

Grieving academic grant rejections: Examining funding failure and experiences of loss

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Abstract

Bidding for research funding has increasingly become a main feature of academic work from the doctoral level and beyond. Individually and collectively, the process of grant writing – from idea conceptualisation to administration – involves considerable work, including emotional work in imagining possible futures in which the project is enacted. Competition and failure in grant capture are high, yet there is little discussion about how academics experience grant rejections. In this article we draw on our experiences with grant rejections, as authors with diverse social science backgrounds working with death and bereavement, to discuss how grant rejection can be conceptualised as a form of loss and lead to feelings of grief. We end by considering what forms of recognition and support this may enable.

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Introduction

In the autumn of 2020, Marian Krawczyk shared a post on Twitter announcing her ambitious research grant application was unsuccessful, and how this ‘sucked’. Somewhat to her surprise, there was significant online response about how common this experience is – both the rejection and emotional responses to ‘unsuccessful’ grant applications. During this year and since, as a group of social scientists working on death, dying, end of life care and bereavement, we regularly met online to provide social support during the pandemic. The tweet, and the responses, prompted a lively group discussion about how we might acknowledge these rejections and ‘failure’ in a way that felt more productive than we had so far experienced in our careers and within wider academic culture, including through a lens of grief and loss. Consequently, we found the collective group discussions enabled us to hold space for a recognition that grant writing entails more than just the creation and packaging of ideas. This article was born out of and reflects these conversations, which we share here to both understand the experience and emotions of unsuccessful funding applications, and to offer ideas for how else we may respond to grant failure within academia.

We recognise that academic work is full of moments of ‘failure’ (Clark & Sousa, 2020). Indeed, grant funding is not the only arena in which academics may experience ‘failure’, ‘rejection’ or be ‘unsuccessful’. Applicants to undergraduate courses can experience rejection, article writing can be perilous, as well as job applications and experience of precarity within a highly skilled sector. There is a growing body of literature that explores academic ‘failures’ (Edwards & Ashkanasy, 2018; Holdsworth, 2020; Turner, 2020; Wood et al., 1992). Some of this literature is aimed at normalising a sense of failure and building scholars’ resilience within a highly competitive system that has escalating expectations of necessary achievements to ensure job security. As noted by Harrison in relation to navigating grief in academic jobs, ‘Academia rewards those who can make hardship invisible, who can be productive amid and despite crisis’ (Harrison, 2021, p. 699). There is little written however about this particular type of failure: ‘unsuccessful’ grant applications. In this article, we draw on our academic field of dying, death and bereavement, along with our own experiences, to explore and reframe these experiences as ones of *loss*. This enables us to bring an understanding of grief into the discussion as a normal reaction to loss (Jacobsen & Petersen, 2019; Thompson, 2022). It is not our intention here to equate unsuccessful grant applications with the loss of life; rather, our aim is to highlight that experiencing ‘failure’ in these contexts is about more than rejection or lack of success.

In this article we articulate the collective effort we have made to share and theorise our experiences with each other and discuss the potentialities for how academics at all career levels, as individuals and collectives, may respond to such losses. Using and reflecting on unsuccessful grant applications as a form enabled us to use the lenses of grief theories and death studies to make sense of these experiences. Such an approach

allows us to reveal and critically discuss the socially constructed expectations about normative behaviours that circulate around grant writing and loss, just as there exists around grief. We provide examples of the ways in which grant rejection can be dealt with through grieving. Our aim is two-fold: to contribute to an academic culture that recognises the human and emotional aspects of our work, and to support the work of grieving diverse forms of loss.

Background

University policies draw upon the discourses and practices of market-economy to gauge and compare their ‘excellence’ (e.g. in the UK Research Excellence Framework and in the Excellence in Research for Australia framework). A particular feature of institutional ‘excellence’ is the income awarded by ‘prestigious’ external research funding bodies. Research income from external grants – including from government, research councils or philanthropic sources – has therefore become a vital metric of an individual researcher’s success, particularly in contexts of decreased direct state support for higher education and research (Edwards, 2022; Moore et al., 2017; Roumbanis, 2021). Research income from external grants has become an exemplar metric of an individual researcher’s success (Moore et al., 2017), and is crucial for promotion and job security. As Cannizzo (2018) notes, research-related activities, compared to other tasks, are most commonly valorised by academics.

However, some argue that the concept of ‘excellence’ has become not only valorised, but fetishised by university institutions (Moore et al., 2017), shifting scientific research from vocation to game in the pursuit of higher positioning in international research rankings. What has emerged is a landscape characterised by increased competition – between or within fields, disciplines and individual researchers – for increasingly scarce resources. It is important to note that institutional frameworks of performance metrics and quantifiable measures of esteem and standing are tied up with individual efforts to secure external funding to support not only a researcher’s ideas, projects and their own professional identity, but also their colleagues and institutional infrastructures (Dollinger, 2020).

