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Connected early-career experiences of equality in academia during the pandemic and beyond: Our liminal journey

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Frederike Scholz.

Email: f.scholz@tilburguniversity.edu**Abstract**

In this paper, we draw on our subjective experiences as two female early-career academics during the global COVID-19 pandemic. While we acknowledge that the pandemic had negative implications for many female scholars due to compulsory telework or increased family responsibilities, we also want to shed light on the empowering experiences shaped by collegial support that became an important part of our pandemic story. We build on the theory of liminality to explain how the events triggered by the pandemic allowed us to break out of our uncomfortable occupational limbo (i.e., feeling “locked-in” to the identity of a foreign-born PhD graduate) and, through creating *a kind of equality*, resulted in some unique opportunities and challenges. During these difficult times, shaped by an increasing fear of us or our family catching COVID-19, we embarked on a betwixt-and-between state that allowed us to grow as academics as a part of a collective.

KEYWORDS

autoethnography, collective, early-career academics, liminality, pandemic

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1 | INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has rapidly changed the world of work and unhinged the lives of employees across the globe. It forced us to adapt to changing circumstances in our personal lives and to navigate new ways of working. The detrimental impact of this unprecedented change has been observed in both the work and home spheres of our lives (Trougakos et al., 2020). Studies demonstrate that the pandemic has impacted women and men in different ways (e.g., Newcomb, 2021; Yildirim & Eslen-Ziya, 2021). More specifically, it is argued that the current global situation has further exacerbated inequalities for women who do not fit the ideal worker norm of being white, male, and able to do productive work alone and undisturbed in their homes (Utoft, 2020; Wright et al., 2021). However, in this paper, we take a slightly different angle to the predominantly pessimistic narrative about the impact of COVID-19 on working professionals (Kniffin et al., 2021), and women in particular (Peck, 2021). Building on the theory of liminality, we demonstrate how the pandemic had some profoundly meaningful and liberating consequences for us—two female foreign-born early-career academics who have graduated with their PhDs from the same UK business school and are now navigating through the struggles in the market-driven and performative culture of the neoliberal academy. Although experienced independently of one another, our pandemic story could not be more similar. It is a story of success and gives hope that the pandemic can create a unique opportunity to grow as an academic *affected by a kind of equality* where organizational members are on equal footing, express compassion, care, and support each other (Powley, 2009). We share our autoethnographic story by describing the various stages of our liminal journey as early career academics in the form of personal vignettes and visual drawings. For us this is the best way to “write differently” to bring our experiences to life in the most honest and unfiltered way (van Eck et al., 2021). This is achieved by contesting masculine accounts of academic writing and creating a meaningful space for our story as two female early-career academics in our early thirties. Playing with writing means that we use a more personalized style of writing (see Darmer, 2006) where the authors present and refer to as “We” rather than adopt more conventional forms of writing, by portraying the neutralized and seemingly “objective writer.”

2 | OUR CONCEPTUAL LENS OF LIMINALITY

In this paper, we use liminality as a theoretical and methodological lens to reflect on our personal experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic as female academics at the beginning of their careers. The concept of liminality was introduced by anthropologist Arnold van Gennep (1960). It highlights a transitory, transformational state, during which an individual is “betwixt and between” and moves from one identity state to another (see also: Shortt, 2015; Thomassen, 2016).

We believe that the concept of occupational limbo is of great importance to our research. Bamber et al. (2017, p. 1514) introduced this term and described it as feeling stuck in a state which is uncomfortable and insurmountable due to a set of structural and social barriers. They suggested that as a fixed state, one's occupational limbo can only be changed via profound intervention (p. 1521). By using our autoethnographic data, we will demonstrate how the COVID-19 pandemic was such an intervention and how it allowed us to embark on a journey of transitional liminars (Ybema et al., 2011).

In doing so, we build on the concept of transitional liminality. It focuses on a sense of in-betweenness and ambiguity when one attempts to move from a current self to a more aspirational identity (e.g., Alvesson & Robertson, 2006; Thornborrow & Brown, 2009; Watson, 2009) while navigating the competing demands of institutions, relationships, and personal goals (see Ryan, 2019). Such a state is often associated with disruption, frustration, and ambiguity (e.g., Beech, 2011; Borg & Söderlund, 2015; Shortt, 2015). However, some organizations and individuals deliberately “create spaces of liminality” (Pina e Cunha et al., 2008, pp. 956–957) as these can be socially and psychologically transformative in a positive way (Sankowska & Söderlund, 2015) and are known for their healing value (Hoyer & Steyaert, 2015).

