

Failure show & tell

Failure symposium, Utrecht

7 October 2025

Prof. Dr. Ir. Veronika Cheplygina
IT University of Copenhagen



My Science CV

2010 MSc, 2015 machine learning PhD Delft, NL
2015-2016 postdoc medical imaging Erasmus Medical Center, NL
2017-2020 tenure track Eindhoven, NL

2021-2025 associate professor ITU, DK
2025+ full professor ITU, DK

PURRlab– Pattern Recognition Revisited lab

<https://purrlab.github.io>

Meta-research, data quality, ML robustness and evaluation, open and inclusive science



novo
nordisk
fonden

IT UNIVERSITY OF COPENHAGEN



My Science & Failure CV

2011-2015 PhD TU Delft

Clueless about academia, missed opportunities

Insecurity, is a postdoc even logical if it's "over" after?

Relationship / family crises, didn't go abroad ("career suicide")

2015-2016 postdoc Erasmus Medical Center

Many projects, little progress

Insecurity re rejected grants & jobs

Leave #1 for depression/anxiety

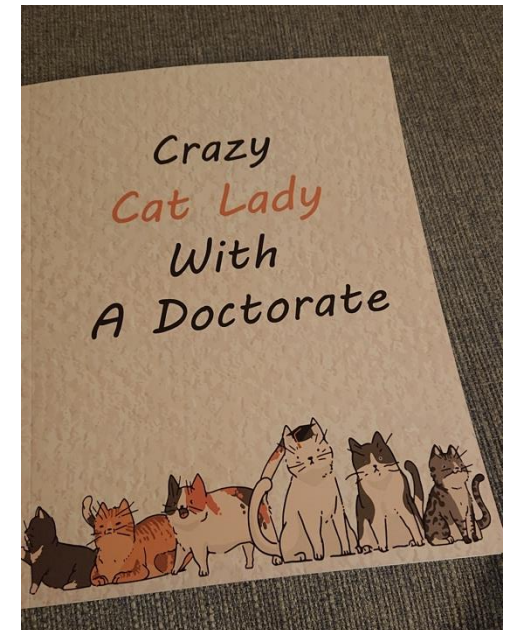
2017-2020 assistant professor TU Eindhoven

More rejected grants

Acute psychosis, leave #2 (in retrospect too short)

"When will you start doing real research?"

Advised not to go for tenure evaluation



The Iceberg Illusion

Success is an iceberg

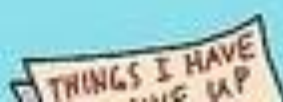
SUCCESS!

