Global Discourse • vol 10 • no 2 • 277–297
 • Online ISSN 2043-7897
https://doi.org/10.1332/204378920X15844659544839

Special Issue: The Politics of Negative Emotions

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Against comfort: political implications of evading discomfort

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We typically think of emotional states as highly individualised and subjective. But visceral gut feelings like discomfort can be better understood as collective and public, when they reflect implicit biases that an individual has internalised. Most of us evade discomfort in favour of comfort, often unconsciously. This inclination, innocent in most cases, also has social and political consequences. Research has established that it is easier to interact with people who resemble us and that such in-group favouritism contributes to subtle forms of discrimination. If we want a more equal and unbiased society, we have a duty to expose ourselves to more discomfort. Living up to this duty requires an enhanced emotional vocabulary that captures the political dimensions of physiological affect. I argue that a better understanding of what I call *interaction discomfort* can mitigate subtle forms of discrimination.

Key words implicit bias • emotional synchrony • affect • emotions • structural discrimination

Key messages

- Political change relies on the mitigation of implicit, affective biases, not just the barring of explicit discrimination.
- We are drawn to people in whose company we feel comfortable and avoid situations and people that make us uncomfortable.
- To counteract such biases and enhance social mobility, we have a duty to choose more *interaction discomfort*.
- Understanding the political dimensions of our gut feelings will make us better equipped to tackle awkward interactions.

To cite this article: Munch-Jurisic, D.M. (2020) Against comfort: political implications of evading discomfort, *Global Discourse*, vol 10, no 2, 277–297,
DOI: 10.1332/204378920X15844659544839

Introduction

Why do some situations make us more uncomfortable than others? We typically think of feelings of discomfort and comfort as highly individualised and subjective. In this paper, however, I argue that visceral gut feelings like discomfort are not merely private emotional experiences but in a certain sense collective and public. To illustrate this point, consider the following testimony from a young African American man:

> 'I feel like I'm disturbing people by just being there. Like, people feel uncomfortable when I walk in. I guess I've kind of become numb to it after so many years. Like, this is just my life, and it's just something that I've gotten used to, unfortunately.' (*Story of Access*, 2018)

Imagine this young man interviewed for a job by three white men. His interviewers appear uncomfortable in his presence. Registering their discomfort, he also begins to feel nervous. If we attribute the tension in the room to individual psychology, we have told only half the story. It is well-established that we find it easier to interact with people who resemble us – for example, in terms of ethnicity, gender, and social and economic class (Danyluck and Page-Gould, 2018). The people with whom we share these characteristics increase our visceral wellbeing and make us comfortable. Emotional synchronising and empathising become easier when we share the same experiences or cultural background (Barrett, 2017; Bloom, 2018). We are drawn to people in whose company we feel comfortable and we avoid situations and people that make us uncomfortable. Feelings of discomfort usher us in certain directions, often without our explicit awareness.

The statement quoted above takes place in the context of the contemporary United States, where perceptions of race play a central role in social interaction. Evidence on implicit biases suggests that we can adapt our thought experiment to any particular social, political and geographical location, varying the example to the social identities of the setting: a woman before an all-male panel of interviewers (gender); or one wearing a hijab before a panel of European Christians or secularists (religion, ethnicity); a first-generation academic from a working class background before a panel of distinguished university professors (class) and many other parameters (appearance, weight, disability, and so on). In each of these cases, the discomfort in the room is the product of a specific political context, not mere individual psychology.

In her studies of hiring processes, Lauren Rivera shows that employers cite a so-called 'cultural fit' as one of the two most important qualifications for a job candidate. Moreover, 70 per cent of employers cited cultural fit as more important than technical qualifications. In her own words, her study shows that 'hiring is more than just a process of skills sorting; it is also a process of *cultural matching* between candidates, evaluators, and firms' (Rivera, 2012: 1000). The value of being comfortable around someone (because of a perceived cultural fit) outweighed concerns about productivity alone.

Because it feels easier and more comfortable to be in the midst of the recognisable, the safe, the familiar, our gut feelings direct us to choose the company of people we perceive to be like ourselves. Interestingly, Rivera's study sheds light on the fact that the operation of implicit biases in this context is not merely automatic and unconscious, as often assumed. In her interviews, employers explicitly mention 'cultural fit' as a qualification they seek. This is an explicit judgement of a candidate's prospective fit within the corporate, business, or team culture. Nonetheless, it is important to

understand that the feeling of comfort in a situation or in the company of a person is rooted in deep physiological processes, not merely cognition. It is metabolically costly to be in environments that are hard to predict and easier (and more comfortable, physiologically) to be in situations and with people that we find recognisable (Theriault et al, 2020). Thus, while employers seek a fit within the culture of their workplace, they are likely evaluating the comfort they personally feel with a candidate.

In political theory and philosophy, political emotions are typically identified narrowly as emotions and feelings that are displayed in public, political life. Important work has sought to understand how emotions like shame, disgust and contempt shape the politics of nations and their political leaders (Nussbaum, 2010; Kelly, 2011; Bell, 2013). But this particular tradition has given little attention to political dimensions of more covert forms of affect like comfort and discomfort.[1] The aim of this paper is to demonstrate the political dimensions of deep, physiological experiences of negative affect and to draw important implications for the practice of not only emotion theory, but political theory as well. If we want to increase social mobility and foster environments where everyone has equal access to educational and career opportunities, we have a moral and political duty to expose ourselves to particular kinds of discomfort that are the products of implicit biases.

Living up to this duty requires a better conceptual framework for understanding feelings of discomfort. We need a more nuanced vocabulary for what discomfort can be. To progress in this direction, drawing on findings in experimental psychology and the constructivist theory of emotions and affect, I introduce the concept of *bias discomfort* and its more specific subtype *interaction discomfort*. Aided by philosophical theories on the structural dimensions of prejudice and bias, I argue that these concepts can help agents recognise how and when the specific experience of interaction discomfort is distorting their ability to connect with others.

