# Failure as Reflexive Method to Think Otherwise

### Annette N. Markham

I fail. I failed. I have failed.

It failed. It is a failure.

I am a failure.

#FAIL

Failure. The term gets used all the time, in both scientific communities and everyday conversations. It means very different things to different people, once you start to unpack the use of the term in its specific context, or listen to how people describe how they define failure. This chapter takes as its departure point the colloquial definition of ‘failure’ when used in everyday conversations among researchers, like social science and humanities doctoral students I have mentored over the years, as they talk about what did or didn’t work in the practical and logistical accomplishment of their scientific research.

While the negative valence of failure is resisted in contemporary critiques, such as the work of Jack Halberstam in the *Queer Art of Failure*, failure in the everyday sense is still considered something to avoid, overcome, or obscure.[[1]](#footnote-1) In more than 30 years of mentoring early career researchers, I have come to realize labelling one’s own work a failure can cause a researcher to pull up short, come to a full stop, and turn away from rather than toward these critical junctures. In this piece, I present three heuristic principles for rethinking what failure actually constitutes in the course of inquiry, to build the conceptual notion that failure is nothing more or less than an outcome of an experiment or action. This is an effort to recast ‘failure’ as merely a critical juncture, an essential core process of sensemaking. I have used these heuristics in my own teaching to help build a mindset and methodological vocabulary as a practical guide for especially those researchers who want to resist or work around the debilitating vocabularies of failure.

In popular culture, business, career, and relationship advice books, the term ‘failure’ is used to describe something bad, wrong, not working as expected, intended outcomes, or lack of success. ‘Success’ is a state typically achieved by attaining money, fame, love or at least a stable relationship. Following the typical — and very Western — hierarchy of needs proposed by Abraham Maslow, the pinnacle of this success story would be ‘self-actualization.’ All of these forms of success are presumed to be achievable through — and the result of — motivation + effort. For example, in business, I’m likely to be ‘a failure’ if I (a) am not seeking success or (b) have not succeeded. Therefore, if a person is a failure, that person has not tried hard enough.

Of course, there have been many efforts in past decades to flip failure into a concept with a positive valence. In the 2013 book *Fail Fast, Fail Often*, authors John Babineaux and Ryan Krumboltz insist that failure is a good thing, something we should embrace.[[2]](#footnote-2) But as one reads deeper in this or other popular texts (like business blogger Megan McArdle’s 2014 book, *The Upside of Down[[3]](#footnote-3)*), one will learn that failure is not good in itself, but is valuable because it is a point or moment of identification that you should change something, or that you’re enroute to getting past failure in the ongoing progression toward success.

Failure, in this pop culture world of blog and book advice for business, innovation, creativity, or relationships, is portrayed as natural and normal, something to accept and embrace. But this is not because failure is a place to stay or an acceptable way of being. Rather, failure becomes something to overcome in the ambition to achieve the state of non-failure. *Fail Fast, Fail Often* is littered with excellent examples of famous people or well-established companies following what they describe as a natural linear progress toward achievement:

Since success is usually preceded by bumbling starts and botched efforts, you can think about anything you would like to succeed at in terms of how you must first be bad at it. You can put it in this form: If I want to succeed at \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_, I must first be bad at \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Alexander Clark and Bailey Sousa, Canadian social scientists and qualitative methodologists who have written various pieces on failure in academia[[5]](#footnote-5) resist this sort of ‘failure is part of a linear progression toward success’ logic. They suggest failure is not something to get beyond. Instead, it is an inherent part of research. Yet even as much as the concept of failure is lifted up as a good thing, and elaborated in refreshingly nuanced ways, their conceptualization and use of the term still reinforces a negative valence. In their call for papers on failure, Sousa and Clark define research failures as ‘situations or events of consequence in which your choices, presence, or influence contributed conceivably to an adverse or undesirable research process or outcomes’.[[6]](#footnote-6) While expanding the notion of failure as inevitable and natural, these authors still situate these moments as wrong and unwanted. They suggest, in a different article published for *The Guardian,* that academics should learn to fail better, so the negative outcomes are minimized: ‘When failure happens, be grateful that it occurred but was not bigger, more damaging or more complex’. [[7]](#footnote-7)

