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Understanding diversity discomfort in higher education: from barrier to resource for inclusion

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ABSTRACT

In our everyday encounters at higher education institutions in the Netherlands, we observe that *diversity discomfort* can severely hamper the creation of inclusive environments. Illustrated by examples from our own institutions, we show that the unease arising from engaging with different perspectives can lead to the reproduction of existing hierarchies. We argue for the need to convert diversity discomfort from a barrier to equity into a catalyst for awareness and change, drawing upon literature focusing on power relations and learning theories, including concepts such as safe and brave space and pedagogy of discomfort. While doing so, we present some strategies and formulate a new research agenda on how to transform diversity discomfort into a resource to create future-proof, meaningful, equitable higher education.

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Introduction

If we want to create inclusive environments in (higher) education, *diversity discomfort* is both a significant challenge and an important resource. In our everyday experiences as researchers and teachers in four Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in the superdiverse European city of Amsterdam, we observe that diversity discomfort prevents many from establishing meaningful connections and engaging in the intellectual plurality and reflection that underpin inclusive environments.

In this article, we introduce diversity discomfort as an analytical concept that captures the complex interplay of cognitive, affective, and social factors that arise in encounters with differences; especially where certain identities or viewpoints have been socially

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constructed as 'other'. We define diversity discomfort as the unease that can arise from engaging with diversity, which may present itself in a wide variety of manifestations and experiences, ranging from annoyance and concern to disgust and hurt. In this conceptual article, *diversity* refers to the plurality of social identities, positionalities, lived experiences, and epistemologies that coexist within higher education in various and uneven ways; some being more centered and some more marginalized.

Creating inclusive and equitable learning environments is imperative, even more so given the increasing social diversity in many societies as an outcome of histories of colonization and global mobility – often discussed as 'super-diversity' (Vertovec 2007, 2017; Crul and Lelie 2023). Consequently, Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) is high on many educational agendas, supported by the United Nations' sustainable development goal 'Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education' (SDG4), which calls for 'safe, non-violent, inclusive, and effective learning environments for all' (SDG 4a; UN 2024).

Yet, in most contexts, education is still not a level playing field. Access, belonging, and learning outcomes depend on students' backgrounds and personal characteristics, both visible and invisible, that are unrelated to their capacities. For example, as research shows, students who identify as LGBTQIA+, non-binary, Muslim, or have a disability, come from a low socioeconomic background, or have a migration background are known to experience more exclusion and lower study success than others (Isik et al. 2021a; Mulder et al. 2023; Taylor et al. 2020; UNESCO 2020; Waldring et al. 2020; Wekker et al. 2016). Students with these identities and characteristics are underserved in our HEIs. This is a pressing matter, given that success in education has exponential effects on opportunities and successes later in life (Kusurkar 2023). Importantly, inclusive education goes beyond accessibility. It involves accommodating the diverging requirements and identities of individual students and a commitment to full and effective participation, attendance, contribution, and achievement of all students, especially those who are excluded or at risk of being marginalized (OHCHR 2016; Verdonk and Janczukowicz 2018).

Inclusive higher education is vital not only for the growth, educational achievements, and wellbeing of minoritized students, but also for enriching education for all students (Ramdas, Slootman and van Oudenhoven-van der Zee 2019). Besides education *in* inclusion, education should also be *for* inclusion, preparing all students to become critical, responsible citizens and professionals who contribute to equity, human rights, and a globally connected society (SDG 4.7; UN 2024).

Hence, for all students to develop critical thinking skills and to also be affirming of underserved students, inclusive education should be diverse and incorporate multiple perspectives, drawing on a wide range of literature, methods, materials, images, and examples. It should furthermore offer a critical curriculum, which explicitly interrogates the power relations that shape whose knowledges are centered and marginalized in academic disciplines and in society. The curriculum needs to feel relevant to every student, and it is important – particularly for minoritized students – that marginalized experiences and identities are acknowledged and affirmed, rather than disregarded and alienated (Freire 1970; hooks 2014; Tuitt and Stewart 2021).