Interestingly, Powley (2009) describes how entering a liminal state at times of crisis (like in our case the COVID-19 pandemic) can provide a temporary suspension of social arrangements that allow alternative social structures and changes in relationships to emerge. He calls this state liminal suspension—a stage where care for safety takes precedence over structured roles and positions and where “a kind of equality” can emerge (p. 1303). When this happens in academia, it may have particularly powerful consequences for higher education as it is often portrayed as a sharply hierarchical industry (Winston, 1999, p. 14). The salience of global competition feeds into a changing distributional politics of higher education (Marginson, 2006) and often results in faculty members facing significant pressures to compete with one another (Harmon, 2006) based on “the golden standard of productivity” (Utoft, 2020). In this context, women tend to find themselves in a minority compared to their male colleagues and are presented with fewer opportunities to be considered for promotion to senior ranks (Park, 1992). In the sections to follow, we will illustrate how we saw the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic as a crisis and how, in line with the reasoning of Powley (2009), it led to a temporary suspension of such hierarchical social arrangements and re-organization of the existing power relations for us.

We are not the first ones to apply the lens of liminality in organizational research to show that individuals are working betwixt and between organizational norms and cultures (e.g., Alvesson & Robertson, 2006; Chen & Reay, 2021; Hennekam, 2016). However, what is still scarce is the use of this concept to illustrate our own autoethnographic data as academics and the context of the pandemic. Some scholars have started to explore this link. For instance, Lee (2021) provides an emotional recollection of her experiences as an Asian living in the United States in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. In her work, liminality is used as an apparatus to explain the moving processes of the experience of the self and writing about the experience of the moments of the self. Jamjoom (2021), offers a different perspective by adapting, adapts liminality as “a theoretical anchor and an artistic methodological tool” (p. 1314) to explore being in-between experiences, thoughts, and writing patterns. She uses a metaphor of a 10 km run where each kilometer is a symbol of a liminal space the pandemic represents. In turn, we would like to describe how we have liberated ourselves from being stuck in occupational limbo. This is done by exploring how the events related to the pandemic, in our case, have *affected a kind of equality* in academia and ultimately helped us to become transitional liminars. We share a story of how we abandon our long-held identities as recent PhD graduates and how we embark on a journey of constructing new identities on our way to becoming established academics.

3 | OUR PANDEMIC STORY “WRITTEN DIFFERENTLY”

Our pandemic story demonstrates that individual experiences can never be exactly the same, but we hope that others are able to benefit from reading our personal vignettes (Janzen, 2016) and able to resonate with them. Since the embodied and affective accounts shared in this paper are based on our own experiences, there is no better way than to open up space for alternative knowledge creation and dialogs by building on the work of Gilmore et al. (2019), Jamjoom (2021), Mandalaki (2021), Pullen et al. (2020), van Amsterdam and van Eck (2019), or van Eck et al. (2021) on “writing differently.” We, therefore, take this paper as an opportunity to contest the limitations of conventional masculine academic research and writing practices for producing embodied and affective accounts’ (van Eck et al., 2021, p. 1099). As Gilmore et al. (2019, p. 4) argue, “writing differently” aims to broaden, widen, and deepen knowledge and understanding by giving space to our ideas in which they can blossom, shape new meaning, encourage us to learn, and “become human.”

We adopted an autoethnographic inquiry like many other scholars (see, Pentón Herrera et al., 2022; van Amsterdam, 2015) where we become “storytellers” (Holman Jones, 2005), and are part of the story that we tell (Doty, 2010), sharing our own lived experiences of growing as academics and breaking out of our liminal space. As Ellis and Bochner (2000) explains, an autoethnography displays mutual layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural, and by zooming backward and forward, inward and outward, distinctions between what is personal and what is cultural become increasingly blurred, sometimes unrecognizable. This style of writing is useful for analyzing and understanding the personal experiences of female academics as part of a larger social and political system (van Amsterdam, 2015). We wanted to leave room for the reader’s interpretation by using personal vignettes accompanied

by virtual drawings and by using the metaphor of “our bubble”, a liminal space, which had shaped our “internal and external” experiences (Sullivan, 2012, p. 92) of being an early-career academic during the pandemic. These virtual drawings developed when we reflected upon our individual but “connected” experiences. They symbolize this type of “locked” and uncomfortable occupational limbo, we were trapped in and how we were able to leave this said space. While we acknowledge our individual experiences and how they differed (in our vignettes), we wanted to provide a broader nuance to our stories with the help of these virtual representations of our “bubble”, which we hope resonates with some of our readers. Like other scholars (see, Farinella, 2018), we see the use of virtual drawings as an innovative way of presenting and organizing complex information through the use of metaphors. Our inner experiences were more focused on our life as an academic and our feelings and emotions undertaking this occupation, whereas our outer experiences were formed by observing the academic context around us. We believe using this metaphor as a space we felt trapped in, will resonate with other early-career academics that also struggle to make sense of their identity and role in the academic context. For us, the pandemic has further highlighted the constraints of this in-between space and underscored the importance of having a work-life balance and a support system in place both by working collaboratively with other scholars and also by being supported by the university and other institutions. As part of this method, we first agreed on our shared storyline as the base of our paper, before writing down our individual reflective and autobiographical vignettes to show in what way the pandemic and this “new way of working” impacted us as female early-career academics. We started to gather self-observations and made notes of our personal experiences from early 2021 followed by multiple virtual meetings and brainstorming sessions where we shared reflections and notes that became a major part of our writing process. It was important to us that we continued to review these reflections and experiences as we are still amidst the pandemic during this period and new narratives emerged along the way of authoring this paper.

