THE EMOTIONS OF FAILURE IN ORGANIZATIONAL LIFE

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: *The emotions that accompany failure, in and of organizations, and their consequences have been researched in multiple domains of management, but comparative approaches have seldom been attempted. The failure of organizations to survive has been a common occurrence over centuries, particularly in the modern era of start-ups, innovation, and political, economic, and environmental turbulence. With the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic, failure at many levels of society, including the organizational and individual, has increased significantly and produced even more intense emotions.*

Study Design/Methodology/Approach: *For this conceptual chapter, literature from many disciplines was consulted on failure in organizations, and the emotions it elicit, including studies on the process of failure as well as its outcomes.*

Findings: *Failing and failure are likely to evoke negative emotions, with negative consequences for the actor. However, positive emotions can also occur, and a matrix of emotional valence and consequences presents an intriguing set of possibilities. The dimensions of emotions (valence, intensity, duration, and frequency) interact with a wide range of contributing factors (salience, personality, identity, emotional intelligence, emotional regulation, prior experience of failure, and context) in producing the emotions of failure and their consequences.*

Originality/Value: *This chapter contributes to the literature by explicating the types of emotions that emanate during and after failure across many domains of management research, their dimensions and contributing factors, and the consequences for the individual actor. The model of the emotions of failure that is presented here assembles a wider variety of elements than prior research*

has offered. We indicate avenues for further research as we approach an era of even more demanding challenges.

Keywords: Emotions; failure; organizations; management; negative emotions; negativity

INTRODUCTION

Failure is a widely experienced and natural aspect of the human condition. We may fail in our relationships, educational, cultural, and recreational endeavors, and, pessimistically, to ultimately find happiness and fulfillment in life. Since the widespread disruption of COVID-19 first manifested, we have seen failure occur on an unprecedented scale – failure of international, national, regional, and local governments, and their multiple agencies and departments – to adequately prepare for and address the pandemic (DeYoung & Sly, 2020). COVID-19 has also led to institutional failures, organizational failures, departmental failures, and personal failures. Multiple reports from practitioner media indicate that the pain will be felt for many years to come, and damage to the global and national economies will lead to a slew of more organizational failures. For example, Stiglitz (2020), a Nobel Prize winner, wrote in April 2020 of the failure of markets (and the industries and companies within them) to adequately and swiftly increase supplies of necessary material to combat the virus. In a similar vein, Donnan (2020) laments the failure of data collection systems to inform decisions on healthcare, business, and other sectors of the economy. Conversely, Gibson (2020), in a call for academic studies on the pandemic, outlines how organizations and employees have responded positively to the crisis. In a plea for a people-centered approach to leading change in the pandemic era, characterized by widespread layoffs, Amis and Janz (2020, p. 273) suggest that organizations must consider "employees as more than simply deployable and depletable resources." This chapter will try to balance pre-COVID-19 research and insights with more current developments.

Failure in organizational life has been studied in multiple subdisciplines of management, such as organizational studies (Vaara, 2002), organizational behavior (Cannon & Edmonson, 2001), organizational change (De Keyser et al., 2019), strategy (Jiang et al., 2017), entrepreneurship (Singh et al., 2007; Ucba-saran et al., 2013), leadership (Giessner & van Knippenberg, 2008), and careers (Heslin, 2005). Research, however, has seldom investigated common and diverging themes in the personal experiences of failure across these many fields. Literature has also seldom distinguished between *failing*, a process that evolves over time, and *failure*, a (generally) final outcome (De Keyser et al., 2019).

The study of failure has often focused on the affective domain – emotion and mood – with a strong and unsurprising focus on negative affect and its mainly debilitating consequences for self-esteem and well-being (e.g., Bell & Taylor,

2011; He et al., 2018). Less studied are the positive emotions that may accompany failure and the positive consequences of failure. Nevertheless, there is a burgeoning literature on the learning that can occur from failure and its favorable outcomes for resilient and adaptive actors and organizations (e.g., Shepherd & Cardon, 2009; Ucbasaran et al., 2013).

The goals of this chapter are to explore emotional reactions (negative and positive) to failing and failure in different aspects of organizational life, to explore the dimensions of these emotions, the negative and positive outcomes of these emotions, and the underlying psychological and contextual factors that surround failure. If the stigma of failure (Singh et al., 2015; Wiesenfeld et al., 2008) can be better understood and challenged from individual, organizational, institutional, and societal perspectives, we, as scholars, can play an effective role in improving the well-being of organizational actors. The focus of this chapter is on the microlevel affective responses of organizational actors to failing and failure in multiple contexts. In answering the following research questions, we contribute to the literature by examining the emotions of failure in some depth, and by developing a model that could be empirically explored.

RQ1. What emotions are experienced through failing and failure in organizational life?
RQ2. What are the dimensions of these emotions?
RQ3. What are the personal outcomes of emotional responses to failing/failure?
RQ4. What factors influence emotional responses to failing/failure and their consequences?

DEFINING AND EXPLORING THE CONSTRUCTS

Failure

Research into failure has been bedeviled – or enriched – by multiple definitions in wide-ranging contexts, including work environments (Newton et al., 2008). Failure is broadly regarded as the inability to achieve goals and to meet one's own expectations or those of others (Heslin, 2005). Newton et al. (2008, p. 229) provide a comprehensive definition:

> Failure is defined as an experience in which (a) achievement is integral to one's personal identity and accompanying sense of self-worth; (b) one feels a personal sense of responsibility for the outcome; (c) lack of success has significant consequences in psychological, professional, and/or interpersonal domains; and (d) one's personal definition of self, the experience, and the success-failure continuum is integral to the process.

