

This is an Open Access document downloaded from ORCA, Cardiff University's institutional repository: <https://orca.cardiff.ac.uk/id/eprint/155568/>

This is the author's version of a work that was submitted to / accepted for publication.

Citation for final published version:

Verbuyst, Rafael and Galazka, Anna Milena 2023. Introducing 'navigating failure in ethnography': a forum about failure in ethnographic research. *Journal of Organizational Ethnography* 12 (1) , pp. 61-75. 10.1108/JOE-10-2022-0027

Publishers page: <https://doi.org/10.1108/JOE-10-2022-0027>

Please note:

Changes made as a result of publishing processes such as copy-editing, formatting and page numbers may not be reflected in this version. For the definitive version of this publication, please refer to the published source. You are advised to consult the publisher's version if you wish to cite this paper.

This version is being made available in accordance with publisher policies. See <http://orca.cf.ac.uk/policies.html> for usage policies. Copyright and moral rights for publications made available in ORCA are retained by the copyright holders.





**Introducing 'Navigating Failure in Ethnography': A Forum  
About Failure in Ethnographic Research**

Journal:	<i>Journal of Organizational Ethnography</i>
Manuscript ID	JOE-10-2022-0027.R1
Manuscript Type:	Research Paper
Keywords:	Failure, Methodology, Ethnography, Fieldwork

SCHOLARONE™  
Manuscripts

# Introducing 'Navigating Failure in Ethnography': A Forum About Failure in Ethnographic Research

[Omitted for peer-review]

Purpose: We **introduce** a recurrent section for the *Journal of Organizational Ethnography* which scrutinizes the various manifestations and roles of failure in ethnographic research.

Design/methodology/approach: We peruse a wide body of literature which tackles the role of failure in ethnographic research and draw on our own experiences to argue for a more sustained and in-depth conversation on the topic.

Findings: 'Failure' regularly occurs in ethnographic research, yet remains underexamined. Increased discussion on the topic will enrich debates on methodology and fieldwork in particular.

Originality: While various scholars have commented on the role of 'failure' in ethnographic research, an in-depth and sustained examination of the topic is lacking.

Keywords: Failure, Ethnography, Anthropology, Methodology, Fieldwork, Access, Rapport, Reciprocity, Academic culture, Theorizing, Interpretation, Research ethics

Ethnography does not always go as planned. **From the get-go, our research proposals may get rejected by research institutions, funding bodies or ethics committees.** Access to the field site or to potential participants gets denied. **If we do 'get in'**, our interlocutors not show up or follow through on promises. We struggle to build rapport. Personality clashes and cultural prohibitions mean we fail to 'give back' to our interlocutors. Fieldnotes and other collected data get lost. Natural disasters happen, bringing suffering, damage and danger to participants and researchers alike. We struggle to explain to students how fieldwork is at once a rigorous methodology and almost entirely improvisational. Our findings are not all that original, but we frame them as ground-breaking anyway. Our ethnographies do not get written up, or they get desk rejected by publishers. We make little headway. Or maybe we concoct farfetched theories and churn out publications in the end. Perhaps the published work angers colleagues, supervisors and participants. We blame ourselves. We feel clueless and inadequate. Seemingly stable ground suddenly vanishes from under our feet. Our pet theories go in the trashcan. The silences during interviews feel awkward. We are bored and we are overwhelmed. No matter how hard we try, our writings do not seem to capture our fieldwork experiences. We miss out on opportunities, at times because we are simply tired or lazy. We stress, and then stress some more. We manoeuvre ethical grey zones. We wonder if we have what it takes and worry about how we are going to fund our next stint of fieldwork or **secure permanent academic employment.** For all these reasons and many more, we ultimately edit out any traces of failures, even though we aspire to be reflexive and transparent.

The list of likely failings runs much, much longer. We have all been there in one way or another. And yet, 'failure' remains shrouded in taboo. The *Journal of Organizational Ethnography (JOE)* prides itself on promoting a substantive, theoretical, methodological, ethical and philosophical understanding of ethnography. We want to capitalize on JOE's ambitions by inaugurating '*Navigating Failure in*

1  
2  
3 *Ethnography*, a new recurring section where we publish rigorous, sustained and systematic reflections  
4 on mistakes, problems and errors. We aim to shine a critical spotlight on failure by courting scholarly  
5 reflections on negative experiences, uncomfortable feelings and practical mistakes as key facets of  
6 ethnographic research. This text doubles as an introduction and a call for contributions: we explain  
7 why we are embarking on this experiment and what kinds of submissions we are looking for. To kick  
8 things off, we sketch a working definition of failure and argue that investigating failure more closely is  
9 both an intellectually stimulating and timely endeavor.  
10  
11

## 12 **Failure, ethnography and research in neoliberal academia**

13  
14  
15 ‘Failure’ is difficult to define as it comes in many guises: mistakes, unforeseen events, *force majeure*,  
16 challenges, and the like. Failure provokes a host of emotions, not all of them negative. Describing  
17 certain experiences as ‘failure’ might indeed be misleading due to its oft-assumed negative  
18 connotations. **The significance of failure can differ considerably**, as it encompasses (un)avoidable  
19 disastrous errors, but also situations which appeared initially as negative, but turned out to be valuable  
20 learning opportunities (Edwards and Ashkanasy, 2018). Failure is ambiguous, **occasionally even**  
21 **contradictory and ironic. Rather than assessing whether something counts as failure or trying to**  
22 **determine what it ‘is’**, we embrace failure’s ambiguity wholeheartedly in this new section. However,  
23 as a working definition of failure in the context of fieldwork, we quite like how Harrowell *et al.* place  
24 an emphasis on perception and subjectivity in their description of failure as an “event or experience  
25 that affects the research process in a manner *perceived* as negative by the researcher and diverts it  
26 away from the intended or expected path she or he had envisaged” (Harrowell *et al.*, 2018, p. 231,  
27 emphasis added).  
28  
29  
30

31  
32 In a culture where it is common to pit those who ‘triumph over adversity’, against those who do not,  
33 failure is conventionally eschewed as the undesirable opposite of success (Appadurai and Alexander,  
34 2019; Loscalzo, 2014). This mentality has seeped through to neoliberal academia: increased  
35 competitiveness, publication pressures, individualism, precarity and emphasis on ‘research excellence’  
36 ultimately make for worse science and stressed-out researchers (Loher and Strasser, 2019; Donskis *et*  
37 *al.*, 2019; Horton, 2020; Devine *et al.*, 2020, p. 2). As it ramps up, this hypercompetitive academic  
38 environment breeds more failure (Holdsworth, 2020, p. 1). Admitting to failures in this context can be  
39 perceived as a sign of poor research, but also as evidence of personal weakness, which can saddle  
40 researchers with “crippling anxiety” and a “fear of failure” (Harrowell *et al.*, 2018; Kovač, 2019, pp.110-  
41 111; Lareau and Shultz, 1996, p. 2). While our response to failure depends in part on our backgrounds  
42 and personalities, it can leave us frustrated, annoyed, confused, insecure, ashamed, lonely and  
43 disappointed (Mattes and Dinkelaker, 2019, p. 229; Billo and Hiemstra, 2013, p. 324; Holdsworth, 2020,  
44 p. 1; Ybema and Kamsteeg, 2009, p. 106).  
45  
46  
47