3.1 | Reflections on our privileged position

In our endeavors, we strive to be genuine and transparent. While we were (and still are) navigating uncertainties and the immense challenges that significantly impact our lives, we perceive ourselves as privileged in that we continue to be able to do so relatively unscathed. We are able-bodied white women who work(ed) as foreign-born academics in the countries of the Global North where we have good access to health and childcare services.

That said, long before the pandemic, we felt the burden of emotional strain related to being a foreign-born academic (Andersson, 2014). Indeed, we did not get away from the experience of “feeling invisible and ignored” when establishing project groups or making decisions related to career progression (see: Maximova-Mentzoni & Egeland, 2019, p. 11). It is such decisions that further reinforced and legitimized the boundaries between belonging and exclusion and, at some points, left us feeling lonely as we live far from our family, friends, and own country.

With the start of the pandemic, it was unavoidable for us to not have any dark thoughts during the lockdowns, travel restrictions, and border closures due to the rising number of COVID-19 infection rates and deaths. Our thoughts were with our loved ones whom we had left in our home countries. What would happen if we had to see them, if they needed our help, and if we needed their help? The longer this pandemic continued, the more we felt on our own, despite the growth of our professional network.

We recognize that the COVID-19 crisis has affected people in different ways (Bowleg, 2020). It has a particularly negative impact on vulnerable populations (e.g., people with low-income, seniors, disabled people, and people of color; Branicki, 2020). For example, there has been an increase in unemployment or deteriorated access to decent work for disabled people (Emerson et al., 2021) or migrant workers (Jones et al., 2021). We see ourselves as privileged in that regard. Working remotely was possible for us and our partners, although one of them was temporarily unemployed during lockdown 1.

However, in the light of looming job cuts in general (Szulc & Smith, 2021) and in academia in particular (Ball, 2021), one of us was seeing her 3-year Postdoc contract ending by mid-2021. This led to additional pressures, and she had to apply for research funding and jobs by the end of 2020, when job opportunities were scarce, and the competition was at its peak. Living in a Dutch-speaking country, meant competing with other early-career scholars who were

fluent in this language placing further strain on top of the already heightened workload by studying for a Dutch language certificate, mostly undertaken past working hours.

Taking our experiences and reflections into consideration, we, therefore, do not want to paint a rosy picture of us sitting conveniently at home, working productively on research, and enjoying our privileged position (see Riseman, 2021). As female scholars, one with a small child, the other being pregnant at that time, we did fear the news that constantly surrounded us on social and mass media regarding COVID-19. This pandemic undoubtedly affected women's ability to work productively and, at times, forced them to exit the labor market as well as reinstated patriarchal hierarchies in the household (Berkhout & Richardson, 2020; Jaim, 2021). Yet overall, the pandemic has helped us gain momentum, helped us break outside of our comfort zone, and has provided us with opportunities to grow and make a name for ourselves as early career academics.

We now share our unique personal vignettes, separated in time and space, alongside visual drawings to indicate our collective experiences that frame our pandemic story and how we break out of this liminal space confined by the neoliberal context. By reflecting on our own thoughts, concerns, and feelings, as two female academics at the beginning of their careers during this pandemic, we try to bring our experiences to life on paper “differently.”

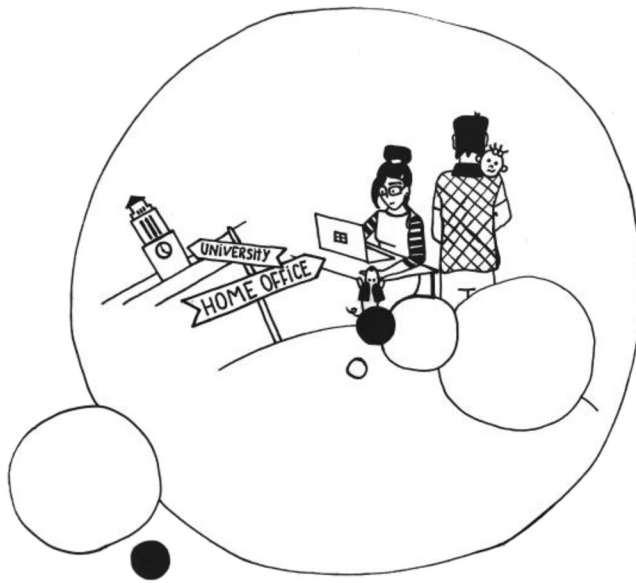
4 | STAGES OF BECOMING TRANSITIONAL LIMINARS

