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# Routledge International Handbook of Failure

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## Discovery and Inquiry Pathways to Navigating the *Routledge International Handbook of Failure*

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## Introduction

This afterword is being written in early spring of 2022 when catastrophic failure seems to be at our doorstep. Just one week ago, Vladimir Putin invaded Ukraine with overwhelming military force. At the same time, we continue to face the effects of the global coronavirus pandemic, which stands at over 444,000,000 cases and over 6,000,000 deaths worldwide. The United Nations recently announced that climate disaster looms even closer than we feared, and that our window of opportunity to save the earth and ourselves is closing rapidly. Some among us continue to question the existence of climate change. Many of us feel a sense of worlds unmaking, of untethering, and an accompanying lack of trust in our capacity to address basic issues. There is in fact a loss of human consensus and common agreements, the failure of systems large and small. We are writing as an academic at a research university and as a consultant to nonprofits. We are relatively privileged female-identified persons who have the benefits of secure housing, reliable electric and water infrastructure, with children who have had the best education our society has to offer. We have not had to suffer the incalculable losses of war or devastating natural disasters. Still, it seems necessary to situate our anxieties about catastrophic failure as a precursor to our reflections on this important work.

As we teeter on the brink of some sort of civilization failure, we seek to understand the phenomena in which we are so deeply immersed. Within this Handbook, the chapter authors offer many ways to engage with the concept of failure. While at first these varied approaches can seem overwhelming, instead in reading, we found a sense of possibility, of options from which one can begin to make sense of failure in all its varied aspects and that leads us far beyond any singular notion of failure. The authors point out a lack of critical frameworks in the existing literature. This volume provides a kind of taxonomy, a way into organizing these different approaches in relationship to one another. Whether we view failure as a moment of rupture or of invention, any reader might ask,

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what of this voluminous and fascinating material might prove useful for my own set of questions about failure? As an example, we offer here a brief recounting of our own encounter with the subject through the lens of intersections between gender, career, and organizational life as experienced by academic women in science and engineering. Finally, we outline our current research on failure as related to the coronavirus pandemic and vaccine hesitancy. We hope to use these projects as examples of how a curious reader might discover salient approaches among the many excellent chapters and perspectives in the Handbook and relate them to their intellectual projects.

Our journey into failure studies began with oral life history. Fraser, an anthropologist at the University of Virginia (UVA), served as principal investigator for UVA's \$3.1MM National Science Foundation ADVANCE program. She and Holman Thompson, a consultant researcher, became intrigued when, in coding the oral histories of science, technology, engineering and math faculty collected during the project, numerous complex failure narratives surfaced. (We should mention that the women studied were highly successful, ranked professors at a major research university.) This finding led us to examine how failure took such a central place in the narratives: one woman described failing her doctoral exam three times; another described the shock of having her department's endorsement of promotion overturned at a higher level; another decided to learn how to be more extroverted after she surmised that, despite stellar research performance in industry, her failure to progress must have been due to her lack of emotional intelligence. Many described institutional failure. For example, women faculty were tasked with the major portion of departmental advising and service, while male colleagues preserved their time for research and publishing, the main metrics used to determine raises and promotion. Many of the women also described institutional failures reflected in androcentric cultures which disincentivized child-rearing and breast-feeding and incentivized women to delay or forego family life. An orientation to failure as an essential scientific value also surfaced. A few of our participants described how they taught their graduate students to embrace failure as a necessary dimension of their learning to be scientists.

Our study of coronavirus vaccine hesitancy looks across cultures at the contexts and settings in which the vaccine is viewed with skepticism. The term we prefer to use for this phenomenon is vaccine hesitancy, but other terms in the literature include vaccine refusal, vaccine dissent, vaccine skepticism, vaccine non-compliance, and vaccine opposition. This subject matter, like the oral histories, is replete with images of breakdown, policy failure, and individual suffering; inequalities of access; and failure to arrive at basic consensus about what constitutes knowledge and truth. Our goal is to use semi-structured interviews with our interlocutors to elicit their complex perspectives on vaccine hesitancy, what it is called, how it is conceptualized. We hope that in the telling they will explain the phenomenon's features and point us toward the range of knowledge, experiences, practices, and attitudes associated with vaccine hesitancy. The lens of failure seems to be a powerful one through which to view and interrogate their responses. For this project, which is just beginning, the ideas in the Handbook inspired us to ask questions about failure that we had not previously considered.

Because there did not exist at the time a volume such as this, we began to read broadly in the failure literature. Written within the critical failure approach exemplified in the Handbook, two anthologies proved helpful, though they were more disciplinarily contained within the anthropology of materialities: *Repair, Brokenness, Breakthrough: Ethnographic Responses* (2019), edited by Martínez and Laviolette, and *The Material Culture of Failure: When Things Do Wrong* (2017), edited by Carroll et al.

## Career and Failure Narratives

For the oral history work on failure, one of the questions that emerged in our qualitative data was how our participants framed ideas of career trajectory, especially regarding the kinds of choices

that led them to their current positions, but also the decisions they made not to pursue various avenues, whether research, graduate school, and the like. It seemed within the narratives that they often sought balance between things not done as against things completed. We found Susie Scott's "Failed Identities: On the Processes and Meanings of Unformed Alternate Selves" especially thought-provoking because of her intervention into what she terms a "sociology of nothing," where rather than pursuing a career goal or identity, the individual simply does nothing at all or moves away from a particular identity, what Scott calls the process of career un-becoming. She characterizes this un-becoming according to acts of omission, non-doing, and commission (that is, deciding not to pursue a particular career trajectory). She argues that failure in these negative identity contexts, in terms of things not done or possibilities not pursued, need not be conceptualized as kinds of moral failure but simply exist as possibilities not made real. These never-identities exist as artifacts of failure that are worthy of examination in peoples' narratives.