48  
49 As we detail below, confronted by these developments, some ethnographers have started talking more  
50 openly about failure. **To be sure, quantitative researchers too grapple with failure. For example,**  
51 **extant publications reveal the inability of methods-centred survey and experimental designs to**  
52 **capture the subtleties of language and the nuances of human values (Morris, 1991) – fundamental**  
53 **insights that can be celebrated in adjustable ethnographic traditions that are led by the researchers**  
54 **and not the methods (Holloway and Todres, 2003; see also Sperling, 2022). It is fair to say that the**  
55 **plasticity of ethnography makes it more resilient to shocks that method-led approaches cannot**  
56 **absorb. At the same time, the human-centredness element in qualitative research can also prompt**  
57 **unexpected challenging turns, new questions, and adapted research techniques (see below).**  
58  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 And yet, failure evidently remains habitually papered over in ethnographic accounts (Folkes, 2022;  
4 Cramer *et al.*, 2016, p. 146). **This is surprising, given that even the fieldnotes of Bronislaw Malinowski**  
5 **(1967/2020), the founding father of modern ethnography, are replete with references to the**  
6 **emotional overwhelm felt by a researcher who is not sure if he can live up to the task ahead of him;**  
7 **musings over time ‘wasted’ in the field; or frustrations about building rapport with non-reciprocating**  
8 **field participants.** Lareau and Shultz (1996, p. 2) decried in 1996 how most methodology textbooks  
9 “extol a set of virtues” that are not easily put into practice in the face of the messiness and  
10 unpredictability of the social world, ranging from building rapport and establishing trust, to keeping  
11 detailed field notes and finding the appropriate theoretical framework. In response, she shared  
12 “lessons learned” from her own mistakes and failures encountered during fieldwork, such as not giving  
13 informants different descriptions of the same research and always clearly emphasizing researcher  
14 independence (Lareau, 1996, pp. 204-205, 217). Years later, various commentators continue to lament  
15 how methodological reflections in the spirit of reflexivity retain a tendency to be self-censured,  
16 sanitized and overtly persuasive (Koning and Ooi, 2013, p. 17, 19; Jemielniak and Kostera, 2010, p.  
17 336). It seems failures are only processed privately in personal field diaries, if at all (Punch, 2012).

21  
22 As Harrowell *et al.* (2018, p. 231) explain when they echo Lareau’s earlier criticism, this “camouflaging  
23 failure” approach is regrettable as it “can give the illusion of a linear clarity to the often frustrating fog  
24 of the research process, hiding the confusion, self-doubt, and many mistakes that are made along the  
25 way”. **There is a tendency to hurry to refocus on the silver lining of every dark cloud, hungry for quick**  
26 **happy endings. Instead, we feel that there is value in sitting in the discomfort and systematically**  
27 **scrutinising its causes, nature and outcomes to truly understand what did not go right and why.**  
28 **Regardless of the stage of the research which they pertain to,** such reflexive encounters with failure  
29 are key to learning, exploring creative alternatives and conducting cutting-edge science (Parkes, 2019;  
30 Halberstam, 2011, pp. 2-3). Ethnography is no exception. However, before fleshing out the relationship  
31 between fieldwork, ethnography and failure in greater detail, we take our cue from those who have  
32 argued that breaking the stigma attached to failure requires leading by example (Jemielniak and  
33 Kostera, 2010, p. 336; Sløk-Andersen, 2020, p. 69). We therefore first make a quick detour and revisit  
34 our own failures by performing methodological post-ops on our PhD research projects.

37  
38 *[Omitted for peer-review] vignette: ‘It’s not about compassion’*

39  
40 September 2014 marked the beginning of my ethnographic doctoral research into the development,  
41 nature and role of clinician-patient relations ([Omitted for peer-review]). My fieldwork unfolded in UK  
42 specialist outpatient wound healing clinics and involved shadowing doctors and nurses on their  
43 consultations with patients with chronic, debilitating, unsightly and often malodorous wounds. My  
44 initial intention was to study ‘compassion’ – what it meant and what it looked like in clinician-patient  
45 relations built over the time of the treatment of chronic conditions. I vividly recall the early days of my  
46 access negotiations. While sitting in the corridor of a research unit of the wound healing organisation  
47 I would soon join, I cast my eyes on a research poster, displayed on the wall, which came from a study  
48 of the concerns of patients with wounds. The word ‘emotion’ figured right next to a clinical photograph  
49 of a big deep wound that stretched over a patient’s entire abdomen. After four access rejections from  
50 different medical specialists, motivated by my lack of hypotheses of what exactly I was going to ‘prove’  
51 in my study of emotions in healthcare, this was when I felt my qualitative exploratory ethnographic  
52 research into clinician-patient relations finally found its home.

53  
54 A few months later, having formalised my ethical and administrative permissions to attend the wound  
55 healing clinics, I found myself in a consultation room, by a patient’s bed, with a pen in one hand and a  
56 notebook in another, determined to understand what compassion meant in the context of wound  
57  
58  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 healing. My fieldnotes kept capturing the blatantly obvious – for example, a hand on the shoulder, a  
4 gentle laughter, silent acknowledgements of patients' struggles, patients' gratitude to clinicians. These  
5 were all demonstrations of compassion, but not enough to theorise them into anything remotely close  
6 to a 'significant contribution to knowledge', as my institutional doctoral policies clearly specified was  
7 a requirement to graduate. I was concerned I was missing something in my depictions of the fine detail  
8 of the interactions – had I not reviewed the literature enough to be an expert on compassion in wound  
9 care? While my fieldnotes did not register my feelings of frustration and self-doubt – fieldnotes in  
10 published ethnographic research papers were always clean and clinical, after all, and so should mine  
11 be – I remember asking myself whether I really was as good a researcher as I thought myself to be. I  
12 had promised my supervisors a critical explanation of the ontology of compassion, while at most I was  
13 delivering an easy-to-read and completely predictable phenomenological description of embodied  
14 emotions.  
15  
16  
17

18 I toyed with various drafts of the chapters discussing my findings, writing about my understanding of  
19 clinicians' compassionate responses to the predicaments experienced by patients with wounds. Some  
20 of these predicaments were tied to the ghastly sights and foul smells of wounds, which accompanied  
21 patients, day-in day-out. My ethnographic notes captured raw, visceral descriptions of my reactions to  
22 some of these wounds, but my gratitude to the clinicians and patients for letting me study their world  
23 meant I felt too ashamed to admit that these made me feel, quite frankly, uncomfortable at times! I  
24 was a professional researcher, after all, and so outside of my fieldnotes, I tried suppressing my  
25 'disgust'. This was somewhat ironic, given my interest in researching emotions in outpatient wound  
26 healing clinics and the fact that disgust had long been recognised as the most visceral of emotions  
27 (Miller 1997). But I felt that my emotions did not matter and my bodily reactions to the site had nothing  
28 to do with what I was there to uncover – after all, emotions are antithetical to knowledge production;  
29 Cartesian ontology splits the mind from the body, reason from emotions, objectivity from subjectivity,  
30 and logic from intuition. To be more objective, a spectator should remain detached, I felt. My original  
31 intention to study the social-medical world of wound healing in terms of its emotional-relational  
32 features offered little room for a reflection on my own emotional dynamics, or so I thought. Moreover,  
33 writing about distressing physical qualities of wounds could have negative effects on the people whose  
34 work and lives I was studying, and felt morally wrong.  
35  
36  
37  
38

