Doing Feminisms on the Ground: Challenges and Opportunities for Critical Feminist Psychologies

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Abstract

Feminist psychological perspectives remain peripheral in mainstream psychological spaces and broader applied settings. This can make it difficult to do feminist psychological work. In this article, we discuss key challenges facing a group of feminist psychologists working in various specialist areas of theory and practice. The discussion was generated from a roundtable session facilitated by the authors at the Psychology of Women and Equalities Section Annual Conference in July, 2022 in response to the conference theme of 'Doing feminism on the ground'. The roundtable aimed to create space for participants to discuss the challenges of doing feminist work. The roundtable also aimed to generate shared strategies for resisting these challenges. Here, we were guided by Sara Ahmed's call to 'stay with the difficulty' of feminist work in order to learn from this. Challenges included professional exclusion, isolation, epistemic erasure, and self-censorship. Strategies included 'rewriting the questions', refusing to engage

with over-simplistic requests, and (re)centering power and its implications. Roundtable

participants are listed as participant authors, and their words co-construct and flow through this

account. This article therefore presents a collaborative account of the challenges and

opportunities facing this group in their efforts to do feminisms on the ground.

Keywords: Feminist practice; collaboration; epistemic exclusion; co-construction; resistance

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Introduction

This article is a collective account generated from a roundtable discussion session facilitated by members of the Intersectional Violences Research Group (IVRG) and attended by participants at the Psychology of Women and Equalities Section's Annual Conference in July, 2022. The authors are members of the IVRG, who generated a written account of the discussion and shared this with roundtable discussion participants. The roundtable participants in attendance at the session are listed as participant authors because their words co-construct and flow through this account. The participant authors do feminist work in various specialist areas of theory and practice including feminist identities, psychological trauma, gender and media, sexualities, queer studies, and gender-based and sexual violence. This article represents a collaborative account of the challenges and opportunities facing this group of feminists in their work to do feminism(s) on the ground.

Feminist work is hard work. The IVRG has engaged in several projects which constitute feminist work that we consider to be 'feminism on the ground'. This includes cultivating a nuanced set of responses to proposed national violence strategies in the UK, working with international publishers to interrogate structural violence, and dealing with national professional bodies to highlight systemic issues of violence. We would describe this work as difficult work that is saturated with struggle. We do this work in the context of an enduring historical contradiction between an expressed desire to address and 'end' violence, and a fundamental lack of action or change on the part of many of those who express this desire. To this end, our work has become a site of struggle to integrate feminist psychological perspectives and principles. For example, we have tried to integrate nuanced feminist psychological perspectives and principles on the ground

despite a consistent demand for simplistic and sanitised solutions, which flatten the complexities of violence. We have participated in media campaigns with organisations whose questions reproduce sensationalised discourses of violence. And, we have provided government consultations that have been treated with a lack of care and value. Additionally, we have noticed how this has forced us to develop strategies for when and how we respond to requests or invitations for public engagement. We feel these struggles as feminist struggles because they come from doing feminist work.

We know these challenges are not isolated and believe that addressing shared challenges collectively is important for feminist work. We believe that the very existence of these shared challenges reflects a systematic lack of support for feminist work. We assert that the project of documenting and naming these challenges is important in showing the need for greater support for this work. Therefore, in response to the conference theme of 'Feminism on the Ground', the IVRG held a roundtable discussion session to discuss the challenges of 'Doing Feminism on the Ground'. One key observation we (the members of the IVRG) have made as a part of our work is just how much can be learned through trying to make feminist change. These experiences resonated with many of the arguments made by Sara Ahmed in 'Living a Feminist Life' (Ahmed, 2017). Therefore, we used various concepts from this text when designing and facilitating the roundtable discussion, and we foreground these throughout this article to develop an account of 'doing feminism on the ground'.

Feminist Work as Feminist Pedagogy

We drew on Sara Ahmed's concept of feminist work as feminist pedagogy (Ahmed, 2017) when first designing this roundtable session. Ahmed argues that 'to learn from being feminist is to learn about the world' (Ahmed, 2017, p. 7). In other words, experiences in the broader world generate feminist theory. Ahmed argues that:

> Feminist theory can be what we do together in the classroom; in the conference; reading each other's work. But I think too often we bracket feminist theory as something that marks out a specific kind, or even a higher kind, of feminist work. (Ahmed, 2017, p. 7)

This resonates with our experiences of doing feminist work 'on the ground'. We have learned from the repeated struggles we have experienced when trying to do feminist work. Ahmed (2017) observes that these struggles are often against histories that have become hardened like 'brick walls'. This was certainly the case in our collaborative experience of our struggles, which framed our roundtable discussion. In our work, we struggle against histories of exclusion and taken-for-granted assumptions, methods, and approaches to understanding and addressing violence. From these struggles we have learned about the power of particular histories, and how these histories constitute the present. At the beginning of the discussion, we drew on Ahmed's argument that we 'come up against' histories when trying to do feminist work, but that we also learn from these histories, and from what we 'come up against' (Ahmed, 2017, p. 136) again and again. Here, we wanted to create a space to reflect on these histories to account for our experiences of doing feminist work. We have also generated approaches that aim to question, challenge, and deconstruct such histories. Ahmed refers to those things we learn or generate through such struggles as 'sweaty concepts' (Ahmed, 2017, p, 12). We will outline Ahmed's

definitions of these, before exploring some sweaty concepts that were co-constructed through our discussion.