Definitions of failure vary according to a number of factors and are usually formulated in a particular field of scholarship. Table 1 contains definitions of failure in nine different organizational contexts, from the failure of the organization as a whole to failure of elements of it, such as products, projects, or change initiatives.

Table 1. Definitions of Failure across Domains.

Field	Definition	Author/s
Organizations	"Organizational death is…the actual demise of the organization when an entire company goes out of business or a plant, office, or other unit is closed."	Marks and Vansteenkiste (2008, p. 810)
Commercial entrepreneurship	"The cessation of involvement in a venture because it has not met a minimum threshold for economic viability as stipulated by the entrepreneur."	Ucbasaran et al. (2013, p. 175)
Social entrepreneurship	"It is more difficult to conceptualise failure in the third sector as organisations have social goals but failure is socially constructed in economic terms."	Scott and Teasdale (2012, p. 140)
Work groups	"Deviation from expected and desired results."	Cannon and Edmonson (2001, p. 162)
Products	"The inability of an engineering process, product, service or system to meet the design team's goals for which it has been developed."	Del Frate (2013, p. 930)
Projects	"The termination of a project due to the realization of unacceptably low performance as operationally defined by the project's key resource providers."	Shepherd and Cardon, (2009, p. 924)
Innovation	"We consider the rejection of an initiative by the management as a failure."	Deichmann and van den Ende (2014, p. 671)
Organizational change	"The failure of planned change [is] an organization's failure to confront or adapt to change project pressures over time, despite planning to do so."	Schwartz et al. (2011, p. 313)
Careers	"Career *success* is defined as the objective and subjective outcomes associated with one's accumulated work experiences. Objective outcomes include observable indicators of career success that can be impartially evaluated by others…Subjective career success captures individuals' affective judgments about their career attainments." [No definitions of career *failure* seem to exist in the literature.]	Kraimer et al. (2019, p. 129)

When an organization is liquidated, it can be termed a failure. Marks and Vansteenkiste (2008) use the term organizational death in three ways: the organization goes out of business (a conventional definition of failure), its activities end when it is acquired by another, or it disappears in an internal restructuring. The last two do not necessarily constitute failure. Scholars of failure in entrepreneurship have indicated that failure can be objectively determined, for example, when a firm is declared insolvent, or more subjectively by entrepreneurs who are unable to achieve the targets they have set (Jenkins & McKelvie, 2016; Ucbasaran et al., 2013). For social enterprises, given the dual aims of financial performance and social impact, failure can be perceived as the inability to meet either one or both aims (Scott & Teasdale, 2012). While career success is defined in the literature but not failure, prior studies of success and failure in people's

careers indicate that there are objective and subjective evaluations, and, regarding the latter, actors compare their achievements not only with their own goals but also with the achievement of relevant, self-determined others (Guan et al., 2019; Spurk et al., 2019). Some authors observe that career success can come at the cost of job satisfaction and relationship failures inside and outside of work (Heslin, 2005; Kraimer et al., 2019).

Within the literature on failure across contexts, there are many proponents of a social constructionist approach. In the context of mergers and acquisitions, Vaara (2002) maintains that perceptions of success and failure are discursively constructed. He argues that accounts of mergers and acquisitions have a strong managerialist orientation, and he bemoans the paucity of research into the social construction of postmerger integration. He notes how managerial narratives overemphasize success, a testament to the skills of the managers, but when failure is too obvious to be contested, the narrative is cynically manipulated to deflect blame from themselves, by appropriating responsibility to others, or to matters beyond their control, such as pandemics, government actions, and investors. Cardon et al. (2011) found failure is attributed by key players to misfortunes or more humbly accepted as mistakes. Sheaff (2017, p. 52) makes similar allegations about the failure of social enterprises and the agencies that back them, observing that, "Accounts will sometimes be constructed with the intention of concealing sources of failure." Tourish and Hargie (2012, p. 1052) dissected the public statements of bank executives to failures in the banking system during the global financial crisis, finding that many had cast themselves as victims, subject to the whims of investors or board members, or as "unfortunate observers rather than active agents in an inescapable economic event." When managerial accounts are presented to the public, as Kibler et al. (2020, p. 16) found, an impression management tactic is to celebrate failure as a triumph, through a narrative that "highlights entrepreneurs' personal determination and persistence." Although discourse is invested with power (Brown & Marshak, 2011), the discerning public and the cynical employee may attribute the blame for failure to management and other powerholders.

In the field of commercial entrepreneurship, Olaison and Sørensen (2014) distinguish between "good failures," where the entrepreneurs depicted in much of the practitioner and academic literature as heroic figures who have learnt from failure and are capable of redemption, and "bad failures," entrepreneurs who have been framed and shamed as incompetent or somehow guilty of moral turpitude. Mantere et al.'s (2013) study of entrepreneurial failure reveals a number of distinct narratives that various stakeholders use in attributions of causes of failure. One is labeled catharsis (an affect-infused construct), with one of their respondents admitting,

> The problems [contributing to the failure] were caused solely by bad decisions made by myself and [another entrepreneur], because quite simply we were the ones who made all the decisions as major owners of the firm. (p. 465)

In the COVID-19 era, we have witnessed many politicians and organizational executives being unwilling to accept at least some degree of responsibility for

failure and pointing the finger at other individuals and agencies (e.g., Donnan, 2020; Sargent, 2020). Conversely, reports have hauntingly shown how frontline healthcare workers and managers have expressed their deep frustration and sorrow about their failures to save lives (e.g., Liu et al., 2020).

Definitions of change failure/success are also socially constructed (Schwartz et al., 2011), not only by change leaders and managers but also by reports in the academic and practitioner media (Hughes, 2011). While the literature on organizational change is rife with claims that most change fails (e.g., De Keyser et al., 2019), Hughes (2011) and Smollan and Morrison (2019) have pointed to the difficulties in assessing what constitutes failure and especially what criteria are used and whose perceptions are taken as "evidence."