39 Moments of serendipity (Rivoal and Salazar, 2013) helped me to make sense of the overwhelming  
40 messiness of my ethnographic data (Harrowell *et al.*, 2018). First, I stumbled upon a fascinating paper  
41 by Sturdy (2003), in which he defended the place of emotions in realist research. Citing Jaggar's (1989)  
42 call for greater 'emotional honesty', Sturdy (2003) portrayed emotions as a precondition for the  
43 production of reliable knowledge. Yet how was I to write about my emotions without turning the  
44 doctoral research into a long-winded self-confession? How was I to deliver and theorise a participant-  
45 focused narrative? An opportunity to share my concerns arose in 2016, when I shared my messy data  
46 and my musings over their place in my study of compassion at my departmental research seminar.  
47 'What you're describing sounds to me like dirty work', said a member of the audience. This equipped  
48 me with the theoretical vocabulary of dirty work (Hughes, 1958): work considered physically  
49 unpleasant, morally problematic or socially stigmatising due to its closeness to taboo subjects and  
50 disadvantaged, marginalised communities. I indulged in reading about dirty work, spotting parallels  
51 between my data and others' accounts. My inability to squeeze my data into theoretical frameworks  
52 about compassion was not caused by my failings as a researcher; quite simply, there was a more  
53 suitable body of work out there that I still needed to discover.  
54  
55  
56  
57

58 I did not write a dissertation on the ontology of compassion, but I produced what I regard as a  
59 fascinating study of stigma in the context of wound healing. On reflection, though, failure to deliver on  
60

1  
2  
3 the research objectives I had set out to deliver on helped me appreciate the truly improvisational  
4 nature of ethnography. To quote Anna Tsing: “Good fieldwork is supposed to change the fieldworker’s  
5 research questions. Standardized questions, goals, and methods block this kind of ethnographic  
6 learning, in which goals and methods change in the research process” (Tsing, 2009, p. 381). The real  
7 world is inherently ‘messy’, as is ethnographic research; but I learned that perhaps ethnography as a  
8 methodology can make the biggest contribution towards understanding this messiness. We should let  
9 ourselves be lost in the messiness of the data and experiment with different framings until we find one  
10 that we feel fits the story that the ethnographic data might be hiding.  
11  
12

13  
14 *[Omitted for peer-review] vignette: failure as a fieldwork companion and muse*

15  
16 In a sense, I had failed before I even began my fieldwork proper. In my research proposal for my MA  
17 thesis, I suggested a study of the South African government’s promise in 2013 to make provisions in  
18 its land claims program for the Khoisan ethnic group ([Omitted for peer-review]). This announcement  
19 was peculiar since the Khoisan were (and are) not officially recognized as indigenous people, not least  
20 because the widespread belief that they virtually perished during colonialism and apartheid. When I  
21 left for South Africa in July 2014, I failed to question this misguided ‘extinction paradigm’ as I  
22 envisioned doing fieldwork in the remote rural areas that are popularly associated with ‘the remaining  
23 Khoisan’. I figured I would settle on a specific destination once I had consulted with my local co-  
24 supervisor in Cape Town and browsed the news to get up to speed with the latest developments. To  
25 my surprise, a couple items mentioned Khoisan activists and their land-related grievances in Cape  
26 Town. To my knowledge nobody had conducted fieldwork among these urban-based Khoisan. Cape  
27 Town presented itself as a fascinating case study: people believed to no longer exist were increasingly  
28 seeking restitution and recognition since the end of apartheid in 1994 — a phenomenon often  
29 described as ‘Khoisan revivalism’ ([Omitted for peer-review]).  
30  
31  
32

33  
34 Stumbling on an original research topic was exciting, but also intimidating. I had to build a network of  
35 interlocutors from scratch. I somewhat naively looked for neatly bounded communities claiming  
36 specific plots of land. I attended all Khoisan-related events I came across and I tried to connect with  
37 self-identified Khoisan activists through social media. After a while, these types of informal  
38 engagements turned into observations and interviews. My interlocutors had diverse backgrounds and  
39 tended to operate either individually or through loosely knit and often short-lived organizations.  
40 Dispersed across the city, Khoisan activists were also engaging a host of spaces: from protesting in the  
41 streets to delivering papers at academic conferences. The land they were claiming similarly ranged  
42 from ‘the whole of South Africa’ to specific areas of historical significance. I struggled to make sense  
43 of this diversity: had I failed to discern ‘the’ common denominator or perhaps not done enough to  
44 meet the ‘right’ people? I even briefly fantasized about cheating on my research proposal by picking a  
45 different topic altogether.  
46  
47

48  
49 Ultimately, however, after consulting with my supervisors, I recognized that I was stubbornly resisting,  
50 rather than accepting, the contradictions and ambiguities of the field. I changed my outlook  
51 accordingly and settled on a “symbolic” interpretation, a vague term with which I sought to emphasize  
52 how Khoisan activists’ land claims were in many ways more discursive than material. This argument  
53 left me rather unsatisfied. There was a great deal more to say about the backgrounds and desires of  
54 my interlocutors. After failing to secure a grant the first time around, I apparently convinced a jury of  
55 my ‘groundbreaking’ research the following year. My PhD research surveyed Cape Town’s Khoisan  
56 revivalist movement as a whole, and more specifically how and why activists engage with the past  
57 ([Omitted for peer-review]). Earlier conundrums came back with a vengeance: which kind of  
58 movement is it exactly and what do Khoisan activists have in common?  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 A complete overview of Khoisan revivalism in Cape Town was practically impossible. Moreover,  
4 Khoisan activists do not all broadcast what they are doing or thinking far and wide. Their activism can  
5 differ tremendously in kind and style. Letting go of the ambition to survey the whole city was easy  
6 enough, but I never ceased wondering whether the interlocutors I ended up working with were 'truly'  
7 representative of Khoisan revivalism. I am still not entirely sure why — perhaps because I am a bit of  
8 a control freak or because I was anxious to deliver something original and convincing at the end of the  
9 ride — but I was rationalizing my choices and hypotheses even before initiating the fieldwork for my  
10 PhD. Amidst the chaos of fieldwork, there was something comforting and reassuring about temporarily  
11 committing 'answers' to paper or drafting preliminary table of contents. At the same time, as I had  
12 learned during my MA research (or so I thought): fieldworkers should actively resist the feeling that  
13 they have it all figured out. I ruminated feverishly about what the data was trying to tell me, but  
14 perhaps even more so about what I was trying to tell the data. I incessantly drafted working definitions  
15 of Khoisan revivalism, only to scrap them as I gathered new data that refuted them. This rollercoaster  
16 proved intellectually stimulating, but also deeply frustrating at times. Had I failed as a fieldworker?  
17 Was I exposed to the 'true' face of Khoisan revivalism or had I missed the mark? Had I gotten stuck  
18 within an unrepresentative cohort of activists because I had insufficiently branched out? Was I guilty  
19 of confirmation bias by seeking interlocutors who confirmed rather than contradicted my definition of  
20 Khoisan revivalism? Is what I called 'Khoisan revivalism' something out there or was it more something  
21 of my own construction?  
22  
23  
24  
25  
26

27 I recall having an epiphany towards the end of my fieldwork when I finally truly understood that these  
28 questions (and many others like them) ultimately had no 'good' or 'bad' answers, resulting in successful  
29 or failed fieldwork respectively. While I had read in textbooks and heard repeatedly from my supervisor  
30 that fieldwork was unpredictable and that it required a constant change of plans, I had to experience  
31 fieldwork myself before I could grasp that the point is to confront critical questions, not to come up  
32 with conclusive answers. At least for me, considering the way I apparently prefer to conduct research,  
33 this occasionally agonizing process stimulates creative destruction and a killing of the ego. Eager to  
34 figure things out, I constantly finetune working definitions, research questions and hypotheses. To fail  
35 along the way is not only inevitable, but necessary to further the research and remember to always be  
36 open-minded while in the field. Now that I am no longer a student, whether this makes for 'good'  
37 fieldwork is less on my mind. I certainly feel like a more mature researcher because of failure, not in  
38 spite of it. If the process of fieldwork itself is already part of the product, failure is ultimately  
39 impossible. Failing is still frustrating, but I now try to appreciate it as an opportunity to reflect about  
40 the research and the researcher. When things go wrong in the field – and they always do – I try to  
41 marvel at how it is all part of the fieldwork experience; a realization which is the rationale for my  
42 involvement in this new special section.  
43  
44  
45  
46  
47