Sweaty Concepts

Sara Ahmed defines 'sweaty concepts' (Ahmed, 2017, p. 12) in two key ways, both of which inform how we account for our experiences of 'doing feminism on the ground'. We will draw on these two conceptualisations interchangeably throughout this article.

First, 'sweaty concepts' are defined as understandings of the world that are *difficult to generate*:

> By trying to describe something that is difficult, that resists being comprehended in the present, we generate what I call 'sweaty concepts'. (Ahmed, 2017, p. 12)

There is value in generating sweaty concepts because they help us to account for difficulty and complexity. This definition resonates with our own need to generate critical understandings of complex phenomena. This is a fundamental and valuable practice for feminist and critical psychologists. However, as we will discuss, it can be a struggle to do this work when there is a demand from external partners and collaborators for simplistic answers or solutions to complex problems.

This brings us to the second conceptualisation of 'sweaty concepts' in this account of our work. Here, we draw on Sara Ahmed's conceptualisation of 'sweaty concepts' as understandings of the world that are *generated through difficulty*:

Sweaty concepts are also generated by the practical experience of coming up against a

world, or the practical experience of trying to transform a world (Ahmed, 2017, p. 13 - 14)

Here, 'sweaty concepts' refer to what we learn by doing arduous, difficult work. Ahmed (2017)

argues that a 'sweaty concept' is generated from the experience of trying, or from a *trying*

experience. These are concepts that are generated through efforts that prove to be difficult.

Ahmed (2017) argues that the task of developing concepts is often bound to a situation in need of

a response. Here, conceptual work is what we do in order to account for such situations. In both

senses, then, difficulty is understood as generative. On this basis, Ahmed (2017, p. 13) argues

that it is important to focus on or 'stay with' this difficulty.

Staying with the difficulty

Going into spaces as feminists can be incredibly difficult, but much can be learnt from this.

Ahmed (2017) argues that the experiences you have when you are not accommodated become

resources for knowledge generation. That is, as we mentioned earlier, we learn about the world,

and about institutions and spaces in the world, when they are not shaped by or for us:

The task is to stay with the difficulty; to keep exploring and exposing this difficulty. We

might not need to eliminate the effort or labour from the writing. Not eliminating the

effort or labour becomes an academic aim, because we have been taught to tidy our texts;

not to reveal the struggle we have in getting somewhere. (Ahmed, 2017, p. 13)

We wanted to 'stay with the difficulty' (Ahmed, 2017, p. 13) by creating space to discuss experiences, opportunities, and challenges arising when doing feminist work. We ground our discussion in a recognition that 'sweaty concepts' are the things we don't necessarily or ordinarily talk about in our work. Ahmed (2017) argues that the task is to try and stay with the difficulties that we are typically taught to obscure when writing about our work. The IVRG experienced this issue in our work on a recent government strategy consultation (Beetham, Turley, Lazard, Thompson & Donnelly, 2021). There was nowhere to record or report the difficulty we faced in negotiating how the consultation was conceptualised and managed. And, when we did express these difficulties in our expert feedback, we were met with silence; no response; an erasure of the complaint. The scope of this work allowed us to make recommendations and identify limitations or exclusions, but it did not allow us to engage or collaborate in the design and development of the consultative process, which is where we encountered the most effort and struggle. We realised that the efforts and struggles we encounter in the process do not often see the light of day, and, as such, become unspeakable and unknowable. Ahmed (2017) argues that it is important not to eliminate this effort.

As Ahmed observes in relation to 'living the consequences' of being feminist (Ahmed, 2017, p. 161), coming up against the same things repeatedly can be 'trying' (Ahmed, 2017, p. 97), but it also generates energy and resources that keep us going. In staying with the difficulty, we aimed to make space to generate collective feminist knowledge about what is difficult when doing feminism on the ground: to generate collective knowledge and 'sweaty concepts' based on what we have 'come up against' (Ahmed, 2017, p. 136), what has come up against us, and what keeps coming up. Therefore, we simultaneously approached the project of 'doing feminism on the

ground' as hopeful. Retrospectively, we recognise our approach in Sara Ahmed's discussion of hopeful difficulty:

> Where there is hope, there is difficulty… …Hope is not at the expense of struggle but animates a struggle; hope gives us a sense that there is a point to working things out, working things through. (Ahmed, 2017, p. 2)

