

Rigid Flexibility: Seeing the Opportunities in “Failed” Qualitative Research

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Abstract

This article highlights an experience of “failing” within a qualitative research study. Specifically, the authors speak to the failure of recruiting participants in conducting synchronous video and telephone interviews. Drawing from literature in business and examples from research method texts to demonstrate the cross-disciplinary concerns and insights of failure within one’s work, the authors discuss how failure can be reframed as opportunity through the lens of “rigid flexibility” and the innovative steps they implemented. Providing additional insight into the process of framing and reframing failure in research, the authors integrate poetic inquiry as a tool for reflection to highlight their process and suggested steps for new researchers. The authors argue that researchers can approach studies with the idea that failures in the planning and/or execution can lead to opportunities and new insights.

Keywords

rigid flexibility, online research, qualitative research methods, synchronous and asynchronous interviewing, Facebook, texting, video-conference, cross-disciplinary, poetic inquiry, mothers in academia, academic pipeline, rigor, higher education, inclusion

Introduction

Irrespective of research design, there is a broad set of standards and expectations on the steps employed to conduct research. For instance, Patricia Leavy’s (2017) description of five research designs provide clear explanations for conducting research. Yet for others, research designs may instead be guided by methodologists, such as Donna Mertens (2010), Elaine Wilson (2013), John Creswell (2018), or David Silverman (2018). However, what happens when the research standards and expectations go awry? At what point is a research study considered a “failure?” In this article, we integrate personal reflection as poetic inquiry (Butler-Kisber, 2005, 2019; Clandinin, 2018) to explore the concept of failure in research. Specifically, we discuss a qualitative research study failing in its implementation of interviews through video-conferencing, and the resultant reframing of the study through the lens of opportunity and “rigid flexibility.”

The Nature and Context of the Study

Institutions of higher education, or “academia,” were historically designed by and for men. While women are now allowed into these workplaces, the culture of academia is still based upon a male model of the ideal worker (Sallee, 2012) where “career choices to accommodate family needs, are made within the confines of traditional academic and family norms dictated

by gendered roles” (Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2017, p. 12). For women in academia, especially those who are also mothers, there are many obstacles, both structural and personal that can impede progression from junior to senior ranks. This progression, or movement along the “academic pipeline,” has been shown as acutely problematic for mothers in academia (e.g., CohenMiller, 2018a; Evans & Grant, 2008; Mason et al., 2013; Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2004, 2012).

For the past 10 years, we—Anna CohenMiller (first author) and Denise Demers (third author)—have been working with and studying mothers in academia (CohenMiller, 2014; Demers, 2014). Throughout this time, in particular, we have examined experiences of graduate student mothers who are at an intensely precarious stage in their academic careers. For the study discussed here, we worked together with Heidi Schnackenberg (second author) to move from studying challenges mothers in academia face to uncover what works well structurally. Our

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study extends the research about mothers in academia by investigating what and where a positive academic work environment exists throughout the world. We sought to understand both what a “great” department looks like for mothers in academia and also if there was such a department providing an “ideal” set of structures to support everyone. In this way, we hoped to acquire practical steps that could be applied to provide positive change for any department, such as for the development of policy and structures to facilitate success for all.

Over many months, we recruited participants from multiple international online communities, focusing on Facebook groups for those who identify as mothers and as working in academia. Membership in these groups ranged from about 200 to over 17,000 individuals from countries throughout the world. The Facebook settings for the groups were listed as either “closed” (anyone can search for the group through search terms and see that it exists, but not see the contents) or “secret” (the group name can only be found through searching for the exact title).

At least one of us had been an ongoing member for months to multiple years of each of the respective social networking closed and secret groups. In this way, we were insiders to the community we wanted to study (Banks, 1998) and positioned to share recruitment materials. We posted a short message in each of the social media groups asking if anyone worked in a department they would consider to be “great” or “ideal,” and detailing some points of the research study. Potential participants showed their interest through responding to the post publicly within the group or texting privately through Facebook messenger.

To find a suitable time to meet with a participant for an hour interview via phone or Skype, we created a separate Facebook text chat between researchers and the participant. We found this technique useful to ease the participant into the mindset of an interview, allowing them to ask us questions in one space. Considering that the three of us lived in different time zones, with Anna living in Central Asia and Heidi and Denise living in separate time zones in the United States, the messages between us and participants also allowed us to determine which researcher would be most readily available for an interview. For example, for participants in Australia, it was easier for Anna to interview them as the time-zones were more closely aligned than in the US.