## 48 **A closer look at failure, fieldwork and ethnography**

49 These brief forays into our own experiences are not meant to illustrate all that can go wrong in the  
50 field, where "failure lurks just around the corner" (Mattes and Dinkelaker, 2019, p. 227). The field is  
51 chaotic, contradictory and unpredictable, constantly sabotaging our plans and attempts to understand  
52 it (Jemielniak and Kostera, 2010, p. 344; Harrowell *et al.*, 2018, p. 230; Horton, 2020, p. 2; Hammersley  
53 and Atkinson, 2007, p. 160). In that sense, fieldwork might be especially "prone to failure" (Mattes and  
54 Dinkelaker, 2019, p. 227). However, as [omitted for peer review]'s supervisor put it, the field is never  
55 the enemy and always a place for opportunity. Indeed, through improvised and serendipitous  
56 encounters, fieldwork should not confirm our preconceptions, biases and certainties, but challenge  
57 them, however frustrating that process might be at times (Stellmach, 2022, p. 3; Rivoal and Salazar,  
58  
59  
60



1  
2  
3 2013, p. 178). As Mattes and Dinkelaker (2019, pp. 228-229) put it: “if any anthropological fieldwork  
4 went strictly to plan, it would actually have to be considered a failure”. ‘Feeling at home’ and having a  
5 satisfactory grasp is therefore to be actively resisted during fieldwork (Hammersley and Atkinson,  
6 2007, pp. 90-91). Along this vein, Lindstrom (1982, p. 317) described the “culture shock” often  
7 experienced by fieldworkers as “vaccinating the mind against the taken for granted”. In sum, open-  
8 mindedness, theoretical flexibility and social agility are considered scholarly virtues for anthropologists  
9 and that which allows them to be enchanted by the field (Halberstam, 2011, p. 12).

10  
11  
12 If fieldwork-induced reasoning is the hallmark of good ethnography, a fear of failure can paralyse its  
13 practitioners since failure can be “of vital epistemological significance” and function as a “heuristic  
14 tool” (Mattes and Dinkelaker, 2019, pp. 227-228, 230; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007, p. 92).  
15 Moments of crisis and failure might give us unprecedented perspectives on our topic, force us to look at  
16 the field with fresh eyes, formulate new research questions, **adapt our methods** and explore new field  
17 sites (Mattes and Dinkelaker, 2019, p. 230; Ybema and Kamsteeg, 2009, p. 106; Jensen *et al.*, 2020, p.  
18 142; Cramer *et al.*, 2016). Failing forces us to pay careful attention to our methodologies and  
19 positionality, potentially leading to novel and creative, if unintended insights (Amrith *et al.*, 2008, pp.  
20 78, 80). Every fieldworker is in a sense “challenged to reinvent fieldwork practices, research methods  
21 and theoretical orientations”, a process replete with failures, vulnerabilities and frustrations (Hazan  
22 and Hertzog, 2012, p. 1). As such, our engagements with failure are part of what shapes our identities  
23 as researchers and opening up about this fact in the spirit of reflexivity makes our accounts not only  
24 more transparent, but also convey more vividly and convincingly what it was like ‘being there’ in the  
25 field (Jensen *et al.*, 2020, p. 144; Lichterman, 2017, p. 4; Koning and Ooi, 2013, p. 27).

26  
27  
28  
29  
30 A number of authors have taken this to heart in recent years by writing about various facets of failure  
31 in ethnographic research. Pioneers published in this very journal not so long ago, with Sløk-Andersen  
32 and Persson (2020, pp. 65, 73) making their case for “the analytical value of awkwardness” in  
33 organizational ethnography by highlighting how researchers are able to discover “silent knowledge  
34 and assumptions taken for granted in the organization” through moments of “embarrassment and  
35 nervousness as our observations are sometimes laughed at, our questions create confusion, or our  
36 mere presence causes unease”. The authors conclude that ethnography is perhaps best understood as  
37 a series of “awkward encounters”, which ought to be placed front and centre in our writings. Jemelniak  
38 and Kostera (2010, p. 336) share this emphasis on the analytical yield of failure in a paper dedicated to  
39 “failures, blunders, and gaffes in ethnographic work”, based on stories from fellow organizational  
40 ethnographers. This discussion naturally extends beyond the field of organizational ethnography.  
41 There is a dedicated section on “Failing and Attuning in the Field” in a recent book on ‘affective  
42 dimensions of fieldwork’ by Mattes and Dinkelaker (2019). The journal *Emotion, Space and Society* also  
43 recently hosted a special issue on “Reclaiming failure in geography: Academic honesty in a neoliberal  
44 world”, edited by Davies, Disney and Harrowell (see e.g. Horton, 2020).

45  
46  
47  
48  
49 Despite this emerging literature that seeks to appraise the role of failure in ethnography, there is a  
50 consensus that much remains to be done in order to break the taboo on failure, with some suggesting  
51 to share experiences of failure on social media through tags such as “#researchfail” or  
52 “#ethnographyfail”, and others calling for explicit “disconnection narratives” that emphasize  
53 difficulties and challenges over success (Jensen *et al.*, 2020, p. 146; Holdsworth, 2020, pp.3-4; Loscalzo,  
54 2014, p. 4; Trundle, 2018, p. 99). Various rationales are put forward for such initiatives. Students and  
55 beginning researchers in particular would benefit from appreciating that failure is key to solid  
56 ethnographic research and reflexivity. People might feel less alone in their failings or frame them and  
57 cope with them differently after reading about the experiences of others (Sjøvoll *et al.*, p. 6). This in  
58 turn might make us take ourselves less seriously as researchers (Tracy, 2014, p. 458).

1  
2  
3 Another aspect of calls for greater attention to failure emanates from those who wish to move past  
4 the aforementioned “triumph-over-adversity-in-pursuit-of-individualised-success” by sharing failures  
5 that have a net negative impact on the research and one’s career, no matter how you cut it (Horton,  
6 2020, pp. 2-3).<sup>1</sup> As Wasterfors (2022, pp. 1, 11) put it, sometimes things fail “in more non-functional  
7 and redundant ways, and you learn nothing”; these events are “epistemically pointless”. This clashes  
8 with the trope of the “anti-hero” ethnographer who prevails despite encountering challenges along  
9 the way, which always ultimately prove didactic. These catastrophic, non-didactic and unproductive  
10 failures are seldom acknowledged as they can cripple academic careers and wreak havoc on one’s  
11 personal life (Jemielniak and Kostera, 2010, p. 336; Horton, 2020, p. 5; Edwards and Ashkanasy, 2018,  
12 p. 167). Our response to this line of argumentation is not to ‘always look on the bright side’, which  
13 admittedly might be difficult to do in certain instances, but that these types of profound failures too  
14 are common in ethnographic research and therefore also shine a light on important methodological  
15 aspects of the discipline. To us, no failure can therefore be entirely undidactic or epistemologically  
16 meaningless, as our review of the writings on failure below suggests.