To be clear, I am not encouraging agents to ignore, silence or bury their negative affective states or the multiple kinds of negative emotions that may arise out of them – anger, guilt, shame, or indignation, to name just a few possibilities. Nor am I arguing that this range of negative emotional and affective states are necessarily counterproductive or politically undesirable (Srinivasan, 2018), nor attempting to water down differences and conflicts between privileged and underprivileged groups (Mouffe, 2005; Dixon et al, 2012). On the contrary, my goal is to argue that an increased awareness and toleration[2] of negative affective states can be a key resource in promoting social and political change. Of course, it would amount to what Laurent Berlant calls 'cruel optimism' to imagine that mere awareness and conceptual attention would be enough to dismantle these processes (Berlant, 2012). As philosopher Laurencia Sáenz-Benavides has meticulously detailed, emotional phenomena are not only 'shaped by oppressive structures, they also play an instrumental role in sustaining and reinforcing them' (Sáenz-Benavides, 2019: 3). Understanding how these engrained emotional responses take the form of social habits that sustain the dominant political structures also helps us recognise why these structures are so pervasive and hard to change.

With these cautions in mind, this paper presents a principled and normative argument for why agents – out of a concern for justice and a fairer distribution of possibilities for upward social mobility – have a duty to expose themselves to interaction discomfort. This duty primary targets members of a privileged majority who are already well-connected and equipped with access to a network of opportunities, but

under certain conditions, minorities would also would also benefit from engaging in a more conscious and purposeful exposure to discomfort.[3] I use the second half of the paper to discuss some of the immediate challenges that my proposal faces.

One set of objections confronts the practical feasibility of the proposed conceptual framework: how exactly is one supposed to identify a specific feeling of discomfort as a byproduct of implicit biases? A related concern is that my reliance on a constructivist view of emotions encourages an unproductive kind of relativism, in which there is no right or wrong interpretation of an affective state. I answer these concerns with some specific examples of techniques to help identify and manage instances of interaction discomfort and by discussing what long-term institutional and societal strategies should be enabled.

Another set of objections confronts the ethical standard and scope of the proposal: Why should disadvantaged minorities be included in this duty to feel uncomfortable? Is it not unreasonable to demand this extra emotional labour[4] of disadvantaged minorities who are already exposed to a considerable amount of interaction discomfort on a daily basis? With reference to the debate over the imperative of integration between Elizabeth Anderson and Tommie Shelby, I argue that minorities are only obliged to expose themselves to interaction discomfort in places of *formal social integration*: institutional environments in both the public and private sphere (schools, organisations, clubs, companies, and so on). Another ethical concern is whether my proposal invites irrational behaviour by demanding a greater exposure to discomfort (Gendler, 2011). By encouraging agents toward emotionally charged and cognitively taxing situations, could the proposal even worsen relations between minorities and majorities? Will agents feel compelled to 'fake' being comfortable or compensate by being overly welcoming? I reject these criticisms on the basis that each rests on a flawed idea of authentic and false emotions and a false dichotomy between rational and unbiased behaviour.

How can discomfort be political?

A fundamental basis of this paper is that affective states of comfort and discomfort are shaped by the social and political. But, to begin with, what is this broader phenomenon of affect? I draw on a constructivist view of emotions where affect is the flow of feelings and unidentifiable moods, of which we are not necessarily explicitly aware, occurring in the background of our conscious thoughts. We often feel a range of moods – excited, jittery, irritable, annoyed, or simply uncomfortable – without knowing why. The same applies to sensations of calm, peace, and comfort (Posner et al, 2005; Barrett, 2017). Affect is sometimes a component of an emotion but not all kinds of affect become constructed as emotions. This is because affect is part of the larger phenomenon of *interoception*, a form of inner perception. In the words of neuropsychologist Lisa Barrett, interoception is the 'brain's representation of all sensations from your internal organs and tissues, the hormones in your blood, and your immune system' (Barrett, 2017: 56). Some of these sensations are transformed into emotions, but not all. If I feel irritable during a morning meeting, I might simply interpret my affective sensation as a sign of hunger but I may also understand my affect as a feeling of frustration at a colleague who missed an important deadline. Whether my state was in fact evoked by my colleague or my hunger is an open question. The cause of an affective state cannot always be settled (Stephan and Walter, 2020).

Many studies have, however, found that negative affect often has a spillover effect and influences our judgement and perceptions of the world. To cite just one example, interviewers were found to rate job candidates higher on sunny days than on gloomy days (Clore and Schiller, 2016).

Because affect is part of this larger system of interoception, it never turns off, not even when we sleep. From birth to death, we are always in some affective state, whether calm or aroused, comfortable or uncomfortable. Even when we are not consciously aware of affect, it influences how we behave, think, and perceive situations and interactions. In Barrett's words 'the human brain is anatomically structured so that no decision or action can be free of … affect' (Barrett, 2017: 72). As a result, like many other contemporary theories, the constructivist view of emotions rejects the dichotomy between feeling and cognition and emphasises that feelings or affect, and the whole body as such, are always involved in the way we experience and perceive the world (Sullivan, 2015; Colombetti, 2017; Barrett, 2017). As philosopher Susan Sullivan puts it:

> The knowledge that an organism has – about the world, about itself, about others – has a bodily basis. Human beings … come to know things through our physiological, affective transactions with the world. (Sullivan, 2015: 14)

If affect is always lingering in the background of our thoughts, how can such rudimentary visceral phenomena entail a political dimension? To understand this, we need to consider the phenomenon of *emotional synchrony*. Different scholarly fields have given the phenomenon a variety of names: attunement, mirroring, mimicry, and emotional contagion (Hatfield et al, 1993). It is, for example, the irresistible urge to yawn following the yawn of someone else. It is also the unconscious coordination of body language that we see in pleasant interactions. But emotional synchrony is more than mere coordination of facial expression and bodily gestures. More fundamentally, emotional synchrony makes us feel better at a very basic physiological level. By synchronising breathing and heartbeats, for example, we help maintain each other's visceral state of wellbeing (Barrett, 2017: 195ff).