We started with 21 participants who self-identified as mothers and classified their workplace as a “great” or “ideal.” Three participants chose to leave the study, noting a lack of time available to respond to interview questions. As a result of our participant needs, we were able to see the demand for a different trajectory in the research.

Poetic Inquiry: Generated Poems

In Lynn Butler-Kisber’s (2019) chapter on *Poetic Inquiry*, she describes two types: found and generated. While found poetry uses the words of participants, generated poetry is developed “reflectively and reflexively” by the researcher (Butler-Kisber,

2019). For Anna, she finds arts as a means to enhance an understanding of research (CohenMiller, 2018b) as a form of quality indicator in the research process. As Eric Teman notes about the power of poetry for his research, “I felt I was able to convey so much meaning and emotion through poetry and drama that I could never achieve in traditional APA-style manuscripts” (Teman & Saldaña, 2019, p. 456).

I (Anna) used generated poetry to connect to the deeper feelings experienced throughout a challenging research process. Informed by Butler-Kisber’s (2005) “visualizing process,” I have incorporated generated poetry to share feelings expressed by the research team. The suggested scaffolding for researchers to engage in poetry generation include the following:

- Identify an event/experience or phenomenon on which to focus.
- Picture the context(s).
- Use the “mind’s eye” almost like a camera to scan the context from different vantage points noting sensory details, zooming in to visualize specifics and to “hear” the auditory details.
- Brainstorm and record concrete and evocative words or phrases and/or metaphors.
- Begin arranging the words in poetic form, going back and forth to the mental images and sounds to experiment with “exact” word(s) to express the salience of the event/experience or phenomenon.
- Add and subtract words and phrases and play with rhythms, line breaks, pauses, and syntax to bring the memory to life.
- Read aloud to fine-tune.
- Revisit the piece as needed after putting it aside (Butler-Kisber, 2019, p. 105).

Following these steps, I then shared the resultant poems with Heidi and Denise. In each case, they supported the representations presented in the poems with encouraging feedback, reporting that they “love” the poems, finding them “wonderful” as a representation of the collective work.

Thinking Reflectively and Reflexively: Failure and Consequence

In our study, we asked participants to meet for approximately an hour for a video interview or phone call. Using poetic inquiry (Butler-Kisber, 2005), I reflected on the research process through the development of generated poems. The following poem highlights the lead-up to our study and the initial satisfaction in “proper” planning, and general excitement we felt as a team prior to the imminent “failure” (see Figure 1).

Similar to other studies showing challenges in participant timing for interviews, from the first recruitment, participants shared concerns about scheduling. While at first, a few asked to schedule and reschedule interviews, the significant change occurred when participants began engaging us in text

They had found the time.
Balancing academic work with motherhood.
Women we had never met. Women willing to speak with us.
 To share with us.
 To open up about their lives...with us.
We had it all planned.

We had it all planned.
We had our ethics (a long process as anyone could guess)
 a global study,
 a set of mothers from around the world.
 around the world.

*gives me chills thinking of the potential insights, those
willing to share their experience with us
how can we help others?
what can we learn?
what changes can occur by simply
talking
and learning
from others?*

Figure 1. “We had it all planned” (CohenMiller, generated poem).

messaging. In other words, participants were asking to continue with the study, but in an unexpected manner. Our participants started sharing about their experiences in their departments, what worked well, what policies were effective.

The data was precisely the type of information we were seeking for the aims of the study, but through a different interview method, through text messaging. With this new modality, which was not part of the original interview protocol, we were faced with a major decision. On the one hand, we were receiving the information we needed to answer our research questions, but on the other hand, we had “failed” at scheduling participants for synchronous interviews. The shift in data collection felt like a failure in our study design and a potential cause for ending the research. Moreover, participants were requesting to interact in a method not approved (yet) by the submitted ethics forms.

Confronting Failure as Opportunity: A Brief Overview of Literature

Examining the literature on failure leads to an array of research conducted in the area of failure experience and opportunity creation. By drawing from and integrating various disciplinary perspectives, we aimed for an enhanced understanding of the topic (CohenMiller & Pate, 2019; Klein, 1990; Moran, 2010), in this case, failure.

