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DISASTERPIECE

on social, historical and cultural evolution of Failure

Research - Intellectual Output n.1

On social, historical and cultural *evolution* of Failure

Intellectual Output n.1

Introduction: *why a research on failure?*

The only way to improve what already exists is to understand it. To do that, we need to dive in: to break through the surface wall of water, that mirror which often generates false beliefs and prevents us from truly knowing the sea and what it contains. But that is not enough. We also need to swim—quite a lot—moving here and there, to explore the depths and realise that there are different kinds of creatures living there, different plants shaping the environment, different temperatures, different shades of blue. In other words: we need, at the very least, to taste the diversity—of values, viewpoints, norms, customs, representations, and self-representations—that characterises the complexity of the human cultural history. Of course, only as far as possible, because doing it properly would require years and years of study, a scientific approach, and substantial expertise.

This research was the starting point of Disasterpiece!: a document that makes no claim to scientific rigor or exhaustiveness, but that helped—first and foremost us, the project staff, and then the youth workers and young people involved—build shared knowledge, so that we could all begin from the same place, with more or less the same luggage.

On a small scale, but with commitment, passion, and method, we wanted to explore how the concept of failure has been studied, perceived, and narrated from different perspectives, trying to understand its evolution from an anthropological, philosophical, sociological, and historical point of view. Above all, we tried to give the research an intercultural lens, exploring how failure is perceived across different latitudes and longitudes.

Not only that: we also tried to connect the past to the present (and perhaps to the future?), building a bridge to contemporary culture and to some of today's most pressing issues (for example, gender identity).

Beyond helping us grasp the topic and enabling others to understand failure tout court, as a human and social phenomenon, we did this to deconstruct mainstream narratives around failure, and to offer possible alternatives.

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One last note. As already mentioned, this research was carried out by the project's international team, made up of researchers and youth workers from the three partner organisations. However strong our effort to be objective, it is still an interpretation: the very fact that we chose what to analyse and what to tell, and how to analyse it and how to tell it, already reflects a point of view. Therefore, nothing reported here should be considered an absolute truth: we do not want to dismantle mainstream thinking only to build another, equally dominant one.

Finally, we invite anyone who wishes to contribute—with experiences, competences, and further diversity - to do so: this output, too, is open source and, like the concept of failure itself, always evolving.

Happy reading!
The project staff

Want more? Get in touch at disasterpieceproject@gmail.com, explore https://disasterpiece.eu/, our LinkTree and follow us on Instagram, LinkedIn and TikTok.

QUICK BOX

- This research is the Intellectual Output n.1 of the **Erasmus+ project 2024-1-IT03-KA210-YOU-000249099 "Disasterpiece!"** and is only a small part of a generative, open-source narrative ecosystem designed to educate young people to deal with failure through the power of stories;
- if you would like to contribute by suggesting topics and point of view, please write to disasterpieceproject@gmail.com;
- if you want to know more about the project, please visit https://disasterpiece.eu/.

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THE CONCEPT OF "FAILURE" THROUGH TIME AND SPACE: A SHORT JOURNEY

Introduction

This research, born as the Intellectual Output n.1 of the project, explores how "failure" has been built and reshaped over time—socially, institutionally, and culturally.

The goal is not to offer an exhaustive history or a purely scientific treatise. The goal is to give youth workers a stronger map of the forces that often sit behind a young person's sentence: "I failed." Once we see how failure is socially produced and why it threatens different things in different cultural contexts, we can accompany young people with more precision, less moral judgment, and more effective educational care.

3.1 Failure is not "natural": how societies build a category

"Failure" is not a fixed object. It is a category used to interpret outcomes and distribute recognition: it defines what counts as acceptable, what counts as deviation, and what consequences follow. This is why what a society calls "failure" changes across eras: the same event can be read as bad luck, moral fault, lack of discipline, lack of talent, lack of effort, or simply mismatch between expectations and reality.

A sociological approach to failure therefore starts with a simple premise: failure is historically and socially variable, and any serious analysis must be grounded in socio-historical contexts rather than universal assumptions. For youth work, this matters immediately: many young people suffer less from the event itself and more from the meaning attached to it—meanings that were not invented by them, but inherited from their environment.

3.2 From outcome to identity: when "the loser" becomes a social figure

One of the most important historical shifts is the transformation of failure from "something that happened" into "something you are." Cultural history shows how, in competitive modern societies, economic setbacks gradually became moralized and personalized: failure moved from being an outcome (loss, insolvency, misfortune) to becoming a character judgment, producing the stigmatized figure of the "loser." Scott Sandage's work is central here: he traces how "failure" became a powerful cultural category in the United States, tied to shame and identity rather than simply to economic facts.

This mechanism is not limited to economics. Once a society adopts strong progress scripts—"the right trajectory," "the correct pace," "the expected milestones"—failure is easily experienced as falling off the human map. Youth workers meet the consequences of this shift every day: the event (a bad grade, a rejection, a breakup) becomes a verdict on the self, and the young person's energy is absorbed by shame and self-surveillance rather than by learning and reorientation.