It is important to emphasise again that we do not necessarily notice these deep forms of synchrony. Sometimes we are aware of these physiological changes and sometimes we are not. But they are always present, part of how our brain interprets and models the world. As a consequence, we experience some interactions as more or less pleasant than others. Often we cannot articulate, or put a finger on, precisely why an interaction made us feel a certain way. But the guiding force behind such encounters is hardly accidental and cannot be attributed solely to individual differences in personality. Research in the psychological sciences demonstrates that it is simply easier to synchronise and therefore empathise and interact with people who resemble us. Empathising become easier when we share the same experiences or background so that, as psychologist Paul Bloom argues, 'empathy distorts our moral judgements in pretty much the same way that prejudice does' (2018: 31). In a job interview, for example, it is easier for interviewers and interviewees to communicate and connect with each other when they share the same socially and culturally inherited scripts for how to display a politely interested and engaged attitude. As we have already seen, Rivera's research has documented how important this kind of 'cultural fit' is for a job offer to materialise (Rivera, 2012).

The flip side of these synchronising processes is that agents experience what I call *interaction discomfort*: they display various signs of discomfort when interacting with individuals they perceive as belonging to other groups. This affective phenomenon has been well documented by testimonies of minority groups and research from social psychology under different names: 'intergroup anxiety' (Stephan, 2014; Jacoby-Senghor et al, 2016; Hagiwara et al, 2017), 'racial stress' (Sullivan, 2015), 'white discomfort' (Applebaum, 2017), and 'white fragility' (DiAngelo, 2011). Many of the studies and testimonies mentioned here refer to an American context focused on race, but I use the concept *interaction discomfort* as a broad, neutral umbrella term that also covers the unease and discomfort agents experience when interacting with people from groups they perceive as dissimilar because of gender, class, ethnicity, dialect, disability or appearance in general (Bloom, 2018: 31; Munch-Jurisic, 2020).[5]

Recall the opening quote from the young African American man who observes the discomfort of his interactions with white Americans. The testimony does not cite an explicit, intentional form of discrimination, but speaks plainly to the wearying, damaging effects of such everyday encounters. Like explicit bias, subtle forms of bias also lead to high stresses in minority populations. These covert forms of discriminations leave the recipient with physiological and affective states of stress, for example a tight stomach, racing heartbeat or blushing (Sullivan, 2015: 144–6).

Despite the fact that this experience of negative affect is felt by a specific individual, we should not understand it as a mere reflection of their own private and individual emotions. The specific experience of interaction discomfort is *public*, in a certain sense, because it is shaped by the social and political environment of the individual. As the work of political philosopher and theorist Elizabeth Anderson demonstrates, racial stigmatisation (and its negative affective consequences) should not be understood as mere 'private thoughts, isolated in the mind of discrete individuals', because these thoughts 'enjoy a certain public standing, coloring the meanings of interactions even among people who prefer that these meanings not apply' (Anderson, 2010: 53).

For a stereotype to have such 'public standing', it has to be common knowledge in a relevant society or context: everyone understands its meaning without necessarily endorsing it (Anderson, 2010: 62). When the discomfort of a particular situation arises as a consequence of internalised stereotypes and implicit social biases with this kind of public standing, it is best understood as *interaction discomfort*. In such cases, understanding the discomfort as individual and subjective does not provide sufficient explanation for the phenomenon, particularly considering the ubiquity of discomfort in such interactions. Following the work of philosopher Sally Haslanger, the specific phenomenon of interaction discomfort cannot fully be captured through an individualist methodology but demands us to apply a wider lens to identify 'patterns in attitudes that gives rise to the pattern of actions which, in turn, constitutes the social fact' (Haslanger, forthcoming: 1). In their core, social phenomena like interaction discomfort are best understood as 'systems, and parts of systems, that involve more than individuals and their attitudes' (Haslanger, forthcoming: 1).

In sum, the phenomenon of interaction discomfort arises as a byproduct of specific social and political circumstances, including biases towards and stereotypes of specific groups, which are inherited and internalised to the point that they materialise in our affective, physiological habits. A mere individualist, psychological account of interaction discomfort is insufficient to explain the multiple factors (political,

material, cultural, historical) that give rise to these types of affective phenomena in a particular social context.

The duty to choose discomfort

So far we have established that, when rudimentary affective states reflect implicit biases, they are not merely individual or private but also social and public in an important sense. Most of us evade discomfort in favour of comfort, often in unconscious and implicit ways, and the consequence of these behaviours patterns poses a problem for equal treatment of social groups. The default to select for people and environments that make us feel at ease tends to privilege majority groups, reflecting and further leveraging existing generational advantages and perpetuating an unequal status quo. Principles of justice and equal access to opportunity therefore require us to expose ourselves to more interaction discomfort.

It may seem an overstatement to argue that unconscious and seemingly benign preferences in social interactions contribute substantially to inequality. But plenty of research demonstrates just that – how in-group favouritism and helping behaviours materialise as forms of exclusion. As Banaji and Greenwald put it: '...discrimination of even the most apparently well-intentioned kind – helping members of in-group – has significant impact on those who are not part of the in-group *and* those who are' (Banaji and Greenwald, 2013: 143). The effects of such favouritism are subtle and become visible only when tracking them based on their structural accumulation in a given society. Nonetheless, the foundation of these processes rests on simple, seemingly innocent questions: Who can help you write the essay for your university application? Who will mentor you about your future career prospects? What other advantages are received in the form of small favours, invitations to social outings, and so on? When our employment decisions favour the sort of people whom we meet for coffee, the company of our coffee dates becomes a political problem.