Recent years have seen a decrease in success rates for funded research (commonly below 25%) (Australian Research Council, n.d.; Economic and Social Research Council [ESRC], 2018; *Times Higher Education*, 2021), arguably, and somewhat paradoxically, adding to the valorisation of funding as a key metric of ‘success’ or ‘excellence’. Diminishing funding pools also mean that a considerable amount of meritorious research, proposed by high quality researchers, goes unfunded (Von Hippel & Von Hippel, 2015; Wood et al., 1992), and that much of research time goes into writing grants that do not get funded. Estimates suggest that 75% of social science researchers do not receive external funding (Edwards, 2022), despite high rates of participation in grant application processes. While submission processes vary, preparing a grant application commonly requires significant labour – weeks and months if not years of preparation. As such, the collective time ‘wasted’ on unsuccessful applications has been calculated to be hugely significant (Barnett et al., 2015; Herbert et al., 2013).

There is widespread acknowledgement that resource allocation processes are flawed, idiosyncratic or opaque (Fang & Casadevall, 2016; Herbert et al., 2013; Moore et al.,

2017; Roumbanis, 2021). Moreover, the persistence of unequal and inequitable distribution of funding, to ‘top’ universities, or according to gender and/or ethnicity, is well-established (Jebsen et al., 2020; Larregue & Nielsen, 2023; Ley & Hamilton, 2008; Moore et al., 2017). Even for researchers leading their respective fields, securing sustained research funding is thus often unrealistic, with high statistical probabilities of failure, including for those with ‘more chance’ given previous funding success (Von Hippel & Von Hippel, 2015). What has emerged is a system in which applying for grants is deemed necessary for success yet researchers are highly unlikely to achieve this success. As such, many researchers are likely to spend considerable time crafting ideas and futures that have a high likelihood of not existing.

Using grief theories to understand and problematise experiences of grant rejection

Within death studies and related disciplines ‘loss’ can refer to situations in which something (or someone) who is important no longer features in one’s life or is missing (Thompson, 2022). Since this entity was important for knowing the self and how to make sense of the world, loss not only is about a missing relationship, but confronts people existentially (Ratcliffe, 2023). Grief psychotherapist Samuel writes that, ‘The essence of grief is that we are forced, through death [or loss], to confront a reality we inherently reject’ (2018, p. xviii). This is particularly acute when people have an emotional investment, or cathexis, to the entity that is lost.

There are a range of grief and bereavement models that have been developed over the last hundred years. Some are more commonly known, such as Freud’s focus on grief work (Freud, 1917), involving detaching from the ‘lost’ object (see also Lindemann, 1994), or Kübler-Ross’s (1969) work on dying and the notion of stages of grief that change over time (see also Bowlby, 1969; Rando, 1993; Stroebe & Schut, 1999). There are countless more theories, grounded in sociological understandings of grief, such as *continuing bonds* (Klass et al., 1996; Valentine, 2008), which articulates the slow changing of the relationship with the deceased over time, and *disenfranchised grief* (Cesur-Soysal & Ari, 2022; Doka, 1989; Lindemann, 1994), which can be used to better understand social and cultural norms and expectations of ‘appropriate’ mourning and grieving. Here we purposely do not focus on describing specific models of grief or how to grieve in depth, as each is limited for explaining the diversity of human experience around loss. Yet, collectively, such theorising shows that grief is a fluctuating affective state characterised not only by emotional responses to loss, but also encompasses physical, socio-cultural, epistemological and environmental dimensions. Importantly for the context of this article, is how grief requires ongoing emotional and affective labour and often has social norms associated with it in terms of ‘how to appropriately grieve’ (even if these norms are resisted, challenged or deemed unhelpful). Moreover, we note how grief is not just about emotional responses to loss, but also involves various social and structural dimensions.

Sociological studies have shown how grief shapes identity, as losses simultaneously close down some possibilities for being and shape the pathway for other ideas of self (Ellis, 2013; Jacobsen & Petersen, 2019; Lund, 2021; Walter, 1996). This a pertinent

point in academic research spheres, where our ideas are inextricably entwined with our personal identity. A rejection of our ideas can therefore be at once a professional setback and a profoundly personal rejection.

Methods

We came together as a small international collective of interdisciplinary researchers on death, dying and bereavement through online video calls starting in 2020. These calls were intended as a place to share updates from our latest projects and foster ongoing and new collaborations. The group is mixed across career stages from early career researchers to established professors, all of whom have been actively involved in grant writing within the past few years, but have not necessarily met before (the common denominator was knowing Erica Borgstrom). All of us have been successful in securing grant funding – in several instances prestigious and/or large grants and fellowships. Many of us have also been external evaluators for grant applications. The informal nature of the meetings was such that everyone is invited to share their research highs (including new papers published, new jobs, promotions) and lows, trouble-shoot problems, contribute ideas and gain motivation from the group. Over time, each of us shared individual stories of being deeply involved in grant development, often hopeful and full of passion, but also weariness about the process. As a collective, we identified and sympathised with each other's stories, and reflected on how academic work and personal identity and energies are inexorably intertwined. Inevitably, many (although not all) of these stories later developed into ones of 'failure' or 'rejection' as grant applications were not successful, and as imagined projects became 'lost opportunities', at least in the present. We shared a range of feelings about these outcomes and about the normative institutional response of which encourages 'resilience', 'regrouping', 'repurposing' and 'recycling' the ideas for future grants. Whilst we understood these responses as ones that were fit for a system reliant on grant funding, we found that in this group we were able to hold space for a recognition that grant writing entails more than the creation and packaging of ideas. We found that notions of grief and loss were common across all our accounts and so we began to think through these experiences using different social framings of grief.

