanity.

possibilities of identification, one advantage of drawing upon my own experience is that, as both author and research subject, the risks I take are ones that, at a conscious level, I choose to take, including my understanding that I do not know what unconscious motivations might be at work, enacted in my speaking and my writing⁷.

The autobiographical vignettes that constitute the empirical materials this paper presents and works with refer to a period between August and October 2011. They came into being as parts of a much longer text first conceptualised in November 2011 (via a conference abstract) but only written in March 2012. The extracts included in this paper were selected from the longer text and lightly edited for the conference presentation from which this paper has evolved. I use the historic present for the autobiographical vignettes themselves (as I did in the original text), through which I seek to evoke my self experience as if in real time. After presenting each vignette I offer reflective observations through which to make connections to key psychoanalytic concepts and in which I make occasional use of a second person address. In the main body of the text (including the vignettes and the reflective remarks) I aim to remain close to the experiences portrayed, with footnotes providing supplementary connections to the literature on which my account depends.

Laing on ontological (in)security

In Laing's (1959/1965, 39-42) words:

A man [and to update Laing's use of language, a woman too] may have a sense of his [or her] presence in the world as a real, alive, whole, and, in a temporal sense, a continuous person. As such, he [or she] can live out into the world and meet others: a world and others experienced as equally real, alive, whole and continuous.

⁷ That unconscious narcissism might be in play is obvious. Psychoanalytically, narcissism is typically understood as a preoccupation with one's own wounded self and self-image. Neville Symington (1993) has offered an account that frames narcissism as a refusal to know, which might be understood as covered over in the very act of turning my gaze upon myself.

Such a basically ontologically secure person will encounter all the hazards of life, social, ethical, spiritual, biological, from a centrally firm sense of his [or her] own and other people's reality and identity. [...]

This [sense of ontological security], however, may not be the case. The individual in the ordinary circumstances of living may feel more unreal than real; in a literal sense, more dead than alive; precariously differentiated from the rest of the world, so that his [or her] identity and autonomy are always in question. [...]

It is, of course, inevitable that an individual whose experience of himself [or herself] is of this order can no more live in a 'secure' world than he [or she] can be secure 'in himself' [or herself].

Two aspects of this extract have particular relevance for my argument. First, Laing presented the person as inextricably located in his or her world. He did not consider the mind of a person isolated or abstracted from the world in which he or she lives. The final sentence of the passage above suggests that he thought of ontological security and ontological insecurity as properties that belong simultaneously to the person and his or her world, to interior experience and external environment, to the world as perceived and the reality encountered⁸. In other words, Laing argued that our experience of the exterior world we inhabit as secure or insecure might be understood as at least in part produced by qualities of our interior worlds. This is not to deny the converse – that conditions in the external world affect how we feel inside. However, Laing's point was that the ordinary "hazards [or misfortunes] of life, social, ethical, spiritual, biological" do not in themselves determine our overarching sense of how we are in the world, hence my observation above about accounts in which outrage at ruptures in everyday environments serving to illustrate the survival of ontological security under pressure. Conversely a state of ontological insecurity may be experienced even in "ordinary circumstances", when the sufferer becomes "precariously differentiated from the world", which is my focus in this paper. Therefore, on Laing's account, understanding geographies of security and insecurity requires consideration of the phenomenological interface between interior and exterior worlds. Laing's formulation came from his blend of psychoanalytic and

⁸ For an in-depth account of "Laing's geographies" see McGeachan (2010)

existential thinking. In what follows I illustrate the relevance of his and some related readings of psychoanalysis to how we think about feelings of insecurity. Central to my account is the idea of continuous traffic between interior and exterior, self and other, the movement of which produces feelings, selves and the worlds we inhabit (Bondi 2005).