Individual employee constructions of failure may also vary over time. It is necessary to distinguish between failure as an outcome of decisions, organizational actions and exogenous factors, and failing, a decline over time in the organization, project, change initiative, etc. As Edwards and Ashkanasy (2018) observe in the context of academic careers, measures of success in the early stages may, over time, constitute a failure in terms of the individual's own ambitions. The pressure to perform according to the changing criteria applied by the university or the current head of department may exacerbate negative perceptions of self-efficacy. Research into career success has investigated objective and subjective definitions and measures (e.g., Guan et al., 2019; Heslin, 2005; Spurk et al., 2019) and how self-perceptions change over time. The study of a merger by De Keyser et al. (2019) employs a dialectical approach in revealing how change is a dynamic, processual journey in which multiple actors navigate, negotiate, and reconstitute individual, group, and organizational "realities." An organization may be considered a failure by its owners, but, when sold, the new owners, with better strategies and/or greater resources, may be able to successfully transform the organization. A strategy or a product may likewise be deemed a failure (in objective, financial terms), but over time may experience a liftoff. According to a study by Jiang et al. (2017), executives of failing firms often decide to find new jobs to avoid the stigma associated with failure and to carve new career paths. It will be instructive to watch in the months and years ahead, how organizations have been rescued, and by whom, from imminent failure, brought about or exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Many programs have already been put in place, but their effectiveness will need to be gauged, short-, medium-, and long-term. The process of failing is accompanied by oscillating emotions (Ooghe & De Prijcker, 2008), which may shape the trajectory, direction, and outcomes of failure (Shepherd et al., 2009; Singh et al., 2015). This chapter focuses on the emotional responses to failing and failure.

Emotions

Under the umbrella of affect, emotions are relatively short-term occurrences directed at a specific "object," while moods are more diffuse, possibly triggered by an event and longer lasting (Yik et al., 2011). Emotions have been defined in many ways: as naturally occurring phenomena, experienced by people across all

cultures (Ekman, 1992), caused by environmental stimuli (Lazarus, 1993), as outcomes of neurobiological processes (Lindquist et al., 2012; Russell, 2003), and as culturally determined, socially constituted responses to events and issues (Voronov & Vince, 2012). Perspectives on emotions as socially constructed responses, particularly in organizational spheres, note how actors are encouraged, trained, and even coerced into accepting not only the regulation of emotional expression but also the actual experience of the emotion, to conform to practices and expectations. These realms include the organizational (Coupland et al., 2008), professional (Ahuja et al., 2019), and institutional (Gill & Burrow, 2018; Voronov & Vince, 2012). Emotions are "somatic and semantic" (Creed et al., 2014, p. 278), with cognitive antecedents, physiological manifestations, and behavioral consequences that influence subjective well-being (Lazarus, 1993). The dimensions of emotions include valence (positive or negative reactions), intensity/activation/arousal, duration, and frequency (Russell, 2003; Warr et al., 2014; Wilhelm et al., 2004), usually dependent on the salience of the triggering event or situation for the actor.

FAILING AND FAILURE: THE EMOTIONS

When the actor appraises the possibility if not probability of failure, the perceived impact is a key factor in terms of the emotional dimensions that are elicited. Deeply embedded in subconscious processes and routines, negative emotions, arising from events and issues, become shards of unhappy memories that prick our consciousness, disturb our equilibrium, and undermine our well-being. Conversely, leveraging positive emotions enables us, even under trying circumstances, to (re)generate positive identities, reinforce our self-esteem, help us cope with stress, and create and enhance relationships (Frederickson & Joiner, 2018). However, Lindebaum and Jordan (2014, p. 1037) point out in their introduction to a special issue on asymmetries in workplace emotional outcomes that there are times, "When it is good to feel bad and bad to feel good." Failure is one context of asymmetry: when negative emotions can produce positive outcomes and positive emotions can result in negative outcomes. Given that failure tends to unfold over time, specific emotions triggered by events or perceptions (e.g., examining mounting losses, inability to secure market penetration or stakeholder buy-in) may morph into a pervasive mood of gloom. Conversely, if failure can be forestalled, or if new possibilities are identified, such as alternative ventures, strategies, projects, or changes, a sunnier mood may emerge.

In exploring the emotions of failing and failure, it is helpful first to focus on the dimension of valence, separating the negative from the positive (although people may experience both, even simultaneously), then explore the other dimensions, and identify the consequences (negative and positive). Emotional reactions to failure will depend on other dimensions of emotions – activation, duration, and frequency – as well as the salience of the outcomes of failure.

Valence of Emotions

Negative emotions: It is almost inevitable that the process of failure elicits negative emotions, but their intensity depends on several factors that vary from one person and one context to another, where the implications of the failure are key elements. Scholars have differentiated between emotions that are self-directed, notably, guilt, shame, and embarrassment, and other directed emotions, such as anger, disgust, and frustration (Creed et al., 2014; Wijaya & Heugens, 2018). The difference lies in not only the individually perceived but also the socially constructed assessment of who or what is to blame (Marks & Vansteenkiste, 2008; Wiesenfeld et al., 2008).