Still, there is a lack of tacit knowledge on 'doing' DEI that makes its actual realization an ongoing challenge (Essanhaji and Van den Brink 2022; Essanhaji 2023; Kusurkar et al. 2023; Ramdas et al. 2025; Saba et al. 2021; Wekker et al. 2016). We experience an avoidance of meaningful conversations and subsequent actions in HEIs regarding existing

inequalities and exclusions both in- and outside the classrooms, reproducing the status quo. We propose that diversity discomfort is a key element in this avoidance, and thereby in the lingering absence of actual change in higher education. Understanding and engaging with diversity discomfort is, therefore, crucial to realize inclusive education. Without deliberate engagement with the prevalent uncertainty and discomfort, DEI efforts are likely to remain superficial, tokenist actions that maintain existing hierarchies (see also Van Stapele 2022; Tuitt and Stewart 2021).

In this conceptual article, we explore how diversity discomfort works. We emphasize the need to transform diversity discomfort from barrier to resource for inclusion. We first describe examples of diversity discomfort at work in our own higher education settings that illustrate how diversity discomfort can severely hamper the creation of inclusive environments. We then outline, with reference to interdisciplinary literature, why diversity discomfort must and *can* be employed to help instil changes and disrupt established educational structures. Subsequently, we reflect on what is required to bring about such transformation from barrier to resource. In the final section, we elaborate on some of the practical challenges that deploying – rather than disengaging – discomfort presents. We articulate the need for a research agenda on how to harness discomfort as a resource for inclusion, as better understanding and further unpacking of the potential for transformation will facilitate inclusive practices for future-proof, equitable education.

Our discussion of diversity discomfort as experienced in educational situations may elicit discomfort among readers. We invite readers to let their diversity discomfort inspire reflection on their own unease and encourage a conscious exploration of how their values and beliefs are challenged, and what emotions are evoked.

Author positionality

Discussing diversity discomfort must necessarily be a reflexive exercise. What composes diversity and what makes diversity uncomfortable depend on the characteristics, positions and capacities of those involved in each situation. This includes its observers and analysts: Our thinking and writing about diversity discomfort is, of course, grounded in our own personal and professional experiences in and of the world.

As authors, we draw from a range of intersectional identities, roles, and disciplinary training, while sharing a national and local context. We all live in the Netherlands, where we work in four HEIs in Amsterdam. We have relatively secure employment positions, working as researchers, teachers, and teacher trainers, combined with various organizational, management and policy roles. We identify as women in our forties and fifties. All of us, in our research and teaching, focus on equitable education and the field of DEI. Each team member has experienced moments of diversity discomfort owing to her background and/or work in DEI; ranging from relatively dominant positions to relatively minoritized positions. Two of us were born in India, one in Turkey, and three in the Netherlands, of which one has fatherly roots in Indonesia, then called Dutch East Indies. Three of us were first-generation students. Five of us are parents. Between us, we have earned degrees in Gender Studies, Humanities, Social Sciences, Education, Psychology, Cultural Anthropology, Medicine and Applied Physics.

In our intercollegiate discussions, which are characterized by high levels of (self-) reflection, specific axes of difference emerge most often. These are ethnic and cultural

backgrounds, class positions, social and geographical mobility, language abilities, neurodiversity, and gender roles (even if men/male bodies are conspicuously absent in our team). As an author team, we embody meaningful diversity that is nonetheless partial and situated.

Diversity discomfort as barrier for inclusion

Discomfort can give rise to various behaviours, such as offensiveness, defensiveness, or adopting an unwavering stance. Clearly, such behaviours do not contribute to inclusive social dynamics. In many instances however, discomfort leads to avoidance, which is less pronounced but equally undermines the formation of an inclusive climate. Diversity discomfort often results in withdrawal from triggering situations, avoidance of uncomfortable encounters, reluctance to speak up on diversity issues, or aversion to anything associated with DEI (Ahmed 2017; DiAngelo 2018). We here present some examples, partially based on our own experiences, in our educational institutions, illustrating how diversity discomfort and the ensuing avoidance can impact equity on three levels.