The storyline in the self-help sections of bookstores is not markedly different from the typical academic environment where early career scholars are socialized into what it means to do good research, unfortunately. Failure remains the opposite of success. Within this framing, while failure is something we might accept, it is still bad or wrong, implying that if one were only a better researcher, it wouldn’t have happened. The discursive impact of this negative valence can be internalized over time from simply an account of what happened (‘It failed’) to an attribute of a person (‘I’m a failure’).

It is no surprise to me that across academic research environments, especially in fields that are continuously criticized for being less scientifically rigorous than the hard sciences (i.e. the humanities or social sciences), failure is almost always cast as something to avoid, and when something fails or is deemed a failure, it is likely hidden behind the cleaned-up explanation of one’s practices in a written report. Despite the many philosophical and critical discussions to the contrary, everyday discourses around failure remain strongly negative and fall into the ‘blameworthy’ end of a spectrum of causes, rather than ‘praiseworthy,’ according to Harvard Business School professor Amy Edmondson. In her piece exploring the misguided beliefs about failure, she explains:

When I ask executives to consider this spectrum and then to estimate how many of the failures in their organizations are truly blameworthy, their answers are usually in single digits—perhaps 2% to 5%. But when I ask how many are treated as blameworthy, they say (after a pause or a laugh) 70% to 90%.[[8]](#footnote-8)

This attitude among my own doctoral students is certainly exacerbated by the persistent injunction of academic institutions to conduct research with the goal of success, a goal that has been heavily scaffolded by the classic scientific model and driven by the models of an ideology that science should be in a continuous state of progress.

What happens when we simply define failure as an ‘outcome’ and then accommodate failure as a common type of outcome, an inherent and necessary part of inquiry practices, creating critical junctures where we might pause, reflect, and possibly think otherwise? Especially in research models involving emergent or open-ended practices of engagement in social contexts or working with human-generated data, the researcher is not a passive observer of processes or a neutral agent, but the primary filter through which cultural and material data passes to be interpreted. Within this idea, what is the value or role of inquiry processes that take an unexpected turn, or tools that don’t operate as expected? If we take failure out of the realm of something to avoid, and detach failure from a negative personal attribute, how can it function as a more positive part of discovery and sensemaking?

## Rethinking Failure: A Model for Using Failure as Part of Reflexive Practice

In developing models that embrace failure as useful and natural, the humanities or social science researcher can take a cue from the hard sciences, particularly those fields where experimentation is a standard practice, such as chemistry, design, or engineering. Here, failure is common and expected. In engineering, for example, failure is traditionally an attribute given to processes or mechanisms that don’t operate as expected, or stop operating as expected, as in ‘the termination of the ability of an item to perform a required function’.[[9]](#footnote-9)

In designing things for use-in-the-world, it is necessary to test various aspects of efficacy by trying to get to the failure state. Here, failure has high information value for further development. It’s a form of what engineers or designers call ‘stress testing,’ whereby the researcher can push a system or structure to the breaking point in an accelerated manner to ‘identify non-intuitive failures that would normally require months or years in the field to identify’.[[10]](#footnote-10) In laboratory or bench research like chemistry, failure happens so much it’s hardly the best explanation for what’s occurring. When one notices how much failure is happening, cognitive scientist Ann-Sophie Barwich notes, one might wonder how science makes any advances at all. But on the contrary, she suggests, science is successful precisely because of these failures.[[11]](#footnote-11)