When it becomes apparent that goals are not being achieved in a plan, project, or new change initiative, anxiety is the first likely emotion, and it can be exacerbated by a sense of inadequacy. Anxiety is related to uncertainty (Ucbasaran et al., 2013), a sense of unease that problems will grow and possibly metastasize into a crisis that cannot be resolved. Anxiety about the future of one's organization, venture, or job may become more activated, and, thus, grow into fear, particularly when failure is perceived as an individual weakness or constructed as such by others. Fear is, thus, a threat to one's well-being (Lazarus, 1993) and is considered by Ekman (1992) as one of the basic emotions experienced by all people, regardless of geographic and cultural context. Jalan et al. (2014) believe that both success and failure can produce anxiety, the former because the pressure of performance does not abate and may even lead to greater expectations. Conroy (2001) conceptualized fear of failure in relation to performance: fear of shame and embarrassment, fear of devaluing one's self-esteem, fear of having an uncertain future, fear of losing social influence, and fear of upsetting others. In a qualitative study in the context of entrepreneurship, Cacciotti et al. (2016) report how fear of failure manifested at different stages of a venture, from conceptualization (e.g., inability to attract investor funds) through start-up (inability to gain momentum) and setbacks. Some of the main sources of fear concerned losing money and reputation and disappointing others. Fear of personal failure as an individual employee (including as a manager) could be driven by its negative prospects, such as criticism, demotion, job loss, and loss of status. Fear, and its less intense version, anxiety, accompany failing and failure – fear of not meeting one's own goals, or those of others, fear of the consequences of failure. In a powerful critique of fear in the institutional arena of haute cuisine, Gill and Burrow (2018) demonstrate the pervasive anxiety, if not dread, of living up to the exacting standards demanded of the chefs. One respondent graphically articulated his fear:

> If I fucking know I'm gonna lose my job or get punched or get the shit kicked out of me, I'm always gonna make sure that everything I am doing is right…that there can never be a mistake. (p. 452)

Similarly, in the study of an educational institution by Coupland et al. (2008, p. 336), one participant expostulated,

Shit this looks really bad, … am I going to be found out…is this mistake of mine going to be exposed…God, what if the results this year are terrible – every year you have a semi-panic attack.

Anger, another of Ekman's (1992) basic emotions, is an outwardly directed emotion that occurs when an actor attributes responsibility for negative circumstances to others (Geddes et al., 2020). As a moral emotion (Lindebaum et al., 2017), anger can be particularly intense when failure experienced in organizational life is perceived to be caused by the deceitfulness, lack of commitment, or unfairness of others. When executives try to shift the blame for corporate failure, anger mounts and those found "guilty" by various stakeholders may seek to stigmatize them (Wiesenfeld et al., 2008).

The stigma of failure may lead to shame, embarrassment, and guilt (Singh et al., 2015), which have been termed self-conscious emotions (Tangney et al., 1996), social emotions (Doern & Gross, 2014), and moral emotions (Wijaya & Heugens, 2018). In examining the differences between embarrassment and shame, Tangney et al. (1996) suggest that embarrassment is a more transient feeling that occurs when one's deficiency has been revealed, particularly in the presence of others. They argue that shame is a much more intense emotion, calling into question one's identity and self-concept. A significant failure is one possible cause of shame if one feels (or is made to feel) accountable for the consequences for others (Creed et al., 2014; Doern & Gross, 2014; Tangney et al., 1996). Shaming, according to Creed et al. (2014, p. 294), can be artfully and cynically deployed by organizations (and institutions) to regulate behavior and drive performance through attempts at "degradation, stigmatization, demonization, and ostracism." Guilt is felt when one accepts one has caused others' problems, but it may be mitigated by apologies, reparations, and improved performance (Bohns & Flynn, 2013). Hareli et al. (2005) found that the emotions employees experienced influenced the explanations they provided for their failures at work with guilt more common than shame. They reported that if fear accompanied guilt, employees were unlikely to be motivated to take steps at reconciliation. Shame and guilt occur for entrepreneurs when they reflect on the impact of their failure on others, and according to Smith and McElwee (2011), this leads to self-recrimination, self-pity, and helplessness.

Sadness at loss – of jobs, income, capital, close relationships, and reputation – accompanies failure. Grief is a much more intense emotion and can be found when organizational death has consequences for the individual (Bell & Taylor, 2011; Marks & Vansteenkiste, 2008). It also occurs in entrepreneurial contexts when grief originates from a sense of loss, including loss of self-esteem (Jenkins et al., 2014; Shepherd, 2003), and is heightened by an acute sense of guilt for the negative consequences for others, such as employees, creditors, and investors (Ucbasaran et al., 2013). Disappointment and frustration (with others) that desired outcomes have not been achieved are generally more muted responses but still eat at the well-being of the actor. Shepherd et al. (2014) found considerable evidence of frustration in research and development staff when a project was

finally terminated in what they termed "a creeping death." The intensity of the emotion again depends on the salience of the situation for the organizational actor. Serial entrepreneurs dislike failure as much as anyone else, yet if they have several ventures in their portfolio, the loss of one is likely to mean less than that of the entrepreneur who has only one enterprise and is, therefore, heavily invested in it, financially and emotionally (Lafuente et al., 2019).

Positive emotions: While less likely and less frequent, positive emotions can occur alongside the negative (Edwards & Ashkanasy, 2018), but there is understandably less research about them. For example, pride has both intra- and interpersonal elements and relates to feelings of accomplishment, confidence, and fulfillment (van Osch et al., 2018). Pride among the ruins of failure can be experienced by those who had the courage to try to who achieved partial or temporary success. The literature on learning from entrepreneurial failure indicates how some actors can see the bright side, despite the considerable setback. Singh et al. (2015) document several indications of pride in failed entrepreneurs that they had managed to forestall bankruptcy, or cope with it, take ethical decisions, and not let others down. As a respondent in another study indicated:

> I think we did it as smart as we could…it was a little ahead of its time…fundamentally it was not a bad experience because we lost money for the right reasons. We minimised everybody's [losses]…I was very proud of what we did. (Cope, 2011, p. 616)

Hope offers a beacon of light to save a failing venture (Jenkins et al., 2014), and relief and contentment may be felt when disaster is avoided or the consequences are mitigated.