3.3 How modern systems produce failure: institutions, metrics, and permanent comparison

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Modern institutions do not only "observe" failure; they can also produce it, stabilize it, and make it durable. Schools, labour markets, and many organizational systems rely on selection, ranking, and evaluation. These systems create thresholds (pass/fail), categories (excellent/average/insufficient), and records (grades, CVs, performance indicators) that can make setbacks feel official, public, and permanent.

This dynamic becomes clearer through a classic analysis of modern power: institutions classify individuals through mechanisms such as examination, normalization, and ranking—processes that make deviation visible and comparable. Michel Foucault's Discipline and Punish remains one of the most influential frameworks for understanding how evaluation produces "normality" and "deviation," and how those categories can attach to identity. (Foucault, 1977; original 1975).

This does not mean that school or work are inherently oppressive. It means that when evaluation becomes constant and trajectories become rigid, failure becomes easier to internalize as identity. It also helps explain why some young people experience failure as inescapable: not because change is impossible, but because the system keeps re-displaying the failure through metrics, records, and comparisons. In youth work terms, accompaniment sometimes includes a structural task: helping a young person decompress the institutional verdict and recover a more human narrative of possibility.

3.4 Stigma changes over time: a concrete example from bankruptcy

Stigma is not destiny. It is a social process, and it can change when cultural narratives and institutional regimes change. Erving Goffman's classic account explains stigma as a mechanism that discredits individuals who do not match a social norm, often producing concealment, silence, and exclusion (Goffman, 1963). In failure, stigma often works like this: people hide their struggles because they fear losing recognition and belonging.

A vivid historical example is bankruptcy. Catarina Frade shows how financial failure and bankruptcy have historically been framed as immoral, sinful, or criminal behavior—and how stigma has accompanied bankrupt individuals across centuries, even as economic systems changed. Rafael Efrat offers an empirical and historical analysis of how bankruptcy stigma evolved over time, reinforcing the point that stigma is socially shaped rather than fixed.

For Disasterpiece!, this matters beyond finance: it shows that "failure shame" is not a natural property of falling—it is produced by narratives, norms, and institutions. If stigma is made, it can also be unmade, at least partially, by creating safer spaces, shared language, and alternative narratives. That is exactly why the project invests in educational tools and storytelling rather than "quick motivation."

3.5 Late modernity: when failure becomes self-accusation

A specifically contemporary pressure intensifies failure: many people are expected to manage themselves as projects—perform, adapt, self-optimize. In this cultural climate, failure is often

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internalized as personal incompetence even when it is structurally produced (precarity, competition, instability, inequality).

Byung-Chul Han describes an “achievement society” where pressure becomes internal and people exploit themselves in the name of performance; burnout and exhaustion appear as social symptoms, not merely individual weaknesses (Han, 2015). Alain Ehrenberg links the rise and meaning of depression to a historical shift in norms of autonomy and responsibility: when individuals are expected to be constantly capable, the inability to “make it” easily becomes guilt and self-blame (Ehrenberg, 2009). Richard Sennett’s analysis of flexible capitalism adds a narrative dimension: instability corrodes long-term commitments and makes it harder to build coherent life stories in which setbacks can be integrated rather than experienced as collapse (Sennett, 1998).

This is the deeper background of a common youth-work scene: “I failed” quickly becomes “I failed at being someone.” In such contexts, the educational response is rarely to push more performance. It is to restore complexity: failure is lived within systems and cultural expectations, and reorientation requires time, language, and relationships.

3.6 A sociological focus on today: liquid modernity, intersectionality, and the hyperconnected society

In an era defined by constant connectivity, hyper-visibility, and relentless productivity, young people are increasingly struggling to cope with failure. This section explores the sociological dimensions of failure in contemporary youth, contextualized within late capitalist society. Drawing from key thinkers such as Zygmunt Bauman, Pierre Bourdieu, Eva Illouz, Judith Butler, and Kimberlé Crenshaw, the report examines how societal structures, economic precarity, gender norms, cultural narratives, and algorithmic mediation contribute to the individual and collective experiences of failure.

Zygmunt Bauman's concept of "liquid modernity" provides a crucial framework for understanding the contemporary experience of failure. In a society where traditional structures and institutions are dissolving, individuals are confronted with a constant flux of information, choices, and demands. This fluidity erodes the stability and predictability that once provided a sense of security, leaving individuals in a state of perpetual uncertainty. Young people, in particular, who are in the process of forming their identities and navigating key life transitions, are acutely affected by this condition. The pressure to adapt, reinvent oneself, and remain constantly "liquid" creates a heightened sense of vulnerability and a fear of falling behind. In this context, failure is not simply an isolated event but a potential threat to one's very sense of self. The relentless pursuit of success and self-optimization, fueled by societal expectations and the logic of consumer capitalism, leaves little room for error, contemplation, or deviation from the prescribed path.

The rise of social media has further exacerbated this pressure, creating a culture of performativity where individuals are constantly encouraged to present idealized versions of themselves to the world. This curated self-presentation often masks the struggles, setbacks, and failures that are an inevitable part of life, leading to a distorted perception of reality. Young people, who are heavy users of social media, may be particularly susceptible to this phenomenon, comparing their own lives to

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the carefully constructed narratives of their peers and feeling inadequate when they inevitably fall short.