The first example is on an interpersonal level and shows how discomfort can make people refrain from addressing discrimination and even go along with exclusionary remarks or practices. In the following quote from an interview with a student with a minoritized ethnic identity about her experiences in medical education, she describes how she affirmed a dominant, exclusionary narrative instead of speaking up against racist remarks among fellow students:

> And sometimes I even go along with their conversation for fun and then I think 'yes, that is what you want to hear, right? That is not what I think … ' Yes, but what else should I do, it is all a game, unfortunately. It sounds very manipulative what I'm saying now, but that's how it works. […] So if they [colleagues from ethnic majority] make racist remarks, 'Yes, there are those street youths around these days, surely many of them are Moroccans'. Yes, that's just what it is, I agree with them. (Isik et al. 2021b, 5)

The second level is the classroom context, as teachers and students often seem to feel uneasy about broaching sensitive topics or minority perspectives in class (Altinyelken 2022; Lee and Williams 2017; Muftugil-Yalcin et al. 2023). Some teachers feel incredibly insecure and try to avoid these topics in class at all costs (Muftugil-Yalcin et al. 2023), as the following quote about tension in class (*hot moments*) illustrates:

> As a teacher, you have to be very on top of things and you really have to manage things on the spot. And even in personal relationships, when people say something awkward to me, I just can't react, you know, that kind of reflex I don't have with me. I'm the type, when the situation is gone I think: 'I should have said that, he should have said that.' I ruminate. So that's why, as much as I want these hot moments to happen, I fear them a lot. I fear I won't be able to manage them properly. – Teacher (interview) (Muftugil-Yalcin et al. 2023, 9)

Colleagues sometimes even fear being publicly 'cancelled'. We have witnessed up close situations in which students blamed teachers for being racist in ways that do not leave any room for dialogue, which discourages teachers from engaging with controversial topics (see also Rom and Mitchell (2021) and Zembylas (2024) on cancel culture and the framing of cancel culture). We have noticed some HEI teacher training courses in the Netherlands even *recommending* avoiding sensitive topics that are feared to be

polarizing in class. Avoidance can, moreover, be built into seemingly inclusive classroom norms themselves. The widely used ground rule *agree to disagree*, for example, allows participants who do not want their views to be challenged to opt out of difficult conversations, thereby closing down dialogue and reinforcing existing power inequalities (Arao and Clemens 2013). We return to this rule, and to the alternative of *controversy with civility*, when we discuss the creation of brave spaces.

Also students sometimes feel uninvited and unsafe to share their experiences and opinions, for example in relation to topics such as political preferences, religious or secular lifestyles, gender identities or health conditions. Even when in-class dialogue is explicitly initiated, students can feel unsafe or unwelcome to share their experiences and perspectives. For example, in a research-interview about first-year experiences carried out by one of the authors, a student told her she did not disclose her political allegiance when the teacher invited a classroom conversation on the recent national elections, because she knew she deviated from the leftist class norm and was convinced she would not encounter genuine interest or respect. On another occasion, a student shared how the atrocities in Gaza consumed her thoughts day and night. A deafening silence at her educational institution however, made her feel she could not address her thoughts at school, which worried and frustrated her further.

When fear of friction or being cancelled makes teachers and students avoid engagement with diverse perspectives and avoid reflection on positionality and hierarchy, this impacts the quality of our education. A lack of (critical) engagement with diverse perspectives is a missed opportunity to make education meaningful and to foster personal growth, critical thinking and respectful social interaction, which are essential qualities of critical and responsible citizens and professionals (Altinyelken 2021). Additionally, such avoidance normalizes unequal regard for the experiences and views of some people over others and contributes to the silencing of certain (often non-Western) perspectives, a phenomenon known as 'epistemic injustice' (Pohlhaus 2012).

Thirdly, diversity discomfort also operates at the level of institutional management. Across our institutions, we observed how leadership responses to socially and politically charged events can reproduce the very inequities that higher institutions claim to contest.

In several Dutch higher education institutions, boards had previously responded swiftly and unequivocally to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, including through public statements and the suspension of collaborations with Russian institutions. By contrast, institutional responses to Israel's military actions in Gaza were markedly more cautious, delayed, or silent, despite universities' stated commitments to knowledge, truth, and critical thinking, and to uphold a social responsibility – as articulated in their own mission statements (Violi et al. 2025). In some cases, explicit calls from students and staff for solidarity with Palestinian citizens in Gaza were not recognized as forms of engaged citizenship, but were instead approached primarily as risks to order, safety or institutional reputation (Advalvas 2025; Jansen 2025; Het Parool 2024, 2025b, 2025c, 2025d).