WHAT PEOPLE SEE

Persistence



Failure



WHAT PEOPLE DON'T SEE

Dedication



Hard work

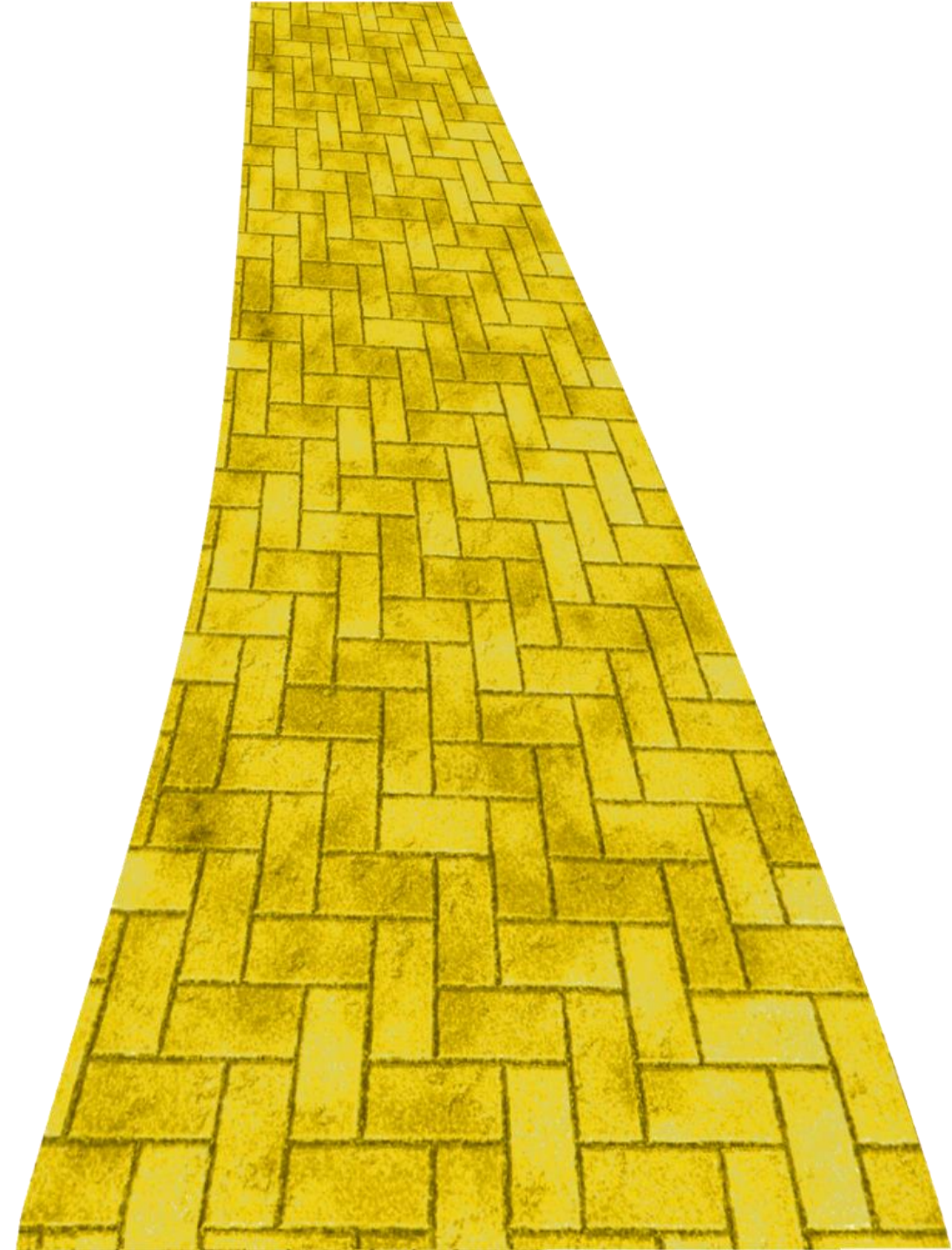


Outline

Story of CV of Failures / How I Fail

Group activity!

Take-aways



Once upon a time...

Melanie Stefan, at the time postdoc at California Institute of Technology

Now Professor of Physiology at Medical School Berlin

<https://melaniestefan.net/>

NATURE | NATUREJOBS | COLUMN

A CV of failures

Melanie Stefan¹ This article was originally published in the journal *Nature*

Nature 468, 467 (2010) doi:10.1038/nj7322-467a

Published online 17 November 2010



Photograph by Chris Coe



A few years later

Johannes Haushofer, at the time assistant professor at Princeton University

Now Professor of Economics and Public Policy at Cornell University

<https://johanneshaushofer.com>



JOHANNES HAUSHOFER CV OF FAILURES	
Most of what I try fails, but these failures are often invisible, while the successes are visible. I have noticed that this sometimes gives others the impression that most things work out for me. As a result, they are more likely to attribute their own failures to themselves, rather than the fact that the world is stochastic, applications are crapsheets, and selection committees and referees have bad days. This CV of Failures is an attempt to balance the record and provide some perspective.	
This idea is not mine, but due to a wonderful article in <i>Nature</i> by Melanie I. Stefan , who is a Lecturer in the School of Biomedical Sciences at the University of Edinburgh. You can find her original article here , her website here , her publications here and follow her on Twitter under @MelanieStefan .	
I am also not the first academic to post their CV of failures. Earlier examples are here , here , here and here .	
This CV is unlikely to be complete – it was written from memory and probably omits a lot of stuff. So if it's shorter than yours, it's likely because you have better memory, or because you're better at trying things than me.	
Degree programs I did not get into	
2008	PhD Program in Economics, Stockholm School of Economics
2003	Graduate Course in Medicine, Cambridge University Graduate Course in Medicine, UCL PhD Program in Psychology, Harvard University PhD Program in Neuroscience and Psychology, Stanford University
1999	BA in International Relations, London School of Economics
Academic positions and fellowships I did not get	
2014	Harvard Kennedy School Assistant Professorship UC Berkeley Agricultural and Resource Economics Assistant Professorship MIT Brain & Cognitive Sciences Assistant Professorship This list is restricted to institutions where I had campus visits; the list of places where I had first-round interviews but wasn't invited for a campus visit, and where I wasn't invited to interview in the first place, is much longer and I will write it up when I get a chance. The list also shrouds the fact that I didn't apply to most of the top economics departments (Harvard, MIT, Yale, Stanford, Princeton, Chicago, Berkeley, LSE) because one of my advisors felt they could not write a strong letter for them.
Awards and scholarships I did not get	
2011	Swiss Network for International Studies PhD Award
2010	Society of Fellows, Harvard University Society in Science Scholarship University of Zurich Research Scholarship