Our story starts with finding ourselves in a state of occupational limbo that we illustrate by using a metaphor that we call “the bubble.” It was this bubble that made us feel trapped in a place where we believed there was no escape. When Bamber et al. (2017, p. 1514) introduced this concept, they described it as being “*always-this-and-never-that*,” where *this* is less desirable than *that*.” This is exactly the way we felt. We were trapped in a state of being *perceived* by others as an inexperienced scholar who only recently defended a PhD and did not have strong connections or an impressive list of publications. This situation was far from our aspirations to be like one of those more experienced colleagues—“top-rated professors, influential management thinkers, or leading experts in the field.” Our experiences during this phase of advancing in an academic career were centered mainly around overcoming some common barriers related to work intensification and “heavy time pressure” (Ylijoki & Mäntylä, 2003) dominated by the forces of massification and marketization of the neoliberal academy (Bosanquet et al., 2020). However, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic seemed to trigger a series of events that gradually began to melt our “bubble,” and, eventually, we were “able to” leave it. Now, stage by stage, we look back to show how it happened.

4.1 | Stage 1: Being freed from judgment

... It was right at the beginning of the lockdown. I had my performance review via Goggle meet and my boss made it clear to me that I was below the “accepted” standard. I was told, “maybe I do not have it”. I had not yet proven that I was a good academic. At first, I took this very personally, I was disappointed in myself for not being able to show any output. But rather than accept it, I tried to prove my boss wrong. Personally, I believe that this was only possible because I did not have to face my boss in person at the office. I was able to put some distance between us since we were all locked up at home. This meeting actually pushed me out of my comfort zone and helped with the anxiety that I had every time I had to go to the office. I began to realise that this lockdown was a curse and a blessing in one. I did not have to go to the office, did not have to see my colleagues or my boss and feel their judgment, I did not have to sit in an office where colleagues were predominately talking in Dutch (which was not my mother tongue) but I was able to do work from the comfort of my own home and I was able, for the most part, to only engage with colleagues that I felt comfortable with and who had my back. The increasing use of technology made this easier for me and I initiated contact with some colleagues that I haven't talked to in a while, which led to wonderful conversations and projects close to my heart.

(Author 1; Drawing 1)



DRAWING 1 Both public and private lives merged.

... The Peppa Pig song got stuck in my head while I was trying to address the reviewers' comments on my latest paper. I felt I couldn't stand it anymore, I couldn't focus. Whilst I was writing an article on supporting colleagues at work, a poignant thought occurred to me: am I sufficiently supporting my four-year-old daughter? I felt I knew the answer, but I still spend an entire day in front of my laptop and she spends her entire day in front of a TV. I felt guilty. I turned down my laptop and started playing with her. I wish I had my parents close. They would be thrilled to help but they are in a different country, and these travel restrictions do not help either, we are here all by ourselves. "It's ok", I thought. My husband comes back from work at 7 p.m., I can resume writing shortly after. In the end, we were in lockdown, and finally, no one was judging at what time I was leaving my office. It finally didn't matter when I was working, but solely if I did what had to be done.

Author 2

While moving the office into the home was for many a problematic experience (Frize et al., 2021; Hjálmsdóttir & Bjarnadóttir, 2021), also in the context of working in academia (Couch et al., 2021; Kelly & Senior, 2021), for us, it was the time which triggered a series of events that helped us to gradually abandon our no longer comfortable identity of a PhD graduate. We began to realize that working from home allowed us to feel less judged by others in terms of what was considered to be acceptable. This enabled us to move from what we thought was an uncomfortable environment to a space that enabled us to be ourselves, our home.

Do not take this the wrong way. We also struggled with our lives during the pandemic. Like others, we felt guilty about our children or partners when we finally sat down for work (Ahmad, 2020; De Coster, 2020). Our experiences were similar to what Yildirim and Eslen-Ziya (2021, p. 244) labeled as the double burden or the second shift—we had to balance increased responsibilities as main care providers and/or employees working from home.

4.2 | Stage 2: Building our own space for academic growth

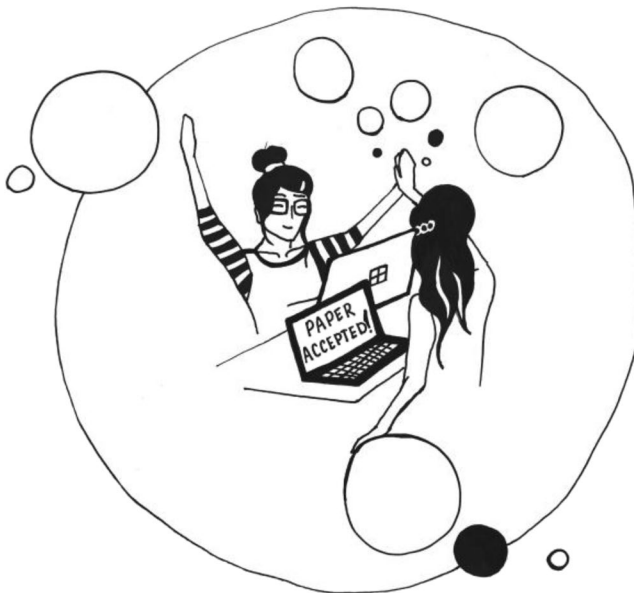
Like many other scholars I saw opportunities during this pandemic to engage in time-sensitive COVID research, but most importantly to prove everyone wrong, to show them that I indeed was a good