The Social Construction of Failure

Failure is not a universal or neutral phenomenon. It is socially constructed, meaning that what counts as 'failure' is shaped by cultural values, social expectations, and institutional norms. What is considered a failure in one society or historical period may be viewed differently in another. For instance, in highly individualistic societies, failure may be attributed primarily to personal shortcomings, while in more collectivist cultures, external factors may be given greater weight.

Pierre Bourdieu's theory of habitus and capital illuminates how failure is classed. Bourdieu argues that individuals are endowed with different forms of capital, including economic capital (financial resources), cultural capital (knowledge, skills, and tastes), and social capital (networks of social relationships). Young people from less privileged backgrounds often lack the cultural, economic, and social capital necessary to navigate the educational system, the job market, and other key social institutions successfully. They may not have access to the same educational opportunities, resources, or social networks as their more privileged peers, putting them at a significant disadvantage. Consequently, what may be perceived as "failure" – such as dropping out of school, being unemployed, or struggling with financial instability – is often a direct result of these structural inequalities rather than a reflection of individual ability or effort.

The concept of the "meritocratic myth" plays a crucial role in perpetuating these inequalities. This myth suggests that success is solely determined by individual merit, talent, and hard work, and that everyone has an equal opportunity to achieve it. However, this belief obscures the systemic barriers and structural disadvantages that prevent many young people from reaching their full potential. When individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds experience failure, they may internalize it as a personal failing, leading to feelings of shame, inadequacy, and learned helplessness. This internalization can have profound consequences for their self-esteem, mental health, and future prospects.

Intersectional dimension of Failure

Experiences of failure are not uniform across the population but are shaped by the complex interplay of various social identities. Judith Butler's work on gender performativity provides an essential lens through which to understand how experiences of failure intersect with gender. Butler argues that gender is not a fixed or innate characteristic but rather a performance, a set of social practices that are constantly enacted and reiterated. Individuals who do not conform to normative gender roles often face amplified experiences of exclusion and failure. They may be subjected to discrimination, harassment, and violence, both in institutional settings and in their personal lives. For example, young men who express emotions that are considered "feminine" may be ridiculed or ostracized, while young women who pursue careers in male-dominated fields may encounter significant obstacles and prejudice.

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Trans, non-binary, and queer youth, in particular, may find their identities delegitimized and pathologized, positioning their very existence as a form of social failure in the eyes of dominant norms. They may face rejection from their families, discrimination in schools and workplaces, and limited access to resources and support. The constant struggle to navigate a world that does not recognize or validate their identities can lead to profound feelings of alienation, isolation, and despair.

Furthermore, drawing on Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality, it is crucial to recognize that experiences of failure are shaped not only by gender but also by the complex interplay of race, class, sexuality, disability, and other social categories. Individuals who belong to multiple marginalized groups often face compounded forms of discrimination and disadvantage, leading to unique and often more severe experiences of failure. For instance, a young, working-class, queer person of color may experience failure differently from a young, affluent, cisgender person. They may face discrimination in the job market due to their race and sexual orientation, lack access to the same educational and economic opportunities, and experience social isolation due to the intersection of their marginalized identities.

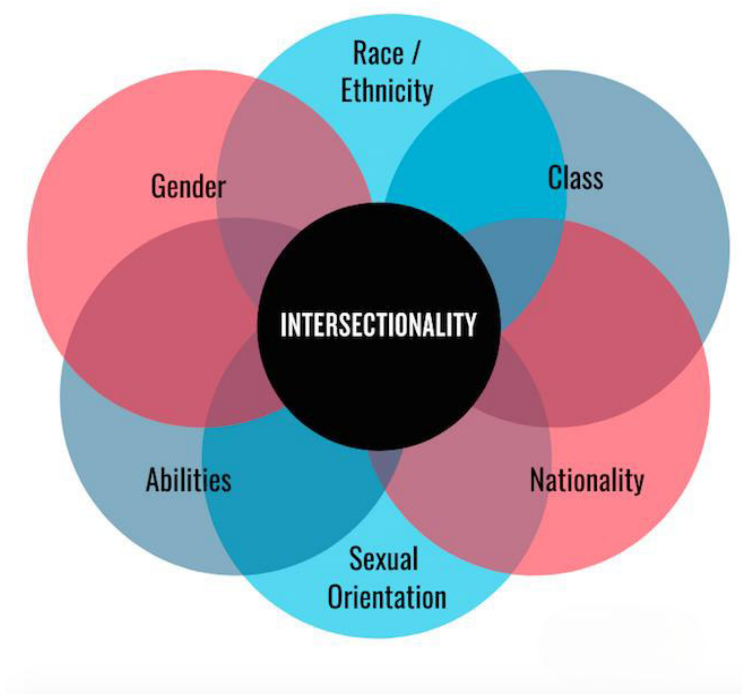

Figure 1: Intersectionality diagram

The Emotional Landscape of Late Capitalism

Eva Illouz's work on the sociology of emotions provides valuable insights into how late capitalism shapes our emotional lives and our experiences of failure. Illouz argues that in contemporary society, emotions are not simply private or personal experiences but are increasingly commodified and integrated into the logic of the market. We are taught to manage our emotions in ways that enhance

our productivity, efficiency, and marketability. Happiness becomes a duty, a sign of success and self-discipline, while negative emotions such as sadness, anxiety, and disappointment are seen as signs of weakness or dysfunction.