As Barwich explains, science ‘must fail to achieve an important job it sets out to do: discovery. For scientific research to exceed our initial modelling assumptions and to continuously supersede our ever-adjusting experimental limits, things have to go wrong’.[[12]](#footnote-12) Failure is information that can be used to disrupt the taken for granted strategies and models. There is strong heuristic value in failure.[[13]](#footnote-13)

Taking a cue from authors seeking to build failure more positively into academic research practices, I use this opportunity to outline a model where outcomes discarded or dismissed as ‘failures’ can be put back into the stacks of usable moments and materials in a project to prompt reflexivity about the levels of fit between research questions and research design, the role of the researcher, assumptions about participants, and assumptions about how one’s tools are working. Inserting failure repeatedly in the process is to ask for opportunities to think otherwise.

The point I’d like to make here is that we can go some steps beyond the idea that failure is necessary, normal, or essential, as authors like Babineaux and Krumboltz, Clark and Sousa, and Barwich have stressed in their various works, respectively, and to insist that failure is central to any sensemaking. As a central component, whatever we might label as ‘failure’ during the process of inquiry should be included and highlighted more deliberately in models for social research design. This discursive reframing is also an effort to correct the imbalance caused by the persistent negative framing that occurs when something is labelled as a failure.

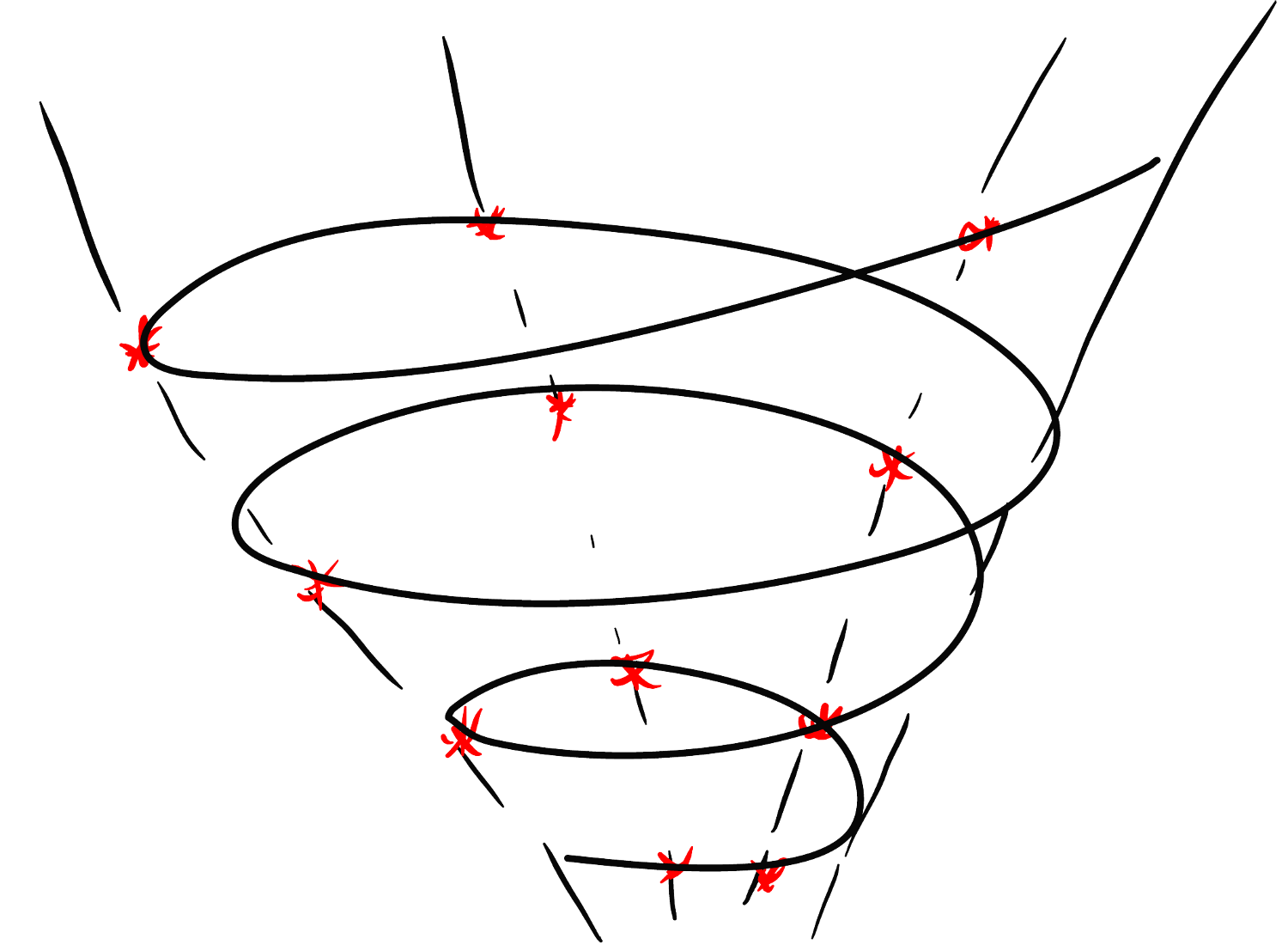
Building from the more abstract manifesto of Sousa and Clark[[14]](#footnote-14), the three principles below seek to build a methodological vocabulary and heuristic as a guide for researchers, especially those who seek to resist the negative valence of failure or consider how they can use these moments more fruitfully and reflexively in their own practice. Notably, the three principles below don’t outline methods, or explicate instances of failure, but describe some epistemologically-driven, generative questions that emerge at various points throughout a study.