academic, which led to a comparative research study and a special issue in a well-known journal with colleagues from different institutions. Whereas the SI proposal took up only a few weeks to draft before submission and its acceptance, the research project began slowly taking over my life. And while we tried to apply for funding for this project, we had little success. This meant more work for us personally, which I did not mind. In April/May/June 2020, I was beginning to work almost 24/7, beyond my other work tasks, such as teaching. This was only possible because I was stuck at home, not able to see my friends (as face-to-face contact was regulated) or visit my family abroad because the borders were still closed. While I shared the responsibilities with other researchers, in the end, it was me who started on this project, it was me who was leading this project, who did not have to balance work with childcare and so I felt that I had to give as much of my “free” time as possible to the cause. I enjoyed working so much to the extent that my partner had to almost drag me off my computer so we could get some fresh air and go out with our dogs for their daily walk.

(Author 1; Drawing 2)

I was tired. Tired of waking up early in the morning and tired of working very late nights. I was tired of fearing for the health of my family, I was tired of the constant feelings of guilt, and I was tired of explaining to my husband why I cannot simply switch off. How could I switch off when I finally see the results of my hard work - my articles started to appear in the press! I was organising a conference. How could I turn down an invitation to take part in a big research project on the impacts of the pandemic? If it wasn't for COVID and the situation we were in, I would never have been asked. At that time I felt I had to take every single opportunity that was coming at me even if that meant working all night. My work impetuously and without a warning crept into my home, into my private space. The boundary was not visible anymore. As I was thinking about the potential effect Peppa Pig could have on my daughter and how long all this will last, a WhatsApp notification on my phone appeared - “You're invited to join Academics with Kids Group”.

Author 2



DRAWING 2 We received recognition.

Our journey to become transitional liminars was not far from its presentations in the existing literature. Like others, we faced feelings of frustration and ambiguity (e.g., Beech, 2011; Borg & Söderlund, 2015; Shortt, 2015), which we now believe are down to our continuous efforts at that time to blindly engage in the neoliberal norms and “makeup” of what we perceived as attributes of the ideal academic (see, e.g., Bleijenbergh et al., 2013). This, of course, has had an impact on our personal sphere as work has taken over our thoughts and disrupted our daily lives. However, we are not the only ones guilty of falling into this dangerous trap of participating in the “golden standard of productivity” against which we are measured at work (see: Utoft, 2020; Wright et al., 2021). In fact, the move to remote work triggered by the pandemic has gradually turned work-life balance into work-life integration for many (Zhang et al., 2021, p. 807). Chung (2022) calls such a situation as the flexibility paradox—in which more freedom at work also leads to more work. Still, this somewhat forced move to working from home had an empowering effect on our perceived autonomy, which is generally considered to be desirable from the perspective of the employees (Gajendran & Harrison, 2007). We felt that our work was in our hands, that we no longer had the experience of being observed or judged, and that we were empowered to organize our working days according to our rules. What perhaps had the biggest impact on our liminal journey though is the fact that we had the freedom to choose whom we interact with and, this time, amidst the pandemic, it appeared that it was so much easier, as if the physical and psychological barriers were removed and the wall between us and others miraculously disappeared. This somehow relates to the positive transformation that liminality is associated with (Sankowska & Söderlund, 2015) and the deliberate creation of liminality spaces to enjoy the associated benefits (Pina e Cunha et al., 2008, pp. 956–957).

4.3 | Stage 3: Being on fire!

Half a year into the pandemic. Although most of us still worked from home as we saw again a rise in COVID numbers, I no longer felt anxious when I had to go to the office or when I saw them. Being away from the office, not having to be present in person during working hours, and creating my own safe space at home had a huge impact on my emotions and my mental well-being. I felt good about myself and the work that I did. This empowering shift in how I felt about myself also had a direct impact on how others saw me and my work. I began to receive direct acknowledgments from others, which of course boosted my well-being even further. The compliments kept on coming. In the follow-up meeting with my boss I was told “I am proud of you”, my colleague sent me an email with “You are on a roll” and my co-author was sending me a “GIF” celebrating and telling me I was a star after our paper was accepted in a journal after ONLY one round of revisions. The atmosphere surrounding me changed all of a sudden from being looked at as a failure to being successful and a valuable part of the group. I was invited to join more research activities or asked for support by my junior colleagues. I thought to myself: in academia, we are very quick with judging individuals and putting them into boxes without actually realising their full potential and giving them a chance to grow and explore. But if we receive more encouragement to boost our physical and mental well-being and to celebrate small steps along the way rather than focusing on only quantitative outputs, meaningful change is possible, even while having to play this game of being an “ideal” academic.