### 21 *Calamities and failures of access and creating rapport*

22  
23 In order to carry out fieldwork, researchers need to ‘access’ their field. They need to be allowed to  
24 conduct their research by the people concerned and ideally they are able to interact with relevant  
25 groups and individuals. This is hardly ever a smooth process. Some literally fail to make it to the field  
26 altogether (Jemielniak and Kostera, 2010, p. 340). Barred or hampered access may be due to a host of  
27 reasons that are out of researchers’ control, such as delays in visa applications, transport difficulties,  
28 lack of basic infrastructure, challenging living circumstances and safety risks at dangerous field sites.  
29 Crises, calamities and disasters can also occur, such as diseases, fires, earthquakes and floods. The  
30 COVID-19 pandemic and the accompanying lockdowns and impositions on mobility have certainly  
31 made countless research projects more challenging or falter altogether. Fieldwork is conventionally  
32 centred around the embodied immersion of the researcher and this proved difficult, if not impossible,  
33 during the pandemic, causing various problems, but also creative methodological adaptations (Briggs,  
34 2021; Eggeling, 2022; Howlett, 2022). However, most ethnographers did not possess the required  
35 training to adjust to digital ethnographic fieldwork, yet they were often left with no other option.

36  
37  
38  
39 ‘Getting access’ of course mostly depends on our own behavior as researchers and that of our  
40 interlocutors. This usually involves negotiating, often unsuccessfully, with gatekeepers and facilitators,  
41 which can significantly impact our research (Davies, 1999, p. 79). Access usually changes while doing  
42 fieldwork and can differ markedly depending on the specifics of a particular field site and our  
43 interlocutors’ strategies (Van der Waal, 2009; Brown-Saracino, 2014). ‘Creating rapport’ and  
44 ‘establishing trust’ are key to obtaining access, but it is seldom specified *how* researchers are supposed  
45 to do so. Needless to say, creating rapport can be incredibly awkward, not least for those who are not  
46 talented at the ‘emotional work’ involved in fieldwork or equipped with the personality traits that  
47 facilitate social interactions, such as self-confidence, assertiveness and easy-goingness (Wästerfors,  
48 2022, p. 3; Harrowell *et al.*, 2018, p. 231; Mattes and Dinkelaker, 2019, p. 227). Fieldwork can be  
49 mentally and physically exhausting for those people in particular (Billo and Hiemstra, 2013, p. 322-  
50 323). Failed attempts at creating rapport can entail backfired jokes or unintended and inappropriate  
51 remarks or behavior, which can in turn result in more distance between researchers and interlocutors

---

52  
53  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60  
<sup>1</sup> As a counter-reaction to the taboo on failure, some academics have created “failure-CVs”, where they list  
rejected articles and grant applications together with failed job applications (Edwards and Ashkanasy, 2018, p.  
178; Holdsworth, 2020, p. 1). The recently established *Journal of Trial-and-Error*, which focuses on the role of  
failure in the natural sciences, though not exclusively, also regularly publishes rejected research proposals  
(Devine *et al.*, 2020, p. 3).

(Sløk-Andersen and Persson, 2020). Among others, Wästerfors (2022, pp. 7-8) gives the examples of accidentally taking a stack of papers belonging to interlocutors or offering alcohol beverages to someone who had previously mentioned to be struggling with alcoholism. Interpersonal relationships may simply not work if personalities clash (Jemielniak and Kostera, 2010, p. 338). Conversely, some have also found their failures to ultimately result in greater access. Arrogantly breaking local rules or making inappropriate remarks and feeling embarrassed made some researchers more appreciative of local lived experiences and practices of boundary making (Harrowell *et al.*, 2018, p. 234; Tracy, 2014, p. 461). Rice (2019) for example witnessed how her interlocutors found her more relatable after learning about her affair during her fieldwork. Similarly, knowledge of local languages can help to obtain access and create rapport, but having a poor command of the language can in certain instances accomplish the same because it shows researchers as human and helps dispel associations with the ivory-tower of academia.

### *Failures of translation, theorizing and pedagogy*

The journey from drafting a research proposal to collecting data and writing up findings is littered with moments of failure. Some have argued that ethnography does not seek to portray observed and investigated realities as objectively as possible and is therefore best conceived of as an “exercise in miscommunication” (Benzecry, 2017, p. 26). Fieldworkers strive to obtain a certain level of familiarity with the “frames of meaning” of their interlocutors, but this is unavoidably mediated through their (confirmation) biases, preconceptions and personalities, as well as those of the interlocutors they engage with (Geertz, 2001, p. 16; Geertz, 1973, p. 9). As a result, ethnography has been described as “guessing at meanings, assessing the guesses, and drawing explanatory conclusions from the better guesses” (Geertz, 1973, p. 20). In order to be more mindful of the implications of this process of translation, ethnographers have over the past few decades engaged in ‘reflexivity’, i.e. self-reflection on “complex relationship between processes of knowledge production and the various linguistic, social, political and theoretical contexts of such processes, as well as the involvement of the knowledge producer” (Alvesson and Sköldbberg, 2009, p. 8-9). Reflexivity is not meant to be comprehensive, but we might be left wondering whether we have failed to single out the most germane issues (Lichterman, 2017, p. 4). Indeed, if we perform reflexivity akin to a process of ticking of boxes from a generic list of things ‘to potentially be aware of’, we are unlikely to arrive at relevant and deeply probing introspection (Folkes, 2022).

Following this process of reflexivity, critics have wondered to what degree fieldworkers habitually fail to make use of all their senses to capture their fieldwork experiences and whether they have accounted for all meaningful actors in their fields, not least the non-humankind (Pink, 2009; Hamilton and Taylor, 2012). In general, some have concluded that “translation is – to a certain extent – always treason” (Benzecry, 2017, p. 26) and that ethnographers will always be frustrated by the fact that their writings and fieldnotes somehow ultimately fail to reflect “the vividness of the ethnographic experience” (Mattes and Dinkelaker, 2019, p. 227). Researchers might feel along the same lines that they have failed to use methods according to textbook prescriptions. Interviews, for example, can be incredibly awkward and turn out useless (Harrowell *et al.*, 2018, p. 231; Whitaker and Atkinson, 2019, p. 621).

Researchers might similarly wonder whether the link between their data and arguments is warranted and indicative of significant breakthroughs (Lareau, 1996, p. 222). How to theorize, grapple with contradictory data or make intellectual detours is rarely explained or reflected in the final text (Vaughan, 2004, pp. 315, 317, 320). Ethnographers in particular should moreover be weary of overtheorizing and accept that fieldwork data stubbornly refuses abstraction and analytical dissection.