Secondly, in the extract I have quoted, Laing might be read as setting up a binary distinction between persons who are ontologically secure and those who are not. However, he also suggested more of a gradation of experience when he described ontologically insecure people as having a “*low threshold of security*” (Laing 1959/1965, 42, original emphasis). In illustrating forms of anxiety associated with ontological insecurity, the first example Laing used was of a young man who displayed in his behaviour and speech clear symptoms of psychotic illness. But Laing (1959/1965, 43-44) explicitly countered suggestions that the patient in question could reasonably be described as “insane”, thereby calling into question any binary opposition between sanity and madness. More generally, Laing’s work in such ventures as the development of the Kingsley Hall therapeutic community explicitly suspended demarcations between normal and abnormal, sane and crazy (Miller 2004; McGeachan 2010). Perhaps some of the troubled and chaotic features that accompanied his own creative brilliance can similarly be understood to call into question the idea that some of us are sane, well and normal, while others are not, that some of us are ontologically secure while others are not. In the autobiographical vignettes and discussion that follow, I follow Laing in rejecting correspondence between insanity and ontological insecurity.

Giving Up (August 2011)

On the 1st August 2011, after 43 gruelling months I am liberated from a fixed-term management role at my University. I hasten to add that this role has had nothing to do with Geography, where I had previously and much more happily done a stint as Head. But now I feel profoundly exhausted and my back is playing up quite badly⁹.

⁹ Throughout this paper I resist the idea of psyche as separate from soma: what might be called a state of mind is always embodied.

People tell me that I should feel proud of what I've achieved during my time in this role, but at this moment I'm too sore, too depleted, too demoralised and too miserable to feel pleasure in the job I have done. What is laid out for me over the coming months is a transition back to being an ordinary academic but I doubt my capacity to recover what I need to return to my scholarship.

As August wears on, I feel worse and worse. Some of the time I display the outward appearance of functioning, giving students feedback on dissertation drafts, responding to colleagues. But everything takes me so long and I feel that I am going through the motions robotically. I wonder how I am going to find the energy to prepare a conference paper for early September, which I surely must sort out before going back to the paper I have promised to deliver for a journal special issue about research and therapy.

Life outside work is reduced to bare functioning. The difference between being awake and being asleep is becoming increasingly blurred¹⁰. Soon after starting in the management role I suspended my small counselling practice, realising that my personal resources were under far too much pressure in my university role for me to be sufficiently emotionally available to work with clients. I have instead sought to support myself by becoming a consumer of therapy again, but even in my own psychotherapy I feel like a zombie¹¹.

¹⁰ Exploring the phenomenon of not being able to dream, Thomas Ogden (2003, 19, emphasis in original) drew on Bion's (1962) account that dreaming "creates consciousness and unconsciousness and maintains the difference between the two". On this account the blurring of wakefulness and sleep suggests an erosion of the capacity for unconscious psychological work. This is most acutely manifest in "the psychotic's inability to discriminate conscious and unconscious experience" (Ogden, 2003, 20).

¹¹ The figure of the zombie blurs the difference between the living and the dead. The cultural resonance of zombies may be understood as an expression of the struggle to mourn, which, as Darian Leader (2009) has argued, entails the symbolic separation of the dead from the living. For a geographical account of zombie movies see Jeff May (2010).

I was able to write of this time only in retrospect. I recall feeling barely able to think and equally unable to take in the words, care or kindnesses of others.

I hope that you recognise in this narration echoes of Laing's account of the deadness and unreality characteristic of ontological insecurity. In Laing's (1959/65, 42) words, I felt "more insubstantial than substantial, and unable to assume that the stuff [... I was] made of [... was] genuine, good and valuable". My engagements with those around me and with the exterior world more generally did not, at the time, help me regain a sense of my own reality: because of the deadened qualities I brought into my interactions with others, nothing I came into contact with – even care and compassion – felt real either.