(Author 1; Drawing 3)

As the lockdown was in place, I started spending more and more time on LinkedIn to keep up with professional networks and not lose touch with other academics. But this time it was not just chit-chatting in the kitchen or the office corridor with a colleague from my department. The world was open, there were no borders. I engaged in spontaneous conversations with experts in my field from all over the world. “I love your new article, I hope we can do something together one day” - this message



DRAWING 3 We were on fire.

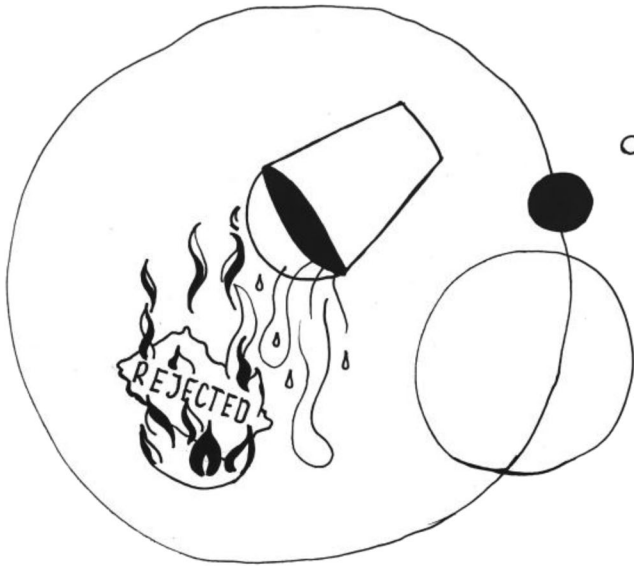
I read on a Monday morning from the person whose academic work I admire made my day! Soon after I was invited as an expert to sit on one of the panels relating to remote work during COVID. Virtual communication, even with often more senior people I have never met in person before, became a standard, something I felt was very natural - like a pre-pandemic coffee with a person in the office next to mine. This was a great feeling. I got that support I always needed and my self-confidence was growing with every small victory of mine.

Author 2

As the pandemic unfolded, our professional interactions no longer created patterns of social exchange and dependency. On the contrary, we felt that informal social networks that involve trust and a sense of belonging have become evident. Powley (2009) suggested that when one enters a liminal state at times of crisis, one can benefit from a temporary suspension of social arrangements that enable alternative social structures and changes in relationships to emerge. That is precisely what happened to us. We no longer experienced the “invisible” wall between us and some senior academics, often living and working in different parts of the world. Unexpectedly, this opened many doors for us that used to be closed and we felt like we were “on fire.” As shown in the following sections, the restrictions and fear for safety caused by the COVID-19 crisis also attenuated the formal relational structures experienced at our institutions and beyond. We would like to demonstrate how it enabled the emergence of “a kind of equality” (see: Powley, 2009, p. 1303) that drew out our latent capacity for attachment and connection and generally brought feelings of positive affect (see: Brass, 1992). Our story turns to this now.

4.4 | Stage 4: Bringing us down to Earth

Finally the email arrived in my inbox. Another rejection. My eyes became watery. I was utterly disappointed in myself. It was data from my PhD and I was still not able to get it published in a journal. I had already sent it to a journal previously without success and I felt that I was reliving the same experience. Reading the reviewers' comments, I felt, “I could have easily done that if they would have given me a second chance.” “Am I the only one who just does not get it right?” Looking at Twitter or LinkedIn, other colleagues seem to publish papers like flies, now more than ever during this pandemic, where everyone was constantly working and praising themselves for their successes. It has become a



DRAWING 4 Rejections are part of the job.

real “show and tell” on these social media sites. Without thinking, I wrote to my close colleague whom I was working with on several COVID-related projects on WhatsApp. Even though she was living in a different country and time zone, she instantly responded and said: “Let’s talk”. And so we did. She told me how many times she was in a similar situation, and that my paper would find a better home in a different journal. Our talk reassured me and I felt relieved. I guess it is “normal” to get a rejection, or multiple rejections, for all of us. The only problem is that we do not talk about this openly enough in academia, maybe because we are embarrassed or ashamed of it, but clearly, it is part of the game.

(Author 1; Drawing 4)

What an awful morning. As I was sipping my coffee, I got a message that my paper was rejected. Another email from the funding body came a few minutes later... I felt excited and full of hope. Such an emotional swing while still having the same coffee! I read it line by line and I couldn't believe it was another rejection, all on the same day! Full of anger I had to put a smile on and give an online lecture on occupational stress. Peppa Pig on, I could start. After an hour my daughter got bored with her favourite TV show. She came to me and started singing a Peppa Pig tone straight into the camera. “Oh no! Occupational stress at its best and I am a real-life example!”. Later in the day, I was internally debating if I am a walking disaster while following the conversation of my new WhatsApp support network - “Academics with Kids”. From the stories they shared, I saw it wasn't easy for them either. That gave me a push to start complaining about my day to let off some steam. I would have never done this in person. There were some senior people from my department in the group that I have never had a chance to talk to before. How surprised was I when everyone cheered me up, they talked about their own rejections and shared stories of their struggles with childcare and work during the lockdown. I felt we were in the same boat, I was not alone.