1  
2  
3 Fieldwork-based reasoning instead involves “a delicate engagement of the inductive with the  
4 deductive” (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2003, p. 172). As Davies (1999, p. 193) put it, researchers need  
5 “intellectual distancing from the minutiae of ethnographic observations”, but their arguments cannot  
6 become “irrelevant to the lived experiences of people on the ground and neither grounded in nor  
7 answerable to ethnographic data”. Failure seems unavoidable in this exercise. However, by at least  
8 owning up to these ‘failures’, researchers can make their work more honest, transparent and open to  
9 contestation (Hammersley, 2010, p. 28; Kapferer 2007, 82; Lichterman, 2017, pp. 35, 38). To be sure,  
10 this realization implies a tricky kind of pedagogy, where prospective ethnographers are set up to fail  
11 as they are taught that ethnography is at once about improvising and adhering to certain guidelines  
12 and best practices. This juggling of failure applies to both those doing the teaching and supervision, as  
13 well as those on the receiving end (Starn, 2022, p. 191). Regrettably, reflections on supervision and  
14 ‘being supervised’, particularly involving failure, are especially uncommon.  
15  
16  
17  
18

### 19 *Ethical challenges and failures to cooperate and reciprocate*

20 The last few decades have seen ethnographers increasingly emphasize the importance of reciprocity,  
21 cooperation and ethical behavior in general in an effort to reckon with the colonial origins and  
22 extractive practices of anthropology, as well as feelings of guilt and privilege that can haunt  
23 researchers, particularly when engaging with marginalized, impoverished and generous interlocutors  
24 (Ryder, 2021, p. 301). The increased uncomfortableness with these dynamics has paved the way to  
25 welcome changes in the way the discipline is practiced, and researchers conduct themselves with their  
26 interlocutors. However, “honest and critically reflexive reporting” has simultaneously laid bare how  
27 pursuing new ideals of effectuating positive transformation involves “ambiguities, mistakes,  
28 frustrations, tensions, conflicts and disappointments”, as well as unique drawbacks and “hidden costs”  
29 (Liu, 2021, p. 4; Jemielniak and Kostera, 2010, p. 338; Bartels and Friedman, 2022, p. 99). What could  
30 be considered ethical behaviour is not always evident and can change during fieldwork, or even long  
31 thereafter, regardless of what ethical boards at universities may claim to the contrary (Mattes and  
32 Dinkelaker, 2019, p. 227).  
33  
34  
35  
36

37 Efforts to balance out power relations between researchers and interlocutors may for instance  
38 ultimately prove unsuccessful as researchers end up (being perceived as) paternalistically speaking on  
39 their interlocutors’ behalf (Liu, 2021, p. 1; Weiss, 2021, p. 950). The research might mostly be  
40 communicated in the form of conventional scholarly output and fail to be a vehicle for change (Trundle,  
41 2018, p. 92; Mattes and Dinkelaker, 2019, p. 227; Horton, 2020, p. 3). This might also disappoint our  
42 interlocutors. Activists in particular can be dissatisfied with research that exposes some of their ‘dirty  
43 laundry’ and therefore try to control research activities and place the researcher in a compromised  
44 position by (in)directly asking them to dial down the criticism (Mosse, 2015, p. 132). Collaborations  
45 might be extremely uncomfortable and perceived as engaging in collusion by certain interlocutors,  
46 who might prefer a more distanced and detached approach from researchers (Trundle, 2018, p. 90).  
47 Inhabiting the grey zone between detached assessment and committed immersion might prove  
48 untenable for some ethnographers (Jemielniak and Kostera, 2010, p. 338; Koning and Ooi, 2013, p. 26).  
49 Conversely, maintaining professional boundaries with hostile or unlikeable interlocutors can be  
50 challenging and make us self-conscious and break the relationship altogether (Mahoney, 2007).  
51 Research assistants might also have expected more from, or plainly misunderstood, the basis of  
52 collaboration (Parry, 2015, p. 112). The list of examples is endless. Scrutinizing failure in this setting  
53 becomes ever more timely as this way of conducting research is increasingly considered best practice.  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

### *Failure to live up to academic standards and pressures*

As we highlighted at the beginning of this article, the current academic climate puts tremendous pressure on researchers. **Although alternative ways of evaluating scholarly research are being explored and put into practice (see, for example, <https://sfdora.org/>), institutionalized metrics-based assessments still prevail**, causing researchers to suffer from “performance anxieties” and dread the prospect of failing (Horton, 2020, p. 3). Within the humanities, this is linked to an academic culture where a mainstream understanding of success is associated with quantity rather than quality of outputs, making far-reaching conclusions regardless of having sufficient data, and consistently delivering ground-breaking, original and ‘impactful’ research (Devine *et al.*, 2020, p. 2). Increasingly forced into competition on the ‘marketplace of ideas’ and having to cope with external funders and short-term contracts, researchers habitually have limited time and resources at their disposal, yet constantly feel pressured to meet imposed expectations and ‘deliverables’ (Rivoal and Salazar, 2013). **They might not question how the labelling and/or censoring of failures along the way is tied to the broader academic culture and political system which they are part of.** All of this can turn writing into a “miserable” experience, causing authors to do what they think is expected of them or resort to desperate measures for fear of failure (Starn, 2022, p. 191), **reinforcing the hurtful neoliberal logic.** For ethnographers — beginners especially — these burdens add to already existing pressures inherent in the discipline. As both of our aforementioned vignettes attest to, we panic that time is quickly running out to ‘prove ourselves’ and collect sufficient and appropriate data (Billo and Hiemstra, 2013, p. 317). Confronted with “the slipperiness of actual research”, improvising and adapting methodologies and reconfiguring research proposals can become a daunting task (Billo and Hiemstra, 2013, pp. 317-318; see also Harrowell *et al.*, 2018, p. 231). Students in particular may feel burdened to emulate the “good anthropologist”: “[evoking] the nitty-gritty of local life yet also [plugging] their analysis into the latest hip theory debates” (Starn, 2022, p. 191). This can also be accompanied by peer pressure to carry out “macho” research, where maximum risks are taken and dangerous, violent and discomforting fieldwork is considered the pinnacle of ethnography (Sampson, 2019, p. 13). Given the pressures and standards imposed by the current academic environment, ‘failure’ is likely to occur more and more, rendering the kinds of issues outlined in this paragraph ever more urgent.

### **‘The greatest teacher, failure is’: Navigating failure in ethnography as pathways of learning**

Failure is part and parcel of ethnography. **We believe that Star Wars’ Yoda is correct in assessing failure as the greatest teacher and that learning from failure will therefore make us better ethnographers. Reflecting on failure allows us to develop a reflexive approach to errors, mistakes and problems, but it can also make us more alert and resistant to existing power relations in academia that tout some as more successful than others. Reflecting on failure can indeed have an emancipatory and subversive potential to read failure not just through a methodological lens, but a critical, political one.** We aspire to facilitate a more sustained discussion about failure and join those who seek to normalize its role in scientific enquiry (see e.g. Devine *et al.*, 2020, p. 4). We want ethnographers to feel that they are not alone, discover useful tips and overall get more insight into seldom discussed aspects of fieldwork. We will unavoidably *fail* to be comprehensive as well, but the scope of failure in ethnography can certainly not be captured in a single paper. In creating a section specifically dedicated to failure and ethnography we want to elevate relatively scattered publications or informal conversations to a scholarly forum ‘in plain view’. Indeed, failures should not remain anecdotal or hidden, but subject to reflexive scrutiny and inform debates on methodological rigour.

We do not want our contributors to wallow in their regrets and disappointments or air frustrations and mistakes for the sake of it. Nor do we promote a nihilistic celebration of failure. Responding to failure by boasting about it or navel-gazing serves little purpose (Holdsworth, 2020, p. 3). Rather, in exploring failure as a key ingredient of ethnography, we want to reconceptualize at least partially what it is that we do as ethnographers. Drawing in part on our own experiences, we believe that it is between the cracks of what was envisioned and what happened in practice that methodological 'gold' can be mined.