2009	Human Frontiers Fellowship
2007	Mind-Brain-Behavior Award (Harvard University)
2006	Mind-Brain-Behavior Award (Harvard University)
2003	Fulbright Scholarship Haniel Scholarship (German National Merit Foundation)
Paper rejections from academic journals	
2016	QJE, Experimental Economics
2015	AER x 2
2013	PNAS, Experimental Economics, Science, Neuron
2009	AER
2008	Science, Neuron, Nature Neuroscience, Journal of Neuroscience, Journal of Vision
Research funding I did not get	
2016	MQ Mental Health Research Grant
2015	Russell Sage Research Grant (two separate ones)
2013	National Science Foundation Research Grant
2010	University of Zurich Research Grant Swiss National Science Foundation Research Grant
2009	Financial Innovation Grant International Labor Organization Research Grant 3ie Research Grant
Meta-Failures	
2016	This darn CV of Failures has received way more attention than my entire body of academic work

CV of failures: Princeton professor publishes résumé of his career lows

Johannes Haushofer bravely posts document listing degree programs he did not get in to and academic positions he did not get

This Princeton Professor's CV of Failures Is Something We Should All Learn From

JOSH HRALA 25 DEC 2017

Meanwhile, in the Netherlands...

JOHANNES HAUSHOFER
CV OF FAILURES

Most of what I try fails, but these failures are often invisible, while the successes are visible. I have noticed that this sometimes gives others the impression that most things work out for me. As a result, they are more likely to attribute their own failures to themselves, rather than the fact that the world is so unpredictable. My applications are crashshots, and selection committees and referees have bad days. This CV of mine is an attempt to balance the record and provide some perspective.

This idea is not mine, but due to a wonderful article in *Nature* by **Melanie I. Stefan**, who is a Lecturer at the School of Biomedical Sciences at the University of Edinburgh. You can find her original article [here](#), her publications [here](#) and follow her on Twitter under [@MelanieIStefan](#).

I am also not the first academic to post their CV of failures. Earlier examples are [here](#), [here](#), [here](#) [here](#).

This CV is unlikely to be complete – it was written from memory and probably omits a lot of stuff. So if it's shorter than yours, it's likely because you have better memory, or because you're better at trying things than me.

Degree programs I did not get into

2008	PhD Program in Economics, Stony Brook University
2003	Graduate Course in Medicine, Columbia University Graduate Course in Medicine, University of California PhD Program in Psychology, Harvard University PhD Program in Neuroscience at Harvard University
1999	BA in International Relations, Loyola University

Academic positions and fellowships I did

2014 Harvard Kennedy School Assistant
UC Berkeley Agricultural and Resource
MIT Brain & Cognitive Sciences
This list is restricted to institutions that
first-round interviews but was not
interview in the first place, is more
also shrouds the fact that I didn't
MIT, Yale, Stanford, Princeton, and
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Awards and scholarships I did not get

2011	Swiss Network for International Studies PhD Award
2010	Society of Fellows, Harvard University Society in Science Scholarship University of Zurich Research Scholarship

1



*I'm not a professor
and would already
have a longer
Failure CV...*

2009

From

Neuroscience, Journal of Neuroscience, Journal of Vision



2016	MQ Mental Health Research Grant
2015	Russell Sage Research Grant (two separate ones)
2013	National Science Foundation Research Grant
2010	University of Zurich Research Grant Swiss National Science Foundation Research Grant
2009	Financial Innovation Grant International Labor Organization Research Grant 3ie Research Grant

Meta-Failures

2016 This darn CV of Failures has received way more attention than my entire body of academic work

2



Not long after...

Posted my own CV of failures as a “more realistic example”

Positive responses on my blog and Twitter (RIP)

How to get more people to share failures, if CV of Failures is too much?

How I Fail! <https://veronikach.com/category/how-i-fail/>

30+ interviews with researchers from different countries and fields, including Melanie Stefan ☺, Daniël Lakens (TU Eindhoven), Casper Albers (Groningen), Caroline Rowland (MPI Nijmegen), Felienne Hermans (VU)

Dr Veronika CH

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How I Fail

Interviews with researchers about their thoughts about failure



Failure “bingo”!