Author 2

Our experiences show that we were and are still working in a context that was based on a rejection culture, making it difficult to find our place among other “successful” academics. However, during that period, the pandemic helped us to create a shared space with our colleagues. This is what Lafaire et al. (2022) refer to as a point of entry where mutual recognition of our vulnerable selves enabled self-compassion and a more positive view of ourselves. What we found particularly important in these situations was that, while we were dealing with the consequences



of rejection, the neoliberal culture of academia, as well as constant fear for our health, our families, and our future, we also saw other, often senior colleagues, out of their structured roles and as equals, as humans. During the pandemic, we have become more aware of the diverse and sometimes conflicting emotions and life experiences of our colleagues (Corbera et al., 2020). This, in turn, *affected a kind of equality* that contributed to the strong feeling of belonging and being able to equally contribute to meeting the physical, emotional, and social needs of a collective—as equals and with no hierarchy. It was our state of liminal suspension (Powley, 2009), a stage where concern for safety and compassion took precedence over structured roles and positions (see, De Coster, 2020).

Having found ourselves in this new and insecure context but also having the encouragement of others, we were able to build up our strength to show that we can be productive and able to combine our professional and personal lives by setting clear boundaries if necessary, that we do not need to be part of the pessimistic narrative about the fate of female academics during the pandemic (Fazackerley, 2020). As we move toward the final stage of our journey, it was also the time when we were able to define our identity at that time as “on-the-move” and we became transitional liminars (see: Ybema et al., 2011).

4.5 | Stage 5: Becoming part of “a collective”

I finally felt that I had arrived where I wanted to be. I was doing meaningful work with mostly female colleagues who had my back and supported me personally as well as professionally. I would have never made it so far without their encouragement. The many WhatsApp interactions or Zoom calls, some past working hours and on weekends. The chance to show my vulnerability, and my inner self by letting off steam, sharing my worries, and complaining about work and life in general. During this pandemic, I was able to deepen my contact with colleagues, now turned friends, beyond borders, time zones, or seniority level. I feel part of a community, a community I had built myself, with people who believe in me or my capabilities and who opened the doors to work on exciting projects. Although I felt stuck at the bottom of a mountain when entering this pandemic after that performance review, I was proud of whom I had become with encouragement from individuals who never gave up on believing in me. While I have started to climb this mountain, I acknowledge that I am just at the beginning of it, and have now joined other colleagues on a long hike realising that the aim of it is not to reach the top the fastest, but rather choosing a shared path that fits us best as a collective.

(Author 1; Drawing 5)

We were all locked in our houses, but, paradoxically, we have never been that close. I no longer felt there was a wall between me and more senior academics. I started the day with a TEAMS meeting with one of the professors who was always keen to share with me his wisdom and advice on navigating the maze of academia. I then exchanged a few emails with another professor who helped me organise a research visit to Australia when the lockdown is over. The good thing about lockdown is that you choose whom you interact with. I talked to people who gave me energy and showed genuine support. In the afternoon I talked to my colleague from Poland. Distance is no longer a problem, we have TEAMS. We talked about our paper, but the discussion quickly turned to the topic of living alone in the UK. As the pandemic hit, we couldn't have travelled freely to visit our parents and siblings back home. As I shyly shared my intention to return to Poland, without a second thought I was offered help. At that time I did not know what to do. But as I went to bed thinking about potentially another big move for me and my family, I quickly checked on my “Academics with Kids” - it was my daily routine then. To my surprise, a colleague said she is leaving the UK to go back home, and everyone was so happy for her. This gave me a push, I already knew what my next step would be. I finally had the courage to welcome a new phase in my career and in my life.

Author 2



DRAWING 5 We left the bubble by being part of the collective.

At last, our “bubble” has burst. Two years into the pandemic, the time that others see as unprecedented collective trauma (Stanley et al., 2021). However, if we reflect on our journey, we can say that under more relaxed managerial control practices, we felt more autonomy to manage our academic career in the direction we wanted it to take. Or as Yarberry and Sims, (2021, p. 245), call it, we felt compelled to take control of our own work, build confidence, and assume power over personal circumstances. For instance, working remotely has broken down barriers related to physical distance. Pre-pandemic, we would never have thought to contact a senior lecturer from Australia to join us on a project. This appeared more justifiable at the time often referred to as the global experiment of working remotely (Kniffin et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2021). Equally, more established colleagues reached out to us. We brainstormed, submitted successful funding applications, worked on papers, or edited a special issue. It was a valuable learning process for us as we were working with senior colleagues who shared their experiences and helped us to navigate the maze of academia during these challenging times. Not only did they share helpful advice, but they also gave us opportunities to advance. We both felt that our contribution was more valued by others. Who would have thought that both of us would be writing a book with recognized professors who believe in us and see us as equals? Crossing a limen and no longer feeling trapped in an occupational limbo is a pleasant or empowering feeling. And the best thing about it is that you are not in it by yourself. You are surrounded by others, and you know that you can count on one another and have an equal share of success along the way.

