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

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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*

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

Failure, ethnography and research in neoliberal academia

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

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

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

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

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

[Omitted for peer-review] vignette: 'It's not about compassion'

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

A few months later, having formalised my ethical and administrative permissions to attend the wound healing clinics, I found myself in a consultation room, by a patient's bed, with a pen in one hand and a notebook in another, determined to understand what compassion meant in the context of wound healing. My fieldnotes kept capturing the blatantly obvious – for example, a hand on the shoulder, a gentle laughter, silent acknowledgements of patients' struggles, patients' gratitude to clinicians. These were all demonstrations of compassion, but not enough to theorise them into anything remotely close to a 'significant contribution to knowledge', as my institutional doctoral policies clearly specified was a requirement to graduate. I was concerned I was missing something in my depictions of the fine detail of the interactions – had I not reviewed the literature enough to be an expert on compassion in wound care? While my fieldnotes did not register my feelings of frustration and self-doubt – fieldnotes in published ethnographic research papers were always clean and clinical, after all, and so should mine be – I remember asking myself whether I really was as good a researcher as I thought myself to be. I had promised my supervisors a critical explanation of the ontology of compassion, while at most I was delivering an easy-to-read and completely predictable phenomenological description of embodied emotions.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A closer look at failure, fieldwork and ethnography

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

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

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

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

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

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

Calamities and failures of access and creating rapport

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

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

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[1] 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).

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(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 Sköldberg, 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.

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

Ethical challenges and failures to cooperate and reciprocate

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

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

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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.

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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.

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