The entire practice has been a form of autoethnography, examining self-experience situated in institutional contexts (Edwards, 2021). Methodologically, our analysis and writing processes were communal and iterative, developing over more than a year. Erica initially encouraged everyone to write short reflective pieces about their experiences and related feelings of grant writing in a shared online document. Other group members then added comments and questions. During our regular calls we discussed, among other issues, what meaning about grants rejection we were trying to create and how our experiences linked to wider academic practice, spotting trends or commonalities across our reflections. We expanded by adding recent and past grant writing experiences, from small projects to individual fellowships and to larger projects complete with multi-institutional collaborations and intended future employment for early career researchers. We then held dedicated video calls to discuss this in more depth and we recorded and transcribed one session, unattributed quotes from which are included below. Overall, we drew inspiration from Evans et al. (2017) about engaging in group 'uncomfortable

reflexivity' to think about our multiple positionings in the grant writing process, the emotional labour, and individual and collective experiences. As we conducted autoethnography with all participants as authors, the project did not undergo formal ethical review. However, we maintained open group dialogue to check ongoing consent for involvement in each stage and reflection on ethical practices (see also Ryerson University Research Ethics Board [2017] for ethical guidelines for conducting autoethnographic research).

In our discussion of grief, we were careful not to equate grant writing with, or the failure of a grant proposal, to be the same as the death of someone. Instead, we used death studies as the lens through which to make sense of our experiences of grant rejection, recognising that there are limitations to grief models as well as parallels that can help us make sense both of the process and experience of loss as well as the social constructs around how grief 'should' be experienced. We drew on a wide range of grief theories and models, acknowledging that no single one encapsulated all experiences. We found that mobilising them provided us with another way to think about grant experiences and the wider academic practice and communities we are part of, foregrounding the relational and social.

Thinking and talking through grant loss and grief

In this section, we provide several examples of how we made sense of the various 'losses' that we experienced through grant failure and how reactions to this loss resemble grief or can be made sense of as grief. This includes the emotions of loss, being a good loser, and the ripple effects of funding failure. In what follows we include excerpts from our reflective writing and conversations, which we have chosen to not attribute to specific authors.

Failed grants as hungry ghosts: The emotions of loss

We begin by providing insight into some of the emotions expressed in our group as we explored a range of reactions and responses to the announcement of unsuccessful grant applications – both our own and others'. For our group, this included anger, bewilderment, hopelessness, self-pity, and even uncertainty about how to feel – summed up as: 'Gutted, disappointed, angry, furious, at loss and hopeless, not knowing how to feel and query if being able to feel one's feelings'. At times we also expressed feelings of relief (although rarely joy) at being unsuccessful, especially when the proposed project was no longer deemed exciting or no longer felt like a good career fit. Some even noted the relief of realising that such 'failure' meant avoiding the additional processes of further rounds of proposal writing, and if successful, project administration. We also noted that feelings related to the loss were not limited to the initial period of hearing that one was unsuccessful, but also that there may be potential 'stages' of grief over time and within specific events (perhaps a form of pastiche of the defined emotional stages of the Kübler-Ross model). This was particularly noted when and in the way that news of unsuccessful grants and feedback are shared; feedback, if any, could be months after the initial news. Whilst some feedback from funders or assessors may rationalise the lack of success, at

other times it was an unwelcome reminder which required further emotional labour, sometimes months after the initial decision was made:

. . . I also think about these stages of grief in terms of you . . . were rejected, and then later, you get the feedback . . . [so I] had to do it [processing the loss] all again . . . to me, [that] really made it hard again.

We also noted that the way in which news and feedback are shared, if at all, can influence the feelings people experienced. This included their feelings of to what extent they can 'legitimately' share or express it as a loss, depending on context and social expectations of the 'lottery nature' of funding. Whilst some feedback may rationalise being unsuccessful, other times it made the loss more difficult to accept and could feel unfair.

I was like OK, well if I got rejected on the right reasons that's fine, but if they didn't read it and then this anger came up and this also this worry with, you know, could [I] have gotten luckier with who read this or how much time they did have to read it and this this whole bad luck . . .