Figure 5.1: The iterative inquiry spiral. Source: Annette Markham. Used with permission.

## Failures as Outcomes: Identifying Critical Junctures in Iterative Spirals of Inquiry

Based on a previous model of reflexive practice that emphasizes inquiry as iterative spirals,[[15]](#footnote-15),[[16]](#footnote-16) any decision that leads to action constitutes a critical juncture where one ventures into experimental territory, a sort of venturing forth into the unknown to see what happens. The outcome of this experiment can be considered another critical juncture where we can examine what happened and explore where to go next. These continual junctures or turning points are encountered again and again as one returns repeatedly to interrogate the research, in all stages and processes. This idea is depicted in Figure 4.1.

At each of these critical junctures, one might invoke Donna Haraway’s practice of speculative fabulation[[17]](#footnote-17) to ask a series of ‘what if’ questions. This practice of examining the moment as a temporal possibility invites speculation along a number of different lines. One can explore ‘What if it had been otherwise?’ or ‘Why did this happen versus that?’ Prompts like these enable reflections about what is happening, or what just happened, or what might have happened otherwise. This sort of check-in is not with the intent to verify that the process is valid, but to acknowledge that the process of inquiry is inherently a matter of choices that have consequences, and there are innumerable other choices that could be or could have been made, which would lead to alternate consequences.

Continuing with the inspiration of Haraway’s later discussion of string figures,[[18]](#footnote-18) discovery comes into and out of view iteratively. By focusing on these moments with some detailed ‘what if’ questions, the researcher can find gaps or absences. This is part of what Haraway means by her concept of ‘staying with the trouble’.[[19]](#footnote-19) These in turn might highlight certain other ‘failure points,’ which can in turn help us think about shifting the lens or direction of gaze or sensemaking practice slightly to get a better (more productive, more ethical, more daring, more meaningful) angle.

Alternately, this can be a moment to pause, slow down, and reflect. By allowing the process, event, or moment to breathe more fully, one can gain a renewed sense of priorities, or maybe discover some limitations, turning points, or blockages in the current way of going about things. Or, this sort of critical interrogation might also reveal rich possibilities and new potentialities, making room for new directions of fruitful inquiry or even inviting more radical transformations of the core goals or audiences for the project.