- Sort into a line by birthday (from Jan 1st to Dec 31st, not by year)
- Split into groups of $N/10$ and get a bingo card for your group
- On the card, write your name into a square if this failure happened to you AND you describe it to the others
- How much of the card can you fill?



Failure “bingo”!

Discussion: what do you think about the different “types” of failures?

Optional: take a picture of the bingo card to connect to the others after the event [?]



Take-aways: types of failures

1. Rejections

- Potentially important/prestigious career thing
- By definition only X% have a positive result
- Core of the failure CV, but increasingly not seen as failures

“There is a big difference between rejection and failure and this approach to collecting rejections helps you to see that difference. Rejections in academia are mostly out of your control and the product of too many people and not enough funding/resources or inexperience.” - [Michele Veldsman](#)



“I also buy a lottery ticket every time I apply for a grant. As long as I manage to bring in more grant money than lottery money, I feel like I am winning.” - [Melanie Stefan](#)



“I don’t consider rejections failures. In psychology a distinction is made between performance goals and mastery goals. Performance goals mean trying to achieve things like a number of publications, [...], and often involves trying to perform better than others. [...]



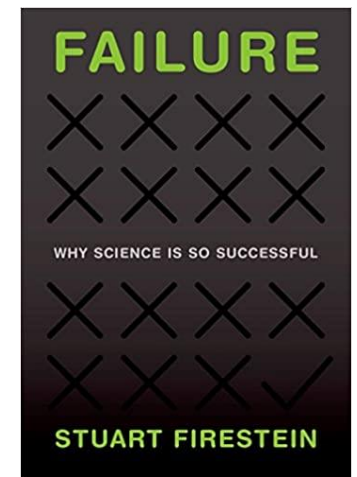
Instead, I set mastery goals. I have spend a lot of time training myself to no longer compare my performance to that of others – I compare myself against my past self, or to the goals I set.” - [Daniël Lakens](#)

Take-aways: types of failures

2. “Science failures”

- Not fully correct ideas, accidents
 - Good ideas but not published
 - Relatable but often invisible
 - Important for science progress
-
- Becoming more normalized?

Book tip: [Failure by S. Firestein](#)



Example 1: *“Newton was successfully wrong and it was the very failed part of his model that led to Einstein’s remarkable insights.”*

Example 2: blood circulation

- Pneuma theory by Erasistratus (250 BCE) and Galen (150 CE): pneuma enters through breath, is added to liver-produced blood, distributed as vital spirit
- William Harvey figures it out 1612
- Publication in 1628 for fear of disputing the mainstream theory

Take-aways: types of failures

3. “Personal”

- Feeling guilt or regret
- Not acting according to your values
- Least talked about

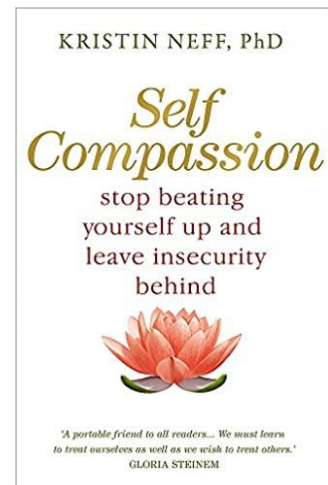
In my own story, it’s putting so much effort into academic “success” features while the bar just keeps moving. Here’s a [YouTube talk](#) about this.

I like to say that I “quit early and often”, opens up unexpected opportunities

“For me, it’s not just a fear of failing at research. I live with a background low level worry that I’m not a good enough boss, mentor, colleague and, especially, that I’m not a good enough mother. I find this much harder to manage than actual failure. If anyone has a solution ...” - [Caroline Rowland](#)



Book tip: [Self Compassion by Dr. Kristin Neff](#)



Take-aways: dealing with failure

1. Remember the numbers
 - Everybody fails (or “fails”)
 - Not all in your control (numbers vs resources)
2. Set intrinsic goals
3. Keep track – insightful for your own progress
4. Share
 - Can help both you and the others
 - But what if...?
 - No need to go “all-in” online, can be a small peer-mentoring group
- Can open opportunities

“I am still quite new to sharing about failure [...]. Now that I’ve done it, I can tell you it has been extremely rewarding, especially to hear from others who have had similar experience or junior scientists who were somehow inspired by it. It was certainly a risk and in fact some colleagues reached out in disbelief. I did not regret it one bit. My highest priority at this time is to mentor and inspire a new generation of scientists.” - [Mike Yassa](#)