Overview of the Roundtable Discussion

With the permission of the session participants, we audio-recorded the session with a view to collaborating on a co-authored publication of the discussion. We asked participants to reflect on three questions: 'What are your experiences of doing feminism on the ground?'; 'What keeps coming up again and again in your own work?'; and 'What have you learned from these experiences?'. The discussion was therefore a conscious and intentional effort to reveal the struggles of feminist work, reflect on what we learn from these struggles, and discuss strategies for managing what keeps coming up. Again, we approached this project with a shared recognition that we are not alone in experiencing these difficulties. We also approached the discussion as a shared resource whereby participants could find strategies or ways to 'keep going'. This was itself a 'sweaty' moment of collective learning through dialogue about our work, in the same sense that Sara Ahmed discusses diversity work:

… my theoretical understanding of how institutions work has been shaped by my work as a practitioner as well as by listening to other practitioners talk about their work. (Ahmed, 2017 p.93)

Doing Feminism on the Ground – Some Sweaty Concepts

In this article, we collectively discuss key tensions, dilemmas, and reflections generated through the roundtable discussion session. Throughout this article, we will frame feminist work – and ourselves – as 'Sweaty' in a multitude of ways. We will begin by conceptualising some sweaty concepts that speak to the difficulties of doing feminist work. Here, we conceptualise the work of trying to make feminist change as *trying* (challenging; difficult), sweaty work. We will then discuss some responses and consequences of this work. We will first discuss how we become sweaty figures in doing feminist labour. Finally, we will argue that we can – ourselves and together – be sweaty concepts through acts of resistance and refusal.

[Heading 2] Feminist work as Sweaty Work

[Heading 3] Exclusion and Isolation: Mapping the Terrain of (Un)Belonging

Participants described the everyday conditions with/in which they were trying to do feminist work as exclusionary and isolating. Here, participants discussed a broad political climate of exclusion against which they were required to engage in constant struggles for feminist

inclusion. The following participant discussed this in a project that attempted to inform a government strategy to address violence against women and girls:

> With the government strategy, I feel like they had a group of people who they went to for their central consultation directly and they included. The government had already decided who was going to be in that circle and then they'd invited all of this extra kind of input from other people. They basically didn't really care who that was, and I think that the fact that feminists and feminist knowledge on violence against women and girls wasn't included in their inner circle is just again, another example of the exclusion of feminist knowledge from these spaces. And we felt that too. And I think that the sweaty concept was the struggle for them to include what was *already there,* and to be in that group of people that they want to hear from, and it just felt like that just wasn't the case.

In the following extract, another participant discussed this constant struggle for inclusion as a constantly growing cycle of 'sweaty moments' marked by frustration:

> It feels like the concept of work and the concept of expertise has come up so much. So all this feminist work is being done, but it's not being recognized so then the expertise isn't being valued and that knowledge isn't being seen. But then there's even more work, so it becomes a cycle where there are more feminist psychologists trying to highlight the work that has been done, but it continues to not really be recognized so we constantly get into the cycle of sweaty moments where there's a lack of recognition, and expertise isn't being valued, and that just gets really frustrating.

Within the University, participants also spoke of conditions of isolation in Psychology departments, where they had to search for feminists and spaces of feminist solidarity elsewhere. This was grounded in a political epistemic exclusion, wherein feminist psychologists were cast as outsiders:

> Spaces of solidarity are very important for all of us where psychology seems to be a 'science' - it's located in the faculty of science in the UK in most universities - and finding your… and that's why it's always like, I tried to hunt where I can find my space and my people and it's never my department… it's never my peers there…

This participant described a 'hunt' for epistemic belonging; for her space and her people. However, belonging is never where she finds herself situated in a Psychology department that excludes feminist knowledge through a 'science' discourse. She discusses the effort involved in 'hunting' for feminist peers and spaces. This struggle for epistemic belonging becomes a sweaty hunt: A hunt which is largely unrecognised, but comes to be known about through naming it with peers who may have been on hunts of their own or trodden similar paths.

Resisting Feminist Flattenings and Erasures

Many participants spoke about how feminist and critical approaches were flattened during interactions with institutions and organisations, and how the sharp edges relating to the complexity of feminist responses were smoothed out such that important nuance would be lost.

12

This is reflected by Ahmed's (2014c) comment that feminism often presents the strongest critiques of neoliberal concepts. In this case, the flattening was characterised by a demand for simplistic, 'black and white' solutions. One participant described how core, complex feminist arguments surrounding power were not valued in work they had done with the British Psychological Society (BPS):

> The BPS got really interested in our group and were like 'we're going to do this big media campaign and we want you to be a part of it.' And we had, I think, one really productive meeting where we were talking about issues around power, and we were saying 'This is our message. We really want to get this out there.' And then, it went quiet. And then, the last time we talked to them they were going: 'can you do something around you the hashtag #breakthebias for International Women's Day?'. And it's like, 'no actually, we can't, because it individualises all the things that we have been talking about for such a long time with you'… … They want to work with you, but in a very specific, normative way that doesn't really challenge anything that you set out to challenge.