Individuals without connections are at every level disadvantaged by their diminished access to similar resources. Worse yet, the advantages of networks are leveraged and multiply with time, opening doors to new rooms that remain closed to outgroups. The downstream effects of evading interaction discomfort are therefore dramatically different for members of majority and minority groups. Consider the following testimony of an African American man on how he deals with the exposure to interaction discomfort in the public space:

> 'I have to make sure that I have given enough space between myself and another patron or another commuter on the train just to make sure that I am not making someone uncomfortable. I have to make sure that my hands are visible when I walk into certain spaces so they make sure I don't – I'm not stealing. I try to make sure I make eye contact with people who may or may not be security or managerial staff, just to ensure, you know, I'm not here to hide anything. I watch my tone to make sure that I don't come off as threatening. Just leaving the house some days, you know, sometimes it'll just keep you at home and just keep you away from everything.' (*Story of Access*, 2018)

For someone in the position of a socially disadvantaged minority, the option of evading interaction discomfort – staying at home – often entails a loss of opportunities because access to jobs is often granted and mediated by members of the affluent group. In contrast, for a person with a privileged background, there is little or no cost to evading uncomfortable environments, situations and people; for them, the social world is relatively comfortable and easy to navigate. Instead of being profiled as suspicious and followed around a store, white Americans are met with a welcoming smile or small gestures of respect and consideration – what Sullivan calls 'microkindness' (Sullivan, 2015: 132, 154). Because of this disparity, an agent's standing in society imposes different obligations to consciously engage with environments where they experience interaction discomfort. The greatest duty lies with members of the majority group in gatekeeper positions, those with influence over a job market, educational opportunities, and so on. The duty to actively choose discomfort is also incumbent on members of minority groups although, as I will detail in the discussion below, this obligation is secondary and neither as urgent nor demanding as the duty of the majority.

If we wish to dismantle the unequal status quo that unconscious affective and physiological habits help to perpetuate, agents need a better vocabulary for the varieties of discomfort that they experience. Following the constructivist theory of emotion, a fundamental assumption of this paper is that we need a *concept* for an emotional state to recognise or perceive it. Without concepts like interaction discomfort, agents will not be able to understand their discomfort as a byproduct of implicit biases. Though agents will still experience the same negative affect, such conceptual frameworks will enable them to evaluate the potential influence of discomfort on their choices and actions.[6]

Let us consider again the example of a young African American man before a panel of white interviewers. If the interviewers – committed to principles of equal opportunity – merely let their gut feelings guide them towards a candidate whose presence feels familiar, recognisable and comforting, they risk biasing their decision against the African American candidate and unconsciously reproducing a status quo that none would defend on a principled level of reasoning. By questioning the temptation to choose the candidate who *feels right*, employers can scrutinise their own impulses and the concrete qualifications of the candidate with the understanding that their interaction discomfort in relation to some candidates may be a product of implicit biases. The suggestion is not that employers should renounce any reliance on gut feeling but rather to broaden the notion of their scope, so as to understand how they may prod them in undesirable ways. With a concept like interaction discomfort, an interview panel would be able to engage in critical discussion on whether their evaluation of candidates lives up to the standards of stated diversity goals.

Let us now apply a similar logic to the perspective of the young man on the other side of the table. To what extent can minorities benefit by acting against the impulse to avoid interaction discomfort? If the young man has arrived well-prepared but still feels nervous and uncomfortable, then he might leave the room, afraid that his nervousness reflects his lack of qualifications or even a flaw in his individual psychology. A critical reflection on the broader political context of his discomfort enables him to realise that the tension in the room is not merely his own but a reflection of the structural and systemic inequalities of American society, operating beyond individual control and through internalised affective habits.

The suggestion is not to return to the classical, implausible dichotomy between emotion and reason. In the above examples, critical reflection should not be understood as an independent cognitive mechanism free of affect. The semantic exercise of naming the discomfort is in and of itself a form of *emotional differentiation* – inseparable from the process of feeling something and experiencing something emotionally. More specifically, my proposal is an expansion of the constructivist idea that the recategorisation of negative affect can be a powerful strategy for individuals to cope with stressful affective states. Studies have shown that students who suffer performance anxiety achieve higher scores on university entrance exams when they can conceive their anxiety as a sign that they are excited and that their body is coping. This kind of 'stress reappraisal' has also been proven to be beneficial for people with fear of public speaking or singing (Jamieson et al, 2013; Barrett, 2017: 189). Using a similar approach, studies in experimental psychology have begun to explore how negative affect stemming out of racial bias can be mitigated through recategorisation (Lee et al, 2018). In contrast to constructivist models that categorise discomfort as purely physiological and individual (Barrett, 2017: 183–8), my point is that some forms of discomfort are a product of an agent's social and political environment. It is insufficient to conceive of the well-known phenomenon of *imposter syndrome* as a private problem that each agent should tackle individually (Olah, 2019). In some cases, it will be psychologically beneficial (as well as descriptively true) for agents to situate their nervousness and negative self-esteem within a larger structure of social and political systems. To sum up, if we are able to properly identify some forms of discomfort as originating from implicit biases, we may be better equipped to devise strategies for managing such affective states and mitigate the harms of 'going with our gut'.

Managing interaction discomfort

In the remaining part of the paper I qualify my argument by considering two sets of objections. The first set of objections concern the practical feasibility of the proposal; the second set pose ethical questions about the duty to choose discomfort.

One common objection to the constructivist view of emotions is that it is too optimistic about the prospects of recategorising and reappraising affect. Many are sceptical that cognitive control can be exercised to make us reassess and re-experience negative affect. In short, the scepticism lies in the thought that merely thinking about nervousness as interaction discomfort can be successful in changing the experience of the affective state. It would indeed be naïve to imagine that agents could exert anything close to complete control over their affective negative states. Reassessing an affective state and assigning it a public standing may not even lessen the discomfort individuals experience.