Several decades before Laing wrote about ontological (in)security, Freud (1917/2005) described melancholia by distinguishing it from mourning. Both, he suggested, often have their origins in "environmental influences" such as "the loss of a beloved person" (*ibid.*, 203). Both entail "a loss of interest in the outside world, the loss of ability to love". But only in melancholia does the sufferer experience what Freud called "an extraordinary reduction in self-esteem, a great impoverishment of the ego" (*ibid.*, 205). He invoked a distinction between the world and the psyche to drive the point home: whereas "In mourning, the world has become poor and empty, in melancholia it is the ego that has become so." (*ibid.*, 205-6). In my own case, my external world was in no sense intrinsically impoverished but my psychic depletion rendered my experience of my self and my environment "more dead than alive" (Laing 1959/1965, 42).

However honest and authentic, my account is not, of course, an innocent narration. I have acknowledged that I was only able to write it in retrospect and it is therefore based on memories that remained vivid for me as I began to recover. (Indeed the experience of emerging from this sense of deadness and recovering my liveliness was central to my desire to write of this.) My narration in no sense precedes my engagement with the writings of Laing, Freud and others, but draws on them to perform its work. My description of an experience I retrospectively present as so lacking in vitality that, at the time, I could not even attempt to convey it to others,

necessarily draws on a readily available lexicon, informed by classic accounts of melancholia and ontological insecurity as well as by contemporary narrations and critiques of what has come to be called depression¹².

I am deeply uneasy about the medicalisation of depression, which frames it as an illness that afflicts individuals to whom treatments are delivered. I do not deny that these treatments – pharmacological and psychological – may provide much relief to many sufferers. (Indeed I could tell the story of my own pathway into the field of counselling and psychotherapy as originating in my experience of psychotherapy during a much earlier period in which I suffered melancholia/depression.) However, when calls for diagnosis and (psychological) treatment rest primarily on economic arguments (The Centre for Economic Performance 2006), and the ensuing treatment infrastructure industrialises “talking therapy” within a Taylorist model (Chapman 2012), critical thinking is vital. It seems to me important to consider the rise of depression and its medicalisation as symptoms of cultural processes that might be undermining our collective capacity to mourn (Leader 2009), and therefore reducing rather than expanding practices of healing (Taylor 2007). I would argue that the apparent rise of what has come to be called depression needs to be understood in this context. Whether or not we identify ourselves as sufferers, it has acquired a pervasive presence that impacts on us all. Viewed as a manifestation of Laingian ontological insecurity, depression affects our selves and our worlds simultaneously.

Anxiety (September 2011)

In early September, I somehow find the energy to assemble my conference presentation. I have booked my ticket for a four-hour inter-city train journey. First I have to travel into Edinburgh on a local commuter service that normally takes about 20 minutes.

¹² Darian Leader (2009) has recently provided a psychoanalytic account of depression that draws directly on Freud’s classic text. Leader’s describes the work of mourning using four spatialisations (also see Bondi forthcoming).

Waiting for my local commuter train, I register that I have cut it a bit fine. Boarding the train, which is already a few minutes late, my anxiety rises. It goes on rising. The train slows, speeds up, slows again. My heart is thumping, my stomach is churning and contracting into tight knots, my palms are sweating, my mouth is dry. I keep looking at my watch, trying to calculate the incalculable. Missing that inter-city train looms as a catastrophe, which I mentally will myself against. It mustn't happen, surely it won't happen, if I concentrate somehow this train will go faster! I begin to feel that my anxiety will undo me and that I will dissolve into a puddle on the floor. But, imperceptibly, another voice enters, imagining what will "really" happen if I do indeed miss the connection. How it won't be the end of the world, how, in all probability, there'll be another train that will get me to the conference in time to present my paper. And how the price of a brand new ticket will infuriate me but will be bearable. In these ways, I begin to self-soothe. As my 30-minute train journey comes towards its completion, my heart is no longer racing, I no longer fear dissolution¹³. My commuter train rolls in to the city centre station I know so well, and I see across to the train I was meant to be on just as it begins its lumbering acceleration away from another platform. Seconds later, I step off my local train and walk like a cool, composed and blasé traveller across the station forecourt to find out when the next train to my intended destination leaves.¹⁴