Another participant discussed how the complexities surrounding violence had been flattened by demands for simplistic solutions when writing a blog about a government strategy they had worked on:

> They really wanted a: 'OK so what's the answer to this? Is it educating boys? That's a thing that we can say: 'if we do it, it will be fixed''. 'Or, is it about changing the language and calling it male violence, and then that's fixed the issue?'. I think that's really

interesting: That lack of understanding of the complexity, and just wanting one really simple answer and being able to hook everything on that.

This flattening was also characterised by a requirement for sanitised solutions that erased feminist perspectives and nuances. In this extract, one participant discussed an instance where key feminist arguments had been 'smoothed' out of a piece they wrote for the web-based publication *'The Conversation'*, which publishes articles by academics in response to topical subjects under the tagline 'Academic rigor, journalistic flair'. In this instance, the editor wanted to shift the focus of an article about gender-based violence away from complex intersectional power relations, asking instead for simple points on how to 'solve' gender-based violence:

> The pitch we submitted and the final article were quite different, and perhaps the final article is not perhaps what we would have intended, and it was a really quick thing we had to do within about 2-3 days… It was on a Sunday we finished it up, so that was really difficult, especially for people who've got family caring commitments. But, when it came back to us the first time it was very heavily edited, and all the hard edges had been softened and smoothed. And the message that we had intended with the first version was almost not necessarily erased but very much polished and smoothed out, and we had a discussion around what to do about that and obviously the trade-off is that if you try and interfere too much with the editorial, then they might not publish you. So it was a real internal battle wasn't it, as to how much we pushed back and how much we stood up for what we wanted to say, and I don't necessarily think we were over the moon with the final version, but we kind of thought it's better having it out there at least than not having

anything out there. So that was the first one that I had contributed to so I found that particularly unexpected and particularly difficult because it was very much not listening to what we had to say. Again, it's this idea of not listening to experts and erasing that knowledge, and that's something I found quite tricky to reconcile. And I think we all did, didn't we?

In response, another participant observed:

I'm not surprised to hear it, partly because I've had some experiences completely outside of the field of psychology in coming back on government-driven requests. And they're all the same because they're looking for you to give something that supports or aligns to the message they want to give.

Participants also identified a refusal from others to engage with difficulty and complexity, particularly when focussing on policy:

When you're trying to do work that is applying intersectional theory in practice to strategy and policy, we're trying to come at it from that perspective. We're applying that level of complexity. And - particularly the government I think - but even The Conversation article – they just don't want to deal with that level of complexity. They want to simplify everything.

Here, one participant explained how this refusal created a division of labour where others were able to avoid the 'sweaty place' of complexity and nuance:

> It's like a refusal to stay with the sweaty stuff, right, it's like a refusal to acknowledge that space - the big space in the middle where it's difficult and it's grey and it's that in between sweaty place - when you search for the one solution to something that just doesn't have one solution.

This extract articulates a central tension between our desire and need to 'stay with the difficulty' (Ahmed, 2017, p. 13), and a refusal on the part of others to do this. As we [the roundtable session facilitators] put together the written account of this discussion, we recognised how central this tension is in so much of our work. The frustration expressed by participants around the demand for simplistic and sanitised solutions speaks to the difficulty of staying with the difficulty, but also how much we value and need this to account for complexity.

Staying with the difficulty is in itself, then, a 'sweaty concept' in several senses. Firstly, describing difficult things is difficult! But, secondly, the practice of staying with the difficulty can be met with refusal, making it a struggle. Further, it also generates complex understandings and accounts; these 'sweaty concepts' come out of this work. This roundtable discussion session crystallised the centrality and importance of our need to 'stay with the difficulty' (Ahmed, 2017, p. 13) in our broader work. The practice of staying with difficulty is so fundamental to critical and feminist psychological approaches that it constitutes our work. A refusal to stay with this difficulty, then, becomes a refusal of our work.

Sweaty Figures: Feminist Work makes us Sweaty

Overall, participants discussed sometimes-overwhelming difficulties in their accounts of doing feminist work. Feminist work was constructed as sweaty work. The additional labour can make us sweat:

> 'It is not just concepts that sweat; figures too; they become containers for what is difficult, even excruciating. (Ahmed, 2017, p. 71)

‘Cracking the Door’: Feminist Work as Risky Border Work

Another tension discussed by participants was the labour required to balance risk when trying to bring about change through feminist work. Making change was described as gradual and incremental due to the constant requirement to manage risk when trying to enter spaces from which the participants and/or their perspectives were excluded. Participants experienced this as difficult work, as one roundtable participant explained:

> Because you're cracking that door a little bit, in choosing how you communicate and the ways that you do it… you're cracking the door a bit and then next time that wedge will be a bit bigger and it will come open a bit wider, and then eventually you'll be able to step through. So it's just that ability to balance – I might be labouring the metaphor here – but it's the ability to balance from our perspective as the researcher what that wedge contains and how big it is at that point in time. So that might mean occasionally you can't or aren't

17

able to talk about exactly what you want to talk about because it is going to scare people on the other side.