5 | CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Our pandemic story may not resonate with every female early career academic. However, we hope it can facilitate a space for discussion and future research beyond the more lonely experiences shared by others and demonstrate that academia can be a collective, joyful, and fulfilling space (Kern et al., 2014) within the set boundaries. By situating ourselves, as researchers, at the intersection of an autoethnographic inquiry and scientific work, not only new ways of writing but also new ways of thinking emerge (see: Grafström & Jonsson, 2020). This is because we proactively welcome the opportunity to become confronted with questions and perspectives that challenge us to think “outside of the box” and influence our ability to render “visible” implicit meanings. We move away from leading the reader into an idealized understanding of a linear academic career progression—away from the everyday problems and messy dilemmas everyone experiences. Rather, we encourage our audience to seek extraordinary viewpoints in an accessible and engaging way. For instance, by inviting the reader to enter our space in the form of personal vignettes, which can be “understood,

valued, cherished and passed around from reader to reader" (Pullen et al., 2020, p. 3). Our aim is to stimulate dialog by linking creative and logical thinking together and to bring new insights to theory (Bjursell, 2020) and its application.

At the beginning of our story, we were trapped in a "bubble", unable to cross the limen to the elevated status of "proper academics." We felt like inexperienced scholars who did not fully understand the rules of the academic game (Kalfa et al., 2018) that had to be played in the context of a neoliberal business school environment, "dark academia" characterized by commercialization, cut-throat careerism, and a myopic focus on outputs (see Fleming, 2020). However, that suddenly changed at the least expected time of all, when the global pandemic struck. While the pandemic physically isolated us from our workplace and colleagues, it has freed us from a hindering working environment and allowed us to reflect on what is important to us in our careers, and enabled the emergence of "*a kind of equality*" (see, Powley, 2009) by tearing down hierarchical structures that led to caring and supporting collegial relationships, which empowered us to adapt to adverse situations. Despite a dominating narrative that sees the competition and not collaboration as the key to individual and organizational success (Jamjoom, 2021, p. 14), we feel lucky to be surrounded by peers with whom we have built a collective environment where we share our work burden and also smaller and more significant successes.

While we have left the occupational limbo and now enjoy the state of transitional liminality, the major obstacle is just around the corner. Having both started jobs as Assistant Professors at different universities and country contexts (one of us back in their home country), we have embarked on the "unbroken" career path of the "ideal academic" (Bosanquet et al., 2017). We feel stronger, more confident, and independent, but we also have to demonstrate that we belong outside of the occupational limbo "bubble," so that we are not "forgotten" (e.g., Capps & Carlin, 2010). This sort of creates a perpetual vicious cycle—if we do not prove that we deserve to have this status, we could easily lose it. Indeed, Bothello and Roulet (2019) rightly noted that early-career academics often need to live with constant self-doubt and a fear that they will someday lose all credibility they have worked for.

Thus, to demonstrate our "value," we aim to lead by example. By engaging and collaborating with others we hope that students acknowledge that working in a group is much more rewarding than as an individual, despite the challenges it may bring. We want to emphasize the value of collaborative learning and teaching, engage in dialogs and conversations with faculty and students, and trigger the development of realistic policies and procedures. Only by challenging the rules of the neoliberal academy as a collective, can our fire continue to burn, and we stay on track to become professors. This demands that we are stricter with ourselves, establish clear boundaries between home and work, and take a mental pause when necessary. As academics, we must recognize that every day, every week, every month, and every year may be different and that productivity has different shapes and sizes. In doing so, we urge our readers to literally reassess the current productivity standards, which leave us overburdened with unrealistic expectations that regularly lead to stress and anxiety and, ultimately, result in an increased focus on quantity over quality in our research endeavors. Most importantly, all of us are in the same boat. Collaboration in academia allows us not only to benefit from new ideas and insights but also helps to foster a sense of community and belonging. This, however, can be easily destroyed by the existing system of rewards and recognition, which is largely individualistic (Harmon, 2006). Collective rewards, such as co-authorship of articles and shared funding for research projects, can lead to increased levels of trust and cooperation and can foster a sense of collective responsibility for sustainable and ethical research. It is important to note that academia is not just an isolated place, where everyone takes care of themselves (Rehbock et al., 2021), but it can be a place where people help each other in order to make a difference (Szulc, 2020) beyond the boundaries of the neoliberal academy. In line with other scholars (Corbera et al., 2020; De Coster, 2020), in this environment and as part of this collective, we hope to lay the grounds for more respectful and sustainable academic practices beyond pandemic times.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

I declare that this manuscript is original and that it has not been published before or is under review elsewhere. There is also no conflict of interest associated with this paper, and my co-author and I are the only authors of this manuscript.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

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

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