As we have discussed, rudimentary affect like discomfort does not necessarily have a transparent, straightforward intentionality. We can often pinpoint whether a feeling of discomfort is a sign of general bodily discomfort like hunger or an upcoming flu but the interpretation of discomfort as an *emotion* is a more ambiguous process. The moment agents begin to interpret their discomfort, they endow this affect with cognitive content, meaning and intentionality. In this process, there can be multiple, competing interpretations of what discomfort signifies in a given situation. This is why both the situational and *conceptual* context is fundamental to how agents interpret

their discomfort (Munch-Jurisic, 2020). We cannot always determine whether a specific interpretation of an affective state is accurate. For both theoretical and practical consequences, it is important to take this potential indeterminacy seriously. To avoid unwarranted determinism, not all cases of uncomfortable interactions should be invested with political and social significance. On the other hand, it would be equally dubious to disregard – *a priori* – the possibility that some uncomfortable interactions are best labelled as interaction discomfort. The challenge for a specific agent is, in other words, to balance between these two possibilities and to ensure that their interpretation of their affective state is warranted.

A related concern questions the practical feasibility of this duty to feel uncomfortable. What strategies can be devised to ensure this process of recategorising discomfort toward socially productive ends? Here I focus primarily on members in the privileged majority who bear the primary duty to expose themselves to more interaction discomfort. I will return to the particular and thorny case of the obligations of minorities in the next section.

Because we have already established that the source of interaction discomfort is a political context, it would be insufficient to merely advocate for various, seemingly benign individualist strategies of showing more kindness to minorities in day-to-day interactions. As I discuss in the next section, such individualist strategies have their own set of ethical problems if not handled appropriately. Instead, the primary focus should be on long-term institutional and societal strategies to create environments that can account for and manage interaction discomfort so as to enable minority access to opportunities for social mobility.[7] We find a promising model in Elizabeth Anderson's advocacy for *The Imperative of Integration*:

> The ideal of integration envisions a restructuring of intergroup relations, from alienation, anxiety, awkwardness, and hostility to relaxed, competent civil association and even intimacy; from domination and subordination to cooperation as equal. (Anderson, 2010: 117)

Anderson's project is specifically focused on the social, economic and political problems of racial segregation in the United States. For her, equality of opportunity can become possible only through securing daily interactions between white and black Americans. Her argument builds on the so-called 'contact hypothesis', originally put forward by social psychologist Gordon Allport (Allport, 1958), which proposes that the best way to overcome in-group/out-group animosity is to create environments where the opposing groups interact to create a new, shared 'we identity' – a super structure that diminishes perceived differences. The contact hypothesis is one of the most widely tested claims in social psychology and recent meta-analyses confirm its robustness (Anderson, 2010: 125; Paolini et al, 2018).

The best environments for the contact hypothesis to unfold and succeed are in what Anderson calls places of 'formal social integration': institutional environments in both the public and private sphere (schools, organisations, clubs, companies), where authorities can secure and cultivate optimal conditions for intergroup interaction. The case of the United States Army constitutes one such interesting case of success, in which 'being in the army' is able to supersede the different racial and social identities of the soldiers (Anderson, 2010: 125).[8] It is more difficult to successfully manage integration in unstructured and informal settings because agents spontaneously (and

often unconsciously) seek out peers with shared social characteristics. However, positive experiences with formal social integration can have a spillover effect on informal social integration. If agents learn how to practise integration under formal and structured settings, for example by acquiring competence and ease in intergroup interactions, the same habits will help them alleviate the anxiety and stress they feel in informal social interactions (Anderson, 2010: 124). The most important evidence for the contact hypothesis appears in its long-term effects (Pettigrew and Hewstone, 2017). Research shows that early experience with integration, such as in schools, leads both minorities and majorities to be more comfortable with interracial interactions and to lead more integrated lives, for example by living in integrated neighbourhoods (Anderson, 2010: 127).

It is important to repeat that my call for integration and for agents to go against their feeling of comfort is not motivated by a goal of promoting intergroup harmony (Dixon et al, 2012), but by a concern for justice – this is where I depart from the prevailing objective in contemporary contact theory. As the cases of the integration of the American military and school desegregation demonstrate, disadvantaged groups profit considerably from top-down, formalised policies that mandate increased contact *despite* feelings of discomfort (arising from both implicit and explicit biases), because they afford them access to opportunities of upward mobility that they were previously denied (Hannah-Jones, 2019; Johnson and Nazaryan, 2019).

Promoting integration or a common group identity will not necessarily eliminate implicit or even explicit biases in the individual. As one African American officer puts it when asked to reflect on his 30-year career in the military: 'The longer you stay, the more you can see that racism knows how to hide itself. But it's there' (Moskos, 1986). He concludes, nonetheless, that it does count as 'progress of a sort' to be in an environment without explicit forms of racisms. As he puts it, 'I know some of those white sergeants are racists, but they never once let anything slip' (Moskos, 1986).

Similarly, from the perspective of equality of opportunity, we can consider it a step in the right direction if an employer with entrenched implicit homophobic biases hires an openly homosexual employee. It would be naïve to imagine that the implicit biases of this employer will vanish into thin air because of his daily interactions with his new employee. But, even if the employer's treatment of his new colleague is driven by external motivations (such as a fear of being seen as intolerant), progress has been made.[9] The employer has gone against his inclination to choose a familiar, comfortable candidate. For the employee this matters significantly: it is a professional opportunity that would have been otherwise denied.