Business Thinking and Failure

An overwhelming majority of the scholarship has been conducted in domains of business and industry. The literature in various business fields provide relevant insight to add context to the discussion of success, or lack thereof, as well as possibility-making for research. In one such study, Matthew Wood et al. (2014) explored how business people experience failure and how that is related to pursuing opportunities. The

researchers found an individual's perceptions of failure (prior experience with failure, contextualization, and fear of failure) impacts the attractiveness of engaging in new opportunities (Wood et al., 2014).

Likewise, Ronald Mitchell et al. (2008) investigated failure and its relationship to the creation of opportunities in entrepreneurial settings. They concluded that better thinking is available when a person focuses on a failure in a positive way, learning that this can facilitate the creation of new opportunities (Mitchell et al., 2008). Similarly, Brandon Mueller and Dean Shephard (2012) found that failure in business leads to heightened recognition of expertise and utilization of processes and prototypes proven to lead to success. As applied to conducting research, through failure, a better way of thinking can emerge.

Methodological Failures and Choices

To move from fear to experience breeds success. It was while Rosie Walters (2019) felt she was losing control of a focus group (considered by her a failure) that the most authentic and interesting discussions ensued. Her failure to regain control of the conversation ultimately provided valuable insights into the heart of her research. Moreover, Christina Sinding and Jane Aronson (2003) share insights about navigating disruption in the flow during interviews and others have encountered failures in positioning, such as in autoethnography (Shim, 2018). Although some consider them failures, others believe those blunders can lead to new directions stating.

Messiness and complexity of a project remain buried within the coherency of a written article unless we can let “failures” lead to alternate collection methods (Nairn et al., 2005). Failure may be due to inexperience or a power differential between interviewer and interviewee. However, it can also lead to unanticipated discoveries and uncovering further directions in the research (Jacobsson & Åkerström, 2013). For example, Katarina Jacobsson and Malin Åkerström (2013) explain, “... the analysis of *how* the conversation proceeds is a clue to what the interviewee considers important” (p. 728).

Failure can allow oneself to locate unfound possibilities (Wood et al., 2014). Failure in work can provide a means to uncover opportunities, new thinking, and expanded understanding (Mitchell et al., 2008; Mueller & Shephard, 2012), and can be transferred to how we think about research.

Methodological Improvements?

While we had planned to use online interviewing, the approach did not work for our participants. We failed in this initial plan. Yet for some researchers, the use of a variety of interactive video conferencing platforms are appropriate for data gathering, especially in qualitative research (Sullivan, 2012). Jessica Sullivan (2012) addresses how Skype provides characteristics such as a natural setting, involvement of the researcher, and nuanced participant responses. Furthermore, Roksana Janghorban et al. (2014) add discussion on the characteristics and

Close your eyes and picture your research.

Can you see its contours? Feels its shape? Sense its smell and sound?

...everything is planned. again. the planning. it's all arranged
 ...but then something happens
 ...anxiety swells as changes occur
 ...more anxiety and then stress
 ...fear

A participant cancels. Nobody shows up for the focus group.

*What do I do? It is a failure?
 How do I move forward? Is it a failure?
 Will the study find its end? Am I a failure?
 What now?*

Stop. Fully. And Breathe.

...everything is planned, but maybe it can change
 maybe the location can be moved
 ...maybe the timing rearranged

Maybe,
 just maybe, the changes can produce something better than initially planned.

*Can you hear the changes happening?
 The opening of new ideas and possibilities?
 Can you see the glimmer, the sparkle beyond the anxiety?
 The potential for opportunity in the failure?*

Everything is planned. And that's okay.
Everything changes, and that's okay too.

Maybe,
 just maybe, the changes can produce something better than initially planned.

Figure 2. Moving from failure in research to opportunity (CohenMiller, generated poem).

capabilities of Skype, describing what makes it an appropriate vehicle for online interviewing, such as flexibility, convenience, and authenticity. While often useful for interviewing, the studies also cite drawbacks to using interactive video, such as software compatibility, and the inability to entirely read body language.