This commodification of emotions has significant implications for how young people experience and respond to failure. They are taught to optimize not only their bodies and their productivity but also their emotional landscapes, striving for a state of constant positivity and resilience. When they inevitably encounter setbacks or disappointments, they may feel pressure to suppress or deny their negative emotions, viewing them as a personal failing rather than a normal human response to difficult circumstances.

Furthermore, there is a growing tendency to pathologize emotional distress, framing it as a mental health problem that requires medical intervention. While genuine mental health struggles are a serious issue that requires attention and care, there is a risk of over-medicalizing what might be seen as normal responses to societal pressures and disappointments. Young people may be increasingly likely to be diagnosed with anxiety disorders or depression, not because they are inherently unwell, but because they are struggling to cope with the unrealistic demands and expectations of a highly competitive and individualistic society. This pathologization can have the effect of individualizing what are fundamentally social problems, shifting the focus away from the systemic factors that contribute to young people's distress and placing the burden of responsibility on the individual to "fix" themselves.

Social Media, Algorithms, and the Illusion of Instant Success

The rise of social media has profoundly transformed the way young people perceive and experience failure. Social media platforms fuel the illusion that success is instantaneous and universally visible. Young people are constantly bombarded with curated portrayals of achievements, happy relationships, and perfect lifestyles, which rarely reflect the failures, struggles, pauses, and detours that are an integral part of any meaningful path. This curated self-presentation creates a distorted perception of reality, where success appears to be the norm and failure an anomaly.

Social media algorithms play a significant role in amplifying this illusion. These algorithms are designed to maximize user engagement, often prioritizing content that is positive, exciting, and attention-grabbing. As a result, young people are more likely to see posts that showcase success and achievement than posts that depict the challenges, setbacks, and failures that are a natural part of life. This constant exposure to idealized images and narratives can lead to social comparison, feelings of inadequacy, and a fear of missing out (FOMO).

Moreover, the metrics of social media, such as likes, followers, and shares, create a system of social validation that is based on external approval rather than intrinsic worth. Young people may come to define their self-worth based on their online popularity, leading to a precarious sense of self that is constantly vulnerable to the fluctuations of social media attention. When they fail to receive the

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validation they seek, they may experience it as a personal rejection, further reinforcing feelings of failure.

The culture of "I want everything and I want it now" is not merely a generational trait but a by-product of consumer capitalism, which demands immediate gratification and treats time as a commodity. Social media reinforces this culture by providing instant feedback and gratification, creating an expectation that success should be quick, easy, and readily apparent. In this context, failure is not seen as a valuable part of a process but as an interruption of a linear, upward trajectory, a deviation from the expected path of constant progress and achievement.

Failure in the Techno-Economy

The changing nature of work in the era of late capitalism has significantly impacted young people's experiences of failure. The decline of traditional career paths, the rise of the gig economy, and the increasing prevalence of precarious employment have created a landscape of economic uncertainty and instability. In this context, "failure" in the realm of work takes on new dimensions. It may not simply mean being fired from a job but also struggling to find one, being forced to accept low-paying or unstable jobs, or being unable to pursue a career path that aligns with one's passions and skills. The traditional markers of career success, such as climbing the corporate ladder or achieving financial stability, may be increasingly out of reach for many young people, leading to a sense of disillusionment and frustration.

The experience of economic precarity can also have a significant impact on young people's sense of self-worth and their ability to achieve other life goals. Financial instability makes it difficult to afford housing, education, and healthcare, and can delay or prevent them from starting a family or pursuing personal interests. This can lead to feelings of shame, inadequacy, and a sense of being "stuck" or unable to progress in life.

Despite these pressures, failure can also be a site of resistance and transformation. Drawing on feminist and queer theories, we can reframe failure as a break from oppressive expectations and a call to reimagine value and success on one's own terms.

Jack Halberstam's concept of "the queer art of failure" offers a powerful framework for challenging dominant narratives of success and embracing alternative ways of being. Halberstam argues that failure, rather than being a source of shame or despair, can be a catalyst for creativity, innovation, and social change. Queer individuals, who have historically been marginalized and excluded from mainstream society, have often found ways to thrive outside of conventional norms, creating their own communities, cultures, and forms of expression. Their experiences of "failure" – of not conforming to heteronormative expectations – have become a source of strength and resilience, leading to the development of unique perspectives and ways of life.

This reframing of failure invites us to celebrate alternative lives, timelines, and ways of being that do not conform to dominant scripts of success. It encourages us to question the narrow definitions of achievement that are imposed upon us by society and to embrace the messiness, uncertainty, and

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unpredictability of life. Examples of this can be seen in various social movements, artistic expressions, and community-building initiatives.

For instance, the feminist movement has challenged traditional gender roles and expectations, creating space for women to pursue careers and live lives that were once considered "unsuccessful" or "unfeminine." The civil rights movement challenged racial segregation and discrimination, demanding equal rights and opportunities for Black people who had been systematically denied access to success. The LGBTQ+ rights movement has fought for the recognition and acceptance of diverse sexual orientations and gender identities, celebrating forms of love and family that deviate from the norm. Artists, writers, and musicians have often used their work to explore themes of failure, alienation, and marginalization, creating powerful and moving expressions of the human experience. Community-building initiatives, such as support groups, cooperatives, and grassroots organizations, provide spaces for individuals to connect with others who share similar experiences of struggle and to build collective narratives of resilience and resistance.