What are the best conditions for uncomfortable encounters in such formal intergroup settings? This is a critical question that goes beyond the scope of this paper. Several strains of research are already exploring the topic, but more investigation is needed (Paolini et al, 2018). My core argument, however, is that decisions makers, elites, technocrats and gatekeepers have a special obligation to actively engage with different communities and environments where they feel uncomfortable and uneasy, in short to embrace or at least *tolerate* interaction discomfort. First, because such authorities play an important role as 'norm entrepreneurs' to induce their subordinates to follow norms of civility in intergroup relations (Anderson, 2010: 124). Moreover, if such authority figures are physically and socially segregated from groups with minority backgrounds, they will not feel accountable for or to them (Anderson, 2010: 124, 131). One concrete example of such practices is the model of 'reverse mentoring'

where CEOs and similar leading figures are coupled with an employee of a minority background to learn and better understand their experiences (Wingard, 2018).[10]

How optimistic should we be about the practical implementation of this kind of model that directly advocates for more exposure to discomfort? Several strains of research have pointed to limitations of the contact hypothesis (Dixon et al, 2012). One important finding is that experiences with negative contact between outgroups can reinforce intergroup animosity and lead to increased avoidance behaviour (Paolini et al, 2016). As Allport warned, not any kind of contact will do (Allport, 1958); research has documented repeatedly that if we expect an encounter to be uncomfortable, we typically opt for avoiding it (Paolini and McIntyre, 2019). However, even if we allow that mandated integration can in some cases worsen intergroup relations, this does not necessarily outweigh the reasons to promote integration for the sake of justice and equal access. The work of dismantling persistent institutional segregation is necessary despite its pains. As Nikole Hannah-Jones puts it while refuting the common notion that the integration policies of 'busing' in North America failed:

> The remedy for such segregation may be administratively awkward, inconvenient, and even bizarre in some situations, and may impose burdens on some; but all awkwardness and inconvenience cannot be avoided. (Hannah-Jones, 2019)

The policy of busing students outside of their local school districts brought immediate results in desegregating schools, eliminating apartheid-like educational conditions in the Southern states and radically changing the trajectory and lives of black children who gained access to quality schools (Johnson and Nazaryan, 2019). In these terms, the policies of mandated integration were successful; white Americans opposed them so vigorously not because they were ill-conceived or ineffective, but exactly because they were such an effective tool of desegregation (Hannah-Jones, 2019).

To prevent this kind of reactionary backlash from majority groups, one central challenge is to make the necessary interaction discomfort of such mandated encounters *tolerable*. Organisations and institutions are responsible for creating open, respectful epistemic environments that encourage agents to engage with their perplexity, nervousness and anxieties – what Medina calls *epistemic friction* (Medina, 2013: chapter 1). As detailed in the previous section, it is my contention that the first step in this direction is to provide agents with the conceptual tools to name their discomfort as interaction discomfort. Of course, as I argue elsewhere, there is no guarantee that reflecting on discomfort engenders moral learning (Munch-Jurisic, 2020). Any intervention that encourages discomfort or epistemic friction must accept this limitation and be sensitive to the fact that agents may understand and interpret their discomfort through a wide range of lenses, which may be valid in their own right or at least relevant to consider.

The costs of choosing discomfort

Another set of possible objections against my proposal are ethical, concerned with problems that may confront agents who take their obligation to engage with interaction discomfort seriously. One particular worry concerns the emotional costs suffered by minorities. Considering the fact that many minorities are already

exposed to interaction discomfort on a daily basis, it can be argued that my proposal demands too much of such communities. Are they not already overloaded by this kind of emotional labour? A related set of questions is whether increased interaction, commonly difficult and uncomfortable, really is beneficial for the minority – whether it will grant them more equal access to opportunities. Philosopher Tommie Shelby criticises Anderson's integration model on this point, arguing that we should whenever possible avoid adding to the burdens of the oppressed (Shelby, 2014: 284).

Shelby questions the core of the 'contact hypothesis' and the underlying assumption, also present in my argument, that minorities have to bear the burden of increased interaction discomfort now to decrease implicit biases among the majority in the long run. While allowing that both the privileged and disadvantaged have a role in redressing injustices, and that it is not in principle unjust for the disadvantaged to incur some costs of social reform that will ultimately bring benefits, Shelby stresses the tipping point of such costs and when minorities should refuse to play this role in the moral reform of the privileged. From the perspective of the disadvantaged group, some costs should never be accepted, such as a loss of self-respect. Other costs, like increased vulnerability to discrimination and hostility, should only be imposed when absolutely necessary and with the provision that the most disadvantaged may opt out (Shelby, 2014: 284). The central problem for both Anderson's model and my argument 'against comfort' is the presumption that modern western societies are primarily challenged by implicit biases and other subtle forms of structural discrimination, and that explicit racism and other forms of direct discrimination are things of the past. Anderson's optimism may have been warranted in light of writing during the presidency of Barack Obama. But is my model 'against comfort' tenable in an era of Donald Trump and rising white ethno-nationalism throughout the western world?

Let us accommodate Shelby's criticism by returning to the example of the young African American who faces interaction discomfort at a job interview. If offered the job, the young man may gain access to an environment where he is likely to experience increased stress and interaction discomfort (Anderson, 2010: 180–81). In light of Shelby's criticism, the question to consider is whether this additional emotional toll will be outweighed by the benefits of the new job (better pay, broader networks, increased opportunities), but also whether he can rest assured that explicit racism and practices of social exclusion have been rejected in the prospective work environment. If this minimum has not been met, we cannot speak of a moral duty to choose more discomfort, nor should we expect such self-sacrifice and heroism of an already vulnerable minority (Shelby, 2014: 282).

As a point of comparison, let us now consider the case of the African American man who discloses that merely leaving the house can sometimes be difficult because of the toll of interaction discomfort and general climate of suspicion towards him. Though clearly sympathetic, Anderson's position would object to this impulse to withdraw to a safe community. In her model, the imperative of integration exists not just at the formal level of institutions but also though *informal* social integration. Anderson is explicitly against models of benign ethnocentrism put forward by scholars like Shelby and Iris Marion Young that endorse self-segregation based on social identity (Anderson, 2010: 186).

