

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

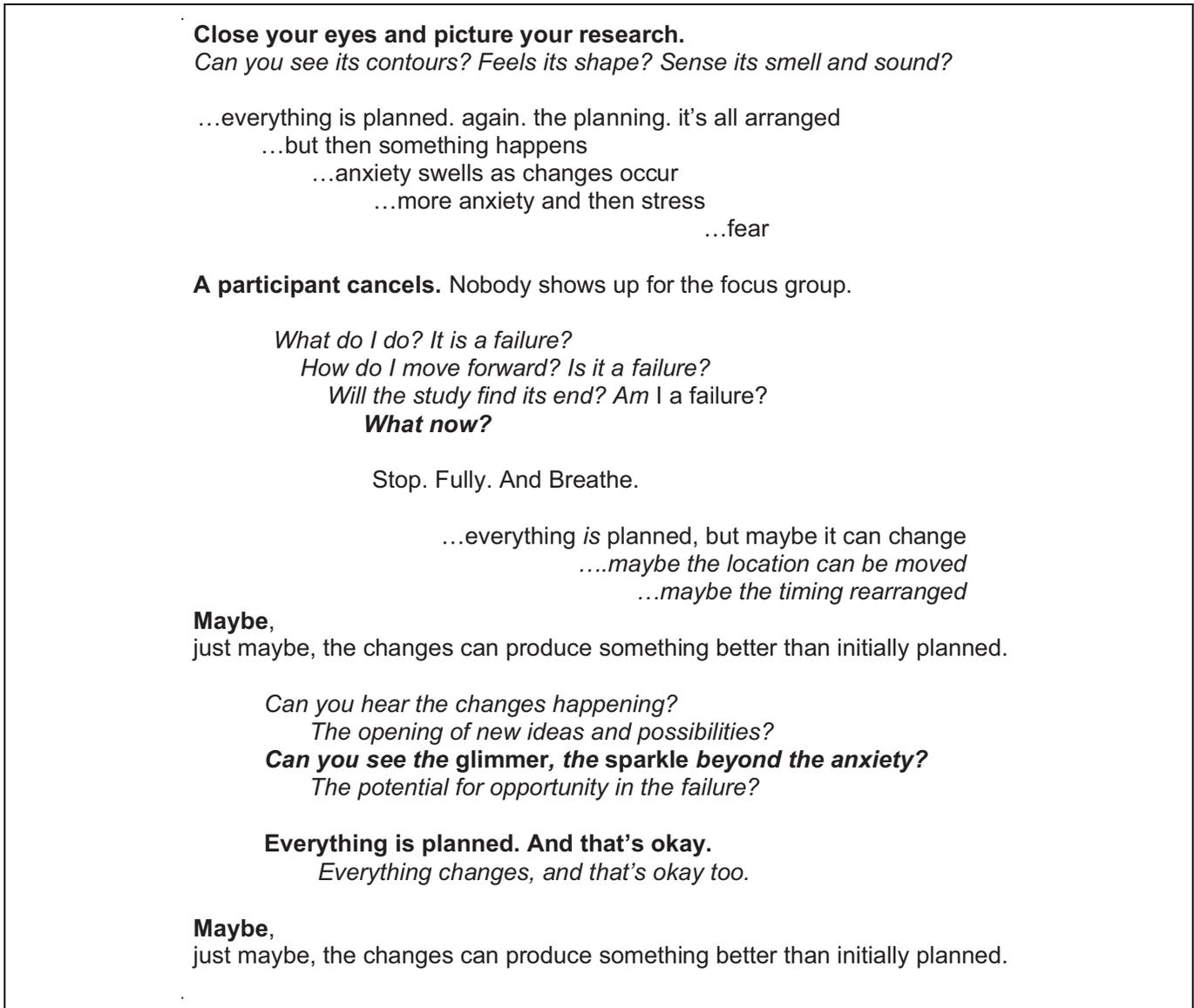


Figure 2. Moving from failure in research to opportunity (CohenMiller, generated poem).

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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