In addition to the pros and cons of online video interviewing, others have discussed how research can be conducted successfully on smartphones. For instance, Sogo Matlala and Makoko Matlala (2018) utilized voice recording on a smartphone to support qualitative data collection, suggesting other features and applications as useful research tools. They concluded that the smartphone is a practical device for scholars (Matlala & Matlala, 2018). Moreover, during times of disruption and social distancing, online interviewing can be an effective tool for conducting qualitative studies (Lobe, Morgan, & Hoffman, 2020).

With smartphones, the use of texting has been shown to be a practical technique for data collection. For instance, Claire McCartan et al. (2012) reported how the use of texting by “young researchers” found the innovative approach beneficial for interactions. They showed how participation in online groups and social media texting platforms surpassed face-to-face focus groups, at some points to the detriment of the work (McCartan et al., 2012).

Ultimately, research choices and participant engagement provide essential means for maintaining the caliber of a research study. As Karen Ross (2017) notes, the interactions between researcher and participant, as well as broader methodological choices, can serve to empower participants. Therefore, while we saw our initial methodological approach as a “failure”—one that came close to derailing the entire study—through a change of mindset and implementation of new steps,

we moved forward with participants committed to sharing their experiences.

“Rigid Flexibility:” Reframing Failure as a Positive Consequence of Failure

For our study, “better thinking” (Mitchell et al., 2008) and the chance to see failure as an opportunity (Mueller & Sheperd, 2012) involved a willingness to engage in *rigid flexibility*. The study continued but in a flexible manner, where the use of text messaging was managed and applied for interviews. In this way, rigid flexibility can be defined as *maintaining a clear and unwavering goal in research with a willingness to be flexible in how it is reached*.

Allowing flexibility in both interview methods (texting) and also in synchronicity addressed our participant needs. Without the willingness to continue the research study and revise the study protocol, we would have missed the opportunity to hear participant stories. Therefore, we returned to the ethical review board with an addendum, requesting both a change of method to allow for interviewing through text message and/or email, as well as a new consent form allowing for a written confirmation instead of a signed and scanned form. After approximately a week, we received approval for the new research protocol.

In the move to texting through Facebook messenger and email, participant interviews were able to resume and perspectives on the ideal workplace environment for mothers in academia could be collected. Ideally, we would have liked to compare the difference in data collection with video versus texting. We knew that texting can enhance interaction for teaching and learning (CohenMiller, 2019) and its utility for research interviews (McCartan et al., 2012). However, as our study primarily relied on Facebook messaging, we did not have a baseline to compare with video interviews to determine if “better” information was obtained in one format versus another for the topic.

Our revised steps for the research included an expanded ability to interview participants in synchronous or asynchronous modes, through additional modalities (e.g., text, email) and a process that evolved. For instance, in a synchronous interview, questions are asked one at a time with pauses for participants to respond. With an asynchronous interview, we found that some participants wanted to see all the questions at once. We were then faced with the decision of whether and how to send the questions. For example, while individual questions more easily led participants through the interview process, at times individuals did not respond to each set or missed an email. While if the full set of questions were sent, at times participants felt overwhelmed or chose to respond simply with short phrases. Through continued discussion across research team members, we addressed each potential concern focusing on the research question and purpose. It was not a *perfect* study, yet with the updated protocol, we continued to implement rigid flexibility, continually working to adapt to the needs of participants.

Using a perspective of reframing failure (Matlala & Matlala, 2018) to engage with new opportunities, allowed us to engage with potential innovation in methods, with the aim of empowering participants (Ross, 2017) to speak about their lives. As participants were not able to find the time or space to spend a consecutive hour in a synchronous format, a new possibility—an opportunity—emerged in the form of text messages through synchronous and asynchronous means. In other words, through an unanticipated direction in the research (Jacobsson & Åkerström, 2013), we were able to redirect our rigid research design with alternative data collection (Nairn et al., 2005) and move into rigid flexibility.

Flexibility in research is essential for working in social science, and rigid flexibility allows for participant needs and unpredictable events (e.g., COVID-19). The following generated poem articulates an embodied visualization process of preparing for research while allowing oneself to be flexible (see Figure 2).

Rigid flexibility in research provides a means to picture our research in new ways, moving from failure in research to opportunity. As researchers, through the use of rigid flexibility, we can focus on the primary aims of the research project while allowing and embracing opportunity when failure presents itself.

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