In this case, I agree with Shelby that Anderson's model sets the demands for integration too high. While it may be practically necessary for minorities to endure the daily chores of interaction discomfort in *formal* institutional settings (if the minimum

requirements discussed above are fulfilled – no explicit discrimination, and so on), it is unreasonable to require that they also seek out discomfort in informal settings, for example by moving to a mixed neighbourhood (with the risks of increased stigma, direct discrimination and hostility). As already stated, the daily stress and discomfort that even subtle forms of discrimination produce are well documented for their physiologically damaging effects (Sullivan, 2015: chapter 3). Often, agents belonging to the majority group do not notice their own signs of discomfort and aversive behaviour (Dovidio and Gaertner, 2004). Though the contact hypothesis predicts that the display of such biases will diminish with time and increased intergroup interaction, it is too big a burden to ask an already encumbered minority group to also give up the comfort and safety in the private sphere of their lives. Furthermore, residential integration and close social contact do not necessarily increase interaction or social ties. One can live in a mixed, diverse neighbourhood without forming close friendships with one's next door neighbour (Shelby, 2014: 275). Proximity does not necessarily entail intimacy or belonging. More importantly, as Shelby points out, a minority's desire for a culturally homogeneous community is not necessarily borne out of political commitment, but simply out of the 'intrinsic pleasures and comfort that come from being around people with similar life experiences' (Shelby, 2014: 273). For black Americans who choose to formally integrate in institutions, black communities may be places of refuge from the strains of an unwelcoming, predominantly white society.

In sum, while Anderson's model of integration is based on the idea of *reciprocity* ('For blacks to achieve racial equality, blacks need to change, whites need to change, and we need to change'; Anderson, 2010: 186), I place the primary duty to change on the majority group, specifically on people in positions of influence, and in proportion to their level of influence: CEOs more than mid-level managers, managers more than workers.[11] This position does prompt another set of objections. Namely, that (i) minorities could find it offensive or hurtful to know that majorities are choosing to interact with them despite their discomfort, and because (ii) merely exposing oneself to interaction discomfort could have cognitive and epistemic costs (Gendler, 2011).

The first concern is worth taking seriously. Certainly, no one likes to be in a social setting where someone is visibly uncomfortable because of your presence. On a principled level, as we have discussed at some length above, the duty to endure this extra level of emotional labour exists only in formal institutional settings and in situations where the disadvantaged group can see a clear purpose or gain. There seems to be, however, another underlying assumption at play in the objection – that our emotional expressions are revelations of some true self – which I do think we have good reason to question.

This assumption relies on a now largely outdated understanding of emotions as reactions that emerge naturally and spontaneously from within, so that it is possible to detect when someone is acting against their so-called natural inclinations through so-called 'micro expressions' – tiny manifestations that reveal the true emotion beneath. This is the premise in the *basic emotion view* advocated by Paul Ekman (2004; 1992).[12] It is, however, premature to conclude that a display of interaction discomfort by a member of a majority group necessarily reveals a negative attitude towards a minority or that their efforts to engage in intergroup contact are dishonest. As many philosophers have argued, it is not justified to assume that these physiological affective habits reflect the 'deep self' of the agent: the principles and values that the

agent consciously and reflectively endorses (Saul, 2014; Zheng, 2016; Levy, 2017). In some cases, it is important to recognise that the discomfort may signal an effort to break with one's affective physiological habits.

Another ethical concern to consider is the view that exposure to more interaction discomfort could carry damaging cognitive and epistemic costs. A variation of this objection has been put forward by philosopher Tamar Gendler.[13] When agents attempt to regulate their behaviour and suppress their biases, she argues, these efforts can have significant epistemic costs. Gendler refers to an experiment in which white people with implicit but low racial biases performed worse at a cognitive task after interacting with black people. Her conclusion is that agents belonging to the well-intentioned but implicitly biased group are faced with a tragic dilemma of choosing between acting ethically (but potentially irrationally) or acting rationally (but potentially unethically) (Gendler, 2011: 57).

Gendler's argument details the processes that leads to interaction discomfort: It really is both emotionally and cognitively taxing to interact with people that we feel less comfortable around.[14] But her conclusion of a tragic dilemma sets up a false choice between acting without bias (according to our ethical standards) and acting rationally. If stereotyping leads an employer to choose a weaker job candidate on the basis of her personal comfort and their mutual and easy familiarity with one another, then it is stereotyping that potentially steers them towards irrationality: making the wrong hire for the job. Rivera's studies demonstrate the frequency with which comfort trumps qualifications (Rivera, 2012).[15]

A further problem with Gendler's view of the issue – that it is epistemically costly to oppose one's intuitions and gut feelings – is that it underestimates the emotional and moral costs of acting against one's explicit principles. If an employer is explicitly committed to principles of anti-racism, anti-sexism and equal access to opportunity, then the realisation that one has perpetuated inequality with an implicitly biased decision can also trigger a feeling of discomfort – a form cognitive dissonance that I have previously described as *awareness discomfort*: the uncomfortable feeling of becoming aware of one's one biases and the lack of alignment between one's principles and behaviour (Munch-Jurisic, 2020). The pursuit of justice, then, may incur short-term costs but can be rational on reflection and in the long run.[16]

To attain the goal of more equal societies, majorities as well as minorities should become better at tolerating and even embracing interaction discomfort. This is no easy task, requiring us to think of aversive affect in novel terms. More work is needed to lay out exactly how we can learn to re-conceptualise discomfort as potentially morally productive, not something to be avoided. The groundwork for this approach is already being laid out by a range of contemporary voices in philosophy who argue that negative affective states like discomfort, distress and anxiety can be valuable because they literally and physically force us to pause and reflect on our situation (Medina, 2013; Applebaum, 2017; Bailey, 2017; Lukianoff and Haidt, 2018; Kurth, 2018).