We are calling for submissions in search for this 'gold' that will maximize our understanding of failure and ethnography. **Contributions can tackle all stages of research and every aspect of academic life.** They should speak directly to lived experiences of young and veteran ethnographers and pursue a range of perspectives on failure (in terms of gender, age, discipline, racial and ethnic background, etc.). This also includes discussions on the role of failure in ethnography in general. As we alluded to earlier, we subscribe to the ambiguity of failure by encouraging contributors to think outside of the box. In terms of format, we are looking for two types of texts, ranging between 5,000-8,000 words (including title, abstract, keywords and references):

- (1) Essay-style methodological reflections on (personal) experiences with failure in ethnographic research;
- (2) Interviews with ethnographers about their encounters with failure. These interviews are a platform for documenting research conversations between ethnographers (3,000–5,000 words of transcript) along with methodological commentary from the interviewer (and interviewee) on the relevant conclusions for the wider community of ethnographers (2,000-3,000 words).

Our reflections on failure in this introduction, inspired by our own experiences and the literature we touched on is unavoidably non-exhaustive. Needless to say, we have likely *failed* to account for failure in all of its diversity but hopefully our brainstorm will inspire others and point out lacunas they are willing to fill. Then again, if we fail to court submissions, it will only confirm how failure lies at the core of our profession. With failure guaranteed, we are vindicated either way.

## References

- Alvesson, M. and Sköldböck, K. (2009), *Reflexive Methodology. New Vistas for Qualitative Research*, SAGE, London.
- Amrith, M. *et al.* (2008), "Harvesting failure in the field: An ethnographic apprenticeship in coping with the unexpected", *Cambridge Anthropology*, Vol. 28 No. 1, pp. 61–82.
- Appadurai, A. and Alexander, N. (2014), *Failure*, Polity, Cambridge.
- Bartels, K.P.R. and Friedman, V. J. (2022), "Shining light on the dark side of action research: Power, relationality and transformation", *Action Research*, Vol. 20 No. 2, pp.99–104.
- Benzecry, C. (2017), "What did we say they've said? Four encounters between theory, method and the production of data", *Ethnography*, Vol. 18 No. 1, pp. 24–34.
- Billo, E. and Hiemstra, N. (2013), "Mediating messiness: expanding ideas of flexibility, reflexivity, and embodiment in fieldwork", *Gender, Place & Culture*, Vol. 20 No. 3, pp.313-328.
- Briggs, C.L. (2021), "Against methodological essentialism, fragmentation, and instrumentalism in times of COVID-19", *American Anthropologist*, Vol. 123 No. 4, pp.954–956.

- 1  
2  
3 Brown-Saracino, J. (2014), "From methodological stumbles to substantive insights: gaining ethnographic access in queer communities", *Qualitative Sociology*, Vol. 37 No. 1, pp.43–68.
- 4  
5  
6 Comaroff, J. and Comaroff, J.L. (2003), "Ethnography on an Awkward Scale: Postcolonial Anthropology and the Violence of Abstraction", *Ethnography*, Vol. 4 No. 2, pp.147-179.
- 7  
8  
9 Cramer, C., Johnston, D., Oya C. *et al.* (2016), "Research note: Mistakes, crises, and research independence: The perils of fieldwork as a form of evidence", *African Affairs*, Vol. 115 No. 458, pp.145–160.
- 10  
11  
12  
13 Davies, C.A. (1999), *Reflexive Ethnography: A Guide to Researching Selves and Others*, Psychology Press, London.
- 14  
15  
16 Devine, *et al.* (2020), "Science fails. Let's publish", *Journal of Trial and Error*, Vol. 1 No. 1, pp.1-5.
- 17  
18  
19 Donskis, *et al.* (2019) (Eds.), *Academia in Crisis: The Rise and Risk of Neoliberal Education in Europe*, Leiden/Boston, Brill.
- 20  
21  
22 Edwards, M.S. and Ashkanasy, N.M. (2018), "Emotions and failure in academic life: Normalising the experience and building resilience", *Journal of Management & Organization*, Vol. 24 No. 2, pp.167–188.
- 23  
24  
25  
26 Eggeling, K.A. (2022), "Embracing the "inverted commas", or how COVID-19 can show us new directions for ethnographic "fieldwork"", *Qualitative Research*, Online First.
- 27  
28  
29 Folkes, L. (2022), "Moving beyond "shopping list" positionality: Using kitchen table reflexivity and in/visible tools to develop reflexive qualitative research", *Qualitative Research*, Online First.
- 30  
31  
32 Geertz, C. (1973), *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*, Basic Books, New York.
- 33  
34 Geertz, C. (2001), *Available Light: Anthropological Reflections on Philosophical Topics*, Princeton University Press, Princeton.
- 35  
36  
37 Halberstam, J. (2011), *The Queer Art of Failure*, Duke University Press, Durham.
- 38  
39 Hamilton, L. and Taylor, N. (2012), "Ethnography in evolution: adapting to the animal "other" in organizations", *Journal of Organizational Ethnography*, Vol. 1 No. 1, pp.43-51.
- 40  
41  
42 Hammersley, M. and Atkinson, P. (2007), *Ethnography-Principles in Practice*, New York, Routledge.
- 43  
44 Hammersley, M. (2010), *Methodology: Who Needs It?*, SAGE, London.
- 45  
46 Harrowell, E., Davies, T. and Disney, T. (2018), "Making space for failure in geographic research", *The Professional Geographer*, Vol. 70 No. 2., pp.230–238.
- 47  
48  
49 Hazan, H. and Hertzog, E. (2012), "Introduction: towards a nomadic turn in anthropology", Hazan, H. and Hertzog, E. (Eds.), *Serendipity in Anthropological Research: The Nomadic Turn*, Ashgate, Farnham, p. 1-11.
- 50  
51  
52  
53 Holdsworth, C. (2020), "A manifesto for failure: Depersonalising, collectivising and embracing failure in research funding", *Emotion, Space and Society*, Vol. 37, p.100744.
- 54  
55  
56 Holloway, I. and Todres, L. (2003), "The status of method: flexibility, consistency and coherence", *Qualitative Research* Vol. 3, pp. 345–357.
- 57  
58  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 Horton, J. (2020), "Failure failure failure failure failure failure: Six types of failure within the neoliberal  
4 academy", *Emotion, Space and Society*, Vol. 35, p.100672.

5  
6 Howlett, M. (2022), "Looking at the "field" through a Zoom lens: methodological reflections on  
7 conducting online research during a global pandemic", *Qualitative Research*, Vol. 22 No. 3, pp.387–  
8 402.

9  
10 Hughes, E.C. (1958), *Men and Their Work*, Glencoe, IL, Free Press.

11  
12 Jaggar, A.M. (1989), "Love and knowledge: emotion and feminist epistemology", Jaggar, A.M. and  
13 Bordo, S.R. (Eds), *Gender/Body/Knowledge: Feminist Reconstructions of Being and Knowing*, New  
14 Brunswick, NJ, Rutgers University Press, pp.151–176.

15  
16 Jemielniak, D. and Kostera, M. (2010), "Narratives of irony and failure in ethnographic work", *Canadian  
17 Journal of Administrative Sciences / Revue Canadienne des Sciences de l'Administration*, Vol. 27 No. 4,  
18 pp.335–347.

19  
20 Jensen, P.R. et al. (2020), "Pushing beyond positionalities and through failures" in qualitative  
21 organizational communication: experiences and lessons on identities in ethnographic praxis",  
22 *Management Communication Quarterly*, Vol. 34 No. 1, pp.121–151.

23  
24 Kapferer, B. (2007), "Anthropology and the dialectic of enlightenment: A discourse on the definition  
25 and ideals of a threatened discipline", *The Australian Journal of Anthropology*, Vol. 18 No. 1, pp.72–  
26 94.

27  
28 Koning, J. and Ooi, C. (2013), "Awkward encounters and ethnography", *Qualitative Research in  
29 Organizations and Management: An International Journal*, Vol 8 No. 1, pp.16-32.