Julia Gruhlich's "Career Failure: Forms and Levels of Analysis from an Interdisciplinary Perspective" proved useful in several ways. A reader focused on inquiry into career failure will find here a literature review that is a model of clarity and range in summarizing and integrating the cross-disciplinary perspectives on career failure. Gruhlich convinces us that career failure is a highly fragmented intellectual space, and both synthesizes this material and offers a critical perspective on failure-related phenomena within the scholarship on careers. Further, the primary focus of this work is to historicize the societal construct of professional career, and alongside it, the individualization of career failure. Individual failure within the context of career is "a historical phenomenon, neither self-evident nor universal." To the extent that universities can be thought of as involved in the manufacture of career success and failure, especially when considering faculty, we find relevant Gruhlich's insight into the paradox between highly regulated, institutional ideas of what constitutes an ideal career trajectory and the demand placed on the individual to hold sole responsibility for their success or failure. Thus, in a sense, even as the individual has little sway over the institution, nonetheless they own their failures as a form of moral and personal judgment upon their ability to perform as prescribed. Gruhlich's work sheds analytical light on our finding that our participants expressed defeat and disappointment when they failed to meet a career goal or stage, but also recognized that the criteria and conditions for what constituted career success were institutionally determined, evaluated, and largely outside of their control. To paraphrase one of our interviewees, "I am ardently pursuing a goal I didn't set for myself."

## Coronavirus Pandemic and Vaccine Hesitancy

Even though we had previously designed a set of questions to guide our research on this project, as we delved into innovative work presented in the Handbook, new areas of inquiry emerged that seemed vital to our comparative inquiry into vaccine hesitancy. This project is a multi-institutional collaboration under University of Warsaw's "Tandems for Excellence" – visiting researchers program (2022–3) and the University of Virginia's Center for Global Inquiry and Innovation. Matthias Gross's "Experiments as Successful Failures" uses the idea of failure as an unavoidable part of the experimental process. In the context of a community of scientists, this approach to failure is considered normative. That is to say, failure is not necessarily positive, but unavoidable. Failure in science, then, does not connote a lack of credibility or prowess. In fact, failure seems inevitable as scientists move from the known to the unknown. However, once outside of the laboratory and into the public realm, Gross invites us to observe how scientific failures and uncertainties can raise questions of credibility among the general population. The public has little exposure to the experimental process, in that they are unaccustomed to surprising events and failures as a source of learning in scientific discovery, perhaps because scientists fail to be transparent (see also Stuart

Firestein's "How Science Fails Successfully" in this volume). Therefore, the public looks to science for certainty and even safety in the production of the known, and in fact will likely question the foundational credibility of science when it fails to explain, guide, and produce solutions. During the pandemic, especially when considering issues of vaccine efficacy, we have seen that when confronted with a science still in the phase of producing mistakes and errors, in other words, with the normative process of exploring an unknown phenomenon, governments and the lay public may respond with disbelief, fear, and anger. Here are some of the questions we began to consider, having read Gross. In other societies, is it also the case that the public is relatively unaware of the relationship between failure and scientific knowledge building? Could it be that there is variability in the way that societies understand and relate to the uncertainties built into the scientific process? In some settings, science may not be the primary intermediary between people's experience of the known and the unknown. The public may be more willing to accommodate surprise and uncertainty as it pertains to the production of knowledge than in the West.

Sandra Resodiharjo, in "Blame Games: Stories of Crises, Causes, and Culprits," writes that societal catastrophes often generate narratives of blame as a way of holding people and experts accountable, and in turn, those held accountable seek to avoid or redirect blame. These blame games disrupt the possibility of learning from failure. She argues that to derive lessons from the failure experience, it is important to understand how blame games work in context. In terms of our vaccine hesitancy work, a question we now ask is whether there is a relationship between cultures of blame and accountability and the patterning and causes of vaccine hesitancy in our research settings.

## Conclusion and Future Engaging with Failure

In providing the reader with these examples drawn from the above chapters, we hope to pattern the way in which one might move between the evidentiary basis of one's research project and the perspectives presented in the Handbook, that might deepen both analysis and point to theoretical frameworks which make sense of nascent ideas of where and how one's work is situated. Part of the contribution of the Handbook will be to cause us to ask the question: How might thinking about failure expand the scope of our exploration? How does the concept of failure offer a productive way of engaging with our data and ideas?

We invite readers to explore the Handbook and discover the richness of the ideas, creativity, and critiques contained therein that might challenge their conventional perspectives on what a critical analysis of failure might engender. We hope, as it has for us, that it fosters a sense of play, openness, and risk-taking in engaging with failure in all its multiple iterations, without having the sense that this body of work is for specialists in particular fields. Approached with a sense of curiosity, the Handbook can offer the delight of new ideas and directions. Those who allow themselves to fall into this new scholarship of failure will, we believe, find themselves challenged and energized for the work we must all undertake if we hope to make our scholarship societally relevant for the world's multiple failures.

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