¹³ As Sara Ahmed (2004, 64) has noted "The difference between fear and anxiety is most often represented in terms of the status of the object": whereas fear refers to an object, anxiety is typically understood as a sense of threat that lacks a specific object or focus. ". This usage is traceable to Freud (1920/1955, 12) and I follow it here, invoking anxiety as a way of experiencing oneself existentially and fear as more focused, for example on the imagined bodily consequences of anxiety. Drawing out the spatio-temporality of fear and anxiety, Ahmed (2004, 66, emphasis in the original) argues that "Anxiety becomes *an approach to objects* rather than, as with fear, *being produced by the object's approach*."

¹⁴ Not only did I miss the train but I also stranded a colleague with whom I was to be presenting our co-authored paper, and who I had arranged to meet on the train that I missed. We had not exchanged mobile phone numbers and so I could not let her know what had happened while we were both en route. Furthermore, my colleague had only very recently taken up a research post on the project from which our paper

I am not alone in sometimes failing to navigate my path across the co-ordinates of time-space¹⁵ as I have planned or intended, whether because of truly unpredictable events, carelessness, miscalculation or some combination of factors. How such failures are experienced varies enormously but I imagine that at least some of you may recognise my account at an emotional level, whether in relation to missing trains, buses or planes¹⁶, or an array of other ordinarily anxiety-provoking events of everyday life. If you do, then we share a sense of being at risk of feeling insecure in our own skin. When we plunge into such insecure feelings, we cease to have confidence in the coherence and continuity of our bodily form and in our capacity to “live out into the world” (Laing 1959/1965, 39).

As with my first vignette, my narration may be heartfelt and authentic, but at the same time it relies on a culturally normative account of ordinary acute anxiety precipitated by the minor mishaps of everyday life¹⁷. In the example I have presented, I “recovered” swiftly, recomposing myself without the overt support or

drew. My failure to catch the train as planned therefore also generated intensely anxiety-provoking circumstances for her. Indeed while I knew exactly what had happened, she was left in the dark for several hours, not knowing if I would show up at the conference at all.

¹⁵ I allude to Torsten Hägerstrand’s (1982) time-space geography. Navigating paths across time-space is necessarily embodied and highly variable. For example, some of us might require assistance to get on and off trains and others might take for granted the capacity to run to make a tight connection.

¹⁶ For many people, travelling is intrinsically anxiety-provoking. For a recent discussion that also makes use of psychoanalytic ideas, see Kingsbury, Crooks, Snyder, Johnston and Adams (2012).

¹⁷ For a phenomenological account of embodied geographies of anxiety, see Davidson (2003). Like depression, and often in conjunction with depression, anxiety is subject to medicalisation, the associated diagnostic categories typically organised around the apparent source of anxiety (as in specific phobias) or the accompanying behavioural responses (such as agoraphobic avoidance) together with a large “bucket” category of “generalised anxiety disorder”.

assistance of anyone else. There is nothing inevitable about this: had I remained in the grip of acute anxiety for longer, fellow passengers and station staff might have been confronted by a visibly distressed passenger, needing some kind of assistance. Among the many factors that no doubt helped me to calm myself was that I knew that I could buy another ticket: economic security rendered my world less scary than it might otherwise have been, helped me to contain or regulate-down my experience of acute anxiety and contributed to my taken-for-granted capacity to travel.

Chronic, rather than acute, anxiety is central to Laing's (1959/1965, 43) account of ontological insecurity, in which he described the unconscious life of the sufferer as constantly pervaded by threats of dissolution through engulfment, implosion or petrification that may result in the world becoming a place that can "no longer [be] share[d] with other people". But Laing also suggested that vulnerability to more fleeting versions of such feelings is very widespread, writing that "we are all only two or three degrees Fahrenheit" away from the profound states of anxiety associated with ontological insecurity such that "[e]ven a slight fever, and the whole world can begin to take on a persecutory, impinging aspect" (*ibid.*, 46). My illustration suggests that even without a fever of the kind to which Laing referred, anxiety may nevertheless reach "fever pitch", generating fear of dissolution. In ordinary circumstances such intense anxiety abates quite quickly, and, as in my account, is remembered as a brief interruption to more normative modes of being. However, many chronic sufferers live in constant fear of the overwhelming qualities of anxiety attacks (Davidson 2003).