30  
31 Kovač, U. (2019), "Is there life after PhD in anthropology? Precarity, anxiety and new opportunities to  
32 assemble in academia", *Social Anthropology*, Vol. 27 No. 2, pp.97-117.

33  
34 Lareau, A. (1996), "Common problems in field work: A personal essay", Lareau, A. and Shultz, J. (Eds),  
35 *Journeys Through Ethnography. Realistic Accounts of Fieldwork*, Westview Press, Oxford, pp.195-236.

36  
37 Lareau, A. and Shultz, J. (1996), "Introduction", Lareau, A. and Shultz, J. (Eds), *Journeys Through  
38 Ethnography. Realistic Accounts of Fieldwork*, Westview Press, Oxford, pp.1-8.

39  
40 Lichterman, P. (2017), "Interpretive reflexivity in ethnography", *Ethnography*, Vol. 18 No. 1, pp.35–45.

41  
42 Lindstrom, L. (1982), "Leftamap Kastom: The political history of tradition on Tanna, Vanuatu", *The  
43 Australian Journal of Anthropology*, Vol. 13 No. 4, pp.316-329.

44  
45 Liu, R. (2021), "I said, they said: The ethnographic backstage and the politics of producing engaged  
46 anthropology", *Ethnography*, Online First.

47  
48 Loher, D. and Strasser, S. (2019), "Politics of precarity: neoliberal academia under austerity measures  
49 and authoritarian threat", *Social Anthropology/Anthropologie sociale*, Vol. 27 No. S2, pp.5–14.

50  
51 Loscalzo, J. (2014), "A celebration of failure", *Circulation*, Vol. 129 No. 9, pp.953-955.

52  
53 Mahoney, D. (2007), "Constructing reflexive fieldwork relationships: Narrating my collaborative  
54 storytelling methodology", *Qualitative Inquiry*, Vol. 13 No. 4, pp.573–594.

55  
56 Malinowski, B. (1967/2020), *A Diary in the Strict Sense of the Term*. London: Routledge.



- 1  
2  
3 Mattes, D. and Dinkelaker, S. (2019), "Failing and attuning in the field: Introduction", Stodulka, T. *et al.*  
4 (Eds), *Affective Dimensions of Fieldwork and Ethnography*, Springer, Cham, pp. 227-232.  
5  
6 Miller, W.I. (1997), *The Anatomy of Disgust*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.  
7  
8 Morris, R.W. (1991), "Limitations of quantitative methods for research on values in sexuality  
9 education", *Canadian Journal of Education / Revue canadienne de l'éducation* Vol. 16, 1), pp. 82–92.  
10  
11 Mosse, D. (2015), "Misunderstood, misrepresented, contested?: Anthropological knowledge  
12 production in question", *Focaal*, Vol. 72, pp.128–137.  
13  
14 Parkes, E. (2019), "Scientific progress is built on failure", *Nature*,  
15 <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-019-00107-y>.  
16  
17 Parry, J. (2015), "The anthropologist's assistant (or the assistant's anthropologist?): The story of a  
18 disturbing episode", Vol. 72, pp.112–127.  
19  
20 Pink, S. (2009), *Doing Sensory Ethnography*, SAGE, London.  
21  
22 Punch, S. (2012), "Hidden struggles of fieldwork: Exploring the role and use of field diaries", *Emotion,*  
23 *Space and Society*, Vol. 5 No. 2, pp.86-93.  
24  
25 Rice, K. (2019), "Forbidden fieldwork: The affair as research method", *Anthropology and Humanism*,  
26 Vol. 44 No. 2, pp.306–318.  
27  
28 Rivoal, I. and Salazar, N.B. (2013), "Contemporary ethnographic practice and the value of  
29 serendipity", *Social Anthropology*, Vol. 21 No. 2, pp.178-185.  
30  
31 Ryder, A. (2021), "Critical ethnography and research relationships: Some ethical dilemmas",  
32 *Anthropology and Humanism*, Vol. 46 No. 2, pp.300–314.  
33  
34 Sampson, H. (2019), "'Fluid fields' and the dynamics of risk in social research", *Qualitative Research*,  
35 Vol. 19 No. 2, pp.131–147.  
36  
37 Sjøvoll, V. *et al.* (2020), "Abandoned ideas and the energies of failure", *Emotion, Space and Society*,  
38 Vol. 36, p. 100709.  
39  
40 Sløk-Andersen, B. and Persson, A. (2020), "Awkward ethnography: an untapped resource in  
41 organizational studies", *Journal of Organizational Ethnography*, Vol. 10 No. 1, pp.65-78.  
42  
43 Sperling, J. (2022), "Guest speakers and sexuality education: an ethnographic look inside one  
44 California high school", *American Journal of Sexuality Education*, DOI:  
45 10.1080/15546128.2022.2097145.  
46  
47 Starn, O. (2022), "Anthropology and the misery of writing", *American Anthropologist*, Vol. 124 No. 1,  
48 pp. 187–197.  
49  
50 Stellmach, D. (2022), "The field is ever further: In search of the elusive space of fieldwork",  
51 *Ethnography*, Vol. 23 No. 1, pp.3–13.  
52  
53 Sturdy, A. (2003), "Knowing the unknowable? A discussion of methodological and theoretical issues in  
54 emotion research and organizational studies", *Organization*, Vol. 10 No. 1, pp.81–105.  
55  
56 Tracy, S.J. (2014), "Fieldwork horse-assery: Making the most of feeling humiliated, rebuffed, and  
57 offended during participant observation research", *Management Communication Quarterly*, Vol. 28  
58 No. 3, pp.458-465.  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 Trundle, C. (2018), "Uncomfortable collaborations: The ethics of complicity, collusion, and detachment  
4 in ethnographic fieldwork", *Collaborative Anthropologies*, Vol. 11 No. 1, pp.89–110.

5  
6 Tsing, A. (2009), "On collaboration", *American Anthropologist*, Vol. 36. No. 2, pp.380–384.

7  
8 Van der Waal, K. (2009), "Getting Going: Organizing Ethnographic Fieldwork", Ybema, S. et al. (Eds),  
9 Organizational Ethnography: Studying the Complexity of Everyday Life, SAGE Publications, London,  
10 pp.23-39.

11  
12 Vaughan, D. (2004), "Theorizing disaster: Analogy, historical ethnography, and the Challenger  
13 accident", *Ethnography*, Vol. 5 No. 3, pp.315–347.

14  
15 Wästerfors, D. (2022), "My face turned red, but it led me ... nowhere. Notes on epistemically pointless  
16 embarrassment in ethnographic practice", *Qualitative Research*, Online First.

17  
18 Weiss, M. (2021), "The interlocutor slot: citing, crediting, cotheorizing, and the problem of  
19 ethnographic expertise", *American Anthropologist*, Vol. 123 No. 4, pp.948–953.

20  
21 Whitaker, E.M. and P. Atkinson (2019), "Authenticity and the interview: A positive response to a radical  
22 critique", *Qualitative Research*, Vol. 19 No. 6, pp.619–634.

23  
24 Ybema, S. and Kamsteeg, F. (2009), "Making the familiar strange: A case for disengaged organizational  
25 ethnography", Ybema, S. et al. (Eds), *Organizational Ethnography: Studying the Complexity of Everyday  
26 Life*, SAGE Publications, London, pp.101-119.  
27  
28  
29  
30  
31  
32  
33  
34  
35  
36  
37  
38  
39  
40  
41  
42  
43  
44  
45  
46  
47  
48  
49  
50  
51  
52  
53  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60