The issue is not simply that universities remained silent, but that instances were treated unequally, and silence in the context of Gaza was justified through the language of non-politicality, connection, safety, and avoidance of polarization (see an interview with a HEI board member in Het Parool 2024, 2025a; see also Advalvas 2023). The board member of another HEI explains the silence in relation to Gaza as follows:

> As a knowledge institution, we do not have a political role, but we do stand for a set of values that we want to promote. When injustice occurs that conflicts with those values, we cannot turn a blind eye and must speak with one voice. The only thing we do not want is to be drawn into the polarized debate. We must avoid that at all times. (HvanA 2025, translation by the authors)

These statements demonstrate how diversity discomfort becomes institutionally organized. The discomfort generated by perceived controversy is not addressed directly, but displaced into procedural vocabularies of 'neutrality', 'safety', and 'depolarization'. These vocabularies appear moderate and responsible, yet they can operate as a means of avoiding ethical and political complexities. In this way, the commitment to critical thinking, moral responsibility, and the contestation of injustice becomes conditional upon the institution's capacity to manage friction.

These examples show how discomfort triggers avoidance, and how avoidance hinders the realization of equitable education. Fear of friction, unease, reputational harm or escalation, or other unwanted consequences may lead students, teachers and institutional leadership to refrain from addressing discrimination, from engaging with multiple perspectives, or from discussing societal and global developments. When people in interpersonal interactions avoid addressing inequality as it happens, this strengthens rather than challenges existing exclusionary structures. This also occurs when in the classroom teachers avoid addressing topics deemed sensitive, and when institutional leadership refrains from acknowledging, discussing, and challenging injustices to avoid discord.

The assumption underlying such responses is often that silence preserves neutrality and prevents further friction. Yet silence is not neutral. Silence strengthens the status quo. When injustices are left unaddressed and unchallenged, silence signals consent, reinforces power imbalances and constitutes complicity in situations of injustice (see for example Durrheim 2024; Violi et al. 2025). Silence loudly communicates this message to those who commit atrocities, to those in power, to those who are harmed or marginalized, and to the wider academic community. Consequently, silence does not deflect friction. Rather, it redistributes friction onto those who are already carrying the burden of exclusion, grief or marginalization. By being silent, institutions overlook the frustration and hurt of those who feel violated by the status quo, adding to epistemic injustice.

Instead of trying to avoid discord at all costs – and refraining from speaking up and silencing voices that 'might lead to polarization' – institutional leadership should provide a space for students and staff to (learn to) engage with sensitive topics. Considering their commitment to truth, equal rights and a better world, to critical thinking and active citizenship, they cannot evade topics for the reason that these might be political or polarizing. Moreover, these commitments and educational responsibilities mean that, even if HEIs avoid being overly political, they are still expected to offer moral direction and speak out against injustice; *especially* when this goes against dominant societal views or when taking a position is not straightforward. Clearly, this is no easy task. It requires courage and a willingness to make and admit mistakes and consequently adjust the course of action – all within a social climate in which vulnerability and 'mistakes' are severely penalized.

Overall, just like offensive responses to discomfort, the avoidance stemming from diversity discomfort also hampers the establishment of education *in* and *for* inclusion.

Rather than retreating from dialogue and reflection to avoid discomfort, we argue for constructively embracing that discomfort as a necessary, though difficult, condition for more equitable educational practice.

Diversity discomfort as resource for inclusion

Having shown how discomfort, left unattended, entrenches inequity, we now turn to its generative potential: under the right conditions, the same discomfort that operates as a barrier can become a resource for inclusion. Instead of removing it, we argue that facing discomfort and processing discomfort in a constructive way is imperative for creating inclusion. After all, conflict and its accompanying discomfort are an inevitable reality of diverse groups, which highlights the need for sustained, constructive engagement with discomfort to strengthen social dynamics (Arao and Clemens 2013, 144). Furthermore, as we show here, discomfort is inherent to personal and societal transformation, and to processes of learning.

We base our view that discomfort necessarily accompanies personal and social transformation, on various feminist scholars. Donna Haraway (2016) urges us to 'stay with the trouble' and cultivate a shared ability to be attentive to difficult realities, think up new ways of being together, and develop critical capacity. Similarly, Sara Ahmed (2017) warns that avoiding and dismissing discomfort risks reproducing inequitable structures. The 'sense that something is wrong' disrupts the status quo and paves the way for transformation.

In this light, discomfort can alert us that we are operating beyond our comfort zones, and we need to consider divergent views. As Chadwick argues, we need to 'stay with the feelings that we might wish would go away' (2021, 564). Had someone in the student example been able to embrace her discomfort and feel able to address the exclusionary narrative, this could have fostered reflection and growth among those involved.

