The Ubiquity and Invisibility of Research Failures: A Call to Share More

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What’s Your Biggest Research Failure?
Sanitized representations of research seldom convey the difficulties, trade-offs, and downright failures that so often characterize our research. Whether due to the parameters of word number or cultural self-disclosure, our professional discourses grossly misrepresent the inherent messiness and compromises of research in favor of discourses of competency and decisiveness more likely to assure acceptance and prestige. With journals, presentations, and keynotes as our only guide, we might even conclude that research failures are comparatively rare, au contraire.

What Are Research Failures?
Research failure in this sense does not refer to mistakes or disasters—events of, respectively, small and extensive consequence around which one’s actions conceivably had little influence (Syed, 2015). Instead, research failures are defined here as situations or events of consequence in which your choices, presence, or influence contributed conceivably to an adverse or undesirable research process or outcomes. This definition permits us to ask what could and should we do differently in the face of research failure?

The Ubiquity Yet Invisibility of Research Failures
We need to acknowledge research failures more. Despite apparent invisibility in formal discourse, researchers’ social conversations around research are characterized by laments of personal and work-related failings and failures. Manuscripts rejected, grants unfunded. The right research questions developed for the wrong research problem. Literature searches that are limited. Recruitment that has stalled. Our job applications rejected, our career aspirations faltering. Writing that is not hitting the mark of our own or others’ standards. Difficult relationships. We could go on and on. . . .

Yet, speaker biographies report an endless procession of effortless incessant successes. Reflexivity in our research process has its place in capturing how our humanness influences our research but seemingly little role in sharing our own failings and failings. Indeed, our working cultures—centered on competency and productivity narratives—have little space for research failures. Failure often accompanies us in research, while success seems to surround us. This imbalance should not persist unchallenged.

The Harmful Invisibility of Research Failures
How does the ubiquity of research failure tally with its absence in our formal research discourses? At least in terms of implications, this leads to underestimations about how frequently others experience research failures and overestimations about what our own research failures indicate about us. Our mental well-being, faced with the manifold challenges of doing qualitative and mixed method work, can be at risk (Clark & Sousa, 2018b). Self-esteem, confidence, and morale to just keep going—let alone stare down another research failure—all suffer. With around 70% of those doing research experiencing mental health challenges (Guthrie et al., 2017), the ubiquity and invisibility around research failures makes for a curious coupling.

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Positively, there is a growing amount of work into understanding and utilizing failure better which has ready application to research failures (Clark & Sousa, 2016, 2018a). This work recognizes the inevitability of failure when doing complex and creative work (Omerod, 2005) and charts the many factors that contribute to failures, from cognitive bias (Syed, 2015) and social acceptance (McArdle, 2014) to idealized identity (Vicore, 2019). Pointedly, this work challenges us not only to be more open to our own research failure but also to be grateful for what these failure provide (Clark & Sousa, 2016). Ironically, if we really care about our own research success, we would learn from our research failures far better (Dweck, 2008).

Research Failures in Qualitative and Mixed Methods

Can qualitative and mixed methods research share research failures better? For some decades, proponents of qualitative and mixed methods have often had to navigate the pragmatics of gaining acceptance of their work among communities and people with less knowledge and ready acceptance of these methods. Without a common tendency to acknowledge reflexivity in inquiry (Clark, Choby, Ainsworth, & Thompson, 2015), researcher’s presence and influence in and on inquiry is removed via recourse to seemingly scientific concepts including bias, objectivity, and method (Firestein, 2016).

This impression of science is dominant but also misplaced, given the ubiquity of research failure in science and its advances—a recognition readily apparent in Firestein’s (2016) outstanding history of failure in science. Yet, the skewed notion of science as glorified success remains dominant. Given it is at the very start of thinking what to write or say to others that academics start to filter knowledge and establish frames (Dolby, 1996), our own scholarly discourses become inherently selective representations of what “research is.” To gain support and legitimacy, invoking research failures in disciplinary spaces least predisposed to acknowledge the role of humans and their humanness in research is folly indeed if our goal is acceptance and persuasion. Yet, inevitably, when simplified and glorified representations of research are conflated with the more messy realities of research failures, the conception we broadcast of what research is changes (Pawson, 2013).

This research conception is not a descriptive end in itself but also constitutes future discourses of research which shape and influence the expectations and experiences of new and emerging researchers. Research failures fail to find their place. This reinforces the dominant notion that research failures are taboo or unimportant. Moreover, un-shared research failures add further to harm by failing to help others avoid future failure better.

Research failures reflect the complexities not only of doing qualitative and mixed method work but also of the communities, phenomena, and people involved in our research. Accordingly, we now need to share our qualitative and mixed method research failures more. And do so with each other openly, gratefully, optimistically, and empathetically.

Sharing Our Research Failures More: A Call for Papers

We firmly believe that we need to share research failures more. To promote more open and constructive discussion and utilization of research failures in qualitative and mixed methods, the International Journal of Qualitative Methods (IJQM) is asking you or your teams to submit papers on your research failures to be part of an upcoming special issue. These could be personal or project-related failures in relation to qualitative and mixed method research. Articles should be 3,000 words maximum and give enough context to understand the nature, context, and consequences of the research failure—and focus on what was done in response to the failure—and any learning accrued that could benefit others. More information and submission guidelines can be found on IJQM’s website (https://journals.sagepub.com/page/ijq/collections/call-for-papers/index).

If possible, include insights into why and how your failure was difficult to share. Sharing more about our own research failures and failings means getting more comfortable with discomfort. The temptations to sanitize, clean up, and otherwise moderate our failures are endlessly compelling. As you write, strong physical sensations and emotions are likely far more a sign that your sharing is getting more to the heart of why your failure cut so deep. Above all, let’s work together to better ensure we no longer fail to value research failure.

Interested in engaging with us to discuss failure? Join us on April 18, 2019, at 3:30 p.m. MST as part of IIQM and ATLAS.ti’s Qualitative Master Class Webinar Series (archived webinars are also posted at www.iiqm.ualberta.ca).

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