In my account of missing that train I describe feeling myself to be hurtling towards a collapse in which anxiety would undo me. But as the physical symptoms of anxiety intensify, I also calm myself, gathering myself together¹⁸. At the same time as feeling the kind of existential angst described by Laing, I reconnect with my capacity to act as a competent, ordinarily functioning human being. In so doing I cast myself as the narrator of my own life. I am the one who missed the train; I am the one who can account for that 30-minute period of dissolution and re-composition; I am master (or

¹⁸ This sense of the capacity to gather oneself together from bits and pieces comes from Winnicott's (1945/1958) account of unintegration and integration.

perhaps mistress) of my own little universe. This apparently agentic and singular “I” is one aspect of who I am but not the only one. I do not wish to be fooled by imagining her to be all that I am, but nor do I wish to live without the capacity to fully inhabit the outward-facing competence she makes available to me¹⁹. Ordinary, acute anxiety, I would suggest, serves to remind us all that our capacity to approximate to Laing’s (1959/1965) or Giddens’ (1990) account of a sense of being ontologically secure is paradoxically fragile. Put another way these descriptions of ontological security present intrinsically unattainable ideal types. They depend upon a sense of clear and stable boundaries that differentiate our selves from the worlds we inhabit. I have argued that any such clarity and stability is a normative fiction belied by ordinary experiences of anxiety²⁰.

Words and Wordlessness (October 2011)

Getting home from the conference I turn to the paper I have promised for the journal special issue. I struggle to write. I may be feeling better than I did in August but I have nothing like recovered from the battering of the last few years. Each day I work on the paper I seem to delete as much as I write. Doubt hovers over every word. I have no faith in my capacity to write anything worth writing. I can’t even hold onto a sense of what I am trying to say. I berate myself for leaving it so late, and for finding it so hard. I flail around hopelessly day after day, week after week. This feels like purgatory; time standing still in excruciating painfulness.

¹⁹ Understanding the subject as fragmented and decentred has been commonplace in geography for many years. While such theorisations have been helpful in unsettling “normative fictions” of the unified rational subject, postmodern accounts of the subject underplay what I have described here in terms of my capacity to gather myself together and maintain coherence and continuity without also denying my vulnerability to feelings of fragmentation and dissolution. On the debate between psychoanalytic and postmodern accounts of the subject see Layton (1998).

²⁰ That normative fiction carries within it a normative privileging of white, male, Western, middle-class, non-disabled, adult embodiment.

And yet, somehow, and I never do understand how, the paper for the special issue is taking shape. Three weeks beyond the due date and just before my teaching load ramps up, I send the result to the journal guest editors²¹. I am so very deeply relieved. I am secretly very pleased with my efforts, finally feeling a sense of my own creativity once more. In fact I feel elated; in my fantasy world I am on the verge of writing half a dozen books! I may loathe the process of writing but I sure love the glow of having written.

There is an absurdity in trying to convey in written words the experience of not being able to write. I may want to communicate a feeling of never-ending wordlessness but my words necessarily cover over rather than convey this experience²². And what I describe as not writing was, paradoxically, accompanied by the paper getting written. If writing is understood as an unconscious as well as a conscious process, and if, as Freud (1901/2002, 265, fn16) said long ago, “the unconscious is timeless”, in my unconscious life there is no difference between a moment and eternity. When I was writing maybe I was feeling the timelessness of unconscious processing even as I consciously struggled to find, delete, replace and re-order words and sentences.