The Other Dimensions of Emotions: Intensity, Duration, and Frequency

While it is common to distinguish between positive and negative emotions, other dimensions also need to be taken into consideration in the context of failing and failure. Most of the emotions are likely to be negative, and when a major blow occurs, the intensity of the emotional reaction will be heightened (Jenkins et al., 2014). Intensity, also named arousal or activation by scholars (e.g., Russell, 2003; Warr et al., 2014; Yik et al., 2011), is dependent on a number of key factors. As noted elsewhere in this chapter (e.g., Coupland et al., 2008), the material and reputational consequences of failure are subject to individual perceptions that are influenced by processes of social construction. While nobody likes to fail, there are cultural differences that influence the type of emotions, particularly shame, embarrassment, and guilt, and how intensely they are experienced (Creed et al., 2014; Doern & Gross, 2014; Leong et al., 2018; Singh et al., 2015). Emotional episodes tend to be short in duration and, in the context of failure, may merge into moods (Russell, 2003). Those who have the capacity to avoid harmful rumination are better positioned to regulate their affective states (van der Kaap-Deeder et al., 2016). While this may buffer some from the impact of failure, as new information is received, and the work situation becomes more challenging, emotional episodes are likely to occur more frequently. Some emotions may recur for some time (Brans & Verduyn, 2014), and emotional reactions are likely to be

more frequent (Wilhelm et al., 2014), particularly during attempts to resurrect a dying organization or project, and in the immediate aftermath.

Consequences of Emotional Reactions to Failing and Failure

In a matrix of emotional reactions to change (negative and positive) and their consequences (negative and positive), all four relationships are possible and could be manifested simultaneously or consecutively. As an example of one negative emotion, the anger derived from an allegation of culpability for a failure at work, could produce consequences of negative significance for the employee, and for the organization if stress levels increase and customer service is compromised, but, if regulated by the affronted employee, the anger could spur higher performance and subsequent praise. The paradoxical effects of fear of failure were explored by Gill and Burrow (2018), who found evidence of the intense concentration that top-end chefs had to employ to avoid mistakes. While this raised their stress levels, it improved their performance, and the avoidance of costly mistakes, thereby lowering some of the stress.

The four possibilities are explicated below.

Negative Emotions, Negative Consequences: In general, the negative emotions of failing and failure may lead to a decline in performance by the entrepreneur, executive, project manager, or employee. When projects fail, as Shepherd and Cardon (2009) suggest, the ability to seek and process information is impaired. Entrepreneurs stressed by failing and failure have reported the debilitating experience of depression, panic attacks, insomnia, and loss of self-esteem (Singh et al., 2007). Failure to achieve goals by employees can lead to similar outcomes plus "self-sabotage and paralysis" (Edwards & Ashkanasy, 2018, p. 172). Emotions may then manifest on a behavioral level in inertia, thoughts of suicide, and entrepreneurs, for example, exiting the venture too early (Singh et al., 2015). Poor decision-making and cognitive impairments are consequences of anxiety and other stress markers (Shepherd, 2003). Relationships inside and outside of work often suffer from negative affective states. Poor performance outcomes and attributions of blame for the failure lead to shame, stigmatization, and a downward psychological spiral (Creed et al., 2014; Singh et al., 2015). Fear of failure may spur an unhealthy degree of competitiveness and aggressiveness, cause conflict, and also increase risk aversion and the likelihood of lost opportunities (Cacciotti et al., 2016; Conroy, 2001). The blame culture that Vince and Saleem (2004) refer to in a study of a local authority was a term explicitly used by one of their respondents, who suggested that this leads to a fear of making mistakes and the resultant lack of risk-taking or job crafting.

Literature on emotional labor indicates how emotional expression at work is constrained by organizational and professional norms (Smollan, 2006) and how it can lead to stress and burnout (Zhao et al., 2019). The point is emphasized in literature on critical management and institutional theory (Creed et al., 2014; Voronov & Vince, 2012). Negative emotions, in particular, often need to be buried, and, in the context of failing and failure, the perceived need to remain silent about their emotions may intensify actors' stress levels (Vuori et al., 2018).

Negative Emotions, Positive Consequences: Negative emotions can, under certain circumstances, lead to positive individual and organizational consequences. Firstly, the anxiety of failing can produce extra effort to solve the problems (Gill & Burrow, 2018). Literature on emotional intelligence (EI) indicates that, rather than undermining cognitive functioning, people who understand their emotions may engage in focused thinking. For example, Mayer and Salovey's (1997, p. 11) influential model indicates that one branch of the different levels of emotional capability is "emotional facilitation of thinking," encompassing the capacity to direct attention to important issues, aid in problem-solving, changing outlooks from pessimism to optimism, and facilitate "inductive reasoning and creativity." Empirical studies of EI demonstrate that different facets help in team-based conflict resolution (Jordan & Troth, 2004) and in buffering stress (Newton et al., 2008). When confronted with impending or actual failure, regulation of negative emotions, as a particular capability, allows actors to focus on concrete actions to address problems and reappraise the potential stigma of failure (Singh et al., 2015). Cognitive reappraisal and emotion-focused coping may help those suffering to engage deeply with failure, rather than wallow in it, and to see their struggles within a larger context (Singh et al., 2016).

There is a wealth of literature in the entrepreneurship field in particular, on how learning from failure can help to strengthen self-esteem, reenter entrepreneurship, or actively seek other employment opportunities (see Ucbasaran et al., 2013, for a systematic review). Learning to cope with failure does not occur quickly (He et al., 2018), and sometimes occurs too late, but the adaptive entrepreneur uses effective cognitive and action-oriented strategies, during and after failure (Cope, 2011). Emotional regulation, according to the findings of He et al. (2018), moderates the relationship between the velocity of failure and learning from failure.