“It would certainly make me take interest in the candidate. Compiling a list of one’s failures is an exercise in self-reflection. Having that level of self-insight is something I value, as is having the confidence to be open about their failures and start a conversation. I think it would make me look on the candidate more favourably.” – [Melanie Stefan](#)

Meta-Failures

2016 This darn CV of Failures has received way more attention than my entire body of academic work

 OPEN ACCESS

EDITORIAL

Ten simple rules for failing successfully in academia

Stefan Gaillard , Tara van Viegen, Michele Veldsman, Melanie I. Stefan , Veronika Cheplygina

Published: December 15, 2022 • <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pcbi.1010538>



Take-aways: dealing with failure

5. Remember the other “hidden” side

- CV of Failure - negative things on the CV. What about positive things, not on the CV?
- “Happy folder” - tag for thank-you emails etc
- “Year in review”
- Achievements outside of “the job”

“When one of the students who graduated under my supervision in the BSc program gets admitted to graduate school, I feel so proud. I feel proud of the student, of course, but also a bit of myself, as I’m actively helping our students to continue their studies abroad.” - [Eva Lantsoght](#)



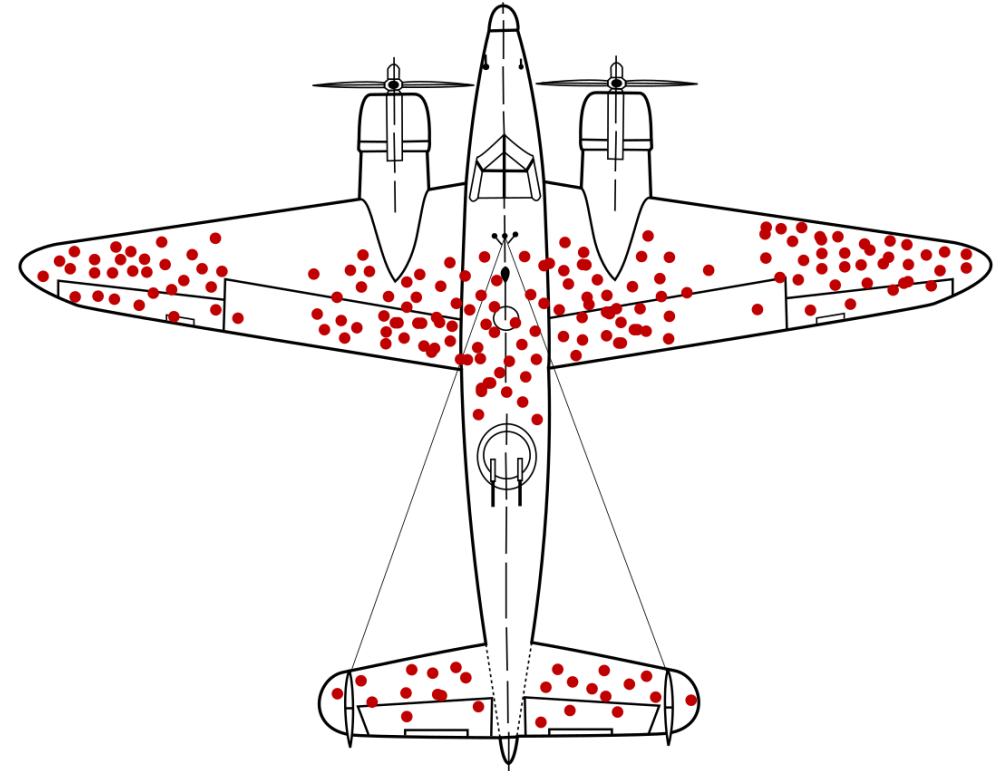
“At each year’s end, I make a list of all that I have accomplished in both the personal and professional domains. For, just as I tend to numb myself to my losses, I also tend to overlook or downplay my wins. So, this end-of-year reflection helps to remind myself that I accomplish quite a bit .” – [Eric Joy Denise](#)

“The thing that comes to mind is much more successful management of depression the past few years. I’ve gotten back to a place where I can actually function well, put my work out into the world, and learned a quiet persistence. It’s still a work in progress, but the progress I’ve made from where I was is impressive. Being able to tell the story is a success to me, at least.” – [Ian H. Street](#)



Summary

- Failure is not the same as rejection
 - Rejections are often not failures
 - “Science”
 - “Personal”
- Bias in failures that we hear about
- Sharing failures is often rewarding, but no need to go all-in
- Don’t forget successes not on your CV



Thank you!



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