There are also good reasons to be sceptical of discomfort and its potentially damaging effects (Munch-Jurisic, 2020). When arguing as I do that both minorities and majorities should actively seek out more interaction discomfort, a central concern is how to structure and mediate intergroup settings. The best settings for intentional interventions are formal, institutional environments where it is possible to cultivate the right conditions for intergroup interaction, but much more work is needed to understand exactly how and under what conditions these interventions are successful.

The possibilities for far-reaching political and social change rest to a large extent on the mitigation of implicit, affective biases, not just the barring of explicit discrimination. Affective states may be experienced individually, but they often reflect emotions that are not entirely private and personal, but social and public. A critical understanding of the political dimensions of deep, physiological experiences of negative affect will make minorities as well as majorities better equipped at tackling difficult and awkward interactions in the public space, and it is the central argument of this paper that the possibilities for social and political change are themselves dependent on the way that individuals interpret and manage their affective states.

Funding
This work was supported by a postdoctoral fellowship from the Carlsberg Foundation under grant no. CF16-0580.

Acknowledgements
Many thanks for comments and suggestions for earlier versions of this paper to editors and reviewers at *Global Discourse*, Michael Ure, Milicent Churcher, Ruth Rebecca Tietjen, Charlie Kurth, Patel Krupa, Laurencia Sáenz, Pedja Jurisic, Lisa Barrett, Jordan Theriault, Mallory Feldman, the audiences during my talks at the Interdisciplinary Affective Science Lab, Northeastern University, April 2019, the workshop on 'The Politics of Emotions. Historical Insights and Contemporary Challenges', University of Braga, January 2019 and the special session on 'Gut Feelings' at the Annual Meeting for the Danish Philosophical Association, March 2019, and to the members in my research group for Criminal Justice Ethics at Roskilde University: Jesper Ryberg, Thomas Søbirk Petersen, Sune Lægaard, Kasper Lippert-Rasmussen, Sebastian Holmen, Søren Sophus Wichmann, Rune Klingenberg, Frej Klem Thomsen and Kristian Kragh.

Conflict of interest
The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

Notes

[1] The so-called 'affective turn' in cultural studies has, however, involved a more explicit focus on affect, especially Sara Ahmed and her focus on the politics of bad feelings (Ahmed, 2005; Leys, 2011). In contrast, my focus in this paper is on the notion of affect as it is used in the cognitive and affective sciences, but I share Ahmed's understanding of affect as relational and political.

[2] The concept of toleration has a long disputed history, but here I rely on political theorist Lars Tønder's understanding of *toleration* as a physiologically painful experience that may nonetheless be beneficial and potentially transformative for citizens who can thus become more openminded towards outgroups (Tønder, 2013).

[3] In the following my use of minority refers not necessarily to a numerical category, but to a socially and economically disadvantaged group that face explicit or subtle forms of discrimination from a privileged majority group. It is important to note that the same person can belong to a minority in one situation and a majority in another. The categories of minority and majority are not stable and fixed but depend to some extent on the social role and context.

[4] The term 'emotional labor' is originally coined by sociologist Arlie Hochschild in 1983 and describes the emotional demands of workers in the service industry (exhibiting

positive attitudes, smiling, being welcoming) (Hochschild, 2012). Today, many use the term for self-sacrificing and other-serving behavior that is rarely recognized or compensated appropriately; for example, when minorities are asked to give testimony on how it feels to be oppressed or when minorities are asked to assume the responsibility of mentoring other minorities in their workplace.

[5] Another form of bias discomfort, *awareness discomfort*, is the discomfort that individuals feel when confronted with the fact of their own implicitly biased attitudes, a phenomenon often discussed in literature and research about implicit bias (for review, consult Hahn and Gawronski, 2019). As I'll discuss later, the precise content and origin of these affective states are indeterminate. It is, in other words, not possible to predetermine or predict what emotion agents construe based on them. More on the indeterminate nature of racial bias, consult Madva (2019).

[6] More on the role of concepts in emotion construction and experiential blindness: Barrett (2017: chapters 2 and 3). For a similar line of reasoning, see Miranda Fricker's concept of *hermeneutical injustice* (2007).

[7] Obviously, the necessary scale and challenge of this task is enormous and far beyond the scope of this paper.

[8] While a formal policy of integration improved social mobility for people from otherwise disenfranchised backgrounds, the increase in representation has not achieved full equity in terms of promotion rates (Han, 2017). The extent of integration within the American military is an interesting and complex case study but scholars agree that it is a unique and meaningful reference point to understand what to expect when mandating inclusivity in social institutions (Bailey, 2019; Moskos, 1997). For a recent review of the status of the inclusion of minorities in the US military, see Rohall et al (2017).

[9] Studies show that even less egalitarian individuals respond to uncomfortable confrontations by exhibiting less prejudiced behavior simply to avoid being called out (Monteith et al, 2019).

[10] For more concrete strategies, consult Madva (2016) and Saul (2016).

[11] Robin Zheng discusses a similar model where one's level of responsibility for promoting structural change depends on one's particular social role (Zheng, 2018).

[12] For a rebuttal of Ekman's version of the basic emotion theory, see Barrett (2017) and Lindquist et al (2012).

[13] Jennifer Saul's analysis of Gendler's paper inspired this objection (Saul, 2016).

[14] Recent findings from intergroup interaction experiments confirm these tendencies. For review see Paolini et al (2016).

[15] Kathy Puddifoot (2017) launches a similar critique of Gendler.

[16] Alex Madva targets Gendler's argument in a similar fashion by arguing that anti-racist ideals (for example, endorsing compensation for racial injustice) can also be rational (Madva, 2016).

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