The excerpt above reveals the difficulty in accepting bad news. Whilst the dying and grief literature often talks about bad news and acceptance (Borgstrom et al., 2013; Prigerson & Maciejewski, 2008; Zimmermann, 2012), in our discussions we often noted how feelings of acceptance (or lack thereof) often gave way to a broader sense of resignation. We reflected on feeling an expectation in academia to act as if a loss has been accepted and emotionally resolved; however, our frank discussions revealed that this may not necessarily be the case. Rather than incorporate the loss into our ongoing academic identities, they become a shadow, or as joked in one meeting, like 'a hungry ghost'. For some of us there was also open acknowledgement that ongoing grant loss(es) at times affected feelings of self-worth and confidence across a wide range of work settings and activities. Experiencing unsuccessful grants as a personal failure, rather than being 'unlucky', has been evidenced also in research with fixed-term employees who often expressed a lack of agency (Loveday, 2018a).

Moreover, different processes and unfolding of time around grant loss could bring up different emotions. We noticed how we anticipate failure, where even before a grant is submitted, we experience feelings linked to loss. The following excerpt illustrates how the cognitive and emotional work that grant writing entails can be given meaning through examination of other forms of ambivalent striving in the face of 'futility'.

[There is a] kind of anticipated futility of the amount of detail and work that you need to put into the application. And it got me thinking about that kind of anticipatory grief in terms of hope and despair . . . thinking, do I need to budget for something in this much detail when I'm not going to get it? And the like, the chances are so slim that it's highly unlikely that this will go anywhere. And yet we still find ourselves going through the motions of doing everything that we can, which really struck a chord with me in terms of like terminal illness and those last kind of cycles of . . . treatment and the diminishing returns of options and the less and less hope that people go through. And that pursuit of anything and everything in terms of those details despite futility.

Precarity in academia is well documented and for many postdoctoral researchers grant applications are a means to continued employment. Anticipating loss, along with trying to maintain hope in a system that requires most applicants to be unsuccessful, formed a key ambiguity in terms of our emotional responses. Of course, within the system, the more pressure felt to submit grants, the more likely success rates are to decrease (due to higher numbers of submissions) (Wood et al., 1992).

A final point here that emerged from our conversations was about *sharing* our emotions. We noted that while it was not always easy to identify or articulate emotions, there could be a benefit in doing so in relation to grant loss. 'It's something about grief, [that] needs to be witnessed to be healed, and that sharing is improving that.' This was further made sense of in our conversations about seeing how expression and appreciation of emotions was only possible in specific spaces. Ultimately, we challenged ourselves by noting the willingness of academics to endlessly produce and perform specific normative 'front stage' (Goffman, 1959) emotional orientations/affective stances while keeping others hidden 'back stage'. This is key because the latter emotional labour is foundational to the successful accumulation of value and capital in universities.

Being a 'good loser' and 'productive loser'

Within death and bereavement studies there are long traditions of studying what people do after they experience a loss: the rituals, who they interact with and when, the language used to express both loss and condolence, and even how bonds with the deceased are maintained or severed (Bloch & Parry, 2012; Klass et al., 1996). Much of this covers social and cultural expectations and actions which can be different across time and place. We, too, have observed that there are expectations around experiencing and communicating loss in terms of unsuccessful grants. For example, we have all been subject to a strong narrative of 'moving on' when a grant is unsuccessful.

So basically silent acceptance of this is just the way it is and therefore move on. And ironically I also found this 'moving on' lingo in my own responses over time. This is a part of how you know you've been socialised in academia right? You're just supposed to move on. It is supposed to be something that you know [how to do] . . .

On one level, this encourages us to not dwell on what was 'unsuccessful' as a way of minimising our emotional experience of pain, particularly within professional cultures where drawing attention to failure are antithetical to professionalism. Moreover, there is a strong narrative here of not further losing productivity – that there is other work that needs to be tended to even if, or more importantly now because, a grant was unsuccessful. Overwhelmingly, this loss is pitched as 'normal' and therefore learning how to 'move on' is vital for being ultimately 'successful' as an academic.

To counter the notion that unsuccessful grants were somehow time *not well spent*, there is much discussion about how applications (and ideas) can be 'recycled' or 'repurposed'. Whilst we can appreciate why this is encouraged, especially within institutions that seek to standardise outputs, we note how this can simultaneously minimise the sense of loss an individual (or team) may experience. This was articulated as such:

. . . so many people try to respond by more than just saying: 'oh you must be disappointed'. It's like this move from 'Okay, this is terrible, but there's life and work after this'. There is a new value to your work. 'You could re-purpose it. It's not lost!' It's like in trying to make something of the loss that [is] simultaneously denying it.

These culturally prevalent expectations, and indeed what we may expect of ourselves, in the context of being unsuccessful with a grant is that the work put into grant writing – from ideas to the physical words on the page – must find a new outlet, whether for a new grant application, for a publication, for new professional networks or in some form of *impact*. Yet, for many, the precarity of fixed-term contracts, competing for work, potential changes of career pathways (often due to lack of funding) meant that such transformation of 'unsuccessful' ideas may be very difficult. The narrative of repurpose/recycle is therefore limited in acknowledging the capacity that academics may have to engage in such work. Moreover, it amplifies the focus on an instrumental productivity, whilst marginalising recognition of the emotional costs of producing grant applications.

