A Manifesto for Better Research Failure

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Research failure feels like it only happens to me. But, where are research failures? Everywhere. What are research failures? Anything. Who’s had research failures? Everyone. Research failure feels like it only happens to me.

To celebrate this IJQM special issue on research failure, we call for better research failure. Research failure that is less stigmatized and stigmatizing. Research failure that is more open, healthier, and, ultimately, improves future research more. From the special issue, you will recognize that research failures come in many forms, happen for many reasons, and justify many various remediation. The only seeming constant is that research failures aren’t often discussed or harnessed sufficiently. Missed entirely, spun-away, or cautiously interpreted—the gift of research failures are indeed seldom fully formed or borne (Clark, 2014). We need to, and can, fail better.

The papers in the issue raise provocative questions: what do the accounts reveal about research failures and how scholarly communities are seen to navigate these mishaps? What made the failures occur? Where is the learning? As Eckert (2020) captures: do the research failures represent failed research or failed researchers? The following manifesto continues our long-term interest in recognizing and harnessing research failure better (Clark & Thompson, 2013), owning it (Clark & Sousa, 2015, 2019) and sharing it for the benefit of ourselves and others (Clark & Sousa, 2018a; Sousa & Clark, 2019), and future research (Clark, 2014). More than anything, when we conceived this special issue, we did not anticipate the sheer bravery that the authors would show. The accounts are courageous and candid; reflective and reflexive. In common, none readily anticipated that aspects of their research would fail. We applaud their efforts to lead the counter-narrative to prevailing research cultures which, from corridor conversations to journals, systemically stigmatize, ignore and waste research failures.

Research Failures: A Reflection on the Special Issue

As this collection of papers exemplifies, research failure is best understood as a continuum—spanning an almost innumerable range of manifestations (Firestein, 2016). Even in the edition’s but half dozen papers, there’s both considerable diversity yet also tight cohesion in the research failures discussed, which occurred in:

- Every stage of the research process, from ontology (Eckert, 2020), design (Ciuhan & Iliescu, 2020), methodological frameworks (Ciuhan & Iliescu, 2020), data collection (Cohen-Miller, Schnackenberg, Demers, 2020; Eckert, 2020) and analysis (Ciuhan & Iliescu, 2020) and community engagement (Held, 2020)
- All facets of research, including: the physical, such as how data are generated (Gregory, 2020); the social, such as in community relations (Held, 2020); participant rapport (Eckert, 2020); and cultural contexts (Gregory, 2020).
- Established (Eckert, 2020) to novel research methods (Cohen-Miller, Schnackenberg & Demers, 2020; Gregory, 2020)

Failures can relate to absence (Held, 2020; Wohlfart, 2020) or presence (Gregory, 2020); ourselves (Wohlfart, 2020) or others (Held, 2020); the overt and obvious (Eckert, 2020; Wohlfart, 2020) to the tacit and hidden (Ciuhan & Iliescu, 2020). The failures were explained in many different ways, including but not confined to, individual issues, such as: foundational misunderstandings of participants (Eckert, 2020; Held, 2020), lack of adequate preparation (Held, 2020; Wohlfart, 2020) or prior experience (Wohlfart, 2020), lack of field work (Eckert, 2020; Held, 2020), and pressures created from external deadlines (Held, 2020). Broader contextual factors contributed too, including: inadequacies in the methodological literature (Ciuhan & Iliescu, 2020), disciplinary silos and tensions

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(Gregory, 2020) and the sheer complexity of the research being done (Eckert, 2020; Gregory, 2020; Held, 2020).

Positively, the failures lead to many benefits, contributing to better understanding and methodological innovation (Cohen-Miller, Schnackenberg, & Demers, 2020), clarification of research priorities (Held, 2020), the need for higher cultural sensitivity (Held, 2020). Beyond the studies themselves, authors better realized the wide prevalence of research failure (Eckert, 2020), the use of failures for improving research quality (Eckert, 2020) and the need for safer and more supportive

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**A manifesto for better research failure**

**Look everywhere**

Research failures happen at any stage of the research process and in innumerable ways. A raft of research indicates that the biggest risk is to simply miss that the failure has occurred altogether (Syed, 2015). It's not that failure isn't faced or dismissed via spin but that the failure is invisible. Being open to our experience of success and failure is necessary. Be open to the feedback of others, and take time to reflect on processes and projects to identify failures that might be missed.

**Share openly**

Be proactive and open. Simply not being open to acknowledging a failure occurred and how you contributed to it is a major obstacle to learning from failure (Clark & Sousa, 2018b). While this process must first involve personal exploration and vulnerability, the next stage is to claim the failure openly. Given research failures can happen at any stage and in many forms, project reports (in journals, dissertations, and theses) should contain sections on what failed and why in the project.

**Change culture**

Despite their ubiquity, research failures are seldom shared by individuals or teams. During team meetings, seminars, and supervisory sessions, become more accustomed to reflecting on what failed and what can be learned. Drawing on recognized approaches (Stone, 2010), focus more on what you contributed to failures—avoiding shaming or blaming others. Senior academics have a particularly heightened level of responsibility to share openly with colleagues and trainees. They should model a sharing culture to normalize how pervasive failure is in the research process and generally within the academy.

On a bigger scale, there are many emerging platforms to share your failures. On twitter, use #academicfailure, or join in a local event such as Fuckup Nights.

**Don’t waste**

"Failure is inevitable in academic life, but wasting it is not" (Clark & Sousa, 2015). Utilizing a growth mindset can help us to not dwell on the feelings of doubt, anger, or defensiveness that sometimes accompany failure, but instead focus on what can be learned. What went wrong? What contributed to the outcomes? How could we do better next time? The best learnings come from our hardest moments and our greatest failures—these opportunities must be harnessed not squandered.

**Consider others**

While recognizing your own contribution is important, remember that your self-worth should not be tied to your work efforts (Clark and Sousa, 2018b) and that while research that you were involved with may have failed, you are not a failure as a person. However, most failures are not just about you, and if others were hurt by the failure and your contributions then it is even more important to claim the failure and apologize or seek remedy as needed.

**Break it down**

Almost every aspect of our lives and science would be weaker without failure (Firestein, 2016). Drawing on research into successful failure, we developed a six-step approach to failing better (Clark and Sousa, 2015) after contributing to a failure in our own work.

1. Be open: Recognize that the failure happened and be specific about what it was.
2. Express gratitude: It isn’t enough to acknowledge the failure, but you must also work towards a place of gratitude.
3. Crystalize your contributions: Focus most on how you contributed to the failure.
4. Share and support others: Share openly about your contributions, but also support others empathetically when they share theirs.
5. Learn and grow: Focus on what can be learned by the failure and how things could be done differently in the future.
6. Move on: Do not carry the failure forward. While we can hold on to our memories the future should be the focus.
spaces and sharing of research failures (Eckert, 2020). Notably, rich paradoxes were raised, common around challenging learning experiences (Clark & Sousa, 2018b), including rigid flexibility (Cohen-Miller, Schnackenberg, & Demers, 2020), and uncomfortable reflexivity (Eckert, 2020).

We need research failures to benefit future research more and more often. Better research failure serves a bigger purpose. The research failure has to first be acknowledged, then understood, and then harnessed to improve future research. Leveraging the insights from these accounts of research failure, we offer the following manifesto for better research failure.

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