Discrete negative emotions arising from failure, if regulated appropriately by the actor, may in due course produce positive outcomes. As noted earlier, shame, embarrassment, and guilt may lead to repaired relationships, learning how to avoid errors, and ultimately to improved self-esteem (Creed et al., 2014; Doern & Gross, 2014). Sadness at loss may imbue some with a renewed quest for successful organizational and career outcomes. However, in the context of a merger, Vuori et al. (2018) found that the masking of negative emotions and the faking of complacency and other positive emotions led to the failure of the integration of the two organizations. Once again, it is not merely the occurrence of the failure-induced emotion that is relevant to the well-being and performance of the actor; it is also the impact of the emotional labor and how effectively it is regulated.

Positive Emotions, Positive Consequences: The broaden-and-build theory of Fredrickson, developed and applied by researchers over many years, maintains that, "everyday positive emotions, as fleeting as they may be, can initiate a cascade of psychological processes that carry enduring impact on people's subsequent emotional well-being" (Frederickson & Joiner, 2018, p. 195). Using an advanced psychotherapeutic approach, according to Fosha et al. (2019, p. 563), can transform negative emotions into positive emotions, thereby "'turbocharging' the innate affects of healing to expand transformation." While this approach is

not readily available to the average organizational actor, reflection helps enable people to transcend hardship and create positive psychological (and material) outcomes for themselves and others.

In the context of the perceived failure of academics, Edwards and Ashkanasy (2018) propose that positive emotions have regenerative potential. The field of entrepreneurship is replete with narratives of resilience, optimism, and renewed self-efficacy, experiences laden with positive emotion that have enabled people to recover from venture failure, many of them reentering the field with a constructive mindset and set of learnings (e.g., Hayward et al., 2010; Hsu et al., 2017; Lafuente et al., 2019). Hope is a resource, and when used adaptively during or after a failure, it becomes a source of renewed confidence. In a study of innovative project failures, Moenkemeyer et al. (2012) have documented how self-efficacy, outcome expectancy, optimism, hope, self-esteem, and risk propensity built the resilience of team members. Actors with a sense of agency rather than victimhood recover quicker from failure.

Positive Emotions, Negative Consequences: While positive emotions tend to have positive outcomes, they can also have negative outcomes for organizational actors (and their employers, subordinates, and colleagues). Complacency, a low activation emotion, leads to inaction and the ability to learn quickly (He et al., 2018). Unjustified optimism and hope may blind actors to the harsh realities of impending failure and to underestimate its consequences. Pride in their skills, past achievements, and the self-perceived ability to weather the storm could be misplaced and self-serving, cloud their judgment, and lead to futile future actions (Hayward et al., 2010). While expressing positive emotions and using humor may mitigate gloom and doom scenarios, they may evoke negative reactions from those higher in negative affectivity (Sears et al., 2016) or with different perceptions of the likelihood of failure and the severity of its outcomes.

FACTORS INFLUENCING EMOTIONAL REACTIONS TO FAILING/FAILURE

There are many external and internal factors that influence how organizational actors react to failure. External factors in the macro environment, like economic crises, political actions, pandemics, and weather patterns, which trigger or exacerbate failure, often lie beyond the capacity of employees to manage. A synopsis follows of a few key internal factors (some of which are noted elsewhere in the chapter).

Salience – The Perceived Significance of the Outcomes of Failure

Affective reactions to events, and their valence, intensity, duration, and frequency, depend significantly on the salience of the outcomes to the individual. Entrepreneurs who have invested a considerable amount of money, effort, and passion in a venture and who encounter failure are likely to experience different negative emotions or more intense emotions, compared to their failure to

penetrate one market, for example. Reputational damage may be hard to stomach for failed entrepreneurs (Jenkins et al., 2014; Singh et al., 2015) or for business executives who lose their jobs, and the loss of income may be seen as more or less onerous than the stigma of failure (Jiang et al., 2017; Wiesenfeld et al., 2008). Failure in some aspect of one's job may draw negative feedback, and elicit feelings of inadequacy, guilt, or embarrassment, but have no long-lasting dire consequences.

Personality

General self-esteem and self-efficacy (e.g., confidence in the ability to run a business, manage a project, or cook a high-quality dish) are damaged by failure, but with other positive attributes and support from others, the actor will cope better with the emotional and other outcomes of failure (Bohns & Flynn, 2013; Renn et al., 2011). Those higher in negative affectivity (Kaplan et al., 2009; Sears et al., 2016) are prone to more intense negative emotions and moods. Positive affectivity and dispositional optimism, in contrast, may lead to different perceptions of instances of failure and more muted positive emotions. Renn et al. (2011) found that self-management failure was related to high neuroticism and lower conscientiousness. People high in perfectionism (Edwards & Ashkanasy, 2018) and those inclined to negative affect are likely to cope poorly when they confront failure.

Identity

Various elements of identity, a sense of who I am and who we are (personal, role, social, and organizational) are shaken by failure in and of organizations. Identity is constructed through intrapersonal reflection and social discourse, and is imbued with emotion (Ahuja et al., 2019). In terms of personal identity, one person desperately reflected, "Academic failure felt like the death of a substantial part of my identity – and I sincerely believed the best possible outcome was for the rest of me to die along with it" (cited in Edwards & Ashkanasy, 2018, p. 167). Leader identity may help the strong-willed to manage the process of failing and the aftermath (Giessner & van Knippenberg, 2008), while the more cynical try to deflect blame and buttress their own emotionally fractured identities (Mantere et al., 2013). Organizational identity, the melding of self and organization, is particularly strong for entrepreneurs who forestall impending failure with appropriate strategies, but it has also been found to be relevant to ex-employees of failed organizations (Walsh et al., 2019). Conversely, it has been more easily abandoned by executives who move to other organizations to avoid the stigma of failure (Jiang et al., 2017).