The call to perform as a 'good loser' was a core aspect of expected responses to grant application failure that we reflected upon. In some instances, this included having to manage one's own disappointment and feelings of loss in a context of celebrating the success of others, such as when grants are announced on the same day,

So you're finding out that you failed at the same time there's kind of people in the same corridor or wherever, or finding out that they've succeeded, and so there's that aspect of kind of suppression and repression because you want to be a sort of good loser in the face of congratulating everyone else on their success.

The conduct required of us as academics is one positive affect and stoicism, especially in collegial contexts where others may be pleased by their own results. This need to perform as a good loser applied in team contexts, for example when a principal investigator – after a moment of ruefulness – felt the imperative to express dogged optimism as a way of maintaining team morale and hope. In this sense we noted that academics' affective states are not valued unless they are 'productive', both normatively and financially. Much like other service industries built on affective labour – particularly care industries – academics often struggle to find the time and space to deal with loss and face normative constraints on grief expression at work. Academics are not only asked to produce positive affects, but also to subordinate the 'bad feelings' that arise alongside this work. Feminists have long identified how this production of 'appropriate' orientations and suppression of 'inappropriate' orientations benefits capital infrastructures yet may have long-term consequences (Hochschild, 1979, 1983). In other contexts, the inability to process a loss is linked to creating trauma (Harvey & Miller, 2000). In academia currently, the social expectations around unsuccessful grant applications mean that people may not be supported to honour the time, effort and grief experienced, and instead need to outwardly perform collegiality and productivity.

Who should be grieving a loss and how they should be grieving has been subject of significant attention in social sciences, both in terms of social norms and in how such expectations can affect individuals. For example, those who experience social situations

where their grief is not recognised or legitimised may be disenfranchised, from both their internal emotional states and social validation of the loss (Bento, 1994; Lang et al., 2011). Studies have also documented perceived hierarchies of grief (Robson & Walter, 2013) with the corresponding notion that some people are more *deserving* to display and express grief, or to have their loss recognised as legitimate. In the context of grants, we found that applicants are subject to normative expectations within academic hierarchies and that this at times could lead them feeling disenfranchised from feelings of loss, disassociated from the emotional labour of managing that loss, and rendering others' expressions of sympathy for that loss as embarrassment.

The ripple effects of funding failure

Another theme revealed in our conversations was the broader ripple effects, or consequences, of funding failure. While the emotions of loss, and the normative constructions of a 'productive' loser permeated our experiences, feelings of frustration and resignation were often linked to such ripple effects: namely, how the time, relationships and professional identities wrapped up in developing grant writing and applying for funding felt compromised, lost, or even wasted. For example,

. . . about the bonds we have to create with people or the relationships that then somehow if the grant is unsuccessful sometimes just get severed right? . . . I know I often experience guilt of trying to maintain those relationships after an unsuccessful bid, but there's only so much maintaining of multiple relationships one can do . . . it's not just like the projects that's lost and having to be invested in, but those all of those relationships [as well].

Grant failure (or indeed success) reveals the privileging of institutional norms related to time, achievement and productivity at work. Being unsuccessful with a grant application can feel like it 'undoes' this work or retrospectively delegitimises and devalues the work that had been done and the relationships that had been developed. It certainly reifies what Nash (2019) terms the 'grey area' of bureaucracy – between marketising and socialising – that increases in the incalculable time and workload of applying for funding among a range of other grey aspects of contemporary academic citizenship. In an increasingly 'output' oriented academic environment the rejection of a grant proposal inevitably equals time that could have been spent elsewhere and perhaps 'more productively'. Importantly we noted during our discussions that the labour and time invested into unsuccessful grants are often made invisible: in many instances, unsuccessful grants are neither listed, nor counted, nor acknowledged as a loss.

Our conversation about time echoes findings in previous research. Herbert and colleagues (Herbert et al., 2013, 2014) found that, on average, preparation of new proposals took 38 working days of researcher time (see also Von Hippel & Von Hippel, 2015). Applying for research funding impacts work and family relationships and is stressful and tiring (along with – ideally – rewarding) (Herbert et al., 2014). Given that the majority of academic roles do not allocate significant work hours for grant writing, funding applications (and deadlines) also significantly impact on academic workloads (Herbert et al., 2014). Importantly then, academics may also experience loss and/or regret when

reflecting on how they ‘managed grant writing’ time alongside time commitments for other responsibilities and activities. This may be particularly pronounced amidst the promise of future success through grants: make sacrifices *now* to improve future prospects.