A similar emphasis can be found in Foucault, who warns against 'being completely comfortable with one's own presuppositions' and instead positions discomfort as a starting point for individual and social transformation (Foucault 1994, 448). Taken together, these perspectives suggest that discomfort should be regarded as an indispensable signal that a situation calls for conscious attention and critical reflection, rather than automatic or habitual responses.

In addition to catalyzing personal and social transformation, discomfort is also an integral aspect of learning. Learning requires a cognitive and personal stretch; outside one's comfort zone into the 'learning zone' (Vygotsky 1978; Senninger 2000). While the 'comfort zone' refers to dealing with familiar issues that provide safety but lack learning opportunities, the learning zone refers to the engagement with new issues. The learning zone is where growth and learning take place. This is why we should embrace hot moments – moments with surfaced or unsurfaced tension – as potential opportunities for learning (Muftugil-Yalcin et al. 2023).

When fear and stress become too high for a person to remain open, they have moved from the learning zone to the so-called 'panic zone' (Kouvela et al. 2018). So, although learning involves a stretch beyond the learners' comfort zones, too big a stretch inhibits the learning process. This requires an intricate handling of hot moments by all participants, with an additional responsibility for the teacher. As the classroom example

clearly shows, teachers do not always feel confident enough to facilitate diversity-related conversations and constructively deal with discomfort, turning it from threat to learning opportunity (Muftugil-Yalcin et al. 2023).

The feminist call to embrace discomfort and the recognition that learning entails discomfort, converge in the concept of a '*pedagogy of discomfort*'. Responding to an observed numbness regarding social and personal transformation in education, this pedagogical approach considers discomfort as not only inevitable but essential to learning (Berlak 2004; Boler 1999). It is seen as the key to the disruption of entrenched views and dominant practices that perpetuate social inequalities. In a pedagogy of discomfort, learners are deliberately exposed to discomforting ideas, experiences, or perspectives, as this fosters a deeper understanding of complex issues, including the conditions of power and privilege. It encourages students and educators to explore their own positionalities and biases in relation to societal mechanisms of inequality (Boler and Zembylas 2003; Nadan and Stark 2017).

Taken together, the understanding of discomfort as integral to societal change, learning and transformative education point to diversity-related discomfort as a crucial catalyst for inclusive education.

What does it take to transform diversity discomfort into a resource for inclusion?

Embracing and employing discomfort comes with challenges. In this section, we present some reflections and suggestions on *how*. We discuss the balance between safety and discomfort and call for an acknowledgement of emotions and a redistribution of power, which involves practicing vulnerability. Furthermore, we reflect on possible harmful effects and present some considerations on how to navigate these challenges.

Balancing discomfort and safety

We should not embrace discomfort at all costs. As we have seen, when individuals drift into their panic zones, this hampers their learning. Panic blocks empathy, openness, and growth. A learning environment should be free from threats of hostility, particularly when dealing with sensitive topics related to identity, race, and gender (Arao and Clemens 2013). At the same time, it is important to acknowledge the role of discomfort in learning and transformation, and to acknowledge that spaces where everyone always feels comfortable do not exist. Hence, inclusive environments that support learning and seek transformation require a fine balance between discomfort and safety. Therefore, safety should not be conflated with not-being-challenged, with comfort.

To avoid conflating safety and comfort, based on Arao and Clemens (2013), we argue to create brave spaces in contrast to safe spaces. Instead of establishing spaces without disagreement (a common meaning of 'safe space') in education we best create 'brave spaces', which allow for engagement with difficult topics, foster critical thinking and personal growth, and enable dialogues that might be uncomfortable. There should be room for disagreement and 'intellectual discomfort' while protecting 'dignity safety' (Callan 2020) which refers to personal consideration and respect.

This does not mean that brave spaces are unsafe. For inclusive education it is a prerequisite that all participants experience dignity safety; that they feel safe enough to bravely engage in learning and endure intellectual discomfort. In the above examples, arguments of safety and neutrality were used to avoid conversations about sensitive topics, in which people had divergent experiences and perspectives. The institutional silence undermines critical thinking, moral responsibility and efforts to challenge injustice, and fails to foster brave spaces.