My description of despair and desolation again echoes Laing’s account of the consequences of ontological insecurity, which render the world of the sufferer profoundly hostile and threatening. But in my recovery from such feelings, the elation I have described is surely just as unrealistic, resounding with a sense of omnipotence as intense and overblown as the preceding helpless impotence. This polarity is also evident in my account of realising that I might miss my inter-city train: I felt myself succumbing to – at the mercy of – ever-intensifying manifestations of anxiety, and I fantasised that by sheer force of will I could make the train I was on go faster. My oscillation between these extremes was unthinking and unreflective: I seemed to “flip” from one to the other, unaware of the contradiction between them, almost as if I inhabited two contrasting worlds simultaneously. These seemingly disproportionate,

²¹ The paper has since been published: Bondi (2013).

²² The intrinsic unrepresentability of everyday lives and everyday geographies is a driving force for the work of non-representational theory (Anderson and Harrison 2010; Thrift 2007).

fantastical and perhaps outrageous feelings, which surely manifest a loss of secure connection to shared reality, are ones that I learned long ago not to speak about and to do my best to ignore. But if responses to my conference presentation are anything to go by, I am certainly not the only ordinarily highly functioning person who is prey to them²³.

Alternation between states of helplessness and omnipotence is symptomatic of what psychoanalysts from Freud onwards have termed splitting²⁴. Broadly speaking, splitting is an unconscious defence in which different aspects of experience, archetypally what is good and what is bad, are kept apart in order to exert a sense of control in an uncontrollable world. It is a psycho-spatial strategy in which we locate what are felt to be incommensurable feelings in different places. Melanie Klein (1946/1991) argued that splitting is developmentally enabling, allowing the kind of trust necessary for the realisation of something akin to Laing's ontological security in a world that is intrinsically unpredictable and hazardous. In other words, in order to trust and to experience ontological security, we actually need to buffer ourselves against the potentially overwhelming existential anxiety of living in an unpredictable and potentially brutal world in which the raw reality is that we, or those on whom we depend, may die suddenly and unexpectedly. For Klein (1935/1991), as we become more able to comprehend the world around us and to grasp our place in relation to others, we also become more able to bear uncertainty and accommodate mixed feelings. On this account, the persistence of unconscious functioning dominated by splitting beyond normative developmental needs expresses a deeply precarious sense of being in the world broadly consistent with Laingian ontological insecurity. Klein, however, insists that we never wholly relinquish our capacity for splitting, and continue to use it routinely to manage our conscious and unconscious hurts and

²³ My training and practice as a counsellor also provide ample evidence to that effect, and have contributed to a positive appreciation of my own vulnerability rather than construing these feelings as something to be ashamed of.

²⁴ Unconscious splitting of the ego takes on particular importance in Freud's (1917/2005) essay "Mourning and melancholia" and is central to W.R.D. Fairbairn's (1952) ideas about endopsychic structure as well as to Melanie Klein's (1975) concept of the "paranoid-schizoid" position, which I draw upon in this paper.

anxieties . For example, when I berate myself for not being able to write, I split myself into a bad, incompetent procrastinator who is obstructing some other good me I ought to be. In my elated fantasy of having half a dozen books nearly written, I have cut myself off from and disowned the me who struggles to write. I do not do this consciously or intentionally and can only recognise the evidence of splitting when I look at my testimony from a more distant vantage point, becoming, as it were, a stranger to myself. Ironically, my capacity to write for publication may itself depend upon my refusal to face the contradictoriness of my feelings, thereby enabling me to occupy the place of omnipotence for periods of time sufficient to enable me to believe myself capable of writing anything original. Splitting thus disrupts any categorical distinction between ontological security and ontological insecurity.

Towards an emotional geography of ordinary insecurity

In Klein's (1946/1991) account, splitting is an expression of the unconscious processes of projection and introjection in which what cannot be tolerated inside is split off and projected into the (supposedly) external world, while conversely, what cannot be tolerated outside or lived without is taken in. These unconscious processes paradoxically both depend upon and undo a sense of being contained and differentiated from the surrounding world: they rely on a distinction between interior and exterior but also entail continuous traffic across the boundary, thereby constantly reshaping what counts as internal and external as well as the boundary between them. Klein's highly spatialised psychoanalytic thinking sketches out a dynamic unconscious emotional geography, expressed in our ways of being in the world, or what Christopher Bollas (1989) calls our personal idiom.

