

F**k Ups in Social Research: Learning from what goes 'wrong'

*What happens when research goes wrong, or at least, is perceived to go wrong? How do researchers manage, or indeed fail to manage, the unexpected, and what new intellectual developments might be made possible through engagement with 'failures'? Jason Hughes, Anna Tarrant, Kahryn Hughes and Grace Sykes discuss these questions, as part of a forthcoming edited collection, called *F**k Ups in Social Research: What to do when Research Goes Wrong*. Here they explore the value of failure in research and the importance of crafting a critical and reflexive space for learning when social research doesn't go to plan.*

Keen to use participatory methods as part of the 'Men, Poverty and Lifetimes of Care' (MPLC) study, Anna wanted to explore the possibilities of [Photovoice](#). Photovoice consists of using digital cameras to enable the most marginalised to tell their stories their way. As part of this research methodology Anna bought and offered digital cameras to her participants. To her surprise, only 5 of her 24 participants agreed to take part. Four of the five agreed to take photos using the digital camera provided, which proved valuable in subsequent interviews. However, the fifth, a couple, did not. Not only did they not take photographs but, when Anna texted the couple to see if she could retrieve the camera, the woman, Jane, replied that she had given the camera to her social workers. Anna had not accessed Jane through social services, she had not met Jane's social worker, and nor was the social worker involved in the study in any way. Anna's initial reaction was, 'oh f**k!' Not only was there no data from this part of the study, but a valuable resource had also gone missing.

Working with Kahryn, Anna explored questions raised by this unexpected turn: Why did Jane give the camera to a social worker who was unknown and unconnected to her study? Why had Jane given the camera away at all, rather than keeping it until Anna contacted them? What was so risky about a camera that Jane had to get rid of it? And why, after having spent time explaining to Jane and her husband about the purposes of photovoice, had the couple not taken any photos in the first place? The answers to these questions would ultimately lead to [new ways of thinking about public engagement](#) and even the research project itself.

Learning from and critiquing 'failure': a process of 'making strange'

While good planning via *prospective* methodological design can help minimise common pitfalls, mistakes can never be entirely eradicated. More significant, is the converse: examples of well documented 'mistakes' that were pivotal to facilitating key innovations or generating unanticipated insights. Through reframing what might initially seem like a 'f**k up', we become better able to engage empirically with the pragmatics of research processes and their sometimes profound epistemic significance.

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Such concerns have come to the fore as researchers have had to adapt their fieldwork quickly to adhere to social distancing measures. Indeed, as COVID disruptions have made many familiar flaws and injustices in society strange, in a less dramatic way they have also 'made strange' the received wisdom of research being ostensibly a series of planned, regulated and strategic processes. Such missteps invariably highlight the productive differences between understandings of how research *should* proceed and the lived experiences of how it *actually does*.



That some of the participants in MPLC did not want to engage in the photovoice task proved to be a profoundly important disruption. Moreover, engaging with such ostensible 'failures' highlights how social research involves more than just methodological procedure and technique. Research is itself a form of social participation involving varying degrees of 'disruption' and an integral part of the world it seeks to apprehend. Thus, rather than viewing research as a means by which an aspect of the world is 'recorded', or 'captured', it is arguably better understood as a kind of 'intervention' with its own standards, characteristics, and cultural life. Altered plans, reorientations, redirections arise from the partly unplanned character of people *doing things together* during research. By which we mean that research inevitably entails the interlacing of plans, intentions, actions, and interactions, not just of researchers and participants in specific research encounters, but the full range of people and relationships involved, which in turn gives rise to 'messiness' and outcomes that no individual *fully planned* or intended.

Learning from f'Ups when publishing about f'ups?

Prompted by our collaborative work and reflections, we developed a proposal to SAGE for an unconventional methods book entitled *Fuck Ups in the Field*. The prospective publishers were intrigued, but were also concerned about how the title would land within the scholarly community. As part of the commissioning process, SAGE distributed a survey regarding the title and proposal to academic reviewers nationally and internationally. The results were widely contrasting. Some reviewers loved the idea, noting that they expected it to be read extensively by students and colleagues alike. Others expressed passionate dislike; one proposing that the use of a taboo word in the title was unprofessional, another suggesting that if our aim was to be funny, we needed to try harder. Although, as we have already found in relation to the approaches we have received thus far, the informality of the title has engendered a kind of intellectual permissiveness —creating the space for an array of candid accounts of research 'F*ck ups' coupled with the serious and sincere reflections on research processes that we had intended.

When we initially started to think about contributors to the volume, we reluctantly came to acknowledge a range of issues beyond potential sensitivities to our irreverent title. For us, the more significant problem was our intention to ask potential contributors to include themselves in a volume that signalled their work had gone wrong or had even failed in some way. This, we felt, might be a particular problem for early career scholars where the stakes of doing so might be high. What might be the reputational implications for scholars not yet fully established and 'proven' in their field? How might we address these?

Underlying such concerns is a set of unspoken principles regarding research standards, and a kind of imaginary of how social research proceeds. That imaginary is perpetuated through a multitude of means: endless methodological treatises on the *shoulds* and *ought tos* of research; sanitised and polished narrations of the research process written into methods sections in journal articles; the very structure of chapters expected from a PhD thesis. And yet, as anyone who has done research will know only too well, *research always goes wrong*. From inception, to design, to planning to execution, to analysis, to publication, and every other phase. Part of this unspoken imaginary is the idea that good, well-established, experienced researchers do not make these kinds of mistakes: they *get it right first time*. Or, relatedly, the idea is that mistakes in research are a sign of failure in themselves: of having not planned properly, of not having sufficiently thought through a study.

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We suggest at play here are several approaches to research 'management'. The first involves the *practical* management of situations 'in the field', that is, during active research, whereby researchers seek to mitigate against negative effects or impacts of research processes on individuals, groups or institutions. Second, and intimately related, are the lesser reported processes of *intellectual* and *emotional* management, which more properly translate into questions of how we might learn from the unexpected. These are the core focus of our project. We suggest that it is this capacity to learn from the unexpected that, if anything, constitutes a hallmark of 'good research' and scholarly professionalism. In social research, as in so many other arenas, there are perhaps few things as potentially valuable and productive to new knowledge as 'f*cking up'.

Confounding our assumptions and initial concerns, our call for chapters for the volume has at the time of writing attracted more interest from early career scholars and doctoral students and rather less from senior and established scholars. Perhaps, once again, we have been mistaken, and we will need to revisit some of the assumptions from which we commenced the project.

Note: This article gives the views of the authors, and not the position of the LSE Impact Blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our [comments policy](#) if you have any concerns on posting a comment below

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