Halleh Ghorashi's concept of 'delayed interspace' provides guidance for creating brave spaces (2014). In such interspace, participants suspend their judgements and embrace ambivalence. In other words, there is 'interpretive hesitancy' (Chadwick 2021). Participants delay and 'step aside', which means they step outside the dominant norms and perceptions, outside dichotomous categorizations of sameness and otherness, and outside their own assumptions and preferences to create space for reflection, commonality, openness and curiosity.

Brave spaces require clear ground rules for interaction. Arao and Clemens explain how common guidelines often contribute to strengthening existing hierarchies in interaction and they propose alternative rules to create equitable brave spaces (2013). As we observed in the classroom examples above, the common rule of *agreeing to disagree* often leads those unwilling to have their views challenged by diverging perspectives to opt out of difficult conversations, thereby hampering dialogue and reinforcing existing power inequalities. Inspired by Astin and Astin 1996, Arao and Clemens propose the rule of *controversy with civility*, which builds on 'a group commitment to understand sources of disagreement and to work cooperatively toward common solutions' (ibid., 59). Arao and Clemens explicitly encourage participants to be brave in exploring content that pushes them to the edges of their comfort zones to maximize learning (ibid., 143).

As boundaries between comfort and safety differ per person and per situation, depending for example on the group composition and the level of discomfort that individuals and the group are accustomed to, creating an inclusive learning environment, which is safe enough for participants to bravely participate involves a continuous conversation on these boundaries.

Acknowledgement of emotions

Discomfort has a significant affective dimension. Discomfort cannot be understood and constructively embraced without attending to emotions and the accompanying embodied feelings. Acknowledging and analyzing emotions invigorate new levels of awareness and empathy, and in turn foster inclusion and transformation (Berlak 2004; Boler and Zembylas 2003; Zembylas and McGlynn 2012). This is why emotions play such a significant role in the strand of anti-oppressive pedagogies, including the pedagogy of discomfort (Boler 1999).

However, this poses a particular challenge in environments with a prevailing focus on cognition; for example, in our traditional education system, where affect is severely undervalued and often ignored. In addition, certain expressions of certain individuals are labelled and appreciated in diverging ways (Ahmed 2004). While an exclamation by a white man might be appreciated as 'passionate' or 'convinced,' a woman of colour exclaiming might be accused of being 'angry', while a white woman's exclamation

might be disqualified as 'emotional.' In the examples discussed, students and teachers explicitly reference emotions such as fear and insecurity; in contrast, institutional responses suggest that rising emotions should be feared and avoided (see HvA 2025; AD 2024). Roger Dawkins (2023) presents a contrasting example, explaining how he deliberately employed affect in his podcasting course. While he initially discouraged engagement with the emotional aspects of students' stories, he later developed teaching activities to support their exploration of emotion and vulnerability, recognizing its value for personal growth.

Given the neglect of emotions in academia and the way affective norms implicitly reinforce societal hierarchies, a deliberate approach to emotions in education is needed when we want to constructively engage with discomfort. Arao and Clemens (2013) criticize the common rule *do not take things personally* as this places the responsibility for the effects of utterances solely on the receiver, the person who is emotionally affected by the situation. The underlying norm of emotional constraint even invalidates felt emotions, and discourages affected people from expressing and addressing their emotions. Arao and Clemens instead propose the principle: *own your intentions and your impact*, which emphasizes that intention and impact matter. They invite participants to reflect on their choices to challenge others (and themselves), and to jointly discuss the meaning of respect and attack.

Efforts to redistribute power and practice vulnerability

Constructive engagement with discomfort furthermore requires a certain acknowledgement of inequality and positionality that many people lack. This is not only because discomfort arises *from* diversity and inequality, but also *in* inequality. Participants in a hot moment have different positionalities. Some have more influence than others in steering the conversation in a certain direction. They have the power to grant certain voices or views more space than others, for example in their roles of teacher, manager, or chair, or because they are relatively assertive or are taken more seriously. Remember the student who, as someone with a minoritized ethnic identity, experienced racist remarks made by fellow students with an ethnic majority background. Furthermore, some perspectives are more dominant and more generally accepted than others. This means that some perspectives are questioned more rigorously than others and require more elaborate argumentation. When we do not recognize and counter the power hierarchies at play, hot moments will not be transformative but will contribute to strengthening the norm and further marginalize people and perspectives who are already marginalized.