One strategy discussed by participants was an effort to temper language. Participants echoed this dilemma in accounts of the effort it took to choose language carefully. Here, using explicitly feminist language was constructed as risky:

> I self-censor, depending on the audience. So some of the stuff I look at is to do with sexual violence prevention. But I've got a bit of background in social influence so I'm always aware that if you're seen as an outgroup then you won't influence. So I don't want to change the heart of my message, but there are terms like patriarchy that I wouldn't use even though I'm going to use 'gender', 'sexism', and 'power'. So, the meaning is the same, but I think sometimes I do more than that. So, I do avoid something if I think it's put me in to directly contradicting another colleague, then I do shy away from that.

Managing this work was described in terms of balancing and reconciling opposing domains in the face of such risks. This was again described as difficult work:

> It feels like you're in two positions at the opposite extremes of a scenario. So, you've got government and friends who want or feel they need to be able to say 'the answer is 'this' - we do this and it's all gonna go away' and that's what they're looking for. But on the other end of the extreme, you've got people who are better-informed saying 'actually no this is

a much more nuanced more complicated issue'. But somewhere in that I think to move forward you've kind of got to try and bring those two points together, so it's partly for us to think about how we talk about what we're doing, how we think about language that resonates or things we can do that mean we get that message across so that they can start to think about changing their approach. So you kind of have the two points coming together so you can go forward and it's obviously not easy otherwise we'd all be doing it.

This kind of work has been discussed by Sara Ahmed as a strategy used by diversity practitioners to allow work (and words) to travel further:

> I think the word diversity has become mobile partly as it does less: the words that travel more are the ones that do less (diversity), while the words that travel less do more (racism). Ironically, then, choosing words that do less becomes a strategy, almost as if to say, doing less is as much as we can do. (Ahmed, 2017, p. 101 – 102)

Participants echoed this, discussing how compromises in the communication of their ideas could form a strategy for incremental change:

> You are able to respond to a situation, understand the background, understand your audience, know and understand the circumstances that you're communicating in, and you're using language that other people are able to be receptive to. So the same way that your Conversation piece maybe wasn't exactly the thing you wanted to write, you've got it in there so it can just be that little wedge. And you're meeting people where they are,

and you're bringing them somewhere along the road, even if you're not quite at the finish line it's still a part of that journey.

Therefore, the strategies for doing feminist work discussed by participants raise similar dilemmas to diversity work, in the form of a trade-off where less always gets done, but using words that travel more is a strategy that gets you 'somewhere along the road'. Participants discussed having to balance their integrity with using words strategically for different audiences:

> Depending on the audience I'm talking to about what my research is will depend on the extent to which I round those edges and the choice of words that are used to describe that research, but there's a fine line there between doing that in a way that is still ethically sound and I mean to me and my values and the research that I've done, versus you know not using terminology that is too scary for people that aren't yet in that space.

Participants also discussed the importance of feminist spaces for feminist survival in this context. Here, one participant noted that feminist work needs the support of other feminists, and spaces where the difficult, strategic work is not required:

> I think it's really important though - if you are in the room, and you're wedging the door open - I think it's really important that there are other people in the room with you. So you have to be in a space where you don't have to be self-censoring or careful what you say or tempering your language, so it's really it's really important to have that community

around you in order to be able to do this strategically in the places that make sense without overexerting ourselves and burdening ourselves, because again thinking about Ahmed's work again you know feminism needs feminists to survive and the other way around, feminists need feminism to survive. So in order to be able to do that, we need to have places where you don't have to do that careful talking, and use all of those skills: you can say 'patriarchy' and say the things you want to say. So, I think that if we are talking [about] wedges and doors we need to think about who is in the rooms that we are trying to open up.

This extract highlights again the importance of feminist shelters as a sustaining strategy for survival in this work.

Being Sweaty Concepts: Feminist Responses and Strategies

As well as discussing feminist work as difficult, 'sweaty' work, participants also discussed sweaty concepts in the form of concepts that came out of this work. Feminist work was discussed as a site for engaging with and challenging established power. This resonated with Sara Ahmed's discussion of feminist effort and hope:

What do you hear when you hear the word feminism? It is a word that fills me with hope, with energy. It brings to mind loud acts of refusal and rebellion as well as the quiet ways we might have of not holding on to things that diminish us. It brings to mind women who have stood up, spoken back, risked lives, homes, relationships in the struggle for more bearable worlds. It brings to mind books written, tattered and worn, books that gave

words to something, a feeling, a sense of an injustice, books that, in giving us words, gave us the strength to go on. (Ahmed, 2017, p. 2)

In this final section of this article, we will discuss how acts of resistance and refusal created sweaty moments where change could be made possible. We will first discuss how participants developed strategies to disrupt established power and shift knowledge production through their work. We will then discuss how participants created sweaty moments for others. These 'sweaty moments' constituted moments of discomfort, difficulty, and learning for others. Here, participants discussed how their presence was difficult for others, and invoked Ahmed's figure of the 'feminist killjoy' (Ahmed, 2017) to construct themselves within these relations.