3.7 Failure across cultures: different stakes, different time-logics, different "repairs"

Culture is not a label stuck to a person. It is a web of meanings and practices that shape what matters most, what counts as honorable, what counts as shameful, and what kind of "repair" is required after rupture. Individuals never belong to one culture only; they live at the intersection of family culture, peer culture, social class, religion, migration, and digital culture. Still, cross-cultural research supports a robust point: dominant cultural orientations shape what failure threatens most—self-worth, social face, family honour, belonging, moral standing, or future legitimacy.

A foundational account in cultural psychology distinguishes independent and interdependent ways of construing the self and shows how these orientations shape emotion, motivation, and evaluation (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Intercultural communication research, particularly face-negotiation theory, highlights how "face" (public self-image and social respect) can be central in vulnerability and conflict, shaping disclosure, shame, and support dynamics (Ting-Toomey & Kurogi, 1998).

For youth work, the practical takeaway is simple: the same failure event may be experienced as a threat to very different core goods—and therefore requires different kinds of accompaniment. Disasterpiece! does not treat cultures as stereotypes; it treats cultural frames as hypotheses that generate better questions.

Western mainstream frames (linear progress and individual responsibility).

In many mainstream Western narratives, life is imagined as linear progress: the "right track" and the "right pace" matter. Failure often becomes "falling behind," and in individual responsibility cultures it can easily become a verdict on worth. Sandage's cultural history shows how modern societies can turn economic or social setbacks into personal identities ("the loser"). In youth work, this often appears as urgency ("I'm late"), self-accusation ("I'm not enough"), and catastrophic forecasting ("I ruined everything"). Educational repair here often means reopening the future as plural: more than one path, more than one pace, more than one definition of success.

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East Asian mainstream frames (relational selfhood, face and family expectations).

In many East Asian contexts influenced by Confucian traditions, social life often emphasizes relational roles, harmony, duty, and learning as moral formation (Britannica overview). Failure may be experienced primarily as threat to face, family honour, or social standing—often making disclosure more difficult. Facework research helps explain why public exposure can be experienced as devastating and why indirect communication or concealment may be protective strategies (Ting-Toomey & Kurogi, 1998). For youth workers, a key implication is practical: safety often means privacy, dignity-preserving language, and avoiding public "confessional" formats unless chosen by the person.

South Asian and other worlds shaped by cyclicality (long horizons, duty and consequence).

In cultural worlds influenced by Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain traditions, existence is often narrated through cycles of rebirth and return (samsara) rather than one linear arc (Britannica). This does not automatically make failure easier or less stigmatized. But it can shift how rupture is framed: the horizon may be longer, and meaning may be interpreted through duty, consequence, learning, or spiritual coherence. For youth work, the implication is to avoid imposing "quick redemption" and instead ask what the failure threatens: duty? family honour? spiritual meaning? future belonging? Repair may take forms such as reconciliation, restitution, recommitment, or re-choosing a path.

African relational philosophies (personhood-in-community, with great diversity).

"Africa" is not one culture; any generalization must be cautious. Still, Ubuntu/Hunhu is widely discussed as an orientation in Southern African thought that emphasizes personhood as relational—becoming a person through others (IEP overview). Mbiti's classic synthesis similarly highlights communal dimensions of personhood and time in African religious philosophy (Mbiti, 1990). In such lenses, failure may be experienced less as "I am incompetent" and more as "I have lost my place / I have disappointed the community / I have broken reciprocity." Educational repair often requires relational work: reintegration, recognition, restoring ties—not only individual coping.

Indigenous/Mesoamerican examples (rhythmic time, continuity, "spiraling" temporality).

Indigenous cultures are highly diverse, but many accounts describe time as rhythmic or cyclical and rooted in continuity with place and community. Brown & Cousins discuss Native American concepts of time and process, contrasting linear "progress time" with more rhythmic, cyclical orientations. Contemporary philosophy cautions against simplistic binaries ("West = line, Indigenous = circle") and explores more nuanced models such as spiraling time that preserve continuity while recognizing change (Fritsch, 2024). A concrete example often cited in public education is the Maya calendrical system, structured through interlocking cycles used to record historical and astronomical information (Britannica). In youth work terms: "repair" may require continuity, reconnection to place or community, and a pace that respects long horizons rather than immediate "success recovery."

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Why time-logic matters (and why "one step at a time" is culturally sensitive).

Across these grammars, time-logic matters: in rigid linear scripts, failure becomes irreparable delay; in cyclical or relational scripts, failure may be integrated into return, repair, and continuity (without denying pain). This is one reason Disasterpiece! insists on "one step at a time" as a method, not a slogan: it respects different paces of meaning-making and protects dignity.

The most important practical shift is to treat culture not as identity-labeling but as question-guidance. Instead of asking "what culture are you?", a youth worker can ask: what is at stake here? Is this failure threatening self-worth, face, family honour, belonging, moral standing, or future legitimacy? Does repair mean re-attempt, reconciliation, reintegration, or a new path? What kind of space is safe: private conversation, small group resonance, mediation, a trusted adult?