For us, it was not only time that was lost, but also the concern that some ideas were at risk of being lost or not being fully explored: ‘those lost ideas that you never got to unfold . . . You know, the life they never lived.’ We noticed that sometimes these ‘unsuccessful’ ideas would appear later when another academic was successful in a similar area of scholarship. This resonated with some people’s experiences of loss more widely in how grief can resurface at unpredictable moments, reminding one of the connection one had to the idea and grant writing. For instance,

. . . or someone else gets a grant on a similar thing [that you have worked on] . . . and it kind of brings back that whole kind of intellectual pursuit of a particular thing that obviously at that time you did feel was really important. And important enough for you to put a lot of work into it, but wasn’t feasible to like, pursue and then just like you might pick up, you know, a piece of like an object in the house that might remind you of someone that you’ve lost. You come across ideas that are similar enough that remind you of the ones that you lost in that way . . .

Collectively, we discussed a series of losses associated with the activity of applying for funding. The loss of relationships that were vital to grant writing, and the challenge of determining if one maintains them or not after a project is unsuccessful securing funding. In the next section, we explore the notion of loss further focusing on the notion of future and one’s career.

Another key ripple effect, a kind of loss that all of us acutely felt, for ourselves and others, was the loss of professional identity, both now and in an imagined future. This was particularly linked to ‘key career grants’, such as fellowships, grants that would lead to secure a permanent post/promotion, and/or grants that would help secure junior colleagues’ ongoing career in a precarious job market. An important aspect of these futures is the self-identified future as an academic. Being successful with grants has become tied up with a particular notion of what a ‘good’ or ‘successful’ academic is, and that ‘set-backs’ at different career stages challenge this identity and even future employability. For example,

It was very much like ‘well, if I don’t get that [grant] I don’t know if I have a job right . . . Not only was my idea tied up into the fellowship . . . but my sense of who I was going to be as an academic or could be . . . [now] there is that sense that I’m not going to have that same trajectory.

Social theorists have contributed numerous insights into the ways by which socio-political and structural issues inflect everyday lived realities, which we see happening here. Conceptualising grant loss requires an understanding of professional academic identities, forms of resistance, compliance and meaning-making in everyday (research) work (Billot, 2010; Edwards, 2022; Henkel, 2005, 2009). It demands consideration of the dynamics and expectations of individualised (and individualising) ideas related

to resilience, entrepreneurialism, productivity, tangled up with broader rhetorics of ‘success’ and ‘quality’ (Edwards, 2022), and how these are tied up with academic identity. Conceptualising the lived experience of grant failure also makes visible the private and ‘personal’ experiences common to many academics.

Perceived loss of future and identity are common in grief theories (Davies, 2020; Harris et al., 2021; Maccallum, 2022; cf. Ellis, 2013), as loss can trigger a sense of biographical disruption. The notion of biographical disruption was originally coined to discuss the experience of those with chronic or life-limiting illness that is perceived to impact one’s social and cultural experiences and challenge one’s self-identity (Bury, 1982). It has subsequently also been used to talk about experiences of bereavement. Within the literature, there is a notion that repair is possible and can be done through a range of activities, including the use of narrative (Peri et al., 2016; Petersen & Jacobsen, 2018); this is similar to wider expectations of social norms and grief work (Stroebe, 1993), and links to our earlier discussion of the productivity imperative, to recycle, repurpose or reformulate ‘failed’ ideas and applications.

Implications for the future: Doing unsuccessful grants differently

Our experiences of unsuccessful grant applications within academia resonate beyond our own collective. Beyond the time, energy and money ‘wasted’ in applications that are ultimately unsuccessful, we have also noted the emotional and social impact that such experiences can have as well as the potential career loss that people may experience. These impacts and losses are also not equally distributed in academia or the communities in which their research could have a positive impact. For example, a growing body of information shows how scholars of colour and women are less likely to receive funding (see for example Larregue & Nielsen, 2023; Zelzer, 2022), including when proposed projects could support marginalised groups, and that equity, diversity and inclusion issues within the sector are a factor in people opting to be independent researchers (Boelman et al., 2021). The collective opportunity cost imposed on researchers has significant and detrimental consequences for both individuals and also the quality of research outputs nationally and internationally. Moreover, persistent demoralisation has been shown to drive away researchers from academic fields, undermining the potential for valuable research and research leadership for future generations (Von Hippel & Von Hippel, 2015). Thinking about unsuccessful grant applications as a point of failure does not only signify ways in which the current academic system may be broken, but also the human cost. Over the past decade there has been an increasing amount of discussion, and indeed funded activity, to explore how academia (and applying for/allocation of funding) could be done differently (e.g. Holdsworth, 2020; Vaesen & Katzav, 2017). Here we will focus on three narratives and how our own attempts to do things differently – by considering the onto-politics of academia – add to these.