Rewriting the Questions

Participants discussed everyday strategies of resistance in relation to how they responded to requests from others to engage in work related to gendered violence. Here, participants worked to reframe the terms and scope of engagement with others. The first example of everyday resistance involved reframing questions provided by others that were either problematic or misrepresentative of particular issues. This involved 'rewriting the questions' asked in interviews or events, to shape what could become known about those issues. This was discussed as deliberate work which allowed for certain issues to be named and heard, thus rendering them knowable. This was constructed as important strategic work by participants to reframe and refocus the narrative away from the agenda of others. The construction of such responses as strategic spoke to the sustained effort, will, and hope that is required to push back against others.

In considering everyday resistance, some participants discussed their own experiences of resistance in relation to dominant understandings of feminist activism, emerging from their direct work with the BPS. The following extract focused on communication with the BPS on a potential national campaign to address Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG). The sweaty moment centred around pressure from the BPS to further a particular individualist understanding of VAWG. The participants discussed their feelings of discomfort with negotiating a competing and difficult set of assumptions that did not align with their own feminist perspectives:

> When we did a media interview with the BPS, we were given a set list of questions that we would be asked and we basically rewrote the questions and sent them back. And actually that kind of worked. They did ask those questions, and I guess it's really interesting to look at what we do when we navigate those challenges and how that shaped then what happens next.

To navigate these tensions, the participants talked about reclaiming the power to ask and answer questions that trouble dominant understandings of femininity and of gender-based violence. Participants framed this as a political practice bound up with power, applying a social constructionist analytic to identify the contingent nature of knowledge and expose power as it operates through discourse. This recognition and exposure challenged the invisibility of power by offering direct resistance through the practice of deconstruction. This is aptly illustrated in the following extract:

Rewriting the questions fundamentally deconstructs and reconstructs the premise or the discursive terrain in which you get to operate, so you can completely change the direction of the conversation by just basically saying 'I'm gonna actually reframe this on my own terms'

Some participants framed this practice in more difficult terms, speaking to the invisibility of taken-for-granted or normalised truth claims in the questions of others who uncritically reproduce dominant, powerful, mainstream narratives and psychological discourses. Moments of disruption and deconstruction come from a recognition that other possibilities are available. However, in the following extract, one participant explains how possibilities of recognition and deconstruction are typically obscured. The participant argues that the strategy of 'rewriting the questions' is normatively unavailable in the context of doing her feminist work and responding to others:

I love the [idea of] rewriting the questions… and I've never thought of rewriting the questions and sending them back!

Some participants spoke not only about 'rewriting the questions', but also about re-organizing events and negotiating terminologies used. The sweaty work in this situation required energy and there did not appear to be much to be gained from doing this work. Coming up against backlash demonstrates an example of what can be experienced time and time again, and the sweaty work and energy that is demanded in order to navigate the backlash. Drawing on Ahmed's concept of

the 'willful' subject (2014d), this participant demonstrates the will that is required to keep pushing back against the dominant narratives and status quo.

> Earlier this year I changed the questions on the title and loads of stuff for an event around sexuality, and I found it was a *sweaty situation*, organising the thing, agreeing to the thing even being asked, being invited to it, didn't feel like it was in the most professional way… there was backlash around the kind of words and terminology that me and the other presenter wanted to use and it was a tough thing. And it's definitely made me quite resistant to doing that sweaty work with that organisation in the future because you think: 'Actually, I can put my energy elsewhere and have sweaty stuff I think I might be able to change in that moment'. I just didn't feel like this was going to be fruitful. The event went ahead, and it was fine, but it was stressful.

Another participant described a different approach to pushing back in a situation where they had refused a request outright:

> There's too much to do here for us to be able to deconstruct this, educate them, and then repackage it in a way that will communicate that to them. So we were just like: 'You know what? We're not doing this, we are **not** doing this. It would take too long.

What is noteworthy is how this sweaty situation is thick with emotion - sweaty work is not happy work. As Ahmed (2017) points out, happiness is conditional on pleasing others. To displease through being identified as a willful subject is subject to trouble and, carries with it, difficult

emotional work (Ahmed, 2014d). We expand on the implications of being identified as a willful subject in further detail in the following section

'It's not our sweat, it's theirs!': We are Sweaty Concepts

Participants also discussed how feminist presence – being a feminist in a world and doing feminist work – can make others sweat. As Ahmed (2017) argues, you can learn from the experiences you have 'when you're not supposed to be there'. This discussion from three participants shows collective development of the understanding that we – feminists – can *become* sweaty concepts:

> There are some great people that set up POWES and they deliberately destabilised power relations… they were at a BPS conference and there was some kind of problematic understandings of gender going on. So they just went up and did their own thing and they were really: 'this is my feminism' you know… really troubling assumptions, which I just think is brave and fantastic and what we should be doing.