3.8 Why this journey matters to youth workers?

Why should youth workers be interested in these historical, sociological and philosophical topics? How can they improve their daily approach to young people at risk or victims of destructive failures? Furthermore, how can they be useful in strengthening educational intervention strategies, tools and models?

Because these lenses change what you see—and what you see changes what you do. A youth worker does not meet "failure" in the abstract: they meet a young person whose experience is already shaped by social narratives ("winners/losers"), institutional mechanisms (grades, selection, records), and cultural expectations (face, duty, belonging, individual success). Understanding this background helps you avoid the most common trap: treating failure as a private defect or as a simple mistake to correct. Instead, you begin to recognize what the young person is truly carrying: shame, loss of recognition, fear of exclusion, or the sense of having fallen off the expected path.

In daily practice, this knowledge improves accompaniment in concrete ways. It helps you ask better questions—what is at stake here?—and to distinguish the event from the verdict that has formed around it. It supports you in naming structural pressures (evaluation systems, precariousness, comparison cultures) when needed, so the young person is not left alone with self-blame. It also makes you more sensitive to cultural differences in how failure is lived: sometimes the core threat is self-worth, sometimes "face," sometimes family honour, sometimes belonging. When you read these differences accurately, you can choose safer settings (private vs group), more respectful language, and a more realistic pace—protecting dignity rather than intensifying exposure.

Finally, these perspectives strengthen intervention strategies, tools, and models because they clarify why certain educational moves work. They justify the need for non-stigmatizing spaces, narrative resources, and gradual reorientation ("one step at a time"). They support a do-no-harm approach to storytelling and group work, and they help refine toolkits so they are not one-size-fits-all, but adaptable across contexts. In short, the research is not "extra theory": it is a practical map that improves judgment, reduces harm, and increases the chances that a destructive failure can be accompanied toward a more generative process. To conclude this conceptual overview, we have

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decided to explore an aspect that we believe is essential for youth workers in their daily work with young people: the fear of failure, stemming from social expectations and differences from supposed social "standards".

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A FOCUS ON THE FEAR OF FAILURE.

a. *Some key points, to start from:*
  - The Normality of Failure: failure is not a temporary interruption of the system but a continuous and normal condition of system operation. It is more common than success and is embedded in the way systems operate.
  - The Need for Conceptualization: a better conceptualization of failure is required to clearly understand what it means, how it is generated, reproduced, and terminated as a normal part of system functioning.
  - Interdisciplinarity: the field of failure studies is emerging and interdisciplinary, reflecting social trends such as the instability of winner-takes-all systems, the omnipresence of the new spirit of capitalism, metrics-based forms of governmentality, platformization, and changing cultural attitudes towards failure.
  - Moral Recognition: failure is a mundane fact endowed with moral recognition, and organizations, art fields, technological complexes, governance regimes, and alternative economies must grapple with the normality of failure in an endogenous, ubiquitous, and morally legitimate sense.

b. *The psychological roots of fear failure*

Baker presents a theory of the development of fear of failure as the result of pathological family relations in which the child's failure comes to play an important function. The parent's role is to provide the child with empathic encouragement so as to minimise the child's frustrations and maximise self-esteem. Parents who cannot accept their child's shortcomings or who are highly critical will rear a child with little self-esteem and unrealistic personal standards. This child will have an unrealistic or grandiose sense of self. The combination of low self-esteem and high demands for performance results in failure or narcissistic injury. Poor self-esteem causes the child to search for external resources of evaluation. Any failure experienced by such a narcissistically vulnerable child will result in either rage or avoidance. Rather than engage in the repeated effort or trial and error necessary for academic achievement, the child begins to avoid studying and instead engages in activities with more pleasurable outcomes. By not studying, the grandiose self is kept intact. "If an exam is flunked, it is only due to lack of study, not due to the lack of ability: Furthermore, the child avoids studying to prevent competition and thus direct comparison with the parent.

c. *Gender difference*

Theorists recognise the prevalence of fear of failure among women and focus on origins of this fear specifically from the perspective of female development. According to Kanefield, conflicts about achievement and fear of failure are prevalent in girls whose mothers are ambivalent about their daughter's independence. The mother in this case needs the presence of a daughter to maintain her sense of adequacy, and she may feel intensely threatened as her daughter matures and this obviates the need for a protective caretaker. Rather than respond to her own maturity with pleasure, the girl associates mastery with anxiety, fear of abandonment, loss of love, or retaliation. Women's undermining of success as a solution to fears of retaliation by the mother has been termed masochism by psychodynamic theorists (Freud, Horney, Kanefield) "Fear of failure may be a form of masochism, in that the constant sense of inadequacy which underlines fear of failure is, in one sense, a perpetuation of pain and suffering" The masochist pursues defeat rather than pleasure and is"...consumed by self-centered suffering" (Yuen & Depper) Rather than accomplish success and thus symbolically risk surpassing their mothers, women devalue success or perceive themselves as worthless. The alternative involves triumphing over parents with terror about retaliation and loss of affiliation.

In response to these social and psychological dilemmas, a woman takes the only resource: she sabotages her accomplishments, devalues or disowns her achievements, or views herself as inadequate in spite of her activities to the contrary. Thus, she assuages her guilt for abandoning her mother, extricates herself from responsibility for her mother's rage, envy, or emptiness, excuses her mother's inappropriate dependency, and

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perpetuates the masquerade that she lacks what is essential for independent achievements. She remains loyal to her mother, but sacrifices self-esteem.

