

American Failure: A Metamorphosis

The concept of failure has gone through a metamorphosis in American popular culture in the past two hundred years. The term “failure” first came into use around the turn of the 19th century and was used as a financial term that described the bankruptcy of a business or an individual. For nearly a century failure was associated with economics and was socially considered to be the antithesis to the American dream. In a history of American failings, Scott Sandage wrote, “the promise of America is that nobody is a born loser.” The American dream attests that with hard work anyone can become successful, therefore “low ambition offends Americans even more than low achievement.”

By the mid-19th century, the fear of failure so dominated American culture that men were routinely outcast from society upon financial failure. In response, Abraham Lincoln wrote “men are greedy to publish the successes of [their] efforts, but meanly shy as to publishing the failures of men. Men are ruined by this one-sided practice of concealment of blunders and failures.” The stigma of failure persisted and by the Great Depression the threat of financial failure had become the leading cause of suicide in American men. With the New Deal, and the government’s support of struggling Americans, the stigma of failure began to wear away.

In the present, idioms about promoting failure as a virtue such as “failure is a path to success” are well-used. The content of this statement is quite true, as many studies have found that a culture of failure is particularly destructive to children. Teaching children to avoid failure has been proven to be unhealthy and dangerous for young people’s mental health. Negative social conceptions of failure more dramatically affect young women, who are disproportionately likely to be taught that failure is attached to poor moral choices as well as financial and academic inaptitude. Teaching success and intelligence as innate rather than encouraging failure creates a static-mindset that does not encourage growth or experimentation, and has negative effects on academic performance and creativity. In the United States, failure has been reconfigured as something to be overcome and dealt with as part of daily life rather than its early connotations as a catastrophic end.

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Information gathered from: “Fear of Failure: A Childhood Epidemic,” PBIS World (pbisworld.com); Noriko Ishihara’s “Intercultural Pragmatic Failure” in Research Gate, 2016; Jessica Grose’s “Teach Your Kids to Fail” in The New York Times, Apr. 21, 2020; Martha Einerson’s “Fame, Fortune, and Failure” in Youth and Society, vol. 30, no. 2, Dec. 1998 and Scott Sandage’s Born Losers (Harvard University Press, 2005).