Emotional Intelligence and Emotional Regulation

If the emotions of failure undermine the performance and well-being of those who have failed or are failing, a key skill is the ability to understand and regulate one's own emotions (Edwards & Ashkanasy, 2018; Mayer & Salovey, 1997). He et al. (2018) found emotional regulation to be an invaluable resource for entrepreneurs

with varying levels of experience, enabling them to modulate negative emotions, enhance cognitive functioning, and learn from their experiences. While fear of failure may galvanize some to improve their performance (Gill & Burrow, 2018), it will be counterproductive if the actor cannot regulate negative emotions. If those driven by high levels of pride, optimism, and resilience are unable to curtail these positive emotions and tendencies and adopt a more realistic view of their goals and the work environment, they may continue to fail.

Prior Experience of Failure

Those who have failed in one context before (e.g., a new venture, strategy, or project) may have learnt from previous experience how to deal with the emotional consequences of the current failure (He et al., 2018; Jenkins et al., 2014; Shepherd & Cardon, 2009), regulate their emotions, strengthen their resilience, and adjust their attitudes and behaviors. Repeated failure, however, may have the opposite effect and lead to a severe decline in well-being.

Context

While looking for common threads of emotional reactions to failure, the unique context facing each actor cannot be ignored. Context includes individual differences (Renn et al., 2011), social mores (Wijaya & Heugens, 2018), cultural attitudes to job and venture failure (Singh et al., 2015), organizational and institutional attitudes to failure and emotional experience (Creed et al., 2014; Edwards & Ashkanasy, 2018; Gill & Burrow, 2018; Voronov & Vince, 2012), and the material and reputational consequences for the individuals concerned (Singh et al., 2015; Wiesenfeld et al., 2008). Context is also relevant to organizational crises triggered by pandemics (Donnan, 2020; Sargent, 2020; Stiglitz, 2020), economic malaise (Tourish & Hargie, 2012), and political (in)activity Sargent (2020).

DISCUSSION, LIMITATIONS, AND CONCLUSIONS

A Model of the Emotions of Failure

Fig. 1 is a dynamic model of some likely negative and positive emotions of failing and failure in organizational life and their negative and positive outcomes. While the emotions experienced while failing may be fairly similar to those after failure, the dimensions may vary, and, in time, the emotions are likely to diminish or evaporate completely. For example, the anticipatory grief of loss may not be realized at all. The model knits together the key elements outlined in the previous sections of this chapter: dimensions of emotions (valence, intensity, duration, and frequency) and a range of factors influencing the experience of outcomes and its associated emotions (salience, personality, EI, and emotional regulation, prior experience of failure and context). The model, thus, presents a more comprehensive framework of the multiple organizational contexts, separately researched in extant studies, and one that can be explored in future studies.
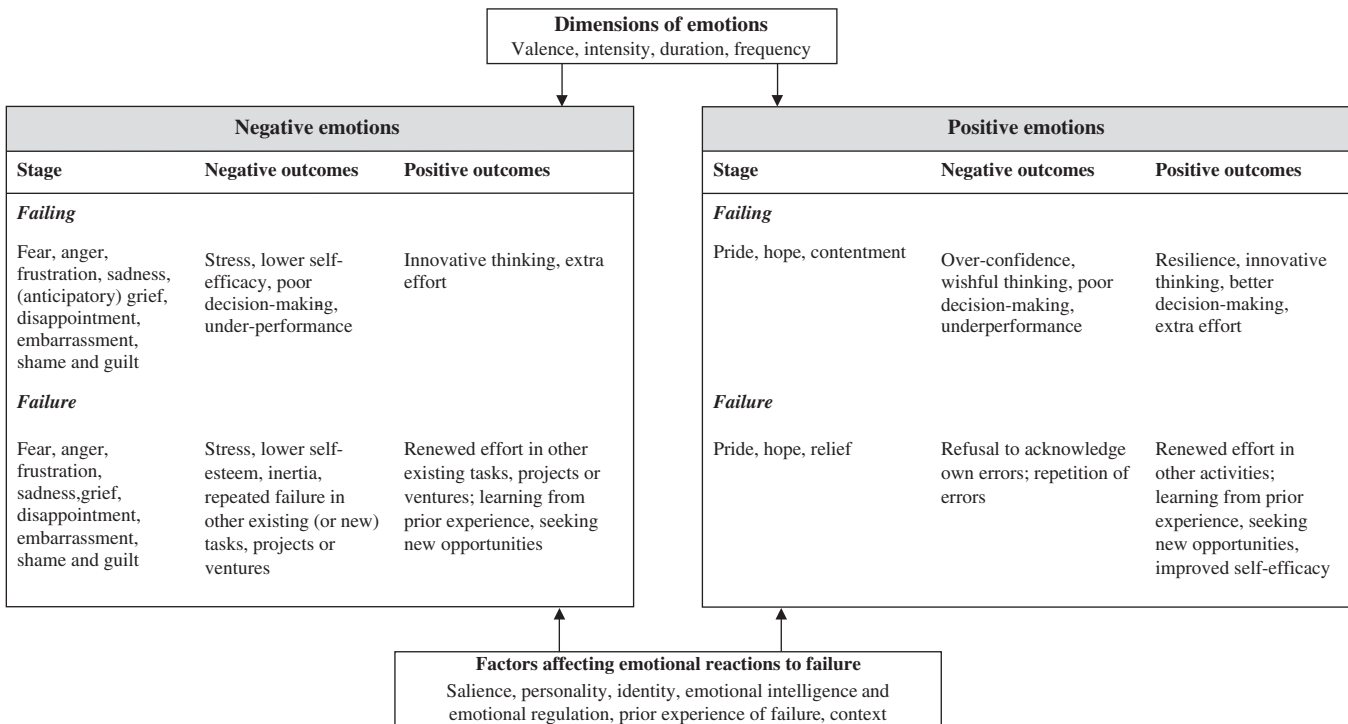
Dimensions of emotions
Valence, intensity, duration, frequency