In illuminating how what is inside gets outside and what is outside gets inside, projection and introjection have been used to help understand a variety of social, cultural and organisational processes. A seminal study in this vein was conducted by Isabel Menzies (1960) into the organisation of nursing in a general hospital setting, which she argued, was underpinned by self-defeating efforts to manage the intense unconscious and existential anxiety inevitably experienced by those in close contact with the realities of serious illness and death. Her classic analysis has great relevance to current debates about compassion (or its absence) in contemporary

health-care. In geography, David Sibley (1995) has drawn on the same ideas to explore geographies of exclusion, attending to the unconscious drivers that underpin spatial expressions of rejection, hostility and hatred²⁵. In another domain, Mark Stein (2011) has applied the same ideas to offer insights into the culture of financial institutions in which the 2008 credit crisis was “incubated”. His account points to the cultivation of an unrealistic sense of omnipotence (not dissimilar from that which I have described in myself a different context) in an environment in which countervailing tendencies were assiduously denied and projected elsewhere.

In these accounts it tends to be other people whose thoughts and actions are shaped by these unconscious processes, and who, in turn, influence political discourse and organisational cultures. These analyses are compelling, and yet my response to them often worries me. What disturbs me is the ease with which I find myself dis-identifying with and thereby locating myself outside the processes they describe. This happens when I think “I’m not like that” or “surely I wouldn’t get caught up in that” in response to the potentially racist exclusionary impulses described by Sibley (1995) or the exuberant, unrealistic over-optimism described by Stein (2011). When I catch myself responding like this, it seems to me that I am claiming immunity from the dynamics described in these accounts. Paradoxically, in so doing I surely replicate them: by saying to myself “I’m not like that” or “I wouldn’t get caught up in that” I deny my vulnerability to the projective processes at stake. In this context, I want to pursue the theme of splitting a little further, elaborating what might be thought of as a personal emotional geography of splitting shaped by the location of blame. In so doing I draw attention to the difference between certainty and ontological security. To this end I return briefly to the first two autobiographical vignettes presented above.

Under the heading “Giving Up (August 2011)” I describe myself as suffering melancholic exhaustion, depletion and demoralisation. By differentiating this experience from an earlier, happier, period in a management role, I gesture to the possibility that the job had “done me in” and therefore that I was the victim of my external environment, which was to blame for my inner state. But my turn to Freud’s

²⁵ For another psychoanalytically-informed exploration of emotional geography of hatred, see Maree Pardy (2011).

account of melancholia gestures in the opposite direction, namely to inner causes, in which, “the melancholic is doomed to experience a sense of lifelessness that comes as a consequence of disconnecting oneself from large portions of external reality” (Ogden 2012, 20). On this account I am responsible for my plight and blame resides inside of me²⁶. Under the heading “Anxiety (September 2011)” I describe my visceral response to realising I was at risk of missing a travel connection. In this account, if my identity is bound up with a sense of the external world as bad and hostile I blame the late-running train and cast myself as innocent victim, locating blame outside of who I am. However, if holding on to a sense of my agency as a self-governing individual is all-important to me, I have to make myself responsible for missing my connection and I therefore locate the blame for the failure of time-space co-ordination in me.

Laing’s (1959/1965) conceptualisation of ontological insecurity conveys a way of experiencing the external world – including other people – as profoundly threatening. This might be read as resonating with the location of blame externally rather than internally. But, as I argue above, for Laing, the dynamic interplay between inside and outside is such that ontological insecurity is necessarily a property of both. Consequently “the dangers most dreaded can themselves be encompassed to forestall their actual occurrence. Thus to forgo one’s autonomy becomes a means of secretly safeguarding it; to play possum, to feign death, becomes a means of preserving one’s aliveness” (Laing 1959/1965, 51). On this account, locating blame internally, and assuming an internal – and perhaps overweening – sense of responsibility for everything that goes wrong, may be as expressive of ontological insecurity as locating blame in a hostile world beyond me.