Breaking established norms and hierarchies, as well as reflecting on one's own role in the current structures and dynamics, can feel very vulnerable, especially for people who are more accustomed to feeling comfortable and are less versed in seeing themselves as part of diversity and inequalities. Embracing discomfort and challenging habits and structures requires vulnerability, which is often novel for those in positions of power. Keddie refers to the pedagogy of *mutual vulnerability*, which involves 'a recognition of our relationality and inter-dependence with others.' (2022, 408). Acknowledgement of our emotions and pain in our entanglements with each other can help us in opening ourselves to others' pain.

Teacher Dawkins, who was introduced before, described how he modelled the vulnerability expected from students through expressing his own discomfort about having students explore personal issues in their podcasts. In his explanation, he cites Carniel:

> By placing oneself on the same vulnerable plane as students, the […] instructor can use critique of the self and practice as an important tool within the pedagogy of discomfort, arguably role-modelling ethical decision-making within the classroom by rendering the pedagogical approach transparent (Carniel 2018, 149).

The approach of *strategic empathy* also responds to this power imbalance (Jansen 2009 in Zembylas 2015; see also Lindquist 2004). It implies teachers deliberately holding back their own norms and preferences, while empathizing with students, even when the presented perspectives disturb other students or the teacher. Taking sides too early 'may in fact make it impossible to build a constructive point of departure to navigate through and transform these knowledges and emotions' (ibid., 172). Zembylas further explains:

> A major requirement, then, of a pedagogy of discomfort is that students and teachers are invited to embrace their vulnerability and ambiguity of self and therefore their dependence on others. (…) In embracing this vulnerability in teaching and learning, a pedagogy of discomfort also acknowledges the limits of knowing the other and the ethical claim that unknowability makes (Zembylas 2015, 170).

Consider ethical dilemmas and reduce harm

Discomfort can be harmful, for example when it violates dignity or triggers traumas. Where do we draw the line?

How can we responsibly navigate discomfort, especially since engaging with it does not automatically promote social justice and can just as easily entrench existing hierarchies? How can we ensure that embracing and inviting discomfort is respectful and supportive rather than coercive or harmful? How can we prevent harm when we 'stay with discomfort' on purpose? How can we support the insecure teacher in managing hot moments in a responsible way? Another relevant question is how we can ethically ask people to reflect on their positions and challenge dominant norms while being inside existing power hierarchies, for example the hierarchy between teacher and student? Under what conditions can we impose discomfort? When is harm acceptable (for example, when imposing democratic principles)?

Blanket appeals to discomfort should be avoided. Guardrails are needed to operationalize discomfort, while reducing harm and without normalizing harm (see also Ramdas, Slootman and van Oudenhoven-van der Zee 2019). Minimum safeguards include consent and choice in tasks that solicit self-disclosure. Furthermore, risk needs to be redistributed away from minoritized students, for example without the burden of 'representing' a group. It is also important to offer multi-path reporting and repair procedures that are independent of course grading and other institutional dependencies. In addition, joint formulation of (equitable) ground rules protects dignity safety while allowing intellectual disagreement.

Nevertheless, in line with Zembylas (2015) and Butler (2005), we do not posit that all harm should always be avoided. The pedagogy of discomfort sees harm as acceptable when it is used to reduce – or cure – other forms of violence. In other words, it is

acceptable when it helps pave the way for transformation towards socially just perspectives and structures (ibid.). This means that certain forms of discomfort are ethically justifiable where it demonstrably reduces other forms of violence and where safeguards are explicit. Every situation calls for a discussion about where to draw the line, and who draws it.

Discussion and moving forward

We have argued that diversity discomfort has an incredible potential for learning and is essential for institutional transformation towards equitable higher education. Real transformation and learning go hand in hand with discomfort. Discomfort should serve as a signal of our being outside of our comfort zones, indicating the need to engage in conscious reflection and consider divergent views. Embracing discomfort aligns with the idea of brave spaces and the pedagogy of discomfort, which encourage students and teachers to move beyond what is familiar and challenge their assumptions and beliefs. Learning itself involves stretching beyond comfort zones, while avoiding the panic zones. Fostering inclusion thus requires a shift from avoiding discomfort to 'staying with' diversity discomfort: recognizing, utilizing, and even inviting discomfort as a catalyst for genuine transformation in teaching and learning.