> I think this plays into something that we've all been talking about, which is that sometimes we can be sweaty concepts, like we can make other people sweat! We can be difficult for people to deal with and we can make them sweat.

> It's not our sweat, it's theirs!

While there was a clear sense of celebration when discussing efforts of subversion, this was not presented as unproblematic by roundtable participants. Indeed, in all accounts of making others sweat, participants described this as a risky position to occupy, which was tied to the backlash discussed earlier. The act of troubling powerful and dominant discourses can have implications for institutional reputation including being perceived as 'difficult' or as 'causing trouble', and as Ahmed (2014c) posits, feminists are often categorised as self-indulgent, difficult people who cause tensions for others. These outcomes can be isolating and limiting for feminist psychologists doing work that destabilises and decentres dominant and normative understandings both within and external to the discipline. This difficulty is illustrated in the following excerpt:

My department is very well known for psychology specialisms rooted in experimental work… How isolating it can be when you're the only one doing qualitative research and you seem like the 'difficult' person because you ask questions – even when you ask questions about reflexivity - even in experimental research - and people look at you like 'what do you mean by reflexivity? It's… it's 'your thing' to do… you're the difficult one… you're the 'trauma person''. I work in gender-based violence so I'm looked at as the 'trauma person' you know, 'she does all of that… she does all the heavy stuff'. But I guess that's something that resonated. By engaging in those conversations in those spaces - although it is isolating and it is hard - we are also showing resistance to the post-positivist or positivist ideas of science and research.

A wealth of feminist scholarship has documented how feminist work has been excluded and marginalised within contemporary Euro-American mainstream psychology (Capdevila & Lazard,

2015; Donnelly, Hubbard, & Capdevila, 2022; Hare-Mustin & Marecek, 1990; Rutherford & Petit, 2015; Segalo & Kiguwa, 2015; Thompson, 2017; Weisstein, 1968; Wilkinson, 1997). This discipline was founded through the projects of positivism, colonialism, and bio-psycho-medical diagnostic interventionism (Mills, 2014; Tosh, 2016).   Work that is positioned outside of these disciplinary boundaries, such as critical, queer, and feminist work - and work with or by marginalised folx - is relegated to the disciplinary fringes of psychology (Grzanka & Cole, 2021). In our panel discussion, this was highlighted as a continuing context for feminist psychology. This well-illustrates the idea of histories coming up and coming up against histories of exclusion, mentioned at the beginning of this article. It also illustrates how our work is emotional work - steeped in frustration when we continue to bang our heads against brick walls. Participants went on to describe the difficult work of the willful feminist subject in broader contexts of power:

> I work in programs facilitating groups for behaviour change for men and even in that setting where I have a male co-facilitator, I can still be that lone voice against the sexist behaviours and the violent behaviours, and finding that I have to really carefully navigate my own language sometimes so as not to tip that balance. And then sometimes I can be thinking 'well, I'm navigating my language in a male domestic abuse perpetrator program to make you feel more comfortable [rousing from group] and actually you shouldn't feel comfortable *at all* sat here on my chairs in my room…' and that can be then - that creates a wider ripple because then there's outrage from the co-facilitator: 'how can you use these words?'… [answering:] 'well, because it's true… if you feel uncomfortable, maybe you need to look at *your* self more.' And then that creates complaints that come

in and then it goes to the management, and it took a little while - but the manager would say to me 'oh we've got another complaint about you. I'm really glad - you're doing your job properly' but at the beginning it was like well 'what are you saying?' Well go look at the recording – we record the sessions - I'm saying the truth. So it's really hard being that lone voice and trying to navigate what needs to be said.

Some participants identified that their identity as feminists often means they are problematised by others, including colleagues and friends. The notion of speaking truth to power and making others uncomfortable as part of feminist work often leads to disconnection and isolation. Speaking truth can lead to becoming the lone voice, and the lone voice that makes others sweat can be uncomfortable. For the roundtable participants, making others sweat can be difficult but is often entwined with a feminist identity and is therefore unavoidable. For Ahmed (2014a) it is necessary for feminist work to devise ways of managing these hostile and sometimes mocking responses, and to negotiate methods to manage the consequences of doing feminist work. One participant invoked Sara Ahmed's figure of the feminist killjoy as a way to make sense of the feminist who creates 'sweaty moments' for others:

I definitely see that as a feminist killjoy in conversations, and I guess all of us are feminists, not just in our practice or research but that's who we are, it's part of who we are and then even if it's a fun outing, a social outing and there are issues that are being talked about and if you raise your voice against something you really get that look and people get uncomfortable and they're like, 'why do you have to spoil?' They may not say that to you directly out of politeness, but they do have that sense of discomfort and it just

eventually leads to isolating you later… like 'she's the hard one', 'she raises these difficult issues and topics'. So again, you experience social isolation as a result of how you view the world and the kind of questions you ask even if it's everyday conversations.