The process of reflection occurs repeatedly, but at different levels. This may not always be comfortable and is, in a practical sense, time consuming. Yet once we start to pay attention to these critical junctures, we might realize that the label of failure is somewhat arbitrary and certainly capricious. In some circumstances, the outcome will be labelled ‘failure,’ whereas in other cases, it will simply be labelled ‘a turning point’, or maybe an event that shifted one’s practice.

## Failure as Information: Locating Movement, Positionality, and Worldviews

As we move — through the world, through field sites, through different experiments, through research projects — we are positioning and repositioning ourselves to various sites of meaning. Whether or not we notice, our habitual and trained modalities of attention are generating layers and layers of data — or perhaps more appropriately put, stimuli that becomes data when we use it as information to interpret situations or make meaning. Each of our movements, actions, or swings of attention create a slightly different lens or perspective. These are tacit tools for observation, engagement, and analysis embedded in our everyday trained sensibilities.

What does this have to do with ‘failure’? Well, when nothing goes wrong, so to speak, we likely never notice the methodological function of the various lenses emerging from our attention, yet they are in continual operation. They become visible only when we stumble, glitch, or otherwise do something that brings our working assumptions or tacit ways of knowing to the surface. Then, they become something to scrutinize. In this way, anything labelled as ‘failure’ can be reflexively considered as reflections or products of particular modes of attention, ways of working, or other operationalizations of our ontologies and epistemologies.

No matter how much we might think we comprehend our own worldview or stance, critically interrogating outcomes or end results — whether we call these ‘failures’ or not — can function as a form of identifying and then scrutinizing the obvious methods as well as the more tacit practices or ways of knowing that were operating that might have influenced these outcomes. Reverse engineering is one way of unpacking various components of end results or products; each component in turn reveals or recreates micro-moments of processes that could have led to the outcome. In connecting to the idea of one’s movements or attention as tools of methods, one is trying to connect one’s trained practice to one’s movements (and habitual actions of attention) more visibly, which gives reflexive focus on how one’s position is influencing decisions that may have led to this versus that outcome. This scrutiny may change one’s perspective, technique, or habit of attention, as is often the case when this scrutiny is used in a chemistry lab to tweak an experiment’s protocol. But it also might simply generate more reflexively oriented information. This principle of conceptualizing failure as information leaps over the simplification that failure is ‘wrong’ and transforms it into a functional and ever-present component of reflexive practice.

## Failure as Indicators: Interrogating Stakeholders and Power

In most situations of scientific or artistic endeavour, individual practices in the lab, field, or studio don’t emerge tabula rasa, but operate within larger communities of practice, disciplinary or historical traditions, and systems of cultural and conceptual frameworks. What and whose priorities are valued or devalued when the label of failure is applied? The most powerful influences on our practices are indirect, when norms are embedded in infrastructures, or when decisions are disconnected from the person through neutralizing phrases like ‘that’s just how it’s done’ or ‘in this field, we use X tools.’ Sure, we might assess a ‘failed’ project or method through our own careful determination, but in many circumstances, the decision to describe something as a failure is externally prescribed, by which I mean we’ve applied a label because we are using external prescriptive and normative advice to inform the categorization of something as ‘failed’ or ‘a failure’. Something (a procedure, an outcome, an encounter, an engagement) does not meet an external expectation.

The question this leads to a question raised in many ways throughout this volume: where does that expectation come from and what does this expectation prioritize? Success? Functionality? Adherence to a norm? Quality? Reflecting on the underpinnings of the expectation reveals layers of norms, structures, and rules. Here, one can also identify and scrutinize some of the stakeholders, human and nonhuman influences on the foundations of our academic approaches. So, when something ‘fails,’ there are troubling but important rabbit holes to travel down, for at least two reasons. First, this interrogation opens up multiple string figures[[20]](#footnote-20) of potential dynamics, relationships, or socio-political structures influencing the shape and conduct of one’s choices of methodological tools or practice overall. Second, and far more poignant, it can be an act of resistance against personal and future potential damage.