A complex responsibility for HEIs

While transformation and learning go hand in hand with discomfort, discomfort is not necessarily and automatically accompanied by transformation and learning. Experiencing distress is not easy. As we have seen, the processes of reflection involved in engaging with content that challenges dominant assumptions can raise anxiety and discomfort, particularly for people who were previously unaware of the existence or validity of multiple perspectives, for people who used to deny this validity, or when people become aware of their own positionality. This often leads individuals to refrain from engaging with perspectives that differ from their own (see also Tuitt and Stewart 2021), or even to embrace unawareness that absolves feelings of responsibility. The process of becoming aware is also not easy for those who are willing to develop awareness. Educators, students and managers might feel vulnerable, disoriented, confused, overwhelmed, or depressed by new insights into how they may be complicit in some of the injustices in their society (Wang 2005). Either way, diversity discomfort can provoke defensive reactions, causing individuals to entrench their identities, solidify their worldviews, and contribute to societal polarization.

The pursuit of equity is further complicated by the nature of the established structures. A characteristic of these hierarchies is that people whose bodies, socialization, experiences and perspectives are regularly aligned with dominant norms – who have norm-group identities – are generally less aware of inequality. Furthermore, people who regularly fall within the norm groups are generally less accustomed to experiencing diversity discomfort. They experience less friction with the system and are more used to feeling at ease than those who are regularly minoritized. As minoritized individuals have bodies, socialization, experiences and perspectives that diverge from prevalent norms, they are

far more accustomed to experiencing discomfort in society, including educational institutions. The student example demonstrates how they have developed coping strategies.

Additionally, people with regular norm-group positions generally also occupy the more influential positions and have more authority to steer situations. This can easily result in avoidance and inertia, leaving the discomfort that is generally experienced by minoritized individuals intact. This mechanism is also described by others. In relation to race, DiAngelo speaks of 'white fragility,' referring to the distressed and defensive attitudes of white people when confronted with discrimination or racism (2018). Pohlhaus uses 'willful ignorance' for cases where privileged groups refuse to hear, acknowledge, or engage with marginalized perspectives (2012 in Chadwick 2021, 563).

These dynamics are further affected by the academic context that – at least in the Netherlands – is characterized by a general experience of constraints on time and funds, a focus on efficiency, and an emphasis on supposedly neutral, cognitive forms of knowledge transfer. Just like Ghorashi (2014), we are concerned that this atmosphere reinforces established hierarchies and solidifies convictions. As these tendencies hinder the slowing down and vulnerability required to meaningfully 'stay with discomfort,' they represent a major challenge to creating inclusive education.

In this context, embracing and strategically employing discomfort for inclusion requires deliberate engagement with the attitudes and responsibilities of people with norm-group experiences, who are often still less aware of mechanisms of injustice and their own complicity.

This calls for HEIs to explicitly support their educators (as well as management and students) in deploying discomfort as a resource for change (see for suggestions Slootman et al. 2023). Particularly teachers need to be enabled to develop adequate knowledge and competences such as empathy, awareness, conflict resolution skills and cultural humility, and the willingness to model vulnerability. Refraining from addressing inequality and injustice in order to avoid polarization – on the assumption that this creates a safe space for all – is not a solution. Instead, it is about engaging with intellectual discomfort while protecting dignity safety. HEIs should create a supportive environment with appreciation for the affective component, facilitate open and respectful dialogue, and offer appropriate guidance to engage with different perspectives. This allows teachers to address the emotional and cognitive challenges that arise in this pedagogical practice and help students to critically engage with their discomfort in ways that promote (self) reflection, understanding, increased awareness, and ultimately transformative learning.

Towards a research agenda

The importance of seizing discomfort to enhance inclusion calls for a deeper understanding of the emergence and manifestations of diversity discomfort. How and when does diversity discomfort arise? How does it function as a barrier? What does it look like when transformed into a resource for inclusion? What do educators, students, and educational leadership need to achieve this? How does this vary with specific national, institutional, programmatic, and personal contexts?

The inevitable nature of diversity discomfort in our increasingly diverse societies and classrooms calls for a robust research agenda. Such research is essential to unpack, cultivate, and utilize the potential of diversity discomfort. Despite the conceptual discussions

of discomfort and the empirical writings on discomfort in the classroom, empirical research that makes discomfort more tangible remains scarce, particularly outside the classroom and in the context of higher education. Addressing this gap is crucial for transforming diversity discomfort from a barrier into a catalyst for inclusion in higher education.

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