In contrast, boys are encouraged to enter into rivalry with their fathers in order to disidentify with their mothers. Consequently, Kanefield argues that males do not have the fears of competition that females do. Women's conflicts about achievement have also been interpreted as penis envy (Chessick, Kanefield; 1985). This is not actual wish for a penis but instead the desire for power, status and independence awarded to men in our society. Given the devaluation of women in our culture and the restrictions and limitations placed on them, this results in women's denigration of their accomplishments, withdrawal from competition, work inhibitions and feelings of fraudulence in their achievements (Kanefield). It will also result in women's lowered self-esteem and in oversensitivity to the opinions of others rather than personal values. (Chehrazi, 1984).

Notman, Zilbacj, Baker-Miller and Nadelson, describe how women's self-esteem is tied to relations with others. Self-esteem is thus enhanced when women feel connected to others and receive feedback about such connections. In contrast, men's self-esteem is characteristically tied to feelings of personal accomplishment. Since our society regards achievement as an individual rather than a collective attribute, men are less likely to experience achievement-related conflicts than are woman.

Kanefield, has similarly described boys as wishing to achieve, motivated by their desire to separate from the mother. Girls on the other hand, are fearful of achieving because of threats of isolation, and consequently they engage in self-defeating behaviours in order to maintain interpersonal relationships.

d. Intervention

Baker emphasises the need to select an appropriate treatment for fear of failure, rather than focusing on improved academic performance or successful career, the therapist should investigate development factors, particularly those related to the client's poor self-esteem. Because of the origins of poor self esteem and lack of separation from parents in the periodic years, the prognosis for recovery is not considered good. Furthermore, the clients' difficult ambivalent relationships with the parents can result in poor transference during the therapeutic process, including rage, lack of interest in therapy, and increased failure in school or career. This in turn may result in the therapist feeling helpless, frustrated, and antagonistic toward the client.

Stein and Bailey reviewed the literature on achievement motivation in order to identify factors specific to women's pattern of achievement. First, they argue that leadership and intelligence are qualities that women are not socialised to value as much as men.

In fact, females place greater value on and have higher personal standards of performance tasks, that are labeled feminine or neutral rather than masculine. Specifically, social skill and avoidance of social rejection are sources of achievement motivation for females. For example:

Females are more likely to seek contact during a failure situation than are boys. Women competing against others report less confidence, lower goals and less expectancies for success than women working alone. In contrast, there are no significant differences on these variables between men and working alone and men competing against others. In sociological studies of coalition forming males tend to use "exploitative" strategies such as playing competitively, whereas females use "accommodative" strategies (such as displaying concern for the welfare of others.

e. Mehrabian Achievement Scales

The Mehrabian Achievement Scales (Mehrabian, 1968) are separate male and female scales of achievement. The scales are designed to distinguish high achievers, who have a stronger motive to achieve than to avoid failure, from low achievers, who have a stronger motive to avoid failure than to achieve. The items are written such that response to an item indicates a behavioral disposition which has been found to be characteristic of high or low achievers (e.g., if high achievers have been found to prefer X to Y, then an item is worded as, "I'd

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rather do X than Y"). Correlation data provide validation for the scales and reliability results are conservative. (APA PsycTests Database Record (c) 2019 APA, all rights reserved).

Nearly 30 years ago, Malpas and Wickham (1995) observed that sociologists get it wrong when viewing failure as “a temporary breakdown within the system” (p. 38). Failure is neither temporary, nor is it a breakdown. It is a continuous state of normal working of the system*: deficio ergo sum* is the paradigmatic expression of failure. Failure is not just normal, it is also far more common than success and only some kind of bias — conceptual, epistemic, cognitive, or ideological — may obscure this basic fact. Success is easy to observe, while failure require an extra-effort. We easily see successful start-uppers but we do not see so clearly the entire population of contenders and the myriad of losses covering the process that produces a handful of winners. Only about one in 1,000 turtles survive to adulthood. Hatchlings die of dehydration if they do not make it to the ocean fast enough, not to speak of animals of prey killing them. For turtles, failure is normal in a Durkheimian sense: it is the way the system they live in works as such.

These basic considerations have been neglected for too long in the analysis of failure, which focused on various sub-topics unified by the belief that failure is the exception, not the rule, of the way things work in a continuous and smooth way. From this presumption, the analysis of failure alternatively underlined the “unexpected consequences” of failure, the “intelligence” of failure (Sitkin, 1992), or its role as a change-maker (Ellis & Davidi, 2005) that governs action. The closest look at the normality of failure is to be found in organizational studies (Perrow, 1999; Vaughan, 1996), where failure is conceived as the consequence of the normal way of working of the system. Still, even in these precursor studies, failure was conceived as a breakdown, a disaster, or a rupture. It was not the ubiquitous condition of the system. To include the ubiquity of failure, the concept of permanently failing organizations first developed by Meyer and Zucker (1986) is key. The study asserted that the continued survival of underperforming firms is contingent on serving the interests of certain internal and external actors who have come to replace the purely economic interests of shareholders and owners (Rao, 1990). Still, the source of the “permanent failure” was found in the surrounding organizational field and not in the way the organizational system works per se. A close conception was later developed by Schrank and Whitford (2011) within the framework of the network failures, framed as continuous, rather than discrete, outcomes.