The label of ‘failure’ or ‘failing’ can damage the state and progress of one’s project, not because it is ‘correcting’ or ‘assessing’ but because it immediately denies and negates, potentially stalling the important experimentation and invention fundamental to discovery. That’s one level of damage. The personal and professional impact of ‘failure’ can also be quite striking. How might the practice of labelling something a ‘failure’ do damage? How does the label and negative valence of failure work over time to foster an equally negative sensibility toward change or approaches that seek to transgress boundaries? While invention and experimentation are encouraged in the hard sciences and failure is actually expected, ‘transgressiveness’ is discouraged in fields where adherence to disciplinary standards is a powerful delimiter of experimentation and risk.

This can be taken further by returning to the classic feminist critiques of positivist science by such authors as Sandra Harding[[21]](#footnote-21) or the complications of sensemaking elaborated by such scholars as Haraway[[22]](#footnote-22) and Karen Barad.[[23]](#footnote-23) The value of building from these works is to continue the long effort to resist the hegemonic power of everyday discourses around how inquiry happens. In this, Gramscian inspired critical theory is valuable as a way of recognizing that failure is part of a larger structure that over time becomes naturalized and neutralized, whereby certain ways of doing things become accepted and consensual yet still privilege certain stakeholder interests over others’ by valuing only particular ways of doing and being. Regaining the connection between our embodied, knowing, culturally specific senses and the moments of keen learning — labelled failure or not — is an open-ended exploration, a way of reflecting on our reflections of our own practices within The Academy.

It is a politic and ethic of resistance, one that contributes to the longstanding and continuing efforts to decolonize narrow Western ideas about causality, scale, knowing, and sensemaking. This goes beyond simply challenging the negative valence of failure. It is a matter of deliberately and robustly interrogating how the attribution of failure happens, with what potential or actual consequences —both positive and negative — for the people involved as well as for future infrastructures of inquiry practices.

## What if failure didn’t really exist?

The three principles above are examples of rethinking how failure functions, or ways of resisting the label in one’s own practice, to gain more specificity about what is really happening, since ‘failure’ is such an all-encompassing yet somewhat meaningless term. There are other principles that can emerge as one creatively digs beneath the surface to consider how recasting the term or playfully rejecting it might be useful to one’s own practice.

And it’s worth noting that these creative or playful practices of reconsidering the definition and utility of the concept of failure may require building phrases or mantras to repel or push back against the dominant narratives that repeatedly tell us that failure is the opposite of success. Even doodling can help provide these mantras, as you see me doing in the middle of a workshop in 2018, in Figures 4.2 and 4.3.

Diagram

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Figure 5.2: Rethinking the concept of failure as a type of infinity spiral. Sketches by the author from a 2018 workshop in Barcelona. Source: Annette Markham. Used with permission

Text, whiteboard

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Figure 5.3: Asking a speculative ‘what if?’ question about ‘Failure’ as a traveling club. Source: Annette Markham. Used with Permission.

As I conclude this chapter, I must admit that I have never believed in failure. Everything labelled as failure is nothing more or less than an outcome. Within this definition, failure never actually exists as ‘failure.’ When it involves research, if we think of the action preceding an outcome as ‘experiment,’ we can gain knowledge from scrutinizing how and why certain outcomes happen, versus other possibilities. Removing the negative or positive valence removes the label itself. The only exception is when failure is used to describe a mechanism that no longer functions as intended, as mentioned at the outset of this essay, as when a spark plug on a combustion engine no longer fires, or the key gets stuck in the lock. Otherwise, anything we label as failure simply highlights a critical juncture, inviting us to pause, look around, and reflect for a moment as we make another decision to do the next thing, which will inevitably turn us this way or that on whatever journey we are on. Recast in this way, we can further specify failures as informational, indicators of pathways, and pointers for thinking otherwise.

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