The first narrative is one of resistance, where critiques centre on the metric-focused nature of academia, particularly in highlighting grants as the apex of the problem through the emphasis on ‘excellence’ and how to manoeuvre within and/or resist such systems (e.g. Burrows, 2012; Moore et al., 2017). This narrative reflects two reactions that we encountered within our academic circles. Firstly, we have all had colleagues or

universities advise us on how unsuccessful grants can be made ‘useful’: papers can come from literature reviews conducted when scoping the field during grant writing, collaborations can be part of impact case studies. Indeed, we are not unaware of the irony that this article could be used as an example of ‘making something’ of funding failure. Whilst these actions do not actively resist the metrics that have come to govern our work, they turn the work that was focused on one type of desired output (successful grant application) into others that have (less) institutional value. Additionally, people commonly suggested that some of the ‘wasted’ time put into unsuccessful grants can be ‘salvaged’ by resubmitting the following year (though often subject to strict eligibility conditions) or submitting to alternative agencies (Herbert et al., 2014). Even the language used to describe these strategies (e.g. ‘salvaging’, ‘recycling’, ‘repurposing’) reflects the imperative for individual researchers to reconcile their various work-related tasks as ‘useful’ or ‘productive’, evoking the administrative efficiency reflective of the marketisation of universities (Nash, 2019). In questioning what productivity should look like, proponents of ‘slow academia’ (Ashencaen Crabtree et al., 2020; Berkowitz & Delacour, 2020; Chambers & Gearhart, 2019; Stengers, 2016) and a queer sociology (Moussawi & Vidal-Ortiz, 2020) attempt to resist the intensified (masculinist) pressure to produce, slowing the pace expected in academia and encouraging a focus on alternative definitions of success and quality beyond metrics and the politics of citation (Mountz, 2016). Whilst it is commendable to embrace a more care-oriented approach to academia, others have critiqued this movement – although it may resist an emphasis on grant capture as a key to success by formulating alternatives (or ways to rework grants into alternatives), it does not question a narrative that valorises academic productivity and quality, nor does it fundamentally change the structural requirements for maximising ‘productivity’ (Mendick, 2014; Vostal, 2021). Moreover, it presumes that people have the desire and capacity to pursue such (endless) productivity and repurposing of ideas without accounting for the costs and inequities previously mentioned, and may minimise the career cost of adopting such approaches. As Ylijoki (2018) highlights, resisting neoliberal forces in academia can be ‘risky’ and bring judgement – we can note, much like how social norms influence the ways in which people express their grief.

A second narrative, and one in which we participate through this article, is the growing recognition of failure in academia as a way to normalise it. Imposter syndrome is well documented in academia (Ronksley-Pavia et al., 2023) and it is not uncommon to draw on such framings to personalise unsuccessful grant applications (or job applications, manuscript submission, etc.). We have seen ‘successful’ academics post their ‘CVs of Failure’ or ‘walls of rejection’ on their doors and on social media to signal that they, too, have suffered failure, intending to normalise it and minimise the personal-deficit narrative of failure. Templates now exist so academics can keep track of their failures, just as they do of their successes¹ (Stefan, 2010). Others actively encourage sharing experiences of research failures to ‘harness’ it as a productive opportunity to learn (Clark & Sousa, 2020). An example is the Wellcome Trust, a large medically-oriented research funder in the UK, who supports ‘Succeeding Through Failure’, an examination of how to make a more supportive peer-review system in research funding by understanding past experiences of ‘failure’. There are two main activities going on here: one is normalising failure (or rejection) across one’s career, and even staging it as a prerequisite for success

in the future (although for some, an unsuccessful grant may mean a significant pause or even end to an academic career). The second is a focus on ‘doing failure better’, from providing feedback on unsuccessful grants to learning how to cope with or even make failure productive through building resilience and a growth mindset. For these approaches to be useful, they need to be embedded in workplace environments that take ‘failure’ seriously as a positive outcome in its own right as well as take seriously that the system does not distribute failure ‘equally’ or solely on merit. Otherwise, there is the risk that some are valorised as succeeding ‘in spite of failure’, and once again becomes predominantly the domain of individual effort.

The final narrative we reflected upon was how individualised responsibility for failure might be resisted through recognising and promoting more collective academic work (Bisaillon et al., 2020). While some disciplines are already geared towards teamwork, in the social sciences there is still a valorisation of independent or solo academic outputs (especially for early career researchers who need to establish their ‘name’ and ‘expertise’). Not only does this emphasis belie the often collective effort that goes into any academic output, it risks perpetuating notions of failure as an individual experience. In sharing our experiences, and thinking through unsuccessful grants as a version of loss and grief, we begin to see the usefulness of collective processing of experiences and emotions. In doing so, we are also bringing to light the amount of emotional and affective labour that is involved in grant writing (and its aftermath) (Hardt, 1999; Hochschild, 1983). More than a decade ago, Herta Nöbauer contended that ‘considering this change it is astonishing that the “lived experiences” of academics along with their bodily and affective strategies of coping with the modifications of academic labour have hitherto drawn remarkably little attention among researchers’ (Nöbauer, 2012, p. 132). This oversight regarding the affective labours which constitute the lifeworld of academics includes the endless imperative for ongoing grant writing and, for our purposes in this article, rejection and loss. We see this article as adding to the since growing body of literature that critically engages with academia and the higher education sector, especially describing the experiences of academics and researchers (see for example Loveday, 2018a, 2018b; Maclean, 2016; Newcomb, 2021).