More recently, social sciences have been paying a closer attention to failure, to its manifestations in the contemporary world and to the modalities of dealing with it both in theory and in practice (Mica et al., 2023a; 2023b). An emergent and interdisciplinary field of analysis has been consolidating under the label of failure studies and the pervasive anti-failure bias denounced by Malpas and Wickham is vanishing. This growing and quickly consolidating interest for failure is due to a number of factors, such as:

- the “failure of excellence”, namely the shaky foundations of a winners-take-all society where few super-champions get the largest part of the resources/rewards (Cook & Frank, 2010);
- the ubiquity of the “new spirit of capitalism”, where personal identity of agents and their economic performance are intertwined in an “entrepreneurial” project-based logic (Boltanski & Chiappello, 2005);
- the growing interest in the analysis of governmentality effects and the critical assessment of metric-based power (Beer, 2016);
- the diffusion of creative industries and performance-based jobs (Elberse, 2013);
- the narrowing of good jobs and the provision and platformization of labor markets (Kalleberg, 2016);
- and the decline of the social stigma against failure, namely the “mundanization” of failure and the growth of failure tolerance (Brendan & Hughes, 2006).

Thanks to these and perhaps other factors, the failure of imagination in the social sciences concerning the conception of failure is evaporating. Failure is no more a temporary breakdown (https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.1971-8853/18960, 2 Introduction Sociologica. V.17 N.3, 2023) of the system. It is neither a rare phenomena, nor is it the permanent but unintended outcome of a complex set of practices

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and conventions of a variety of actors from within and outside the organization. Failure is embedded in the way the system ordinarily works per se. It is not a dichotomous variable confined in a precise sector of field and it manifests ordinarily in a nuance of discrete states at multiple levels.

Moreover — from the discursive and symbolic viewpoint — it is a mundane fact endowed with moral recognition. Accordingly, organizations, artistic fields, big-tech complex, governance regimes and even the "alternative" economies in the production and distribution of goods and services need to deal with the normality of failure in a threefold sense; failure is endogenously normal, ubiquitous, and morally legitimate.

The normality of failure calls for a better conceptualization of it, for there is a resounding recognition that a clear understanding of failure remains elusive. What is needed is a clearer thinking about what failure really means, a better understanding of the mechanisms that generate, reproduce and terminate it as a normal way of working of the system. The essays collected for this symposium offer fresh insights on the analysis of failure from this perspective.

The symposium opens with the essay by Diane Vaughan (2023), a key scholar of organizational failure studies. Vaughan's essay assumes that failures and harmful outcomes are not restricted to a particular type of organizational field, form, or function. She looks at the failures of large complex socio-technical systems through a cross-case comparison of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration's (NASA) Space Shuttle Program and the Federal Aviation Administration's National Airspace System (NAS).

The second essay, by Janet A. Vertesi and danah boyd (2023), starts from a cognitive twist: failure may not be just an unintended consequence, on the contrary it can be a purposeful agency of players who restrict sociomaterial resources to push their respective systems toward failure. The aim is reconfiguring the resulting agencies along politically expedient lines to the brink of failure through the strategic withholding of resources.

The third essay, by Martin Jones (2023), deals with the failures of governance and metagovernance. It starts from the concept of spaces of collibration, taken initially from the work of Andrew Dunsire and developed by Bob Jessop, to critically get behind how uneven development and state intervention in sub-national economic development is managed by creating an unstable equilibrium of compromise, which in turn helps to the explain the governance of failure.

The fourth essay, by Adriana Mica, Mikołaj Pawlak, and Paweł Kubicki (2023b), explores how new meanings of policy failures enact new expectations in relation to policymaking. The redefinition of failure in terms of ignoranceand social injusticeentails oppression risks and social justice costs. This happens, as they show, especially on the terrain of politicized and polarized policymaking, where the introduction of new changes in the name of emancipation may occur to the detriment of social groups that do not have a dominant position.

The fifth contribution is from Rachel Skaggs (2023) and it is built on the concept of kaleidoscopic failure made of thousands of points of potential for failure along a number of relevant dimensions. Skaggs shows how failure is a normal reality in the arts, yet it is felt individually and can lead artists to self-doubt, low motivation, blocks in creativity, or to them exiting the field altogether.

Bernd Bonfert (2023), in the sixth essay, considers the causes, dynamics, and intensity of network failure as the partial dysfunctions and underperformance in alternative food networks, as well as the inability to realize their collaborative potential. In a sense, it matches an alternative conceptualization of failure to the failure of an alternative way of organizing food production and distribution.

Finally, Filippo Barbera and Ian Rees Jones (2023) review different understandings of moral economy and their applications across different political, economic, and cultural contexts. Following this, they examine the literature on failure in different spaces including failure of markets, valuation regimes, innovations, markets, governance, policy and democratic (https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.1971-8853/18960, 3 Introduction Sociologica. V.17 N.3, 2023) experimentalism. The essay argues that a moral economy of failure needs to be built on sociohistorical understandings of failure in different contexts, cultures, and environments.

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