Splitting renders me as helpless victim at the mercy of, and diminished by, a blameworthy exterior, or as omnipotent author of my own misfortunes, effectively inoculated against external reality. These may sound like unattractive alternatives but they generate what are often felt to be deeply comforting certainties, especially in a

²⁶ Moral discourses of the subject have received particular attention in the context of illness, explored, *inter alia*, by Arthur Frank (1997), Deborah Lupton (2003) and Susan Sontag (1989).

fast-changing, and often unpredictable world. Knowing who or what to blame, and even taking the blame oneself, may appear to provide relief from the anxieties of ambiguity, indeterminacy and irresolvable doubt. The examples I have drawn upon from my own working life illustrate an ordinary oscillation between the extremes of helplessness and omnipotence. This oscillation is often barely perceptible. Indeed when I first wrote these autobiographical vignettes I was not aware of it and only when reflecting on the material I had generated did I become aware that my self-narration provided so many everyday illustrations of splitting. When my functioning is dominated by splitting, genuine ambiguity and doubt are firmly excluded from my self-experience, even as I flip between helplessness and omnipotence. I am not able to reflect on and thereby gain perspective on my feelings. There is, in effect, no contradiction between the extreme positions. Certainty (good or bad) prevails in my internal world and I produce a corresponding certainty (equally good or bad) in my external world.

As I have shown, this kind of psychic certainty is closely related to feelings of insecurity, which in turn are recognisable in Laing's (1959/1965) description of ontological insecurity. For Laing (*ibid.*, 39) ontological insecurity interferes with our capacity to feel "real, alive, whole and continuous". Moreover, the production of certainty through splitting insulates us from direct contact with the dilemmas and challenges of negotiating our external realities with others: it shields us from the messiness of a genuinely intersubjective world, and therefore, in Laing's (*ibid.*, 39) words, leaves us unable to "live out into the world and meet others".

These dynamics offer a psychoanalytic lens through which to understand attempts to make certain, categorise and separate "us" from "them", illuminated, for example, in studies of attitudes to immigration, asylum and national identity (see for example Skey 2010; Waite *et al*, this issue). But they are equally relevant in relation to my own insistence that "I am not like that" when I read about those who I judge to be stigmatising others. Certainty about who "we" and "they" are, almost invariably implies that "we" suffer or are wronged because of "them", and that "we" omnipotently insist on "our" entitlement or rectitude. Superficially such certainty might sound like an expression of (too much) ontological security, but my argument is that it is underlain by brittle and fragile foundations in which splitting serves as a defence

against existential and unconscious anxieties. Uses of the concept of ontological security that lose connection with these underlying psychodynamics risk confusing it with comforting certainties. Conversely, attending to these dynamics, whether via fictional texts (Noxolo, this issue) or interview data (Waite *et al.*, this issue) may be a pre-requisite for an attitude of compassion towards others.

The psychoanalytic underpinnings of the concept of ontological (in)security reveal richer and more complex ideas than geographers have generally acknowledged. Laing's concern with the phenomenological interface between interior and exterior worlds suggests the possibilities of a geographical reading of these ideas. I have offered a personal account of feelings of insecurity, interwoven with a psychoanalytic account, to suggest that elements of ontological insecurity are an ordinary part of all our lives, rendering fragile our sense of being in the world. I have used my own experience in the hope that others will recognise in my autobiographical vignettes aspects of their own vulnerability to ordinary feelings of insecurity. In seeking to evoke or show, as much as to tell or explain, how psychoanalytic ideas can be used to think about personal and subjective emotional geographies, I have cautioned against confusing certainty with ontological security and I have sought to resist the temptation – sometimes very subtle – of locating feelings of insecurity in others as a way of disowning them in ourselves.

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