Negative emotions		
Stage	**Negative outcomes**	**Positive outcomes**
Failing		
Fear, anger, frustration, sadness, (anticipatory) grief, disappointment, embarrassment, shame and guilt	Stress, lower self-efficacy, poor decision-making, under-performance	Innovative thinking, extra effort
Failure		
Fear, anger, frustration, sadness,grief, disappointment, embarrassment, shame and guilt	Stress, lower self-esteem, inertia, repeated failure in other existing (or new) tasks, projects or ventures	Renewed effort in other existing tasks, projects or ventures; learning from prior experience, seeking new opportunities

Positive emotions		
Stage	**Negative outcomes**	**Positive outcomes**
Failing		
Pride, hope, contentment	Over-confidence, wishful thinking, poor decision-making, underperformance	Resilience, innovative thinking, better decision-making, extra effort
Failure		
Pride, hope, relief	Refusal to acknowledge own errors; repetition of errors	Renewed effort in other activities; learning from prior experience, seeking new opportunities, improved self-efficacy

Factors affecting emotional reactions to failure
Salience, personality, identity, emotional intelligence and emotional regulation, prior experience of failure, context

Fig. 1.   Model of Emotions of Failure at Work.

Failure has been defined in many ways, both by researchers (see Table 1) and multiple organizational stakeholders; it can be objectively determined in some circumstances but subjectively and discursively constructed in others (e.g., Jenkins & McKelvie, 2016; Mantere et al., 2013; Vaara, 2002). Its emotional impacts are considerable and largely negative, often with debilitating outcomes for the actor (Shepherd & Cardon, 2009; Singh et al., 2007). Lessons learned from failure may lead to productive outcomes for individual and organizations, including the ability to build resilience and strengthen self-esteem.

Limitations and Further Research Directions

First, when a study attempts a broad sweep of failure in multiple organizational contexts, the disadvantage is that discrete contexts are treated too lightly. Most of the literature on failure in and of organizations has been focused on one area, such as entrepreneurship or organizational change. If further research examines several contexts simultaneously, it will advance understanding on how failure is experienced and what emotions it generate. For example, studies of mergers and acquisitions may cross into the broader fields of strategy and organizational change (e.g., De Keyser et al., 2019; Vuori et al., 2018).

Second, cultural contexts have not been explored. Attitudes to failure vary across countries and ethnic groups (Newton et al., 2008). While Ekman (1992) posited that basic emotions are experienced across all populations, the way in which discrete emotions are experienced and regulated varies across cultures (Jalan et al., 2014). Previous studies, for example, have unpacked the differences between shame (more of a Western concept) and loss of face, a phenomenon in parts of Asia (Leong et al., 2018).

Third, many of the emotions, negative and positive, which permeate this chapter could not be explored in sufficient depth, and other emotions will have been omitted. This suggests that more attention needs to be paid to discrete emotions in specific and general circumstances. For example, authors have called for in-depth studies of moral emotions (Lindebaum et al., 2017), such as shame, embarrassment, and guilt (Creed et al., 2014; Doern & Gross, 2014; Wijaya & Heugens, 2018), and how they surface in contexts of failure. In the COVID-19 era, morality and selflessness has been powerfully demonstrated by some actors (Gibson, 2020; Liu et al., 2020) and noticeably shunned by others who either seek to profit from the failure of systems and organizations or refuse to accept responsibility for them (Sargent, 2020). Other emotions, such as anger and fear, could also be studied across failure in different fields of management.

Fourth, to add richness to the study of the emotions of failure across several different fields, other theoretical frameworks could be engaged, such as psychoanalysis (Jalan et al., 2014), coping with stress (Singh et al., 2007), institutional theory (Creed et al., 2014; Gill & Burrow, 2018), and affective events theory (Edwards & Ashkanasy, 2018; He et al., 2018). Finally, this chapter has focused on the individual actor, be it the entrepreneur, executive, or employee. Prior research has looked at the impact of the emotions of one person spreading to others in the organization (e.g., Shepherd et al., 2014) and to stakeholders outside it. The emotions of others also deserve attention as failure affects them too.

CONCLUSION

Since the treatment of emotions in organizational failure has tended to be confined to specific contexts (e.g., entrepreneurship) and deal with emotions, in general, or focus on specific emotions (such as shame), this chapter has contributed to the literature on failure and its emotional impact across a wide range of contexts, looking at both negative and positive emotions and their consequences for the individual actor. It has investigated the dimensions of these emotions and the factors that trigger them and combined these elements in a model that is suitable for empirical examination and conceptual exploration and extension. The COVID-19 era has, in a short space of time, wrought rapid changes across society, its multiple institutions, and organizations, and delivered unprecedented challenges to the physical and psychological well-being of a vast number of people (DeYoung & Sly, 2020). The impact of COVID-19 will manifest in many further changes over a considerable period of time. Research studies have already begun (e.g., Amis & Janz, 2020; Gibson, 2020; Liu et al., 2020) and will enrich our understanding of resilience, empathy, and coping with stressful change and failure.

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