Conclusion

In this article we explored how reflecting on conceptualisations of grief and loss could problematise discourses of grant failure or being ‘unsuccessful’ in the context of grant applications. By looking at our experiences of unsuccessful grants as a form of loss, and drawing on our expertise in death studies, we hope to enrich the academic literature and published discussions around grants. Firstly, we approached not being successful with a grant application as a form of loss, and not just of the physical funding but also of time, relationships and imagined futures. Secondly, we identified expectations around how academics are supposed to respond to not being successful, most notably by not perceiving it as lost time and labour, and ‘moving on’. These expected behaviours and responses relegate feelings of loss to the ‘back stage’ and informal spaces within academia. Like other losses that people can grieve, we encouraged the acknowledgement that, as a form of loss, a rejection of a grant application can generate a range of feelings that can change

over time and are not necessarily ‘linear’ or easy to ‘get over’. Such an acknowledgement foregrounds the affective labour involved in maintaining positive, upbeat, resilient responses to grant outcomes and efforts involved in resubmission and repurposing, and invites collective support for such work. Lastly, we acknowledged being unsuccessful with a grant application of loss within a wider system premised on the production of failure. This allowed for the Berlantian observation of resisting discourses of individualised responsibility of loss in place of recognition of the collective endeavour, within the systemic and structural circumstances in which we work (Berlant, 2011).

Social science perspectives consider how responses to loss and grief are socially constructed and mediated. We highlighted how academics are institutionally socialised to respond to the perceived ‘normality’ of academic life, which includes instances of loss through unsuccessful grant applications. We have shown how these losses can be profound and compounded, and that this may lead to questioning one’s capacity and identity, and bring career precarity to the fore. Rather than provide a space in which to actively acknowledge and work through these aspects, we found that academic narratives around repurposing the work are almost instantaneous and can marginalise those who do not immediately engage in this emotional labour. By thinking through our experiences of failure from unsuccessful grant applications and understanding this through our disciplinary engagement with death studies, we began to hold a space for this loss. The ‘failed grants’ we discussed during our calls did not need to be immediately recycled or repurposed, and we resisted trying to console each other by searching for ‘silver linings’. We found failure to be an unhelpful way of framing our experiences, due to its individualising tendencies and its focus on metrics and certain ways of valuing productivity. It internalises messages about ‘keep at it and get better’, which ignores how some unsuccessful grants are already ranked at ‘outstanding’ levels. Reframing unsuccessful grants from ‘failure’ to losses helped us capture a wider range of things that happened when grants were ‘unsuccessful’: the loss of time, energy and emotional investments into imagining futures, and the impact on identity and relationships and on the careers and individual livelihoods that can be tied to securing funding.

Moreover, reflecting on our unsuccessful grant applications through conceptualisations of loss may have helped us to recognise broader feelings of grief and grieving: mourning ‘bigger’ losses (changes) in higher education settings – as institutions and as affective experiences. In thinking about *what is lost*, individually and collectively, within increasingly competitive and marketised approaches to supporting research, we may be grieving much more than the loss of specific ideas, opportunities, projects and so on. We may be mourning a bygone era (albeit highly unequal and in many ways problematic), mourning lost academic identities and lost morale, mourning the loss of treasured academic values (see also Burrows, 2012; Connell, 2019). We propose three actions that we hope can help change how unsuccessful grant applications are framed and experienced. Firstly, a change *in the way grants* are talked about, so that discourses and culture around funding can shift. Terminology like failure, salvage and recycle all point towards grant writing as a key metric of success and a process that should be made the most of.

We ourselves have used such terms and we need to be intentional in our language use; we have kept ‘failure’ as a term to frame parts of this article because of the immediate resonance of the term in existing literature. At the same time, we have also introduced a

different way of talking about the grant development process, where low rates of success can lead to powerful and ambivalent emotions which can be usefully understood as ‘loss’, and therefore as a form of grief. We argue that this framing offers an important new form of visibility and validation for these emotions. This visibility and social validation in turn positively affects our entwined personal/professional identities and how we perceive our grant crafting efforts as part of a larger shared collective experience, even as it is ‘felt’ individually. Secondly, academic institutions need to recognise the significance of *collective spaces* where we can acknowledge and share these (and other academic) experiences of loss, as well as our successes. Engaging in these activities can be given higher priority within annual reviews and/or promotional criteria. Our group discussions and writing are an example of this, along with the ‘de-briefs’ we have done with colleagues outside of this group which have further promoted supportive collegiate environments. Thirdly, we urge institutions (universities and funders) to *develop alternative metrics* to measure excellence and ‘success’ that better support careers and career progression. We understand that these changes are idealistic, but they are not unrealistic. Grant loss does not need to be an inevitable feature of academia – it is one that has been created, normalised, and demands unrecognised affective labour.

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1. <https://pearlaboratoryorg.files.wordpress.com/2020/04/cv-of-failure-template.doc>

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