Refusing Refusal: Making and Breaking Collective Feminist Sweat

In this collective account of 'doing feminism on the ground', we have explored and articulated some difficulties that are often eliminated in our writing. In doing so, our goal is not only to make these difficulties visible, but also to show how these difficulties - and our discussions of them - can be generative. Sweaty concepts are useful in accounting for the experience of doing difficult feminist work, and are also recognised and acknowledged in the consequences of this work. Feminist work is fraught and saturated with sweat. Doing feminism on the ground is marked by 'sweaty moments' discussed in relation to the self, but also created for others. Sweaty moments come from not being 'at home' in a world (Ahmed, 2014b), and doing feminist work, as we have outlined in this article, troubles, questions, and critiques taken for granted ways of knowing and being. The 'sweaty concepts' we have written about in this article are a reorientation (Ahmed, 2014b) which offer ways to explore these difficulties for feminist psychologists.

The roundtable discussion session was designed as a direct response to the difficulties we [the facilitators] had experienced in our broader work of 'doing feminism on the ground'. We designed the session with a central desire to 'stay with the difficulty' (Ahmed, 2017, p. 13), which again retrospectively affirms the centrality of this desire in our work. However, we

approached this session with an intuition that others would welcome a space for this kind of dialogue. Rather than fearing a refusal to engage in the difficulty, we hoped our desire would appeal to others. And, this is what we found. Participants came with a desire to stay with the difficulties of our work together.

Ahmed (2017) argues that 'sweaty concepts' are generated from a world that does not accommodate us. Here, in response to our experiences of refusal in the world, we created feminist space to generate understandings of this refusal. This resonated with Sara Ahmed's notion of feminist shelters. Ahmed discusses how feminists build spaces with other feminists, because they need them to survive. Sara Ahmed conceptualises feminist shelters as places we do not typically find ourselves: As places we *go to*, rather than places we already *are*. These are places we *go to* when we are tired or worn out by the world:

No wonder, if we are shattered, that we need somewhere to go. (Ahmed, 2017, p.175)

The feminist strategies we have discussed here were generated through our feminist work 'on the ground', but also through collective thought and discussion about the difficulties of doing this work in this feminist space. This can help us account for how we 'sharpen' what others try to smooth out:

There is an academic tendency to think of strategy as what you do when you stop thinking. I have learned from diversity practitioners that strategy can be not only thought in action but thought sharpened by action. (Ahmed, 2017 p.93)

For example, we have discussed how the flattening and smoothing of feminist perspectives requires us to sharpen our focus on staying with and accounting for difficulty, and developing strategies for doing this in action. In many ways, thinking and strategising is an academic tendency, but this is also a sweaty, bodily, and embodied process (Ahmed, 2014b), especially when it involves constantly strategising against exclusion. Perhaps then, staying with the difficulty is an embodied process which has the capacity to allow us to 'to and fro'.

> I like that sense of to-ing and fro-ing: it is what I would call also a 'hap method' a way of being redirected by what we encounter, by what we happen to find when we follow things wherever they go. (Ahmed, 2014b)

Our bodies and our thoughts can be redirected by what we come up against. This means we keep sharpening our thoughts and actions in response to our embodied experience of staying with what is difficult. Perhaps there is a sharpened strategy in 'following things wherever they go' (Ahmed, 2014b). In our experience, our actions have been sharpened by staying with what we have encountered. As we have explored, there are no simple solutions. This is difficult work! But, it is imperative to stay with this, because with that difficulty there is also generative hope. Resisting demands for sanitised and flattened solutions to complex problems has sharpened our collective capacity. Examining the power inherent in refusals to hear critiques of taken-for-granted ways of knowing and being can bring about collective sweat on the part of ourselves and others. In this roundtable discussion session, we forged strategies that feminists use in their sweaty work. Sometimes, we may choose to temper our language to make change palatable or

incremental, and other times we may choose words that travel less to resist the normative assumptions inherent in what we are invited to address. And, we may retain the agency to direct the narrative by rewriting the questions. We can also refuse requests which demand too much labour to reframe or redirect.

The roundtable demonstrated the power and the strength in discussing, sharing, and creating new strategies as a feminist collective to render visible the often invisible challenges and social and emotional labour that is involved in doing feminism on the ground (Smith, 1987). Through both doing and discussing feminist work, we show our labour rather than tidying it away. We also make the epistemic and disciplinary margin into a place to do this difficult work and give space to these important discussions. In line with hooks (1989), we do not view the occupation of this space - in this way - as a relegation, but rather as a radical point of resistance where we can reimagine alternative possibilities by strategising, co-constructing, and community-building. Here, the margin becomes the centre; the starting point from which to imagine alternative worlds and possibilities. It is in this place that staying with the difficulty becomes generative, collective, and recuperative.

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